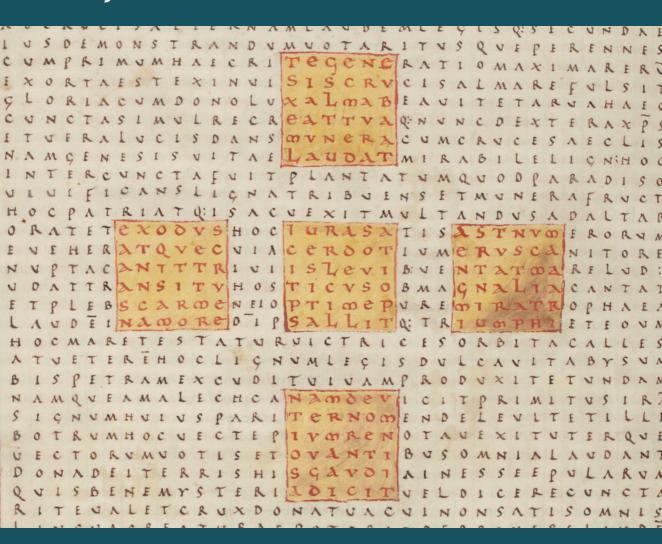# Abstraction in Medieval Art

Beyond the Ornament

Edited by Elina Gertsman

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Illustrations

Preface: Withdrawal and Presence

Elina Gertsman

Abstract

Since Henri Focillon's eloquent meditation on *la vie des formes*, originally published in 1939, the subject of abstraction in medieval art has been largely reduced to the study of ornament and questions of style, with occasional forays into the discussion of sacred geometry and exploration of the late Gothic hard style. The introduction outlines major themes of this collection, which seeks to reopen the question of medieval abstractions, interrogating the term itself and asking about the ways it can be fruitfully applied to pre-modern material culture. It also provides an overview of contributions, which approach the concept of medieval abstraction from a multitude of perspectives—formal, semiotic, iconographic, material, phenomenological, epistemological.

Keywords: abstraction, terminology, theory, Haggadah, matzah

On folio 22r of the thirteenth-century Hispano-Moresque Haggadah (Bl Ms. Or 2373) a kaleidoscopic circular image splits open a page of text, its axial symmetry indicated by four pyramidal protrusions on four sides (Figure 0-1).[1] The protrusions, which dip into the text at an angle, are placed as if to suggest movement: the riotous circle—red, gold, silver, blue—seems poised to roll off the page onto the preceding folio. There, a word panel indicates the nature of the form: מצה , 'matzah', or the unleavened Passover bread (Figure 0-2).

What are we to make of this startling image? Some of its elements seem, by all measures, abstracted and abstract—at least so in their modern sense: non-representational and non-denotative, the image indexes its ostensible model only inasmuch as it echoes the round form of the actual bread. This is a matzah that is not a matzah: visually divorced from its prototype, it is semiotically trussed to it through the written word. It is a form that signals the unrepresentability of what is really at stake: no longer just an element of a Seder dinner, it is the metaphorized affliction of the Jewish people, a marker of their identity, an embodiment of their longing for divine redemption. It also is, most potently, a container for the Divine

Figure 0-1. Matzah, the Hispano-Moresque Haggadah, 1275-1324. London, British Library, Or. 2737, fol. 22r. Photo: The British Library.

Figure 0-2. 'Matzah', the Hispano-Moresque Haggadah, 1275-1324. London, British Library, Or. 2737, fol. 21v. Photo: The British Library.

Presence, what the kabbalists call the Shekhinah. The Shekhinah is a malleable vessel, void of definitive form or colour: an ever-shifting template whose shape and appearance are predicated on any given beholder's cognitive apparatus as much as on any given projection of the divine.[2] So it is with the Hispano-Moresque 'matzah', its interlaced form arrested in mid motion, plotting to escape both the page and the beholder's grasp. This matzah's emphatic abstraction is predicated on and brought into contrast with the figurative elements it comprehends: the four quadrupeds arranged around a floral form at the centre and a speckling of minute trifoliate plants against red and blue colour fields. It is, thus, also abstract in a very medieval sense, which sees abstraction not as the opposite of figuration but as its integral aspect.

