

## ADEN KUMLER

1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

My first experiences studying medieval art, at the University of Chicago in the 1990s, were shaped by the emphasis on “word and image” relations that had already transformed iconography and iconology at that time. The integration of semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, and, not least, the history of gender and sexuality in the classes I took made studying medieval art quite thrilling. My first publications, including my first book (based on my dissertation), focused on questions of how medieval images produced meaning in collaboration and in tension with texts, primarily vernacular-language texts focused on aspects of Christian religious truth and practice. In the last ten years, like many other art historian colleagues focused on periods before 1500 CE, I have increasingly integrated consideration of materials and material culture in my research and teaching. Often described as “the material turn”, recent interest in historical conceptions of materials and the material world, as well as the very material “stuff” of images is not a radical new direction in art history, but rather a return, with a number of vital differences, to fundamental questions of form, facture, and process. Although it might be described as displacing the focus on “images” and image-theory that dominated scholarship in my field in prior decades, I think images and their theoretical stakes remain a central preoccupation.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

Reflecting on this question, I find that essay-length studies have been far more important for my research than books. Nonetheless, books have played crucial roles in shaping the questions that interest me most. From a much longer list, three books that have decisively shaped my perception and thinking are: Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1988); Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2011); Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

3. *What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between “style” and “iconography”? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

By “traditional” art history, the question seems to evoke iconography, iconology, the connoisseurial tradition’s taxonomies of “styles” and “schools,” and art historical stemmatic criticism’s investment in tracing the diachronic transformation and continuity of “motifs”. Whereas in the study of medieval art I think both iconography and Panofskyian iconology still play central roles, the connoisseurial and the stemmatic approaches have fallen out of fashion. This, I suspect, because they are today judged to depend upon highly mechanistic, sometimes teleological accounts of how art is made that are of little use in addressing questions of *why* art is made, or how works play formative roles within cultures. From this vantage, they seem to ill-suited to investigation of the cultural, social, and political – that is to say, anthropological – dynamics that have most interested art historians since the 1960s. The rejection of such “old fashioned” art historical methods, has in turn produced a curious state of affairs. On the one hand, very few art historians active today have been trained in the techniques of close observation and comparison that defined the *habitus* of pre-1960s connoisseurship, with the result that many academic art historians effectively delegate the work of dating, localization, and attribution to colleagues working in museums and in the art market. At the same time, at least among historians of medieval art, growing interest in artistic processes, techniques and materials, and in makers would seem to call for a critical revival of the first-hand skilled forms of empirical observation that “old-fashioned” connoisseurship and stemmatic criticism practiced. In my view, a reinvestment in these practices would be welcome, provided that it was resolutely sceptical, self-aware and critically interested in how an art historian’s contemporary moment shapes their perception. Past concern for adjudicating “quality” seems to me to be at best irrelevant to, and, at worst, obfuscating of most historical questions we want to bring to works of art and to artifacts today, but surely meticulous, comparative close-looking can do much more than pronounce upon quality.

4. *Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different “turns”, each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?*

In my lifetime, art history has taken numerous “turns”: to reception, to post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, to the history of gender and sexuality, to word-image relations, the “iconic turn,” the “material turn,” etc. Each of these (re)orientations has enriched my understanding of the images, works of art, objects, and historical-cultural practices I study. Cumulatively, these “turns” have expanded my conception of what an image has been and can be, what objects can do, and – perhaps most importantly – they have diversified both the questions and the ways of pursuing answers that I bring to my research, teaching, and writing. The heuristic contribution seems most vital to me: that is, the ways that successive “turns” open up new possibilities for question formation, new impulses to be *curious*

about works of art and culture. It's a sign of the discipline's vitality that art history keeps "turning." So much so, that rather than naming and trumpeting each "turn," perhaps we should simply acknowledge the inventive energy of the discipline as a quasi-constant.

5. *In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

I find that the concept of the meta-image – that is, images that thematize or question their own status and effects as images – has proven to be enduringly illuminating. Skilful analyses of such reflexive images have effectively demonstrated how "the image" has been diversely theorized in images: a trans-historical and trans-cultural phenomenon of central significance to anyone interested in images and their histories. In the study of medieval images, important recent work on diagrams has, in my view, opened up new vistas for how we can perceive and interpret seemingly non-mimetic images in ways that recognize their representational power, that is their denotative (and sometimes connotative) work, as well as modes of thinking-in-images that were central to medieval European cultures.<sup>1</sup> As a final observation, I think the explosion of interest in art historiography, that is in the history of art history itself, is significant. The best work in this vein offers us new critical perspectives on the concepts and blindspots that have both enabled and limited our understanding of images.

