Images and Objects in Ritual Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe
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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

KRISTA KODRES AND ANU MÄND

This collection of essays explores the use of images and objects in medieval and early modern ritual practices, as well as how certain ceremonies were depicted in works of art. The topic is not entirely new,¹ and the answer to the question of why it was chosen should be given at the beginning. The editors of this collection see it as an experiment, or even as a provocation, the origins of which can be traced back to 2011. In that year we invited our colleagues to participate in a conference in Tallinn, entitled “Art and Ritual in Late Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe.” The call for papers included a statement that in the Middle Ages and in the early modern era “images, spaces and rituals were closely interconnected; hence, the complex study of these phenomena is essential for a better understanding of the medieval and early modern societies and people. Topics to be discussed include church, court and civic ceremonies, performative aspect of festivals, rituals associated with images, rituals of dying and commemoration, (self)representation of individuals and social groups, and art and architecture as means of symbolic communication.”²

As is evident from this text, it was assumed that the papers would focus on the role of visual means in various medieval and early modern social practices, which were linked by their ritual character. It can also be inferred that we took a fundamental approach to “ritual” as an action, which, on the one hand, is discussed under the general umbrella term “performative practice,” which characterises societies as a whole, and, on the other hand, is characterised by a synthesis between the repetitive and the extraordinary that carries an intense

¹ Here it is sufficient to draw attention to two recent publications: Claus Ambos et al., eds., Bild und Ritual: Visuelle Kulturen in historischer Perspektive (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010), and Gerhard Jaritz, ed., Ritual, Images, and Daily Life: The Medieval Perspective (Münster: Lit, 2012).
² This was the fourth international conference in memory of Prof. Sten Karling (1906–1987). The previous conferences have led to the following publications: Art and the Church: Religious Art and Architecture in the Baltic Region in the 13th–18th Centuries, ed. Krista Kodres and Merike Kurisoo (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2008); The Problem of Classical Ideal in the Art and Architecture of the Countries around the Baltic Sea, ed. Krista Kodres, Piret Lindpere, and Eva Näripea (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2003); Sten Karling and Baltic Art History, ed. Krista Kodres, Juhan Maiste, and Vappu Vabar (Tallinn: Teaduste Akadeemia Kirjastus, 1999).
symbolic meaning and is emotionally charged. In addition, we looked at ritual as a teleological act of communication, in which images and objects as means of persuasion play an important role. Ritual has also been termed an event which is “performed” for someone at the present time. Moreover, we imply that a “ritual moment” is not only a communicative event but also an emotional one; at its onset, visual and material objects are essential components, media that stimulate sensomotoric reactions. One of the reasons why we offered so broad, perhaps even too broad, a platform to the conference participants was to obtain some feedback from them, so that we could discuss which events and activities in different places in medieval and early modern Europe could be treated as rituals. While preparing for the publication, we asked all the authors to clearly point out how their visual research objects were related to ritual action.

We would also like to stress that the aim of the articles in this collection is not to theorise about ritual as a performative act or about performative acts. Rather, we looked for contributions in which the scholars would (first of all) explore and situate images and objects and their potential for conveying meanings and evoking emotions.

Here, however, let us distance ourselves from the frameworks mentioned above and discuss some of the theoretical views on ritual and the visual. Inevitably, some historiographical depth of theoretical analysis, which has its roots in the early twentieth century, will be sacrificed but, luckily, one can make up for this with additional reading, which is becoming more and more voluminous.4

Today, in the post-performative-turn period, the theories and research regarding rituals are fruitfully connected with the theories and research of performativity and, after the pictorial turn and the material turn, art history has linked up with the theories and research on visual and material culture. All of the turns in the field of the humanities in the late twentieth century are interdisciplinary; now we are witnessing the next phase of fusion and “cross-fertilisation” between the disciplines. In the context of the present collection, we can speak of a “transdisciplinary turn”; it is difficult to draw a boundary between pictorial and visual culture studies and performativity studies. This is neither necessary nor possible as, in practices that are characterised as rituals, performativity, visuality and materiality are all present and inextricably linked. Their co-existence was recognised in the language long before the phenomena were exhaustively studied: let us think of the Latin words speculatio

