

REVIEW

Herbert L. Kessler and David Nirenberg, Eds.

***Judaism and Christian Art: Aesthetic Anxieties
from the Catacombs to Colonialism***

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011),
hardcover, 456 pages + 110 illustrations.

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This collection stands out amid recent publications on western representations of Jews and Judaism in its swerve away from this scholarship's typical focus on the history of Jews or Jewish-Christian relations. Instead, its editors seek to consider what references to Judaism in Christian-made works of art reveal about Christendom's own internal struggles with self-identity, theology, practice, and aesthetics. Drawing upon papers presented at the Third Lavy Colloquium on Judaism and Christian Art, held at John Hopkins University in 2007, the volume investigates how the figuration of Jews and Judaism helped to define and justify the very forms and materials by which western Christendom defined itself.

The contributions generally take the form of case studies, which vary as widely in topic as they do in their mode of addressing the collection's stated goals. In the first and chronologically earliest cluster of studies, Jaś Elsner describes how the early Christian adaption of Roman triumphal imagery transformed the depiction of the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea into a symbolically-laden Christian narrative in fourth-century sarcophagi. Sara Lipton explores the visual and epistemological elaboration of Augustine's "Jewish witness" as a means of validating both Christian truths and Christian sensory experience in the twelfth-century. Herbert Kessler's wide-ranging essay traces the tension between the material and the spiritual, Christian supersessionist claims, and the conflicted perceptions of Jews as iconoclasts and idolaters. Francisco Prado-Vilar meditates on the visible and invisible dynamics of

Jewish conversion in the thirteenth-century song collection known as the *Cantigas de Santa María*. Marcia Kupfer employs oppositional paradigms of colonization and dialectic to analyze Rabbi Moses Arragel's simultaneously enforced and subversive contributions to the early fifteenth-century Alba Bible, an illustrated Christian manuscript of the Old Testament.

A second cluster of chapters spans the late Middle Ages and early modernity. Achim Timmerman reads the Living Cross tympanum of St. Martin in Landshut as a visual gloss on the violent expulsion of the town's Jews just prior to its (now redated) construction in 1452. Mitchell B. Merback shows how multivalent references to Jewish hostility toward the Eucharist in a fifteenth-century panel of the Last Supper in Rotterdam responded also to fears about misuse of the host by Christians. Dana E. Katz explores how the sixteenth-century segregation of Venetian Jews within a vertically expanding ghetto provoked new patterns of tension and surveillance between Jewish and Christian communities. Felipe Pereda's English-language summary of a chapter from his well-received book *Imágenes de la Discordia* (2007) examines how both the function and the style of devotional images were transformed by their deployment to combat judaizing in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Castile. Stylistic as well as iconographic decision-making becomes central to the chapters by Stephen Campbell and Richard Neer. Campbell describes a mode of "sacred naturalism" (p. 308) in which pre-Tridentine north Italian painters harnessed key elements of the *maniera moderna* to articulate points of Catholic doctrine (often through representations of Judaism). Neer describes the seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin's elegant play upon vision, legibility, and the dual negative and positive figurations of Jews and Judaism in the service of a transcendent Christian truth.

Ralph Ubl's chapter stands somewhat apart from the others in its more secular "Christian" perspective. He departs from typical Orientalist readings of Eugène Delacroix's *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* and asserts that the work harnesses the theme of the Jewish wedding in a defense of the materiality of

painting. Like Pereda's contribution, Ubl's is an English-language version of work already published elsewhere; both are thus, despite their undeniable merits, curious additions to a volume that seems otherwise dedicated to new scholarship. The collection is closed by Nirenberg's erudite rumination on how the figure of the Jew activated fundamental binaries of matter and essence, and of letter and spirit, that shaped the nature, understanding, and uses of art as much as they were shaped by it over the *longue durée* of western culture.

The strength of this volume lies in its self-conscious reversal of the traditional focus on what works of art say about Jews to consider what they say about Christians. The most successful of its contributions keep this agenda at their forefront, leavening knowledgeable analysis of contextual and material specifics with attention to their consequentiality for the broad questions posed by the editors. Exemplary in this regard are the chapters by Lipton and Kupfer. Lipton's elegantly wrought counterposition of the imagery of the twelfth-century Eilbertus altar against contemporary writings such as the *Life of Saint Heribertus* attests revealingly to the heightened flexibility of Jewish tropes in high medieval thought. Kupfer's deployment of seemingly contradictory frames for understanding Rabbi Moses' participation in the making of the Alba Bible suggests the dancelike complexity, risk, and excitement inherent in many such "inter-faith" collaborations.

As a collection, *Judaism and Christian Art* is certain to advance and complicate current scholarship on Jewish-Christian relations, as well as that on the nature and significance of the visual *per se* in western culture. Specialists in art history, religious studies, philosophy, and history, as well as readers of SCJR generally, are sure to find more than one item of interest among its widely varied offerings.