CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean

Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova

Université de Lausanne • Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic • Masaryk University •

CONVIVIUM II/2/2015

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II/2

edited by **Michele Bacci**
& **Ivan Foletti**

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BOOK REVIEWS

The World of Convivium:

between Post-modernism and new Discoveries

Michele Bacci & Ivan Foletti

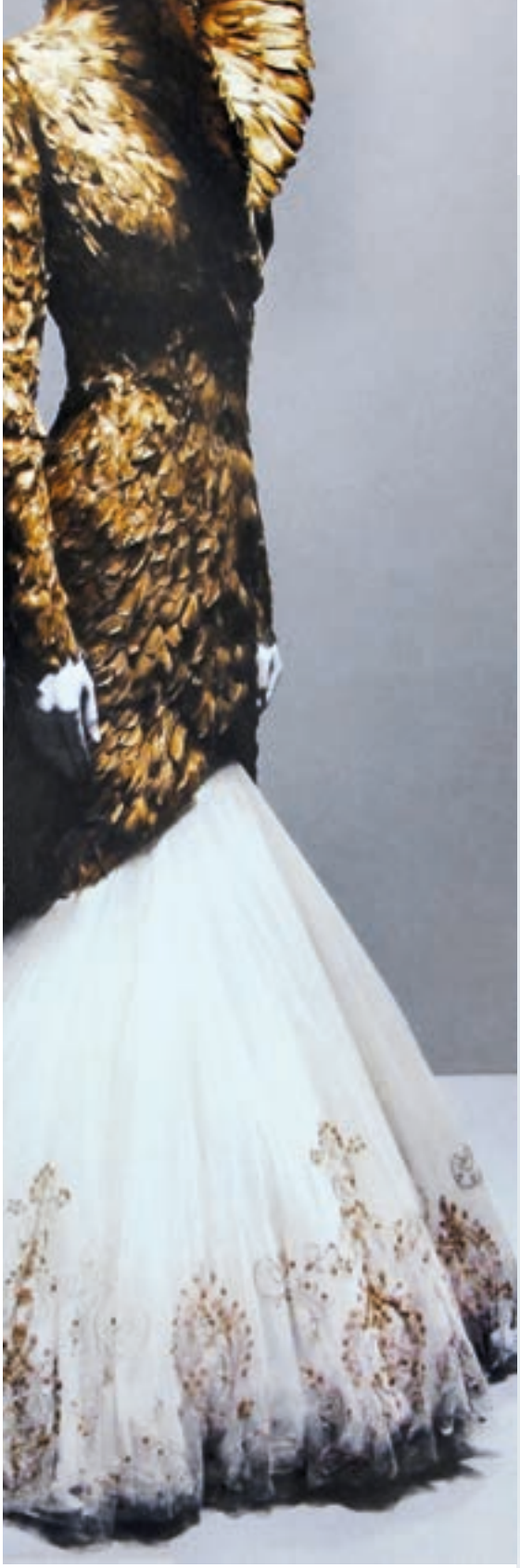
As a very young journal, albeit one with a long prehistory, Convivium is, in certain ways, still in search of a definitive identity – not in terms of its scholarly aims, which have been well-defined since the publication of the first issue in 2014, but in terms of the form it should take, and the horizons it seeks to broaden. It is in the context of this search that a new structural element has been introduced in the present issue, our miscellaneous volume of 2015. We refer to the editorial, the first lines of which you are now reading, with which the editors have decided to open each year's miscellany from now on. The reasons for the introduction of this space are twofold: on the one hand, it will give the editors an opportunity to discuss the way in which the current issue came about – to reflect on the articles and reviews collected therein, but also to trace and explain the direction the journal is taking. On the other hand, the editorial seeks to provide a much-needed space for reflection on the state of our discipline – for the exploration of those questions, so rarely addressed in scholarly studies, which are nevertheless of crucial importance for the world of Convivium.

