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### BOOK REVIEW: Elina Gertsman, *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015)

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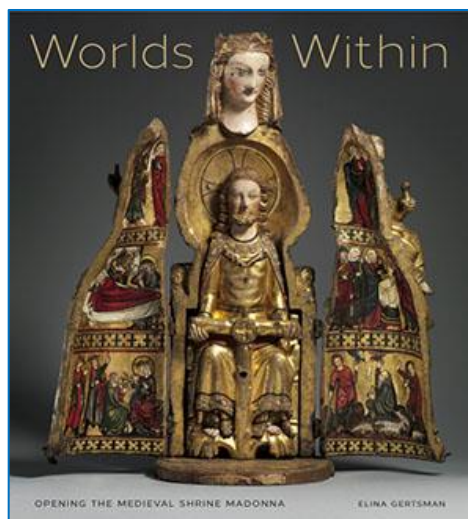
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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Book Review: Elina Gertsman, *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), xvii + 288 pages, 48 color and 106 b&w illustrations, \$79.95 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-271-06401-7.

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Visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's medieval section have the opportunity to confront one of the marvelous creations of the later Middle Ages. The Rhenish Shrine Madonna (**fig. 1**), though diminutive, is eye-catching. At first glance it looks like a many-headed creature framed by colorful bat wings, but upon closer inspection, it turns out to be a statuette of the *Virgo lactans* that has, improbably, been opened to reveal yet more images inside. At its center are the remains of a carved Trinity in the form of the Throne of Mercy, flanked on the wings by six painted Christological scenes. It is at once a surprising, delightful, strange, and fascinating object. Despite the many different perspectives that medieval and modern viewers have held, its very purpose – to disrupt a familiar form, to physically transform, to reveal the hidden – suggests modern viewers' initial reactions of surprise and delight mirror those of medieval viewers. The Met Shrine's relocation in recent years to a more prominent position, near the threshold between two large galleries, signals a renewed modern curiosity for unusual objects like this, indicative of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century fascination with the more challenging aspects of late medieval visual culture. Elina Gertsman's *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine*

*Madonna* meets these challenges head on, seeking to understand the place such objects held in the hearts and minds of medieval Christians.



**Figure 1** Shrine of the Virgin (ca. 1300). Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

*Worlds Within* is an expansive exploration of the world of the Shrine Madonna, examining 38 surviving examples made across western Europe from the late 13<sup>th</sup> through the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The French term for the Shrine Madonna, *vierge ouvrante*, pins down its essential defining feature. Its ability to open and reveal more images contained inside, and the ramifications of these revelations, are the subject of Gertsman's study. The book's focus is the "reception and perception" (p. 10) of these shrines. The possible variations in viewer response allow Gertsman to lead the reader on an epic journey through medieval Mariology, offering an engrossing meditation on the late medieval experience of images that extends far beyond the Shrine Madonnas. Along the way, *Worlds Within* exercises and synthesizes the past 20 or so years of scholarship on medieval art and related fields,

making it a must-read for serious students of this subject. Medieval discourses on the body constitute a central focus, and in so doing the author's investigations fan outward, touching upon a number of topics that have received significant attention in recent years, including medieval theories of vision and other aspects of medical history, the art of memory, performance and theatricality, rituals of pilgrimage (real and imagined), metaphors of stamping/sealing, and the interplay of the senses.

The book begins with a controversy. A late-medieval invective against the Shrine Madonnas that contained Trinitarian imagery, pointed out a theological error: Mary's womb could not possibly contain the entire Trinity, including the Godhead, within it. This complaint, originating with Jean Gerson in 1402, echoed into the 16<sup>th</sup> century and contributed to shifting attitudes toward the shrines over their long lives (and is perhaps already familiar to scholars of medieval sculpture). The tension between the Shrine Madonnas' potential dangers and their relative popularity is part of what makes these objects so intriguing, and their problematic nature impels Gertsman's study. The shrines' unstable status complements the variety of possibilities of signification that they raise, changing depending on the viewing scenario, as these objects were found in a number of settings from parish churches to monasteries, on display for large or small groups or single viewers. This wealth of possibilities enables Gertsman's study to be so wide-ranging, and upon setting the stage with two key examples in the introduction, the author maps out the ensuing pages in terms of a long series of questions – bewildering at first read, but Gertsman's curiosity is infectious. Overall, the book is predicated on the concept of the Shrine Madonna as a generative image, giving birth to new images, ideas, and associations. *Worlds Within* similarly generates further paths of thinking about not only these objects, but about medieval sculpture at large.

