Materiality and the Religious Impulse
Week 2: Idolatry and iconoclasm
Lecture notes

Concepts to review:
Mass
Incarnation (as represented in the mass, vs. St. Gregory images)
Typology
Presentation and representation (Freedberg p. 28)

Reminder: part of the purpose of my lectures is to help provide context for the reading. You should take notes on page numbers referenced and have your books with you.

The Judaic tradition
As Lisa explained last week, one reason for the absence of Christian imagery in the first several centuries of Christian practice may be the ongoing influence of the Jewish tradition, which was largely aniconic (without idols or icons). A brief glimpse at the Old Testament reveals the complexity of this inheritance, however.

As Freedberg says, in his typically strident fashion: "The idea of a culture without material images runs counter to both experience and history." (59) [for more on typology, see pp. 150 and 158 in John of Damascus]

<u>Exodus 20:4-6</u>
You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand {generations} of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Two important events in the life of Moses, the great leader of the Jewish exile, demonstrate the complexity of the Old Testament's relationship with images, despite the apparent transparency of the commandment.

Exodus 32:4 describes the golden calf (SLIDE: POUSSIN, ADORATION OF THE GOLDEN CALF), a cult image created by the Israelites during Moses's journey to Mount Sinai. The cow was an object of veneration in Egypt. When God alerted Moses that Aaron had made the people a golden calf and that they were worshipping it, Moses descended from the mountain, burned the calf in the fire, ground it to powder, and forced the Jews to drink it. The chapter ends by saying that the Jews were punished by the plague (among other things) for their flirtation with idolatry.

In Numbers 21:5-9, however, Moses himself made an idol. (SLIDE: VAN DYCK, BRAZEN SERPENT) The Jews were suffering from poisonous snake bites, and God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and to place it upon a pole. Those who looked on the serpent were cured of their snake bites.

These stories from the bible demonstrate the ongoing usefulness of images, but also the central question of authority: it matters who's making the image. It also matters what you do with it: ostensibly, the brazen serpent was a tool, not an idol to be venerated. Intriguingly, both the serpent and the calf are representations of the natural world, and not anthropomorphic. John of Damascus calls attention to the juxtaposition of the calf and the serpent on pp. 116, among other places.

Why images

Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence:*

"The image was the representative or symbol of something that could be experienced only indirectly in the present, namely the former and future presence of God in the life of humankind. An image shared with its beholder a present in which only a little of the divine activity was visible. At the same time, the image reached into the immediate experience of God in past history and likewise ahead to a promised time to come." (10-11)

This quotation give us at least two ways of re-thinking the complicated relationship between Christianity and time. I've already suggested that the New Testament, and Christ in particular, exist in a typological relationship to the Old Testament. I also suggested that the mass is typologically related to the crucifixion. Icons work in a similar fashion. We can think of them as working on two axes. 1) capturing Christian history 2) material/immaterial (in the present moment, getting us to the divine).

A more philosophical argument on behalf of images was put forward by medieval theologians, inspired by neo-Platonic systems of thought:

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74 CE): "It is natural that we attain the intelligible through the sensible because all our knowledge derives from our senses." (cf. John 113)

Plato speaks of worldly forms and ideal forms: one of the tenets of neo-platonism (the humanist rediscovery of Plato) was that one could use worldly forms (including love for one's mistress) to access divine forms (love of god). This is the central premise of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Signifier and signified

(see Freedberg, p. 12)

Another way of thinking about the relationship between material and divine forms is to consider the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), inventor of modern semiotic theory. The premise of this theory is that we make our own meaning in the world through linguistic signs. Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects, but such things have <u>no intrinsic meaning</u> and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something - referring to or standing for something other than itself. We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar conventions.

Key terms:
* a 'signifier' (signifiant) - the form which the sign takes; and
* the 'signified' (signifié) - the concept it represents.

Roughly speaking, signifier + signified = sign. Or, in other words, a sign is a recognizable combination of a signifier with a particular signified.

If we take a linguistic example, the word 'Open' (when it is invested with meaning by someone who encounters it on a shop doorway) is a sign consisting of:

* a signifier: the word open;
* a signified concept: that the shop is open for business.

The same signifier (the word 'open') could stand for a different signified (and thus be a different sign) if it were on a push-button inside a lift ('push to open door'). Similarly, many signifiers could stand for the concept 'open' (for instance, on top of a packing carton, a small outline of a box with an open flap for 'open this end') - again, with each unique pairing constituting a different sign.

Consider another signifier, the icthus (the fish symbol that derives from the anagram Lisa discussed last week). This is a signifier that implicitly references the linguistic anagram, and thus signifies Christ.

But what happens when we combine it with another signifier? It results in an entirely different sign. (SLIDE: DARWIN FISH)

The cross is a signifier that stems from a particular historical and theological narrative. Intriguingly, even the cross without the body of Christ on it points to the crucifixion, and thus to a whole series of Christian beliefs and values. (cf John p. 132) But the very ambiguity of the signifier results in a series of debates about the representation of God.

