Out of the Stream
Out of the Stream
Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Mural Painting

Edited by

Luís Urbano Afonso and Vítor Serrão

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The editors
Luis Urbano Afonso and Vítor Serrão
INTRODUCTION

LUÍS URBANO AFONSO AND VÍTOR SERRÃO

When Vasari¹ wrote, compiled and organised the first biographies of artists, resurrecting a literary practice from antiquity, he presented them according to a chronological sequence that was almost always dependent on the teacher-pupil relationship, repeated successively, generation after generation. However, more than the linear nature of this time sequence or the direct descent between generations of artists, what really cements Vasari’s narrative is the combination of two things—one very old, the other much more recent. On the one hand, like Pliny the Elder and other classic authors who wrote about art, Vasari uses biological metaphors (genesis, maturity, decline) to explain artistic evolution, gauging the quality of the art via its capacity to imitate nature and its ability to be confused with the real thing. On the other, Vasari adds a triumphalist ideology of re-discovery, emulation and the overtaking of Ancient Art by a small group of Italian artists. Mural painting was ever-present in the construction of this great narrative. It was via this specific pictorial genre that many of the artists that Vasari wrote about and venerated made their contribution to the “development” of the art of painting. This presence is found at the moment when the light dawned again on the horizon, with Giotto in Assisi and Padua,² until the moment it reached its zenith, with Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel.³

Over time, however, mural painting ceded the important place it had occupied in Art History’s founding narrative, and little by little found itself on the margins of historiographical discourse. The reasons for the increasing marginal situation of wall painting are essentially related to the fact that this type of painting is tied up with architecture and cannot leave its original spot, making it difficult for connoisseurs to see it close up and, in particular, with the fact that it cannot be made into a saleable object that can be part of a private art or “universal museum” collection. The pleasure and prestige of possessing and

² idem, vol. I, pp. 304-307 (for Assisi) and p. 323 (for Padua).
exhibiting a Raphael, a Masaccio or a Fra Angelico is difficult to match with the wall paintings of these masters. When the first great European art collections were being put together, especially in those royal houses with hegemonic cultural and political pretensions, the kaleidoscope of masters and artistic periods focussed on marble, bronze, wood, canvas or paper—rarely on painted plaster-work. Despite a few attempts, the museums of the 19th and 20th century were also unable to find a place for a kind of painting that was difficult to make tradable and that was economically, culturally and artistically valuable.

History of Art has changed considerably since Vasari. In recent decades that which was considered marginal has become the main object of analysis for professionals in the field. Women artists, heretofore forgotten, have finally stepped into the limelight. Works that were considered as minor are now considered to be as interesting as the work of the great masters. Although the differentiation between “Art” and “art” still lingers, the most insignificant or inapt artistic object of the past retains enormous potential for the study of art and the culture of a particular society. The interaction between the artistic centre and periphery has gained new perspective and value with the studies of authors such as Carlo Ginzburg and Enrico Castelnuovo. History of art seems to have left behind its evolutionist model and biological metaphor to focus on the analysis of the “texts” and “contexts” of production and reception of art objects. In more recent times it has also become simpler to access image databases. Via the Internet, research is quicker and, sometimes, more creative (with unexpected links), as well as having easy access to thousands of virtually unpublished images. In short, not only has the field of Art History been considerably extended, bringing marginal artistic traditions and genres to the core of the subject but also the historiographic discourse itself has sought consolidation within new paradigms.