6. *What is your specific understanding of "meaning" in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

I take a rather promiscuous approach to this question. In practice, I find that I distinguish – and occasionally collapse – several species of "meaning" when analyzing a given work. Thus, to discuss meaning "in" a work of art often invites consideration of the maker(s) intention(s): all the cumulative, often minute decisions and actions that first specified the object as a physical and hermeneutic existent. When a work presents representational or picture-like elements to perception, then the project of interpreting meaning "in" the work turns to established iconographic and iconological questions: What is depicted? How is it depicted? What historical pre-existing knowledge is demanded or activated by the work's depictive aspect? But, as much recent scholarship has emphasized, non-mimetic elements, as well as materials, size, format, techniques, placement, and use are themselves powerfully involved in the "meaning" of works of art. And, of course, meaning often changes profoundly over time. Accordingly, I find it surpassingly difficult to isolate the meaning "in" any given medieval work; one is always already confronted with a complex situation in which "meaning" is produced, variously, by conditions leading to the start of the process of making, informing that process, and accruing to and/or vanishing from the work, *in situ* or in movement, through time. For these reasons, to address "meaning" in relation to works is always a complex and necessarily selective undertaking. The challenge is to be clear-sighted and self-aware about how one privileges certain meaning-producing or meaning-imputing dynamics, and excludes others.

7. *To what extent is “meaning” determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?*

I think extra-formal factors are quite important to how any image was seen in the past and they continue to inform how a given image or work is seen. Put dogmatically: we never perceive or interpret images in a vacuum. And, of course, this is part of the real challenge of interpreting historical images: we never have access to the initial *mise-en-scène* of the image, both in an empirical sense and in an apperceptual sense. The experiential dynamics that condition the perception of images have, I think, in recent years really come to the center of scholarly attention. The growing number of scholars who are committed to a multi-sensory art history indicate how seriously and ambitiously the experiential dimension of perception is now taken. As an historian convinced that the body has a history (or rather, *histories*), and that sensorial experience is a cultural fact, I remain quite skeptical about how an emphasis on sensual experience can avoid positing the human sensorium as quasi-transcendent or trans-historical. My first encounter with the *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* volumes published by Zone books (1989) made me a cultural constructivist when it comes to questions touching on human embodied experience of images.

8. *In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?*

In broad terms, I think the open-ended project of studying images and their beholders has produced an ever-growing body of knowledge and a diversification of questions and interpretive approaches that have both expanded and deepened how we can conceive of and understand the interplay of images' appearances and the expectations of viewers. To this continuous process, the advent of digital images and the concomitant explosion of images of images, offers us an historically unprecedented *musée imaginaire*. I can still recall lectures from my BA studies in which a majority of the slides projected were in black and white and studying for exams involved making notes from black and white photographs. The proliferation of images accessible online makes all kinds of research possible in ways that would have been unthinkable in the past. At the same time, however, this phenomenon also has the effect of radically widening the gulf between the expectations we bring to historical images today and the expectations historical beholders likely brought to the images they encountered. To put this simply, any student of medieval art today with an internet connection has access to a far more expansive corpus of medieval images than any medieval beholder – even the most privileged, widely travelled, and “art loving” medieval beholder – ever had. This state of affairs makes scholars today potentially better equipped to ask *longue durée* questions, but I think it also makes it harder for us to grasp the historically conditioned, quite contingent dynamics of expectation and perception that informed how people in the past experienced works of art. At the very least, the proliferation of digital images of historical works of art, objects, and images should

prompt us to think even more critically about how and to what ends we deploy those techniques of comparison and distinction that remain central to art historical practice.

