

ART BINDS COMMUNITIES IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

The present issue of the journal *Intrecci d'arte* is devoted to the theme *Art Binds Communities in Medieval Europe*, with contributions stemming from research presented in three sessions that were organised during the 2023 International Medieval Congress in Leeds (3–6 July), which focused on the thematic strand *Networks and Entanglements*. The term “network”, which is ubiquitous in contemporary discourse, typically evokes a sequence of material relationships. In contrast, the term “entanglement” suggests a more intricate form of interdependency among individuals, artefacts, and locations. The objective of these sessions was to situate these concepts within the distinct art-historical context of the European and Mediterranean Middle Ages, covering a chronological span from the 9th to the 15th century.

KEYWORDS: Medieval Art, Medieval Europe, Community

L'arte lega le comunità nell'Europa medievale

ABSTRACT

Il presente numero della rivista *Intrecci d'arte* è dedicato al tema *L'arte lega le comunità nell'Europa medievale*, con contributi derivanti dalle ricerche presentate nelle tre sessioni organizzate durante il 2023 International Medieval Congress di Leeds (3–6 luglio), incentrate sul filone tematico *Networks and Entanglements*. Il termine «network», onnipresente nel discorso contemporaneo, evoca tipicamente una sequenza di relazioni materiali. Al contrario, il termine «entanglement» suggerisce una forma più intricata di interdipendenza tra individui, artefatti e luoghi. L'obiettivo di queste sessioni è stato quello di collocare questi concetti nello specifico contesto storico-artistico del Medioevo europeo e mediterraneo, coprendo un arco cronologico che va dal IX al XV secolo.

PAROLE CHIAVE: arte medievale, Europa medievale, comunità

The present issue of the journal *Intrecci d'arte* is devoted to the theme *Art Binds Communities in Medieval Europe*. The contributions gathered here stem from research presented in three sessions we organised during the 2023 International Medieval Congress in Leeds (3–6 July), which focused on the thematic strand *Networks and Entanglements*. The term “network”, ubiquitous in contemporary discourse, typically evokes a sequence of material relationships. In contrast, the term “entanglement” suggests a more intricate form of interdependency among individuals, artefacts, and locations. Our aim in these sessions was to situate these concepts within the distinct art-historical context of the European and Mediterranean Middle Ages, covering a chronological span from the 9th to the 15th century. The sessions sought to explore how medieval artworks – including illuminations, paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and buildings – facilitated the creation and reinforcement of social networks within various communities, from monastic and mendicant orders to politically driven cultural environments. This issue examines how the production, organization, and decoration of sacred spaces, illuminated manuscripts, and other objects across medieval Europe served as vehicles for relationships, reflecting the attachment of people to places and cultures and contributing to the formation of shared histories that transcended societal divisions.

The renowned Italian art historian Roberto Longhi asserted the notion in 1950 that “L'opera non sta mai da sola, è sempre un rapporto” (1950) (The artwork never stays alone, it is always a relationship), thereby underscoring the concept that every artwork exists within a network of

relationships, both with other artworks and with the social context in which it is placed. This insightful observation highlights that artworks are not isolated objects but are instead deeply embedded in the complex web of cultural, historical, and social contexts. Building on the work of Joachim Wollash (1965), medieval historians have long used the concept of *Verbände* (associations) or *Verbandsbildung* (creation of associations) – initially applied to monastic congregations – to describe networks of interconnectedness. The art historians contributing to this issue have built upon this framework to examine the relationships between artworks, thus showing how these material objects express and reinforce connections not only within monastic systems but also across a wide range of both religious and secular communities.

The present issue opens with a study by Maddalena Vaccaro, who explores the historical and artistic relationships from the 9th to the 12th century between two Benedictine communities, Montecassino and Fleury, both of which claimed the relics of St. Benedict. By examining the artistic strategies employed in floor mosaic decoration and the veneration of these relics, Vaccaro reveals how these elements were instrumental in constructing and reinforcing the monastic identities of both communities. By undertaking a comparative analysis of artistic evidence, substantiated by historical and archaeological documentation, Vaccaro underscores the interplay between spirituality and art in shaping the identities of Montecassino and Fleury, notwithstanding their rivalry over the relics.

