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Approaches to the Visual in Religion

Edited by
Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati
Christopher Rowland

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

In memory of
Melanie Wright
(1970–2011)

"The pushke contains the possibility both to be sad,
  that one does not have the opportunity to visit the shtetl of one's grandparents,
  and to be glad, that one does not have to remain there."

(Melanie Wright, "Material Judaism")

"People like Melanie do not leave. Every step of her adult life was
  genesis of eternity: the way she lived and shared her life with others
  gave her lasting presence in humanity. Carrying on her passion for writing,
  her book of life shall never close. Now it's our turn to write the next one,
  with the helping hand of her legacy."

(Lucia Faltin, friend of Melanie)

Finally, the book is dedicated to the memory of one of our contributors, Melanie Wright, who died as the book was in the final stages of preparation for publication. Her untimely death has robbed us all of a colleague of great humanity whose intellectual contribution to our work speaks for itself in this book: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them".

Contents

Preface

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati
Christopher Rowland

The essays in this volume investigate the analysis of visual sources and their indispensable role for understanding and interpreting religions, their symbol systems, and the wider traditions of which they are a part. A particular interest in this study is the focus on the methodological challenge of images from a comparative perspective.

The common concern that ranges across all the contributions is the search for a methodological perspective in which images may be analysed in a comprehensive way, paying particular attention to the social, and wider intellectual, settings, as well as the religious frameworks, in which the images are embedded. Accordingly, we seek to show that visual sources need to be interpreted from different angles, not only by considering their visual elements, but also their origins and material aspects, as well as their hermeneutical effects.

In the last few decades, a broad range of publications have contributed to a greater appreciation of the significance of images, and visual media in general, in understanding religious traditions, communities and discourses from both historical and contemporary perspectives.[1] Of course, attention to sources other than texts and writings has always been present in the field of religious studies. Nevertheless, visual sources have been, and partially continue to be, considered more marginal, at the boundaries of disciplines dealing with religions.

In more recent research, centring on visual media in religious traditions and symbol systems, various avenues have opened up and been explored, focusing on the status of images and on the perspective of the viewer. Furthermore, there are illuminating contributions dealing with the theoretical premises and methods by which to approach the visual as a central component of religion, some providing an overview of essential definitions and implications, whilst others concentrate on specific techniques and/or media.[2]

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1 For a survey of this field see Cancik/Mohr 1988, Plate 2002, Landwerd 2002, Bräunlein 2004, Morgan 2005, 2008.

2 The bibliography in this area is very broad. The following select examples provide informative contributions from differing approaches to the field of religion and visuality: Miles 1985, Morgan 1998, Arweck/Collins 2006, Hoover 2006, Blizek 2009, Beinhauer-Köhler/Pezzoli-Olgiati/Valentin 2010. Select examples of illuminating contributions from visual study and art-history include: Mitchell 1986, Beyer 1996, Macho 2000, Belting 2000, 2001, 2008, Böhm 2004, Pattison 2007.

This volume emerges out of this diversity of contemporary approaches within the field of visuality and religion. As a creative response to this diversity, the present volume focuses, in particular, on questions of method and approach to visual sources. Based on the premise that visual communication is an essential part of religious traditions in both the past and present, the contributions assembled in this book are concerned with the analysis of selected visual documents and their contribution to general theoretical questions. They explore appropriate means of understanding visual sources, attentive to the different historical settings in which they are embedded, and the different theoretical frames within which the questions driving the analysis are generated.

This volume is based on an interdisciplinary conversation among colleagues involved in different disciplines concerned with religion: the study of religion with reference to historical and contemporary religious case studies; biblical studies, systematic and practical theology; and hermeneutics. The task has been to produce common lines of interest as well as to trace emerging lines of continuity and discontinuity between the approaches.

Surveying the whole volume and the distinct disciplines it encompasses, some common points of interest and evaluation may nonetheless be highlighted in this preface. There is no intention in this collection to offer *one* comprehensive method which might encompass every conceivable interpretation of every type of image. Rather, in the book we discuss both the opportunities and limits of different approaches, as well as the necessity of correlating and combining those different approaches, in order to capture the interpretative complexity required to interpret visual media. The proposed approaches to the visual offer consideration of a process of communication that may be applied to a broad range of artefacts, products and objects. Each contribution explores and evaluates different possibilities, presenting a variety of case studies from different historical contexts, ancient and contemporary. Each contributor assesses the question of method as comprehensively as possible, and from different perspectives, considering images and visual communication as integral parts of cultural processes and of the religious representations and traditions in their respective cultures.

