

Images of the Mother of God, edited by Maria Vassilaki. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005. pp. xxxii + 383, illustrations.

In October 2000, the Benaki Museum in Athens opened an exhibition entitled “Mother of God” which collected in one place many of the important icons of the Theotokos. In conjunction with this exhibition, the museum and the Institute for Byzantine Research sponsored in January 2001 the “Mother of God” Conference, gathering together an international slate of scholars. *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, presents the proceedings of that conference.

In her introduction, Averil Cameron correctly describes the book as taking a “wide sweep, both chronologically and thematically.” Essays range from wide angle to narrow focus covering a cross-section of history, from the early growth of the “cult” of the Virgin and the council of Ephesus (431) that established her as Theotokos, to the late Middle Ages. Although the volume grows out of an exhibition of

visual art, the essays included explore images of Mary from many disciplinary perspectives. The book contains five parts for a total of twenty-seven chapters. Both black and white and color plates supplement each offering. As Cameron notes, certain concepts and themes recur throughout the volume: each section is characterized by consideration of both public and private concerns, the political impact of devotional practices, and the identification of Theotokos images as representations of Incarnational significance. The collection does not present a comprehensive examination of devotion to the Virgin in the Orthodox Church; rather, it opens windows on that devotion.

As the number of essays prohibits individual summaries, the book is best examined through its five parts. The first section, “Early Cult and Representation,” discusses, in four separate essays,

images of the Virgin from Rome and Egypt as well as Byzantium. Egyptian images are treated in two essays, "Isis and Mary in Early Icons," and "The Enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the Cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt." The second section, "The Theology of the Theotokos," gives perspectives from hymns and liturgy, as well as visual images. Although this section focuses mainly on the relationship between visual images, poetry, liturgy, and homiletics, one essay, "Use and Abuse of the "Image" of the Theotokos in the Political Life of Byzantium," by Nike Koutrakou, makes the connection between theological concepts and political imperatives.

While the entire book, because of its subject matter, inherently deals with representations of the feminine, the third section, "Female Piety and Devotion," deliberately examines the relationships between images of the Theotokos and the lives of real women. The public/private juxtaposition is clearly evident in this section, which looks at the relationship between

the role of the Empress and devotion to the Virgin as well as private pietistic practices. The fourth section, "Public and Private Cult," more fully explores these manifestations of Marian devotion on the domestic level and in public places and celebrations such as major festivals of the Virgin and processions associated with these feasts. This and the previous section provide tantalizing glimpses of what we can learn from studying objects owned by women. Of particular interest is Harry Maguire's essay, "Byzantine Domestic Art as Evidence for the Early Cult of the Virgin," in which he highlights images of Mary found in jewelry and textiles. "Zoe's Lead Seal: Female Invocation to the Annunciation of the Virgin" by Vasso Penna, describes a lead seal dating from the eleventh century containing an inscription which requests that the owner be blessed with a child. This invocation, paired as it is, with an image of the Annunciation, points to a similar trend in Western Marian devotion.

Other such East/West correspondences focus the

discussion of the last section, “Between East and West,” which examines overall trends and specific examples. This section effectively calls into question distinctions between East and West. Some real differences do exist, including separate ecclesiastical hierarchies, liturgies, and doctrinal divergences (like the Dormition vs. the Assumption). By emphasizing the convergences, for example, in the shared visual vocabularies of Italian artists like Duccio and Cimabue and their Byzantine counterparts, the essays in this section present an extended conversation about the Virgin in which all Christendom engaged. Much discussion regarding these correspondences has centered on the chicken/egg argument. The questions raised in this section could do much to move the discussion toward understanding the total phenomenon of the Virgin, as well as the differences that evolved in liturgy and doctrine.

I approached this book as someone who has spent much time exploring the role of Mary in Western medieval culture but has had neither

the time nor the training to examine in depth her Eastern antecedents, hoping the book would provide an accessible means for bridging that gap. The collection presents a wealth of information and diversity of ideas that for the most part reward the reader. That being said, this book is not without frustrations. It represents the proceedings of a scholarly conference, and as such, many of the essays assume a certain level of expertise on the part of the audience. Some authors don’t provide translations for all the passages they quote in Greek. Some don’t provide historical or cultural context for the educated but non-specialist reader. The rationale for grouping the essays isn’t clear as the editor has not provided the five main sections of the book with introductory statements. A brief paragraph at the beginning of each part would help pull together threads that might not be obvious to the reader and at the same time give the entire collection increased coherence.

Many of these concerns are addressed if the non-specialist reads this book in tandem with *Mother of God*, the

catalogue for the 2000 exhibit (Milan: Skira, 2000). While the editor never overtly states this, the two books are meant to complement each other. Not only do both books have the same editor, they share a number of contributors. The first article in *Images of the Mother of God* underscores this relationship: the first paragraph refers readers to *The Mother of God*. The exhibition catalogue provides the historical and cultural context lacking in *Images of the Mother of God* as well as an extensive collection of plates. The contents are pragmatically arranged within three major sections: “Part One: On the Cult and Theology of the Virgin;” “Part Two: Representing the Virgin;” and “Part Three: The Catalogue.” The first part includes explanatory discussions of the early cult of the Virgin, the iconoclastic controversy, Mary in the texts of the Gospels, and information about Mary included in the Apocryphal Gospels. The second part is organized by the various media used to depict the Virgin, such as mosaics, wall paintings, ivory, and enamel. These articles address a general audience and

supply useful information on the history and cultural aspects of Byzantine society at the time these images were created. The second section discusses the various ways in which the Virgin is portrayed for those who are not art historians, thus supplying definitions of terminology that make the conference proceedings more comprehensible for non-specialists.

Taken as a whole, these two publications provide a model for future studies of Mary in Western culture. We have a tendency to approach Mary piecemeal, from various disciplinary perspectives or as a popular culture phenomenon. Broader studies include Marina Warner’s *Alone of All Her Sex* and Jarislav Pelikan’s *Mary Through the Centuries*, which engage Mary’s impact on Western culture. *Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts* (Oxford, 2001) and *Mary: Art Culture and Religion through the Ages* (Crossroads, 1997), much like *Mother of God*, approach the Virgin through the vehicle of visual art. While these publications are helpful, none focuses on the Middle Ages. A

western counterpart to *Images of the Mother of God* and *Mother of God* would greatly increase our understanding not only of Mary, but also of women and their influence in economics, politics, piety, and artistic expression in the Middle Ages.

Images of the Mother of God contains much to fascinate those interested in the roles of women and perceptions of the Virgin in both eastern and western medieval culture. When read together with *Mother of God* it provides an even richer experience, especially for those who do not specialize in Byzantine studies.

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