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4 When the editors of the collection Bild und Ritual used the Google Search to look for the notion “ritual,” 32 900 000 results were found in November 2008; in December 2012 the number appeared to be 161 000 000.
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(observation) and spectaculum (a show), which are related to the English word “spectacle,” as well as to the German Spektakel. It is also meaningful that the same stem (spectare, “to view, watch”) is present in the word speculum—“a mirror,” but also as a reflection and as an image. In German, as well as in Estonian, the native language of the editors, a frequent epithet and/or synonym of ritual is designated with a precise compound phrase: Schauspiel in German, and vaatemäng in Estonian. The meaning of the first part in these compounds is “a look, a view,” which points to the fact that something is to be looked at or viewed, that there is a visual object. The fundamental idea of any ritual practice—hence the difference from some other performative practices, for example from the personal practice of devotion—is that “it is done to be seen.”

The second part of the word, “a play,” points to the idea that we are not dealing with something that belongs to the daily routine, but with something that is performed, in which the participating subjects and material objects (as well as sounds and light effects, for example) are related to each other within the space of this particular event in a special mode. This mode can be described as a reflective practice, in which visual symbols and signs—although visible—“hint at something invisible that is, however, no less real than the visible things at hand.” Thus rituals as entities are, at the level of all of their components, cultural “sites of memory”—lieux de mémoire—where the human psyche, consciousness, society and culture interact. It can be said that society explains itself to itself by showing itself and constructing itself, as after a ritual event it is no longer the same. Thus a ritual, as with any performative practice, is also an identity formation practice.

Ritualised events do not happen on their own; at least in the medieval and early modern times, ritual practices, which are examined in this collection, did not automatically take place. Rituals are planned and arranged by someone whose world-view and interests they reflect and these, in turn, are expressed and reaffirmed by rituals. As Jeffrey C. Alexander has convincingly argued, rituals as performative acts are initiated by “social actor(s), who present themselves as being motivated by and towards existential, emotional, and moral concerns, the meanings of which are defined by patterns of signifiers whose referents are the social, physical, natural, and cosmological worlds within which actors and audiences live.” In order to perform an event—according to Alexander a “cultural text”—the social actors need mundane material things that make it possible to have a symbolic projection, and allow the objective of the initiator—the effectiveness of the event—to be fulfilled: “They need objects that can serve as iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent.”

To recapitulate, Alexander points to the elements needed for any cultural performance: actors (performers and attenders, audiences), the means of symbolic production (visuals and objects, participants’ clothing etc.), mise-en-scène (an ensemble of physical and verbal gestures, put into a scene), and social power (which always establishes an external boundary). Further on, he looks at cultural performances in connection with historical dynamics and shows that in highly stratified and literate societies they are characterised by both greater artifice and planning: performative action becomes more achieved and less automatic. In highly stratified societies, elites seek, first of all, the legitimation of their positions, so that they can serve and perpetuate their interests (and enhance their benefits). To be able to do this, they must convince people of the need to maintain a state of affairs and must make them believe that this corresponds to their interests: both in religious rituals and secular ceremonial acts, the initiators aim to demonstrate their authority in interpreting the world. At the same time, this attempt shows that elites perceive the power of the other side: the audience. Hence there is careful planning to ensure the effectiveness of rituals, including their form, i.e. performance in all its individual components.

In art history, the idea of pictures and objects as “co-actors” in ritual events is not new. It is sufficient to refer to Aby Warburg, who noted their symbolic and emotional functions in the rituals of the Pueblo Indians, describing them

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11 Ibid., 35.
12 Ibid., 36.
13 Ibid., 45.
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as “demonic mediators between man and nature.”

Even before Warburg, several art historians (Vischer, Fechner and Riegl) reflected on the emotionality and associativeness of art. However, this line of research was not actively pursued until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Only after the object of art historical research itself—the work of art—was problematised was it possible to pay attention to different visual phenomena that existed in the societies of the past. This (re-)recognition of them as “symbolic practices” (Laclau and Bourdieu), i.e. the inclusion of sociological and anthropological knowledge in the interpretation of visual objects, led to the interpretation of the socially constructed meaning of the visual field (visual studies), but also to the formulation of the new picture theories mentioned above and a new discipline called Bildwissenschaft. The latter focuses on the question of the power of the image, i.e. on the specific nature of the medium of the visual and its impact on human experience. In retrospect, one can say that, since the 1990s, there have emerged competing—semitic and phenomenological—discourses in art history. The performative turn, which occurred at about the same time, provided a good opportunity to overcome the oppositions, because—as mentioned above, and quite obviously—performative acts, and rituals in particular, can be conceived of as models of particular societies, which, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, assemble the social and the cultural. Images and objects in this model are clearly observable and provide new opportunities to study the roles assigned to them, as well as how they are realised.

