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 •

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VIII/1

Objects Beyond the Senses

Studies in Honor of Herbert L. Kessler

edited by **Philippe Cordez** & **Ivan Foletti**
with the collaboration of **Karolina Foletti**

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A *Convivium* with Herbert L. Kessler

Sharing Objects, Sensory Experiences, and Medieval Art History

Philippe Cordez & Ivan Foletti

Herbert Leon Kessler is one of the founders of *Convivium* and, since its first issue appeared in 2014, has been one of its editors. The role of editor, of course, meant work. Thinking about *Convivium*'s subtitle, *Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean* demanded effort that was both collective and personal. It implied constant reflection on the epistemology of art history, as *Convivium* was to revive and perpetuate the tradition begun by the interwar journal *Seminarium Kondakovianum*. Kessler drew on and shared his experience during encounters in Rome, Brno, and elsewhere, as well as through countless phone and video discussions[1]. But collaborating with Herbert Kessler meant also – as the word *convivium* implies – moments of life spent together and more than one memorable *symposion* or *cena*. A *convivium*, after all, is a dinner party, rich of the pleasures of food, drink, and long, far-ranging conversation.

1 In particular, Herbert L. Kessler co-edited the miscellany volume I/2 of 2014, the thematic and honorific issue II/1 *Many Romes. Studies in Honor of Hans Belting* in 2015, the *supplementum* of 2017 on *The European Fortune of the Roman Veronica in the Middle Ages*, and in 2020 number VII/1, *A Hub of Art. In, Out, and Around Venice, 1177–1499*.

In 2021, still with overflowing energy, Herbert Kessler is turning eighty years young. It was clear that an issue of *Convivium* had to be dedicated to him, and it had to be a special issue while being consistent with the journal he helped to initiate. Ivan Foletti, familiar to readers as *Convivium*'s Editor-in-chief and a frequent contributor, and Philippe Cordez, who is new to these pages but no less close as a mutual colleague and friend, joined forces to design a question. It had to be Kesslerian enough for the occasion, and connected to current interests in our fields. Given the importance of Kessler's writings in today's medieval art history, we did not need to think for too long. As a result, the following papers, even if not a *Festschrift*, constitute a birthday feast. Besides the texts submitted through the journal's double-blind procedure (their authors, of course, were eventually informed), the last part of the volume – "About Herbert Leon Kessler"– presents aspects of his intellectual life and the list of his publications.

Introducing this issue on *Objects Beyond the Senses*, let us come back to the question of work, to related objects, and to associated sensory experiences. Richard G. Newhauser, in his contribution to a recent interdisciplinary collection close to our topic, considers the feeling of tilling land with a plow pulled by oxen or horses, entering soil with the tool to make it fertile. Newhauser explores the socialization of this act, most often accomplished in a familial or communal context, as a symbol of male peasantry in fourteenth-century England, especially in a series of further elaborations in written texts and materialized images. As he makes clear with this example, sensory experience, which is culturally constructed, is also constitutive of social identity within sensory communities. He understands them as "groups in which people are linked cohesively through norms of interpretation of sensory experience and subscribe to the same valuation (or devaluation) of those sensory experiences"[2]. In the case of medieval plows, this might go as far as suggesting that good plowmen are new Adams and Christlike saviors of society[3]. More generally, if objects, etymologically, are what affect the senses, and if most sensory experiences are related to objects, sensory communities will develop around any object of which subjects share some experience. Inter-objectivity and inter-corporeality create such communities. They may be large and last for centuries, or "as small as temporary gatherings of people at a banquet, all participating in a series of tastes, smells, sights, and so on"[4].

