



# CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval  
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean  
*Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova*



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• ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF  
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## CONVIVIUM VI/1/2019

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**VI/1**

**Movement, Images  
and Iconic Presence in  
the Medieval World**

edited by **Hans Belting, Ivan Foletti & Martin F. Lešák**  
with the collaboration of **Karolina Foletti**

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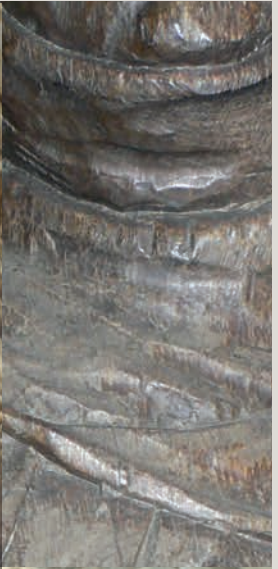
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# The Movement and the Experience of “Iconic Presence”. An Introduction

Hans Belting, Ivan Foletti & Martin F. Lešák

Although the notion of “iconic presence” has previously appeared in several different fields, it entered Medieval Art History mainly after the publication of *Bild und Kult* in 1990. It was further developed in *Bildantropologie*<sup>1</sup>, becoming a widely diffused concept. The notion of “iconic presence” was discussed again in 2016, and explicitly defined: “Iconic presence is presence in and as a picture. The physical presence of a picture in our world refers to the symbolic presence which it depicts<sup>2</sup>.” The image is in this sense understood as a threshold between the tangible world and the imaginary one.

In 2016 the Balzan Foundation supported an interdisciplinary project titled *Iconic Presence. The Evidence of Images in Religion* which became an invitation to reopen the case and to distinguish the presence of an image from the presence for which an image served as agent. *Iconic presence*, in the first case, thus became the presence of an artifact that fills an absence and serves as a material substitute for the one it represents. In this project, the image is confined to *representation* in a symbolic sense and with a topographical destination. Its presence is site-specific even when it depicts an unseen and absent power. *Real presence*, on the other hand, was the belief in and the desire for the live presence of the

1 Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult*, Munich 1990, for the English version see *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, Chicago/London 1994, p. 300.

2 *Idem*, “Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions”, *Material Religion*, XII/2 (2016), pp. 235–237.

represented figure who is expected to occupy or to visit the artifact. Real presence must be seen as the experience of an event that transforms the image into a vision or apparition. The present volume, which came into being as one of the results of the above-mentioned project, takes this discussion as its starting point, and addresses the relationship between movement and the “iconic presence”.

Within its scope, this *Convivium* deals with questions arising from the *Migrating Art Historians* project (which partially intersected with the project *Iconic Presence. The Evidence of Images in Religion*). These queries are: can movement facilitate the revelation of presence in an image, and can the movement of our bodies determine the perception of (medieval) images<sup>3</sup>? The *Migrating Art Historians* project was centered around a 1500-km pilgrimage from Lausanne to Mont-Saint-Michel (twelve art historians covered this distance by foot) and focused on the role of biological constants in the perception of artistic objects. Being immersed for several months in the natural (cultivated or uncultivated) outdoor world, the participating art historians also reflected upon the notion of image. In the pilgrim’s experience, mental images – produced in the realm of expectation and memory of the encountered places and decorations – play a major role. Further questions arising within the frame of “iconic presence” include: first, how can we classify the visual experience of landscape or a ritual in which material culture participates? And second, facing mobile images or situations in which they are literally transfigured by light, to what extent is the image transformed by movement?

