

Not Ruled by Time and Space Comparing medieval, modern & contemporary art

Elizabeth WILLIAMS

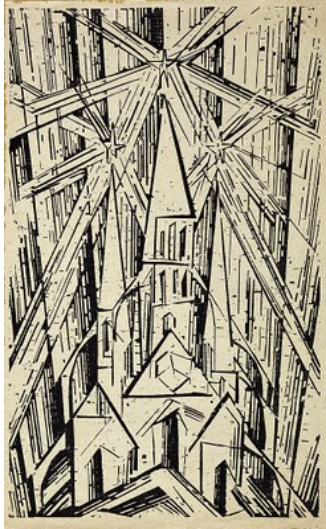
Is an art historian looking at modern and contemporary art through the lens of medieval art necessarily risking anachronism? Breaking the taboo of cross-period comparison, Alexander Nagel's *Medieval Modern* uncovers deep similarities between two seemingly distant periods of art history, which challenge our own sense of time and space.

Reviewed: Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time*, London, New York, Thames and Hudson, 2012, 312 pp, 134 illustrations.

Medieval art historians have long turned to colleagues in modern and contemporary periods for theoretical and interpretative models that have proven fruitful in exploring the often fragmentary evidence for premodern artistic output.¹ Such cross-period interest is arguably one-sided, however, as few working in modern and contemporary periods would seek parallels from across the profound breaks in art's production and consumption considered to have started in the Renaissance, before continuing to full fruition through the Enlightenment period. Indeed, from a certain perspective, engaging with parallels across the divides of time and space of these periods is to risk anachronism, for it opens one to accusations that such similarities exist on a strictly superficial level.

It is exactly this sort of engagement, however, that provides the underlying rationale for Alexander Nagel's *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time*. The author's *longue durée* view reveals in fact potentially unsettling parallels across periods that deserve sustained attention. The book proceeds in a series of case studies, which pull together a wide range of artworks from across periods to explore underlying structural themes. To this end, Nagel's study considers on the one hand works from the medieval west, with particular emphasis on canonical late medieval and early Renaissance works. He looks across time to compare these works to modern and contemporary periods, with particular focus on late 18th- through mid-20th-century examples.

¹ See for instance the current issue of [Studies in Iconography](#) (vol. 33, 2012), which includes discussions of globalism, feminism, and post-colonialism as applied to medieval studies.



Lyonel Feininger (German, b. America, 1871-1956), Programm des Staatlichen Bauhauses in Weimar, April 1919. Woodcut with letterpress on green paper. 30.2 x 18.6 cm. Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin.

The Art in Art History...

One of the major themes threading throughout the book centers on modernist debates about art itself, a topic that gained particular urgency in the rhetoric of the late 19th and 20th century art writing. In these decades, artists and critics endeavored to define their aims through ever more refined discussions about art's purpose, function, and meaning. Intriguingly, medieval art reappears over and over again in these debates. While one might at first thought expect medieval art to have served as a foil against which modern art could differentiate itself, Nagel shows in fact that modernist responses to arts of the middle ages were significantly nuanced. In some instances, artists and critics even posited the medieval period as an ideal model. To cite just one example, Nagel elaborates on Bauhaus artists' interest in the unifying nature of the Gothic style (Chapter 18: "Cathedral Thinking"). He shows that this group of 20th century artists was fascinated by the arts of 14th and 15th century Europe, in which architecture, metalwork, and other arts were united in styles transcending individual media or regional identities. The appeal of the Gothic was made clear in Lyonel Feininger's illustrated cover of the *Bauhaus Manifesto* of 1919, for example, where an image of a cathedral served as a model for the group's own artistic aims in uniting media and regions in the recreation of an all-encompassing, pan-European aesthetic.