The arbitrary idea, widely present in the Middle Ages, that humans have only five distinct senses, is still familiar today. More surprising might be the hierarchy of the senses according to medieval authors, ascending from the most corporeal sense of touch to those of taste, smell, hearing and, with lowest implication of the body, sight. The concept of inner senses, as spiritual echo of the outer senses, was also esssential. Certainly intriguing is that two conflicting concepts of sensory experience coexisted in some situations. The first understood the senses as deceptive and leading to sinfulness. For the other, the senses were fundamental to any act of thinking. This contradiction had to be resolved and generated even more sophisticated reflections. As Newhauser explains:

> "…[I]f the senses might be thought to potentially destabilize cognition, we can observe that the connection of perception and the will still achieves coherence in the Middle Ages in a process of training the interpretation of sensory data – that is to say, through educating the senses. It includes such important elements of the social as the modification of the interpretation of sensory data through scientific knowledge […], the shaping of the user experience of devotional objects and books, or something as ubiquitous as the sensory training of apprentices in a trade[5]."

With the help of anthropology explaining that perception is "a continuum between the life of the mind and the life of the body", as Newhauser adds, perception, will, and cognition

1 / Bottom of a gold glass representing Saint Agnes, Catacombs of San Panfilo, Rome, 4th century

can be seen as "steps in the same process"[6]. As for sensory information and scientific knowledge, he gives the example of optics in the thirteenth century, referring to a book he co-edited with Kessler[7]. The argument, however, has implications beyond the sense of sight and beyond the Middle Ages. It concerns art history, since art historians train their sensory capacities to perceive objects and, in an exercise of scientific discipline, elaborate historical knowledge with that information. A *convivium* with art historians might thus take the form of a meal, or of a journal, but as a moment in the life of a broader community of students and scholars, it will be about shared objects, related sensory experiences, and scholarly interpretation – beyond the senses. Studying objects in art history entails the encounter of a scientific sensory community in the present with reconstructed sensory communities of the past. This temporal ambivalence is reflected in the titles of Kessler's two synthetic books, *Seeing Medieval Art* and *Experiencing Medieval Art*[8]. As his image and object lessons demonstrate, seeing and, more broadly, experiencing are learned skills than can lead beyond the perceptible, in both medieval Christian devotion and art historical science.

As a kind of birthday toast, we consider two fragmented glass dishes made for drinking and thinking in Late Antiquity and in the Late Middle Ages. In diverging manner and for different purposes, both depict Christian saints who died violently; both are dramatic and joyful in some ways. The first, dating to the fourth century and one of many remnants of Late Antique gold glass beakers, carries an image of Saint Agnes of Rome, who was supposedly beheaded as a young girl (291–304/305) **[Fig. 1]**. As in all such fragments, only

2 Richard G. Newhauser, "'putten to ploughe': Touching the Peasant Sensory Community", in *Sensory Reflections. Traces of Experience in Medieval Artifacts*, Fiona Griffiths, Kathryn Starkey eds, Berlin/Boston 2018, pp. 225–248, sp. p. 234. For a valuable overview of questions and literature, we refer to the introduction to this volume: Fiona Griffiths, Kathryn Starkey, "Sensing Through Objects", pp. 1–21. As for art historical approaches, see at least Éric Palazzo, *L'invention chrétienne des cinq sens dans la liturgie et l'art au Moyen Âge*, Paris 2014 and the exhibition catalogue *A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe*, Martina Bagnoli ed., Baltimore 2016.

3 Newhauser, "'putten to ploughe'" (n. 2), pp. 226, 243. Similarly, female textile workers can be associated with Eve and Maria: cf. Sylvain Piron, *Généalogie de la morale économique*, Brussels 2020, pp. 67–100 (and pp. 101–136 on Adam).

4 Newhauser, "'putten to ploughe'" (n. 2), p. 235.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 239.

6 *Ibidem*.

7 *Optics, Ethics, and Art in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Looking into Peter of Limoges's Moral Treatise on the Eye*, Richard G. Newhauser, Herbert L. Kessler eds, Toronto 2018.

