

Glenn Peers, *Sacred Shock. Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium*. Pennsylvania State Press, 2004, 188 pp., 81 black-and-white illus., \$40.00 U.S., ISBN 0-271-02470-4

Lesley Jessop

Volume 31, Number 1-2, 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069632ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069632ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Jessop, L. (2006). Review of [Glenn Peers, *Sacred Shock. Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium*. Pennsylvania State Press, 2004, 188 pp., 81 black-and-white illus., \$40.00 U.S., ISBN 0-271-02470-4]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 31(1-2), 112-114.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1069632ar>

quiltmaker Harriet Powers; and Nancy Gruskin on early twentieth-century architect-designer Eleanor Raymond. Fry undertakes a sophisticated reading of Powers's quilts that, along with Frederickson's earlier comments, provides grist for the deconstruction of Janson's still much used text. In her analysis of the "new" Janson and Janson (2001), Frederickson cleverly and simply juxtaposes writings about women artists with writings about their contemporaries; for example, she compares a section from Janson about Gentileschi with a section about Caravaggio, a section about Camille Claudel with a section on Rodin, and she examines the small section on Vigée-LeBrun. In all instances, the women's appearances or their characters plays a significant role in discussions of their work – something virtually absent from discussions of the work of their male counterparts.

Perhaps most telling for feminist scholars (and most frightening) is Frima Fox Hofrichter's account of her return to research on Judith Leyster. According to Hofrichter, she went "through periods of being more and sometimes less engaged in working on Judith Leyster" (p. 44) and, when she decided in 2001 to "look her up again," she returned to a familiar site for her, the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD) in The Hague. There she proceeded to go through files that contained photographs of Leyster's pictures, on the assumption

they would contain new images from recent sales. The photographs "were repeatedly stamped Tent.Leyster 93–94 (*Tent.* is the Dutch abbreviation for *tentoonstelling*, meaning 'exhibition')" (p. 45). She "suddenly realized that all of these photos had been cut" from her book on Leyster and remembered that her "publisher had generously given the RKD an unbound copy" of her plates "to cut up for their photographic files" (p. 45). However, the inscription attributed the photographs to the organizers of the 1993–94 exhibition catalogue by James Welu and Pieter Beisboer. Hofrichter's reaction is poignant: "All my hard work (which was fundamental to their exhibition) was now attributed to them!" (p. 45). Despite her request to the RKD and its understanding of the request, the RKD pleaded the difficult and time-consuming nature of repairing the mistake – Hofrichter was told it would take years to correct. She ends her essay with a question and comment that many feminist historians might wish to note clearly: "How could I work for years on Leyster and then see all my work, all the photographs from my book, stamped with another name? I told them [the RKD], 'This is how women are written out of history'" (p. 45). One might also add that this is how female art historians are written out of history.

JANICE HELLAND
Queen's University

Glenn Peers, *Sacred Shock. Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium*. Pennsylvania State Press, 2004, 188 pp., 81 black-and-white illus., \$40.00 U.S., ISBN 0-271-02470-4.

In this thought-provoking book Glenn Peers explores the relationship between art and the Byzantine viewer in an often-overlooked aspect of Byzantine art: the frame. Unlike the frame of a painting in an art gallery today that separates what is real from what is not real, in the Byzantine world no such distinction existed. In devotional contexts, Byzantine viewers sought divine presence in their images, and through his examination of framing devices, Peers reveals the role of the frame in gaining devotional access. He offers a series of case studies, incorporating different media, taken from different time periods. The aim is to show the different strategies at work, rather than a chronological development. Although the concentration is on Peers's visual analysis, many of his arguments are supported by evidence gathered from textual sources. The book is amply illustrated, although unfortunately some of the black-and-white images are so small that it can be difficult to see details essential to understanding the text.

In chapter one Peers discusses how the framing of Crucifixion iconography in the sixth and seventh centuries could facilitate assimilation. Of particular concern is the relationship between the bodies of the worshipper and the divine, and how the gap between the temporal and divine can be merged as one. For example, his examination of pectoral crosses is an interesting exploration into the relationship between Crucifixion iconography, the shape of the cross, and the Christian body. Worn around the neck, with the cross resting on the chest, these Crucifixion images were framed by the cross, and then both image and cross were framed by the wearer's body that, in turn, would make the sign of the cross during prayer.