In the first chapter, the author examines the Shrine Madonnas with respect to beliefs, practices, and images of late medieval culture. To understand the Shrine Madonnas' place within this world, Gertsman seeks comparanda that share two key linked phenomena

that the shrines offer viewers: revelation through breakage and recognition through the fragmentation of the body. A number of potentially related image categories, including Virgin and Child statues, tabernacles, relic cabinets, and holy sepulchers, fall just short of the criteria, allowing the author to establish the uniqueness of the Shrine Madonnas – the only objects of the time in which container/contained are truly one and the same unit, and which function as both vessels and doors. Nonetheless, she finds these features to be consistent with many aspects of late medieval Christian thought, and many well-known theological metaphors appropriate to the shrines anchor the discussion: Mary as door, as castle, as book, etc. Gertsman stresses as vital to their appeal the Shrine Madonnas' liminality through their potential for physical transformation from one state to another. In particular, she argues that the dual potential for concealment and revelation is crucial to understanding the impact these objects had on viewers.

For example, Gertsman characterizes the shrines as one way of representing the Incarnation. In Chapter 2, she explores the opening of the Shrine Madonna as a manifestation of Mary's "sacred anatomy" (p. 57) on the one hand and the "performance of birth" (p. 100) on the other. She begins by examining medieval interpretations of Mary's painless experience of birth together with images of the Annunciation and Nativity, the latter generally omitting the actual birth. The sedate Nativity iconography finds a striking contrast in the "breaking" body of the Shrine Madonna. Because the *vierge ouvrante* experiences a rupture that disturbs the overall form, the shrines trouble the perception of Mary as a vessel that remained forever uncorrupted. This observation leads to discussion of medieval obstetrics as a possible key to unlocking medieval perspectives on the shrines. The author suggests that a number of Shrine Madonnas' segmented interiors (the Met example included) bear resemblance to late medieval diagrams of the uterus, increasing the sense that opening the shrine constituted a re-creation, a performance, of holy birth. Because the shrine is an active body and a hybrid, comprising multiple bodies through its interior imagery, it can be seen as a grotesque body reflecting

late-medieval ideas of the monstrous fusing of Mary and Jesus, mother and son. Bringing all of these possibilities together, the chapter ends with a meditation on ways in which medieval viewers, and particularly female viewers, might have experienced the opening of a Shrine Madonna somatically.

Having broached the topic of viewers' interactions with the shrines, the third chapter focuses on the shrines' potential for animation through viewers' interventions, placing emphasis once again on performance and above all on play. Observing that the later medieval period "offers a near obsession with such uncanny puppetry" (p. 102) as the Shrine Madonnas offer, Gertsman compares them with other kinds of late-medieval images that served as performative objects within the contexts of ritual or other encounters. Given the relative dearth of texts detailing actual late medieval use of images, much of the discussion in this chapter rests upon the numerous miracle stories that tell of images springing to life or exhibiting traces of life. This entails a rumination on Christian image theory in the west (or rather lack thereof), though Gertsman is particularly concerned with emphasizing the role of sensory experience in these stories, and especially touch (and gaze as a kind of touch), in order to explore the actual physical experiences of the Shrine Madonnas in their medieval settings. Armed with the literary accounts, the author stages several scenarios for the reception of the shrines, which were displayed in a variety of settings before different kinds of viewers engaging in a number of potential interactions. While the expected discussion of nuns' devotions is covered, a welcome addition to this chapter is a discussion of the interaction between image and setting in a parochial context – which to my mind often falls by the wayside – focusing on a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Finnish Shrine Madonna still housed in its original intended location, the church of the Holy Cross in Hattula.

