Ornamented Membranes

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The human mind is the place where meaning is created and where feelings of belonging and rejection evolve. This individual process is shaped by material manifestations of the outside world. Ornament operates at exactly this threshold: medieval objects negotiated visibility, access, and meaning through their ornamental surfaces, which could simultaneously invite and restrict.

At this international conference on “Ornamented Membranes” in medieval art history at the University of Cologne, the focus was on the interplay between material forms and human cognitive abilities. Medieval ornaments often survive only as descriptions in written documents, presenting themselves to us as two-dimensional. Yet in their original contexts, it was commonly questions of accessibility that governed their perception. In art history, the materiality and agency of things have been foregrounded in recent studies.[1] As the organiser Irina Dudar (University of Bern) observed, however, this approach risks an 'abstraction in medieval art'. She therefore urged the participants to begin the discussions from the visible elements rather than the abstract agencies. In practice, the conference oscillated between both approaches.

Restricted access to sacred spaces has manifested in various forms. Iron grilles marked a boundary between the sacred and the profane in medieval church interiors of Northern Spain. Susanne Wittekind (Cologne) worked with these material boundaries and tensions between protection and selective permeability that were manoeuvred by the clergy. An ornamented iron gate functioned as a demarcation of sanctity, separating the sacred from the profane. Heavy entrance doors were in some cases fashioned with animal-head shaped handles that had to be pushed away to enter the sacred. The spiral pattern of these Spanish iron grilles was characteristic for this region and the producers took pride in working iron instead of nobler materials. In fact, as Beate Fricke (Bern) argued, because these iron grilles were produced in the context of liberation struggles against feudal authorities, their use of local iron may have been a demonstration of independence by the artisans. From these contexts of liberation and grilles as ornamented gates, the conference moved on into confinement architectures and the similarities of nuns and birds.

With a provocative comparison between “women behind bars” from cloistered convents and modern prison architecture, Gabriella Cianciolo (Cologne) applied an architect’s lense. While modern prisons have no ornamentation in the structuring of fences, she argued, the grilles inside medieval female convents in Italy were regularly ornamented. Historically, many convents were changed into prisons and Le Murate monastery in Florence served as an example for this. Established in the 14th century, Le Murate officially became a prison in 1884 and today houses the architectural

faculty and functions as a museum. The bars inside female convents separated these women from the outside world. In the case of a convent in Palermo, however, these women were able to finance and build convex wooden loggias on top of the convent. This architecture was reaching outside and allowed the nuns to passively participate in city life while effectively being “kept behind bars”. Considering that these nuns would at times perform as choirs within the context, the comparison with caged birds became evident. Ornamented membranes were also central to sacred medieval architecture in the Maghrib.

Abbey Stockstill (Charlottesville) identified bent entrances to mosques and shrines as central features for actively disorienting the pious visitor. The bent entrances to these spaces mediated the turn from the profane to the sacred while also effectively blocking the city’s soundscape from entering the latter. Inside the mosques and shrines, the viewer's gaze would be trapped by bright, multicoloured tile ornaments. Recent neuroscientific studies have shown that the effect of these patterns forces the mind of the viewer into a state of contemplation. The architecture within the madrasas controlled the students' sensorial experience by forcing them to turn their attention to the teachings within the madrasa rather than to the outside world. While there were no windows to the exterior space, ornamented screens connected the students’ small cells to the courtyard. As permeable membranes, these ornamented Mashrabiya screens mediated the sounds of the teachings. The inside life was decisively separated from the outside by these creative architectural choices.

Another perspective was offered by Elizabeth Dospěl Williams (Boston), who studied large-format textiles from 5th-century Egypt, made by enslaved people, as objects that describe their own actions. These textiles were originally employed in funerals but were removed from their contexts by grave robbers. The representation of a curtain puller at work in a domestic setting raised important questions about depictions of enslaved people. In a cultural context where enslavement reached all parts of social life, these large-format textiles served as markers of wealth in households of the social elite. The depiction of an enslaved person on a luxury material confronted the viewer with a shocking window into the lived realities of people whose lives may have received a lower valuation than the very textiles that portrayed them. The bodies of enslaved people were often portrayed as grotesque and aged, which effectively blurred the lines between conceptions of people and things even further. In this context, the textile became a metaphorical, non-permeable membrane of social categories and valuation regimes.

Questions regarding the limits of euro- and Christocentric terminology surfaced in the discussions around the case of the early 9th century Flabellum of Tournus, presented by David Ganz (Zurich). The categories of the “human cultural sphere” and the “natural environment” were discussed. In light of the complex nature of these terms in postcolonial discourse, it became clear that merely substituting them with the “ecosphere, technosphere, and mediasphere” as overlapping points has its own limitations. The realisation, therefore, was that the divide between “human” and “natural” environments apparently keeps existing in Christocentric discourses and perspectives, and that a scholar’s application of these terms needs to be clearly positioned in regard to this. With that in mind, the case of the Flabellum was a reminder of the functional nature of “art objects”. The Flabellum was inscribed with gold and silver ink on both sides, instructing the user to drive away flies from the eucharistic elements and to generate a fresh breeze on hot days in enclosed sacred spaces.

The religious and regional diversity of the presented topics created a cognitively stimulating environment and the lectures showed how walls, grilles and manuscript pages became ornamented membranes as sensory and cognitively stimulating objects. Rethinking ornamented membranes from these perspectives added considerable depth and diversity to the conceptual understanding of these architectural and medial surfaces. By drawing on a variety of case studies from across Europe and Northern Africa, the participants understood ornamented membranes as liminal spaces that divided the seen from the unseen; the inside from the outside; and the sacred from the profane. While highlighting the clerical power of structuring sacred spaces, this conference also foregrounded the overlooked agents. From women behind bars in Italian convents to enslaved domestic workers in ancient Egypt, the participants in the conference offered a wide range of perspectives on unseen but powerful human agencies. The core learning of this conference was the understanding that materials can function as (semi-) permeable membranes that shape the way that human agents experience their environment.

Notes

[1] Fricke, Beate; Lehmann, Ann-Sophie: Materials matter, in: Kunstchronik, 77. Jg., Heft 7 (2024), S. 461–467; Ingold, Tim: Materials against Materiality, in: Archaeological Dialogues 14/1, 2007, 1–6; Raff, Thomas: Die Sprache der Materialien. Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe (Münchner Beiträge zur Volkskunde 37), Münster, New York, München, Berlin 2008.

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