



Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm

Charles Barber

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Figure and Likeness presents a thought-provoking new account of Byzantine iconoclasm--the fundamental crisis in Christian visual representation during the eighth and ninth centuries that defined the terms of Christianity's relationship to the painted image. Charles Barber rejects the conventional means of analyzing this crisis, which seeks its origin in political and other social factors. Instead, he argues, iconoclasm is primarily a matter of theology and aesthetic theory.

Working between the theological texts and the visual materials, Barber demonstrates that in challenging the validity of iconic representation, iconoclasts were asking: How can an image depict an incomprehensible God? In response, iconophile theologians gradually developed a notion of representation that distinguished the work of art from the subject it depicted. As such, Barber concludes, they were forced to move the language describing the icon beyond that of theology. This pivotal step allowed these theologians, of whom Patriarch Nikephoros and Theodore of Stoudios were the most important, to define and defend a specifically Christian art.

In highlighting this outcome and also in offering a full and clearly rendered account of iconoclastic notions of Christian representation, Barber reveals that the notion of art was indeed central to the unfolding of iconoclasm. The implications of this study reach well beyond the dispute it considers. Barber fundamentally revises not only our understanding of Byzantine art in the years succeeding the iconoclastic dispute, but also of Christian painting in the centuries to come.

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