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REGARDING NORMAN SICILY: ART, IDENTITY
AND COURT CULTURE IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

SUMMARY

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This paper is composed of a series of brief, mainly historiographically-oriented excursions on the interrelated and yet, particularly for the Middle Ages, recalcitrant concepts of art and identity.¹ These concepts have also been much discussed from various points of view and in order to do them any justice it will be necessary to remain, for the most part, outside of the immediate scope of Norman Sicily. Why proceed in this way? The image of Norman Sicily as a hybrid culture is enduring and pervasive in modern historical thinking.² In the lapidary characterization of Charles Homer Haskins near the beginning of this tradition:

“The art of the Sicilian kingdom, like its learning and its government, was the product of many diverse elements, ... the Roman basilica and the Greek cupola, the bronze doors and brilliant mosaics of Byzantine craftsmen, the domes, the graceful arches and ceilings, and the intricate arabesques of Saracen art...”³

The more I pondered the Norman court and its extraordinary artefacts from the reigns of Roger II through William II – the Palazzo dei Normanni and the Cappella Palatina (fig. 1), the Mantle and the porphyry tombs, the Zisa and Monreale – with this kind of characterization in mind, however, the more I felt impinged on by the lack of a framework that was also grounded in the twelfth century.⁴ My aim is to provide one in the only way in which it would

now seem possible, by means of a variety of observations, generalizations and hypotheses.

Central to this framework is a phenomenon that has often been spoken of as the ‘artistic exchange’ between Islam and Christianity in the medieval Mediterranean world, which is understood at the same time as a species of ‘cultural encounter’.⁵ It would be interesting to know when modern scholarship first began to use these terms and the pattern of thinking that they embody in order to define the historical problem. It certainly pre-dates my interest in medieval Sicily, which developed in the 1980’s, but it probably follows by some time the grand mediterranean syntheses of historians of generations earlier such as Henri Pirenne.⁶ But the issue clearly flourishes now, as witness the numerous publications devoted to it and the variety of their manifestations: the vast literature on the Crusades, the studies of specific areas of the medieval Mediterranean world, such as Italy (*Gli arabi in Italia*), the studies of political entities, such as Byzantium, Norman Sicily or Venice (André Grabar’s study of the Macedonian period in Byzantium; Deborah Howard’s monograph on Venice), the studies of objects (Avinoam Shalem’s catalogue of Islamic objects in medieval church treasuries), the studies of buildings and sites (Nea Moni on Chios) not to mention the publication of conferences such as *The Meeting of Two Worlds. Cultural Exchange Between East and*

¹ I would like to thank Dr. David Knipp for the invitation to participate in the symposium of December 2002, *Art and Form in Norman Sicily*, in which this paper was first presented, and the Bibliotheca Hertziana and the British School at Rome for their hospitality in sponsoring the event.

² Hybridity is a deeply resonant notion in contemporary cultural criticism and particularly post-colonial theory, of which the locus classicus is Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994; see also his edited volume, *Nations and Narration*, London 1990.

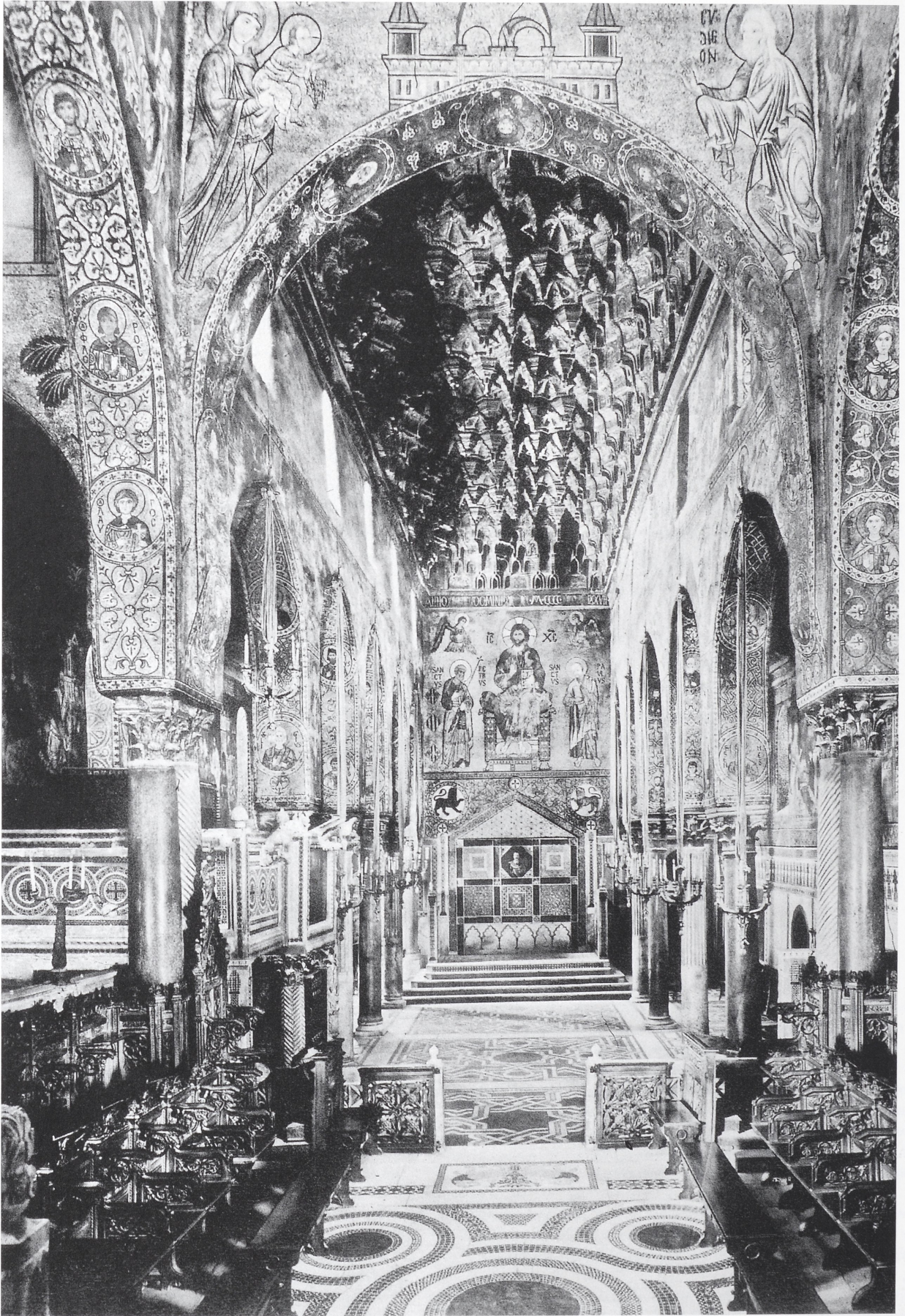
³ Charles Homer Haskins, *The Normans in European History*, Boston 1915, 240f.