The subject of this book arises from recent developments in the inventory, preservation and study of mural paintings from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, particularly those from what can be considered the periphery of Europe, from both the point of view of geography and of historiography. In terms of space, this concerns mainly Iberia, Scandinavia or Romania, but in terms of historiography it also includes mural paintings produced for parish churches and noble houses located throughout the rural or mountainous areas of Great Britain, France, Germany and even Italy—a heterogeneous region, which has informed much of the traditional formalist and evolutionary approaches to

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5 An example is the database of images of Danish wall paintings, created and developed by Axel Bolvig: www.kalkmalerier.dk.
Art History. These developments allowed a number of studies to appear, which sought to explore new paths within the field of the historiography of mural painting. This can be seen in the volume edited by Peter Klein, on the correlation between the function and the location of wall paintings on the inside of buildings, or in the two studies that Marcia Kupfer dedicated to French Roman wall painting. Both of these studies were very aware of the function of images, be it in correlation with the establishing of the Gregorian Reform, be it in the association between the images painted on the walls and the thaumaturgic role of relics. The book that Axel Bolvig and Phillip Lindley edited in 2003 also includes various articles dedicated to this genre of painting. The articles in this book are a good example of the benefits that the study of peripheral wall painting can bring to Art History, be it for the perspective used in those texts, be it for the peripheral nature of many of the works that were analysed.

The aim of this book is to demonstrate the vitality that the study of wall painting in peripheral regions can bring to this discipline. The articles that we have collected in this book are overwhelmingly about wall paintings that would be hard pressed to be considered part of the master narrative of Art History. They are studies regarding regions and themes that are rarely present in the mainstream of the discipline, but their common thread is their focus on the functional dimension of mural paintings and on the complex interrelation between image, audience, social context and everyday life. From Denmark to Portugal, from graffiti to secular painting, from the orthodox monasteries of Moldavia to the noble residences of Tirol, from Giotto to anonymous and sometimes almost amateur painters, the studies gathered in this book place very distinct artistic realities side by side but offer complementary perspectives and insights. One of the most interesting aspects of this book, we believe, is the observation that small, half-destroyed works of art, works located in forgotten regions and places or works using apparently banal themes can give us richer and more complex information than a lot of works used as the paradigms for the stylistic changes in European painting. Furthermore, in comparison to the majority of easel painting from the same period, now preserved in museums, mural painting has the great advantage of being physically attached to its

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original and intended location. Thus it offers direct information about the specificity of contexts of production and reception, and is therefore a privileged field for micro-historical and anthropological inquiries.

This book is made up of eighteen studies organised into four parts. In the first part, entitled *Looking at pictures*, we find four articles about completely different regions: Denmark, the Alps, Northern Italy and Portugal. Despite using different methodologies all of these articles approach the phenomenon of the fresco from a more anthropological point of view, looking at the spoken culture and the function of images in the society of the time. The first text, written by Axel Bolvig, is an especially interesting epistemological challenge. Indeed, Bolvig considers that linguistics and iconography are of little use when it comes to understanding the Danish wall paintings of the 15th and 16th century, doubting whether it is possible for verbal discourse to effectively translate visual discourse and also questioning the static form that historians use when analysing images. In these paintings the secular and the profane blend together and the images are distributed in a free and non-linear fashion, while surrounding the observer, creating random visual associations and paths that cannot be crystallised into photographs or into iconographic designations. Bolvig believes that the images in question were for an illiterate audience that was unaware of the vast majority of religious iconography, which is why he prefers to analyse them within the spoken culture of rural communities that had little religious culture and who would more easily recognise their day-to-day experiences in the images rather than any official discourse from the Church.