The visual communication process always involves some kind of viewer. Even in instances where the viewers are invisible, or absent, images may still be perceived as part of a complex, multi-layered communication process. The relationship between an image and its viewers can be analysed from an historical and a hermeneutical perspective, involving both the moment of production and the ongoing process of reception in which the image is embedded. The dynamic between historical, imaginary or imagined visual sources and viewers, is the foundation for this form of communication and concerns not only the historical reconstruction of a particular original setting but also potential possibilities for reception in very different contexts.

Also relevant is the relationship between the researcher and the visual sources he or she is investigating. Although these considerations may be regarded as secondary, nonetheless, within a general methodological reflection, they should not be underestimated or ignored. In fact, the admission of one's own involvement as a viewer of the images on which one is undertaking research, opens the door to the crucial issue of the role of the particularity of subjectivity in academic enquiry.

Given the immediacy and the emotional involvement of the visual gaze, the subjective and cultural imprint has a greater, and more obvious, impact here than in other fields, perhaps even more obviously than in textual study (though we would want to emphasise its central importance there also). Obviously, there is the necessity of contextualising one's own academic perspective on visual media. For instance, the mediating role of dealing with foreign languages and translations that is paramount in classical religio-historical work is much less present in visual fields, where the source is perceived primarily through the sense of sight, albeit culturally conditioned. The hermeneutical challenge of interpreting images belongs essentially and specifically to the investigation of visual issues as they confront the viewing subject.

Furthermore, it is important to consider both the necessity and the limits of socio-historical contextualisation. When investigating religious traditions, the distinction between the context of production and the multiple contexts of reception is essential. The dialectic between production and reception opens up a broad range of frames for interpretation. This allows the interpreter to conceive of visual communication as a communication not only at a particular historical moment but also as a dynamic articulation through time and traditions. A comparison between different stages of transmission and reception presupposes the materiality of the image as a constant characteristic (though obviously changing through age and use), in contrast to the variable modes of interpretation in the reception process.

The investigation of visual sources from the perspective of the different historical, social, cultural, and geographical settings covered in this project has suggested some specific characteristics of visual communication as a complex part of culture. This has demonstrated the fact that language cannot deal with the visual in anything like a comprehensive way, precisely because language confines and reduces the impact of images whose interpretative effects can never adequately be communicated in textual form. Between images and language, as different modes of intellectual engagement, there lies a gap one must always keep in mind. The difference between text and image is not absolute, as a written text is itself also an artefact, perceived visually in its materiality and form whose overall effect also produces mental images.

The various case studies, where different methods are critically discussed, are presented in three different parts.

In the first part of the book, the essays are very much part of the study of religion, and deal with visual sources from a largely descriptive perspective, looking

for the significance of images and their role in the processes of the construction of meaning. Images are here considered within a process of communication which is subject to continuous fluctuations and changes.

In the second part, we have a series of contributions in which the interpretative process is itself at the centre of attention. Visual communication develops in its own way, but it is always integrated into a network of interpretative mediations. A multi-faceted hermeneutical reflection can help to distinguish and correlate the various moments in the interpretative process, therefore, not least those in which images are often aligned with texts and literary traditions. Furthermore, the hermeneutical approaches mediate between, and clarify, subjective involvement and critical distance, with both as necessary poles in processes of interpretation.

The third part contains contributions in which the visual is considered in relation to the hermeneutically productive moment and its relation to wider theological reflection. From this perspective, images are not only the object of academic enquiry but also a stimulus to new thinking within contemporary theological discourse.

At the beginning of each new part, a short introduction characterises the contributions it contains by outlining the main lines in common.

The articles collected in this volume were conceived, written, and discussed over the last few years at the regular meetings of researchers in the fields of biblical studies, theology, hermeneutics, and the study of religion, based in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Italy in a research project originating from co-operation between the Faculties of Theology at the Universities of Oxford and Zurich, which the editors of this volume initiated. In addition to the previously mentioned interdisciplinary character of the meetings, the collection of essays presented in this volume also displays a plurality of academic traditions and conceptions of disciplines that is typical of contemporary European research. It is hoped that this broad spectrum of approaches to the visual will stimulate other scholars to investigate and deepen their appreciation of the visual aspect of religious traditions and their symbol systems in the variety of their historically and socially contingent contexts of reception.