The ideas I raised last week about the mystery of the transubstantiation help further elucidate this tension. As Lisa has suggested, one way of thinking about iconoclasm is to say that the presence of Christ in the host is in effect a super-presence, and that all other evocations or manifestations of the sacred—such as relics and images—are dim and feeble by comparison."

On the other hand, the Byzantine icon was thought to embody the divine noumenos, the presence of Christ in the same way the mass did. But how could they do so if they were made by human hands? (you could make the same argument about the communion wafer; it's the act of consecration that makes it sacred, not the materials -- see Freedberg).

The problem with images and worship:

This conflict, along with existing tensions around the second commandment and the Mosaic tradition, eventually led to the first example of wide spread destruction of images.

Timeline
2nd-3rd century: first Christian images begin to appear
4th century: Constantine solidifies the status of Christians in the Roman empire, eventually leading to a new era known as the Byzantine (meanwhile, council of Nicea attempts to resolve conflicts over the status of Christ's divinity)
8th century: the first iconoclastic controversy begins; images of Christ are defaced or torn down
787: Second council of Nicea officially re-authorizes the production and use of icons, temporarily ending the iconoclastic controversy
[for aftermath, see Cormack]

The events started in 726 with what was apparently an edict against images and with the destruction of the icon of Christ on the palace gate, which caused Patriarch Germanus, an advocate of images, to resign in 730. Emperor Leo III, who was born in the Syrian hinterland, apparently represented the majority of the army when he initiated iconoclasm. His actions have also been attributed to his desire to break with the centrifugal forces of diverse cultures and local authorities.

According to Hans Belting: "such images possessed charismatic powers that could turn against church institutions as long as they were excluded from such institutions. They protected minorities and became advocates of the people, since by their nature they stood outside the hierarchy. They spoke without the church's mediation, with a voice directly from heaven, against which any official authority was powerless."

He also points out that icons had originally been used in military campaigns against Arab enemies, and it was only after they failed to "work" in this context that the imperial officials started to really worry about the problem of idolatry.

Apart from these political considerations, and the arguments about Christ's divinity (remember Arian vs. Athanasius?), there were specific complaints about icons:

1) We're spending too much money:
"Men's eyes are feasted with relics cased in gold, and their purse strings are loosed. . . . the Church is resplendent in her walls, beggarly in her poor; she clothes her stones in gold and leaves her sons naked."

2) We can't get to the divine anyway:
Origen: "[what reasonable man can keep from smiling at these heathens who] imagine that by gazing upon these material things they can ascend from the visible symbol to that which is spiritual and immaterial?"

3) We mistake the signifier for the signified:
Eustache Deschamps (14th c. poet)
"For the work [of imagery] is a pleasing shape; the painting thereof, whence I complain, and the beauty of the shining gold, make many inconstant folk to believe that these are gods for certain; and, in their foolish thoughts, they serve these images which stand around in the churches, wherein we place too many of them. This is very ill done; in brief words, we should not have such images." (375)

Here are some of the rebuttals, which you'll recognize from John of Damascus

1) Judaic law doesn't apply to us, we're too spiritually sophisticated

2) Icons are like books for the illiterate.
Saint Gregory (540-604 CE): "To adore images is one thing; to teach with their help what should be adored is another. What Scripture is to the educated, images are to the ignorant, who see through them what they must accept; they read in them what they cannot read in books."

3) Inappropriate worship is the problem, not the creation of images. The problem is not whether scripture condemns idolatry but what it meant by idolatry when scripture condemns it.

4) We're not worshipping the material thing, we're worshipping what John of Damascus calls the <u>archetype</u>. (152, among other places) Here's a beautiful formulation of this idea from Belting: 'the material image-to sum up the aesthetics of the time-is in itself lifeless, but in the face of the person depicted it catches the same life that lives in a person's body like a guest.' (214)

With that in mind, it's worth separating out at least two distinct forms of worship:
Latria: worship due to god alone
Dulia/proskynesis: the respect or service owed to the creature

Thomas Aquinas argued, for instance, that "the same reverence should be paid to the image of Christ, as to Christ himself. Since therefore Christ ought to be worshipped with the adoration of latria [the adoration paid to god] it follows that his image should be worshipped with the adoration of latria."

[why is this important?]

It's also worth thinking about the material of the image itself: is it flat or two dimensional? How might you interact with these two images differently? [SLIDE: BYZANTINE STATUE, EARLY MEDIEVAL ICON PAINTING]

Madonna and Child
Berlinghiero (Italian, Lucca, active by 1228, died by 1236)
Tempera on wood, gold ground; Overall: 31 5/8 x 21 1/8 in. (80.3 x 53.7 cm); Painted surface: 30 x 19 1/2 in. (76.2 x 49.5 cm)
Gift of Irma N. Straus, 1960 (60.173)

Berlinghiero was always open to Byzantine influence, and this Madonna is of the Byzantine type known as the Hodegetria, in which the Madonna points to the Child as the way to salvation.

