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# The Carolingian Answer to the Iconoclastic War and the Birth of Western Art

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After a long quarrel scattered with persecutions, uprisings, dismissals and replacements of religious authorities, deaths, military expeditions, confiscations and attempts of assassinations in Greece, Italy and other European areas, the Council of Nicaea, in 787, imposed the victory of the iconodules in the Byzantine Empire. The West, especially the Kingdom of the Franks and the Lombards ruled by Charles, later known as Charlemagne, tried to take an official position in the synod of Frankfurt in 794 and in an odd and complex treatise, comprising four books, entitled *Opus Caroli*, or *Libri Carolini*, which were recently attributed by Ann Freeman to Theodulf of Orleans, one of the greatest intellectuals of his time. In this work, which we could call the first western treatise on images, the icon is freed from its ritual and cult value, and returned to its artistic use, thus determining, according to some scholars, the larger freedom of figurative representation that characterizes western religious art as compared with the Orthodox one. This stance is followed by a lively debate, involving many authors, the materials of which have not yet been translated and put into full circulation in historical-artistic research.

## The Cult Value of Images

In the Middle-Ages, the debate on iconoclasm is the discussion that created, most of all, an awareness of the artistic fact and of the image as an instrument of knowledge and power. Such a discussion, with impressive political and even military implications, had important consequences not only on the Christian religion but, above all, on the development of the history of art, for which, in 793, the so-called *Libri*

*Carolini* theorized for the first time a sort of autonomy. Thus, one of the most fascinating and relevant questions for the history of Western culture was faced and provisionally closed in the Carolingian age: the question of the religious and, therefore, of the *social value of image*, which has returned to extreme relevance on the occasion of the recent destruction of monuments by both the so-called ‘Cancel Culture’ movement and some pseudo-representatives of an extremist interpretation of the Islamic jihad. Yet, the Carolingian age is completely ignored in important historical-artistic and anthropological studies on the cult value of images, such as Hans Belting’s *Likeness and Presence* and *Bild-Anthropologie* (Belting, 2011, 2014), Alain Besançon’s *The Forbidden Image* by (Besançon, 2000) and the recent *Iconoclasm* by David Freedberg (2021). Only Thomas Noble (2009) accurately reconstructs the historical and textual events of this story, between the eighth and ninth centuries, but he underestimates its fascinating theological background, which is on the contrary the subject of Mitalaité (2007).

### *From the Icon of the Emperor to the Icons of the Saints*

In his masterful *Bild und Kult*, Hans Belting (1990) illustrated the path that led from Roman imperial images to Christian icons and beyond, up to Calvinist and Lutheran iconoclasm and the demands of the late 1990s for the return to Venice of the venerable icon of Maria Nicopeia. In his view, an icon was:

nothing but a late classical panel picture that inherited the divine image, the imperial image, and the portrait of the dead. Thus the icon adopted a multiplicity of formal devices, each coming from a different tradition and from different genres. It had not yet developed a style or an aesthetics in its own. It embraced the conflict between the desire for commemorating an individual likeness and the wish for obtaining an imperishable ideal. (Belting 2014: 26)

While Noble, following Gari Vikan, defines it as follows:

an Icon is a devotional image that demands reverence and respect; it is holy in the sense that it shares in the sanctity of the figure whose likeness it bears. (Noble 2009: 29)

But even this definition would not be approved by many of those who were involved in the disputes of the third to ninth and subsequent centuries. Belting demonstrated, with indisputable documentation, that during the Roman Empire the images or statues of the emperor had an official legal value and were subject to a form of worship. This relationship of representation of power was soon extended to the images of Christ, as in the case of the icon of the Saviour preserved in the *Sancta Sanctorum* of the Lateran basilica of Rome. In the most ancient icons, such as that of St. John in Kiev, or those of St. Peter and of Mary in the cloister of Sinai, the central characters were represented with medallions (*bullae*) or a clypeus (oval) of

Christ hanging from the neck or ‘suspended’ next to their head, as happened in the funeral pictures of Roman personalities, with portraits of family members or ancestors. So the cult of the image is *not* a phenomenon born with Christianity or with the Middle-Ages, but actually preceded them by many centuries.