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati/Christopher Rowland (Hg.), Approaches to the Visual in Religion

Part I
Perspectives from the Study of Religion

Introduction

Anna-Katharina Höpflinger
Marie-Therese Mäder

The first part of this book focuses on a range of different methodological approaches to visual sources within the study of religion. Although a study of religions perspective is characterised by a comparative approach to visual sources, a diversity of methodological approaches is required to answer the variety of questions that arise in this complex field. Amidst the diversity of approaches and questions considered by the contributors to this volume, however, a common thread may still be detected, in the recurrent interest in a functional approach to religion.

Such an approach to religion and visuality focuses on religion as a system of orientation, creating meaning in human existence and providing a cognitive setting which is reliable for individuals as well as for communities. Moreover, the term religion envelops, in the context we are using it here, a certain tension between immanence and transcendence. Embedded within this general functional frame, the following articles also share some presuppositions and terminology that derive from such a theoretical perspective.

In the contributions that follow, images are understood as a form of visual communication, as indispensable sources to understand religion as an element of culture. Several forms of communication proceed from, within, and around cultural products, for example: communication between the visual medium and its producers; communication between image, film or artefact and viewers; intertextual communication between different cultural products; communication within the artefact on the textual, image or material level; and communication concerning historical or contemporary context. Such multi-layer communication processes that surround visual media can be divided into three different categories, which help to mirror its complexity, namely, production, distribution and reception. Accordingly, the papers in this collection analyse their case studies with particular reference to the categories of production, distribution and reception.

Production includes the field of fabrication with its social, economic and political conditions as well as the materials and technologies which are employed. Distribution enhances the material and ideological exchange between producers and consumers, between supply and demand, following the rules of marketing strategies and/or traditions. Reception describes the multiple processes of consumption as an exchange between product and consumer. Reception, there-

fore, is a kind of reconstruction of cultural representation. It influences, or at least changes, the perception of the object. The differing scope of production, distribution and reception reflect and take into account the complexity of cultural configurations.

It seems useful, therefore, to analyse visual media in a comprehensive way with special attention paid to the wider cultural setting where the visual source is embedded. The inclusion of a wider cultural context allows a more sharply differentiated analysis of the complex processes accompanying the sources under consideration.

The contributions in this first part treat different visual objects from various cultures and historical settings. In *Images in Images. Self-Reflexivity in Votive Paintings from the 19th Century*, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati analyses votive paintings. Her research focuses on religious practices and intermedial references. With a sustained focus on visual self-reflexivity, she approaches the visual sources according to the pragmatic dimensions and the functions of the pictures that are represented in the images themselves. Similarly, Anna-Katharina Höpflinger in *From Visibility to Invisibility. A Semiotic Approach to Marduk's Battle against Tiāmat on a Relief from Palmyra* questions the aim and intention of a hidden relief depicting a familiar scene from a widespread mythological narrative. The questions that this paper raises are of concern not simply for the unique, three-dimensional artefact under consideration, but also indicate, more broadly, the significance of inter-mediality when investigating the realm of visual communication. By contrast, Melanie J. Wright in *Material Judaism. Interpreting the Pushke* discusses a commercial artefact produced on an industrial scale. She outlines the complex interplay between distribution, demands and production. The recipient is of central concern in Monika Glavac's approach to caricatures. In *Viewing and Reconstructing Caricatures. The "Other" in Benjamin Roubaud's La leçon de danse* she develops a method for analysing hermeneutical processes and queries the representation of the stranger as "the other".