Chapter two focuses on a page from the ninth-century Chludov Psalter (Moscow, Historical Museum, cod. 129, fol. 23v) and shows how iconographic details, such as blood on the page, can serve as entries for devotion. The lower part of the page depicts the iconoclastic council of 815, with three of the iconoclasts whitewashing an image of Christ. The figures are framed by blood. It flows down the right side of the page, pools at their feet, and is met by a smaller stream of blood that flows between the two seated figures on the left. The bloody frame is a

striking feature of the page, and to ensure there is no confusion regarding its identity, it is accompanied by the inscription AIMA (blood). According to Peers, the blood is a clue to unlocking a series of meanings on the page. Traditional explanations for the presence of blood link it to the words “bloody men” in the accompanying text (Psalm 25, verse 9), or to popular stories about Jews stabbing an icon of Christ with a spear, causing it to bleed.¹ Peers suggests that it also works as a framing device that declares presence. Using textual sources, Peers argues that the body of the manuscript represents Christ’s body, and that the ink is Christ’s blood. This means that the blood on the page, whose source is unclear, actually flows from Christ’s body. In addition, Peers considers the relationship between the manuscript and the body of the viewer/reader. The Psalter was the most popular devotional book in the Middle Ages. The words of the Psalms were personal, and when reading the Psalms worshippers felt as if they were reading their own words. At the same time, they felt as if Christ’s voice was speaking to them through David’s poems. That is, assimilation took place: as the worshipper read the Psalms, he or she also heard the voice of Christ speaking through the Psalms.

The Chludov Psalter was produced for the circle of the patriarch. Such a group of erudite readers and viewers would have been searching for deeper meanings within the pages. The presence of the blood was a sign that a literal reading of the page was insufficient. The bloody frame on the Chludov Psalter page shows how, in ninth-century Constantinople, it was possible to assimilate with the divine through sacred objects. As Peers states “the blood was the opening through which this view became clear” (pp. 57–58).

From the framing device of blood, representing the body of Christ, Peers moves to an examination of architectural frames as devotional pathways. The frontispiece of a twelfth-century liturgical manuscript, the *Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Mount Sinai, Monastery of Saint Catherine, cod. gr. 339 fol. 4v), serves as his example. The page depicts Gregory writing his homilies, enclosed by an elaborate architectural framework. He is depicted as a monk, rather than as a bishop. This is not surprising, as the manuscript was a gift from Abbot Joseph of the Pantocrator Monastery in Constantinople to the Monastery of the Theotokos Pantanassa on the island of Hagia Glykeria. Monastic life revolved around worship, and monks could be expected to take communion as often as daily. In addition, monasteries were often founded by wealthy lay donors who, through their munificence, hoped to accelerate their passage to paradise. It is within this environment of worship, closeness to God, and hope for paradise that the frontispiece is best understood.

The architectural frame replete with fountains, gardens,

porphyry marble columns, marble revetment, domes, roofs, and an image of the Virgin and Child at its apex gives the portrait of Gregory a context, and sets it apart from the myriad of author portraits that survive. The imagery on the frame invites contemplative viewing, and can be read on several but not necessarily conflicting levels. At its most literal, the frame represents the monastic environment in which Gregory wrote. As a specific collection of buildings, the frame can also be viewed as representing the Pantocrator Monastery (the church of the Virgin Eleousa was adorned with two fountains at its west end). When emblematic of monasteries in general, or as a specific reference to the Pantocrator Monastery, frame and centre integrate to promote ideals of monastic behaviour, in response to the growing spiritual decline in the church and monasteries. For Peers, however, the most important interpretation of the frame is as an evocation of heavenly Jerusalem. The image of Gregory in a paradisiacal setting reminds the viewer of how the activities of holy men and women can facilitate one’s passage to paradise. It also shows that paradise can be found in the world around us: in the reading and writing of sacred texts, and in the viewing and understanding of religious art.

The next chapter examines a thirteenth-century narrative icon of Saint George from the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, in order to demonstrate how the saint’s body works as a framing device. The icon is painted on wood and gesso, and is unusual in that the central figure of Saint George is in low relief, contrasting with the two-dimensional painted scenes on the frame. Rather than the frontal pose of most icons, George is depicted in a three-quarter stance, with his arms raised in prayer towards Christ in the upper right corner. A small female donor kneels in prayer behind him, and two angels flank the *hetoimasia* on the top panel, above George’s head. For the most part, the martyrdom cycle on the frame is standard and the inclusion of two of the less common scenes (the conversion and sentencing of Queen Alexandra) is probably related to the wishes of the female donor. It is a large (109 x 72 cm), double-sided icon (Saints Marina and Catherine are depicted on the back), designed for prominent display and most likely used in processions.