But the language with which we describe this form is patently post-medieval: 'abstraction' as a term in its application to visual culture is a phenomenon of the recent centuries. The Latin term *abstractio*, at least as it is known to us from the assorted writings on perception, mathematics, noetics, and universalism, as well as through a series of reinterpretations—Boethian reinterpretations of Aristotle, Aquinian reinterpretations of Boethius—means something else entirely. What this

something else *is* constitutes one of the central questions of the present collection, wherein nearly every essay chafes at the confines imposed by modern vocabulary on medieval works of art: 'ornament', 'decoration', 'abstraction', 'geometry', 'non-representation', 'non-figuration', 'stylization', 'non-denotation', 'non-mimesis', 'subtraction', 'lack' flit in and out of these papers, here reluctantly discarded, there exultantly embraced. In this way, each essay toils, on the one hand, to disentangle present-day terms from objects at hand, and, on the other, to formulate productive ways to think through and build up concepts of what medieval abstraction might and might not be, how it might be manifested, and how it might be described.

A project like this is utterly new, and yet its historiographic roots reach to the first years of the twentieth century, to Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1907; published in 1908) and *Formprobleme der Gotik* (1912).[3] Worringer did not study medieval abstraction in any sustained way however, and neither did other luminaries of the field: not Henri Focillon in his remarkable *Vie des forms* (1934), which considers Romanesque painting in terms of space and/as ornament; not Ernst Gombrich in the erudite *The Sense of Order* (1979), where Ottonian illumination rubs shoulders with pre-Columbian sculpture.[4] When abstraction does become a focus of a continuous inquiry, the emphasis, not surprisingly, shifts to early medieval art. The writings of Victor Elbern, for instance, focus on metalwork; eschewing the question of ornament, he had written on the aniconic and the non-figurative schemata, emphasizing particularly the form of the Cross.[5] Jean-Claude Bonne, conversely, has dedicated a great part of his scholarship to the question of ornament, particularly in Insular illumination, and has drawn connections between medieval visual culture and modern/contemporary art.[6] Several recent studies tug the notion of abstraction in different temporal directions, towards late antiquity on the one hand, and towards Gothic art on the other.[7] Of course, to fully reassess the historiography of abstract forms one would have to attend to a colossal constellation of studies, ranging from those on abstraction in medieval philosophy—such as Alain de Libera's *L'art des généralités*—to those on abstraction in modern and contemporary visual culture: a patent impossibility within the scope of this unavoidably brief preface.[8] Instead, in order to avoid being reductively selective here, I asked contributors to this volume to bring up and reassess as needed key studies in abstraction immediately relevant to their own essays.

The resultant historiographic mosaic proves to be instructive, as from the very start the authors were given a wide-ranging brief: to approach the concept of medieval abstraction from a multitude of perspectives—formal, semiotic, icono-graphic, material, phenomenological, epistemological. This brief was framed by a still broader set of questions. Abstraction haunts medieval art, both withdrawing figuration and suggesting elusive presence. How does it make or destroy meaning in the process? Is it by detaching itself from matter and foregrounding the figurative?

Is it by dissolving the figurative into matter, by calling attention to the surface and to its planar artifice? Do the figurative and the abstract collapse upon each other? In what way does abstraction represent or deny? Does abstraction suggest the failure of figuration, the faltering of iconography, and can it truly escape the semiotics of colour or form? Does medieval abstraction function because it is imperfect, incomplete, and uncorrected—and is therefore cognitively, visually demanding? Is it, conversely, precisely *about* perfection? Just how closely are medieval abstraction and vision connected, and to what extent is the abstract predicated on theorization of the unrepresentable and imperceptible? Is there something intrinsic about the connection between abstraction and the divine? How much can the abstract really comprehend and elide with the aniconic? Does medieval abstraction pit aesthetics against metaphysics? How, finally, does it define its viewers, medieval and modern?

The Hispano-Moresque matzah image raises three broad themes—abstraction as the untethering of image from what it purports to represent, abstraction as a vehicle for signification, and abstraction as a form of figuration—and it is these themes that give general shape to the present book. Its first part is concerned with shifting dissemblance that simultaneously denies and invites abstraction as signification. Because later medieval painting is often framed as the demise of Hiberno-Saxon abstract forms in anticipation of early modern 'naturalism', I wanted to open this book with a set of essays that tackle largely later medieval art, although the groundwork here is laid by Vincent Debiais's chapter, which looks at the uses of plain colour in manuscripts and wall paintings created between the ninth and the twelfth centuries. Debiais parses our notions of the 'figure' and the 'monochrome', provocatively positing colour not as a sign for something else but rather as the very subject of the image under scrutiny—a notion heretofore limited to the discussion of modern and contemporary colour-field painting. The necessity to step away from the modern conception of abstractions is confirmed in Aden Kumler's essay that explores the so-called reticulated grounds in Gothic illumination. Kumler focuses specifically on a framed, apparently aniconic, miniature in an early fifteenth-century copy of Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de l' âme*, to argue that in eschewing narrative figuration, the image functions as an exemplar and a vehicle of an explicitly medieval concept of abstraction, here in relation to Trinitarian ontology.