### ***Biblical Sources***

The attitude of Jewish and Christian culture in the early centuries was conditioned by two factors: biblical prohibitions and the need for opposition to pagan art.

In the Bible, the most relevant passages are Exodus 20: 4–5 and its revival in Deuteronomy 4:15. The first reads: ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol or any image of what is in heaven above, or of what is on earth below, or of what is in the waters under the earth. You will not bow down to them and you will not serve them.’

The text of the Latin Bible (the Vulgate version translated by Saint Jerome in the fourth century), which is the one on which we must rely for medieval culture and art, is a little different. God commands: *non facies tibi sculptile neque omnem similitudinem quae est in caelo desuper et quae in terra deorsum* etc., which means, ‘you shall not make a sculpture or *any similar image* of what is in above, in heaven, or down on earth’. Therefore, it does not seem to refer only to idols but to *any* sculpture or image that resembles living beings. The same is found on the original Latin of Deuteronomy 4: 15, which summarizes the term *similitudo*, ‘imitative representation’ and gives the motivation of the order: God, when he manifested himself on Mount Horeb to speak to Moses, did not show Himself in any form of living being but of fire. Therefore, God has no form of man, woman or animal and cannot be represented.

The same position belongs to the two other great monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, and evidently corresponds to the uniqueness of God who is irreducible to a visible figure. The prohibition of the production and worship of images is not found in the Koran (which condemns only the *idolatrous* use in Sura 5: 87, 5: 92, 21: 51 and 21: 52), but is based on some *Hadith* of the Prophet of later tradition, collected three centuries after his death by Al-Bukhārī (2001), which constitutes the source of authority together with the consent of the community (*Igma*) and reasoning by analogy (*qiyas*) in cases not foreseen by the precepts (Bettetini 2006: 49; Gruber 2019). This attitude, as it is well known, derives from the need of the Mohammedan religion to oppose the idolaters of Mecca mentioned in the Koran.

### ***Early Christian Aniconism***

In the first centuries of Christianity, the contrast to the representation of divinities in statues, paintings, mosaics and frescoes of classical culture favoured uncompromising positions such as that of the third century apologist Minucius Felix (in his dialogue called *Octavius*), and the fourth century historian Eusebius of Caesarea (in a letter to Constance, the sister of the emperor Constantine), who was radically opposed not only to the cult of images but even to the production of images,

positions reaffirmed in the councils of Elvira (306) and Trullanus (692: see below) and justified, both with theological arguments such as the un-representability in material and human terms of a spiritual and non-human divinity, and with the need for a rejection of pagan customs and productions, as well as of a devaluation of the material elements.

### ***Dura Europos and the First Christian Iconography***

In that period also, archaeological data confirm the aniconic nature of Christian culture. Evidence of figurative, that is not purely symbolic, Christian art between the first and third centuries, concerns very few cases, beyond the catacombs: the main example is the poly-religious sanctuary of Dura Europos (near Salhiyé in present-day Syria), abandoned and buried in AD 256 and rediscovered in 1920 by British soldiers. It includes a Jewish synagogue, a Mithraic temple and a Christian church, with representations of Christian symbols such as the Good Shepherd and evangelical episodes of miracles.

### ***Liberalization***

Everything changes after the liberalization of cults and the legitimation of Christianity that follows the Edict of Constantine of the year 311: both because the need to oppose pagan customs decreases and because, with the involvement of richer sections of society, wealthy clients emerge who can afford building and decorating operations. In the fourth century there are testimonies of paintings, mosaics, chalices and chisels that introduce a new iconography and include, for example in the sarcophagi, Christ in majesty or with the Apostles Peter and Paul, or Risen. ‘The image-sign tends to become a more descriptive image’ (Grabar 2021, my translation). The evolution of the attitude is recorded after a few decades in testimonies such as those of bishop Gregory of Nyssa (335–395), according to whom (*Oratio laudatoria sancti ac magni martyris Theodori*, *Patrologiae... Series Graeca* 46, 737–9) the beauty of representations has a double function: to be pleasant to the viewer and to communicate the story of the saint ‘as a book’, that is to say, as if a text were narrating it to those who cannot read it. Therefore, aesthetic and didactic-edifying arguments appear, made acceptable by the fading of the conflict with the pagans, now in the process of being overcome by Christians. In a second passage, Gregory (*ibid.* 572) emphasizes that sacred art provokes a beneficial psychological reaction in the viewer: it is possibly a first Christian attestation of the emotional effect of art.