The interaction between spoken culture and literary culture is one of the issues dealt with by Harald Wolter von dem Knesebeck in a text dedicated to the late-medieval painting of the manorial residences of Tirol and Trentino. The author interrelates the topography of the residential space and the themes in the painting, mainly dedicated to moral questions associated with the virtues of the “House” and its inhabitants. Almost always organized via antithetic contrasts, such as the one established between the prudent hostess and the women who pick the fruit from the *Phallus Tree*, these secular paintings transmit a host of moral values associated with the honour of the “House” and those that its owners should possess. The concern with the maintaining of the “natural order of things”, namely in the relationship between men and women, explains the allegorical discourse based on the control of carnal desire, satirising the situations where that order and hierarchy are turned upside down or giving a warning about the tragic consequences that will follow via the themes of *Judgement of Paris*, *Wheel of Fortune/Love*, *Phallus Tree*, *Aristotle and Phyllis* or *Samson and Delilah*. 
Véronique Plesch analyses the secular graffiti incised over religious painting in Arborio, in the Piedmont region of Italy. These inscriptions transmit how this small community in the North of Italy experienced natural and astronomical phenomena, such as floods, poverty, fires, epidemics or the passing of comets and military events. They also represent a certain notion of communal memory, with some monuments being the object of this type of graffiti for four centuries. Sometimes, the number of inscriptions is such that they almost obliterate the sacred painting that hosts them. The majority of these graffiti were painted on iconic images and, in the case of the references to epidemics, the favourite “canvas” was one of the images of the anti-plague saints. The author considers that the practice of recording this type of event on sacred images should be understood as one of the ways that the local community dealt with their fears and, especially, as a way of their overcoming traumatic experiences and memories.

Luís U. Afonso’s study is based on a quantitative analysis of Portuguese wall painting between c.1490 and c.1550. Through the identification of the type of painting that predominated (iconic vs. narrative) and the most represented themes the author proposes that the essential motivation of those that commissioned these works was the production of apotropaic and preventative images, especially representing the anti-plague saints that would protect the local communities from epidemics and other ills. Another dominant tendency is related to the protection of the souls of the living and the dead, with the noteworthy number of intervening saints represented. One of the most interesting aspects of this study is found in the lack of importance given to the production of narrative and didactic discourse of this era, while the importance of the decorative component of the paintings was much more significant.

The second part of the book, entitled Mural paintings, workshop practices and its relation to other media, brings together five studies that have two things in common; all of the studies deal with wall paintings in Portugal, from the 15th to the 18th century and the all of the studies focus their attention on the practical processes involved in wall painting and its relation to other arts, such as engravings, calligraphy, manuscript decoration, tapestry. The text by Joaquim I. Caetano develops methodologies that allow different wall paintings to be identified with the same workshop, based only on the identification of the workshop’s practices and especially on their use of the same decorative stamps. In doing this the author critically analyses the formalist method of Morelli and re-evaluates the importance of individual workshop processes in wall painting.

Manuel Batoréo demonstrates the importance of the Germanic engraved models for the creation of figures, scenes and decorative elements in Portuguese painting in the first half of the 16th century, both in terms of wall painting and easel painting. To a very large extent, these engravings facilitated rapid and
direct contact with some of the innovations in other parts of Europe, contributing to a certain aggiornamento of painting in Portugal and more effective work from workshops.  

**Vítor Serrão**’s study is dedicated to an artist who, until recently, was virtually unknown, Giraldo Fernandes de Prado. The author identifies the work of the mannerist painter, both in wall and easel painting, as well as proves that he was also the author of calligraphy on a treaty kept in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University, in New York. Serrão analyses the multifaceted path of this blue-blooded artist, especially his relationship with the Portuguese humanist circles of the second half of the 16th century and the interaction between his easel painting, fresco painting and his calligraphy, highlighting its erudite nature and demonstrating the communion of forms and solutions that are found in the different artistic genre.  

**Jessica Hallett** explores how the depiction of an oriental carpet can enhance the importance of an “out-of-the-stream” mural painting in a provincial setting, and make it worthy of appreciation. Hallett focuses her attention on a late 16th century Annunciation from the Convento das Maltezas in Estremoz, where the Virgin is depicted kneeling upon a carpet which has the word *lillah* ("belonging to God") written in kufic script. The author develops an analysis that gives some prominence to the continuation of the Muslim custom of taking visual and tactile pleasure from the oriental carpet, as well as to the prominent place it held in the lives and households of Iberian women, two features that can explain why the carpet became a floor furnishing for prayer in convents.  

This second part concludes with an article from **Patrícia Monteiro**, where she studies the way ceiling painters from the 17th and 18th century interacted with the late-medieval architecture of the Alentejo. Instead of destroying the previous architecture during this period, the artists were able to create a symbiotic relationship with the network of ribs and late-gothic vault cloths, incorporating them with frames or using them as decorative and compositive elements in the frescoes of the time, renovating religious places and making them more contemporary according to Gothic taste.  