9. *To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers' understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?*

In a word: massively. A transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon, intervisuality is always at play when an image is encountered and any intellectual, affective, or creative process is sparked by that encounter. So too, in my own research I find again and again traces of contact and mutual relation between images and other aspects of medieval realities and experiences, be they material, conceptual and/or imaginative. Thus, for example, the recourse to images and artifacts in medieval Christian theology and philosophy – most notably, in thought experiments – demonstrates how people in the past “thought with” the visual-material culture around them. To take the passage of light through a transparent vessel as a starting point for thinking about the physics of light or the mystery of a virgin becoming pregnant with a god-man is to attempt to understand “reality” with a mental image likely derived from “real-world” experiences with transparent vessels, but plausibly also catalysed by images of the Annuciation. Put bluntly in terms of method: iconographic and iconological interpretation would be nonsensical undertakings if images could not inform other images, both directly and obliquely.

10. *What is your assessment of the materiality of images?*

As I explored in an essay from 2019, the term “materiality” is exceedingly elastic.<sup>2</sup> I have yet to encounter a deployment of the term that makes clear its sense and utility, in distinction to “matter,” “materials,” “physical substance,” “facture,” etc. If one takes the question as asking how the material form of a work conditions our apperception of that work, I would answer that the material form is always of paramount importance. This assertion can be readily tested by comparing an encounter with a work re-mediated through ekphrasis, photography, or line-drawing with a first-hand experience of the same work. If by “materiality” one refers not to the empirical constitution and presence of an image, but rather to the constellation of ideas about matter, materials, and images that potentially informed its making and reception, the answer I’d give is the same. A maker and a perceiver’s premises or ideas about matter, materials, images, and whatever is culturally designated as immaterial or transmaterial (e.g., concepts like beauty, ugliness, divinity, the demonic, nature, history, fraud, value, etc.) inevitably inform both the making and the perceiving of images.

11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

A matter of principle, I am resistant to granting human-like agency to images and so, by extension, I am resistant to propositions that would grant images a “social life.” At the same time, however, it is clear that certain images in medieval Europe were understood to

exert themselves upon the world and to act in ways that we might readily define as social or anti-social. In medieval Christian contexts, figural images of Christ, Mary and the saints offer the most obvious and wide-spread exemplification of this phenomenon. And of course, medieval Christians devised a variety of ways of understanding and/or justifying such images' sociality. I find such emic accounts of how images were understood to interrelate with human beings, with nature, and with other images quite important, but as an historian I am equally interested in how people in the past conferred "social life" upon images. Considered from this angle (i.e., anthropologically), we need not assume anything. The evidence for medieval Christians cultivating relationships with images, particularly religious images, *as if they were people* is irrefutable.

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

For medieval people it seems clear that the experience of images was often a multi-sensory affair. Given that many medieval images are consubstantial with the forms of functional objects, the haptic dimension of experiencing images is obvious. Nonetheless, until recently, the experience of touching or handling images received relatively less attention from scholars working on medieval art. Following several decades in which scholarly attention was fixated on vision and theories of vision, the recent enthusiasm for a multi-sensory approach to images is, fundamentally, a welcome corrective. In this newer work, the importance of touch, sound, and smell to medieval experiences of images, architecture, and the built environment has already been amply demonstrated.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when Herb Kessler revised and expanded his 2004 book *Seeing Medieval Art* he quite significantly re-titled it *Experiencing Medieval Art*.<sup>4</sup> Attention to the sense of taste in relation to medieval images, however, has not yet garnered much attention, although historians of medieval Christian exegesis and mysticism have shown that visionary experiences often involved gustatory sensations, charged with religious significance and much work has been done on the visual aesthetics of elite dining in the period. A small number of studies have examined the physical ingestion of images in medieval and early modern cultures: this work should prompt us to integrate taste more fully in our accounts of how images were experienced in the medieval past.<sup>5</sup>

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that "iconicity" (or "visual efficacy") is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

I am convinced that "artistic images" have never enjoyed a monopoly upon iconicity. The transhistorical, pluri-cultural phenomenon of the "chance image" demonstrates that people have repeatedly discerned images, including iconic representations, in natural materials and phenomena.<sup>6</sup> The history of landscape architecture and garden-making also testifies to how intensely non-figurative works have attained and/or been invested with iconicity. So too, with respect to living beings, one could read Kantorowicz's *The King's*

*Two Bodies* as a study in a longue durée tradition of iconicity, organized in relation to the living and the deceased body of the ruler. In the medieval period, it seems clear that iconicity is sometimes a property of “artistic images,” but it is by no means their “exclusive” property. As an art historian focused on the medieval period, I think the pressing question is not whether non-figurative objects can be included in our art historical narratives, but rather how our art historical narratives should change in response to the vital play of iconicity within *and* beyond “artistic images.”

