

The Ebstorf Lectern Cloth as Cypher: Interpreting the Late Medieval Nun's Embodied Experience of Convent Architecture

Maggie Wilson, Ohio State University

There resides today in Kloster Ebstorf a 15th century embroidery of the Mystic Hunt, i.e. the iconography of the Annunciation casting Christ as the unicorn, Mary as the virgin who captures him, and Gabriel as the courtly hunter. This work was produced by a Benedictine sister who resided at the convent and was used in the liturgy as a lectern cloth. The Ebstorf cloth is a dual site of rich speculative interpretation. First as a material object it travels between two key zones of the convent: the nun-artisan's space of production and the priestly space of the altar. As an extension of the maker's hand the Ebstorf cloth traversed gendered spaces where the physical body of the female monastic could not. Ebstorf Abbey has undergone many renovations since the creation of this work in 1475, and the material evidence of nun's works are a key to interpreting the gaps in the remaining medieval architecture. Second, the complex iconography of the Mystic Hunt invites an allegorical reading of the nun's occupancy of the convent and the priest's occupancy of the altar. Within convent architecture the gendered bodies of priest and nun become entwined with the bodies of angels and sanctified virgins. The Ebstorf cloth punctures the barrier between altar and nun's choir and queers the space of the abbey church.

This paper was written under the travel restrictions of COVID-19, and thus my research has been doubly limited to a strict reading of the cloth and 18th century maps. However, using the Ebstorf cloth as a matrix I have speculated on the borders of the nun's gendered experience of the liturgy, and the borders of her own body within the stone walls of Ebstorf convent. I believe future on site research will only strengthen the position of material culture like this embroidery as a key to understanding the dynamics of life within convent architecture.

Maggie Wilson is a PhD student in History of Art at the Ohio State University where she studies medieval art under the direction of Dr. Karl Whittington. She has an MFA in Studio Art from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research interests are materiality and queer themes in Catholic art of the High and Late Middle Ages with a focus on convent visual culture.