The third part of the book, entitled **Death and eschatology**, collects three studies that all focus on wall paintings in funeral areas. The first study, by **Fernando Gutiérrez Baños**, consists of a statistical study of wall painting within the context of funerals carried out during the reigns of Castille and León throughout the 13th and 14th century, which corresponds to 20% of all preserved wall paintings. Unlike the funereal sculpture of the same time, which has been the object of countless studies, this wall painting has rarely been part of any histiographical research. The author presents a general picture of these paintings, in terms of their iconography, typology and topography. One of the aspects highlighted by the author relates to the interaction that exists between
Maja Dujakovic takes us to Paris and studies the *Danse Macabre* painted around 1425 on one of the walls of the Cemetery of the Innocent. This painting, like other similar representations, has a generic moralist sense that is associated with the inevitability and universality of death and the transitory nature of human life and material possessions. According to the author, however, the political and social context in which the painting was created (France was occupied by the English, without a king and at a time when it was coming out of the Great Schism of the Western Church) permits a more specific understanding, namely the interpretation of this painting as a political allegory, where the main players are the Church hierarchy, secular power and Paris University.

The last study of this section is by Marnie Leist and looks at the representation of the *Coronation of the Virgin in Paradise and Hell* by Giovanni da Modena in the Bolognini chapel in the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna. According to the author, this painting reflects the political alliances of the chapel’s patron, Bartolommeo Bolognini, and serves as a proclamation of the city’s desire for jurisdictional freedom. According to Leist this painting emphasizes the possibility of salvation directly through Mary, without the blessing of the Pope.

The last part of the book, entitled *Paintings, religion and politics*, brings together six studies. In contrast to most of the articles in this book, two of the studies are related to paintings or painters that are normally found in the discipline’s master narrative. Brendan Cassidy analyses the relationship between mural painting, the construction of civic identity and the manipulation of public opinion in some of the Italian city-states, namely the monarchy of Naples, the quasi-democratic oligarchies of Florence and Siena, and the despotic regimes of Milan and Verona. Drawing on a range of evidence, visual and textual, this article situates some Italian frescoes within the historical and ideological circumstances in which they were painted and indicate their social and political functions. Andrea Lermer’s study looks at the well-known frescoes Giotto painted in the Arena Chapel in Padua, highlighting some of Giotto’s overlooked innovations. Drawing on the cycle of Virtues and Vices, the author highlights some of Giotto’s inventions, both in artistic as well as intellectual terms. Lermer raises the question again of who devised the programme for the cycle at the base of the Chapel and discusses the painter's role in refining the iconography and choosing the appropriate artistic means to depict it. Finally, the author emphasises Giotto’s acquaintance with the literary milieu of early humanism and suggests the influence of Francesco da Barberino on Giotto.
From Italy we move to England. Kathleen Ashley analyses a narrative cycle of wall painting found in the refectory of the old priory of Saint Foxy in Horsham. The painting dates back to the 13th century and corresponds to a foundational narrative. Throughout the nine scenes this cycle illustrates the vicissitudes that the two people who founded the priory experienced in the South of France at the beginning of the 12th century and serves, above all, to highlight the role of the saint in freeing the pilgrims/founders from captivity. The author fundamentally focuses on the relationship between secular patronage and ecclesiastical institutions, exploring the role that the cycle of images would have had on the monastic imagination and memory of the old religious institution.

Sarah Glover analyses the murals of the Eton College Chapel, one of the finest examples of fifteenth-century English wall painting. The author places this large Marian miracle cycle, painted in grisaille, within the context of the devotions it supported, particularly in opposition to Wycliffe and the Lollards. Glover emphasizes the selective choice of miracle scenes and the importance assumed by the Latinate inscriptions running along the frames, which transformed the cycle into a pictorial sermon defending the Marian devotions celebrated at Eton.

