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Exploring New Geographies: Medieval Art in Eastern Europe

ABSTRACT

“The map of art history is drawn by the modern, the national, and the Euro-American and by their culturally derived senses of order, classification, and system.”

“As discipline, art history acquired and has been accorded the ability and power to control and judge its borders, to admit or reject people and objects, and to teach and thus transmit values to others.”

--- Robert S. Nelson, “The Map of Art History” (1997)

Particular temporal and geographical parameters have defined the study of western medieval and Byzantine art, architecture, and visual culture for much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Medieval art, for instance, focuses primarily on the artistic production of western and central Europe, sometime as far east as Bamberg or Krakow, and spans temporally from about the third to the thirteenth centuries. The study of Byzantine art, in contrast, centers mainly on Constantinopolitan artistic developments and some select regions around the Mediterranean and the Balkan Peninsula, progressing temporally from the fourth century up until 1453 when the Byzantine Empire and its capital fell to the Ottoman Turks. What happens in Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages—and more specifically in the northern regions of the Balkans and the territories around the Carpathian Mountains that developed at the crossroads of the Latin, Greek and Slavic traditions between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries in particular—remains elusive. My narratives of medieval art, and recent scholarship that questions and pushes traditional boundaries, seek to bring the artistic and cultural traditions of marginal Eastern European regions that formed a cultural landscape beyond medieval, Byzantine, and modern borders, into larger dialogues with the more established accounts of western medieval and Byzantine art, contributing thus to the push toward a more geographically and also methodologically global approach to the study of the Middle Ages. My contribution for this symposium explores how the study of medieval art, architecture, and visual culture in Eastern Europe could help us reveal more nuanced facets of the stories of both western medieval and Byzantine art, history, and culture in which scholarship is more firmly grounded. The written component of my contribution addresses historiographic matters and the broader questions at the forefront of my scholarly inquiries. The oral presentation centers on a case study, namely, the eclectic visual culture of late medieval Moldavia with a focus on the painted and fortified Orthodox monastic churches built in the region in the crucible of the post-1453 world. I aim to outline how this sophisticated Moldavian cultural production is indebted to western medieval, Byzantine, and Slavic traditions, and highlight more broadly the value of examining how cultural spaces in frontier zones engage in dialogue with multiple centers.

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