8 Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, Peterborough 2004; *idem*, *Experiencing Medieval Art*, Toronto 2019.

the bottom of the goblet – being of two fused layers of glass with the image in gold in between – has survived; this example is 7,7 cm in diameter[9]. Within a radiant geometric pattern, the well-dressed young saint is represented as an orant, her arms raised, and her name is written on both sides of her face, as on a coin. Flanking her are two columns on which sit pairs of doves, while on the side of her head, two stars are represented, as well as two rotuli. Unlike other, similar gold glass fragments, this one has a slightly blue hue. We can imagine that, when the wine had been completely drunk, the golden image of the saint, the stars, and the other objects depicted shone against in a blue aura; moreover, if the wine was clear, such a vision could be seen throughout the drinking process. This experience could naturally recall a vision of the saint's celestial body – possibly through the mobile surface of the wine, recalling perhaps the upper waters that, according to coeval cosmology, separated the earthly and heavenly realms[10]. The bottom of the glass might thus have reminded the user of the illusive oculus at the apex of a mosaic dome, of which one of the most evocative examples is that of the baptistery of San Giovanni alle Fonti in Naples, built during the incumbency of Bishop Severus (364–402)[11]. There, on the blue background, gold and silver stars shine, surrounding a golden Christogram [Fig. 2]. A similar idea appears a century later, in the dome of Milan's San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, dating from the years of Bishop Lawrence (489–512). Here, the martyr's bust hovers over his own tomb [Fig. 3]; the *imago clipeata* is, in this case, constructed of a crown, while the star-filled blue sky is replaced by an entirely golden background. In both these monumental cases, however, contemplation of a sort of illusive oculus should be seen – thanks to the spiritual eye – as giving access to the *Hyperuranion*[12]. The view into the physical vessel may have evoked such mosaic domes.

The signification of this and of the many similar, gold-bottomed vessels carrying images of saints and martyrs, all attributed to fourth-century Rome, remain intriguing.

2 / Christogram at the center of the oculus, Baptistery of San Giovanni alle Fonti, Naples, 364–402

3 / Saint Victor at the center of the oculus, San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, Milan, 489–512

The most plausible hypothesis about their function is that they served in the ritual meals (actual *convivia*) organized on the *dies natalis* of the depicted martyrs[13]. From coeval sources we know that these festivities – *refrigeria in terris* – were anything but sober. This was shocking to the point that Ambrose (339–397), Augustine (354–430), and other church authorities actively worked to prohibit them as being too "pagan" for Christian worship[14]. We can thus envision the numerous glass vessels in the hands of worshippers and filled with (possibly good) wine, celebrating for example the festivities of Agnes. Moving

9 See Penelope Filacchione, "Dalla materia all'immagine. Fondi d'oro tardo antichi e arte Cristiana monumentale", in *Arti minori e arti maggiori. Relazioni e interazioni tra Tarda Antichità e Alto Medioevo*, Fabrizio Bisconti, Matteo Braconi, Mariarita Sgarlata eds, Todi 2019, pp. 551–572, with further bibliography; Susan Walker, "Gold-Glass in Late Antiquity", in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, Robin M. Jensen, Mark D. Ellison eds, London / New York 2018, pp. 124–140; and Chiara Croci, "Portraiture on Early Christian Gold-Glass: Some Observations", in *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*, Ivan Foletti ed., Rome 2013, pp. 43–59.

10 See, e.g., Antonio Iacobini, "'Hoc elementum ceteris omnibus imperat'. L'acqua nell'universo visuale dell'alto medioevo", in *L'acqua nei secoli altomedievali* (Settimane di studio della Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, LV, Spoleto, 12–17 April 2007), vol. 2, Spoleto 2008, pp. 985–1027.

11 See Chiara Croci, *Tessere per un nuovo inizio: il battistero paleocristiano di Napoli e i suoi mosaici*, Naples 2019.

12 See Ivan Foletti, *Objects, Relics, and Migrants: the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan and the Cult of its Saints (386–972)*, Rome 2020, pp. 51–94.