### ***Use of Images in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries***

The century following the death of Gregory of Nyssa records few contributions to the discussion on the value and cult of images. The production and dissemination of icons, sacred images of a static type usually distinct from those ‘historiated’ (that is, representing sequences of narrative scenes), increased greatly in the sixth

and seventh centuries and influenced imperial representation in the liturgical sense. The only attestations of some importance are canons 82 and 100 of the council *Trullanus*, held in Constantinople (in the *Trullo*, that is the domed hall of the imperial palace) in 692 and also called *Quinsestus* because it completed the provisions of the Vth and VIth ecumenical Councils, but it was never recognized by the church of Rome. In the same period, the first attestation in Latin of the verb ‘to adore’ associated with an icon appears (*Itinerarium Placentinum*, end of the sixth century) and, in his monastic *Regula* for women, Caesarius of Arles (c. 470–542) forbids painting the walls of the rooms because ‘in a monastery, there must be only objects that please the spiritual, not material eyes. No painting except on napkins and towels if the abbess orders it’ (*Patrologiae ... Series Latina*, 67:42, col. 1116 B, my translation). Even Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae* writes that:

a painting is an image that represents the appearance of something else which, when seen, is recalled to memory. A painting, however, is called artificial [or ‘artistic’] because it is an artificial image, not a truth (ed., Lindsay 1989, I, 73, 32, my translation)

and in particular, on the icons of real saints, offers a metaphorical reflection by writing that:

many represent the lives of the saints and derive from his behaviour an image (effigies) of virtue such that, if one looks intensely at any image, a sort of painted image can be produced: so whoever lives in the imitation of the image becomes like the image. (ed., Knoebel 2018, II, 11, 9, my translation)

### **Gregory the Great’s Solution: Painting as ‘Literature for the Illiterate’**

A letter of Pope Gregory 1st (called Gregory the Great), at the beginning of the seventeenth century, which is discussed in another article included in this issue of the *European Review* (see Barbara Crostini), presents a corrective response to the destruction of images in the Church made by the bishop of Marseilles Serenus, whom Gregory criticized not so much for theological as for pastoral reasons: the need not to create disturbance in the community of the faithful, still bearing roots that proved too shallow to be able to renounce ‘popular’ practices (Chazelle 1990; Davis-Weyer 1986). The ideal justification is given in a formula, then imitated and repeated in many variations, which remained famous and often quoted: *gentibus pro lectione pictura est*, ‘painting is like reading for simple people’. It therefore partakes both a formative and an informative, both an edifying and a didactic motivation. Through images, those who cannot read can learn about the events relating to a saint or to sacred history. This will be the key that will open the doors to the enjoyment of ‘free’ art in Western churches regardless of worship.

### The Iconoclastic Conflict and the Letters to Caliph Umar II

What triggered the real conflict over iconoclasm was the evolution of the question in the Byzantine East. According to the chronicles of Theophanes and Nicephorus, who were in favour of the cult of icons, emperor Leo III the Isaurian (675–741) had to face the confrontation with people of his Empire and religious sects, such as the Paulician docetist heretics, who did not accept the cult of icons. In addition, Leo was also influenced by a Bezér, a Christian who was converted to Islam as a slave and who, once freed, returned to Byzantium and ingratiated himself with the emperor. Therefore, in 730 Leo promulgated an edict (sources indeed report it as a *logos*, followed by a *silentium*) in which the destruction of icons was imposed. The text of this edict has not been transmitted, but it seems that it prohibited the cultic use of religious images, while not prohibiting the decoration of churches with other types of representations. Leo symbolically started the iconoclastic campaign by destroying, in 726, an icon of Christ on the so-called *Chalké* – the bronze door of the imperial palace – and replacing it with a cross (Mango 1990; Brubaker 2012; Karahan 2014; Humphreys 2021).