In this context, the views of Louis Marin, who has undeservedly fallen into oblivion in the Anglo-American and the German language areas, merit attention. In particular, Marin used the example of ritual practice to discuss art practices more generally and to explain his own vision of “critical semiotics.” Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice and Hubert Damisch’s theory of the cloud, Marin argues that the principles of a practical coherence of Bourdieu’s symbolic systems are supplied with the logic of their genesis and their functioning. This means that in practice both the symbolic systems them-

selves and objective conditions are taken into account. Borrowing from Jeffrey C. Alexander, we can conclude that the cultural pragmatism characteristic of humanity leads to the manipulation of symbolic systems (images, pictures and objects—eds.), the nature of which allows for multiple interpretations. Marin stresses the ambivalent nature of symbolic systems: “In the ritual practice . . . , the symbols that are at once instruments of its manipulations and objects of its activity, simultaneously indeterminate and overdetermined, are grasped in relations of global resemblance, but at the same time used under a particular aspect of analogy, so that when they are put into practice by the ritual, that particular aspect continues to benefit, under various modalities, from all the other aspects of the resemblance.” The symbolic representations in sets of rituals are determined by both their (familiar, traditional) meaning, which is intentionally written into their scripts, and by the indeterminateness of their impact or effect. Marin stresses that “pictorial writing” is an “open and constantly decentered system, postulated simultaneously by the polythetic logic of practice and the polysemy of the elements and mechanisms that it puts to work historically.” The task of a researcher is “to systematically explore the diversity and heterogeneity of the processes and their entities, the effects of symbolic overdetermination that these heterotopies provoke, by bringing to light both the historical constants that are indicated in them and the invariants that are attached to a specific practice and that refer to the material entities that ultimately shape it.” Marin himself followed this in his article “Establishing a Signification for Social Space: Demonstration, Cortege, Parade, Procession (Semiotic Notes),” conducting an analysis of space-constructing and performative aspects of ritual acts and their effectiveness.

The articles in this collection deal with particular ritual events, with the purpose of contributing to the study of performative practice, which is also pictorial and/or material practice, in medieval and early modern times. We can see different environments—church, town and castle—and ambitions: the demonstration of faith, power or self, performed for others as well as for oneself.

The articles included in the first part of this collection analyse the role of pictures and material objects in religious ritual practices. Gerhard Jaritz emphasises the need to consider the transformation and variability of (medieval) ritual practices, which are also reflected in visual culture. He studies

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20 Ibid., 36.
21 Louis Marin, “Establishing a Signification for Social Space: Demonstration, Cortege, Parade, Procession (Semiotic Notes),” in On Representation, 38–53.
these aspects in connection with the content, function and uses of late medi-
eval religious images, by discussing some Central European paintings on the
Journey and Adoration of the Magi, the Last Judgement and the Virgin of
Mercy. He points out that humorous figures and details added, for example, to
the entourage of the Three Magi and depicted at the eye level of the beholder
motivated the beholder’s gaze and “participation” in the religious story,
increased the closeness between the image and its viewers, and thus assisted
them in learning and memorising the spiritual message. Visual representations
of well-known themes had many variations, depending, among other things,
on the social position of the donor and the prospective beholders. Jaritz points
out that, although the religious message to be perceived was the same, the way
it was perceived was realised with the help of different means of construction
and performance, mainly dependent on the social differences in late medieval
society. Stability and variation, repetition and mutability did not contradict but
supplemented each other, and thus influenced the ritual sign language and the
representation of ritual actions.

Andrew Spicer examines consecration crosses, which were a visual
reminder of the religious rites that transformed the church building into a
sacred space and set it apart from the secular realm. Recent research into the
decoration and appearance of medieval churches suggests ways in which
scholars might be able to gain greater insight into how these crosses were
perceived by church-goers. He stresses that consecration crosses, like wall
paintings, were more than ecclesiastical decoration, and that their role in late
medieval devotional practice needs to be reassessed in relation to the period’s
understanding of sight and vision.