### Icon: A Fundamental Yet Problematic Notion

Defining the notion of “image” in this context means dealing with the notion of “icon”, inseparable from the “iconic presence”. Although this term was traditionally used to designate two-dimensional, mostly devotional, images, scholars such as Alexej Lidov and Bissera Pentcheva have turned away from this tendency in recent years<sup>4</sup>. Lidov introduced the concept of “spatial icon” to describe space as being defined by objects and images, but also by visual and ritual metaphors<sup>5</sup>. Pentcheva at first followed the widespread definition of “icon” in *Icons and Power*. Later, however, in her *Sensual Icon*, the scholar deemed cult images one of many essential agents in performative practices<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, Pentcheva focused on the iconic potential of the *choros* and sound in the sacred space as such, thus introducing and frequently referring to the notion of “icon of sound”<sup>7</sup>. What is clear from these examples is that the notion of “icon” has started to take on an increasingly wider signification.

Though this historiographical tendency seems necessary and does justice to the complex medieval reality, the abundant use of “icon” in contemporary scholarship has sometimes led to confusion. Hence, it must be emphasized that in ancient and medieval Greek, the term *εἰκών* was semantically very rich, comparable to the word “image”. It encompassed various media and functions – images and sculptures of emperors, images of pagan deities, Christian images of all types<sup>8</sup>. The word *εἰκών* appeared in Eusebius of Caesarea’s description of Constantinian coins<sup>9</sup>, in the description of Theodore of Ephesus’ image written during the reign of Justinian<sup>10</sup>, and in the *typikon* of the Pantokrator monastery church in Constantinople where it designated various images – wall mosaics or devotional panel paintings<sup>11</sup>.

The semantic variability of “icon” in ancient and medieval Greek is especially striking considering the reduction of its meaning in modern dictionaries. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “icon” firstly as “a devotional painting of Christ or another holy figure,

typically executed on wood and used ceremonially in the Byzantine and other Eastern Churches<sup>12</sup>. The other three definitions presented in the same dictionary relate the term to exceptional individuality, a linguistic sign, and a graphic representation on a computer screen. It is the first definition, which restricts its medieval significations, that is fundamental to Art History. From “image” in general, the meaning of “icon” was reduced to “devotional image” on wood or precious material, diffused in Byzantium.

We should also address the fact that the term “icona” or “icone” appeared in the West, especially in Italy, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a designation for images assumed to be of Eastern origin. The word then almost disappeared from most of the European languages and was referred to extremely rarely up until the beginning of the twentieth century. In the Tommaseo-Bellini dictionary of the Italian language, published between the years 1865 and 1879, a very brief entry “icona-icone” speaks of a scholarly term defined as “*un’immagine, segnatamente sacra*” (an image, particularly a sacred one)<sup>13</sup>. English dictionaries were more explicit: as attested by Samuel Johnson who, in 1755, described “icon” as a “picture or representation” and referred to Antique pre-Christian images<sup>14</sup>. The word is absent from any other European monolingual dictionary (German, French, etc.) written in the nineteenth century<sup>15</sup>. The widely used *Dictionnaire grec-français des noms liturgiques en usage dans l’Eglise grecque*, translated the term εἰκών simply as “image”<sup>16</sup>.

In the 1920s, in his *Dictionnaire illustré d’art et d’archéologie*, Louis Réau defined “icon” similarly to the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This definition was subsequently canonized in the middle of the century by legendary Paul Robert<sup>17</sup>. Ivan Foletti pointed out that the Russian concept of “icon” migrated to West between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth<sup>18</sup>. It was the success of Russian panel painting that enriched the vocabularies of Western languages by (re)introducing a term that had for various reasons been “reduced”. The icon had thus changed from its vast Greek signification to that of “a devotional image”.

It seems necessary to underline that, today, use of the term “icon” is not without risk. It evokes in the minds of public, as well as for specialists, a two-dimensional, devotional image, betraying its original, broader meaning.

3 *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*, Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková, Adrien Palladino, Sabina Rosenbergová, Brno 2018.

4 Katherine Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons: Between Reality and Spirituality in Byzantine Art*, Turnhout 2013.

5 Alexej Lidov, “Spatial Icons. The Miraculous Performance with the Hodegetria of Constantinople”, in *Hierotopy. Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, *idem* ed., Moscow 2006, pp. 325–372.

