

8-7-2020

English Alabaster Carvings and their Cultural Contexts (ed.) Zuleika Murat

Rachel Dressler
State University of New York, Albany

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

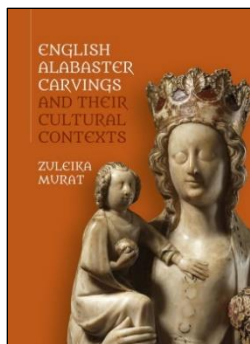
Recommended Citation

Dressler, Rachel. "English Alabaster Carvings and their Cultural Contexts (ed.) Zuleika Murat." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 7, 2 (2020): 183-188. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol7/iss2/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

PEREGRINATIONS

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOLUME VII, NUMBER 2 (AUTUMN 2020)



Review of *English Alabaster Carvings and their Cultural Contexts* (ed.) Zuleika Murat. Boydell & Brewer, 2019, \$99.

RACHEL DRESSLER

State University of New York, Albany

English Alabaster Carvings and their Cultural Contexts edited by Zuleika Murat promises to make a substantial contribution to the study of English alabaster panels and tombs from the later Middle Ages through the mid-17th century. The authors, including major scholars of both alabaster and English medieval sculpture in general, cover a broad range of subjects ranging from the historiography, to materiality, conservation and function and treat examples both in England and abroad. There are eleven essays organized into four main areas: the first three essays lay out the historiography of alabaster studies and the resultant framework and critical issues still governing the field; the next three examine the liturgical and spatial (including geographical) context for alabaster panels; these are followed by three pertaining to curatorial and conservation approaches to alabaster; and, finally, there are three chapters concerned with English alabaster tomb production in the later medieval and early Modern periods. In addition to the essays there is a substantial editor's introduction and an extensive bibliography. The volume is adequately illustrated with twelve color plates, 92 black and white photographs, and three tables.

As stated in the Introduction, the intent of this volume is to consider alabaster sculptures within their social, cultural, intellectual, and devotional context and employ several novel points of view in doing so.¹ As the editor details in her introduction, reinforced by Nigel Ramsay's essay, the study of English alabasters is rooted in antiquarianism. While a significant find was made in the 18th century, it was really members of the Society of Antiquaries, specifically Sir William St. John Hope, Edward Prior, and Philip Nelson, collectors as well as antiquarians with their concern for classifying and dating, who set the tone for future alabaster studies. His essay is really a biographical sketch of three men he considers to be the founding "fathers" of English

¹ Zuleika Murat (ed.), *English Alabaster Carvings and their Cultural Contexts* (Boydell & Brewer, 2019), p. 2.

alabaster studies: Sir William Henry St. John Hope, Philip Nelson, and Walter Leo Hildburgh. He credits these collector-antiquarians with two fundamental myths about alabasters: they all emerged from Nottingham workshops and they were products of a more industrial approach to object-making. The latter has resulted in the relative isolation of alabaster sculptures from the mainstream of medieval art history and consigned them to the category of popular rather than high art.

Ramsay ends his contribution to this book with suggestions for further areas of research, among them the need for greater attention to high-status patrons on the Continent, the relationship between alabaster panels set into tomb chests and the effigies lying above them, the devotional context for alabaster figures and panels, and finally inquiries as to why the material eventually lost popularity.

Aleksandra Lipinska traces the various meanings assigned to alabaster that enhanced its prestige as a material for sculpture. She begins by examining the historical association between marble and alabaster as a basis for the latter's prestige, including in this discussion ancient and medieval lapidary explanations found in Pliny, Isidore of Seville, and Albertus Magnus. Lipinska also explores theological interpretations including biblical references to the alabaster ointment box used by the Holy Women, and the association between the stone and human flesh sanctified by faith. It was this meaning that ultimately led to alabaster's association with the carnal body, most notably the female body, in the early modern period. Lipinska concludes her historical survey with 20th-century sculptors such as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a proponent of the direct carving movement, and Jacob Epstein in whose hands alabaster comes to signify not the body, but flesh itself. Throughout, Lipinska argues that these historical understandings accruing to the material become activated under particular historical and cultural contexts.