We go southbound again with Antonio Urquizar Herrera, to Andalucia, more specifically to one of the various aspects of the process of transforming the Old Great Mosque of Córdoba into a Christian Cathedral. The author focuses his attention on mannerist wall paintings of the Sixteenth Century tabernacle chapel, painted by Cesare Arbasia, and particularly on the way the link between the sacred Christian history and the Islamic legacy of this building was made. The author studies the iconography of this fresco campaign, which shows the death of the local martyrs at the hands of the Muslim rulers and reflects the ideological implications of this counter-reformist pictorial campaign, especially its attempt to unsuccessfully “domesticate” the Islamic and Gothic memories and forms of the place.

The last study, by Simion Doru Cristea, is quite unlike the other texts in this book, not only because it deals with a region even more peripheral in terms of art historiography, Romania, but also because it uses a perspective that is very distinct from the one normally found in this field. The author looks at the mural paintings of Romanian monasteries from a philosophical and spiritual perspective rather than a historical one, offering an interesting challenge to art historians, who normally neglect this aspect of the objects they study. This last text constitutes a fine epilogue to a book that intends to awaken interest in out of the stream medieval and Renaissance wall painting.
PART I:

LOOKING AT PICTURES
CHAPTER ONE

MURAL PAINTINGS, ORAL SOCIETY, VISUAL LINEARITY: THE ACT OF LOOKING AT A PICTURE

AXEL BOLVIG

Where the spirit does not work with the hand there is no art
—Leonardo da Vinci

Introduction

My theory is that late medieval Danish wall paintings represent oral illiterate society: what ordinary man heard and saw, experienced and expressed himself. How do I in the best way put forward this hypothesis? When writing this article (2006) a great Rembrandt exhibition is taking place at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The British filmmaker Peter Greenaway is working on a project related to the Rembrandt’s The Night Watch. His idea is to demonstrate, that in order to understand baroque painting you must skip the idea that the images are anchored to linguistics. You have to look at Rembrandt as a director and to interpret the contents by means of dramatization, music and action. Yes indeed Greenaway is looking for the soundtrack behind the painting. This is what I am trying to do with when dealing with late medieval Danish wall paintings (Bolvig, 2006). The wall paintings are bound to action, drama, music, shouting, noise and the human body more than to biblical text. I interpret the Leonardo da Vinci quotation in this spirit.

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1 http://www.jimpoz.com/quotes/speaker.asp?speakerid=791
2 This article is an elaboration of a paper given in 2004 (Bolvig, 2005).
3 At Lisbon’s Conference I used a Keynote program by which I presented computerized video-presentations. Consequently this print only offers a limited version of my paper.
Discursive versus non-discursive

It is necessary to underline the differences between linear text and non-linear image. As soon as we try to present an image we start a chain of linguistic interpretations. We transform the contents of a non-discursive to a discursive system, we verbalise visually. Michael Baxandall (1992: 3) refers to the problem when writing «Again, there is an awkwardness, at least, about dealing with a simultaneously available field—which is what a picture is—in a medium as temporally linear as language: for instance, it is difficult to avoid tendentious reordering of the picture by mentioning one thing before another.»

Now information technology has enabled us to move around within the images and thus create a discursive visual story. These new possibilities of visual linear description might be the answer to the continuation of the Baxandall quotation «but if a picture is simultaneously available in its entirety, looking at a picture is as temporally linear as language. Does or might a description of a picture reproduce the act of looking at a picture? The lack of fit here is formally obvious in an incompatibility between the gait of scanning a picture and the gait of ordered words and concepts» (ibidem). Now the researcher has access to the tools of creating a temporally visual description.4

It is relevant to indicate that at least Danish medieval painters always refer to their decoration of the total interior of say a church in the singular, pictura.5 The walls and vaults of the church constitute the frame of this «picture» so in a way you enter into the image. You are not standing in front of the image on the contrary you are surrounded by it. When the architecture acts as the framing function no splitting in a space next to and in front of the picture is taking place. There is nothing next to the image and the space of the spectator virtually is in the middle of and sometimes under the image. The spectator has invaded the frame and becomes part of the painted decoration that forms the image. The optimal way of representing the painters’ pictura would be through 3D exposures. By this you virtually place yourself within the church, the frame.

