



## BACK TO SCHOOL IN GRUNEWALD ADEN KUMLER

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I was born in Cambridge, MA (USA) in 1974 and studied at the University of Chicago (B.A. 1996), the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto (M.A. 2000), and Harvard University, where I earned a Ph.D. in the History of Art and Architecture in 2007. Since 2007, I have taught at the University of Chicago, where I am currently an Associate Professor of Art History. In past and current work, I have focused on Western illuminated manuscripts. My first book, *Translating Truth: Ambitious Images and Religious Knowledge in Late Medieval France and England* (Yale University Press, 2011), examined the role of manuscript painting in the transformation and dissemination of theology to elite lay audiences in the Gothic period. In my current work, I am concerned with medieval processes of making, with objects made in multiples, and most broadly with the imbrication of the material and the intellectual, writ large, in medieval culture. – Address: Department of Art History, The University of Chicago, 266 Cochrane Woods Art Center, 5540 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago, IL 60637, USA. E-mail: akumlér@uchicago.edu

I suspect that many professors harbor a desire to be students again. Of course, research and teaching involve a constant hum of learning, but to learn and to be a student is not quite the same thing. I came to the Wiko very much focused on the prospect of a year of research and writing. I was determined to make the most of the time, devoting myself to all the reading, looking at art (essential for art historians like myself), and writing that the normal course of academic employment makes difficult, particularly as time spent in meetings about university business steals time from thought, from slow forms of cogitation, from chance discoveries, and also from the important work of reading and writing.

What I had not anticipated – and how could I have? – was that arriving in Grunewald would mark the start of a new school year in the most literal and profound sense.

From the first day of the advanced German course, not only was I conscious of being a student of two wonderful German teachers, Nadja Fügert and (subsequently) Eva von Kügelgen, but I also realized I was being taught by an intellectually diverse, expert, and generous “accidental” faculty – the Fellows in my *Jahrgang*, the Permanent Fellows, the Fellow partners, and, not least, the Wiko’s staff – all of whom labored under the (mis-)impression that they were *not* offering instruction in 2015/16. Joining the Wiko as a 2015/16 Fellow, I discovered to my genuine delight, I had gone back to school and the program of study in which I was enrolled would be demanding and thoroughly exhilarating.

As I worked on several essays and a book at the Wiko, firmly anchored in the European Middle Ages and focused on how the appearance of made things shaped what and how medieval people could think, imagine, and argue, in the broadest terms, I found that daily life at the Wiko offered me an immediate lesson in the phenomenon I was analyzing in the distant past. In Tuesday Colloquia, and seated around a table sharing a meal with other Wikoites, I came to expect a certain revelatory blurring of intellectual work and daily life. Venturing beyond Grunewald to see and discuss both historical and contemporary art, to hear incredible music, to buy groceries, to hear a dj and dance as the sun rose, to go for purposeless walks, often in the company of Wiko friends, I was conscious of how all that I was seeing, hearing, and discovering in Berlin – a city so profoundly under construction – was informing my own attempts as an art historian to elucidate the contingent collaboration of the material and the immaterial in the shaping of medieval culture.

The word “form” plays a central role for the discipline of art history, and as an art historian I have become increasingly aware of how polymorphous “form” is in art historical thought and writing. At the Wiko, I quickly realized that the same word – form – was of central significance for many other Fellows and Fellow partners, not only my humanistic comrades working with literary texts or philosophical concepts, but also the life scientists in residence, for whom questions of form and changes in form loom large and lively.

Over the course of the year I felt that I had, quite unwittingly, been enrolled in a cryptoseminar on form. There was no regular schedule of seminar meetings, no readings were assigned, no homework was demanded, and yet week after week I found that my understanding of what form is and what it can be was changing: it was stretched in new directions as it came under a salutary critical pressure from exchanges with other Wikoites, and

even as it was becoming more expansive and flexible, it was acquiring new precision and analytic power in relation to my own work. The pedagogy that catalyzed this intellectual transformation was simple and effective: I had only to prick up my ears, ask questions, answer questions put to me. And the beauty of it was that no one seemed to realize the didactic burden they were shouldering even as I knew that I was receiving a world-class tutelage in one of the subjects most central to my own questions and way of working as a scholar.

This aleatory, *sub rosa* education informed my own work immediately and powerfully. The book I worked on at the Wiko focuses on three important classes of object in the medieval European world – the coin, the seal, and the communion wafer consecrated in the Mass – and asks a series of rather obvious questions: why were these three different objects materially fashioned to resemble each other over and over again in the Middle Ages? What was intentionally or unintentionally accomplished by cultivating an apparent resemblance between the three object types, even as they were asked to do different kinds of work in the world? And what bearing did their convergent appearances have on how medieval people could think about them and with them? Put in more generalized or abstract terms, the book takes up the question of the import of visual and material form: what does it mean and what does it do to make something look like something else? How do appearances matter in both conceptual and historical terms? By the end of the *Wiko-jahr*, I did not have definitive answers to these questions, but as my specialized research advanced with the heroic help of the Wiko librarians, so too I found that the constant intellectual exchange that is cultivated and nourished at the Wiko was making me more adventurous and more sophisticated in how I pursued these questions. My thinking on form was no longer entirely my own: week by week, it was transformed by the Wiko's unwitting corps of teachers, by its curriculum of formal and informal intellectual occasions, and by countless chance, often epiphanic exchanges that were, I realized, never predictable in their substance and yet consistently made possible by the form of life shaped and sustained by the Wiko.

As I worked to understand why ninth-century European Christians transformed the bread of the Eucharist from a loaf to a small disk impressed with motifs in low relief, and then, in the eleventh century, why the seals applied to legal documents were compared to Eucharistic wafers, and further, to what end political powers issued coins that imitated communion wafers in the early and later Middle Ages, I was conscious of how much my own thinking and writing was itself being stamped, refashioned, and given new forms by all that I was learning from the other denizens of Wallotstraße and Koenigsallee.

Leaving behind the Chicago classrooms in which I try to make the pursuit of learning vital and transformative for my students, I came to the Wiko full of my own specialized knowledge, excited to focus on my own research and the distilling of that work into writing, itself a mode of teaching. And over the course of the *Wikojahr*, I made real progress in my work: I wrote several essays and I drafted sections of a book. But the accomplishment I value most highly from my year at the Wiko – one of the greatest pleasures in a year full of pleasures – was the experience of becoming a student again in Berlin.