Nagel's criticisms of the stylistic thrust that powers much of the practice of art history come through in this example, because "Gothic" itself could be seen as a fiction of art history, a symptom of the discipline's fundamental emphasis on periodization and attribution via formal analysis of artworks. Its very terms are problematic, since they developed out of Renaissance disgust at "Gothic's" characteristically elaborate features considered typical of barbaric taste. The instability of the term itself is revealed even further in that there were, in fact, any number of regional reactions and interpretations of what would be called "Gothic", and that while these do share some visual similarities, close examination also reveals many divergences, as well. Peter Parler's Saint Vitus Cathedral in Prague (started in 1344), for instance, is certainly reminiscent of the kind of architecture popularized in France. Nonetheless, its many innovative qualities make it stand out as a unique work of its architect and as reflecting particular regional traditions and motivations. In this sense, the unifying and stable "Gothic" the Bauhaus idealized never even existed, or rather, that existed only insofar as art history defined it as such.

This observation underlines one of Nagel's major points: once one accepts that art largely resists art history's categories, the fictions of these taxonomies become ever more clear. Belief in the reliability of styles such as "Gothic," or the even more problematic "Romanesque", for example, accepts a notion of a narrative linearity and artistic progress. Instead, Nagel's multidirectional approach to artworks opens an alternate way of reading, one that rejects the rationalizing constructs of art history's sequential orderings. Such a new approach produces novel and surprising arrangements of objects, artists, and styles. This history seems rather like a

mirror placed in front of another mirror, where art reverberates forward and backwards in its echoing inflections.

...And the Art of Art History



The Hannover Merzbau by Kurt Schwitters. Photo by Wilhelm Redemann, 1933.

Considering the limits of art history's organizing principles turns attention to the art *of* art history, i.e. its enduring methodologies, and how the practice of these methodologies in turn profoundly shaped developments in modern and contemporary art. Late 19th and 20th century art writing's academic awareness of its own history emerges with particular force throughout the book. This impulse towards self-definition was understandably a key effort of modernists' writing, as writers sought to distinguish their modern from what came before. In reading the accounts presented in Nagel's book, one is struck by how constantly artists, critics, and art historians were in dialogue with one another, often through formal academic training in universities. Many studied or taught history of art, and this familiarity (and confidence) in art history's narratives arguably framed their approaches and outlooks. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of the medievalist Meyer Schapiro, which shows that art historians nuanced their appreciations of medieval objects thanks to encounters with contemporary art. At other times, critics of modern and contemporary art and aesthetics sought parallels in the middle ages, as in the writings of Clement Greenberg relating Byzantine aesthetics and modern abstraction.²

In still other examples, Nagel presents moments when artists themselves were profoundly impressed with earlier periods of art, mediated through art history and its related counterpart, the museum. This was the case in Kurt Schwitters's compelling *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends* of the 1930s (later his *Merzbau*), a work operating on several layers of reference (Chapter 20: "Cathedral of Erotic Suffering"). Nagel argues that in presenting a dynamic and constantly changing arrangement of curiosities and relic-like objects, Schwitters's work purposefully emulates the often chaotic displays that were common to medieval chapel spaces. It was through this effort, Nagel suggests, that the artist critiqued the deadening effects of contemporary museum display. He argues that, "rather than offering a re-creation of a Gothic church, the *Kathedrale/Merzbau* offered instead an archaeology of display practices from a post-museum future, an archeology that incorporates the medieval cathedral among other, later kinds of accretive spaces, such as the *Kunstkammer*. Rather than a revival, the *Kathedrale/Merzbau* offers

² As in Clement Greenberg, "Byzantine parallels" *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961), 167-70. Nagel includes many other examples of modern and contemporary critics turning to medieval art, such as Leo Steinberg, Umberto Eco, and who are discussed throughout the book, particularly in chapters 12, 13, and 14. Key works are outlined in the book's ample annotated bibliography.

an estranged an anachronistic installation, capturing a moment when museums started to look like crypts and cathedrals, like art installations.” (p. 272).

Yet perhaps some of the book’s most intriguing research excavates lost university courses to explore how these networks of artists, art historians, and critics shaped a generation’s outlooks, sensibilities, and language. Nagel searches archival records to present documents such as the scribbled course notes of Allan Kaprow (p. 178-183) or the notebooks of students of Josef Albers (p. 160-163), which offer insight into the academic training and art historical interests of these figures. Kaprow, for example, a student of John Cage, is described writing an article on Jackson Pollock in a 1958 volume of *Artnews*³, which had developed in fact out of an essay in a Romanesque art history course with Schapiro (Chapter 14: “Environments, Flatbeds, and Other Forms of Receivership”). Such an intensely academic engagement of modern and contemporary artists and critics with the discipline of art history emerges as one of the most striking themes of the book.

