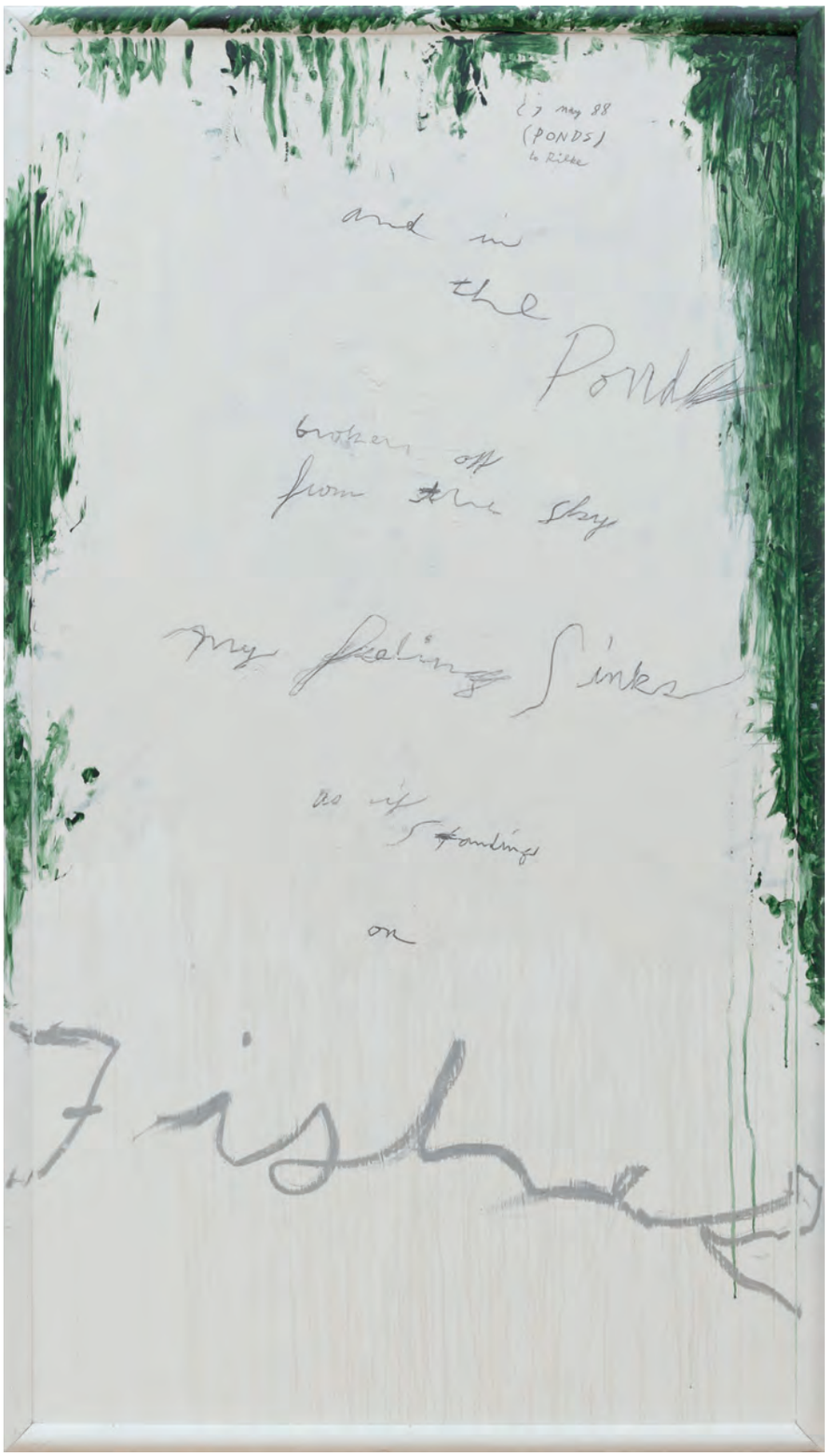

Twombly's art, not our final instruction: 'The loss of an unambiguously definable message is counterbalanced by the gain in the activation of the viewer's creative power' (p.91).