The episode sparked a revolt which resulted in armed clashes and a failed attempt to depose the emperor. Patriarch Germanus, whose significant letters constitute the main source on the subject, refused to join and was sent into exile. He was replaced by his secretary Anastasius. The Byzantine church then sanctioned the excommunication, with consequent persecution, for those who defended the cult of icons, causing a strong reaction from Rome (Noble 2009: 86–88). In the West it aroused the reaction of Pope Gregory II, who was even supported by the Byzantine troops stationed in Italy. Part of this army, on the contrary, tried to attack the pope, who was defended by the Roman military. The war was of course also fuelled by land and economic-political interests, which saw the confiscation of the assets of the Roman Church located in Byzantine territories (Sicily and Calabria), while Ravenna was attacked by the Lombards, who also invaded the Roman duchy and the Umbrian corridor.

Some scholars have questioned this reconstruction, but some epistolary documents, the changes in ecclesiastical appointments and the armed conflicts in Italy seem to confirm it. Recently, another source has also been added: a correspondence of Leo III with Umayyad Caliph Omar II, a series of letters previously believed to be legendary, until a philological edition was finally published in Washington in 2017 by Seonyoung Kim, on the basis of a recently discovered manuscript in the monastery of Sinai Saint Catherine. These documents do not have official status so far (although some scholars, such as John Meyendorff, assert their authenticity) (Meyendorff 1989), but they still represent the convictions of eighth-century Arabic-speaking Christians. Leo defends the use of the Cross but not that of images: ‘As for pictures, we do not give them a like respect, not having received in Holy Scripture any commandment whatsoever in regard to this’. Leo says Christians have a desire to preserve the ‘images of the disciples of the Lord’ because of their attachment to them. Leo does not show a hostile ‘iconoclastic’ attitude here, but again at the end of the

same passage he says, ‘as for the wood and the colours, we do not give them any reverence’ (Kim 2017: 67).

After the death of Leo III in 741, the iconoclastic measures and persecutions continued with Constantine V, who in 754 had his opponents excommunicated in the synod of Hieria (Fogliadini 2013; Adams 2020) and reiterated the cult of images condemnation, thereby raising a very heated confrontation with the monastic class, both a producer and a worshiper of icons. On a theological basis, it was argued that such behaviour fell into the monophysite (i.e. the idea that Christ had only a divine and not a human nature) and Nestorian heresy (which denied the union of these two natures, stating that Jesus was only a man into whom God only later descended). The emperor himself, who had an excellent philosophical training, wrote the treatise *Péuseis* (*‘Questions’*) in which he argued, as Eusebius of Caesarea had done, that icons represented only the human aspect of Christ and were therefore inappropriate.

Recently, a historiographical fashion has attempted to minimize the extent of the clash, attributing the perception of its gravity to the attitude of the remaining sources, largely adverse to iconoclasts. However, multiple testimonies on murders, conspiracies, councils, mass arrests, as well as theological and legislative elaborations, still remain, that do not reconcile with a framework of near normality that some scholars, even authoritative ones (Cameron 1992; Noble 2009) have tried to support against those (Ladner 1931, Ladner 1940; Florovsky 1950) who have shared instead the idea of a dramatic trend.

The subsequent emperor Leo (IV) died young, in 780, probably from poisoning, and since his successor, Constantine VI, was still a child (9 years old), the regency was assumed by his mother Irene of Athens, who late sources describe as privately an iconodule. Irene managed power with energy and innovative vision, so much so that she sought an agreement for the political management of the Italian territories and even a possible marriage of her son with a daughter of Charlemagne. This completely reversed the fate of the iconoclastic battle, determining its defeat, also because Irene probably saw in the restoration of the cult of images a possible ideological glue between the Church (not only Eastern) and empire. The ecumenical council of Nicaea VII (786) was convened, whose canons were formulated with unusual harshness and an openness to even the unwritten (and therefore unverifiable) tradition of the Church.