Icon with the Virgin and Child, carved mid-10th–11th century
Byzantine; Probably made in Constantinople

Ivory; 9 3/16 x 2 3/4 x 1/2 in. (23.4 x 7 x 1.3 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.103)

This statue follows a very widespread Byzantine image type called the Virgin Hodegetria ("she who guides"), in which the Virgin holds the Christ Child on her left arm. It is named after an icon from the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople that was the original model for the type. The Virgin Hodegetria was an icon attributed to the brush of the Apostle Luke. Guides at the Hodegon Monastery were trained to assist the blind to use a miraculous spring that was believed to restore sight.

This ivory portrays the iconography of its famous prototype: the Virgin holds Christ in her right hand while making a gesture toward him, indicating that he is the "way" to salvation. The Virgin's gesture makes her our "guide" to salvation and explains the appellation. Christ appears in a chiton and himation, while holding a rotulus, attributes of a classical philosopher that were adopted from Hellenistic art. Christ is represented not as an infant, but rather as the Logos, the eternal Word. The carving emphasizes the elongated proportions of the figures and is overall restrained and refined.

Over time, some ivory icons experienced wear and tear, subsequently leading to their reconfiguration. Because Byzantine ivory carvers cut deeply into the panels to create images in high relief, the background area is thin and prone to breakage. In the case of the icon illustrated here, the image was excised from the panel to create a statuette; part of the original background can still be seen in the area between the head of Christ and his mother's left shoulder. This object served a double function: an indentation on the back indicates that it was also used as a reliquary. It is not certain whether it served this purpose from the time it was carved or only after it was detached from its ivory matrix.

What about this one [SLIDE: HEAD OF CHRIST]

is a good example of what James Bernauer calls, an object of "art-faith". It is neither simply an aesthetic object or simply a devotional object. In part because it moves, and is sculptural, it calls attention to the devotional uses to which it was put.

The image made without human hands
[SLIDE: VERONICA]

I want to return to the question of the Veronica icon and talk a bit about why it's so important that these things are taking to be "real" copies of objects that are specifically not "art". A cool way to think about this: As Christ born from no semen, icon born from no artist. But of course there is an artist involved, and the case of Christ there's Mary.

I also want to talk about the functionality of a narrative image (like St. Gregory) vs. an icon

"his body in the flesh thus provides the likeness of God the invisible"

But what happens when we start making art rather than icons? There are several beautiful images of Veronica made by late medieval painters.

[SLIDE: MEMLING (c. 1483) AND VERONICA MASTER (c. 1420)]
What do these two images do to the dichotomy between presentation and representation?

[SLIDE: DURER (1513)]
What about this one?
Durer: "I have done a good Veronica in oil, worth twelve guilders. I gave it to Francisco, the agent in Portugal. I then painted another Veronica in oil, better than the first, and gave it to the agent Brandan in Portugal."

Durer version (Belting: "Christ bears the crown of thorns on his head and traces of his suffering on his face. The cloth is held not by Veronica but by angels, who present it as a legacy from heaven to the earthly church. The artist thus succeeds in combining the historicity of the Passion, the material proof of Christ's biography, with the Divine Face, which even the angels are unable to view directly." (222)

[SLIDE: VAN EYCK (1440]
"Van Eyck's view, in which portrait and icon were one and the same, is a surprising conclusion that he drew from the private image. With the recent scheme of the individual portrait, the 'holy portrait' offers Christ for a private viewpoint. The immobile frontality preserves the aura of the icon, but the close-up simulates the physical appearance of a living person sitting in an interior whose windows are reflected in Jesus' eyes. In the competition between the genres, two separate functions of the picture have been reconciled. Contemporaries fully accepted van Eyck's 'modern icon' as a devotional image, to which the many replicas attest.'"

Intriguingly, in this case, we're not even sure it's really by Van Eyck.

CF. Freedberg, 52 (he implicitly talks about this as an image that follows you with its eyes. What would that mean?)

Final thoughts: 2 quotations to ponder:

John Ruskin (19th century art critic): "The religious passion is nearly always vividest when the art is weakest; and the technical skill reaches its deliberate splendor only when the ecstasy which gave it birth has passed away forever." (328)

Margaret Aston (20th century historian): "Symbolic destruction, of which the iconoclasts offer so many examples, is the obverse (and perhaps necessary counterpart) of the creative image-making faculty that distinguishes man. . . One attacks the physical object to destroy the spiritual being that resides in it—or the system of belief to which it belongs. As long as people have believed in gods and fashioned stones in their honor, stone-breaking has held the capacity to effect a spiritual end. Breaking the holy image amounted to breaking a holy power.

Our list of criteria for evaluating the materiality and reception of images:

Size
Dimensionality
Use of color/other sensual materials
Medium/history of that medium
Availability/accessibility
Realism
Distance/perspective
Narrative quality (or lack thereof)

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Also: vis a vis reception:
Who gives the work value? What type of actions or exchanges lend it that value?