Luca Palozzi concentrates in part, on the appeal of English alabaster carvings outside of England, in particular Italy, which he contends lay in its material qualities familiar from ancient and medieval discourses. His secondary argument concerns the overlap of certain aesthetic and material characteristics among alabaster and other materials such as marble, leading viewers to sometimes mistake one material for the other, an issue Lipinska also explores. Palozzi maintains that modern art historians have erred in insisting that leading Italian sculptors such as Giovanni Pisano only worked in marble when observations demonstrate his and others' carving of alabaster, onyx, and other materials.

Philip Weller and Andrew Kirkman's observations about the interplay between alabaster statues or altarpiece panels and liturgical music performances such as antiphons opens up a potentially fascinating new dimension of alabaster studies. Generally, the authors argue for a correspondence between themed masses and the iconographic emphases of surviving English alabaster panels and altarpieces. Indeed, the entire essay works on arguing for the parallels between alabaster works and

liturgical music not only in iconography, but also in presentational genres, vernacular versus Latin, private versus more public, and geographical spread of English alabasters and liturgical compositions. According to the authors, such parallels allow for a certain degree of speculation about how musical performance and alabaster images interacted within devotional spaces.

The editor's own contribution to the volume argues for the importance of a contextualizing approach to the study of alabaster altarpieces since these works were intended as part of an overall environment involving architecture and painting as well. Murat uses the Novalesa polyptych as a case study. As the author states, the polyptych has been split up with some fragments lost, and Murat focuses on reconstructing the work for the first part of her chapter. She achieves her goal using the remaining fragments dispersed among both private and museum collections. She then dates the reconstructed altarpiece by locating it within a typology of other English-made alabaster altarpieces that found their way to the continent. Her essay concludes with speculation concerning the altarpiece's original spatial context within the abbey church of Novalesa and the patronage of the powerful Provana family, wealthy merchants who supplied the abbey with many of its abbots.

Jennifer Alexander's chapter addresses the production and market for alabaster effigial monuments and altarpieces, or tables in the medieval county of Lincolnshire. The author focuses on the retable from Scartho, one of the very few almost complete alabaster altarpieces to survive the Middle Ages and she gives an extensive account of the finding of the various tables belonging to the retable along with a detailed description of their appearance. In addition, Alexander examines documentary sources such as churchwarden accounts, the 1566 Commissioners' Report, and antiquarian writings for the production and popularity of alabaster works in this county. The author concludes that the Lincolnshire quarries did not produce much in the way of effigial monuments possibly due the availability of high-quality freestone for tombs, and that the production of tables was concentrated in two areas: one in the south of the county and the other in the north.

In their essay, Claire Blakey, Rachel King and Michaela Zöschg focus on three St. John's Heads in Tabernacles from the Burrell Collection in the Glasgow Museums. Their intent is to understand William Burrell's motivations in acquiring the works and to restore some sense of their use as devotional objects. Using various accounts from the time, the three authors attempt to reconstruct the methods by which Sir William acquired each of the tabernacles and conclude that in doing so he was tacitly challenging the entrenched power and collecting zeal of major museums, private collectors, and the Society of Antiquaries at the time. In addition, the authors examine the tabernacles' iconography and decorative motifs as part of their project of contextualizing these works within a devotional context. In this way, the authors hope to return to them an agency long neglected in scholarship. The following thorough

conservation study by Sophie Philipps and Stephanie de Roemer thorough conservation study of the three Burrell Collection tabernacles makes a nice follow up to this chapter.

Jon Bayliss's essay concentrates on the last phase of English alabaster production, in particular, tombs produced in the decade between 1550 and 1660. By the 15th century, alabaster tomb production was concentrated in alabaster-producing areas of the Midlands and dominated by English sculptors, but after 1550 the picture changed thanks to an influx of sculptors from the Continent. The author traces the work of Netherlandish sculptors who immigrated to England. Several of the figures he discusses established family dynasties with sons and grandsons following in the profession. Over time, these artists helped make London a major center for alabaster tomb production

Kim Woods' focus is a patron group frequently overlooked in scholarship on English alabaster tombs: merchants. Alabaster effigial tombs, a rare commission for members of the merchant class in later medieval England. She presents a detailed study of the formal and iconographic characteristics of the surviving corpus of alabaster merchant tombs as well as what can be gleaned from archival and other evidence of the circumstances of commission and production. Woods' main concern is an explanation for the relative paucity of merchant alabaster tombs and her study of the tiny group that survives suggests that the commissions were motivated by desire to emulate and/or compete with their social peers and betters.

