

EDITORS' NOTE

In the last thirty years, many books have been devoted to images and many new theoretical frameworks have been worked out to add an extra dimension to their understanding. Therefore, it can be wondered to what extent another volume should be needed to approach the different dynamics whereby images were used, perceived, approached, and experienced in pre-modern societies. Admittedly, after the collective infatuation for images in the wake of the so-called “iconic turn”, art historical research has largely turned toward other topics, even if an impressive number of publications dealing with the interpretation of visual forms is still being produced every year. Indeed, images lay at the core of the research made throughout the world by scholars with expertise in art, visual studies, history, anthropology, and many other fields of knowledge: depending on the approach, emphasis is laid on such factors as iconography, composition, style, materiality, context, function, seriation, use, dissimilarities and similarities, placed-ness, or the involvement of figural objects in social, religious, political, experiential, individual and collective, practices. Our aim in this book is not so much to propose a new theory, but rather to explore the multiple ways in which the image-notion is being used, approached, and understood in the everyday work of visual researchers.

With this goal in mind, we asked several image-scholars from throughout the world, irrespective of their specialization, academic age, training, and cultural origins, to express their ideas not so much as to the theory and *ontology* of images, but rather as to the ways in which the image-notion has been negotiated and made use of in their own research work. A list of sixteen questions was sent to the twenty-five scholars from different countries who accepted our invitation: their answers are themselves a clear witness to a diversity of approaches that cannot be simply traced back to major trends, fashions, and traditions of the art-historical discipline, but should be understood as constructs of each scholar's autonomous experience in its dynamic interaction with the surrounding (cultural, political, academic) realities.

In addition to these interventions, the volume includes another two important texts. Herbert Kessler's dense essay offers not only a state of the art, but also envisages the future perspectives of iconographic studies. In examining the shadow-notion in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Hans Belting provides clues as to his own understanding of “images” and their role in the art-historical discourse, thirty-two years after *Bild und Kult* and two decades after *Bild-Anthropologie*. Hans left us on January 10th, 2023, to the regret of so many scholars whose research activity owes so much to his thoughtful and ground-breaking works. We are especially proud to honour his memory by publishing here one of his last contributions to the art-historical discipline.

The book has also been conceived of as a tribute to the journal *Iconographica*, which, in its twenty years of life and despite its limited means, never stopped promoting an unbiased, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural study of images in their multiple cultural, material, performative, spatial, and visual dimensions. In addition, this volume inaugurates a new Sismel series, which, drawing inspiration from the journal but expanding its perspectives, aims to welcome innovative and unconventional studies on the multiple ways in which pre-modern societies experienced, shaped, and conceptualised those complex, multifaceted and multi-layered phenomena that, in the absence of a more precise expression, we are used to reducing to the ambiguous category of 'art'.

Warm thanks are due to all authors for their enthusiastic engagement in giving shape to this odd and definitely idiosyncratic, but probably long-wished-for, book.

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