In the next paper, Ursula Prinz directs her attention to the realm of manuscript illumination from the late 10th and early 11th centuries, focusing on the Benedictine monastery at Reichenau Island and the ‘Master of the Registrum Gregorii’ from Trier. Prinz’s analysis encompasses significant works such as the *Codex Egberti* and the *Egbert Psalter*. These manuscripts, though produced in geographically distant centres, exhibit notable stylistic and iconographic similarities. The study reveals a dynamic exchange of artists and ideas between the Trier and Reichenau scriptoria under the patronage of Archbishop Egbert of Trier, and Prinz also addresses scholarly debates regarding the origins of these manuscripts, calling for further research into their collaborative production.

In his paper, Antonino Tranchina examines the intervention of Greek-Byzantine painters in two 11th-century Western manuscripts: the *Speyer Codex Aureus* and the *Egbert Psalter*, specifically the *folia gertrudiana*. Tranchina explores how these illuminated manuscripts serve as links between the living and the dead, with particular focus on the depiction of St. Peter. In the *Speyer Codex Aureus*, the imperial frontispieces featuring St. Peter symbolise the eternal life of rulers, while in the *Egbert Psalter*, St. Peter represents a profound connection between the earthly and the divine. This study highlights the spiritual and artistic bonds forged through these objects.

Stefano D’Ovidio’s research shifts the focus to the practice of lay ownership of sacred images in Naples between the 10th and 12th centuries. This phenomenon is uncommon in medieval Europe. Unlike typical donations, these images were often fully owned by the donors, who entrusted them to churches within their own neighbourhoods. D’Ovidio’s analysis, grounded in textual evidence, explores the typology, iconography, and locations of these “private” images, as well as their social and economic implications. The paper also examines how this practice influenced the city’s religious rituals and identity.

Gianluca del Monaco’s paper further investigates medieval manuscripts, focusing specifically on illuminated copies of the *Decretum Gratiani*, a pivotal work in medieval Church legislation, composed around the mid-12th century. Del Monaco examines how these manuscripts, produced in collaboration with ecclesiastical institutions and professional lay craftsmen, became integral to the communities that used them. The study focuses on manuscripts associated with particular monastic or canonical communities and identifies characteristics that distinguish these manuscripts as ‘cloistered’ Gratians, thereby highlighting the close ties between the *Decretum* and monastic or canonical institutions.

Maria Alessandra Bilotta's study also delves into legal manuscripts, focusing on Latin 362 and Latin 16905, which are preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France and had previously been overlooked by art historians. By conducting a detailed stylistic analysis, Bilotta confidently attributes these manuscripts to the so-called Master of the Avignon Decretum, an illuminator who was active between 1320 and 1350 and likely received his training in Toulouse. Bilotta's research sheds light on the role of this illuminator in shaping the visual culture of the Dominican order, particularly in Avignon, while also examining the broader networks of circulation and patronage associated with these manuscripts.

Michela Young's paper moves us into the Italian Quattrocento and investigates the artistic influence of the Vallombrosan congregation in 15th-century Florence, by focusing on their role in shaping artistic networks through commissioned works. The study explores how the Vallombrosan monks asserted their presence and influence within the city's artistic circles, particularly through the renewal of artworks in prominent churches such as Santa Trinita and San Pancrazio. The author contends that these artistic patronage networks played a pivotal role in the establishment of the monks' urban identity and cultural prominence.

Finally, Roberta Venditto's paper examines the Cascina altar frontal, crafted around 1480 in the England and acquired by Fra' Fabiano of the Servants of Mary in 1540. This altarpiece, produced by the prolific medieval English alabaster workshops, stands as a rare example of its kind in Italy. Venditto discusses the altar's patronage, its connection to the Protestant Reformation, and its broader significance within the artistic and cultic needs of the period. The paper also highlights the production and diffusion networks tied to alabaster works and their importance to mendicant orders and lay confraternities.

It is apparent from these studies that medieval artworks were profoundly interconnected and deeply tied to religious, political and social networks. This reveals the central role that art played in shaping shared histories and collective identities across medieval Europe.