

Medieval City, Modern Nostalgia: Jerusalem, 1000–1400

“Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People under Heaven,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 26 September 2016–8 January 2017.

Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People under Heaven, ed. Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb. xvi + 299 pages, notes, bibliography, index, and photography credits to 336. \$75.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Alex Winder

The “Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People under Heaven” exhibition that ran from autumn 2016 to early 2017 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York embodied in many aspects the atmosphere of Jerusalem: from the multilingual, multicultural, and multi-religious demographics of those whose paths cross the city; to the perpetual twilight that bathes the people, animals, and commercial goods in the Old City’s covered streets and markets; to the ever present, but often unacknowledged, specter of violence that hangs heavily over the most mundane moments. This exhibition thus produces a *feeling* of Jerusalem inflected with a nebulous nostalgia for diversity and inclusivity implicitly contrasted with an equally vague and unexplored present-day conflict. This uneasy anti-politics haunts what is otherwise an enlightening and at times transportive exploration, through a vast and varied collection of objects, texts, and images from and about Jerusalem (accompanied at times by video interviews with contemporary scholars and citizens), of the city’s spiritual and material significance from 1000 to 1400 CE, and serves as an answer of sorts to the question posed by the curators, Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb, in their introduction to the exhibition catalog: “Suppose we set aside political history as a means to define cultural history so that we could better explore the variety, richness, continuities, and interconnectivity of the city, its people, and its art?” (5–6).

Although the museum’s exhibition closed on 8 January 2017, much of the material is accessible online on the Met’s website (www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2016/jerusalem) and its extensive catalogue, which includes eighteens essays by scholars of Jerusalem and thematic introductions by Boehm and Holcomb, in addition to 354 illustrations of which 149 are images of exhibition objects.

Rather than a chronological approach, or one that divides material according to faith community, the curators chose six major themes that link the worldly to the sublime: the Pulse of Trade and Tourism; the Diversity of Peoples; the Air of Holiness; the Drumbeats of Holy War; the Generosity of Patrons; and the Promise of Eternity. In the exhibition, each of these themes was displayed in a separate gallery; in the catalog, the curators' more lengthy introductions to each theme are supplemented by short essays penned by leading scholars on the medieval world.

The Pulse of Trade and Tourism gallery includes objects related to the circulation of goods and people in and through Jerusalem, motivated by commerce and faith. These include the instruments, including astrolabes inscribed in Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Latin, that allowed travelers to make their way to the city and the surrounding region, and a number of maps that were intended both to aid and document travel. Gold coins, jewelry and adornments, textiles, and numerous plates, bowls, and vessels of metal, ceramic, and glass testify to Jerusalem's significance as a site of production, exchange, and export. Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, in her essay in the exhibition catalog, points to documents from the Geniza in Cairo, legal documents discovered in the Haram al-Sharif, and the estate inventory of Eudes, Count of Nevers in Burgundy (an upper-class thirteenth-century Crusader) in order to elaborate on the kinds of domestic goods bought, sold, and inherited in Jerusalem in this period. Although much of the gallery (and the exhibition more generally) tend to focus on the Mediterranean world, a beautiful Ming-inspired vase, likely produced in Cairo or Damascus, and cotton prints from India's Gujarat region also illuminate the significant networks that extended eastward from the Holy Land toward Asia.

The didactic label at the gallery entrance stresses commerce as a field of harmonious interaction between locals and foreigners, especially those coming from Europe: "Trade and travel between Europe and the Holy Land provided a common cause and afforded peoples from different worlds the opportunity to meet through the shared language of commerce." This attention to social mixing is also the subject of Martin Jacobs's essay in the exhibition catalog on Jewish-Muslim encounters. Although Jacobs is focused on religious rather than commercial arenas of interaction, he writes that lower-profile "local holy places" – especially the shrines of holy men and women – "seem to have functioned as liminal spaces in which the boundaries of religion, social status, and gender were relaxed" (21–22). Religious pilgrims were also economic actors, of course, as Avinoam Shalem elaborates in his essay on pilgrims' souvenirs from the Holy Land in the exhibition catalog. Beyond interaction and exchange, however, the economy of religious pilgrimage was also one of extraction and plunder – not necessarily of market commodities, but of holy relics. The numerous reliquaries in the gallery are among its most fascinating objects, demonstrating the powerful intertwining of the spiritual, the material, and the corporeal in European Christianity of the period. Particularly striking is a twelfth-century reliquary from the Meuse River Valley that depicts the Finding of the Cross, whose label illuminates both the underlying violence of relics and a rather unnerving imposition of modern concepts to describe and sanitize medieval violence: "Here," the label reads, "the third-century empress Helena first uses 'enhanced interrogation' techniques to compel Jewish residents of Jerusalem to disclose the site of the Crucifixion."