6 Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: the Mother of God in Byzantium*, University Park, PA 2006; *eadem*, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*, University Park, PA 2010.

7 See for example Bissera V. Pentcheva, “Mirror, Inspiration, and the Making of Art in Byzantium”, *Convivium*, 1/2 (2014), pp. 10–39.

8 “εἰκών”, in Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, pp. 410–416.

9 Eusebius, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, IV, 15, Friedhelm Winkelmann ed., Berlin 1975, p. 125.

10 *Anthologia Graeca*, I, 36, Hermann Beckby ed., Munich 1957, p. 144.

11 Paul Gautier, “Le typikon du Christ Sauveur Pantocrator”, *Revue des Études Byzantines*, xxxii (1974), pp. 1–145, sp. p. 75ff.

12 “Icon” in Oxford Dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/icon> (accessed on 30 March 2019).

13 Niccolò Tommaseo, Bernardo Bellini, *Dizionario della lingua italiana*, Torino 1865–1879, vol. II, p. 1264.

14 Samuel Johnson, “Icon”, in *Dictionary of the English Language*, London 1755, vol. I.

15 The French dictionary offers the term *iconique*, in reference to Greek sculptures. Cf. Maximilien P. E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, Paris 1863–1877, vol. II, p. 3. The German dictionary contains only *Ikongraphie: Bilderbeschreibung*: cf. Otto F. T. Heinsius, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, Vienna 1829, p. 449.

16 Léon Clugnet, *Dictionnaire grec-français des noms liturgiques en usage dans l’Eglise grecque*, Paris 1895, pp. 50–51.

17 Louis Réau, *Dictionnaire illustré d’art et d’archéologie*, Paris 1930. On this scholar see Xavier Barral i Altet, “Introduction”, in *Dictionnaire critique d’iconographie Occidentale*, *idem* ed., Rennes 2002, pp. 23–37; Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française: les mots et les associations d’idées*, Casablanca 1953–1964, vol. III, pp. 593–594.

18 Ivan Foletti, “L’icona, una costruzione storiografica? Dalla Russia all’Occidente, la creazione di un mito”, *Annali di critica d’arte*, XII (2016), pp. 175–194, 593.

## Images, Spaces and Presences

To speak about “iconic presence” thus means to speak about the presence manifested through (and in) images, but also about the meaning of “image” in the Middle Ages. The present volume is conceived to bring about precisely this. The first section dedicated to sites of worship and landscapes as living phenomena shows the presence to be possible through mental images, traces of divine, miraculous events or landscape design. The medieval landscape sacralized by the architecture and transcendental phenomena thus becomes a place where the divine presence manifests itself. Martin F. Lešák directs his article in this precise direction while Michele Bacci shifts his attention to a mental image, connected to a holy site, which becomes the reason behind the creation of the physical image. The real presence which stands at the origin of a cultic place needs, at a certain point, according to Bacci’s insightful analyses, visual input. This finally leads to the birth of an anthropomorphic image or at least a trace which makes visible (and attests) what is known from tales. A pilgrim travelling towards holy sites (and sacred spaces) is therefore the medium in which the experience of the presence happens through the activation of all senses. At the same time this pilgrim in movement is asking for the birth of figurative representations. Thanks to their itinerant experience, we argue, travelers conscious of the power of devotional images instinctively sought these representations at holy sites. They thus created an expectation to which the market, it seems, had to respond.

