

Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Print, 272 pp., US\$49.95, ISBN: 9780812241426.



R e v i e w

This book is not textual, but cultural, intellectual and historical on the public image of Christian saints. The study of late ancient Christianity is used to explore the philosophical or theological thoughts of early Christian leaders in the third and fifth centuries. *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity*, however, examines the saintly human bodies depicted in the hagiographical manuscripts and icons between the fourth and seventh centuries. The body of a saint was interpreted through architecture, art, events, people and places in the context of *ekphrasis*. In particular, amulets, bones, relics, statues, shrines, mosaics and pilgrimages were represented to denote a ‘corporeal imagination’ of saints. The purpose of Patricia Cox Miller’s work is to analyse pictorial strategies that draw on the power of discourse to materialise its effects in the world of the reader in the era of early Byzantine Christianity.

Chapter One demonstrates that there was an increase in appreciation for colour, glitter and spectacle in public ceremonies and personal clothing. The use of the body was seen to be a visual and tangible frame of selfhood. The images of ‘Plotinus’s transparent sphere’, ‘Origen’s divine library’, ‘Proclus’s animated statues’ and ‘Victricius’s spiritual jewels’ were considered as expressions of the authors’ views of self-identity and its relation to human corporeality. The human body and its objects were presumed to be theophanic vehicles in the material world. The development of aesthetics that emphasised the visual and tactile immediacy of the body part (a piece of bone, a single mosaic tile and a word in a poem) is illustrated in

Chapter Two. Miller explains that the sculpture of human figures, particularly in the similar stylistic trends of sarcophagi, has been observed in the mosaic and painterly arts of the period. For this, Kitzinger's view is adopted, where the actions and gestures of the figures are organically generated by the body as a whole (p. 45). *Chapter Three* explores the relic-minded Christians. Prudentius of Calahorra, Asterius of Amaseia and Paulinus of Nola created, through the relics of saints, a contact for approaching body parts. The association of blood and flowers that had a long history in Greco-Roman myths, is, likewise, related to the concept of jewelled counterparts for the crown of the martyrs. The bodies of martyrs, in this notion, are appreciated as relics in a poetic concept.

The connection between martyrial bodies and their relics is seen as the cultivation of an inner visual imagination. The three features in *Homily of St. John Chrysostom on the Relics of the Holy Martyrs* are interpreted in *Chapter Four*. The narratives of 'Augustine of Hippo and mental theater', 'Prudentius of Calahorra and spiritual landscapes' and 'Victricius of Rouen and metaphors of Light', are seen as evoking the spiritual power of saints at the sites of their relics. *Chapter Five* explores hagiographic texts' use of sensory realism, in order to articulate how the holy could be present in the world in the form of a saintly body. The testimonies in the *Life and Miracles of St. Thekla*, *the Life of St. Symeon the Stylite the Younger*, and *the Miracle of St Artemios* support the view that the life of the saint is a prelude to the explosion of the saint into action, as miracle succeeds miracle in rapid-fire (p. 106). The author suggests that the saint's body is invisible yet seen as quite physical, touching both the man in the story and the reader. *Chapter Six* maintains the view that late ancient Christianity encouraged the development of three remarkable movements — the cult of the saints, the cult of relics and the production of iconic art. All of these were in the form of a human body, as a locus of spiritual presence. The transfiguration of both Christ and human beings was understood as the triumph of spirit over matter or the triumph of flesh over human fallenness.

The role of the hagiographical pictures that represented the materialisation of a saint in an icon is examined in *Chapter Seven*. Here, it is argued that the saintly icons were significant parts of the material turn in late ancient Christian era. Miller assumes that the hagiographical enterprise developed discursive strategies for advertising the importance of representation, of imaging, as a means for embracing the saints without idolizing them. *Chapter Eight* continues to explore the issue of the relation between saints and their icons as portrayed in hagiographical anecdotes. This focuses specially on the odd doubling of saint and icon that occurs in the anecdotes, even though the topos of Athanasius' *Life of Saint Antony*, according to Leontius of Neapolis' *Contra Iudaeos orationes*, can be reflected as the scene of idolatry. The depiction of the saintt–icon relationship is demonstrated as a meditation on the manner in which flesh enters the order of representation. The saintly body in icons, therefore, is imaged not just as a figure, but as a being called *image–flesh*, in which the relation of likeness is transformed into one of immanence. The image of saints reflected in icons is also mentioned in the final chapter, in which it is assumed that the function of icons was to memorialise the saint depicted, and also to effect an exchange between the human beholder and the image whereby the spiritual power mediated by the image had a miraculous impact on the beholder (p. 166). The scene, for example, the reputed of Symeon, illustrates that the (colourful) body of a saint could be shown to be holy: *we honour [the saint] as if he were present*.

The book *The Corporeal Imagination* is not a theological textbook, but well developed the historical transformation of early Christian traditions on saint's image. Miller's interpretation of human body and its objects was critically reflected through the external figures of sculpture, paint, and relics. Although there is still controversy on the worship of saintly icons, it is a reasonable point where the inspiration of beholder is recognised in the context of spiritual power and miracle. Such approach is abstract and sophisticated, yet a useful source for readers on the theory and

method of art history, aesthetics, hagiographical studies and the history of Christianity.

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