The Diversity of Peoples gallery continues to stress the interaction in Jerusalem of a great heterogeneous mix of people of various faiths, languages, origins, and cultures. Most notable in this gallery is the collection of religious texts in numerous languages, including Arabic, Armenian, Copto-Arabic, French, Ge'ez, Georgian, Greek, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, and Syriac. This impressive collection offers a remarkable visual elaboration of the phrase *ahl al-kitab* – People of the Book. The textual record of Jerusalem's communities is also the subject of a video interview with the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute's Merav Mack, who speaks about her research on the libraries and archives of Jerusalem, including the oldest known repository of manuscripts at Mar Saba monastery (near Bethlehem). In the exhibition catalog, Jennifer Ball provides a biography of Saint Sabas and an account of his monastery. Other essays in this section also focus on the special relationship between Jerusalem and the written word, including Meria Polliack's portrait of Karaism, a "distinctive form of Judaism [that] focuses on the Hebrew Bible, as reflected in the names given to its followers – *kara'im*, *benei-miqra*, *ba'alei miqra* – all of which are derived from the word *miqra*, the Hebrew root for 'Bible'" (79); David Kraemer's treatment of Maimonides's writings on Jerusalem; and Carole Hillenbrand on *fada'il al-Quds* literature of Islamic hagiographies.

The Air of Holiness galleries contain familiar images of Jerusalem's holy architecture, as the curators "attempted to evoke the city's sacred iconic monuments" (6), devoting a gallery each to: the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque; the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; the "absent" Jewish Temple; and the "Roads to Jerusalem," which addresses the infrastructure that accommodated pilgrims to the Holy Land and secondary pilgrimage sites in the region. The galleries displayed architectural and decorative features of these sites – including capitals, stone inscriptions, friezes, lamps and candlesticks, and textiles – as well as two- and three-dimensional reproductions and imaginings of them. In addition to Jaroslav Folda's essay on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Robert Hillenbrand's on the Dome of the Rock, monuments that receive individual treatment in the exhibition catalog are Jerusalem's double-arched Golden Gate (by Melanie Holcomb), the *minbar* of Nur al-Din (by Sylvia Arnold), and the Cradle of Jesus and Oratory of Mary (by Nabil Matar). Folda, Holcomb, and Matar in particular stress the multi-faith and multi-confessional character of these sites between 1000 and 1400.

In this section of the exhibit, however, some of the present-day tensions and contests over these sites begins to infringe on the exhibition's general silence on such matters. A video interview with Samar Nimer, a paper conservator and restorer in the Islamic Museum located inside the Haram al-Sharif introduces, for the first time, the word "Palestinian" into the exhibition. In his catalog essay on the Dome of the Rock, Hillenbrand writes, "this dome of discord remains the perennial symbol of Palestine defiant" (135). Meanwhile, New York-based Israeli novelist Ruby Namdar, in a video on the absent Jewish Temple, presents a view consistent with the Jerusalem school of Jewish history,¹ but also one that hints to the historical understanding of militant religious Zionists who wish to see the Temple rebuilt, stating: "The Jewish existence after the Temple is basically scar tissue over this wound that deep inside never healed." Later, though, Namdar's narrative hews more closely to the exhibit's efforts to elide differences and divisions between Jerusalem's communities: "the absent Temple is not just a Jewish symbol," Namdar says, "I feel that it is a universal symbol."

The de-centering of violence and conflict is not only a reaction to present-day narratives about Jerusalem, Palestine, and Israel, but also an attempt to move beyond the Crusades as the sole lens through which to view the period covered. But even if, as the rest of the exhibition attests, the Crusades did not define all of Jerusalem's interactions, expressions, and imaginations during this period, as James Carroll points out in the sole essay on holy war in the catalog, they "marked a turning point in Christian history" and left a legacy that continues to resonate today. No account of Jerusalem's first four centuries of the second millennium CE would be complete without examining the impact of the Crusades, and a gallery on the Drumbeat of Holy War acknowledges the role of art in "subtly stoking sectarian violence through jeweled tones and glittering gold surfaces." The elaborate depictions of battles, finely wrought weapons of war, and magisterial tombs of fallen warriors included in the gallery "encouraged the hesitant and affirmed for the overeager the grim necessity and valor of war." One piece in particular, three coats of arms of Sir Hugh Wake carved into a marble, over a preexisting royal Fatimid inscription – superimposing the symbol of one dynasty over that of another without fully obliterating it – indicates the degree to which artists and artisans were conscribed in the effort to impose sovereignty over the Holy Land.

