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The Idol in the Age of Art – Objects, Devotions and the
Early Modern World**

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Recension de Muriel Adrien

Michael W. Cole and Rebecca Zorach (eds), *The Idol in the Age of Art — Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World*

This dense work, which collects essays from scholars in widely ranging fields, oversteps conventional boundaries, extending past the 16th century and reaching out further than Europe—to which art history is sometimes confined—, opening onto issues of cross-cultural encounters and conflict.

In the wake of the path-breaking work of the Reformation historian Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, the book deals with a broad spectrum of objects and texts that document attitudes toward the idol mainly in the early modern period, with a view to focusing on the positive contribution of iconoclasm to art, and how it resulted not only in the destruction of things, but also in the making of new objects, or new points of view on former objects.

Suzanne Preston Blier's chapter looks at the reinvention of the original intent of an object, which sometimes turned secular objects into instruments of worship. She takes examples from African art and examines how they were improperly recast in the European imaginary as threatening idols that had to be destroyed or secreted away, thereby providing a useful alibi to demonise the African population and justify slavery. A later chapter, by Claire Farago and Carol Komadina Parenteau, also shows how art objects, such as the Veytia Mexican manuscripts, were misrepresented and reframed within a Western system of beliefs.

In the context of the Netherlands' decades-long struggle for independence from Spanish rule and Protestant Reformation, Celeste Brusati examines the *Perspectives* of Pieter Saenredam (1627-1665), where church images were no longer treated as objects of religious veneration, but as artefacts commemorating history and testimonials of an artistic heritage contributing to the preservation and constitution of the identity of the nascent Dutch Republic. Saenredam drew from the historiographic protocol of descriptive geography to give his paintings documentary value (including observers, featuring eye-points...), and pays particular attention to the deformations of shifting vantage points—in line with Hans Vredeman de Vries's perspective treatise of 1604—, and thereby negotiating confessional and political divides. Saenredam's younger compatriot, Samuel van Hoogstraten, introduced his treatise on optical illusions by metaphorically linking perspective with the visibility of paintings coming into view or receding out of view according to periods of iconoclasm or iconophilia.

Although Pope Sixtus V (16th century) modelled himself on Gregory the Great, the "Destroyer of Pagan idols", dismantling monuments of the pagan past, Michael Cole looks at how he sometimes used them as bases for Christian images, as in the case of obelisks or columns on top of which crosses or statues of saints were erected, for example. More than repairing them, he ambiguously restored them as salient urban features and cult objects, thereby preserving the force of images, be it in their power of exorcising that very same force. Therefore, the bronze or gold idols were used as models, and not just as counter-examples, for the Christian monuments that initially were to transform them, and had therefore functions ambivalently close to those they intended to eradicate.

Thomas Cummins pinpoints the ambivalence of the Spaniards who believed it was their mission to remove golden idols in South America (mirroring Continental iconoclasm) and yet refashioned Christian images with that gold or financed Christian Baroque wars with it. This dubious enterprise was in fact just another way of greedily and lustily worshipping gold; Cummins also draws a parallel with transubstantiation—another figuration of God deemed proper—which he contends is suggestive of the ritual cannibalism of the Indians.

Through the example of the Strozzi Chapel (S. Maria Novella, Florence), Philine Helas and Gerhard Wolf show how the god Mars is given lifelikeness and, in their own words, "vitalization"—particular animated appearance—, inspired by the living figures acting as statues in *quattrocento* festival cultures, thereby underlining Mars's central role in Florence's self-identification.

Megan Holmes explores the idolatrous dimension of votive offerings, focusing on wax and silver figurines and body parts, as well as life-sized multi-media effigies. Wax anatomical ex-votos bore the very traces of physical imprint, and furthermore were displayed very close to body relics and cult images. Therefore, during the 15th century, the votive object was progressively invested with talismanic potency, and became a cult image itself and the locus of social competition, since its greater or lesser magnificence encoded markers of social identity.

Donald McColl's essay deals with iconoclasm by water. "Provision of water has been associated with strong social discipline" (185), and therefore disposal and destruction by water drew on the "gestures and timing of carnival transgression" (186), although McColl argues that such a parallel has its limits. Iconoclasm by water had the further advantage of being strikingly visual—with the floating objects of corpses—, making the symbol more lasting. Such acts were reminiscent of Biblical punishment (the Flood, the Drowning of Pharaoh's men in the Red Sea), rites of purification, or the fact that some sacred images (especially the *acheiropoieton* images) were borne out of water.