Stina Fallberg Sundmark, dealing with Swedish late medieval artworks
and theological texts, investigates how the rosary and the wounds of Christ were
related to each other in Christian iconography and what role this combination
played in late medieval liturgy and devotional practices. Her starting point is
that ecclesiastical rituals have to be understood more broadly than solely as
liturgical acts performed by the priest, that rituals also include acts performed
by the laity, during the mass as well as in private worship and meditation.
Visual representations of the rosary with the wounds of Christ were used in
different ways as instruments of prayer and devotion. The purpose of these
representations was by no means merely decorative; on the contrary, they had a
distinctive function as visual and material instruments of prayer and meditation.
In the liturgical setting of the church building, these motifs, either separately
or combined, also had strong connections with the Eucharist.

Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen, in his article, challenges the earlier
understanding of the role of pictures in the Lutheran church, which was
based on the principles of Martin Luther and the *Formula Concordiae* (1577), according to which images in the church were to “adorn, remind, admonish and instruct.” Jürgensen demonstrates that, in addition to this instrumental approach to images, a much more ambitious and emotional function is revealed in the practice of the Eucharist in which the Last Supper altarpiece “participates.” This is connected with the Lutheran doctrine of the Real Presence. During the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Last Supper altarpiece acquires a ritual quality, characterised by the idea of the union of time, space and the partaker of the sacrament. Jürgensen shows how the sacrament of the Eucharist is emotionally enforced by pictorial means, which, during the communion ritual, meet the hearts of partakers who are well prepared by the pastor.

Aivar Põldvee’s article also focuses on the Lutheran pictorial practice. The author examines the way God’s word was taught to children of local peasants in a small village church—the Lutheran congregation of Keila in Estonia—in the 1680s. Catechism classes, offered after the service every Sunday, became a ritual. During the class, children stood in front of a large picture which depicted two scenes: Jacob wrestling with the angel, and Jacob’s dream, based on the *Icones Biblicae* by Matthäus Merian. The article attempts to untangle the iconographic additions—those of local landscape and memory—to the famous scenes, which were to serve as complementary “study aids”; they are juxtaposed with passages from the catechism textbook by the pastor Anton Heidrich. This pedagogical practice caused an iconoclastic controversy that reached the Estonian Consistory, which, among other things, throws some light on the fear of images that the conservative wing of the Lutherans still had.

A large number of the articles explore the events of ritual character that were initiated by secular rulers. All of them are united by one aim: to inculcate the notion that power was sacred, predetermined and, consequently, inevitable.

Giedrė Mickūnaitė focuses on the significance of ritual viewing and analyses how the iconography of the Byzantine wall paintings which adorned the medieval residence of Lithuanian grand dukes and the parish church in Trakai manifested the sacred and secular power of the rulers. She also discusses the reasons for the atypical (southward) orientation and location of the original church building and concludes that it was deliberately chosen to create a visual bond between the castle and the parish church, to suit the gaze of the founder, Grand Duke Vytautas, who could symbolically look from the palace onto the main altar of the church. By the end of the fifteenth century, when the grand dukes no longer resided in the castle and the latter was turned into a prison, this visual bond lost its meaning and the church building was turned eastwards. However, the wall paintings with the donor scene and the icon of the Mother of God, which, according to a legend, was a present to Vytautas, incorporated
the memory of the grand ducal founder and strengthened his image as a true Christian prince.

**Kersti Markus** provides an overview of the first coronations of kings in twelfth-century Denmark, and suggests that the pictorial programme of two contemporary baptismal stones reflected the rituals performed on these occasions in Ringsted Cathedral. She discusses the possible ideological messages conveyed through the images depicted on these stones, and states that they can be linked with the ambitions of King Valdemar I of Denmark to consolidate his own power and that of his son Canute. The visual language of the baptismal stones emphasised the notion that the king was Christ’s deputy on earth.

