

Sharon E. J. Gerstel, ed. *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 246 pp. index. illus. \$65. ISBN: 0-88402-311-7.

The nine essays in this fine collection, as the editor Sharon Gerstel explains in the introduction, concentrate on “liminality and thresholds” (1), on the barriers created in religious architecture between the sacred and the profane, particularly in the restriction of the sanctuary. Drawn from a symposium held at Dumbarton Oaks in 2003, these studies raise questions including: What was the architectural or decorative nature of these divisions? Who would be divided from whom: clergy from lay? Men from women? What were the liturgical and devotional implications of these boundaries? And what theological ideas did they embody? Responses to these questions, when they can be determined, vary according to time periods, geographical locations, and type of structure. These essays cover topics from ancient Jerusalem and Coptic Egypt to Byzantine center and periphery, Gothic

cathedrals, and Italian monastic churches. As is typical for a collection such as this one, several of the essays have a rather narrow focus, and are addressed to highly-specialized audiences. Nevertheless, the volume as a whole is illuminating in revealing areas of commonality.

The chapters are presented in roughly chronological fashion, and begin with Joan Branham's description of the Herodian Temple in Jerusalem, based on ancient texts and archaeological evidence. Branham discusses how the Temple architecture established a sequence of separations by means of different kinds of barriers, as visitors traversed the complex, successively dividing the faithful from outsiders, men from women, priests from laity, and finally allowing entry to the Holy of Holies by the High Priest only. The essay provides a logical introduction to the construction and practices in Christian churches, especially as the concept of a veiled tabernacle provided a metaphorical basis for many Christian ideas about sanctuary spaces.

The bulk of the succeeding essays addresses Byzantine and Eastern churches. Robert Taft, analyzing early Byzantine textual sources, concentrates on the rise of sanctuary enclosures in relation to liturgical practices, such as the frequency of communion, or the restriction of the laity from the areas used for priestly processions. Urs Peschlow relies on archeological evidence for some early Byzantine churches in reconstructing partitions between the nave or central space from the side or ambulatory aisles, although the purpose of these walls remains tantalizingly unclear. Elizabeth Bolman discusses Coptic churches in Egypt, which, she suggests, by the fourth century possessed sanctuary screens and divisions between the nave and side aisles. Bowman also treats theological sources, drawing parallels between sanctuary enclosures and the veil of the tabernacle. Sophia Kalopissi-Verti addresses the imagery and meaning of the icons called *proskynetaria* found in middle and late Byzantine churches — paired images of special devotional importance, usually painted on the nave sides of the piers flanking the sanctuary, and sometimes duplicated in the narthex. Sharon Gerstel discusses the role of double-sided icons in sanctuary barriers, carefully distinguishing among the varying meanings revealed to either a lay or clerical audience for the images. In a concluding study on Byzantine issues, Nicolas Conostas addresses aspects of the theology of the icon screen as drawn from the writings of Symeon of Thessalonike, a fifteenth-century Bishop.

The final two essays move to Western Europe. Jacqueline Jung discusses Gothic choir enclosures, using some fifteenth-century Netherlandish paintings for the evidence they reveal about practice as well as for certain optical effects and juxtapositions. Appropriately, the final essay is by Marcia Hall, whose researches on Italian choir screens, or *tramezzi*, a generation ago profoundly influenced the art historical study of these structures. Hall revisits some of her initial conclusions on Italian monastic churches, clarifying aspects of function and practice: the essay forms a fitting conclusion to this useful collection.

One complaint, however, about the design of the book. While this reader is grateful for a layout that puts footnotes on the same page as the text, on all but the

introductory page for each essay the font used for the text is very small, and that for the footnotes is even tinier: imagine the bottom row of an eyechart. This choice may have kept the publication cost low, as it crowds the text into fewer pages, but it does not make for an easy read.

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