⁴ I offered an earlier formulation of thoughts on this issue in my study of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo; see Tronzo, *The Cultures of His Kingdom. Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*, Princeton 1997, pp. 134ff.

⁵ See, for example, Barbara Zeitler “Cross-Cultural Interpretations of Imagery in the Middle Ages,” *Art Bulletin*, 76 (1994), pp. 680–94; Priscilla Soucek, “Byzantium and the Islamic East,” in *The Glory of*

Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261 (exh. cat.), ed. Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom, New York 1997, pp. 403–11; Sharon E.J. Gerstel, “Art and Identity in the Medieval Morea,” in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, Washington D.C. 2001, pp. 262–85; and, further afield, Leonid A. Beliaev and Alexei Chernetsov, “The Eastern Contribution to Medieval Russian Culture,” *Muqarnas*, 16 (1999), pp. 97–124. The issue, in an earlier incarnation, was cast in terms of ‘influence’; see, for example, Otto Demus, *Byzantine Art and the West*, New York 1970.

⁶ Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, Paris and Brussels 1937. The ‘Pirenne Thesis’ has accrued to itself a substantial commentary; see *The Pirenne Thesis. Analysis, Criticism, and Revision*, ed. Alfred F. Havighurst, Lexington MA 1976; *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe*, ed. Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse, Ithaca 1983.



1. Palermo, Cappella Palatina, interior, view to west

West During the Period of the Crusades based on the 1981 symposium at the University of Michigan, with over thirty contributions.⁷

At the end of the latter, however, one of the contributors posed a question that should continue to resonate throughout this increasingly complex discourse: given the presence in Byzantium of Armenians, Georgians, Syrians, Coptic monophysites, Cypriots, among many others, and in Islam, of the dynastic successions of the Fatimids, Zenguids, Ayyubids, Zirids, Hammadids, Almoravids, Almohads, among others, not to mention the medieval West, how can we represent the historical situation in terms of only two worlds?⁸ What this question highlights is the problematic nature of history or perhaps more accurately the malleability of its form in light of the fact that it is nothing more or less than the shape of the points of view and fields of study that gather together to make it up, whose boundaries are a variable task and dependant on the degree of precision – linguistic, ethnic, political – deemed necessary in a given context.

This differentiation notwithstanding, one might well wonder whether a certain sameness is not emerging in this research area – whether, in the abundance of evidence, cases and situations of ‘interrelations’, resurrected, reconstructed and analyzed, something important has not collapsed, or perhaps more accurately, been subsumed in a desire for commonality that is also the hallmark of a contemporary ethos: multiculturalism. That multiculturalism proceeds from a concept of culture, that is to say, from a conscious construction of the arts as a social activity, however, prompts us to ask the critical question, or set of questions,

of this paper: to what degree is it accurate to conceive of artistic relations between Islam and Christianity in the Norman court as ‘cultural encounters’? To what degree did they embody consciousness, and a consciousness of what?: of objects? of styles? of peoples? And to what purpose?

1. Art

There is an issue fundamental to these questions that also, in a sense, must be regarded as antecedent to them, and it emerges with the appearance of a word in the title of the conference in which this paper was first presented: “art.” Simple word, and it could easily be passed over without comment, except for the fact that it has come under scrutiny in medieval studies, which reflects in turn a broader discussion that has taken place in the field as a whole.⁹ A generation ago no one would have questioned the appropriateness of the term as a firm and fixed universal concept to the Middle Ages. But now it has clearly come under stress and some preliminary remarks about it are in order.

It is argued that the concept as well as the object of art, that is to say, the concept of an object of autonomous aesthetic value, was an invention of the early modern period, and that the Middle Ages never knew it. The Middle Ages knew only images, or visual constructions that were yoked to certain functional contexts, largely religious, and that were shaped largely by the practices of devotion and cult. These practices, therefore, displace aesthetic considerations as the more appropriate framework for the historical study of the image. This is the sense, for example, conveyed in the subtitle to Hans Belting’s recent book *Likeness and Presence*, “A history of the image in the era before art,” and its explanation: “The subtitle of this book, which speaks of ‘a history of the image before the era of art,’ is still in need of explanation . . . Art, as it is studied by the discipline of Art History today, existed in the Middle Ages no less than it did afterwards. After the Middle Ages, however, art took on a different meaning and became acknowledged for its own sake – art as invented by a famous artist and by a proper theory.”¹⁰

⁷ For a recent survey of art of the twelfth century and the Crusades, see Jaroslav Folda, *The Art of the Crusaders in the Holy Land 1098–1187*, New York 1995; *Gli arabi in Italia. Cultura, contatti e tradizioni*, ed. Francesco Gabrieli and Umberto Scerrato, 2nd ed. rev., Milan 1985; André Grabar, “Le Succès des arts orientaux à la cour Byzantine sous les macédoniens,” *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, 2 (1951), pp. 32–60; Deborah Howard, *Venice and the East. The Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture 1100–1500*, New Haven and London 2000, and also ead., “Venice and Islam in the Middle Ages. Some Observations on the Question of Architectural Influence,” *Architectural History. Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain*, 24 (1991), pp. 59–74; Avinoam Shalem, *Islam Christianized. Islamic Portable Objects in Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West*, 2nd rev. ed., Frankfurt am Main 1998; Robert Ousterhout, “Originality in Byzantine Architecture: The Case of the Nea Moni,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 51 (1992), pp. 48–60; *The Meeting of Two Worlds. Cultural Exchange between East and West during the Period of the Crusades*, ed. Vladimir P. Goss and Christine Verzar Bornstein, Kalamazoo MI 1986.

⁸ Oleg Grabar, “Patterns and Ways of Cultural Exchange,” in *The Meeting of Two Worlds* (as in note 7), pp. 441–45, in particular p. 441.

⁹ The issue of *Gesta* (International Center of Medieval Art) devoted to the theme, “Medieval Art without ‘Art’?,” provides a point of departure; see *Gesta*, 34.1 (1995), esp. the introduction by Henry Maguire, p. 3f.

¹⁰ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago 1994, p. xxi.