**Juliette Roding** and **Nico Hijman** provide insight into the iconographic programme of the tomb monument (1542) of Reinoud III van Brederode, the Lord of Vianen, and his wife. Its study reveals the details of the artistic and anatomical depiction of the ruler’s “two bodies,” the allegorisation of kingly virtues and the different forms of their commemoration in the monument. The authors also show how the chapel, containing different objects—a monument, a retable and a crypt, separated from the rest of the church by a screen—was used. The chapel was not only a place for the funeral service as a rite of passage, but also a place for personal or familial commemorative and devotional practices; it was a meeting place which centred on the visually present figures of the father and mother of the family, on the core values of life sanctioned by them, and conveyed allegorically through them.

**Hugo Johannsen** in his contribution looks at the portals in two Danish kings’ residences: the Kronborg Castle and Frederiksborg Palace, dating from 1585 and 1610, respectively. Both portals feature extremely rich iconography, which, according to Johannsen, was designed to affirm the hereditary right of the Danish kings and its divine origin. This was, as Johannsen shows, a performative practice (quite common in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), or performative rhetorics cut in stone, which aimed to challenge the elective character of Danish monarchy as regulated by law. The figures of biblical kings (in Kronborg Castle) and historical Christian kings of Denmark (in Frederiksborg Palace) on the chapel portals of the royal residences were to act as memory stimuli, as permanent *lieux de mémoire*. The iconography of the Frederiksborg portal also served to perpetuate the coronation of Christian IV.

**Birgitte Bøggild Johannsen** examines the re-enactments of historical rituals in Denmark in the eighteenth century, the first of which (1749) was arranged on the occasion of the coronation of Christian I, the first of the Oldenburg dynasty, in 1449, and the second (1760) was connected with the law, mentioned in Hugo Johannsen’s article, which transformed the elective monarchy into the hereditary monarchy; a hundred years ago, in 1660, absolutism
was introduced in Denmark. In addition, two more events are dealt with: the celebrations of the Lutheran Reformation and the two-hundredth anniversary of the Danish Reformation, which were intended to affirm the creed, but also demonstrated the sacred nature of royal power. Johannsen analyses how, by using different media simultaneously, a magical presence was achieved in officially sanctioned re-enactments. By referring to Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, she differentiates between body symbols, spatial and object symbols, temporal symbols and textual symbols that stimulate presence, and demonstrates that their concrete applications were intended to reactivate communal memory. This memory was meant to serve the aim of social unity, of which royal power and evangelical faith were legitimate warrants.

The means of creating the magical presence of royal power in Tallinn (Ger. Reval) during celebrations on the occasion of taking an oath of allegiance to King Charles XI of Sweden in 1690 are explored by Krista Kodres. The festivities, without the king present, were organised in view of the need to convince local estates, whom the king had harmed with his policies, of royal power being above earthly authority, as being bestowed by God, and as having absolute justification. The surviving documents of the Tallinn City Council reveal how the events were planned and carried out. Among other things, the sources describe the objects, the images and the texts, as well as the meanings given to them by the organisers. The magnificent scenography of the events and the participation of the estates in the preparations for them guaranteed that the ceremony of taking the oath was like a “blessing of heaven” and that “when the drums and trumpets sounded and cannons roared, not only those who were in the castle, but people everywhere and everyone in the houses and streets had fun all night long.”

In the last part of this collection, some performative practices, which can be regarded as either personal or corporate ritual acts, are explored. They contain one-time or repeated demonstrative self-affirmation: reminding oneself and the public of one’s status and position. On these occasions, images and objects also served as active “co-actors.”

Emilia Jamroziak studies the self-representation of late medieval Cistercian abbots, focussing on art commissions in Bukowo Morskie Abbey in Pomerania in the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries, particularly on the altarpiece containing the image of the donor, Abbot Henry Kresse (1510/13–35). She draws attention to the changing nature of the abbatial office in the late Middle Ages, which, in turn, brought about changes in the

visual culture of the abbeys: abbots used various visual means (seals, tombs, altarpieces and other liturgical objects) to emphasise the status of their office and of themselves, their family lineage and personal qualities. Abbots began to be represented in a manner resembling that of lay benefactors. She argues that this development was linked to different forms of engagement with the laity, the new form of the abbatial office and the reform movement shaping the Cistercian order in this period.

