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The Art of Affective Piety in the East: Re-Thinking Origins and Effects

Project Overview

The Medieval Art of Fear explores how fear (variously called *phrike*, *phobos*, or *ekplexis* in Gree) is a central and largely neglected element of medieval thinking about art and architecture. It offers a new angle into a core issue in medieval studies: art's elicitation of psychosomatic experience.

The Medieval Art of Fear does so by exposing a tradition of art and affect different from the one typically associated with icons and divine representation. It draws on—and contributes to—recent object-centered approaches to premodern art that examine affect in relation to materiality, form, space, and acts of making. This medieval art of fear comprised a range of materials from gold paint and mosaic to steatite, rock crystal, ivory, even silk. Its scales ranged from the monumental to the intimate and miniature, and as a result, we confront an art that intensified visual perception as well as invited kinesthetic and tactile forms of participation. At stake is not the medieval shock before divine images or magical amulets; **pursued** in public and private, fear was the object of a psychosomatic craft cultivated in dialogue with objects and spaces. In some cases, this affective craft was even imparted in acts of artistic labor

To explore this tradition draws us to locations familiar to the history of art such as Italy, Greece and, Turkey but also to areas far less studied such as Syria, Palestine, Cyprus, Macedonia, Egypt, and Georgia. And from varieties of matter and scale, we may glimpse different medieval communities of viewing and economies of ownership. The medieval art of fear drew patronage across all forms of Mediterranean society, from monastic and aristocratic circles to the urban public in places like Constantinople and Thessaloniki.

Major questions / Interventions

How can the relationship between medieval art and affect be understood in a way that breaks from previous logocentric models? (IE, previous scholarship held that models of rhetoric provided the inspiration for medieval artists to effect viewers.)

How does the Christian emphasis on fear as *sensation* rather than *pathos* cut across social groups? How do the effects of this medieval art of fear posit or reflect different viewing groups?

Very broadly: When did “affective piety” originate? (A major question in the book)

Big, existential historical question: What is ancient about medieval fear? This point regards a broader art historical issue, especially pertaining to medieval Mediterranean: the *nachleben* of ancient artistic forms and strategies in the creation of Christian aesthetics.