Book Reviews


Readers attracted to the notion of “trans-cultural” explorations will find the books reviewed here particularly enticing. Their subjects would be intriguing in themselves, but perhaps even more engaging are the ways the author of the monograph and the various contributors to the edited collection work out their methodologies, and then tease out categories that are quite convincing as modes of comparison across that gossamer veil sometimes called “culture.” Both books view their larger topic from a Eurocentric perspective, but demonstrate persuasively the many ways in which “culture” is far more like a permeable membrane than a fortified bastion. In the final analysis, osmosis flows both ways. Although the European construction of the “oriental other” is the central topic here, both volumes give important attention to the reverse dynamic, namely, the Middle Eastern cultural stereotyping of the “European other.”

Linking the two volumes methodologically is the increasingly popular concept of the “imaginary,” a noun rather than an adjective, rooted in the French *imaginaire*. Manifest in images and “representation,” *imaginaries* presuppose distinctive ways of *seeing*, and here lies the shared strength of these explorations. Harper and his eleven distinguished collaborators in *The Turk and Islam in the Western Eye, 1450–1750: Visual Imagery Before Orientalism* view a wide range of topics through the lenses of their varied backgrounds and specializations. Here, for example, are studies of “corporate personalities” (a depiction of the Sultan and a psychological portrait
of the bipolar Fernando de Medici); of the contributions of individual artists (Bellini, Tiepolo, Dürer); of specific signature events embodying a perceived threat (Ottoman designs on Vienna, the Battle of Lepanto); of more generic characterizations of the “other” in terms of ethnicity or perceived threat (“Black Turks” or “the Frank” and “the Turk” as polar opposites); and perhaps the most global concept of all, of the specter of the “other” as Apocalyptic Scourge. From the perspective of religious studies, these collected essays point to a host of ways in which, for Europeans, fear of “the Turk” morphed into the image of Islam as an eschatological juggernaut. On the art historical side, the volume will surely expand many readers’ visual literacy by examining a host of works and genres whose subjects generally keep them outside the category of the “greatest hits” of medieval and early modern European art. For that reason alone, Harper’s collection would make a very worthwhile addition to public and educational library collections.

Hans Belting has previously produced a number of superb, thought-provoking studies that moved pointedly beyond art history into the realms of theology, philosophy, aesthetics, and perception theory. A cursory glance at the index of Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science offers a tantalizing hint as to Belting’s tack this time. The dozen most numerous entries include eye, gaze, geometry, image, light, perception, perspective, picture, space, viewer, vision, and unexpectedly perhaps, a very influential early medieval Muslim physicist named Al-Haytham (965–1040). Known in Europe as Alhazen, he is most renowned for his studies in optics. Belting devotes an entire chapter to him, and understandably so, since he is still well-enough esteemed to have appeared on the 2003 Iraqi 10,000 dinar banknote.

One of the many strengths of Belting’s study is its broad trans-cultural reach, which allows him to incorporate a most gratifying array of art by and for Muslims as primary sources. He explores an intriguing constellation of topics, beginning with the phenomenon of visual perspective in contrast to the widely studied emphasis in Islamic art on two-dimensional geometric, vegetal, and calligraphic designs with their infinitely repeatable patterns—a set of devices collectively known as “arabesque.” This design preference does not, however, betoken a complete banishment of “figural” elements in Islamic art, though many Muslims and non-Muslims alike share that mistaken conclusion. His analysis of this convoluted matter is particularly instructive, in the context of which he introduces the concept of the “gaze” by describing culture as the “exchange of glances.” Perhaps Belting’s most