

BOOK REVIEW ON *THE MINERAL AND THE VISUAL: PRECIOUS STONES IN MEDIIEVAL SECULAR CULTURE*

Adriana C. van Manen
Smith College

Brigitte Buettner, *The Mineral and the Visual: Precious Stones in Medieval Secular Culture*,
University Park: Penn State University Press, 2022. 272 pages.

Today, the Crown of the Holy Roman Empire sits motionless behind a glass vitrine at the Imperial Treasury in Vienna. However, in *The Mineral and the Visual: Precious Stones in Medieval Secular Culture*, Buettner invites the reader to imagine it in action. Laden with 116 gemstones and around 200 pearls, the decidedly maximalist crown once shimmered in candlelight when rulers wore it during coronation ceremonies. The goldsmiths placed holes behind the raised settings of the gemstones, allowing light to stream inward and making the stones appear to glow from within. Buettner concentrates on this beguilingly tactile crown and others like it in Part I of *The Mineral and the Visual*. She demonstrates that these gem-heavy objects also carried substantial conceptual heft. The significant mineral presence in royal crowns was not merely ornamental. Rather, jewels enacted the ideology of medieval kingship, transmitting in visual form the monarchy's transcendent sovereignty.

In Part II, Buettner turns to the genre of illustrated lapidaries (texts that describe the characteristics of stones) and the active role of precious stones in knowledge production during the Middle Ages. Part III looks towards the advent of capitalism and colonialism, using illustrated travel accounts to examine how Western Europeans manufactured the economic value of gems imported from China, India, Persia, and other exoticized locales. Throughout, her guiding aim is to show how precious stones worked in the cultural sphere of the Middle Ages. In doing so, she consistently draws out the keen insight of the medieval visual idiom, which has at times been denigrated for its lack of pictorial illusionism. For instance, she evocatively describes a ca. 1400 illumination of fifteen different stones as foreshadowing Rosalind Krauss' concept of the modernist grid. Similarly, in a

depiction of a gem-encrusted emperor, she sees a medieval recognition of what postmodern scholars call hybridity, a kind of “becoming-mineral.”

Through its focus on lithic agency, *The Mineral and the Visual* positions itself within the material turn of the humanities. This theoretical shift challenges the conception of materials as passive receptacles upon which humans inscribe symbolic meaning. Furthermore, the term “secular” in the book’s subtitle issues a challenge to art history’s methodological impulses. The discipline’s traditional reliance on iconography can render gem-centered artworks illegible, yet Buettner suggests that art historians simply need to use different tools to analyze these kinds of objects. Therefore, while *The Mineral and the Visual* focuses on Western Europe in the Middle Ages, its broader approach may prove generative for art historians whose specialties lie in diverse geographies and time periods. As Buettner illuminates, the medieval mindset held that stones could do anything from the minor, like preventing a bad hangover, to the major, like warding off demonic assault. Thus, *The Mineral and the Visual* will also be a fascinating read for students interested in questioning the divide between culture and nature.

Adriana C. van Manen is a student in Brigitte Buettner’s Spring 2023 course “Medieval Art on the Move: Pilgrimages and Crusades.”