This exceptional ontology can be no more comprehended than the divine essence of the unknowable God, communicated in the Kennicott Bible, as Adam S. Cohen and Linda Safran argue in their essay. The illuminator of this late medieval Jewish Iberian manuscript, Joseph ibn Hayyim, confronts the ineffability of seeing, reading, and grasping the biblical text through the device of abstraction, which mutates throughout the book, scattering itself across full-page compositions and side panels,

the binding and the paste-downs. Abstraction, Cohen and Safran suggest, offers access to the indescribable God through order, beauty, and, above all, infinity. This infinity, and the unknowability of the divine, are, finally, the subject of Robert Mills's essay, which explores Hieronymus Bosch's *Visions of the Hereafter* panels, concentrating specifically on their non-figurative backs. Generally considered to imitate stony surfaces, these paintings, Mills contends, are emphatically unlike stone: their dissemblance from what they purport to represent indexes the notion of *dissimilitudo* between divine substance and phenomenological, sensible corporeality. Like the plain-colour surfaces discussed by Debiais, these panels call attention to their own *thingness*, to the liquescence of their pigment; like the evacuated image in the *Pèlerinage de l' âme* and the complex mazes in the Kennicott Bible, they ask that we look through, with, and ultimately beyond the threshold of the sensible.

All four essays in the first part of the book make clear that abstraction, built as it is on the slippage between signification and aporia, is predicated on figuration. The role of figuration in the semiotics of the abstract stands at the core of the second part of the volume, which looks at the way that abstraction intervenes in figurable reality as a form and a sign. Here we take a chronological step back in order to look at early medieval manuscripts that have historically been seen as hospitable grounds to abstraction of form. Danny Smith's essay explores the seventh-century Ashburnham Pentateuch, zeroing in on four patches of pink paint variously applied over the first and the second person of God. Like Mills, who evokes Jackson Pollock's drip canvasses to structure his argument about the materiality of Bosch's paint, Smith looks to the language of Barnett Newman's ideographic paintings to articulate the abstraction of the Godhead as the painterly matter of Creation itself. In turn, Benjamin Tilghman borrows from Jasper Johns to explore the semiotic instability of Vespertinum monograms, which oscillate between abstraction and figuration. Just as contributors to the first part of the volume worry the question of unrepresentabilty by focusing on the disjunction between image and prototype, Tilghman locates abstraction in the tension (and, ultimately, divorce) between lettering and its content.

This tension is also explored in Gia Toussaint's essay that takes, however, a different approach to the complex relationship between writing and figuration. Toussaint studies three distinct cases of what she calls 'abstract ornamentation', and posits it as both a formal and a semiotic vehicle for meaning-making. Abstraction, for Toussaint, is thus a complex union of script and ornament, activated by the artist as well as the reader-viewer. This activation—evident especially in two tenth-century *carmina figurata* letter mazes—is similarly the predicate of viewing practices explored by Nancy Thebaut. Thebaut looks at several eleventh-century evangeliaries produced at Echternach, which unite and juxtapose monochrome or skeuomorphic paintings on one side of the folio with figural paintings on their

obverse. In examining such 'monochromes', Thebaut returns to some of the issues
brought up by Debiais in his contribution, while her focus on the materiality of paint
on these folios establishes a dialogue with Smith's essay. She nonetheless arrives
at a different aspect of abstraction, finding an analogy between the semiological
transformation of colour fields across the folios and the ontology of the Eucharist
itself predicated on transformation.

If the first two parts of the book focused on essential ontological questions that
tied abstraction, one way or another, to the celestial plane, the last section turns
towards the natural world and to the human pursuits that define abstraction
in epistemic terms, at turns poetic, at turns ecological, at turns scientific, and
oftentimes fallible. The chronological range of the four essays here is less restricted,
comprehending the temporal span of the first eight contributions. Danielle Joyner
examines two sixth-century bird-shaped Frankish brooches as a succession of
abstractions that here mean removals and withdrawals. Guided as much by Gallic
poetry as by eco-critical approaches, Joyner suggests that jewelled pieces include
ornithological and environmental abstractions—that is, abstraction of visual
elements from real birds, and abstraction of stones and metals from the earth,
as well as subsequent abstraction of animal form from these natural elements.
The concept of abstraction as removal and withdrawal similarly governs Megan
McNamee's essay, which considers devotional images through the lens of mathe-
matical treatises. McNamee turns to eleventh-century codices to problematize
their planarity, framing it by contemporaneous discourses on geometry and optics:
abstraction—here reduction and withdrawal of solid forms—is used as a pictorial
strategy of divergence between what it is possible to clearly describe / imagine /
see and what it is possible to represent.