Once stated as categorically as this, the case expands with additional considerations appended to it by others. One is the lack of a term and hence a conceptual category in the Middle Ages that would encompass all that the history of art embraces in or requires of the word ‘art.’ How could something exist without a name? *Ars* and *techne* are hardly adequate. This is not to say that the Middle Ages was devoid of aesthetic theory: there was theory in abundance from Augustine to Aquinas.¹¹ But a theory of beauty cannot be coincident with any practice one associates with objects. This raises a related, though perhaps more important consideration: the lack of critical discourse on art in the Middle Ages. Again this is not to claim the lack of appreciation. To peruse surveys such as Meyer Schapiro’s study of aesthetic response in the twelfth century is to be impressed with the depth and range of the appreciations of visual phenomena – buildings, sculptures, paintings and textiles – that are voiced, and the terms in which they are put: “pulcherrimum, subtilissimum, splendidum, mirum, mirificum, decus.”¹² One could hardly doubt the conviction of William of Malmesbury on Canterbury Cathedral, Abbot Suger on St. Denis, or Andrew of Fleury’s King Robert, who was so consumed with the beauty of his church that he wept.¹³ But as Schapiro notes, the response to visual phenomena in the twelfth century was an individual affair, and “the reflections on its aesthetic were still unproblematic, incidental, and summary.”¹⁴ The presence of this discourse is one of the most telling and, it is argued, enabling features of the art and art-historical traditions of the post-medieval period from the fourteenth century on, and its lack is equally telling regarding the nature of the appreciation of the visual in the Middle Ages.

On the other hand, one cannot help but feel that the impetus behind the diminishment of the concept of art as an analytical tool in medieval studies comes from another quarter. Historiographically – not historically – speaking, one might claim that the Middle Ages themselves were born

in a reaction based on art. The first attempt consciously to articulate the Middle Ages as a historical period occurred in the negative aesthetic judgment of the fourteenth century.¹⁵ The Renaissance constructed this age as the quintessential ‘other’, an unwanted intermediary in its own midst, the embodiment of an irrational reversal of values that lay between itself and its origins, Antiquity.

It is precisely these ‘reversed values’, however, that engendered the opposite response in the modern period: the manifestation of an aesthetic sympathy and to an extraordinary degree. It is to modern viewers that we owe what are perhaps the most positive and empathetic assessments of medieval objects in visual terms that we possess – witness, for example, Meyer Schapiro’s representation of the aesthetic environment of the twelfth-century:

“Reading these texts, we sense that we are in a European world that begins to resemble our own in the attitude to art and artists. There is rapture, discrimination, collection: the adoration of the masterpiece and the recognition of the great artistic personality; the habitual judgment of works without reference to meanings or to use; the acceptance of the beautiful as a field with special laws, values, and even morality.”¹⁶

This thought sequence is an almost perfect embodiment of modernist assumptions about art as a historical category and a phenomenon – ‘idealist’ and ‘transcendent’, ‘a-historical’ and ‘a-contextual’ are the epithets that come to mind.

It is here that the critique embedded in Belting’s assertion of the Middle Ages as an “era before art” may be located. Essentially what Belting has laid claim to is the necessity of contextualizing, rather than de-contextualizing objects, of reconstructing their contexts, and far from separating them from their functions, seeing these functions as key to their meaning. Belting places a premium on experience, which, in the case of the Middle Ages, is, with regard to objects, above all, religious in nature and often centered on the practices of liturgy, devotion and cult.¹⁷ Religion and devotion had little accent in the modernist history of medieval art by Schapiro, for example; today they play a central, and overwhelmingly important role, in the service of which the term ‘image’ has replaced ‘art’. What ‘image’ signifies is the opposite of transcendence: it is a category of embeddedness, of experience. If the Renaissance collapsed the category of art for the Middle Ages one way, post-modern scholarship has done it in another.

¹¹ The exhaustive treatment of medieval aesthetics by Edgar de Bruyne, though decades old, is still useful; see De Bruyne, *Études d’esthétique médiévale*, 4 vols., Geneva 1975 (repr. of 1946 ed.); see also the stimulating essay by Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, London 1986; Thomas A. Heslop, “Late Twelfth-Century Writing About Art and Aesthetic Relativity,” in *Medieval Art: Recent Perspectives. A Memorial Tribute to C. R. Dodwell*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Timothy Graham, Manchester and New York 1998, pp. 129–41; Valérie Gonzalez, *Beauty in Islam. Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, London 2001; as well as the discussion of color by Liz James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art*, Oxford 1996, pp. 111–40.

¹² Meyer Schapiro, “On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art,” in *Romanesque Art*, London 1977, pp. 1–27.

¹³ Schapiro (as in note 12), pp. 12 ff.

¹⁴ Schapiro (as in note 12), p. 11.

¹⁵ See *Memoria dell’antico nell’arte italiana*, ed. Salvatore Settis, 3 vols., Turin 1984–86, esp. Maurizio Bottini, “Tra Plinio e Sant’Agostino. Francesca Petrarca sulle arti figurative,” vol. 1, pp. 219–67.

¹⁶ Schapiro, (as in note 12), p. 23.

¹⁷ Hans Belting, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages. Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*, New Rochelle NY 1990.

There is something disturbing about this coincidence that cannot be entirely dispelled by recourse to an analysis of methods and practices. But the dissatisfaction recently voiced by Willibald Sauerländer, who has argued that the image-relationship alone is an insufficient basis to reconstruct human experience, especially in the post-Freudian age, and that the medieval personae that populate post-modern art history of the Middle Ages are too often simply pious ciphers – whose piety in fact is matched by the romantic piety of the historians who have created them is worth bearing in mind.¹⁸ At the end of Hans Belting's rumination on the state of the discipline, *The End of the History of Art*, it is proclaimed that, with the help of reception theory, "the history of forms may be integrated in a historical process in which not only works but people appear."¹⁹ For Sauerländer, people cannot be conjured by forms alone.

The more pressing problem raised by Sauerländer, however, is this: are we simply to discard the edifice erected by the modernists – quality, form, style, periodization – all of which constitute the measure by which we assess and differentiate, group together and pull apart, the body of objects that form our field of study? Are we then too to assume that the medieval viewer operated in the same way, thus relinquishing the possibility of a practical, rather than theoretical, aesthetic in the Middle Ages? The argument of the following paper is that it is not necessary to discard 'art' in order to understand 'images', indeed that modernist sympathies and approaches, albeit regarded critically, continue to have meaning and utility.

