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# Art, Religion, And Material Culture: Some Reflections On Method

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# AAR ESSAY

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## Art, Religion, And Material Culture: Some Reflections On Method<sup>1</sup>

John E. Cort

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SCHOLARS OF RELIGION tend to go to texts as sources of information in their research. Much of the study of religion consists of the careful analysis and interpretation of written sources, whether they be canonized

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<sup>1</sup>This essay is intended as a speculative meditation on method, and not an introduction to Jainism. I have therefore refrained from providing a full apparatus of references. The reader curious to learn more about Jainism is referred to the exhibition catalogue (Pal 1994a) and to Paul Dundas's recent magisterial survey, *The Jains*.

This essay is inspired in part by conversations over the past several years with (in alphabetical order) Marcus Banks (see 1989 and forthcoming), Cynthia Cort, Louise Cort, Leedom Lefferts (see Gittinger and Lefferts 1992), and Janice Leoshko (see 1994)—all anthropologists and art historians. Colleagues in those fields will, I am sure, find much of what I say in this essay to be rather puzzling, since neither discipline is as captivated by texts as is the study of religion. This essay is also the product of teaching a course entitled "Religion and Art: Icons and Iconoclasts," first at Harvard University with John Carman, then at Denison University, and most recently at Columbia University. The Columbia experience was particularly informative, given that university's aggressively text-centered core curriculum. For a clear example of the Columbia emphasis on textual studies, see de Bary and Bloom 1990.

Finally, for two recent statements by historians of religion that have also influenced the basic argument of this essay, see Margaret Miles's 1985 *Image as Insight*, especially chapter three, "The Evidence of our Eyes: Fourth-Century Roman Churches", and Joanne Punzo Waghorne's 1994 *The Raja's Magic Clothes*, especially her introduction, "Toward a Recovery of Religious Things," where she says, "Historians of religion have too long looked only at words. The word of bureaucratic documents, the paraphernalia of the court, the style of dress, the colors of a painting—all these 'things' must be added to the words of theological and mythic discourse we have learned to read so well" (11).

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