A similar kind of divergence is addressed in Taylor McCall's piece on late medieval
anatomical diagrams, which turned to abstraction of form—what she defines as a
disassociation between the idea and its figuration—as a vehicle for communicating
hidden physiologies. Both McNamee and McCall ultimately see abstraction as
an example of failure of figuration to show what cannot be shown. The same is
finally true for Harris's essay, which explores a fourteenth-century Hebrew Bible
illuminated by Joshua ibn Gaon, where, however, even abstraction falters, serving as
it does as an index and a sign of human fallibility in the face of divine perfection. Like
McNamee's flat cubes and McCall's geometricized organs, the full-page abstractions
on the pages of ibn Gaon's Bible are purposefully flawed—flawed as a way to show
the failure to represent what is ultimately unrepresentable. In suggesting painting
as an analogy for an impossible ontology, Harris's essay circles back to the issues
tackled in the first part of the book: those of unrepresentability and dissemblance.

Discussions of unrepresentability (of the divine) and fallibility (of human sight)
similarly, and not surprisingly, govern Herbert Kessler's response to the collection

at hand. This penultimate essay focuses on the first cupola in the atrium of San Marco in Venice, but reaches broadly to comprehend the rich variety of topics brought up by other authors: the relationships between abstraction and figuration, abstraction and imagination, abstraction and materiality, abstraction and mathematics, abstraction and ineffability, abstraction and imperfection, abstraction and perception. Kessler's response explores the San Marco cupola within a categorically medieval framework, calling up Honorius Augustodunensis in the epigraph, and carefully parsing sources from Pope Innocent III to Albertus Magnus and from Gerald of Wales to Pacificus of Verona.

Still, even though the contributors to this volume aspire to study medieval abstraction on its own terms, they must, perforce, have recourse to present-day vocabularies and present-day definitions of the abstract. In fact, the shared visual vocabularies of images separated by many centuries have given rise, in the last decade, to a multitude of studies that ask whether medieval art is modern and whether modern art is medieval.[9] While these questions are emphatically not the point of this book, several authors—notably Debiais, Mills, Smith, and Tilghman—evoke modern and contemporary art practices to set up their arguments. In order to give methodological shape to these evocations, this book's coda, written by Charlotte Denoël, explores a complex set of affinities between medieval and contemporary art. In her essay, Denoël creates purposefully a-chronic conduits between Carolingian manuscripts and twentieth-century minimalist and conceptual art, to shed light on their visual and epistemological kinship. Denoël's coda thus serves as a fitting conclusion to the book: it does not close the subject of medieval abstraction but rather opens it anew.

The range of this book might be broad, but still, to many, it will not be broad enough: essays here focus on abstraction specifically in the medieval art of Judaeo-Christian Europe, created between the sixth and the sixteenth centuries. This scope is predicated by what I see as shared ontological, theological, and epistemological concerns evidenced in the material culture that is delimited by fairly specific temporal and environmental geographies. It is not, as I write this, a fashionable position to take, at a time when we are acutely aware of the fraught history of our field that has long privileged Western medieval art.[10] To that end, a word on these geographical limitations is needed. When I originally conceived of this volume and began conversations with colleagues and friends, I was pelleted with ideas: what about Almohad ornament? Byzantine gold ground? Buddhist aniconism? After a while, as I was jotting down notes, I became uncomfortably reminded of the famous fable that all of us Soviet children learned in school: Elephant paints a landscape and, before sending it out to the exhibition, invites friends to come and look at it. Everyone likes the painting but finds something missing: Crocodile wonders where the Nile is, Seal wishes for ice and snow, and

Pig longs for acorns. Elephant picks up his paintbrush and adds all these elements, and then some (a pot of honey, just in case Bear is in the audience). Once finished, Elephant gathers his friends again, and they proclaim, quite justly, that the painting is an utter mess.[11]