2. A Common Culture?

Regarding the relationship between the western medieval, Byzantine and Islamic worlds, there is a view gaining credibility in scholarship that elides difference. It concerns objects specifically. One of its proponents is Oleg Grabar who formulated it in a number of studies, including one presented at Dumbarton Oaks in 1994, *The Shared Culture of Objects at Court*.²⁰ Grabar's topic is the world of objects that inhabited the mediterranean courts of the later Middle Ages, eleventh through thirteenth centuries, mainly Muslim

and Byzantine, but also, though to a lesser extent, western. After discussing a number of them, vases and crowns, cloaks and exotic animals, he concluded, "None of these impressive creations has in fact a geographical or historical, probably not even a temporal, home. They reflect a culture of objects shared by all those who could afford them and transformed by their owners or users into evocations of sensory pleasures..."²¹

Grabar's point has since been expanded by others such as Anthony Cutler who, with regard to the same period and milieu, has spoken of "qualities of mind and aspects of performance that transcend historical difference and thereby tell us about the ground that these cultures (Muslim and Byzantine) had in common," or even more radically of similarity in the breadth and comprehensiveness of cultural phenomena: "In dozens of different areas in which spectacle was the objective ... marked similarities obtained between Arab and Byzantine practice, similarities disregarded in their own time but striking to the observer who stands at sufficient distance from them. Whichever universe invented the procedure involved, we can be sure that no less important than the originary impulse was the reinforcement that came from repeated experience of the other's performance. To perceive this reinforcement, be it in art, ceremony or any other aspect of social behavior, is the privilege of the historian who benefits from what in today's physics is called parallax."²²

Two characteristics of these highly complementary analyses are problematic and worthy of note. On the one hand, neither scholar is particularly concerned with chronology. Grabar speaks of the tenth century as a world apart, citing André Grabar's work on Byzantine-Muslim artistic relations in the Macedonian period. But he makes no mention of a terminus at the other end. The subtitle to Cutler's study, "The Parallel Universes of Arab and Byzantine Art," is "with special reference to the Fatimid era," although this is not the exclusive focus. Thus there is a temporal vagueness that hangs over the whole.

On the other hand, both scholars deal with a large number of works of art and architecture, often glancingly, not to mention motifs and decorative and ornamental elements, and Grabar even expands the field of inquiry to include exotic animals. But these works remain exclusively fragments. None is ever presented or considered as a whole. Even though both scholars discuss the issue of hybridity in

¹⁸ Willibald Sauerländer in *New York Review of Books*, 49, no.7 (April 25, 2002), pp. 40–42.

¹⁹ Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, Chicago 1987, pp. 67 ff.; and further, Idem, *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München 2001.

²⁰ Oleg Grabar, "The Shared Culture of Objects at Court," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Henry Maguire, Washington D. C. 1997, pp. 115–29.

²¹ Grabar, (as in note 20), p. 126.

²² Anthony Cutler, "The Parallel Universes of Arab and Byzantine Art (with Special Reference to the Fatimid Era)," in *L'Égypte Fatimide. Son art et son histoire*. (Actes du colloque, Paris, 28–30 Mai 1998), Paris 1999, pp. 635–48, and 648 for citation.



2. Venice, San Marco, Treasury, Byzantine cup with inscription

terms of key monuments, such as the famous cup in San Marco with its classical motifs and pseudo-kufic inscription (fig. 2), these monuments are mined exclusively for their parts – for the mere fact of hybridity – as opposed to whatever might be imagined to make these parts cohere as a whole.²³ Thus the obvious question with regard to the cup never arises: in combining Islam and Byzantium, why did the maker chose Islam for the inscription and Byzantium for the motifs as opposed to vice-versa? Our contemporary viewpoint, which enables us, according to Cutler, to see a significance that the inhabitants of the past missed is predicated on evidence that is, in an important way, disembodied.

Grabar and Cutler are not alone in seeing similarity in the face of difference in the medieval mediterranean. The view is also implicit in Soucek's work on art at the time of the Crusades, who uses phrases such as, "strong artistic continuity," "homogeneity of decorative themes," "conservative cast of the period," which raise an important point.²⁴ However vague or precise in concepts of periodization, these studies all cover material that is situated in the era dominated by the Crusades, or a phenomenon of extraordinary

interaction among different parts of the mediterranean world, which provides, if not a model for the inquiry, at least a historical framework that justifies it.

Two other ideas, or constellations of ideas, are at base here. One is a notion of hybridity, by which an object is understood as a concatenation of sources, or elements drawn from different places or traditions, as opposed to whatever it is – a structure – that holds the parts together, based, probably in no small part, on the supposedly logical assumption that such concatenations are the natural product of regions with "mixed populations." That these objects have a structure, rationale or program – however one may define it – seems self-evident, but in the view of "sources" that behave, amoeba-like, to combine and re-combine to make a never ending series of new creatures, it is most decisively ignored. Concomitantly, a premium is also placed on what Cutler has termed spectacle, that is to say, a set of conditions of display and representation that remain all pervasive precisely because of their generalization or generalized because of their all-pervasiveness. Method and results are thus complementary, and yield a picture of the medieval mediterranean that is seamless and unified.

With regard to such a picture, I cannot help but think of stories like the one related by George Pachymeres about a vessel that was to be included in the liturgy because of its beauty but later withdrawn when its true nature was discovered. The vessel was decorated with an Arabic inscription that made mention of the name Mohammed, which was regarded as imparting to it an impure character.²⁵

The emperor had the inscription verified by a member of his court "who knew how to read the writing of the Hagarites; he read the inscription and testified that what the accusers had said was true. The vessel, therefore, was not presented to the emperor for moral reasons."²⁶

One might characterize this story as a tale of before and after: before was the case of form overwhelming content, that is to say, of the visual appeal (beauty) of the object, which lifted it from whatever context it had been in before to the liturgical one, and after, the case of content overwhelming form, the understanding of what it was (what it said) that led to its swift demotion. One might also construe it as a drama of reception, in which one set of conditions, attitudes and practices was replaced by another, whose efficacy as a narrative derives as much from the abruptness of the transition as from what might be inferred about its nature: the loose and what would seem to be in retrospect freewheeling conditions of exchange that characterized the

²³ Anthony Cutler, "The Mythological Bowl in the Treasury of San Marco at Venice," *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*, ed. D.K. Koumijian, Beirut 1974, pp. 235–54; Ioli Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, "The Cup of San Marco and the 'Classical' in Byzantium," *Studien zur mittelalterlichen Kunst 800–1250. Festschrift Florentine Mütterich zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Katharina Bierbrauer, Peter Klein and Willibald Sauerländer, Munich 1985, pp. 167–74.

²⁴ Priscilla Soucek, "Artistic Exchange in the Mediterranean Context," in *The Meeting of Two Worlds. The Crusades and the Mediterranean Context* (exh. cat. University of Michigan Museum), ed. Christine V. Bornstein and Priscilla P. Soucek, Ann Arbor 1981, p. 15f., in particular p. 16.

²⁵ George Pachymeres, *Relations historiques II: Livres IV–VI*, ed. Albert Failler and trans. Vitalien Laurent, Paris 1984, pp. 572–75 (VI.12).

²⁶ Loc. cit.

earlier moment have been replaced by a studied, serious and moralizing approach. To paraphrase Shapiro, we would appear to have entered, in this latter moment, a world that begins to resemble our own, particularly with regard to the kind of knowledge that resembles our own, of where things come from, of who made them and of what they mean.

3. Identity

The story from Pachymeres suggests a dissatisfaction with an understanding of objects that was too imprecise, too general and too a-historical. I would argue that it is also a symptom of a crisis of identity that marked a particular moment in time. What had served the makers and users of objects who were engaged in the process of exchange in an earlier age, which we might define for the moment roughly as the eleventh and twelfth centuries, had become, in a later age, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, insufficient. A deeper, fuller understanding of the object was called for, a more complete grasp of what it was, who had produced it and what it meant. That this in fact represents a change in need of further explanation.

