The role of women as patrons of culture during the Middle Ages is recognized and valued without any doubt, to the extent that we are able to distinguish women as “arbiters of medieval culture.”² Like their male counterparts, women who sponsored or commissioned works of art identified and represented themselves in clearly-defined and conventional ways. Could the same be said of women artists, especially before the twelfth century?

Aside from textual evidence, most of what we know about medieval artists, whether they were male or female, is based on the inventory and analysis of signed works and “self-portraits.” My purpose is to study some of these portraits and signatures, i.e. visual and textual self-presentations, in order to suggest ways for analyzing works that we know were “made” by women. To undertake such an analysis is to transverse the fields of lexicography, art history, history, and theology. Signatures give ambiguous information about the authorship of the work of art, since the artist, the designer, the contractor, and the patron all were engaged in the process of “making,” and thus all may rightly be characterized as the creators of the work. A key part of my study, therefore, is to look closely at the implications of the verb facere (to make) when it was used to describe art production.

Women are named most consistently as makers of books and textiles, so it is in these genres that we can best explore women’s roles in producing art. But even in those arts most associated with women, the ways in which women artists sign or represent themselves pose a significant

¹ I dedicate this essay to Therese Martin, whose patience and learning has greatly contributed to what it has become since the 2010 conference in Madrid. Translation by Elaine Beretz.
problem. From the eleventh century on, the creative gesture was considered a performative one, which was copied from the (sacerdotal) gesture of benediction. This is seen most clearly when the medieval artist represents him- or herself in the act of making, where he/she most frequently stages him-/herself in the act of putting the finishing touches on the work. Two portraits, even “self-portraits,” of artists at work provide good examples of this: that of the illuminator Rufillus of Weissenau found in a Passionary from the end of the twelfth century (Fig. 1); and that of the noble (clarus) Gerlachus (Fig. 2), a glass painter, who beseeches for himself the benevolence of the King of Kings on a stained glass window of Moses and the Burning Bush from Arnstein an der Lahn Abbey. Sometimes it was even understood, or so it would appear, as analogous in function to the act of transubstantiation, the creation of the body of Christ at the altar. Yet women were excluded from the priesthood, and this very fact should disqualify them (except for the Virgin) from acting as teachers or as mediators of the spiritual, such as their male counterparts did. How then are the signatures and portraits of women artists to be understood within the larger dynamic of artistic gestures as sacerdotal ones?

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6 Although she may bless: see Jean Wirth and Isabelle Jeger, “La femme qui bénit,” in Femmes, art et religion au Moyen Âge, ed. Jean-Claude Schmitt (Strasbourg, 2004), pp. 157–79.