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lost in the discussions of contextual material. The book would also have benefited from tighter editing; Borland’s major points are repeated many times. I would also have liked to see more attention to the representation of class: how, for example, do we know that some of these figures are servants rather than workers hired for a particular occasion? Again, closer observation would have revealed visual distinctions among the servants. And since gesture is discussed, I was surprised that François Garnier’s classic handbook on the subject seems not to have been consulted.

But no book can satisfy the wish list of every reader. Indeed, my criticisms are minor. Very thoughtful in its approach and its discussion of so many interrelated contexts, Borland’s book is truly interdisciplinary and makes a major contribution to art history, gender studies, manuscript studies, history of medicine, and so many other fields. As Borland writes, “A key argument throughout this book is that the illustrated copies of the Régime straddle a surprising number of textual, cultural, and artistic traditions” (106). She successfully proves that thesis and much more. Beautifully produced, with many color images, the book is also intelligently written and a model in so many ways.

DIANE WOLFTHAL
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With a Midas-like touch, Elina Gertsman has a gift for turning her every subject into scholarly gold. The Absent Image is no exception. It joins her previous publications as a prize-winning book, having received the Charles Rufus Morey Award from the College Art Association. The achievement is all the more noteworthy considering that this project represents, by the author’s own admission, her first sustained foray into the field of (late medieval) illuminated manuscripts. Gertsman’s incisive powers of analysis are no less sharply attuned to the creativity of intimate, small-scale images than to their large-scale counterparts, the focus of, among others, The Dance of Death: Image, Text, Performance (2010) and Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna (2015).

In the present case, an initial intuition persuaded Gertsman to work against the grain of a common assumption: the belief that medieval artists crammed their pages with as many shapes and colors as they possibly could, as if propelled by a horror vacui of the kind ascribed to other “primitive arts.” The Absent Image asks us instead to take in what is easy to overlook or dismiss as accidental and incidental, namely the empty spaces and lacunae of all sorts that inhabit even densely illustrated manuscripts. If such emptiness always tests the limits of representability, its iterations are many and varied, encompassing images unpainted, erased, and excised. Like the original medieval beholder, we are invited “to look at, around, and through absence” (119) and to ponder what layers of meanings that excavation might reveal.

Framed spaces that never received, and were most likely never intended to receive, representations offer a prime example of literal emptiness. Yet the delicately painted frames around the blank
parchment demand attention precisely because they make the absent real without giving it a concrete form. As semantic placeholders, they serve “to prod and provoke the power of phantasia” (40), encouraging viewers to wonder, muse, and project their own internal visions. Optical pauses, introduced within narrative scenes, constitute another type of emptiness filled with latent meanings. These could take the form of empty speech scrolls, like the ones held aloft by Gabriel and the Virgin in Annunciation scenes. Medieval viewers, of course, would easily fill in those blanks, and reenact the disconcerting encounter between angel and woman by mentally mouthing the Ave Maria of their daily devotions. Voids also structure, in Gertsman’s ingenious reading, those images that deal with what cannot be represented, whether the compact of sin and lust or the absolute caesura introduced by death. For the first scenario, the “intertwinement of death and desire” (57), a copy of Eustache Deschamps’s Double lay de la fragilité d’humaine nature provides an arresting example in the unconventional—and gap-receptive—illustrations of Pierre Remiet (who had already retained Michael Camille’s attention). As to death itself, Gertsman looks at depictions of The Three Living and the Three Dead, among other iconographies. Here, as elsewhere, her analytic intelligence catches details that a more hurried perusal is likely to miss. It leads her to parse the void that separates the perky corpses from their elegant former selves as a sign that parallels, in the visual register, the ultimate ontological rupture. What better way indeed to evoke one’s unrepresentable death (as per Freud’s famous dictum) than by a missing beat in the representational fabric?

In addition to actual gaps and framed nothingness, The Absent Image extracts a wealth of meanings from scratched-out passages. Though difficult to date, pronounced marks of erasure could somewhat paradoxically result from intense devotional gestures involving a physical engagement with books. Constant rubbings and kissing of the longed-for divine body became an effacing force, leaving the viewer with a “fading God.” If codicology and theology are in this instance conjoined by a mutually affirming relationship, shrouding Christ’s body, as in crucifixion and entombment scenes, does some of the same erasing job in the realm of narrative. Building on Georges Didi-Huberman’s provocative proposition of a hermeneutics of the vestige and the ensuing figurative logic of dissemblance, Gertsman sees scratched-out parchment skin and partially obscured human flesh in terms of “the unavailability and ineffability of God” made palpable “through the means of discursive and visual divesting” (84). Very useful in this regard is her summing up (109–15) of the tradition of negative theology, and how it fueled ongoing debates between supporters of image-based devotional practices, on the one hand, and ascetically minded advocates of imageless mystical ideals, on the other. “As vehicles in the quest for the visually absent divinity” (102) images were powerful tools; even, and perhaps above all, if they did not depict anything at all. The two miniatures that echo one another across the sumptuous book of hours of Mary of Burgundy provide a fitting example. When commenting on the second image, Gertsman notes that it performs a radical act of self-erasure. The painted devotee has taken leave, letting the viewer (including the duchess) contemplate Christ being nailed to the cross alone. We discover the dolorous moment, consonant with the plangent Christomimetic piety of the later medieval centuries, through an oratory window. And it is Mary’s personal belongings—rosary, book, jewelry chest—that mediate, like so many vestigial presences cramming the windowsill, the passage from devotional present to biblical past.
Canceling the corporeal to reach the spiritual took on more playful connotations when medieval illuminators integrated accidental holes and tears found in parchment leaves into meaning-making moments. Materially oriented investigations in the history of books have intelligently revived such codicological oddities, foremost by tying physical evidence to content and uses. Gertsman draws on this stimulating body of recent literature (notably on works by Sarah Kay and Kathryn Rudy) to peer into holes that were reprogrammed as mouths, wounds, and vaginal apertures. Entirely original is her patient exploration of the Thott Hours in Copenhagen, illuminated by Jean Poyet at the close of the fifteenth century. This extended journey through a single object takes us to paired sets of images. Separated by several folios, they appear through wells of parchment, as the author analogizes diamond-shaped cut-outs. They make for a unique viewing experience, here mimicked thanks to excellent close-up reproductions. Take what seems at first glance a conventional Annunciation scene. It reveals itself to be an illusion, or, at least, a momentary suspension of continuity, for when the reader-viewers turned the pages while reciting prayers to the Virgin it was a split Gabriel and the Virgin they discovered. Rather than trivializing Poyet’s superbly framed lozenges as some show-offish display of artistic virtuosity, Gertsman elevates the interpretive tenor, as she does throughout. In particular, she highlights how the conversation between figures across the conspicuously hollow spaces allows for dynamic, even kinetic reading, thanks to which what is seen alternatively recedes and comes to the fore. As such, the “matter of nothingness” at the center of the Thott Hours is fecundly generative: it mounts an embodied experience of different temporalities, the circular time of the liturgical calendar, the recurrent time of devotion, now and then, here and there.