We intend to jealously keep intact all the traditions of the Church, both written and oral. One of these concerns the representation of the model by means of an image, insofar as it [...] serves to confirm the authentic and not imaginary incarnation of the Word of God [...]. As in the depiction of the [...] cross, so the holy and venerable images, painted or in mosaic or in any other suitable material, *must* be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on sacred furnishings, on sacred vestments, on walls and tables, in homes and streets [...]. In fact, the more often these images are contemplated, the more those who contemplate them are brought to the memory and desire of the true originals and to pay them respect and *veneration* by

kissing them. It is certainly not a question of true adoration [*latria*], reserved by our faith only for the divine nature, but of a cult similar to that which is rendered to the image of the cross [...] according to the pious use of the ancients. The honor rendered to the image, in reality, belongs to the one who is represented there and *whoever venerates the image venerates the reality* of whoever is reproduced in it. (Menozzi 1995, my translation: emphasis added; a standard edition in Mansi (1758–1798, vol. XI) and a philological edition in Alberigo, Leonardi etc., 1991, pp. 135 ss.)

The veneration of images was therefore not only rehabilitated but imposed and mandatory. And the doctrinal source that legitimized this approach was not a theory or a theology, but the social use of the Church: a choice of incredible audacity yet destined for a very long stability, despite some iconoclastic regurgitation in 815 (Synod of *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople).

### *The Carolingian Reaction*

The *Acts* of the Council of Nicaea were translated into Latin for Charlemagne, who made a copy for Theodulf, a Visigoth refugee from Spain and future bishop of Orléans, an intellectual and poet who played an important role at the court and in the system of government. At that time, the Carolingian intellectual elaboration marked an extraordinary flowering in all disciplines, from grammar and rhetoric to mathematics and astronomy to music and jurisprudence, promoting in the territories that would later constitute within the Empire a broad schooling coverage, a standardization of the graphic and liturgical systems, a strong multiplication of the circulation of books and texts, an artistic and architectural development of vast dimensions, with theological implications in contrast to heresies such as ‘Adoptionism’ (which believed Christ as adopted son of God). Yet the Franks only marginally participated in the debate about the icons, merely sending delegates to the synod of Rome in 769 who attempted to oppose the iconoclasm of Constantine V and promoted a discussion held in Gentilly in 767. Some marriage negotiations between the princes of the two empires also failed.

The Latin version of the *Acts* of Nicaea II seems to have been very inaccurately translated, so much so that, between 878 and 882, this version was replaced by that of an expert such as Anastasius the Librarian, and, of the first, only fragments and citations remained in circulation. A typical confusion was that between *adorare* (προσκυνέω, *proskynéō*) and *venerari* (λατρεύω, *latréuo*). The first reaction of the Carolingians to the decisions of Nicaea was a legislative decree entitled *Capitulare adversus synodum*, in 85 chapters, sent to Rome in 792. The pope’s reaction can be read in Adrian I’s long *Responsum* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica 1928, 5–57), whose position, relatively favourable to the cult of images, he summarized in his letter to the emperors of Byzantium (*Hadrianum*) read during the council of Nicaea.



The *Responsum* also praised the Carolingian choice of quoting the text of Gregory the Great to Serenus and advised the king to stick to this position by abandoning other opinions. The reaction of the Carolingians was expressed again in a more analytical form in the huge text entitled *Opus Caroli*, also called *Libri Carolini*: 120 chapters in four books, handed down as anonymous but composed, according to the text editor Ann Freeman, by Theodulf in 790–791, which represent the first and major Western treatise on image and art up to the Renaissance, still not translated into any modern language and therefore little known and underused by art and aesthetic historians. The Carolingians limited the diffusion of the *Opus* to avoid conflicting with the pope, so much so that no other Carolingian source seems to mention it. The Vatican Latin manuscript 7207 reports a first version, incomplete, but subsequent to the Chapter, with 3400 corrections made by a team of at least four scribes to improve or clean up the text of Theodulf, insert condemnations of the Adoptionist heresy or comment on successful passages, probably exposed to the reading of King Charles, the future Charlemagne, in Regensburg in 792. The complete text is instead transmitted from a Paris manuscript (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 12125) and probably contains a second version of 793–794.

