

Editorial Note

Language is read—and it is seen. Latin is no exception: the language of ancient Rome has been one of the most visually prominent languages across generations. Latin words appear on multifarious surfaces throughout the world, including walls, medals, artworks, and postage stamps, visible to many different people, including those who cannot read the language. Such ‘writings on display’ vary in length from single words to a few lines or even entire texts such as, most famously, Augustus’ *Res Gestae*, returned to public view through a copy inscribed on the exterior wall of the Ara Pacis Museum under Mussolini. With the declining literacy in Rome’s language, Latin words have morphed into things that are seen before they are deciphered, assuming they are read at all. However, both for those who understand Latin and those who do not, the materiality of these words may possess a significance that transcends textual interpretation.

While Latin inscriptions have been studied intensively, and there has been considerable research on the handwritings and typefaces in which the language has appeared on the page for generations of readers, the material embodiment of the language throughout its long and complex history has not received sufficient attention in mainstream histories of Latin language and literature. A visual and material semiotics of Latin has yet to be established.

The articles offered in this issue of the *Journal of Latin Cosmopolitanism and European Literatures* suggest that exploring Latin beyond the mere forms and shapes of its letters and considering the complete material embodiment of its words, including their supports, materials, and techniques, may yield valuable insights into how Latin was used beyond the confines of the literary work. At the same time, none of these papers ignores the importance of textual meaning, literary significance, and the symbolic resonance of the language, acknowledging the potential for multiple layers of semiosis. Each article, in its own way, paves the way for future research that embraces a comprehensive understanding of Latin’s material nature.

The articles by Klazina Staat and Barbara Baert remain close to the page but show how its material surfaces shape Latin’s ability to carry significance beyond textual meanings. Taking its cue from New Philology, Klazina Staat’s essay (“Between Reading and

Viewing: Mapping and Experiencing Rome and Other Spaces”) examines the *mise-en-page* of the Carolingian *Itinerarium Einsiedlense*, preserved in the Stiftsbibliothek Einsiedeln, and compares it to the famous Plan of St. Gall and a diagram of the Holy Sepulcher. Recognizing the texts’ materiality as key to the meaning-making process, Staat shows how the manuscripts’ layouts, including the shapes of the words and their positions on the page, enable readers to traverse the text in unconventional ways and to approach it both as text and as image. Barbara Baert (“The *Incipit* Miniature of the Morgan Gospel of John”) further illuminates the significance of the materiality of medieval book culture from the distinct perspective of iconology. By exploring an initial letter on fol. 157r of the Morgan Gospels, written and illuminated in Westphalia around the mid-tenth century, she unravels the profound symbolical significance that the letter, when considered in its specific locus within the manuscript, can bestow upon users of the book, imbuing their experience of the book’s pages with heightened meaning.

With the articles by Han Lamers and Simon Smets we leave the world of the medieval book to see how the ancient language of Rome also left its mark on modern and contemporary material cultures. Han Lamers (“Language on Display: Latin in the Material Culture of Fascist Italy”) explores the tangible presence of Latin within the material culture of Fascist Italy, providing novel insights into the political significance of the language. Lamers, besides paving the way for future research, explores specific cases in graphic design, architecture, sculpture, and landscape design that demonstrate how Latin was transformed into an instrument for political messaging, even for those lacking comprehension of the language. On the other hand, Simon Smets (“Looking at Latin 1911–1965–2019: An Ancient Language in Modern Art”) investigates the versatile presences of Latin in modern and contemporary art, discussing a range of examples from the work of, among others, Giorgio de Chirico, Joseph Kosuth, Giulio Paolini, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and William Kentridge. In contrast to the self-reaffirming usage of Latin explored by Lamers, Smets focuses on situations where Latin emerges as a symbol of lost, or vanishing, world views. He explores how Latin can also be employed to disrupt established discourses and elicit surprise and uncanny experiences.

The issue is crowned by an engaging response by Vincent Debais (“Towards a Codico-Ecology of Latin”), which brings forth some of the shared concerns that run through the articles. Debais highlights the dynamic interplay between language and medium, asking how the interpretation of Latin is not only shaped by its material embedding but also how it, in turn, transforms the objects to which it is applied. Additionally, Debais wonders about the role of the act of writing and the significance of its remembrance in the process of meaning-making. How is the effort of writing echoed in a text’s appreciation? These are just some of the questions raised by the articles presented here, which we hope will inspire more work on Latin’s material presences throughout its long history.

This is the first thematic issue of JOLCEL, and we look forward to featuring similar initiatives in the future. We therefore welcome readers to reach out to the editorial teams’ coordinators with any ideas or proposals in this regard.

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 JULY 2023