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

Which hermeneutic tools are *not* useful in our analyses of such phenomena? Arguably, all historic works of art are subject to the dynamics inventoried in the question. Collectively, changing aesthetic values, conceptions of the work of art, ideas about what is involved in experiencing images, as well as the insistently empirical dynamics of historical change (ranging from transformed landscapes and built environments to the inevitable alterations and/or restorations of works extant today) powerfully condition both how a work is materially constituted, how it appears, and how it is received. These are the inescapable pre-conditions of our encounters with historical works of art and they call for all the forms of attention and analysis we can muster.

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

As someone who researches and writes exclusively on “western” art, I hardly feel qualified to answer this question proscriptionally. I have certainly found the critical examination of emic terms undertaken by colleagues working in fields other than my own to be illuminating. As a recent case in point, in an essay that appeared in a book I recently co-edited with Beate Fricke, Kristopher Kersey offers a sensitive examination of how several Japanese terms associated with concepts of impermanence (*aware*, *mujō*, and *mappō*), have been taken up by essentializing accounts of “Japanese aesthetics” (particularly, Japanese Buddhist aesthetics). As Kersey shows, such scholarly recourse to emic terms effectively strips them of their complex historicity, and obscures how impermanence, futurity, and loss were aesthetically conceived and explored in twelfth-century Japan.<sup>7</sup>

This question, and the status quo it evokes, points to the profound inadequacy of the binary “western” / “non-western.” Although this binary names a reductive taxonomy that has shaped the writing and teaching of art history profoundly, and continues to do so, I nonetheless I think it should be more actively interrogated and dismantled. It lumps together the majority of world cultures under the rubric “non-western,” designates art and artifacts made in the western hemisphere as “non-western” (e.g., works created in Mesoamerica and by North American first nations), and represses the fact of major discontinuities and tensions within the art and art-theoretical vocabularies of the so-called “West.”

16. Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?

One desideratum – by no means the only one – is intensified exchange and research collaboration between those of us trained in the discipline of art history and colleagues trained in archaeology and technical art history/conservation studies. I am convinced that such collaboration would lead to exciting insights, both empirical and theoretical. Whereas I see some momentum towards integrating the findings of technical art history in the teaching and research done by “traditional” art historians, the majority of art historians and archaeologists continue to work along more or less separate tracks. We often are siloed in separate programs within universities, hold separate conferences, and publish in different journals. Of course, this was not always the case. To offer a concrete example of how collaboration between art historians, conservation scientists, and archaeologists could produce insights that each specialization could not achieve alone: the role of destruction, waste, loss and damage in the making and experiencing of artifacts and art works is an area of research that merits greater attention and theorization. Examining these ubiquitous dynamics from collaborative, interdisciplinary perspectives would, I think, deepen and transform how we can perceive and interpret images’ complex, transitive conjunctions of presence and absence.