The fourth and final chapter positions the Shrine Madonnas as both sites of memory and instruments of the art of memory. Delving into medieval theories of memory and practices of remembering from the now-classic studies of Mary Carruthers, Gertsman

presents the shrines as ideal objects for structuring memory, serving as both *loci* – spaces in which to store memories – and *imagines agentes* – strong, surprising images standing for memories. Furthermore, the Shrine Madonna provides a *ductus* – a way through itself – that transforms the viewer over time. To that end, another example, the Breton Shrine Madonna of Notre-Dame de Quelven, itself the goal of a real pilgrimage, also provides an opportunity for the author to demonstrate the *ductus* of an imagined pilgrimage – described here as a performance involving both shrine and viewer.

A post-script, “The Excavated Body” takes the “kinesthetic, experiential process of discovery” (p. 181) offered by the Shrine Madonnas into the early modern and modern periods, considering other examples of opening, revelatory female bodies, from a 16<sup>th</sup>-century “lift the flap” book to a tone-deaf Heineken beer ad from 2007. This section brings together associations that readers may have had in the backs of their minds all along – the matryoshka doll set especially comes to mind – and this broader perspective provides a fitting end to the study.

To give chapter summaries outlining this book, however, is to water its contents down unfairly. Gertsman’s vivid language and boundless curiosity bring the reader to many far islands of medieval culture and experience. As such, with all of the ground that the book covers and the sheer number of possibilities that it presents, it is not correct to say that *Worlds Within* is simply a study of Shrine Madonnas. The author’s approach, consistent throughout the book, is to discuss specific shrines not so much as hermetic case studies, but as wellsprings for considering a plethora of ideas that may (or may not) have preoccupied the shrines’ viewers; this further complicates the book’s characterization. Gertsman describes her own approach as “a sustained analysis of the Shrine Madonna as a culturally charged prismatic object, which... filters and refracts discourses...” (p. 109). In the text, objects and ideas often hover near each other, resisting the contact of a definitive conclusion. While the author uses contextual clues to link beliefs and understandings to specific shrines, taking advantage of every scrap of text at her disposal

with regard to specific shrines, she treads lightly in assigning ideas to objects. In this, the book provides a model of a new way of thinking about medieval material culture, arguably more medieval in appearance, that is discursive rather than exclusive. For this reason, *Worlds Within* may be an unsatisfying read for those used to more traditional object-based, art-historical explorations. Nor does every argument stick – for example, Gertsman’s discussion of mirror neurons as a way of understanding bodily empathy, though taken up recently by a number of art historians, is enticing, but premature, given the long way neurologists still have to go in understanding the extent of pre-cognitive mirroring in humans. Along the same lines, the applicability of somaesthetics (coined by Richard Shusterman, not Robert, as he is named in the text) to medieval art still requires more development. That said, for many more readers, myself included, the world of ideas that Gertsman conjures with respect to the shrines is a stimulating space for contemplation. As objects “to think with” (p. 149), the Shrine Madonnas suggest many possibilities of interpretation. It is likely that much of what Gertsman says about them will lead to independent paths of inquiry by others, perhaps applied to some extent to different kinds of images – even if there is no medieval image quite like the Shrine Madonna.

The book itself is a handsome object with an abundance of high-quality images, including many in color. The centerfold is a color photographic re-creation of the Met’s Shrine Madonna folded as a triptych. The reader opens the flaps, performing the rupture of the shrine and participating in the revelation of the interior images. By placing the reader in the role of practitioner, this image cleverly invites the very bodily interaction and sense of play that the author seeks to underscore in the experience of the original objects. This makes for a satisfying complement to the study’s emphasis on movement and physicality (even if the glossy photograph itself feels nothing like the carved and painted wood), inviting further meditation by today’s scholars – just as the Shrine Madonnas themselves did for medieval viewers. 🐾