

Abstract

Focused on art, religious practice and confessional identity the research discussed here explores the role of the visual in religious culture during the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. The study has set out to map the changes in the perception of art and its uses brought about by the dissemination of evangelical ideas within the Saxon community of Transylvania. The research has focused primarily on a body of visual documents particularly altarpieces produced in the late medieval period and during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Broadening the definition of the visual the study has taken into account images and furnishings as well as the visually perceptible elements of ritual. These documents have been analysed from a cultural perspective concerned with their placement within the space of the church, their connection to the religious services, their functions and their reception by the body of faithful. Thus, the study has explored the role of art in religious communication, its functions in religious worship and its place in constructing the religious/confessional identity of this particular group. Thus, the body of documents has been approached with the tools of the historian finely honed by contact with art history, anthropology and cultural studies. Focused less on the object than on its use in specific contexts and structured around a number of case studies, this research has led to tentative conclusions concerning the place of art in the context of piety and its role in building the identity of a new confessional community. Informed by the debates in the literature concerning religious art within Lutheran context, this study has reinforced the impression of diversity within Lutheran religious practice despite the efforts of reformers and secular authorities to give coherence to the new Church and its religious culture. In this vein, the study has ultimately highlighted the importance of social and political contingencies for the development of religious practice and the construction of confessional identity.