Neither holy war nor sacred art was undertaken as an individual act; rather, they emerged from complex and highly developed infrastructures of patronage, a subject addressed in a gallery on the Generosity of Patrons. The gallery includes a variety of ornate texts and objects that belonged to prominent patrons or bear the inscriptions of their benefactors. In the exhibition catalog, Barbara Drake Boehm, Helen C. Evans, and Xavier John Seubert provide essays on Christian benefactors, focusing respectively on Jacques de Vitry (the thirteenth-century bishop of Acre), the Armenian community, and the Franciscan order. Yusuf Natsheh adds an essay on Muslim women patrons in Jerusalem, noting that the significance of Jerusalem in Islamic culture led prominent women – "among them princesses, wives of sultans, and mothers or wives of rulers and notables" – to play "an extraordinary role in sponsoring charitable urban projects," including soup kitchens, schools, and a shelter for the poor in Jerusalem (242).

The final gallery, the Promise of Eternity, addresses the otherworldly associations of Jerusalem. As Abby Kornfeld writes in the exhibition catalog, "Although the city's significance and symbolism vary widely in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, there is a consensus that Jerusalem functions as the meeting place of God and man, the gateway to heaven, the terrestrial threshold of the eternal world" (271). It is not surprising that, as a result, this gallery features some of the most imaginative and metaphorically rich artistic production about Jerusalem. This is compounded in some cases by a Jewish artistic tradition in southern Germany in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries by which "the artists who decorated the Bible avoided accurate depictions of human figures by replacing their heads with those of animals" (281). For example, a fourteenth-century "Birds' Head Haggadah" from the Upper Rhine illuminates the prescription for the Passover Seder with images of people with human bodies and birds' heads. Among the most spectacular of all of the exhibition's objects is the series of folios from the *Paths of Paradise (Nahj al-faradis)* of al-Sara'i, a fifteenth-century Timurid account of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem (*isra'*) and ascension (*mi'raj*) from the Holy City. The fantastic

and beautifully rendered folios, brought together from at least three separate collections, show the influence of Central and East Asian artistic and cultural traditions in the visual representations of Muhammad, other prophets, and a number of angels and again speak to Jerusalem's status as a city whose significance extended far beyond its centrality in Europe's spiritual, political, and creative lives. This reviewer, at least, is grateful for the curators' decision to include these folios – overlooking the fact that they slightly postdate the period of the exhibit.

Among the greatest successes of the exhibition and its accompanying material is its open approach to Jerusalem. Jerusalem does not emerge here as the city inhabited by, ruled by, or belonging to one single community, whether religious or linguistic. It is central to the three major Abrahamic faiths, but it is not only defined solely by its sacredness. It is a real city, but also an imagined nexus between the human realm and the divine. This openness to the multiplicity of Jerusalem is a self-conscious effort by the curators, who write of the insufficiency of previous explorations of the four centuries covered here: “Approaches that are beholden to political history or the academic compartmentalization that separates works of art by religious tradition suppress the overlapping histories, points of contact, and complexity that the city engendered and find their brilliant reflections in works of art” (4). But its seeming unwillingness to approach the uncomfortable questions of “politics” – to “set aside” these matters – produces its own kind of suppression, and although the exhibition highlights Jerusalem's expansive and multidimensional nature, it is less comfortable exploring the contests that its multiplicity produced.

The artistic production of diverse peoples in and inspired by Jerusalem was the product of competition and conflict as much as exchange and interaction. The experience of Jerusalem was not “universal,” nor were all parties equal in their attachments to the city, whether at its monuments or in its markets. The erasure of the politics that prompted and shaped the production of these works, their dispersal and distribution throughout the Levant and beyond it, and their assembly as objects in this exhibition, serves ultimately to mask the power behind these processes, the struggles over them, and the legitimacy of claims to them and, by extension, to Jerusalem itself. Addressing such issues would clearly cause some discomfort to a number of the contributors to the exhibition, but it would, I believe, provide a more satisfying framework for this impressive collection than the imposition on medieval Jerusalem of a bland nostalgia for contemporary liberal conceptions of multiculturalism and diversity.

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Endnotes

1 Historian David Nirenberg describes the Jerusalem school as a “post-Holocaust, secularized version of the lachrymose school,” which “sees the history of Judaism since the fall

of Jerusalem as a vale of tears, a progression of tragedies.” David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 9.