### ***Positions of the Carolini Books***

The structure is divided into four books of similar length (30 chapters, 31, 31, 28), 35 chapters more than the *Capitulare*. In the first book, Theodulf comments on Genesis 1, 26 ff. (God created the man in his image and likeness) to define the spiritual sense of ‘image’; as the soul, according to Ambrose, is the image of the Trinity because it is composed of intellect, will and memory. The term is also important to illustrate the need for a moral interpretation of the Bible when it speaks of ‘images’ or the worship of objects or human beings, such as when Abraham prostrates himself before the people in Genesis 23, 7 and others. Among the most often quoted passages is the description of the Cherubs on either side of the Ark (Exodus 25, 18–20), who take on an important artistic role precisely in a mosaic commissioned by Theodulf at Germigny-des-Prés, near Orléans, and which are interpreted on the basis of Augustine, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* (see Poilpré 2019).

Chapter II 21 denies any legitimacy to the cult of images, while their use is accepted for ‘fear of forgetting’ past events or for ‘love of embellishment’, that is, for teaching and aesthetic purposes. Gregory the Great’s letter to Serenus, which was not considered in Nicaea, is cited, but St. Paul is also mentioned to confirm that only God deserves adoration and not even the living apostles accepted it. In III 16 it is recalled that saints never solicit this kind of superstitious honour; the author wonders how, among images of the same saint made by different artists, the most reliable and most valuable one can be identified. When they are beautiful, how do you evaluate the strength of the faith of someone who is only dragged by an aesthetic attraction? Does a less successful or less expensive image deserve less devotion?

Chapter IV 16 refutes the Neoplatonic theory of the passage from the adoration of a painting to that of the object represented there thanks to an example of comparative iconography that has become famous as a case of modern-type iconology:

Suppose they offer to anyone who worships the images, the pictures of two beautiful women without a legend, whom he despises and throws away and leaves abandoned somewhere. Let's say someone tells him: 'One of them is the image of Saint Mary, and it must not be put away, the other of Venus, which is absolutely to be thrown away' and asks the painter, since they are similar in everything, which of them is the image of Mary and which the image of Venus. He gives the inscription 'Saint Mary' to one, the inscription 'Venus' to the other. This, which has the inscription of the mother of God, is raised, honored, kissed; that, since it has the inscription 'Venus'; mother of a refugee named Aeneas, is thrown down, outraged, cursed. But the figure is the same, the colors the same, the materials the same, only the inscription changes. Tell me then [...] where the sanctity of this resided before it received the inscription? And where is the abjection of that, before the inscription was written? (Freeman and Meyvaert 1998: 528–529, my translation)

It is therefore the inscription that brings knowledge, but the inscription cannot induce the sanctification of the images to which it is affixed. In fact, sanctification is granted to rational creatures by demonstrating good works and the primacy of merits. Irrational things, which lack intelligence, such as objects of worship and the like, do not receive sanctification from any inscription but from priestly consecration and the invocation of the name of God.

The consequence of this position is the development of a theory of the *autonomy of art*. According to Ann Freeman:

That the LC should treat of art and the artist's function is a natural outgrowth of the argument. Statues and portraits of saints have, of course, an aesthetic as well as an ecclesiastical function (...). Their disregard for the artistic aspect of images is one of the charges brought by the *Libri Carolini* against the Eastern clerics [...]. So sophisticated are the LC's views that one recent critic finds in them a well-developed doctrine of Art for Art's sake; he attributes this entirely to the influence of antiquity at that time operative in the court circle. (Freeman 1957: 695)

In turn, quoting Weisbach:

In these situations, art is judged from the point of view of art and the artist and its autonomous value is recognized – which is not affected by the fact that the group of authors responsible for the formulation of the script at the emperor's court was strongly influenced by ancient views. (Weisbach 1945: 5, my translation)

The argument repeatedly returns to the fact that images are artefacts, ‘*opificia*’, i.e. the material products of a mundane art:

This is, of course, a logical consequence of the *Libri Carolini*’s stand on images in general. If they are to be considered devoid of mystic function, then any supernatural agency in their production must rigorously be denied. [...] The LC are explicit in their contention that the artist is a craftsman like any other; he must seek out good models and good masters in order to advance in his craft (iii 15). [...] There is no operation of the Holy Spirit in the production of a work of art, which must be created by human agency alone (i 10; ii 5). [...] Not inspiration but experience is the artist’s teacher (i 19; iv 21); the success of his ventures varies with the extent of his genius, and the skill he attains with the instruments of his craft (i 16; ii 27; iii 24). It follows as a necessary conclusion, *cornerstone of the Western stand* [emphasis added], that an image can exercise no mystic function. Contrary to the Eastern allegation, its value is not due to the virtue of the saint it depicts (i 17); no sanctity resides in the common clay, wax, or wood out of which an image is made (i 2). [...]. (Freeman 1957, 696–697)

### *Consequences on European Art History*

The *Carolini Books* are not easy to read, have never been translated and have often been misunderstood or ignored by scholars. Their theological objective is to refute the iconolatrous conclusions of the council, in the process of being approved by Pope Adrian I, and to develop the mediating and realistic solutions of Gregory the Great: the didactic and mnemotechnical use of images was accepted, justifying it on a strictly pastoral level, that is of ecclesiastical practice, but its cult was refused and the neo-platonic motivation of the Greeks was criticized, based on the possibility of communication or emanation between the One, that is God, or the saints, and matter, that is the physical support of the cult images. The Carolingians therefore share the Gregorian idea of sacred art as a narrative representation of Christian realities suitable for the less educated public, a sort of ‘bible for the illiterate’, but, unlike Gregory, they define art as a narrative and aesthetic tool and theorize the intellectual superiority of written communication, fully reflecting the typically Carolingian exaltation of the role of writing that we have explored in Stella (2005, 2019, 2021): they are only perceived when they are exposed in words, ‘they can be understood and referred to others not by painters but by writers’ (OC III 23). The image is a simple tool: the Carolingians carried out what has been called the ‘desacralization of religious images’; their reduction to material objects, as Daniele Menozzi writes:

not only constitutes a rejection of Platonic theories on the relationship between representation and prototype, but also determines the elimination of the restrictions that accompanied the production of icons, linked, by their

reference to the supernatural, to fixed schemes (Menozzi 1995: 105; my translation)

which will be characteristic of Byzantine art.

*Opus Caroli* therefore introduces two fundamental innovations into the debate: on the dialectical level, the historical–artistic argument is used for the first time, often resorting to concrete examples of artistic artefacts; and on the intellectual level, an aesthetic category emerges, presented in terms of the *decorum* and ‘beauty’ of art, which opens the door to the autonomy of art, ‘*l’art pour l’art*’, typical of the ‘liberal’ West. This did not derive from the *Libri Carolini* in themselves, since they were not very widespread and never obtained the approval of the pontiff, but it is expressed in the *Libri Carolini* as in no other document of the medieval centuries, and its position testifies to an attitude which will remain roughly stable in Western thought.

So the Carolingian West, by freeing artistic expression from worship, desacralizes it and makes it potentially open to every possible scheme and interpretation. The ‘secularization’ of the West bestows upon art a public and private freedom and diffusion that was by no means taken for granted and that today enriches thousands of museums and churches visited by tourists and connoisseurs from all over the world. *Precisely because it does not have a cultic dimension, the image can have a more relevant aesthetic one.*

Defending the political and cultural autonomy of the future Carolingian empire, Theodulf laid the foundations for the creation of a cultural autonomy which resulted in the first recognition, in Europe, of the autonomy of art even in the sacred subjects that constituted the artistic heritage of Europe for another 1000 years. And yet, probably, the sophisticated and so ‘modern’ position of the *Libri Carolini* was basically superficial. As studies of semiology have theorized, the image *has* indeed a power of representation and memorability, it finds an attribution of supplementary value that not even the secular culture of the medieval and modern West has managed to obscure, and the overwhelming interference of the mass media, as well as the follies of ‘Cancel’ cultures still prove it to us today. The current idea of ‘cultural heritage’ to be protected, shared by UNESCO, implies an irrepressible identity value that Theodulf, fighting as he was against the cult of icons, had not been able to imagine.

### Note

This article does not include the footnotes of the original version. Detailed historical information or documental evidence, as well as the comments referring to them, can be consulted in: Stella (2019, 2021).

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