It is also worth to emphasize the difference at least in the Danish material between two-dimensional wall paintings and three-dimensional objects of art. Inscriptions on respectively the former and the latter indicate an interesting difference between the notions connected to them. The paintings are perceived as objects of the creation while three-dimensional objects are perceived as individual beings. On baptismal fonts, procession crosses and altarpieces scrolls referring to their creation are representing statements of the object itself as an

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4 I used the programs Photo to Movie and Final Cut.
individual ‘living’ creature: *me fecit*. Inscriptions in wall paintings on the contrary read *hoc fecit* (Bolvig, 2003: 40-44).

### Word and image in an illiterate society

Written versus oral communication is in a way a central topic in the wall paintings. In Fanefjord church we find a wall painting representing two women sitting on a bench gesticulating, which is a conventional sign of talk or gossip (Fig. 1-1).

![Fig. 1-1. Fanefjord church. Two women are talking and Tutivillus is writing down their gossip. 1500-25. Photo: Axel Bolvig.](image)

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6 The altarpiece in Århus Cathedral donated 1479 by the bishop and made by Bernt Notke has an inscription that reads «*Bernardus fecit me*» (*Ny dansk kunsthistorie*, 1993: 161); a procession cross dated 1150-80 in the National Museum has an inscription that reads «*Those who believe in the Crucified shall in their prayers commemorate Liutger who has carved me ...*» (idem: 52); the inscriptions on the Romanesque baptismal fonts of Baarse, Lundby and Kastrup churches read: «*Bondo Friso me fecit*»; on the font of Tikøb church the inscription reads «*Alexander me fecit in onore dni nostri...*» (Bolvig, 1992: 215). It is worth to point at the famous inscription at tympanum sculpture of St Lazare, Autun, (1120-30) ‘*Gislebertus hoc fecit*’.

7 [www.kalkmalerier.dk](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk) search: fecit.

8 [www.kalkmalerier.dk](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk) search: 12/12.
They represent oral society. Next to them a devil is writing down their talking. Both simultaneous actions are related to linearity in time while they are represented by an image functioning in space. It is interesting to notice that in an illiterate society the devil is a master of writing and reading. The observing and writing devil named Tutivillus intends to use his writing against the women at the Day of Judgement. As a matter of fact it is a very negative connotation attached to the knowledge of writing. Furthermore one could add that the image is more than a sign of talk? It indicates that talk is a female matter; a matter of married women and a matter of public space (there is no indication of privacy). But talk is only dangerous when misused by the devil’s writings.

Let this example reverse the above-mentioned question about discursive and non-discursive information. Is it possible by an image to illustrate the linear linguistic contents of the Bible? It leads to a crucial question: Does iconography in fact lead us away from the visual reality of medieval spectators?

**Oral society**

Quite a lot of subjects demonstrate that the wall paintings refer to oral communication. In Brunnby church St Andrew is depicted preaching or reading aloud from a book to the inhabitants of a town (Fig. 1-2).

![Fig. 1-2. Brunnby church. St Andrew preaching – in vain. c.1500. Photo: Axel Bolvig.](image-url)
The image displays the efforts of an erudite man endowed with the art of reading trying to present the written text to an illiterate public. Reading aloud was common in the Middle Ages but in order to catch the attention of ordinary man you had to rely on your ability of speaking or even better of telling stories. While St Andrew is reading aloud or preaching, the inhabitants of the town are occupied by building a town wall and apparently they do not care. Nobody is listening. In addition the man’s head to the right might indicate a great hangover, which makes any mental attention impossible. Consequently the image is as well a depiction of «business as usual» with St Andrew as a remote figure. I think that a linear visualised representation of this image would offer a better understanding than the iconographical label St. Andrew preaching. In short, iconography says «St Andrew is preaching» but analogue interpretation ads: «in vain». You can write about it in prose and today you can also demonstrate it on the terms of the image itself. Anyhow any solitaire keyword is far too narrow and unified as a reference to an image.