Time and Space

One of the reasons art history (and many other disciplines concerned with history, for that matter) concerns itself so intensely with ordering and taxonomies, is of course due to the nature of the artefacts themselves. Any given object has a date, place of creation, and creator(s); these facts may be known, or they may be unknown, but one of art history’s central principles is that objects came from somewhere and were made by someone. In some instances, nonetheless, these orderings of space and time no longer work, whether for practical reasons (as in archaeological artefacts divorced from their original contexts) or conceptual ones (where authorship is purposefully obscured, for example). Some of the book’s most poignant and indeed important chapters look at how medieval and modern art challenge and transcend our ordering of time and space.

This critique is not an unfamiliar one, particularly not in the 20th century, which saw explorations in the study of physics that completely upended how scientists themselves thought of the relationship between space and time. Artists, too, picked up on the complexity of these concepts, as in the case of Robert Smithson’s *Non-Sites* works and their accompanying theories: here was there, there was here, these exist both there and here, but also nowhere.⁴ But Nagel argues that medievals had *Non-Sites* of a kind, too, in the form of the Holy Land (Chapter 9: “Topographical Instability”). For example, Nagel discusses at length the “geographical and chronological instability” at play in the [Jerusalem Chapel in the Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, in Rome](#) (p. 114). There, a complex layering of space and time centered around dirt believed to have come from the place of the Crucifixion, transposed to Italy, creating a place both there and here. This chapel, of course, was just one of many medieval renderings of Jerusalem to situate the Holy Land in temporal and spatial suspension, where it was there (in the Middle East) and here (in Europe), existed then (in Biblical times), now (as a place of pilgrimage), and always (in the constant reiteration of its stories and places through ritual and belief). The overlays had a transformative and transportative effect for medieval viewers and

³ Alan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock”, *Artnews*, October 1958.

⁴ See, for instance, Robert Smithson, “A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites,” available at <http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/provisional.htm>

visitors, as Nagel argues, one where “the potential for time- and space-travel is actualized in the experience of users who assemble the elements creatively and thus, for a time, inhabit a space that is removed from their own environment, a space linked to Jerusalem through real conjunctures – the relics and the earth.” (p. 100-101)



Written prayers and glass floor covering soil said to come from Jerusalem. Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Rome, Italy. Photo © Holly Hayes.

Perhaps the most powerful contemporary example of this logic emerges in a discussion about a 1969 project Smithson developed as part of a new year’s poster and greeting card commissioned by the Jewish Museum in New York, which was later abandoned by the artist (Chapter 10: “Non-Site Specificity”). For this work, Smithson transported dirt from Hebron, from a spot where Adam was believed to have been created, to Mount Moriah (Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif; a reproduction of Smithson’s work is visible here [“Art out of Time: The Relic and Robert Smithson.” Artforum 51.2 \(2012\):232-39](#)) in Jerusalem, a place holding supreme eschatological significance; this dirt formed the Hebrew letters of the Jewish new year (5)730. The fragility of the numbers, the dirt’s displacement to such a charged location, and its use to form the measured reckoning of a new year, Nagel argues, comment on the transience of humanity and human time, producing compelling parallels between the medieval and the modern.

Medieval Modern: Art out of Time provides a controversial approach to working across fields, and it is certain that the non-linear nature of the book and its capacious time frame might frustrate some readers. In the larger sense, however, Nagel’s case studies challenge the period-bound, intensely specialized practices of art history common among its practitioners today. Indeed, these and many other episodes presented in the book probe underlying preconceptions to prompt the reader to consider the uniqueness, in fact, of any period of art at all. In the broader sense, however, the author’s focus on shifts and continuities in artistic production, consumption, and display ultimately draws attention to the constructed nature of time and historical progress. In the end, Nagel’s points are perhaps most eloquently expressed in a quotation from a 1956 interview with Marcel Duchamp: ““Only in art is [man] capable of going beyond the animal state, because art is an outlet towards regions which are not ruled by time and space.”” (p. 240)