



BESONDERS/EXEMPLARISCH **Morphomatische Fallstudien zu Biographie und Portrait**

Abstract

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The Holy Man as Exemplar: Principles of Pictorial Hagiographies in the Late Middle Ages

This paper will consider the pictorial representation of holy lives in the late medieval period. It will rely on visual material drawn from three main groups of images: 1) *vita* icons, whereby a central portrait of a saint is surrounded by narrative scenes of his/her life; 2) large painted crosses which show bands of narrative scenes flanking the body of Christ; and 3) *Vierges ouvrantes*, i.e. carved ivory reliefs of the Virgin, which, when opened, reveal episodes of the life of Christ. What will interest me in these different formats is the principle of arrangement of narrative scenes. I will suggest that the chronology of events is frequently broken in order to place special significance on a certain episode or/and to draw correspondences and comparisons or/and oppositions and contrasts. For instance, a narrative scene takes centre stage in a *vita* icon (i.e. replaces the usual portrait of the saint), thus making this particular episode prominent and significance-laden. In this way, pictorial hagiography becomes much more than the visual illustration of a hagiographical text, which it can extend, conflate, alter and even contradict. The aim of this paper will be to analyze various principles of pictorial narrative, whereby a holy man is put forward as an exemplar of the Christian life through specifically visual means. My methodology will rely, in part, on Russian Formalist literary theory. In the 1920s and 1930s, Russian Formalists drew a distinction between “fable”, i.e. the temporal-causal sequence of events that make up a story and “sjuzet” (“plot” in English), i.e. the artistically-imposed order of motifs (for example Tomashevsky, *Teoriia literature* [Theory of Literature], Leningrad 1931). This distinction is relevant to my own discussion of pictorial hagiography, a topic which has attracted some scholarly attention in the last several decades but remains still understudied.