The contributions dealing with film refer to different areas within film studies. Tommi Mendel considers a documentary film which he himself produced and directed, in *Multilayer Reality in Documentary Film. An Approach towards a Critical Reading of Documentary Films on the Basis of ARUKIHENRO (T. Mendel, CH 2006).* He examines the boundaries of film analysis by questioning "reality" in documentary films. Marie-Therese Mäder in *A Cultural Studies Approach to Film and Religion. Context and Film Analysis of Yes (S. Potter, GB/USA, 2004)* examines the triangular relationship between film production, reception and context. She shows how contextualisation and previous knowledge may influence hermeneutical processes in film viewing and how they shape the message of a film. Fabian Perlini-Pfister's approach focuses on film reception, specifically the process of banning film, in *Censorship as Self-Representation. Interpreting the Banning of I ACCUSE (W. Liebeneiner, D 1941) in Switzerland*. He examines dimensions of

historical contextualisation with a focus on hermeneutical questions about the dialogue between the film and its viewers at a specific time.

In discussing these diverse case studies, this part of the study presents a wide range of examples across different times and cultures. The diversity of case studies correlates with the diversity of possible methodological approaches that enable multi-layered interpretations. The theoretical foundation of the study of religion approach, however, ensures that a common functional thread, focused on production, distribution and reception, binds these diverse case studies into a coherent collection.

Visual media always involve reception by some kind of viewer. A religious studies researcher is both a viewer and a participant in the process of reception. The hermeneutical implications of this observation raise critical questions about the position of the recipient or consumer in the production of meaning. This significant hermeneutical issue forms the final topic of discussion at the conclusion of each of the papers in this section and serves as a bridge to the second part of the present volume.

Images in Images

Self-Reflexivity in Votive Paintings from the 19th Century

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

This contribution to the methodological conversation about approaching images within the study of religious traditions focuses on visual self-reflexivity within religious practices.[1] In different cultural settings and times, and in various forms of production, there are visual representations which offer more or less explicit information about the function of the image itself. In these cases, the depiction and/ or the visual medium hint at how such sources were used. Of course, this is only a mirroring of the pragmatic dimensions within the visual representation itself, and, therefore, it is strongly bound to the context of its production. It must be considered primarily as an implicit suggestion of possible religious practices.

Nevertheless, self-reflexive elements can be an interesting starting point for an analysis of visual sources since they allow a methodologically accurate correlation between inner-visual aspects and the historical reconstruction of the functions of such visual images supplemented by other (written and visual) sources. In other words, a particular attention to self-reflexivity enables the observer to immerse him-/herself in the visual fiction before beginning the dialogue with other kinds of visual, literary, or material sources. I propose, therefore, to approach images firstly from an inner-visual perspective, before considering the historical and inter-medial settings in which they are embedded.

Attention to self-reflexivity in visual sources is deployed here with reference to selected examples. I consider votive paintings within the Catholic tradition of the Southern Alpine slope. Since the production of votive paintings in this tradition is diffuse and covers a considerable period of time, I limit myself to a few examples from the 19th century. In line with the main question presented above, I principally focus on representations of paintings and related devotional artefacts and practices within the votive painting itself. Although these self-reflexive

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1 On the definition of the term "self-reflexivity" in visual contexts see Reinecke 1996, 9: "Selbstreflexiv sind nicht nur Filme, die den eigenen Betrieb vorführen, sondern auch solche, die (...) das Sehen selbst ins Zentrum rücken. Selbstreflexiv sind insofern nicht nur Filme, die qua Sujet als Selbstspiegelung erscheinen, sondern die sich der Bilderproduktion überhaupt widmen und die fragen: Was ist ein Bild, wie strukturiert sich Wahrnehmung?". Cf. also Kirchmann 1996; Lüthy 2001; and Sykora 1996.

elements do not appear in all the *ex voto* paintings, they are quite common in the period and region under consideration.

The first section of this essay is dedicated to the description and the analysis of the paintings; the second deals with contextual aspects and the role of comparison between paintings, texts and further media. A third section outlines the pragmatics of votive paintings both on an individual and a collective level. Some general remarks on the relevance of self-reflexivity as a methodological approach conclude the present essay.

Votive Paintings in Alpine Catholicism in the 19th Century

The production of *ex voto* offerings in the Christian tradition over many centuries encompasses a broad range of visual and material objects. Among the variegated products of *ex voto* offerings are, for instance, miniature reproductions of parts of the body, stereotypical hearts in silver, drawings, photographs, framed collages with newspaper cuttings or personal writings, and embroideries (fig. 1).

