

Hans Belting

A Bridge to Many Romes

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Dedicating a special issue of *Convivium* to mark Hans Belting's eightieth birthday is an altogether natural gesture. Few scholars have contributed as profoundly as he has to the mandate articulated in the new journal's subtitle: "Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean". Fewer still have realized the fledgling periodical's goal of extending art history into such allied fields as anthropology, literature, and history – from the Early Christian period to the sixteenth century. Even a cursory review of the bibliography printed at the end of this volume confirms the overlap between Hans Belting's prodigious production with *Convivium's* aspirations. His work covers the map encompassed by the journal, from the Caucasus to Constantinople to Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Germany; and, setting aside the contributions to modern art, photography, new media and theory, his proceeds along more or less the same development *Convivium* embraces – from the Justinianic period through the eighth and ninth centuries, into the High Middle Ages and beyond as far as the Reformation. Challenging many assumptions underlying the ways scholars consider the basic materials, furthermore, Hans Belting has extended a medievalist's sensibility to materiality, reception, and function and also to works produced by Jan van Eyck, Giovanni Bellini and Hieronymus Bosch, anticipating in this way *Convivium's* call to broaden the definition of the history of art and to examine "the genesis and life of art-historical studies" by attending to historiography as in his highly influential synthesis *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*. Journal and scholar are a perfect fit.

Moreover, like *Convivium*, Hans Belting does not limit his purview to Europe. His revolutionary comparison of the reception of Alhazen's optical theories in Islam and Italy in *Florenz und Baghdad*, to cite the most important of many

examples, gives due weight to both Christian and Moslem cultures in a manner that provides a paradigm for understanding the very foundations of the methods art historians use for understanding the relationship of theoretic writings to artistic manifestations. And while Hans Belting probes the ways in which ideas are received differently, he also tracks the real exchanges that contributed to medieval art, the movement of materials, models, objects, and persons. Not surprising, he has been a leader in the new global art history.

A scholar who has consistently rejected all narrow definitions of the discipline of art history while applying the highest standards of research to each project he has undertaken, Hans Belting thus embodies *Convivium's* own aspirations; his enormous range of interests demonstrates the very possibility that the study of medieval art need not be balkanized into subspecialties, even as its methods rely increasingly on specialized knowledge and theoretical reach. His unlimited imagination and intelligence, which has prompted and inspired so many admirers to think and work in new modes – and to take risks – provides a model for this journal.

This special issue is not a *Festschrift*. Taking as its principle a theme that Hans Belting has considered in diverse aspects, it constitutes a modest but impassioned tribute to a great scholar who has been both a mirror for self-examination in the field and a beacon of promise for future study of medieval art history. Moreover, the question of “Many Romes” seemed to the editors not only to acknowledge Hans Belting’s innumerable and diverse contributions to the history of medieval art (and more than that as well) but also to be a fertile subject for further consideration within *Convivium's* mandate.

To judge from the preserved evidence, Rome was probably the nucleus of artistic production during the medieval millennium. Both models and ideas emanated from the Eternal City within the Mediterranean basin and throughout continental Europe; and, in a reverse process, like a sponge, the “*Urbs*” absorbed impulses flowing into it from the “*Orbis*”. How important Rome was might be understood through the heated debate about Late Antique art conducted more than a century ago by Alois Riegel and Josef Strzygowski. But one fact is certain: if not all roads, certainly many, led to the City, skirted it, crossed it, or emanated from it.

This volume of *Convivium* proceeds from this, to a certain extent, obvious observation with the goal of focusing on one of the crucial aspects of the myth of Rome, namely, the ways in which the imagined and physical characteristics were intentionally engaged to construct culture, power, and devotion throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. From Kiev to Avignon to Protestant Bohemia, to Assisi, and obviously to the Second Rome, Constantinople, the Eternal City became a model, explicit or implicit, for generations of artists and intellectuals. The name or simply the myth engendered associations that provided a first sketch of what was to become “Europe”. An example not treated in this volume but worth mentioning is the “Third Rome” of Moscow. Conceived in the sixteenth century and becoming a central concept in the nineteenth, it clarifies one major issue, namely, that the imaginary Rome – like the real one – was a bridge between diverse worlds and cultures. Referring to the ancient *Urbs*’s power, but also simply the awareness of it, became a means for constructing a stable if polymorphous space that was not only very real but also where the synthesis of numerous elements was an aspect of self-identity. In turn, this special issue of *Convivium* also treats how Rome assimilated stimuli and ideas from the East and northern Africa to construct itself as the capital of the world. It was not by chance that, in this dialogue, Rome absorbed at least as much as it inspired.

At the same time, the cultural interchanges at the center of this volume also serve as a potent metaphor for describing the role that Hans Belting has had in the study of art history and also for *Convivium* itself: a bridge between diverse worlds and consistently driven through dialogue. The hope is that the volume might become a vehicle for reflection on how the medieval worlds constructed themselves and interacted with one another in a reciprocal process as a way of paying tribute to one of the most significant scholars of medieval interchange, interaction, and dialogue. In the name of the editorial boards of *Convivium*, faithful to Central European traditions – themselves a world bridging worlds – it is a song of *Živijó* to Hans Belting in thanks for all he has given and continues to give to the history of art.