Fig. 1-3. Ottestrup church. The Fox and the Gees. c. 1500. Photo: Axel Bolvig.
Depictions of the fable of the fox and the geese have their own iconography being part of a widespread and well-known fable but they do also deal with the use and misuse of the spoken word and the reaction to this (Fig. 1-3). It is worth to point out the fact that the audience is listening intensely to the fox contrary to the townspeople who do not pay attention to the apostle’s reading aloud from a book. Do these two different depictions of «oral communication» (quoting a text versus speaking without manuscript) indicate an indifference towards religion and an absorption in other matters? Under all circumstances the subjects are dealing with oral and illiterate and not written and elitist society.

The connection between oral society and image can be found in several depictions. In Lojt church as in other churches we find that the painted ornamentation is growing out of the mouths of heads, which are painted around built-in holes in the vaults. The ornamentation is bound to what is spoken or shouted—verbal utterances—but not to text. The painted expressions stem

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9 www.kalkmalerier.dk search: sh/ 181
10 www.kalkmalerier.dk search: 19/ 21 (Lojt church); 134-22.jpg (Vester Sotrup church).
from heads of fools and jesters and not from biblical persons. In Gudum church the head belongs to a very negative person. He is painted in profile, his nose is broken and you see his teeth. He is almost pulling the ornamentation out of his mouth. One is tempted to ask: how shall we appreciate the wall paintings in this church? They originate from the body of an outcast, they are created through his mouth as if he is vomiting and they represent unnatural nature. They have very little to do with text but with all that is passing through the mouth including, of course, spoken words (Fig. 1-4).

One could ask: how far are we indeed in our conception of medieval religion from our forefather’s beliefs? Apparently the wall paintings stem from and belong to oral maybe even musical society. In Vrangstrup church the ornamentation is growing out of a bagpipe played by a man depicted in profile (Fig. 1-5).

Fig. 1-5. Vrangstrup church. The ornamentation is growing out of a bagpipe. 1490-1500. Photo: Axel Bolvig.

I question if it is reasonable to link the subjects of the wall paintings to text-related iconography? Medieval rural parishioners did not know the written bible. But they knew of the stories that were told. If their vocabulary consisted of not
more than 300 words how did they perceive and describe these images? What did people see? What did they say about what they saw?

People’s attitude towards the religious contents of the wall paintings might be reflected by some strange—in our modern view—obscene configurations. In Nørre Saltum church in the midst of an elegant ornamentation in the chancel we find a man exposing his bare buttocks and pointing at his anus (Fig. 1-6).12

![Image](image.jpg)

**Fig. 1-6. Nørre Saltum church. A man showing a «fuck up» sign. 1520-30. Photo: Axel Bolvig.**

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11 As late as in 19th century a lord of a manor estimated that his peasants only had one hundred words at their disposal (Basbøll and Bleses, 2004: 43).
12 [www.kalkmalerier.dk](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk) search: 28-3/64.
A representation of the Last supper in the chancel of Smørum church is surrounded by acrobats one of which is whipped in his buttocks so hard by a woman that he is shitting down in the head of a man pissing in a bucket–while Jesus is performing the Eucharist! Some other examples are either whitewashed over or exposed to retouch. In my optic such depictions represent a bodily attitude or response to the religious scenes, which–through telling–stem from the text.

**Did the medieval spectator know religious iconography?**

Many Danish depictions that we define as staunch iconographic subjects are labelled with captions indicating the iconographic contents as if ordinary spectators did not know these contents. But these captions never use the strict vocabulary of iconography. On the contrary they are drawn up as descriptions.