It would seem perfectly natural to identify objects of the later Middle Ages with the cultures, ethnicities and nations that produced them: Muslim, Fatimid, Samarran, and so on. Yet Francis Haskell, in his brilliant monograph *History and its Images*, traces the roots of this conviction only to the late eighteenth century:

“During the last years of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth, historians, theorists and philosophers of differing convictions and in different countries frequently suggested that developments in the visual arts, as in music and in literature, were far more intimately linked to the political and social circumstances of their own, and to earlier, societies than was generally believed. Indeed, so organic were such links said to be that by the 1840s it had become almost conventional to assert that the arts of a country could give a more reliable impression of its true character at any given moment than those more usual yardsticks, such as military and economic success or failures, which had hitherto been made use of by historians.”²⁷

We have built a vast reservoir of knowledge, which we carefully augment and hone, comment upon and revise. But there is one assumption, above all, that would seem to have remained constant through all of these peregrinations: the assumption that the identity of an object derives from the

culture in which it was produced. There is no more transparent way of understanding art for us than as a cultural product, and fully the equivalent in this sense of other phenomena we regard as cultural products, such as literature, music, and so on. But even more. Our tendency has also been to see culture as a social activity that embraces religion, and politics, and economics – in other words, as part of a larger picture of human endeavor that is systematic, however we want to define the system. The system too always has an identity, and though it may shift from moment to moment and argument to argument, it occupies an even higher level of abstraction – regional, ethnic, political – Venetian, American, Renaissance, tribal, and so on. We layer abstraction on abstraction, category upon category, to the extent to which we hardly ever question the connections we imagine between and among them. Indeed it is our natural predisposition to imagine things in this way. It is precisely in these terms that we construct our history of art.

A number of arguments offer the image of a medieval viewer in possession of a sophistication in and knowledge of things visual approaching that of modern art history. A case in point is the study of Ilene Forsyth on the ambo of Henry II in the Palatine Chapel in Aachen.²⁸ Forsyth’s hypothesis that the underlying conceptual structure and program of the work is the “visible expression . . . (of) . . . the ascendancy of contemporary Ottonian Christianity over Roman, Alexandrian, and Fatimid forbears . . . a statement of the Ottonian fulfillment of the concept of a cumulative and culminating Christian history, conceived not so much as a renovatio as a culminatio . . . (and) . . . a worthy rival to similar Byzantine pretensions,” depends, of course, upon a medieval viewer (any medieval viewer) being able to identify correctly, in the absence of labels, titles or explanatory inscriptions, and to appreciate the significance of the entire miscellany of objects displayed, and indeed quite specifically to be able to identify the agate bowls as ancient Roman, the ivory carving as sixth century Egyptian work – and more – sixth-century *Alexandrian work*, and the rock crystal cup and saucer as not only Islamic but Fatimid.²⁹

Yet even Abbot Suger, whose adoration of precious objects was made manifest most poignantly in the history he wrote of the reconstruction of the abbey church of Saint Denis, the *De rebus in administratione sua gestis*, bears not a trace of anything even vaguely approaching this degree of his-

²⁷ Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images. Art and the Interpretation of the Past*, New Haven 1993, p. 217.

²⁸ Ilene H. Forsyth, “Art with History: The Role of Spolia in the Cumulative Work of Art,” in *Byzantine East, Latin West. Art-historical Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann*, ed. Christopher Moss and K. Kiefer, Princeton 1995, pp. 153–58.

²⁹ Forsyth, *ibid.*, p. 158.

torical consciousness.³⁰ It is interesting to observe that he never once makes reference, in his uniquely rich and detailed account of Saint Denis, to the cultural or historical origins of any of the precious vessels he acquired, which included objects of Antiquity and of Islamic origin, and only rarely refers to a difference between old and new, and each time with regard to the older furnishings of the church versus those that he had made. Suger has been considered the benchmark of medieval connoisseurship, and the level on which he operates can hardly claim to approach our own.

Conversely, Deborah Howard, in her monograph on Venice and the East, persistently claims that a variety of architectural motifs held deep meaning regarding intercultural relations and conjured up important mental images and associations for the Venetians, as witness, for example, certain types of window frames, which Howard derives from the muslim mihrab (“no Venetian thereafter could easily divorce the imagery of a real mihrab from the meaning of home”), even though the selecting out of the motif from the vast, chaotic and uninflectable field of vision and then the capacity to see it in conjunction with the far-flung objects with which Howard compares it, is almost entirely a function of photography set on its task in the service of art history.³¹

I am struck by these arguments and their presumptions of extraordinarily knowledgeable and visually acute viewers especially in the context of contemporary medieval textual witnesses like that of Abbot Suger. The point is that contemporary expectations with regard to the medieval frame of reference are too high. With regard to the visual arts and architecture, medieval men and women did not have the capacity for or the inclination to employ the kinds of associative powers, researched and nourished by knowledge that has often been painstakingly acquired, that we take as a natural part of our mental, and hence our art historical world, and by implication, the world of the history of art.

To approach the matter from the opposite side, one might ask how natural was it for men and women in the Middle

Ages to make another of the assumptions that we find so natural as to be intellectually transparent, namely, the assumption that objects have national cultural identity, that is to say that they may be understood as the product of a race, a people or a nation, held together by the common bonds of language and politics. Yet no medieval source, in which the attributes of states, nations or peoples is discussed, makes mention of objects, styles, forms, or anything that might be subsumed in the category of art.

My impression is confirmed by recent studies such as that of Susan Reynolds, in which the complexities of the concepts and terminology for ethnic and political entities in the Middle Ages, and in relationship to modern usage, is probed.³² Among the texts cited, mention may be made of Regino of Prüm (ca. 900), who characterized “different peoples (diversae nationes populorum)” as different “in descent, manners, language, and laws” (genere moribus lingua legibus); King Stephen of Hungary (d. 1038), who refers to a kingdom of one language and one way of life (unius linguae uniusque moris regnum) as weak and fragile; or William of Apulia, who said the first of the Normans taught their manners and language to local malefactors who joined them in order to create a single people (gens efficiatur ut una).³³ As Reynolds’ lengthy study, as well as the substantial bibliography appended to it, indicates, the interconnected notions of ethnic, political, and national identity were complex and shifting ground in the Middle Ages. Never once in the treatment of them, however, were the features of art or architecture adduced. These, the latter, were clearly not the means by which the essential nature of a people or a nation was conceived of as manifesting itself.³⁴