Peers focuses on the contrast between Saint George’s spiritual, intact body in the centre, and his physical, damaged body on the frame. Four of the nine extant narrative scenes portray tortures: Saint George’s body is scraped, speared, beaten, pinched, and his head placed in a red-hot helmet. He finally meets his death by being beheaded, but in the burial scene, Saint George’s head is miraculously reunited with his body. This bizarre detail is not, however, unique to Saint George. For example, a much earlier example can be found in the early-ninth-century martyrdom cycles in the church of Santa Prassede, Rome,² and a

contemporary example appears on a narrative icon of Saint Pantaleimon, now in the Monastery of Saint Catherine, at Mt. Sinai.³ Peers notes that in three of the torture scenes, George is shown semi-nude with his arms held out to the side, evoking Christ on the cross, and assimilating Saint George with Christ. Closeness to God was an important element for belief in a saint's intercessory powers. This is demonstrated on the frame through Saint George's ability to suffer his tortures painlessly, confirming God's presence and availability. Thus, while the central image portrays Saint George as intercessor, the power of that intercession is strengthened by the frame. In Peers's words, frame and centre "create a narrative of damaged and reconstituted bodies as a demonstration of the advocate's presence before supplicant and viewer" (p. 10).

In the final chapter Peers examines icons framed in silver in order to demonstrate how the interaction between metal frame and painted panel creates devotional access. He begins with a pair of icons portraying the Annunciation. The icons were probably produced in the early-twelfth century, and are now in Ochrid, Macedonia. The Virgin and the archangel Gabriel are each set within a silver frame adorned with floral motifs and studded with figures set in panels or medallions around the rim. These peripheral figures serve as a gloss: to the archangel Gabriel on one icon, and the Virgin on the other. The icons were most likely placed on the architrave of the templon, on either side of the central door leading into the sanctuary. Candles burned before them. The light that reflected back towards the viewer meant that the details on the frame would have been very difficult to see (similar to being blinded by the sunlight coming through stained glass windows). Throughout the Middle Ages, light was described as symbolizing the divine. When viewed against the reflected light in the church, the angel and the Virgin of the Annunciation could be seen emerging from a frame of light, making the viewer aware of a divine presence (in this case, the Holy Spirit). The painted images reveal what is seen (Virgin and archangel Gabriel), while the light-reflecting silver frames reveal the unseen (divine presence). Thus the frames work as catalysts that transform the viewer.

In his final analysis, Peers examines one of the surviving copies of the Mandylion, from the church of San Bartolomeo degli Armeni, Genoa (the second copy is in Rome). Like the icons of the Annunciation, the Mandylion is clad in silver, with ten enamels relating the story of its production set into the exterior frame. Both the central image and its frame are believed to have been made in the Byzantine East, and although the date

of Christ's image is not known, the frame probably dates from the early-Palaeologan period. The Mandylion is a special icon: it is a miraculous relic, and a contact relic, as the image of Christ appeared miraculously on a cloth he had used to wipe his face. It also has the extraordinary ability to reproduce itself, meaning that the Genoa icon can be directly linked to Christ, blurring any boundaries that may separate image and prototype. The ability of light to transform and assimilate was a consistent feature of Byzantine devotion. As seen with the Annunciation icons, the appearance of Christ's face framed by light-reflecting silver declared presence. But Peers also argues that it differs from the Annunciation icons in that, just as God made man in his own image, when confronting the Mandylion, the viewer comes face to face with a transcendent version of him or herself.

Sacred Shock is a fascinating, at times provocative, exploration into how framing devices worked to manifest God's presence in Byzantine art. As Peers states, "historians can in no way describe perfect conditions or perfect viewers" (p. 131). Using a combination of textual and visual evidence, he examines frames to provide an insight into ways Byzantine viewers could have understood and viewed their art. Through this study, Peers demonstrates that the frame was the meeting point between the viewer and the central image, and the catalyst for revealing divine presence. At times, however, very little distance separated the material and the divine, as demonstrated in his examination of the bloody page from the Chludov Psalter and the revetted icons. Throughout the text, an underlying theme is the importance of desire for the realization of divine presence. Peers lays down the pathway that makes that desire become reality. *Sacred Shock* is a fine book, and one that will stimulate us to rethink the way we look at Byzantine art.

LESLEY JESSOP
Victoria, B.C.

Notes

- 1 Kathleen Corrigan, *Visual Polemics in the Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters* (Cambridge, 1992), 32–33.
- 2 Joseph Wilpert, *Die Römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der Kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*, IV (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1917), Tafel 202.
- 3 Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom, eds, *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843–1261*, exh. cat., New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (1997), cat. no. 249.