**Anu Mänd** approaches the topic of *memoria* and pious donations from the gender perspective, by studying the commemorative strategies of lay women in medieval Livonian cities. First she explores the role of women in guilds and confraternities, particularly in the rituals of burial and commemoration. Then she discusses the opportunities of women of different social, economic and marital status to establish their own *memoria* by, for example, endowing a chantry or donating a liturgical object. Although women played a far more modest role in public life than men, they had the opportunity to influence the sacred space through their commemorative bequests and, to some extent, even “feminise” it. Eucharistic vessels, church furnishings and tombstones commissioned by women or for women, and provided with their coats of arms or with proper inscriptions, functioned as bearers of collective memory. Mänd also points out that women, unlike men, had multiple identities: they could visually identify themselves as members of their natal or marital families.

**Jürgen Beyer** looks at Lutheran churches and the problem of the interior lighting of a sacred space. By giving examples from several churches in northern Europe, he refutes the claim that the role of chandeliers and the aims of donating chandeliers did not change with the Reformation. Beyer shows that when the masses and the side altars (together with altar candelabra) disappeared, evangelical churches became relatively dark and the role of lighting in the liturgy was reduced. Lutheran nobles donated chandeliers and candelabra in connection with the commemoration of the dead and these objects functioned similarly to epitaphs, especially when associated with the places where the dead were buried. They may have played a certain role in funeral rites, which took place mainly at night. The chandeliers were also used to mark a corner of a church belonging to guilds and other corporations, who donated them to be hung near their pews. The chandeliers were types of ritual gifts, which were donated at the consecration of churches, as well as gestures of gratitude for escaping harm or gestures seeking forgiveness after sinful deeds. The article also includes a discussion of Lutheran church economics: direct orders by donors regarding how to use the chandelier money and the candle wax leftovers.

**Ruth Mohrmann’s** article deals with Samuel Pepys, an English MP and a man of letters, the son of a tailor, who kept a diary for ten years (1660–70)
in which he recorded daily events that had some significance for him. Among these were his (very) frequent theatre visits, which can be seen as a personal ritual for Pepys, constantly repeated and clearly performative. Mohrmann discusses the causes of Pepys’s passion and, through close reading of his diaries, she reaches the conclusion that for Pepys going to the theatre was not simply an act of watching a play, but an act of “being seen,” being present as a dignified member of the audience, which also gave him an opportunity to show off. Pepys participated in other elitist social rituals as well; in addition to going to the theatre, Mohrmann mentions newspaper reading in coffee houses, concert attendance etc. These new rituals provided an opportunity for Pepys to participate and to perform in the role of a character (wearing expensive clothing he could ill afford), the logic of which dictated that he had a utopian view of himself: he played the aristocrat game, though he was not a member of the aristocracy.

Stephan Hoppe, in his article on German Renaissance palaces, explains how certain rooms were created in order to perform certain repetitive actions and how the architectonic framework of the rooms made the ritualization of these actions possible. Based on the results of the building archeology of early modern residence palaces in Central Europe, as well as on textual sources and images, he analyzes the phenomenon of the *Herrentafelstube*, a room meant for the private dining of the lord of the castle which came into existence in the early sixteenth century and was located on the upper floor of a palace. One of the first such rooms was probably built for Emperor Maximilian I in the hunting lodge of Wellenburg; a similar room was also established by King Vladislaus II in his Prague Castle. Characteristic of the *Tafelstube*, which was common in German courts, were panoramic views of surrounding natural and man-made environments, in the ideal case in three directions. As such, the room enabled the ruler and his retinue, seated at the table in hierarchical order, to somewhat distance themselves from court ceremonies, and allowed them to enjoy food as well as magnificent views similar to those described by Pliny the Younger in his villa letters. At the same time, the phenomenon of *Tafelstube* can also be interpreted as a daily exercise of power: the controlling gaze of a ruler over his estates and subjects.
PART I

IMAGES AND OBJECTS
IN RELIGIOUS RITUALS
Ritual studies have been trendy since the 1970s and 1980s. There have been many new and important results of research, but also a number of problems have arisen, which generally happens when new interests are developing in specific study areas. Research into rituals has emerged as a wide field covering many aspects of the cultural and social disciplines. Thus, as early as 1977, Jack Goody expressed scepticism when he stated that the concept had become global in a way which made it rather unusable. In 1993, Richard Schechner saw ritual as something that “means very little because it means so much.” In 1997, Edward Muir remarked that one knows what rituals are when one sees them; if asked to define them, however, one might be confronted with very different replies. Therefore, rituals and ritual studies speak with many voices. This means that one generally has to cope with multiplicity, variety and sometimes even heterogeneity. Since Émile Durkheim, the famous French

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4 Ibid., 5.
sociologist of religion, stated in 1912 that “ritual is the totality of practices concerned with sacred things,” much has changed.