1. *Untitled, part I*, by Cy Twombly. 1988. Acrylic, tempera, oil and pencil on panel with a painted frame, 191.77 by 108.6 cm. (Menil Collection, Houston).

Inventing Late Antique Reliquaries: Reception, Material History, and Dynamics of Interaction (4th–6th centuries CE)

By Adrien Palladino. 312 pp. incl. 18 col. + 88 b. & w. ills. (Viella, Rome, and Masaryk University Press, Brno, 2022), €48. ISBN 978–88–331–3867–1.

by **JULIAN LUXFORD**

This is a wide-ranging study of late antique containers that were either designed to serve as reliquaries or suitable for use as such. The containers in question, which are called, interchangeably, boxes, caskets and reliquaries, come mostly from Italy and Dalmatia and were made between c.350 and c.600. By analysing a selection of examples, the author aims to throw light on the question of when and why the reliquary emerged as a distinct class of object. This, at least, is the ambition suggested by the title, and it seems the best way to indicate the book's relationship to the broader study of Christian reliquaries and their contents. In fact, the author calls his study a 'pre-history' of reliquaries (p.18), and it is fair to note that he never sets up a notional 'birth of the reliquary' as a soluble or even valid problem. Rather, he is interested in how 'boxes decorated with Christian imagery' acquired meaning through a combination of practical aspects, such as setting and use, and more abstract ones, such as 'rhetorical and metaphorical construction' and 'associations with mental spaces' (p.18). Given the lack of contemporary written evidence for the containers, the abstract goals may seem dubious, and in fact, their pursuit does not always yield coherent results. Nonetheless, the book, which is based on a PhD thesis submitted to Masaryk University Brno, in 2019, is a success, both as an overview of a challenging subject with a vast underpinning literature and to an extent as a development of thinking about its core materials.

The book consists of three long chapters, each appropriately illustrated with images. Chapter 1, 'Historiography, prejudices, and late antique boxes', offers a detailed overview of the methods used to analyse the containers in the past, extending to aspects of the literature on relics and reliquaries that have helped to condition this analysis. Such an overview is 'necessary' (p.19) in order to explain why the containers are normally and unhesitatingly classified as reliquaries, a reflex the author wants to discourage. It is here that Palladino's methodological preference for anthropology and the social history of religion becomes

evident. Other approaches have apparently been less helpful. Notably, he is pessimistic about art history's capacity to explain meaning and function (Palladino uses 'function' to mean both purpose and utility). The discipline is criticised for its traditional classification of the containers as part of the so-called minor arts. Crucially, art history has no vocabulary for notions of 'emotional response and the subjectivity and personal values that one may attach to an object or image' (p.204). On the one hand, this is a bit like saying that mathematics has no vocabulary for entomology and, on the other, it suggests an unusually conservative view of the discipline. In fact, for better or worse, in its interests and rhetoric the book corresponds to much recent medieval art history.

The review and critique of existing scholarship also occupies much of chapters 2 and 3. It is, perhaps, not difficult to see why. For, taken by themselves, even the most elaborate containers discussed here, including the Brescia ivory casket (Museo di Santa Giulia at S. Salvatore, Brescia), the S. Nazaro silver casket (Fig.2) and the fragmentary brass casket from Novalja, Croatia (Archaeological Museum, Zadar), are hard to interpret if removed from the existing interpretative frameworks, such as those offered by iconography, style, museology and archaeology, which are found wanting in chapter 1. Anthropology and social history are not, as it transpires, adequate substitutes for them. Thus, the description of the relevant literature becomes (intentionally or otherwise) a matrix for analysis in its own right, as opposed to simply serving as a background. As it happens, this is the book's main strength and will likely prove a great advantage to readers. The literature is vast, multidimensional and would be very time-consuming to marshal and absorb independently.