The tiered alabaster tomb of Alice de la Pole is the subject of the final essay in the book, that by Christina Welch. With its *en vie* effigy above and its *transi* effigy below, the monument is unique in the corpus of alabaster tombs. The cadaver figure is meant to be seen as if in a liminal state between life and death, still sentient and suffering the pains of Purgatory while imploring the saints' mercy. It also displays an anatomical accuracy indicative of the sculptors' access to real bodies, living and dead, as study tools. The tomb thus represents an aspect of English medical history not previously acknowledged in scholarship.

The editor's intention to place English alabaster carvings in their cultural contexts with these essays is an admirable undertaking, one which this volume achieves to a limited extent. All of the chapters make valuable contributions to our understanding of this significant artistic industry in later medieval England, whether it is recognizing the foundational figures and parameters that still shape the field today, the meanings accruing to the material itself, little-studied patronage groups, important collectors' motivations in acquiring works, or more in-depth examinations of individual works and their devotional functions, to name a few of the areas covered.

It is in the claim of new approaches to the subject that this volume falls short. There is not that much evidence in the collection as a whole of the many theoretical analyses of material culture that have had such a major impact on the study of medieval visual culture going back several decades now whether it be critical theories, feminist critiques, or even the more recent turn toward visibility, materiality, or eco-criticism.

Indeed, the editor's statement concerning the "clever use of dark pigments to mark the faces of evil figures" (p. 145) suggests an unfortunate lack of awareness of critical race issues that have featured quite prominently in recent scholarly discourse. Instead, many authors rely on what at one time were the standard approaches in art history: historiography, formal analysis, iconographic interpretation or patronage studies. That is not to say that recent methodologies are completely absent from this volume. There are four essays which come closest to fulfilling the stated aim of innovative approaches: those by Lipinska, Woods, Weller and Kirkman, and Welch.

Both Lipinska and Woods address alabaster as material in line with recent art-historical interest in the materiality of medieval art. The former's survey of the meanings acquired by the stone over the centuries covers familiar ground,² but the connection she makes to it as surrogate for the female body is intriguing. Equally interesting is the connections she makes between the medieval understanding and use of the material and its employment by modern sculptors. Materiality also informs Woods' discussion of merchant class patronage. Her suggestion that the choice of alabaster was in part motivated by concerns over status and a desire to emulate one's "betters" grants this sculptural medium an agency beyond the practical issues of its relative availability in England and its suitability for carving.

An interdisciplinary approach characterizes Weller and Kirkman's contribution, which sets out an ambitious agenda: the interplay of music, liturgical and devotional performance and alabaster cult images. Unfortunately, the argument is hampered by the lack of concrete examples except that of St. Mary's Altar, Guild Church of St. John the Baptist, Babelak, in Coventry. Acknowledging this difficulty, the authors attempt to parallel alabasters, both single figures and altarpieces, to the structure of liturgical chants. In the end, however, the musical analysis dominates the essay and the reader questions why the alabaster parallel is necessary since the same Marian iconographic themes are to be found in scriptures. One gets the impression that the authors were more interested in the musical forms than alabaster devotional carvings, the discussion of which comes off as an afterthought.

Welch's essay employs familiar methodologies such as iconography and biography with a fascinating and disturbing account of what actually happens to the body after death. The author uses this information to great effect in order to analyze the Alice de la Pole's cadaver effigy as representing her in a liminal state between life and death. The author further argues that Alice has had herself depicted as if suffering in

² See my articles "Identity, Status and Material: Medieval Alabaster Effigies in England," *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 5,2 (2015): 65-96 and "Alabaster and Agency: The Tomb of Edward II in Gloucester Cathedral," *Mediaevalia: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Medieval Studies Worldwide*, 40 (2019): 107-138.

Purgatory while appealing to Saints John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene painted above her emaciated figure. The essay concludes with a fascinating contention that Alice's cadaver effigy evidences the hitherto unacknowledged artistic practice of empirical observation on the part of late-medieval English carvers. Welch is more successful in supporting her arguments than are Weller and Kirkman, but both suggest that some new directions in alabaster studies are both possible and desirable. 🐼