In spite of various doubts and critics, research into rituals contains concepts that can lead to approaches that are particularly important for any field of historical studies. Asked for a common definition, one can, in my opinion, use the one by the American cultural anthropologist Conrad Kottak, who sees rituals as “behavior that is formal, stylized, repetitive, and stereotyped, performed earnestly as a social act.” For medieval studies, the definition given by the German historian Gerd Althoff has proved influential. He recognises rituals as “chains of actions of a complex nature [that] are repeated by actors in certain circumstances in the same or similar ways, and, if this happens deliberately, with the conscious goal of familiarity.”

In spite of the fact that much has changed since Durkheim, the sphere of religion still represents one of the most important areas of research, although the range of “ritual” has broadened from mainly religious emphasis to a social and cultural study field covering more or less any aspect of human life. Research into rituals also can clearly show how religious and secular space intermingle frequently.

Some multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies have dealt with the transformation of ritual practices during the Middle Ages and have stated that ritual and its performativity are to be seen as a process. One has to be aware that rituals are generally not static and unchangeable, concerning their def-

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9 Ibid., 71–87.
10 See, e.g., Nils Holger Petersen et al., eds., The Appearances of Medieval Rituals: The Play of Construction and Modification (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), passim. See also the research of the German Sonderforschungsbereich 619 “Ritualdynamik” (Collaborative Research Centre 619 “Ritual Dynamics”), founded in 2002, representing a large interdisciplinary research collective that exclusively deals with rituals, their dynamics, variation, transformation and change (http://www.ritualdynamik.de/index.php?id=1&L=1).
11 See Catherine Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 210: “Part of the dilemma of ritual change lies in the simple fact that rituals tend to present themselves as the unchanging, time-honored customs of an enduring community,” and ibid., 211: “Despite … evidence for change, it is nonethe-
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nition as well as the emphasis of the interest in them, and with regard to the studied actions and practices themselves. The transformation and variability of rituals and ritual studies has to be considered in any research.

My contribution intends to deal with such aspects of the variability of rituals in connection with late medieval images:

• on the one hand, with regard to their content;
• on the other hand, concerning their function and usage (although closely connected with content).13

I will concentrate on images from religious space and will use Central European visual evidence, in particular.

Studying the perception and use of late medieval religious images, one is confronted with different levels of the beholders’ experience of closeness to the images’ contents, a closeness that made it easier to connect with the images and that “vivified the interaction between human beings and their spiritual destiny,” as Marilyn Aronberg Lavin emphasised in her *The Place of Narrative*.16

Such integration of well-known or recognisable types of objects, situations and actions familiar to the beholder out of her or his own life or environment is less quite true that ritual activities generally tend to resist change and often do so more effectively than other forms of social custom.”

12 See ibid., 252: “No ritual stands by itself. It is always embedded in a thick context of traditions, changes, tensions, and unquestioned assumptions and practices. Ritual is a way that people can act in the world.”


certainly involved different realisations and, therefore, different types and meanings of closeness. This has to be analysed in consideration of distinct artists, patrons, beholders, and their ways of participation in the visual message.

I would like to offer some examples of visual constructions and representations of ritual actions, which I think clearly show differences, modifications and variability. I understand these ritual actions in terms of the above-mentioned definition of Gerd Althoff: “chains of actions of a complex nature . . . repeated by actors in certain circumstances in the same or similar ways, . . . with the conscious goal of familiarity.”