Historiography aside, the issues at stake in chapter 2 and 3 are not always distinct. It is indicative of this, but not encouraging, to read that chapter 2, 'Containers of the holy: from cult to material culture', will 'aim to deal with a vast set of questions' (p.75). Dealing with one or two essential ones would surely be kinder to the reader and certainly clearer. In fact, a dominant – and interesting – hypothesis does emerge here, namely, that some of the containers, including the silver ones from the Pula reliquary deposit now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, were originally luxurious personal effects rather than reliquaries. The author discusses this idea in relation to the phenomenon of sumptuary sacrifice, the surrender of costly things as an expression of piety, described by anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss and Alfred Gell. 'Femininity' (p.139) is also brought into it, as some of the people said to have owned precious containers that were supposedly converted into reliquaries are identified as women. Unfortunately, there is no reliable way to test this hypothesis. The only really suggestive evidence, apart from two small ivory medical boxes with images of Asclepius on them (and it is unclear whether these were ever used as reliquaries), is the Christogram attached to the lid of the S. Nazaro casket, which is decorated with a repoussé relief depicting Christ and the Apostles. The Christogram may have been added to sacralise a non-liturgical object. Although conversion of personal containers into reliquaries is regarded as an established fact later in the book, it is never actually more than an intelligent guess.

2. The lid of the S. Nazaro casket, showing the Christogram. Milan, before AD 386. Silver, 20.5 by 20.5 cm. (Museo del Duomo, Milan).

Another such guess, this time about the status of the containers in relation to historical memory, lies at the heart of chapter 3, 'Inside and around: boxes as spaces for images and memories', which discusses the Samagher ivory casket (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Venice), the Maskell ivory casket (British Museum, London) and the Brescia casket. This argument is more diffuse than the hypothesis about repurposing. The containers were, for example, 'originally conceived to contain [. . .] a variety of memories which are in essence mobile, modulable and delocalized' (p.22). Here too, however, there is not enough evidence to develop such claims convincingly. We simply do not know enough, where we know anything at all, about the original purposes, provenances, settings and uses of the objects discussed in this chapter, and the obscure iconography of the Samagher casket cannot easily support the complex interpretation placed upon it, which is entirely extrapolated from the presence of barley-sugar columns on one of the panels. A fourth case-study, of a painted wooden box from the *Sancta Sanctorum* in the Lateran Palace (Vatican Museums) containing relics from the Holy Land, is potentially a more solid base for speculation about devotional memory but is little discussed.

Palladino's arguments should not be criticised too energetically. It is obviously hard to develop historical knowledge of undocumented and intensely studied works.

At one point, Palladino calls what he has to offer a 'reflection' (p.165), and this seems an appropriate description of much of what the reader finds throughout the book. Some of the claims are a little inflated, and sometimes a passage or section is overwritten, but such things are common in current art history, and are anyway small matters in light of the book's qualities. Those who work on relics and reliquaries in later medieval periods will, perhaps, benefit most from having the rudiments of their subject so thoroughly documented.

Balthazar: A Black African King in Medieval and Renaissance Art

Edited by Kristen Collins and Bryan C. Keene. 152 pp. incl. 121 col. ills. (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2023), £35. ISBN 978-1-60606-785-7.

by **SCOTT NETHERSOLE**

From as early as the fifth century, one of the Magi was identified as African. The name most often, but not always, given to him was Balthazar. This book, dedicated to him, grows out of an exhibition with the same title held at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, in 2019–20, which was curated by Kristen Collins and Bryan C. Keene, who have also edited the present volume. The small, collection-based display did not have a catalogue and was predominantly focused on manuscripts, the particular expertise of the two curators. It is a great strength of *Balthazar* that it was not published in advance of the exhibition, as is normally the case with a catalogue, but that the writers have taken the show and its lessons as their point of departure to produce this beautifully illustrated book. Still with a series of objects from the Getty's collection at its core, it is much expanded in the works of art that it addresses, as well as in the number of authors it includes, many of whom have been central to the discussion of Black Africans in Western art.