Amid this diversity, votive paintings constitute an important and well defined category.[2] In the region under consideration, votive paintings are well attested from the early 15th century to the present day.[3] Generally of small dimensions, they always have a narrative character.[4] Often they were made by professional artists whose name, in most cases, remains unknown.[5] The votive paintings selected are associated with different Marian sanctuaries located in the Southern part of Switzerland and in the bordering Italian territory.[6] They all date from around the middle of the 19th century.

The first example selected (fig. 2) contains a typical constellation of imagery from the *ex voto* productions under consideration. A young woman lies in bed. The extremely pale colour of her face and the desperation of the man sitting beside the bed point out that she is dying. The scene is depicted in the most intimate area of the house, the bedroom. On the right-hand side there is

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2 Pozzi 1999, 25–26, Didi-Huberman 2006.

3 Gaggioni/Pozzi 1999.

4 Pozzi 1999, 25–26: "The votive painting is neither a symbolic object (like the anatomic *ex voto*) nor an objectified symbol (like a flower or a heart) and therefore it does not speak by means of metonymy or metaphor, but rather by means of narrative through the representation of the whole performance of an action" (26, English translation by Pezzoli-Olgiati). Cf. also Battisti 1986, 35.

5 An exception, in the region under consideration, is represented by the work of Giovanni Antonio Vanoni (1810–1886) whose large production of votive paintings has been reconstructed and published in Museo di Valmaggia (ed.), 1986.

6 Pozzi 1999, 24.

Fig. 1: Wall with different kinds of contemporary *ex voto*. Sanctuary of
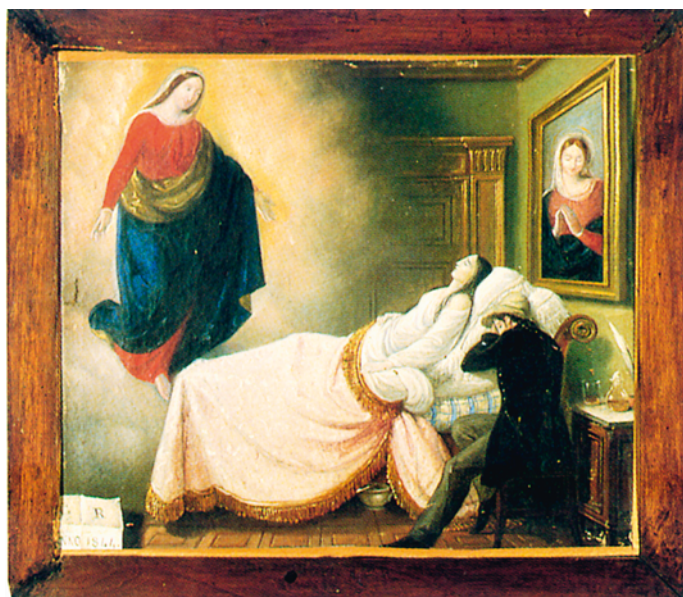Maria Weissenstein, Italy. Photograph by Fabian Perlini.

Fig. 2: *Ex voto* from the oratory of S. Maria Annunciata or Madonna del
Ponte, Arzo (Switzerland), attributed to Rinaldo Antonio (1818–1875),
oil on canvas affixed to a wooden board, 49 × 43.5 cm. *G. R. ANNO 1844.*[7]

7   For a complete inventory of all the preserved *ex voto* in Ticino consult Gaggioni/Pozzi 1999.
    This painting is no. 11 (Gaggioni/Pozzi 1999, 125).

a bedside table with some medicine that evidently did not have the desired effect. Over the bed hangs a painting of a Madonna in an attitude of prayer. This is the self-reflexive element I would like to emphasize here. The painting over the bed is not only a typical element of the bedroom decoration, but it also indicates a strong relationship between the patient and the Madonna del Ponte based on everyday piety.[8] The image within this private space, in the bedroom, is a reminder of the essential function of the visual representations of Mary in this locality. The image accompanies individuals from when they rise in the morning until they retire in the evening; it watches over them during the night and – as is the case in the depicted scene – during severe illness.

All the elements of the scene, referring to everyday life and the immanent world, contrast with the apparition of Mary embedded in a radiant cloud.[9] In the very moment of greatest need, when humans are at the mercy of disgrace, Mary is able to accomplish a miraculous recovery.

