IMAGE AND FIGMENT

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Pictura quasi fictura, a volume of conference papers from the Institut für Realienkunde of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, takes its title from a lemma from Joannes Balbus’s Catholicon, a fourteenth-century encyclopedia strongly influenced by the work of the seventh-century encyclopedist Isodore of Seville: “et dicitur pictura quasi fictura sicut pingere quasi fingere. Et est imaginis ficta non veritas.” As the introductory article by Gerhard Jaritz, the editor of the volume, suggests, the conceptual linkage of the notions of depicting and making/feigning, of image and figment, expressed in this quotation should be viewed as the programme that holds together the nine articles, despite a substantial variety of subject matter and considerable differences in approach. Images, one of the main sources of our knowledge about medieval and early modern material culture, are not to be studied as if they offer “portraits” of the world in which they were produced, but as “discourse-specific valued representations” (“wertbehaftete Repräsentation(en) innerhalb eines Diskurses”), which often are capable of providing the researcher with more incisive information about the relation of man and object (“Mensch-Objekt-Beziehung”) than could possibly be gathered from archaeological finds or, in some cases, even from written texts. Of the eight articles, only one (Keith Moxey, “Reading the ‘Reality Effect’”) is predominantly theoretical; the remaining seven successfully aim at various mixes of theoretical reflection and historical analysis and/or systematic description of specific types of images.

Palma Martinez-Burgos García’s article “Verhaltens- und Reaktionsmodelle und der Inhalt von Bildern” (“Models of Behaviour and Reaction, and the Content of Images”) focuses on what one might call

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the pragmatic dimension of images: the patterns of behaviour and the models of reaction mentioned in her title are the ones inculcated in and presented to the pious viewer of certain types of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious imagery. Starting out from the view, broadly held during the sixteenth century and reinforced by the Counter Reformation of the seventeenth century, that the use of religious imagery recommended itself because of the precedence of the eye over the ear, Professor Martínez-Burgos García investigates various ways in which the devotional imagery produced during the period made attempts to meet, support, and stimulate the spiritual needs of the Spanish Catholic believer. An adequate viewing of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish devotional imagery, she suggests, presupposed prior training in perception, a visual education of the pious, so to speak. But once undergone, such an education could at times lead to excessive forms of behaviour and reaction on the part of the believers. Hence a new role for the old concept of decorum, this time one of controlling both the producers and the recipients of devotional imagery, and of securing the barriers that Spanish Renaissance and Baroque society drew between the spheres of the sacred and the profane. Professor Martínez-Burgos García’s article is the only one in the volume under review that focuses on the images in relation to processes and norms of reception. All the other articles, apart from Moxey’s theoretical reflections, address the problem of the “reality of images” in contextual terms, that is, in relation to other images.

Nils-Arvid Bringéus’s article, titled “Die Wirklichkeit der Bilder. Schwedische Beispiele aus dem Mittelalter und der frühen Neuzeit” (“The reality of images. Swedish examples from the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period”), presents an overview of recent Scandinavian research into medieval and early modern imagery. In addition, it offers a specimen of the type of diachronic contextualizing that has become the hallmark of “bildlore,” the ethnological study of the dissemination and provenance of images of which Bringéus is the pater et princeps. The casus discussed by Bringéus concerns a painting from 1583 in the Church of St. Mary in Helsingborg representing the “Rich Man and Lazarus.” By tracing its sources in sixteenth-century woodcuts, illustrated books, pieces of tapestry, gravestones, and other kinds of artifacts, and by comparing elements of the painting such as the shape or colour of the loaves of bread to similar elements in other representations from the same cultural context, Bringéus is able to provide a detailed “reading” of the painting, and to underscore his belief that we are not to “isolate