According to Walter Malion, Georg Mack the Elder's painted print of *The Trinity* resonates across confessional lines, in that Lutheran viewers are able to appropriate this initially Catholic print, where the Ancient of Days is inspired by Isaiah's portrait of God as divinely sovereign and humble, dramatizing the conjunction of exalted dignity and majesty and exemplary abasement.

Mia Mochizuki examines the three types of Japanese images that grew out of cross-cultural encounters with Europe:

- Western subject matter represented according to Japanese conventions.
- Experiences with Western pictorial techniques, such as aerial and linear perspective called "Western views" by Japanese, adapted to such themes as theatre or sumo fights.
- Western-style depictions of Western matter—that is, copies or replicas adapted to a Japanese medium for a Japanese audience, and with a few Japanese stylistic characteristics, mainly Catholic devotional art created in mission workshop such as the Niccolo school. This third category was increasingly viewed as seditious—because it could harbour political loyalties of Japanese Catholic converts—, and it therefore came under attack.

Mochizuchi then analyses the hybrid nature of map screens, which flourished because they did not emulate the mimetic representational paradigm of the devotional icon. In so doing,

they detached likeness from value—since they integrated details that were unintelligible for a Japanese—but merely served as a signifier of Western knowledge and as a metaphor for a world view which depended on a specific geographic locale, hence neutralising any attempts at idolatry.

In the following essay, Dawn Odell traces shifting European conceptions as regards the mimetic abilities of written text and imagery. As an example, in Dutch merchant van Linschoten's *Itinerario* (1563-1611), the descriptive naturalism of the picture served as visual objective confirmation of the text, as if the verisimilitude of the image were necessary evidence the text could not provide. The non-mimetic non-transparent European language was suspected of misrepresenting the world, creating a parallel perceptual world, a potentially idolatrous human-created code. By contrast, Chinese was thought to be an offshoot of the Adamic language—the lost universal language after humanity's hubris in constructing the tower of Babel—, because of its close kinship to pictograms, containing the promise of transparency to the physical world.

As mariolatry became a widespread phenomenon, the most common cult image, Maria in Sole, deriving from the Apocalypse (12:1-6) and Genesis (3:14-15), appeared suddenly in great numbers just before the beginning of the 16th century, not only as three-dimensional, life-sized wooden sculptures but also in the form of prints, both engravings and woodcuts, by celebrated artists such as Albrecht Dürer as well as anonymous craftsmen. Larry Silver shows how her protective aid was invoked during Reformation wars, and how her triumphalist symbolism over the devil, over the moon (recalling the crescent of Islam, a visual potent counter-offensive to Islam's iconophobia) served as an emblem for the true Church. Its afterlife was particularly long as it resurfaced when it was necessary for the threatened Catholic faith to reaffirm itself: at Guadalupe in Mexico (1531), Lourdes in France (1858), Fatima in Portugal (1917), and also at Regensburg (early 16th century), or Mariazell (around 1520).

In the 15th century, widely circulating popular printed images did not lend themselves to destruction because they were considered innocuous as printed media, with merely a mnemonic function. Drawing on the wide circulation and standardization of mathematical printing, which expanded greatly in the years around 1500, Rebecca Zorach focuses on the didactic diagrammatical images of the French scholar Charles de Bovelles which he connects to mathematics in an effort to find a mystical language of the mind. These were doubly abstracted images, as printed matter and as mathematical reference, and thus avoided the deception of visual imagery suspected of producing idols.

The strengths of the book are also its weaknesses: its piecemeal nature as a series of case studies offers no synthetic all-embracing overview. But it does provide very stimulating insights on the ways in which idolatry was seized upon as a political or social alibi, and how those who combated idolatry ambivalently often reproduced the same sort of practice. It also highlights the link between idolatry and mimesis, and says how detachment from that mimesis pinpointed the geographic and contextual relativism of art, thereby opening new vistas for artistic creation.

This richly documented edited collection is highly commendable to all those interested in the phenomenon of iconoclasm in the early modern era but also, more broadly, to all those interested in the ways images can be invested with power and reality, in that its many erudite historical examples can easily fuel more theoretical reflections.