13 On this hypothesis, see, e.g., Josef Engemann, "Bemerkungen zu spätrömischen Gläsern mit Goldfoliendekor", *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, XI–XII (1968–1969), pp. 7–25; Renate Pillinger, *Studien zu römischen Zwischengoldgläsern*, vol. I, *Geschichte der Technik und das Problem der Authentizität*, Vienna 1984; discussion in Claudia Lega, "Il corredo epigrafico dei vetri dorati: novità e considerazioni", *Sylloge Epigraphica Barcinonensis*, X (2012), pp. 263–286, with further bibliography.

14 Fabrizio Bisconti, "La lastra aquileiese del refrigerium. Dal banchetto edonistico al pasto funebre", in *L'alimentazione nell'antichità: atti della XLVI settimana di studi aquileiesi, Aquileia, Sala del consiglio comunale (14–16 maggio 2015)*, Giuseppe Cuscito ed., Trieste 2016, pp. 351–366; Paul-Albert Février, "À propos du repas funéraire: culte et sociabilité '*In Cristo Deo, pax et concordia sit convivio nostro*'", *Cahiers Archéologiques*, XXVI (1972), pp. 28–45; Brigitta Rotach, "Der Durst der Toten und die zwischenzeitliche Erquickung (refrigerium interim)", in *Himmel, Hölle, Fegefeuer. Das Jenseits im Mittelalter*, Peter Jezler ed., Zürich 1994, pp. 33–40.

towards and inside her basilica, conversing and singing, smelling and tasting the wine, touching the glass and seeing, as a sort of revelation, Agnes's image – first through the liquid with its Eucharistic connotation, and then more immediately once the glass is empty and its contents incorporated – all activated the worshippers' senses. The ritual feast and the related objects were thus creating the environment for a very special experience: not least thanks to the wine, the faithful meeting at the saint's tomb entered in relationships, as a group and with Agnes, which certainly went beyond the senses[15].

Though none of the vessels survive intact, many of the gold glass bottoms were later affixed as ornaments in the walls of catacombs (most probably also at the one of Agnes, on Rome's via Nomentana, a few meters from the place of celebration). There, in the realm of the dead, the glass disks with their golden images set in the mortar appeared in artificial light. Such a pattern of re-use – in the case of our fragment in the catacomb of San Panfilo – must have had a symbolic purpose. This can hardly have been accidental indeed, and it is tempting to suppose that these objects had very important meaning in the lives of fourth-century Romans. Beyond the banquets of the living, they accompanied them in the place of their final rest, which could itself become a place of funerary banquet[16]. These remnants raise the question of how and when the vessels were broken. Would it be too bold to imagine a Russian-like custom of smashing glasses to mark the end of funerary festivities? A particularity is that the Roman glasses were certainly broken with care, which we can deduce from the great numbers of perfectly preserved bottoms. The aim of this operation was probably to free the images from the vessel's sides. Now immediately accessible, the images were set in the dark of the catacomb. There, they could be seen not by drinkers looking each into their beakers, but simultaneously by several persons; they appeared not isolated, but as a series of gold images of formerly individual use, transforming the sense of community around the "iconic presence" of the most popular local saints. In one sense or in the other, what seems certain is that these small late antique glass fragments are testimonies of sensory communities, constructed around a shared worship, using objects as means to go beyond.

Our second beaker [Fig. 4] is another type of fragment – actually, more than a dozen pieces – unearthed in 1962 during construction work in the Kapuzinergasse at Breisach, not far from Freiburg im Breisgau, and collected by a private person[17]. Its archeological context was destroyed and not documented, but in this same street leading to the Stephansmünster, the city's main church, later excavations have brought to light a cistern and several cesspits filled in during the thirteenth century: the latter contained ceramics and even more glass[18]. It is probable that the remnants of this beaker were simply thrown away, during this same period, where it had just been used and eventually broken – in a domestic context on the Münsterberg, overlooking the River Rhine.