In saying this, I do not mean to imply that objects were not recognized as the product of an other. The Byzantines were particularly acute in this regard, as witness, for example, Theophilus’s Palace of the Bryas, or the Mouchroutas, a building of a “Persian” hand, “by virtue of which it contains images of Persians in their different costumes,” to quote the description of Nikolaos Mesarites.³⁵ Rather, that this kind of descriptor cannot be taken automatically to signal the existence of a generalized notion of national/cultural

³⁰ *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, ed. and trans. Erwin Panofsky, 2nd ed. Gerda Panofsky-Soergel, Princeton 1979. With regard to the issue of Suger’s concept of the past, see in addition: Beat Brenk, “Sugers Spolien,” *Arte medievale*, 1 (1983), pp.101–107; *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis. A Symposium*, ed. Paula Gerson, New York 1986; Conrad Rudolph, *Artistic Change at Saint-Denis. Abbot Suger’s Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy over Art*, Princeton 1990; William W. Clark, “‘The Recollection of the past is the promise of the future’: Continuity and Contextuality, Saint-Denis, Merovingians, Capetians, and Paris,” in *Artistic Integration in Gothic Building*, Toronto 1995, pp.92–113; Philippe Bec, “Conversion of Objects,” *Viator*, 28 (1997), pp.99–143; Marvin Trachtenberg, “Suger’s Miracles, Branner’s Bourges: Reflections on ‘Gothic Architecture’ as Medieval Modernism,” *Gesta*, 39 (2000), pp.183–205.

³¹ Deborah Howard (as in note 7), *passim*, and p. 159 for citation.

³² Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300*, 2nd ed. rev., Oxford 1997.

³³ Reynolds, *ibid.*, pp.257ff.

³⁴ Reynolds (as in note 32), esp. “Introduction to the Second Edition 1997,” p. xiff. One might adduce, as counter-proof to this hypothesis, the Christian polemic against Islam, of longstanding and multifarious in its manifestations, which did not avail itself of art or architecture in its argument; see, for example, Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West. The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh 1962; Richard W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge MA 1962.

³⁵ See Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453. Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs NJ 1972 (repr. Toronto 1986), pp. 160–65 (Theophilus), and p. 228f. (Nikolaos Mesarites).

artistic identity of the kind we so naturally assume; it belongs to the set of circumstantial and highly variable criteria by which objects were commonly known and noted: by their function and placement, by their materials and techniques, by their subject matter, by their quality, and every so often by the name of the artist or architect who made them.

Another and perhaps more important indicator of change beyond the text itself is the emergence, at this time, of a significantly different mode of designating objects. *Opus anglicanum* was the term applied in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to a type of textile characterized by an abundant use of gold in exceptionally fine embroidery coupled with the techniques of underside couching and split stitching, whose center of production was London.³⁶ These textiles were used for both secular and ecclesiastical purposes, particularly vestments, from roughly the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries. *Opus francigenum* was the contemporary term used to describe the motifs of rayonnant gothic architecture, created in France, and diffused throughout Europe in the thirteenth century.³⁷ *Opus venetiarum* describes the category of luxurious crystal objects, particularly vases and candelabra, produced in Venice, often for export, in the thirteenth century.³⁸

What all of these designations hold in common, beyond their relative contemporaneity, is the fact that they brand a technique (gold embroidery), a style (rayonnant Gothic), and a class of object (crystal vessels), with the name of the people who invented or produced it, thus imputing to the technique, style and object national cultural identity. That these designations were born in an era of heightened economic activity and trade, and have been taken as the symptom of a new economy of production, only adds another dimension to their meaning. These terms also arise in an era in which a new tone and quality of discrimination is discernible in the remarks that are made about visual phenomena, and the vast and chaotic array of artistic borrowings and interrelationships assumes at times a strikingly clear-cut and perceptible rationale. I take this as exemplary of

another age in which content has triumphed over form, in which an appeal to knowledge – of function and subject matter, of place of origin or mode of manufacture – has replaced an appeal to the visual and to visual pleasure.

4. Norman Sicily

Let us return to issues raised at the outset of this paper, beginning first with Haskins' characterization of Norman art. For Haskins, the use of the terms 'Roman', 'Greek', 'Saracen' and 'Byzantine' clearly derived from the edifice of scholarly research in which forms were linked with chronologies, ethnicities and regions, in other words, where origin in the sense of source, manufacture or point of inspiration was linked to and then elided with culture. It can hardly be denied that many Norman works were clearly the result of the coming together of craftsmen of different ethnicities, traditions, background and training. To contemplate the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, even bearing in mind the extended chronology of the edifice, is to be convinced of the point: the Byzantine mosaics of the sanctuary and the Islamic muqarnas of the nave seem so purely products of their own (different) realms that they are unimaginable except as the result of indigenous, i.e. non-Sicilian, craftsmen.³⁹ On the other hand, when one scratches the surface, these simple terms quickly become more complex.

For example, even though the muqarnas in the ceiling of the nave of the Cappella Palatina finds close parallel in the Muslim world (i.e., the twelfth-century stucco fragments from the vault of the al-Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez), it is more difficult to locate a comparison, in any earlier or near contemporary work, to the star-shaped compartments that form the central field of the ceiling. This bifurcation suggests perhaps a more complex parentage to the ceiling as a whole.⁴⁰ The same also appears to be the case with the Byzantine mosaics of the sanctuary, which have been demonstrated to adhere strongly to and yet at the same time to depart sharply from Byzantine precedents.⁴¹ In a recent study of the Mantle of Roger II, I argued that the work was not only the result of different impulses, but that these impulses were not combined so inextricably that their edges

³⁶ Donald King, *English Medieval Embroidery*, Oxford 1938; Idem, 'Opus Anglicanum'. *English Medieval Embroidery*, London 1963; Nigel Morgan, "L'Opus anglicanum nel tesoro pontificio," in *Il gotico europeo in Italia*, ed. Valentino Pace and Martina Bagnoli, Naples 1994, pp. 299–309.