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1. For salutary points of entry into a much larger bibliography, see: J. F. Hamburger, R. Maurus, *Diagramming Devotion: Berthold of Nuremberg's Transformation of Hrabanus Maurus's Poems in Praise of the Cross*, Chicago and London 2019; S. Bogen, *Der Körper des Diagramms: Präsentationsfiguren, mnemonische Hände, vermessene Menschen*, K. Marek et al. (eds.), *Bild und Körper im Mittelalter*, 2nd (rev) Munich 2008, pp. 61-81; S. Bogen, F. Thürlemann, *Jenseits der Opposition von Text und Bild: Überlegungen zu einer Theorie des Diagramms und des Diagrammatischen*, A. Patschovsky (ed.), *Die Bildwelt der Diagramme Joachims von Fiore: Zur Medialität religiös-politischer Programme im Mittelalter*, Ostfildern 2003, pp. 1-22; D. Ganz, *The Cross on the Book: Diagram, Ornament, Materiality*, M. Brown, I. Garipzanov and B. Tilghman (eds.), *Graphic Devices and the Early Decorated Book*, Woodbridge 2017, pp. 243-264; K. Müller, 'Admirabilis forma numeri': *Diagramm und Ornament in mittelalterlichen Abschriften von Boethius' 'De arithmetica'*, *Ornament. Motiv - Modus - Bild*, München 2012, pp. 181-210; B. Kühnel, *The End of Time in the Order of Things: Science and Eschatology in Early Medieval Art*, Regensburg 2003; B. Kühnel, *Carolingian Diagrams, Images of the Invisible*, in G. de Nie, K. F. Morrison and M. Mostert, *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Papers from "Verbal and Pictorial Imaging: Representing and Accessing Experience of the Invisible, 400-1000" (Utrecht, 11-13 December 2003)*, Turnhout 2005, pp. 359-389; U. Ernst, *Diagramm und Figurengedicht. Betrachtungen zu zwei affinen Formen visueller Kommunikation*, «Comunicare e significare nell'alto medioevo, Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo» 52 (2005), pp. 539-571; K. Müller, *Irritierende Variabilität. Die mittelalterliche Reproduktion von Wissen im Diagramm*, B. Bussmann et al. (eds.), *Übertragungen: Formen und Konzepte von Reproduktion in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Berlin and New York 2005, pp. 415-436; K. Müller, *Visuelle Weltaneignung: astronomische und kosmologische Diagramme in Handschriften des Mittelalters*, (Historische Semantik 11), Göttingen 2008.



2. A. Kumler, *Materials, Materia, 'Materiality,'* C. Rudolph (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Art*, 2nd ed., Hoboken, NJ, pp. 95-117.

3. See, for example, E. Palazzo, *L'invention chrétienne des cinq sens dans la liturgie et l'art au Moyen Âge*, Paris 2014; B. V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*, University Park, PA 2010; B. V. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia. Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium*, University Park, PA 2017; Niall Atkinson, *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture, and Florentine Urban Life*, University Park, PA 2016; M. Bagnoli (ed.), *A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe* (Exhibition, the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, October 16, 2016 - January 8, 2017, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, February 4 - April 30, 2017), Baltimore 2016; F. Griffiths, K. Starkey, *Sensory Reflections Traces of Experience in Medieval Artifacts*, Berlin and Boston 2020; M. G. Shoaf, *Monumental Sounds: Art and Listening before Dante*, Leiden 2021; T. E. A. Dale, *Pygmalion's Power: Romanesque Sculpture, the Senses, and Religious Experience*, University Park, PA 2019; R. Betancourt, *Sight, Touch, and Imagination in Byzantium*, Cambridge 2018; R. Betancourt, *Performing the Gospels in Byzantium: Sight, Sound, and Space in the Divine Liturgy*, Cambridge 2020; E. Palazzo, *L'activation sensorielle de l'art dans la liturgie au Moyen Âge. Etat de la question et perspectives*, G. Rodríguez, G. Coronado Schwindt (eds.), *Abordajes sensoriales del mundo medieval*, Mar del Plata 2017, pp. 3-14; E. Palazzo (ed.), *Les cinq sens au Moyen Âge*, Paris 2016.

4. H. L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, Peterborough 2004; H. L. Kessler, *Experiencing Medieval Art*, Toronto, Buffalo and London 2019.

5. See, for example: F. Barry Flood, *Bodies and Becoming: Mimesis, Mediation, and the Ingestion of the Sacred in Christianity and Islam*, in S. M. Promey (ed.), *Sensational Religion*, New Haven 2014, pp. 459-494; G. Vikan, *Ruminations on Edible Icons: Originals and Copies in the Art of Byzantium*, K. Preciado (ed.) *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies, and Reproductions*, Washington, D. C. 1989, pp. 47-59; M. Schaller, *Bilder essen? Einverleibte »Schluckbildchen« und »Schabmadonnen«*, F. Eberling, E. Paetzold and M. Schaller, *Einverleibungen. Imaginationen - Praktiken - Machtbeziehungen*, Berlin 2021, pp. 138-165.

6. On "chance" or "potential images," with critical consideration of prior scholarship, see D. Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002.

7. K. Kersey, *Impermanence, Futurity, and Loss in Twelfth-Century Japan*, B. Fricke, A. Kumler (eds.), *Destroyed—Disappeared—Lost—Never Were*, University Park, PA 2022.