

Art History 331

Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Medieval Iberia

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Robert Ousterhout and D. Fairchild Ruggles, "Encounters with Islam: The Medieval Mediterranean Experience – Art, Material Culture, and Cultural Interchange," *Gesta* XLIII/2 (2004), 83:

In an age of pluralism and increasing globalism, historical interactions can be enormously instructive, particularly between peoples of different religions and ethnicities. Current discussions of cultural and religious identity may be illuminated by past encounters, just as our understanding of the historical past is usually motivated by present investments, whether acknowledged or not. For example, the rhetoric inspired by recent terrorist acts, as well as by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, reflects long-standing historical prejudices and embedded attitudes. At the close of the twentieth century, the urgent need to negotiate difference was learned at home as we tried to implement ideas for equal opportunity and non-discrimination; but on the international front, the belief in intransigent differences has often shipwrecked the foreign relations of the United States.

[A] vision of the world divided between real positions of East and West still persists in modern politics, popular thought, and historical scholarship. Moreover, all too often in the writing of medieval and premodern history, West connotes Christian, and East connotes Muslim. The West is familiar, viewed as safe, rational, progressive, and good, while the East is exoticized, presented as hostile, irrational, repressive, and even "evil." And frequently, both are treated as if they were clearly defined and self-contained, and the encounters between them are presented simplistically as hostile confrontations. One reason for this is that modern thought and the scholarship underpinning it is often framed by traditional religious, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries: for example, one can specialize in medieval European history and know nothing of Islam, and vice versa—in both cases ignoring the contributions of the Jews and other minority communities. Moreover, scholars who do address the cultural hybridity and fluid exchange between societies have often found themselves relegated to the margins of already determined fields of historical and literary study.