In this votive representation each depicted person is performing a specific action. Following the diagonal axis, a contrast between static and dynamic actions can be stressed. On the line from the painting above the bed to the folded paper sheet with the inscription "G.R. ANNO 1844" – this line optically relates the praying Virgin with the ill women – there is no motion at all. The link is given on a semantic level: the praying Mary successfully intercedes for the person who is near death, as the text *grazia ricevuta* attests. On the other diagonal axis, contrasting, dynamic actions are depicted: the desperate, crying man and the apparition of the Madonna sharply distinguish human from divine responses towards illness and death. The first can only express his pain whilst the second portrays the positive effects of transcendent intervention.

Although evidencing some minor variations and different accents, a similar pattern characterises the second selected image (fig. 3). The mortal danger caused by illness is represented by the excessive bleeding of the man lying in bed.[10] A woman in a dark blue dress with covered hair is assisting him. An apparently younger woman (perhaps his wife?) is praying in the midst of the bedroom, kneeling in front of an apparition of the Madonna del Boden. She is sitting on her throne holding the child Jesus on her knees. When compared with the previous example, the elements of the bedroom scene are almost identical. The furniture comprises a bed – as in the previous case with fine sheets and blankets – and a bedside table with a bottle. The image representing the Madonna del Boden is small; she can only be recognised be means of the typical colours of the dress and the red

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8 For a general introduction to visual piety (albeit with particular reference to a North American context) see Morgan 1998, especially 21–58.
9 For a detailed analysis of the motifs of clouds and light see Pozzi 1999, 37–38.
10 On the representation of blood and its dramaturgical connotation see Lombardi Satriani 1986.
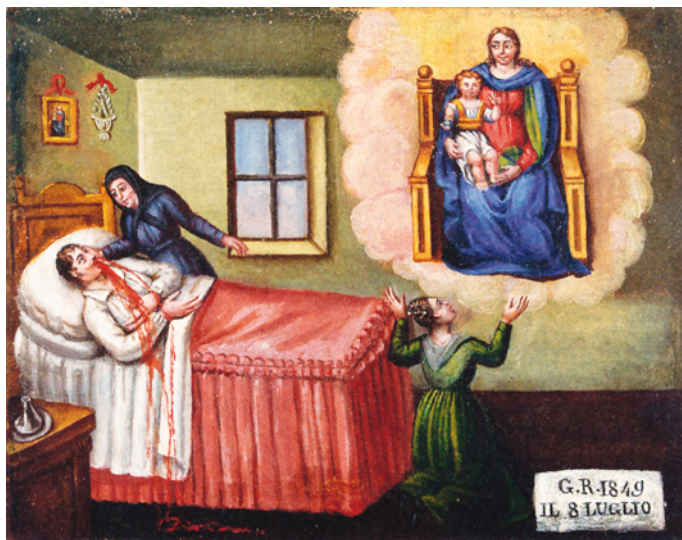
Fig. 3: *Ex voto* from the sanctuary of the Madonna del Boden, Orna-
vasso (Italy), anonymous, oil on canvas, 50.5 × 39.5 cm. *G. R. 1849 IL
8 LUGLIO.*[11]

ribbons that belong to the stereotypical attributes of this particular representa-
tion of Mary (see figs. 4 and 6). Strikingly, the ribbons are missing in the depic-
tion on the right-hand side. Nevertheless, close to the image within the image –
the self-reflexive aspect in this *ex voto* – there is a holy-water font with the ribbon
motif.

   All these elements emphasize the function of the representation of the Ma-
donna del Boden above the bed as an object of devotion. The image is not (only)
a decorative item in the bedroom; it is also a material representation of a relation-
ship with a transcendent figure in front of which the family prays and crosses
itself with holy-water. The painted window with skyline breaks the isolation of the
interior so that the contrast between the internal scene in the bedroom and the
apparition of the Madonna in the clouds is not as radical as in fig. 1.

   In general, the composition in this painting is articulated differently, with more
characters and a particular balance between them. The dying man has open eyes,
both women are active, the one assisting the patient, the other praying. There is
no place for desperation; the scene is depicted from the perspective of a positive
way out of the precarious situation. In this image, eyes and gaze play an impor-
tant role, expressing different relationships between the characters. The woman
in dark clothing looks at the ill man, while the bleeding patient and the kneeling

11 From Museo del Paesaggio (ed.), 2005, 105.