In the late 16th century–half a century after the Reformation in 1536–the bishop of Odense, Jacob Madsen travelled around in his diocese on visitation. Sometimes when looking at the imagery of the local churches he did not know the religious iconographic contents. He resorted to analogue description. For example *St. Gregory’s Mass* was described as Jesus standing on a table. Apparently his ignorance was not unique. In 1548 in Sulsted the local squire let his church decorate. Under the individual subjects there are inscriptions in vernacular explaining the iconographic contents. The inscription under Fig. 1-7 reads: «Here is the Message from the Angel to the Shepherds» (left) and «Here is the Birth of our Lord in Bethlehem» (right). Was it really necessary to clarify the visual contents? And what did it matter if the spectators could not read?

The iconographic ignorance of the Lutheran bishop might be understandable when he is confronted with Catholic imagery, but the post-reformatory decoration of Sulsted church is in accordance with Lutheran imagery. A closer examination of the database on www.kalkmalerier.dk reveals a similar use of clarifying captions during all five hundred years of decoration campaigns.

Anchoring captions in Danish wall paintings are never connected to subjects depicting daily life including the devil. Does this mean that people had no problem recognising the latter motifs from daily life and that the donators and painters were unsure about the parishioners’ knowledge of the religious contents?

If it is so, we must admit that (art) historians’ use of iconography just is a means of indexing images which tells very little of the understanding and the

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13 [www.kalkmalerier.dk search: Sulsted](#)

14 For further examples see [www.kalkmalerier.dk search: hic](#)
function of the paintings in the Middle Ages. Indeed the use of iconography might be misleading our research in «What the Spectator Sees» (Wollheim, 1992). If daily life depictions needed no explanation it is tempting to suggest that illiterate spectators first of all saw what they recognized from their own experiences both on a denotative and a connotative level. It is questionable to which extent institutionalized belief was present in such connotations.

In *Iconography at the Crossroads* Irving Lavin (1993: 33) writes «that late in his life Panofsky gave up the term iconology altogether: ‘get rid of it, we don’t need it any more». Later in his article Irving Lavin writes «I must first confess that, personally, I sometimes think iconography is an invention of the devil. At least, it is a devilishly duplicitous notion that marries two things almost genetically incompatible, an abstract idea called an image, and a concrete object called a work of art» (idem: 38).

**Analogy**

If the medieval illiterate spectator just saw what he recognised from his daily life experiences and notions, we must try to supply iconography with the
connotative world of daily life with its imaginations and restricted vocabulary. In his volume *Les mots et les choses* (The Order of Things) Michel Foucault (1992: 30) writes:

«This passage quotes ‘a certain Chinese Encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that animals are divided into:
  - Belonging to the emperor
  - Embalmed
  - Tame
  - Sucking pigs
  - Sirens
  - Fabulous
  - Stray dogs
  - Included in the present classifications
  - Frenzied
  - Innumerable
  - Drawn with a very fine camel brush
  - Having just broken the water pitcher
  - That from a long way off look like flies.

In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that … is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of [us] thinking that.»

My concern is that most images—e.g. medieval wall paintings—first of all contain a connotative world that is situated outside the conventional and/or analogue realm—respectively referring to text and material things. To define this external world I can refer to Roland Barthes’ «rhétoriques de l’image» and Norman Bryson’s «inter-individual space». It is a creative task trying to understand these connotative outer meanings, which actually very often is the main concern of visual expression. It has little to do with analysis but much to do with interpretation.

Today visual experience is influenced by mass communication and mass production of images on paper and screen, which create a passive consumption. We recognise and interpret images on the basis of our mental image store. On the contrary visual experience of medieval man was connected to the surrounding society filled with people, movement, talking, shouting, drama, music and consequently active participation, all of them being relevant manifestations in Peter Greenaway’s project. Passion plays are part of this manifold living society. Mitchell B. Merback (1999) has convincingly shown the connections between devotional practice, punishment and judicial spectatorship and religious art.