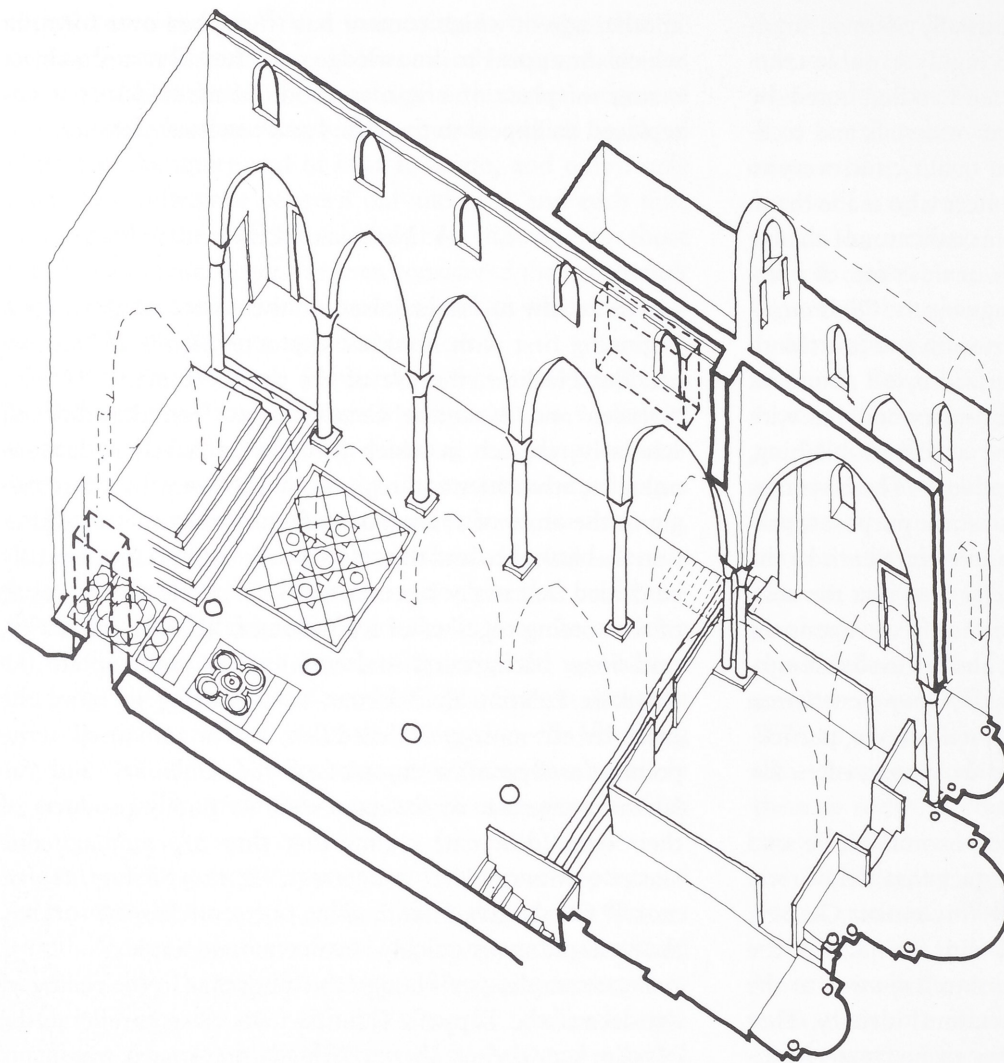
³⁷ Robert Branner, *Saint Louis and the Court Style in Gothic Architecture*, London 1965, pp. 1–11; Günther Binding, "'Opus francigenum'. Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsbestimmung," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 71 (1989), pp. 45–54.

³⁸ Angeliki Laiou, "Venice as a Centre of Trade and of Artistic Production in the Thirteenth Century," in *Il Medio Oriente e l'Occidente nell'arte del XIII secolo*. (Atti del XXIV Congresso Internazionale di Storia dell'Arte, Bologna, 1979), ed. Hans Belting, Bologna 1982, pp. 11–26, in particular p. 19.

³⁹ Tronzo (as in note 4), pp. 94ff.

⁴⁰ Tronzo (as in note 4), pp. 57–62.

⁴¹ For a detailed analysis of the sanctuary mosaics in terms of both adherence to and departure from Byzantine traditions, see Ernst Kitzinger, "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo: An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects," *Art Bulletin*, 31 (1949), pp. 269–92.

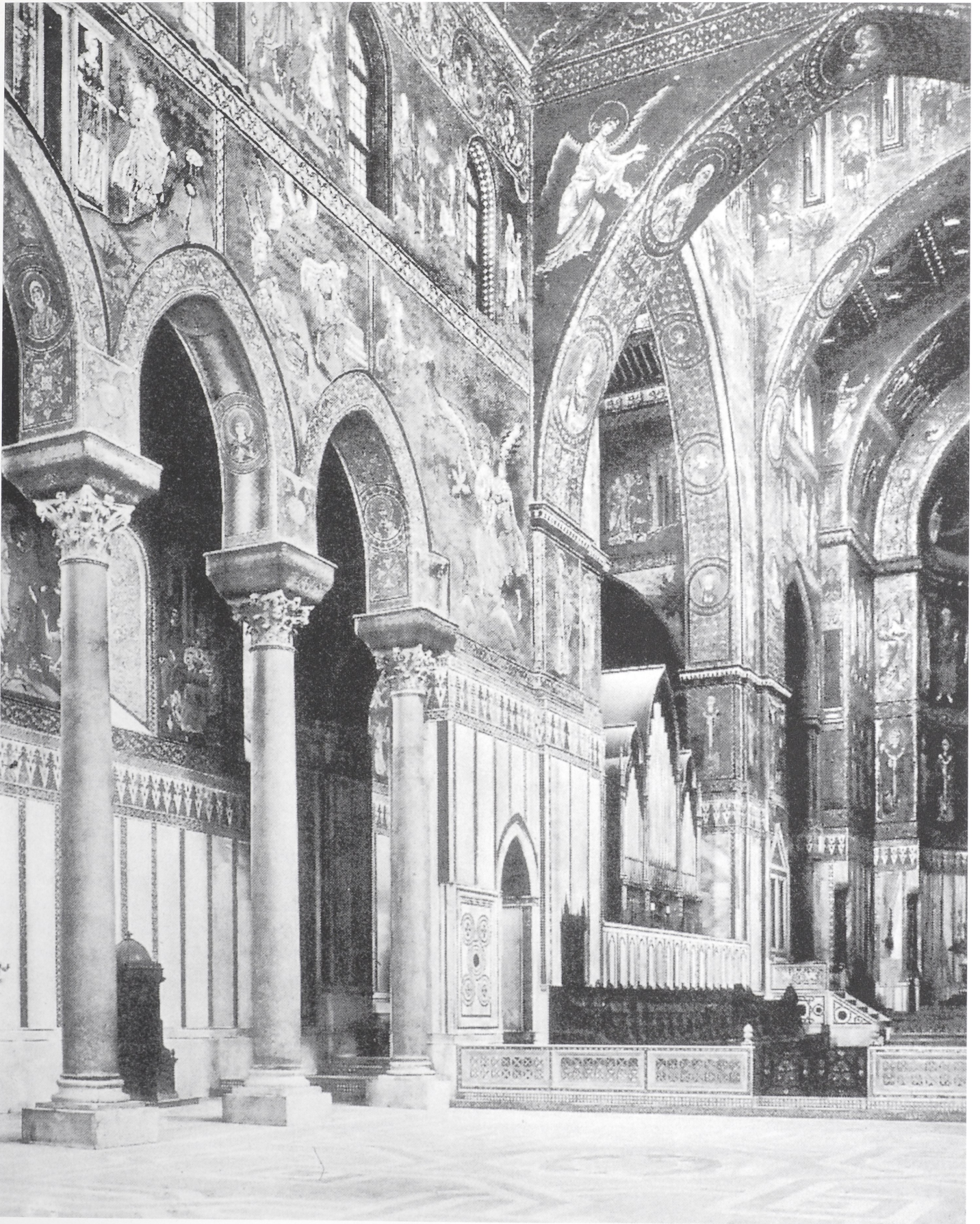
3. Palermo, Cappella Palatina,
reconstruction of first phase
of interior under Roger II

