

M. Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles. Medieval Christian Art in Syria and Lebanon*. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 184 (Leuven; Peeters 2009) Pp. 325. Hardback

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A comprehensive study of the Christian Art of Syria and Lebanon is long-overdue and so this new book must be applauded for attempting the first complete overview of a field that has thus far been fragmented and lacking a holistic approach to the subject. For far too long Syrian and Lebanese frescoes and icons have been explored only in the context of the art of Asia Minor (in particular Cappadocia), Cyprus and Egypt and been relegated to a footnote of art historical scholarship as “provincial Byzantine” or “Crusader” art. Immerzeel does the monuments of the region a great service by placing them firmly centre stage and arguing for provincial workshops across the Levant that had their own iconographic and stylistic traditions that were confident enough to draw inspiration from other regions whilst remaining secure in their own Syrian identity.

The other issue with this subject has been that although we have had a series of monographs and articles on individual monuments or cycles (for example Erica Cruikshank Dodd’s monograph on Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi, Matt Immerzeel and other members of the Paul Van Moorsel Centre publishing extensively on Deir Al-Surian in Wadi Natrun as well as on many other sites across Syria and Lebanon) this is the first time that anybody has sought to establish a corpus of Syrian Christian art. This is no small task and, as an inventory of all frescoes and medieval icons known at this time, this is an invaluable addition to anyone with even a passing interest in the field. It is extensively and gorgeously illustrated and the photographs alone are a mine of valuable information.

There is a clear and logical geographical arrangement of the material which makes it easy for the reader to compare and contrast the styles and iconographical preferences of different regions and to understand how these different workshops may have functioned individually and in collaboration with each other. On many levels this is a substantial and excellent guide to the Medieval Christian Art of Syria and Lebanon; however there is one crucial area in which this study is not wholly successful and the key

to this flaw lies in the title. In naming the book *Identity Puzzles* Immerzeel is clearly stating that his work will address issues of identity amongst the Christians of the region and, to some extent, disentangle the plethora of denominations that exist in the area. He also debates how far it is possible to link different styles of painting to different denominations and doctrinal beliefs. As he states in his introduction and first chapter this is a complex and, in many cases, impossible question to answer. Denominational borders are fluid and ever-changing and it would also be unrealistic to conclude that artists would be prepared only to work for one Church. This would have been financially unsustainable at the very least and it is untenable to presume that painters would have erected such rigid barriers unless the frescoes and MSS were carried out by monks, when on the contrary most evidence points to professional ateliers.

Therefore Immerzeel sets himself a task which is, with the current state of scholarship, impossible to answer comprehensively. He succeeds admirably in synthesising the material in general and identifying the sites which can be clearly linked to a particular denomination, something that is not particularly arduous in Syria given the relative paucity of material and the fact that the denominational boundaries are relatively well-defined there. The problems occur in Lebanon and on the Syrian coast where various groups have inhabited different regions at different times in history and the extra factor of Western, Crusader influences is added into the equation. Here Immerzeel can, for obvious and well-explained reasons, do little more than advance hypotheses based on language, fashion and style.

On balance this reviewer believes this to be a very good addition to the literature on the subject but has two reservations; the first is that this should have been edited with a little more care as the language is often clumsy (and in places slightly incorrect) for native English readers, but this is an exceptionally minor quibble! The other, more significant, concern is that this felt rather hastily produced and leads the reader to wonder if it would not have been better to have waited a little longer and produced a much more “finished” study. This very much reads as “work in progress” and is excellent as a statement of where the field has reached at this particular moment in time, but one very much hopes that Immerzeel will take the time to write a more extensive volume in the near future.