Aleksandra Koutny-Jones

Visual Cultures of Death in Central Europe: Contemplation and Commemoration in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania. Leiden: Brill, 2015. Pp. xxvii + 257. Hb, 110 euros.

For some time scientific studies of the baroque era, conducted regardless of discipline, and at the same time interdisciplinary, stress and focus on its complexity and multidimensionality; the pluralist presentation announced in the title of Aleksandra Koutny-Jones's book—the subject of visual cultures of death in Central Europe—is consistent with that stream. Aleksandra Koutny-Jones is an art historian preoccupied with the characteristics of the art and architecture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; her particular academic interest focuses on the visual cultures of death in baroque art in the Kingdom of Poland, to which she dedicated her doctoral thesis and a few publications in scientific journals (including “A Noble Death: The Seventeenth-Century Oleśnicki Funerary Chapel in Tarłów,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 72 [2009]: 169–205). Thus, the book in question is a continuation of her scholarly activities and constitutes a synthetic study of the complex *memento mori* culture and profound preoccupation with death in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the early modern period, with particular stress on conspicuous contemplation and extravagant commemoration. The theme of mortality was grounded firmly within social life and the public sphere, which is frequently highlighted by the author. She also notes that the visual cultures of death were primarily played out in a public forum. The content and construction of the work and its manner of reasoning show that the book is addressed to international readers who desire to deepen their knowledge of art and, in a wider sense, the baroque era, and look into the specifics of a significant aspect of the culture of the era that occurred within the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In Polish scientific literature (both within the history of arts and in a wider sense, specifically cultural studies, anthropology, literary studies) the phenomenon of the visualization of death in the culture of the baroque has long been a significant research problem; in Western European scholarship, however, dealing with death in much of Central Europe considered as the particular region (as defined by Thomas DaCosta-Kaufmann in his *Toward a Geography of Art* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004]), including Poland-Lithuania, has not been treated sufficiently. So even the very introduction of issues related to imaginary and subjects typical of baroque art of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (from the first half of the sixteenth century up to the partition in 1795) certainly gives credit to the author.

In subsequent chapters, Koutny-Jones distinguishes and concentrates on what she considers to be the most important issues and subjects, which are imaginatively and eloquently illustrated or analyzed through a variety of works and objects, ranging from painting and prints to sculpture, textiles, and architecture. These are personifications of Death and the proliferation of death-related imagery; indigenous variations of the macabre (the “Dance of Death”); transformation in the visual culture of commemoration towards extravagance and opulence; funerary ceremonials and their evocations (coffin portraits, funerary decorations, funeral monuments and architecture); “landscapes of Death” exemplified by the proliferation of funerary chapels (domed chapels in particular) and Jerusalem sites. Recognition and scientific elaboration of the above questions, recognized by the author as specific to the cultural and artistic background of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, is not completely original (it has been long functioning in Polish scholarly literature). However, her ambition is to place it in a wider, European context. In that respect it is particularly important to highlight the role and influence of Western European graphics as the source for iconography and content (especially *dances macabres*, to which the author previously devoted a considerable paper, “Dancing with Death in Poland,” *Print Quarterly* 22, no. 1 [March 2005]: 14–31), which were adapted to the specific situation of Poland-Lithuania. In the case of artistic models for domed chapels, she demonstrates multiple and complex sources rooted in a cultural exchange with various European states over a significant period of time combined with processes of architectural replication and adaptation within the Commonwealth itself.

The profound cultural concern with mortality undoubtedly left a strong stamp on the culture of the Polish and Lithuanian baroque. Among the reasons and, at the same time, as a significant historic, social, and religious framework, the author names the impact of the Counter-Reformation and the multiple afflictions suffered by Poland-Lithuania in the seventeenth century particularly. Again, the thought is not original. However, it should be highlighted that such information will be relevant to readers of the book from beyond Poland and Lithuania, unfamiliar with the history of that region—an enormous, multinational political entity—and the specifics of its system. Thus, the author incorporates a glossary of specific Polish terms and she rightly devotes the whole first chapter to sketching the characteristics of the Commonwealth as a state, and describing its hierarchical stratification within society with its predominant class—the numerous *szlachta* (nobles), artistic patronage, religious conditions, the most important historical factors (warfare and plagues). Koutny-Jones skilfully uses available archival and printed sources as well as extensive secondary sources (in great measure studied

by Polish scientists). Moreover, it should be noted that while discussing as a symptomatic aspect of the Polish-Lithuanian baroque an obsession with death, the author actually does not refer to the national myth of Sarmatism born in the sixteenth century (according to which the Polish gentry had descended from the ancient Sarmatians) as the dominant culture, ideology, and unifying belief of the *szlachta*. Although today the notion and significance of Sarmatism has been re-evaluated, it still remains an important, representative point of reference for the era and also for its imaginary and “visual cultures.”

The author does not focus her attention on specific questions concerning the activities and spirituality of the Society of Jesuits in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, however analyzing frameworks for visual cultures of death she admits the pivotal role of the order in dissemination of the modern artistic and architectural forms following the Council of Trent across the country. She cites the example of the Jesuit Corpus Christi Church in Nesvizh located far from contemporary cultural centers (in former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, now in central Belarus), a noticeably early copy of Il Gesù Church in Rome. Soon it was to become the mausoleum of the prominent Radziwiłł family. Koutny-Jones mentions likewise several objects situated in other Jesuits churches (for example funeral monument of Bishop Andrzej Trzebicki in the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Cracow), nonetheless the clue to their choice has not been determined by the order itself and its art, but they serve as illustrations or examples of the issues studied and interpreted by the author.

Subsequent chapters of the book contain seventy illustrations, to a great extent photographs taken by the author. It seems, however, that this kind of publication, concerning, after all, the visual culture, deserves much better pictorial material, both as to the number and framing of particular objects. Nonetheless Aleksandra Koutny-Jones's book on the visual cultures of death in early modern Poland-Lithuania, which she finds incomparable on this scale anywhere else in post-medieval Europe, is a skilful and reliable effort to introduce and analyze this intriguing subject.

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