

## Seeing the Medieval: Realms of Faith/Visions for Today

“Seeing the Medieval: Realms of Faith/Visions for Today,” was a two-day [symposium](#) organized by MOBIA and the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture in the spring of 2008 (for transcripts from the presenters at Fordham University click [here](#) and [here](#)). MOBIA invited a group of scholars to consider the Middle Ages and its relevance to today’s world. Scholars addressed topics such as “Why the Medieval Matters” and “Life and Art in the Middle Ages,” as well as discussing particular works of art on display at MOBIA in the exhibition “Realms of Faith: Medieval Art from the Walters Art Museum” (March 5-July 13, 2008).

These panels were conceived to connect not only with MOBIA’s exhibition on medieval art, but also with MOBIA’s mission more generally. As a young museum with a very specific mandate, we strive to present new perspectives in a visitor-friendly manner, integrating art and cultural history, religious studies and theology.

“Medieval Objects from Different Viewpoints” (see [slideshow](#)) was a discussion that set out to ask the question: What happens when scholars from different disciplines look at the same works of art? Examining the works of art shown in the accompanying slide show, an art historian, liturgist and theologian would each treat the object from a distinct perspective. An art historian, viewing the chalices that are illustrated, would focus on stylistic and artistic attributes, including the object’s place in the evolution of liturgical art in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Italy, while taking into account the significant changes following the devastating Black Death. An art historian would also note the quality of craftsmanship, making reference to any knowledge of the workshop it was produced in, as well as examining the provenance history of the chalice. A liturgist, on the other hand, would address the role of this object in the liturgy, discussing the way in which it was used and the way it connected with other components of the ritual.

A theologian would discuss the symbolic role of the chalice within the doctrine of the Eucharist and the central role it played (and continues to play) in the administration of the sacred rite of communion. A cultural historian, by contrast, would examine the ways that contemporary treatises and other primary sources provide a contextual framework for our analysis of the object.

Each of these perspectives is at once correct and incomplete. Presenting them side by side may weave a more comprehensive image of the multivalent character of these objects and the lessons that can be learned about the society that created and used them. Distinct methodological approaches can contribute to a better understanding of the work of art. This multidisciplinary approach is at the core of MOBIA’s vision. Focusing on a group of Eucharistic objects in MOBIA’s exhibition, panelist represented the disciplines of art history; musicology; systematic theology; and liturgical practice. The aim of the discussion was to shed light on different, and multiple, ways to look at and learn from religious art. It has been argued that in order to recreate and teach a historical dimension of medieval art, a visitor’s informed imagination is better than mock apses and piped plainsong. MOBIA aims to inform the visitor’s imagination.

In the panel on “Teaching Techniques for Medieval Studies” scholars examined how and why the study of the Middle Ages in all of its complexity demands an interdisciplinary

approach. The works which were on view in *Realms of Faith* were approached in various ways: firstly, as beautiful, old objects valued today for their age, workmanship and precious materials, traits validated by the works' very display in a museum setting. They might also be seen as objects essential to medieval liturgical drama and choreography. In addition, they serve as tangible records of a lived faith. They may also be viewed as indications of medieval conspicuous consumption. At the same time, they provide examples of visual interpretations of sacred stories.