Carefully reassembled to the extent possible and on view in the Museum für Stadtgeschichte a few steps from the spot of its discovery[19], the beaker is 13,2 cm tall, for a diameter of 7,3 cm at the bottom. Its opening at the top must have been about 12,0 cm wide. The part best preserved shows three figures under an arcade, a scene identified as the Flaying of the Apostle Bartholomew. The scene was repeated on the opposite side, with plants in between. Red, yellow, white, green, and black enamels were applied on both sides of a thin (originally more transparent) glass. This produced a layered effect, from the shining white of the outside surface – including the large body of the saint – to the glass itself, the thickness of which varies between 1,3 and 2,0 mm, to the contrasting deeper red inside, and to the liquid, likely a Rhenish wine. The relation between seeing and drinking is inverted in regard to the late antique beaker. The saint is figured not below the liquid, its visibility

4/ Fragments of a beaker with Saint Bartholomew being flayed by two men, enameled glass, probably Murano, end of the 13th or early 14th century / Museum für Stadtgeschichte, Breisach

15 See, e.g., Georgia Frank, "The Pilgrim's Gaze in the Age Before Icons", in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, Robert Nelson ed., Cambridge 2000, pp. 98–115; Ann Marie Yasin, "Making Use of Paradise: Church Benefactors, Heavenly Visions, and the Late Antique Commemorative Imagination", in *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams and Insights in Medieval Art and History*, Colum Hourihane ed., Princeton 2010, pp. 39–57.

16 See, e.g., Éric Rebillard, "Commemorating the Dead in North Africa: Continuity and Change from the Second to the Fifth Century C.E.", in *Death and Changing Rituals: Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practices*, J. Rasmus Brandt, Håkon Roland, Marina Prusac eds, Oxford/Philadelphia 2014, pp. 269–286; Allison E. Sterrett-Krause, "Drinking with the Dead? Glass from Roman and Christian Burial Areas at Leptiminus (Lamta, Tunisia)", *Journal of Glass Studies*, LIX (2017), pp. 47–82. Both texts are focused mainly on North Africa, but with a much larger perspective.

17 On this beaker, see especially Peter Schmidt-Thomé, "Neue Funde emailbemalter Glasbecher aus Breisach und Freiburg", *Archäologische Nachrichten aus Baden*, XXXV (1985), pp. 36–43, sp. pp. 36–39; *Phönix aus Sand und Asche: Glas des Mittelalters*, Erwin Baumgartner, Ingeborg Krueger eds, Munich 1988, no. 79, p. 133. With thanks to Ingeborg Krueger for her information.

18 Michael Schmaedecke, "Mittelalterarchäologie in Breisach am Rhein, Kreis Breisgau-Hochschwarzwald", *Archäologische Informationen*, VII/2 (1984), pp. 115–120, sp. p. 117; Matthias Klein, "Archäologische Ausgrabungen in Breisach am Rhein. Kurzbericht über den Grabungsabschnitt 'Rathauserweiterung'", *Archäologische Nachrichten aus Baden*, XXXIV (1985), pp. 22–29, sp. p. 28.

19 With thanks to Uwe Breisach for confirmation.

5/ Martyrdom of St Bartholomew in the upper register, looking southwest from the main nave, San Marco, Venice, ca 1200

6/ Martyrdom of St Bartholomew, mosaic, San Marco, Venice, ca 1200

addressing an increasingly inebriated user, but on the outer surface, introducing a viewer, still sober at first, to the consumption of the intoxicating beverage. With a significant development of viticulture, the thirteenth century saw a great diversification of vessels used to drink wine. The use of transparent glass enabled the spreading of oenological habits and discourses. Drinkers were expected to evaluate the wine visually before they smelled and finally tasted it, a procedure borrowed from medical practice. Since the twelfth century, it was applied to wine as a remedy, but first of all in the examination of bodily substances, of which urine played the main role – to the point that a uroscopy became symbolic of any visit to a doctor[20]. On our beaker, the representation of the Flaying of saint Bartholomew offers a spiritual variation of these connections. Another bodily substance, the saint's blood abundantly spilled, is here probably associated with wine, as in the Eucharistic ritual. For medieval Christians, a martyr's violent death opened the way to intercession and the promise of redemption. Held at the foot, as was common at the time, the glass beaker declared in the inscription near to its lip *[ave maria gra]cia ple[na]*: this toast linked the wine and its consumption to the moment of God's incarnation. Salvation awaited whomever heard these words and drank the wine.