The three articles in the second part of this volume written by Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, and Tina Bawden deal with three-dimensional objects and the way they were activated by sight and corporal movement while entering the sacred space. In the case of the famous sculpture of St Foy in Conques, the cultic object *par excellence* presented by Foletti, the moving body of a believer approached an anthropomorphic image which made the presence possible. In the other two cases, sculptures placed in “liminal zones” offered company to the faithful who were waiting to enter the sacred space. The object-image of St Foy in Conques is also a reliquary, and therefore a place containing a physical, authentic, and “real” part of the saint. It thus obtains all the virtue of the latter. The images of the celestial pantheon in the Lausanne cathedral’s painted porch and the Visitation represented on the door of the parish church at Irrsdorf, introduced by Palladino and Bawden respectively, enabled the visitor to enter the sacred space by raising their eyes to them or touching them. People experiencing the presence of saints facilitated by the anthropomorphic images in these “liminal zones” headed further towards another “level” of the sacred<sup>19</sup>. In Irrsdorf, the images covering the door followed the body of believer entering through them to the church. The images, when carrying relics, as in the case of St Foy, did not only produce a place where the viewer could activate the “spiritual eye” and enter into dialogue with the figure represented. Through various rituals, these images also construct the sacred space<sup>20</sup>. The movement of pilgrims around them, the dialogue of faithful with the venerated saint through relics, all serve to include them in the further sacralization of space. In the “liminal zone” cases, the encounter with the holy through its representation forms an integral part of a series of experiences – consisting of the exchange of views between the image and the subject – establishing a condition or basis for a sacramental meeting in the consecrated space of the *Ecclesia*. Movement is therefore an instrument which facilitates the meeting with images, and consequently, with holy relics or Eucharistic mysteries.

The last section of the volume opens yet another discussion. Vladimir Ivanovici and Johanna Abel focus on human bodies in movement that become images themselves.

Ivanovici, writing from a different perspective on a subject recently analyzed by Pentcheva, proposes to regard the bodies of Late Antique consuls as living sculpture<sup>21</sup>. Dealing with the liturgical drama *La Margarita Preciosa*, Abel attempts to understand the visual dimension of the performance celebrating the authentic “real presence”, that is the Eucharist, defined as such at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The notions of “image” and “icon” acquire in these two final articles meanings very similar to the one introduced by Lidov and Pentcheva and presented above. In both cases, however, the magical transformation of the body into a living sculpture happens only thanks to movement. The bodies in motion create in this way a kind of ephemeral installation which contribute to reinforcing the power of the images.

### **Transformed by Movement? Back to the “Iconic Presence”**

What can we say, at the end of this introduction, about the concept of “iconic presence” transformed by movement? First of all, we emphasize the much wider conception of the notion of “iconic”. It cannot be understood only within the frame of the Greek origin of the term, which covers all the media. It seems necessary to also include performative qualities in what is “iconic”.

The anthropomorphic image, mental image, and the image formed by rituals work together to make present what is absent, alive what is dead (in the case of relics). Considering landscapes, the presence (angelic, paradisiacal, saintly, etc.) manifests itself, among others, through lights, sounds, and silhouettes on the horizon. All the senses are activated to participate in an Epiphany of the presence – an Epiphany which would be impossible without movement. The very notion of “presence” thus becomes more widespread and, in some cases, even more gradual. However, as Michele Bacci reminds us: no matter how powerful a Christian holy place might be, at some point in its history it will need an anthropomorphic image. The image thus facilitates the presence; on the other hand, the presence requires visual input in order to happen. Presence and image – whether anthropomorphic or sensorial – were, it seems, two inseparable elements in the Mediterranean Middle Ages.

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19 On the question of “Liminal Zones” in recent years, see Tina Bawden, *Die Schwelle im Mittelalter: Bildmotiv und Bildort*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2014; Ivan Foletti, Manuela Gianandrea, *Zona Liminare. Il narcece di Santa Sabina a Roma, la sua porta e l’iniziazione cristiana*, Rome 2015; Emilie M. van Opstall, “General Introduction”, in *Sacred Thresholds. The Door to the Sanctuary in Late Antiquity*, eadem ed., Leiden/Boston 2018, pp. 1–30 and *Liminality and Medieval Art*, Klára Doležalová, Ivan Foletti eds, Brno 2019 (in press).

20 For the notion of “Spiritual Eye” see Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, Peterborough, ONT 2004.

21 Bissera Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia. Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium*, University Park, PA 2017.





