

**REVIEW**

Pamela Patton

*Art of Estrangement:*

*Redefining Jews in Reconquest Spain*

(University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), hardcover, xi + 206 pp.

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If Francisco Franco's death in 1975 reopened a debate on Spain's Christian-Jewish relations, then the events and publications that coincided with the quincentennial of 1492—the year of Columbus' landing in America, the conquest of Granada, and the expulsion of Jews from Spain—represent the moment when that reassessment really began to take on an international dimension. Twenty years on, in *Art of Estrangement* Pamela Patton contributes to that reassessment with a wide-ranging, scholarly, accessible, and sumptuously illustrated account of the role of visual culture in articulating those relations. She examines “the potential of visual imagery to enrich modern understanding of the place and perception of Jews in the Christian kingdoms of medieval Spain during the twelfth through mid-fourteenth centuries” (p. 6), for the first time locating that visual culture in its proper European context. Broad in scope yet authoritative and rich in detail, Patton's study will for a long time provide an entry point into the visual culture of medieval Spain for students, scholars, and anyone interested in Christian-Jewish relations.

Patton opens by sketching a broad historical panorama from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, noting the common mismatch between the evidence of texts and images, and utilizing Jeremy Cohen's critical concept of the “hermeneutical Jew.” Chapter two, “*Topos* and Narrative: New Signs and Stories for Iberian Jews,” then traces the earliest attempts to develop a visual lexicon with which to represent Jews, one typically indebted to northern European stereotypes, even if these

sometimes seem to be resisted. Amongst these are figures of Church and Synagogue in the version of the Bible made ca. 1197 for King Sancho VII of Navarre (pp. 51-53), in which Ecclesia is shown on the right (the proper *sinister* side), rather than on the left, as is more common. Patton quite reasonably concludes that this may represent “confusion” on the artists’ part, although more is possibly at stake given that the same reversal is found on the south transept portal at Lincoln cathedral and in a number of English manuscripts.

In the next chapters, Patton analyzes the particularly Iberian inflections of representations of Jews and Judaism. In “Shaping the Jewish Body in Medieval Iberia” (chapter three), she examines material ranging from scribal doodles to the very finest court manuscripts, exploring the relationship of these images to contemporary theological debates. “Jews and Muslims in the Iberian Christian Imagination” (chapter four) then considers the conflation of Jewish and Muslim identities and includes an important discussion of representations of ethnicity. Finally, chapter five, “The *Cantigas de Santa María* and the Jews of Castile,” focuses on miniatures in the two most heavily illuminated volumes of the *Cantigas*, the collection of Marian miracles and songs compiled under Alfonso X in the thirteenth century.

Despite the range of *Art of Estrangement*, Patton rightly and repeatedly emphasizes the importance of contextualizing the production of images. For instance, if the *Cantigas* were indeed painted in the 1270s and early 1280s in Seville—conquered only in 1248—then they were produced in the midst of a community of first and second generation settlers that included many Jews, as well as Christians (and their books) from northern Spain and beyond. Throughout her study, Patton also convincingly argues that images of Jews not only reflected contemporary Christian attitudes but also articulated and produced them. Yet many of the examples she cites are found in manuscripts that were seen only rarely, and by very few, while more public images, such as the elegant figure of Synagoga in the thirteenth-century west portico of Leon

cathedral, are not discussed at all. This makes it all the more regrettable that it is only in her final chapter that Patton properly explores the question of who would have viewed these images, or if they should be considered as survivors and witnesses to a much wider visual (and oral) culture that is now lost. Her argument that few besides Alfonso X could have seen the *Cantigas* miniatures (p. 142) illustrates why this matters. An important corrective to many earlier studies, it has significant implications for our assessment of the resonance of these images, not least in light of a recent and intriguing suggestion by David Nirenberg that the *Cantigas* were partly intended to defend Alfonso X's politics against charges of Jewishness.<sup>1</sup> Yet indications that someone selectively scratched out devils in the Florence manuscript (e.g., fols 3r and 7r) suggests that someone *did* look very closely at the *Cantigas* miniatures, perhaps at the same moment that new and clumsy miniatures were added in the fourteenth century.

Occasionally, Patton's appropriately cautious approach to sensitive material seems to limit her insights. Once or twice she alludes to the comic potential of the *Cantigas*, rightly perceiving that "conflict among Spain's religious minorities was not always conceived or conducted on a lofty plane" (pp. 93; see also p. 155). This idea is never developed, however, despite what we know of the importance of humor then (and now) in defining and demeaning Jewish identity. To recognize the presence of humor in these images is certainly not to condone it. However, to ignore it impoverishes our understanding of complex visual and oral cultures.

With such a wide-ranging book some readers will also inevitably quibble with other details. I would question, for instance, the suggestion that the Christian conquests of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries extended Christian control over thousands of new Jewish subjects (p. 9). Most Jews and Christians seem to have left Muslim territories following the invasion of the

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<sup>1</sup> "Discourses of Judaizing and Judaism in Medieval Spain", *La Corónica* 41 (2012): 218.

hardline Almohads in the 1140s. I also regret that Patton did not extend her discussion to include the critical century after 1349, when Christian-Jewish relations in Iberia were even more radically redefined following the Black Death and subsequent persecution of Jews. But this is perhaps unfair: this book already covers a remarkably wide range of periods, media, and regions with tremendous authority. It is precisely its combination of range, rigor, and wonderful images that makes the *Art of Estrangement* so impressive and so important.