The River Rhine, in the history of this beaker, was certainly central. If exceptional for its representation of a martyrdom, the object belongs to a group of at least 261 enamelled glasses with very diverse images – from heraldry to love scenes – in archaeological finds from Egypt and Sicily to Sweden and Finland, to Portugal, England, Russia, and Israel. Archival evidence indicates that such objects were produced by the thousands each year in Murano, from around 1280 to 1350 and probably even longer. From nearby Venice, merchants would have transported and sold many such vessels in the busy Rhine valley[21]. But who of them, and their clients, knew that the Bartholomew scene repeats a mosaic created around 1200 at the basilica of San Marco? Visitors to the basilica discover it very high in the ceiling, looking southwest from the main nave **[Fig. 5]**. Painters might have seen the image there, or, as a model used in the mosaic workshop, since the glass tesserae were presumably produced locally, not far from the beakers[22]. Art historians today will turn to a classic book for comments and a better photograph **[Fig. 6]**[23], and consider that both the monumental mosaic and the tiny fragments of its commercial and festive variation are good enough as food for thought.

Nowadays, the glasses we raise are mostly aniconic; some, especially in a time of pandemic, materialize as icons in electronic messages. Whatever the form, our toasts are no less full of emotion, memories, and well-wishes: To a long life with Herbert Leon Kessler!

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20 On uroscopy, among several articles by Laurence Moulinier-Brogi, see especially "Un flacon en point de mire. La science des urines, un enjeu culturel dans la société médiévale (xiiie–xve s.)", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, i (2010), pp. 11–37. On its transfer to oenology and on wine vessels, see the important contribution of Danièle Alexandre-Bidon, "Le vaisselier du vin (xiiie–xvie siècle). Contribution à l'histoire du goût", *L'Atelier du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, xii (2014), https://journals.openedition.org/acrh/5917, [last accessed 11.03.2021].

21 For a recent state of research, see Ingeborg Krueger, "Die europäischen emailbemalten Becher des 13./14. Jahrhunderts: Eine Zusammenfassung zum Forschungsstand", *Journal of Glass Studies*, lx (2018), pp. 129–162. See also Ella Beaucamp, Philippe Cordez, "Glass Vessels, Camel Imagery, House Façades: The Venetian Art of Commodities (13th–14th Centuries)", in *Typical Venice? The Art of Commodities, 13th–16th Centuries*, Ella Beaucamp, Philippe Cordez eds, London/Turnhout 2020, pp. 4–43, sp. pp. 5–12.

22 About the tesserae, see Liz James, "Mosaic Matters: Questions of Manufacturing and Mosaicists in the Mosaics of San Marco", in *San Marco, Byzantium and the Myths of Venice*, Henry Maguire, Robert S. Nelson eds, Washington, d.c. 2010, pp. 227–243, sp. pp. 230–236 for this hypothesis.

23 Cf. Otto Demus, *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*, Chicago/London 1984, vol. i, *The Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, pp. 223–224, pl. 359. On the role of Herbert L. Kessler in facilitating this publication, see his "Encounter: Otto Demus", *Gesta*, liv/1 (2015), pp. 1–2. For Kessler's own work on San Marco, see most recently "Conclusion. La *Genèse Cotton* est morte", in *Les stratégies de la narration dans la peinture médiévale. La représentation de l'Ancien Testament aux ive–xiie siècles*, Marcello Angheben ed., Turnhout 2020, pp. 373–402.