Still, because of my long-standing commitment and scholarly sympathy to global medieval study, I cast a wide call for papers, gathering essays on Buddhist, Christian (both Western medieval and Byzantine), Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu art. When I began the editing process, however, it became abundantly clear that in my wish to be inclusive, I was doing the volume a disservice. The set of research questions I set out to explore was watered down, transformed into a cluster of case studies that pricked the surface of these questions; where many essays (included here) cohered beautifully, some seemed to stand on their own and therefore appeared definitively *othered*. All edited volumes, to some extent, present a congeries of sorts, but what I had on my hands was Elephant's mess that tried both my scholarly and moral principles. The volume had to be transformed, its focus tightened, its cultural bounds redrawn; certain essays had to go, others had to be commissioned. The majority of those writers I had to leave behind saw perfectly my quandary and generously endorsed my decision. I am as grateful to them as I am to the authors whose essays I did include, and who bore my convolutions of conscience—which remade the volume nearly from scratch and therefore took a fair amount of time—with patience and encouragement. Perhaps this book will serve as an impetus for another volume on the subject, one with a global focus. After all, in my experience, the project of medieval abstraction is not unlike the impossible matzah of the Hispano-Moresque Haggadah: rich, colourful, kaleidoscopic, it keeps expanding and turning, seemingly without end.

Scholastics talked about abstraction as an intellectual process that allows one to strip facts and phenomena of their specifics, and move from the sensorial observation to an ontological understanding of the universe. In putting together this volume, I borrow from their playbook: I hope that the sum total of this collection will allow the reader to isolate the multivalent meanings of 'medieval abstraction' from every given essay and put them together in order to move from specifics— reticulated Gothic ground, a geometricized bird, a figureless monochrome—to something rather more general, more universal, and therefore, dare I say, rather more abstract.

Notes

1. The Hispano-Moresque Haggadah (BL ms. Or 2737) is a Sephardic haggadah for Passover according to the Spanish rite, created between 1275 and 1324. On the manuscript, see Margoliouth, *Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts*, vol. 4, no. 609; Metzger, 'Two Fragments of a Spanish XIVth Century Haggadah', pp. 25–34; Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*, vol.1, no. 9; vol. 2, figs. 79–104; Metzger and Metzger, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 304; Zirlin, 'The Schocken Italian Haggadah', pp. 63–72; Gutmann, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval Jewish Art', pp. 74, 85; Harris, 'Love in the Land of Goshen', pp. 161–80; Kogman-Appel, *Jewish Book Art*, pp. 94–95; Tahan, *Hebrew Manuscripts*, pp. 90–93; and *Sacred: Books of the Three Faiths*, p. 160
    On the matzah, see especially Batterman, 'Bread of Affliction, Emblem of Power' as well as Batterman, 'The Emergence of the Spanish Illuminated Haggadah Manuscript'. On movement in medieval Jewish manuscripts, see Epstein, 'Thought Crimes: Implied Ensuing Motion in Manuscripts Made for Jewish Patrons', pp. 84–86.
2. *Sefer ha-Zohar*, 95a-b, in *The Wisdom* of *the Zohar*, vol. 3, pp. 1314–16. On the matzah image in Sephardic haggadot as the Shekhinah, see Batterman, 'Bread of Affliction, Emblem of Power', pp. 62–67. Batterman connects this shifting form to the varied forms of the abstracted matzah, found in various manuscripts (pp. 64–67), but stresses, however, what he sees as an association between the form of the matzah, Christian imagery, and, more specifically, the form and appearance of the Eucharistic host. See Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals*, especially Chapter 6, on dining rituals as 'augmentation theurgy'.
3. Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* and *Formprobleme der Gotik*.
4. Focillon, *Vie des forms*, Chapter 2; Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*.
5. Elbern, 'Anciconica, arte' and 'Bildstruktur – Sinnzeichen – Bildaussage'.
6. See, e.g. Bonne, 'Art ornemental, art environnemental'; 'De l'ornemental dans l'art médiéval (VIIe-XIIe siècle)'; 'L'ornement – la différence dans la repetition'; 'Ornementation et representation'; and 'Une certaine couleur des idées'.
7. For the former, see essays in *Envisioning Worlds in Late Antique Art*, ed. Olovsdotter; for the latter, e.g., Powell, 'Late Gothic Abstractions'; Rau, *Die ornamentalen Hintergründe*; and Beyer, 'Unding Ornament?'.
8. From Alain de Libera's *L'art des généralités* to, e.g., Goodman's 'Abstraction', Damisch's, 'Remarks on Abstraction', and Elger's *Abstract Art* (2017).
9. Betancourt and Taroutina, eds., *Byzantium/Modernism*; Nagel, *Medieval / Modern*; Powell, *Depositions*; Prado Villar, 'Silentium', pp. 21–43.
10. On what Christina Normore calls 'external pressures to produce a field of medieval global art', see the introduction to her edited volume, *Reassessing the Global Turn in Medieval Art History*, p. 3.
11. Sergei Mikhalkov, 'Elephant Painter' [Слон-живописец], http://basni.net/basnya/slon-givopisets.html, accessed 3 November 2019.

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