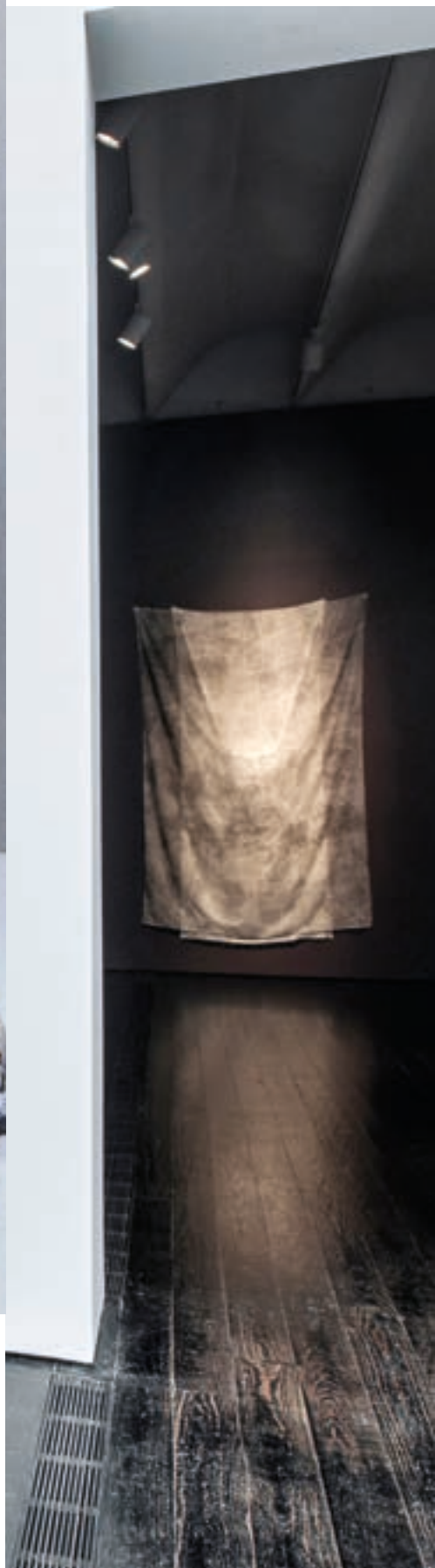
Hence, the decision to create a truly flexible space which, in the image and likeness of our journal, will make flexibility and openness its watchwords. In introducing this feature, our hope is to give the reader of Convivium the opportunity to better understand the methodological, intellectual, and *human* choices that have shaped our enterprise.

For our editorial debut, we would like to get straight to the point, beginning with a brief overview of the contents and structure of this second volume of Convivium 2015. Given that the seven texts accepted for publication are entirely the result of unsolicited proposals on the part of their various authors, the diversity of their subjects is very interesting, and offers us a means to understand the way in which Convivium is developing in its most organic form, that of the miscellany.

Reading between the lines of the various articles presented here, Convivium appears, in the first place, to be a journal anchored to the Mediterranean world – from the Late Antique period to the end of the Middle Ages – with a predilection for certain artistic techniques, like mosaic and painting. The technique of mosaic is, in fact, the common subject that unites the first group of essays, beginning with a piece by Stefano Riccioni and followed by texts by Michele Bacci and Maria Lidova. Despite their shared theme, however, these three articles demonstrate decidedly different methodological approaches: Riccioni turns a fresh eye on one of his favorite monuments – the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome – considering it through the lens of visual rhetoric, a very fashionable subject in recent years, while Maria Lidova takes a more traditional approach, concentrating on the iconographic analysis of one of the most important types of Roman *Theotokos* – the *Maria Regina* – providing new arguments to support innovative interpretations. Different again is the methodology, not to mention the content, of Michele Bacci's article, which presents the very recent discoveries from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, situating them in the context of the basilica's history of reception by pilgrims since the end of the Middle Ages. It is precisely the urgency and novelty of these new mosaic discoveries that prompted us to publish, here, an essay by one of the volume's two editors. In publishing this piece, Convivium aims to establish itself as a platform where new findings can be quickly announced.

The second group of essays – dedicated to exchanges between the Kingdom of Naples and those of Hungary, and to interaction between Byzantium and the West – confirms a fundamental theme of our journal, which is also spelled out in its subtitle, "Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean": we refer here to the notion of artistic and cultural transfer, which has been a central concern of Convivium since its conception.





The two final articles by Geraldine Leardi and Glenn Peers explore decidedly new – and perhaps for some, unexpected – frontiers. These texts create a tangible bridge between our present reality and the medieval worlds of the Mediterranean. Whether dealing with the reception of "Byzantium" in the fashion world, or with the interaction between contemporary art and Byzantine objects, these two articles introduce postmodern thought (and reality) to our journal. The fact that both essays have arisen interest among our reviewers indicates how such contemporary themes have forcefully entered the Commonwealth of the *longue durée* – Byzantine and medieval – that is at the heart of Convivium.

These essays would appear, then, to indicate the directions in which Convivium is developing – directions that are further emphasized by the reviews collected in the second part of the volume. The aforementioned case of the basilica of Bethlehem, meanwhile, touches upon a topic of great contemporary relevance, and thanks to the research carried out, broadens the horizons of our journal to include the sensitive problem of the conservation of medieval monuments – in this case in the Middle East, a region increasingly under threat from war and fanaticism of every kind – and the ensuing, increasing difficulties encountered by historians of art, in a world that seems to be satisfied with the erection of walls, barriers and check-points, in promoting a method of investigation that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. The restoration of the Church of the Nativity, which was only begun, 173 years after the last significant intervention in 1842, thanks to the initiative of the Palestinian National Authority and collaboration between the three communities which, on the basis of the so-called *status quo*, exercise rights to the sacred site – Orthodox Greeks, Armenians, and Franciscans – is an unexpected development, and one to be celebrated. At a time when so many artifacts of ancient cultures are disappearing in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, one monument is slowly being restored to life, despite the difficulties that afflict the entire region: the unexpected rediscovery of an intact angel under a layer of plaster, and of additional portions of the mosaic decoration from the twelfth century, is not only an extraordinary discovery and a fundamental contribution to our knowledge of medieval art, it is also a beacon of hope for all of mankind.