However formally and contextually different from manuscript to manuscript, nothingness is never nothing in Gertsman’s handling. Every one of the optical lacunae she examines is a full-fledged sign even though it can only grant a promise of semantic plenitude. A neat example is provided by the Vienna Bible moralisée. Its famous frontispiece, showing a gothically flamboyant Creator as a geometer intent on drawing a perfectly circular world with a compass, has often elicited scholarly comment. In contrast, the pristinely blank recto has not received much attention. Empty surface as it may seem, it is impregnated by the miniature on the verso, which bleeds through, ghost-like. If a parallel between the Creation (in its incipient stages) and the book that will come into being (once the reader sets the process of reading in motion) is the obvious conclusion, Gertsman skillfully takes this and other instantiations of generative voids in the direction of natural philosophy. A starkly blank roundel in the otherwise pictorially crowded Genesis initial I in the late thirteenth-century Kaisheim Bible, for instance, becomes an illustration of “nihil as procreant emptiness” (22). Signaling the primordial separation of light and darkness through an absent image, this meticulously delineated void quite literally enacts a creation from scratch, one, moreover, that creates the very conditions for visibility and visuality. Like the enlarged divine eye set with a mesmerizing black pupil in an azure iris made of circles of tightly compacted angelical wings, painted much later by Jean Colombe for the same passage and discussed at the end of The Absent Image, such willfully aniconic surfaces show nothing. But optical quietude can still act as a stimulus for the imagination and, in the process, alter the way we understand the standard repertoire of figurative representations.
Gertsman augments her finely granular readings of specific images by drawing well-chosen parallels with other discursive domains. Theological debates revolving around the concept of a creation *ex nihilo* and the attendant predicate of an original nothingness are made to resonate with sophisticated philosophical disquisitions about the nature of the void, the time-bound existence (or not) of the cosmos, and the possibility of different worlds (our multiverse theories). Disagreements among medieval thinkers were many and vociferous, leading to repeated official condemnations of views deemed heretical. No less fraught was the reception of the number zero. Borrowed from Indo-Arabic mathematics, this non-number, devoid of inherent content, contains all other numbers and mathematical operations *in potentia*, just as the primordial void incubates all of creation. Theology makes for another fertile transdisciplinary comparison in the form of apophatic or negative theology, a robust strand of medieval thinking with roots in older religious traditions. It, too, revolved around an empty core, specifically a letting-go of sensible realities envisioned as the royal path to draw closer to an ever-absent, and never-representable, God. Breathtaking in this context is the rectangle filled with a pure yellow found in the Silos Apocalypse. The monastic illuminator devised this pigment-saturated visual silence to allude to the apocalyptic silence against which the noise of the trumpets blasted by the seven angels will arise. Silence in speech acts and pauses in musical compositions would have provided other interesting instances of generative absences, but Gertsman prefers to build conceptual bridges to contemporary experiments in minimalist nothingness (think Robert Smithson’s “museum of emptiness,” evoked in the introduction). It is an invigorating decision, for coupling medieval artistic practices with those more present to us shows that the two are far less disconnected than teleological histories would have us believe. And that fundamental questions about visual representation, including the deletion of representation, have retained the attention of artists across time, no matter how different the cultural contexts.

In addition to a broad range of judiciously selected primary sources, this generously illustrated book is a treat for the eyes with its spectacular collection of miniatures both familiar and unfamiliar. As someone whose work has focused on late medieval court culture, I would have liked to see some examples from the secular sphere (such as magic literature in which the question of invisibility looms large) and the occasional social dimension to complicate otherwise exquisitely tuned theological, devotional, and aesthetic readings. How, for example, are we to make sense of the ostentatious display of luxury objects and seductive materiality in Mary of Burgundy’s prayerbook besides viewing them as efficacious prompts for religious arousal? Or of Poyet’s brilliant conceit when bearing in mind that he produced his manuscripts for cultured consumers who valued artistic inventiveness and creative idiosyncrasies? Those are, however, minor cavils in light of the richly rewarding intellectual pleasures *The Absent Image* dispenses. It is an ambitious, original, nuanced, and subtly self-reflexive book grounded in “close, slow, and sustained looking” (137), one that reminds us page after page, image after image, just how beautifully sophisticated medieval art is.

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