If one is thus aware of the repetitive character of ritual actions, but also aware of ritual dynamics, transformation and variability, one certainly has to ask to what extent both of these statements can fit together without losing their relevance. To deal with this problem, I would like to concentrate on aspects of visual representation and participation in religious space, with the help of three examples of ritual action that are regularly depicted in and presented by late medieval art: (1) the Journey and Adoration of the Magi, (2) the Last Judgement, and (3) the search for protection under the cloak of the Virgin of Mercy. I see these themes and their visual representations as constructions of perseverative ritual actions, which are generally familiar and close to the beholders, ask, to some extent, for their participation, and influence their behaviour and lives. My interest does not lie in the particular representations, “but in their essential significance and their relative positions within ceremonial wholes—that is, their order.”17 One of the most important aspects is connected with the beholder’s direct and indirect participation in the performance and ritual.18


The Three Magi

We are used to visual representations of the Three Magi\(^\text{19}\) that show them adoring the baby Jesus and offering their presents, as in an Upper Austrian example from the end of the fifteenth century (fig. 1). The Magi represent worldly powers abasing themselves to venerate the newborn King. The image offers the beholder a better comprehension of the story from the Gospel. The entourage of the Kings may increase the strength and effect of the ritual action’s message (fig. 2).

This rich entourage might be seen as a kind of basis for another type of visual representation of the Journey of the Magi and the Adoration, which offers a different, additional and stronger type of closeness than these two prestigious panels from winged altarpieces. One comes across a modified Journey and Adoration of the Magi which increases the impact of the message for, and the participation of, lower class beholders. One finds the most impressive examples of this type in rural churches in today’s Slovenia. The Kings still represent the same worldly powers abasing themselves. But their entourage has increased. It includes not only the traditional richly equipped servants and escort, but also such different figures as a hunter with his horn and lance, and a fisherman with his rod (fig. 3). In following the Three Kings, along with the rich members of the entourage, they offer a contrast that can be recognised as very close to rural beholders, as “you and me,” who are on our way to adore the baby Jesus. They are mostly presented at the eye level of the beholder standing in the church.

There are a number of such examples of this kind in the wall painting of the Magi’s Journey and Adoration in the filial church of the little village of Hrastovlje in northern Istria. Below the Kings and their rich entourage, there is, for instance, a peasant carrying eggs as a present for the baby Jesus (fig. 4).\(^\text{20}\) At Gradišče pri Divači, a cook takes part in the journey (fig. 5). Sometimes, one can find humorous or satirical details in depictions of this type of lower class escort which, on the one hand, can increase closeness and, on the other hand, augments the variety of people who join the Magi to adore the newborn Lord: offering the message that everybody is taking part in the performance. Two hunters with their hares can be found at Hrastovlje; a dog wants to steal one of the hares, which results in a fart by the hunter who is


\(^{20}\) Concerning the fresco cycle in Hrastovlje, see Marijan Zadnikar, *Hrastovlje: Romanska arhitektura in goitske freske* [Hrastovlje: Romanesque architecture and Gothic frescoes] (Ljubljana: Družina, 1988).
Fig. 1. *Adoration of the Magi*, end of the fifteenth century, panel painting. Kremsmünster (Upper Austria), gallery of the Benedictine abbey. All figures of this chapter: courtesy of Institut für Realienkunde, Krems an der Donau (Austria).
Fig. 2. Adoration of the Magi, with large entourage. Journey and Adoration of the Magi, ca. 1490, panel painting. Klosterneuburg (Lower Austria), museum of the Augustinian abbey.
carrying the animal (fig. 6). At Gradišče pri Divači, two jesters are depicted (fig. 7), one of them showing his naked buttocks to the other, again visualising humorous aspects that certainly could motivate the beholder’s gaze and “participation,” and, as a result, also make the spiritual message more accessible to the beholder. This type of indirect participation in the Journey and the Adoration, constantly repeated, not just once a year, broadens the context, involving every living being: also disabled humans, wild women and men, and animals.

Comparing the images representing mainly or only the Kings abasing themselves to adore the newborn Lord with those that present a concentration on everybody joining the journey to the baby Jesus, particularly also from the beholders’ environment, i.e. you and me, demonstrates the following:

- the same general (spiritual) message for any beholder;
- the realisation of the message in distinct ways, by the visual representation of a different type of participation.

The latter still occurs in other ways, for instance, by the portrayal of the participation of recognisable members of leading groups of society, i.e. by personalisation. One well-known example of this kind is a panel painting from a winged altarpiece most probably produced at the end of the fifteenth century for the ruling Habsburg family. There, the decisive element of participation is presented in an individualised and personalised way: Emperor Maximilian I is