The book is divided into three sections on, respectively, Balthazar in art and legend; trade and diplomacy between Africa and Europe; and the 'paradox of the Renaissance'. Each section has an extended introduction by Collins and Keene – the three introductions form the core of the book – and includes three additional shorter essays by other authors as well as brief 'in focus' articles by Collins and Keene. Section 1 provides a broad overview of the representation of the Magi across the long Middle Ages and the presence of Black Africans in medieval Europe, such as Johannes Maurus, who served as chamberlain and chancellor to Emperor Frederick II. The authors consider the various guises in which Black African figures are shown in medieval art, ranging from the famous sculpture of St Maurice at Magdeburg Cathedral (c.1250) to the equally celebrated fresco of a procession in S. Zeno, Verona (1230s). Also discussed are depictions of the Queen of Sheba and heraldry. There follows a sensitive discussion of race and Blackness, which should be read together with the short essay in that section by Geraldine Heng, who perhaps more than anyone else has contributed to a scholarly focus on race in the Middle Ages, most obviously through her book *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (2018). She draws attention to the surprising meanings that skin colour can have in medieval art and culture, making distinctions between epidermal race and the colour black. Complementing Heng's contribution, Hussein Fancy corrects a general bias towards Italian and northern European imagery by drawing attention to the representation of Muslims and Jews in the Castilian manuscript *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (late 13th century; Real Biblioteca Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid; MS T.1), in which 'religion, race, and skin color formed a complex of changing and colliding ideas' (p.45).

The second section uses the gifts of the Magi – gold, frankincense and myrrh – to ask how Europe and the Mediterranean world was connected by trade and diplomatic ties to other parts of the world, especially Africa. It includes a contribution from Gus Casely-Hayford on African kingship in Christian Ethiopia, in the Swahili sultanates and Great Zimbabwe and in some of the Islamic kingdoms of west Africa, such as Mali. Andrea Myers Achi writes about Nubia and Samantha Kelly about Ethiopia and the presences of Ethiopian monks in Europe, which neatly parallels an essay in section 3 by Cécile Fromont on António Manuel, the magus-like ambassador of Kongo to Pope Paul V, who died in Rome in December 1607. The second section also begins a discussion of the 'painful histories of trade and enslavement' (p.63) that opens the way for the third on the 'paradox of the Renaissance'. With this phrase, the authors seek to draw attention to a disjunction between the 'principles of reason, ethics, and social justice [that] were being extolled by Europeans' during the Renaissance (at least, as traditionally understood) and 'their violent incursions abroad [that] were denying the humanity of other peoples' (p.78). The examination of slavery in Europe leads the author to discuss Black Africans in the Americas and Balthazar beyond the Renaissance, focusing primarily on Rubens.

Collins and Keene's book would not have been possible without the seminal and far-sighted research of Paul Kaplan, whose book *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (1985) remains indispensable. One can only wonder why it has taken the discipline so long to follow his lead. Kaplan has contributed three short essays to the volume. The first, on the 'geographies of the black magus tradition', explains the key turning points in that tradition, from the appearance of Black African retainers in Nicola Pisano's pulpit in Siena Cathedral (1266–68) to their adoption across the German-speaking lands, where (as in the Czech-speaking lands) the Black African magus would emerge as a distinct type in the second half of the fourteenth century. The situation in Italy, as he explains, was 'more complicated' (p.36). His second intervention, 'The Black Magus in the public space', in which he discusses works in locations that range from Tuscany, Venice and Seville to Antwerp, ends at the chapel of the Magi in the Palazzo di Propaganda Fide, Rome, in the 1620s. Kaplan's final short notice concerns a lithograph illustrating the American Christmas carol 'We Three Kings', published in 1865, as the Civil War was coming to a close, in which the page labelled 'Balthasar' includes the moving image of an enslaved African American gesturing upwards across the page to Christ, collapsed under the weight of the cross, during his ascent to Golgotha. As Kaplan reminds his readers, 'The association of the Black magus with the enslavement of Africans had, across many centuries, never been so explicitly expressed' (p.106).

Next to Kaplan's study, the other magisterial work to which *Balthazar* is most obviously indebted is the multi-volume *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, to which Henry Louis Gates Jr calls attention in his introduction. He reminds us of the noble, if naive, ambitions of the collectors John and Dominique de Menil, who initiated the publication, to build the largest collection of 'antiracist visual imagery' ever assembled and thereby to affirm the deeply held belief 'that "great" art transcends race' (p.xi). But he also warns 'how the Blackness of subjects depicted in Western art bears a relation to real Black people, to their economic subjugation as enslaved people [and] can never be reduced to simple formulations of "positive" and "negative" images' (p.xiii). Collins, Keene