and contours are not discernible.⁴² They are, and in the case of the Mantle, one of the major divides occurred, as I argued, between the desires and intentions of the parties interested in having it produced (Norman king and court) and the Islamic craftsmen who actually fashioned it, who in all likelihood were Muslims brought into Palermo from the outside to work in the *tiraz* of the royal palace (although the possibility that they were Sicilian Muslims cannot be excluded). These efforts to discern parts within the whole may seem pedantic, and contrived to speak more to the concerns and interests of the modern historian than to those of distant past, but they have a direct bearing on the matter at hand. If any given work of Norman art was not so purely, forthrightly and simply ‘Byzantine’ or ‘Muslim’, how can

we be certain that they were ever identified and understood as such by those who actually saw and used them in the twelfth century? In other words, did the categories of cultural identity, which are natural to the modern historian, ever have relevance with regard to art in twelfth-century Sicily?

The second and related issue raised at the beginning of this paper, that of consciousness, may be framed in these terms. Here an interesting contrast emerges. There is a variety of evidence that points to the fact that the population of Sicily in the twelfth century was recognized in its own time as ethnically diverse: the visual testimony of depictions of the court in the late twelfth-century illuminated version of the poem on Henry VI by Peter of Eboli, for instance, with its members dressed in a variety of costumes; the titles by which offices in the courts were designated, emir, logothete, camerlengus; the multi-lingual inscriptions on monuments of both royal and private patronage; the words of the king himself, Roger II, who adduced “*varietas populorum nostro regno subiectorum*” as one of the defining characteristics of

⁴² See my essay on the Mantle in the exh. cat., *Nobiles Officinae. Perle, filigrane e trame di seta dal Palazzo Reale di Palermo*, Palermo 2003. Another case in point is the analysis of the Norman tombs by Josef Deér; see Deér, *The Dynastic Porphyry Tombs of the Norman Period in Sicily*, Cambridge MA 1959.



4. Monreale, Cathedral, view of interior

his regnum.⁴³ Consciousness of diversity was embedded in social activities and political structures. Yet it is not manifest in the response to architecture or the visual arts.

A telling case is the famous sermon on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul by Philagathos, whose proemium contains one of most extended and important descriptions of a building that we possess from the Middle Ages. Certain features still extant, such as the nave ceiling and the wall mosaics, are described, but without reference to any affiliation, cultural, political or ethnic, that would serve to distinguish one from the other, 'Islamic' and 'Byzantine.'⁴⁴ Nor is there such a reference in any other twelfth-century description of a work of Norman art or architecture (though admittedly these are not numerous): not in the various passages on the Norman Palace in the chronicle of Romuald of Salerno, not in the Falcandus *Epistola*, and not in any of the edicts of the Norman kings.⁴⁵

The witness of these documents can hardly be argued to be definitive, but it is eloquent, and it supports the contention that difference, defined culturally or ethnically, was not an engrained or natural predisposition in contemporary thinking about art. It is our point of view, rather than that of the twelfth century, that has collapsed the two categories, form and cultural or ethnic affiliation. In the degree to which it sees forms as historical phenomena and thereby products of cultures, our viewpoint, therefore, comes closer to what we have rather roughly defined as a thirteenth/fourteenth as opposed to an eleventh/twelfth-century approach. To put the matter this way, however, raises the possibility of characterizing the shift, again roughly defined, in the terms of a view of history or historical thinking, wherein a historical or historicizing view supplants one in which the grasp of history (context, affiliation) is weaker, or non-existent: historicity as opposed to a-historicity.

At the conclusion to my study of the Cappella Palatina I attempted to put the radical transformation that I discerned in the relationship between sanctuary and nave into a larger context that had to do with the way in which styles, forms and motifs of different origins and affiliations were handled in conjunction with one another in twelfth-century Sicily.⁴⁶ I posited a simple change. In an earlier moment, represented by the first phase of the Cappella Palatina, I suggested that

styles were used to create highly developed environments, though clearly shaped to a Norman purpose, that were integral and essentially undiluted by the presence of extraneous stylistic elements (fig. 3). The sanctuary of the chapel was thus formed essentially as a Byzantine church and the nave, as an Islamic hall. By the end of the century, however, these totalizing environments were no longer desirable, and when different styles, forms and motifs were used, as they were in the second phase of the Cappella Palatina or in the Monreale project (fig. 4), they were blended so as to not stand out distinctly one against the other.⁴⁷ In contemplating the whole at Monreale, furthermore, it becomes clear that the Islamic component has diminished not only in scale but also in importance. Whereas in the first phase of the Cappella Palatina, an entire space, the nave, could be defined by its Islamic affiliation, and then set against the byzantinizing sanctuary, at Monreale, the overwhelming impression is that of the Christian tradition, Christian imagery and architectural form, with a few decorative flourishes, such as the revetment of the exterior of the main apse, in a 'foreign' mode. The Islamic component has been degraded from a position of parity with the Christian and relegated to the edge, to the frame and to decoration. Does this change have any bearing on the issue of historical thinking? Possibly so, for I suspect that what enabled the earlier usage, in which not just a motif but an entire world was evoked in an architectural space, was, in a sense, a lack of commitment to what that world stood for: Roger had no intention of becoming a Muslim prince any more than he aspired to be the Byzantine ruler. The styles employed in his chapel were just that – styles – they were not the representation of intrinsic beliefs. One might say that they were used superficially, in the loose and free way that must have enabled the Islamic bowl to make its way into the Byzantine liturgy in Pachymeres' account. Once the awareness arose that they were connected to beliefs, that is to say, once they were seen historically as the manifestation of a culture, it would no longer have been possible to use them in the same way and maintain conviction as a Christian king. Under the impact of this awareness, it was inevitable that the Islamic component in Norman Sicilian art be diminished and thereby neutralized in meaning.

⁴³ Hiroshi Takayama, *The Administration of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, Leiden and New York 1993.

⁴⁴ *Filagato da Cerami, Omelie per I vangeli domenicali e le feste di tutto l'anno*, ed. Giuseppe Rossi Taibbi, vol. 1, Palermo 1969.

⁴⁵ Tronzo (as in note 4), pp. 3 ff.

⁴⁶ Tronzo (as in note 4), pp. 97 ff.

⁴⁷ Tronzo (as in note 4), p. 152.