
Transparent Things
A Cabinet

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Edited by

Maggie M. Williams and Karen Eileen Overbey

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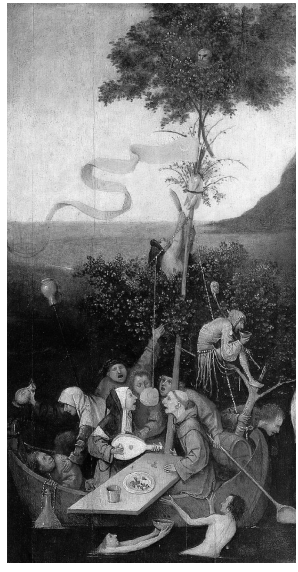

Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490-1500)

for the Material Collective

Acknowledgments/ Contributors

We would like to thank a number of individuals, collaborators, and organizations that helped to make this volume a reality. It probably goes without saying, but none of this would be possible without the Material Collective, the members of which are now too many to name. Particular recognition goes to Asa Mittman and Martin Foys, though, who were both present in the audience at the Transparent Things session at the 1st Biennial Meeting of the BABEL Working Group in 2010, guiding our thoughts in new directions with their energetic comments and questions. We'd also like to single out Rachel Dressler, who helped us to design the session in the first place. Jennifer Borland would like to extend special thanks to her colleague and frequent collaborator, Louise Siddons.

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Karen Overbey teaches medieval art at Tufts University. Her book *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territories* was published by Brepols in June 2012. She is also co-editor (with Martin Foys and Dan Terkla) of *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Interpretations* (2009) and has published a number of articles on Irish cults of the saints. She is working on a project on the materiality of gems in medieval art and another on temporality and 'ruins' in visual hagiography. Karen's essay, "Reflections on the Surface, or, Notes for a Tantric Art History," leads off the collection.

Next up is Jennifer Borland, Assistant Professor of Art History at Oklahoma State University. Her scholarship is concerned with issues of audience, corporeality, gender, phenomenology, and materiality in medieval visual culture. She is currently working on a book about the illustrated manuscripts of Aldobrandino of Siena's *Régime du corps*, a late-medieval health guide. Her essay is entitled "Encountering the Inauthentic."

Angie Bennett Segler is currently (as of 2012-2013) a fourth-year PhD candidate in the English Department at New York University. She works on late medieval devotional inscription practices — including reading, composing, copying, and meditating — in English literature. Her work aims to bring a codicological and vital materialist approach to interpreting literary texts in a historical and theoretical framework. Her essay, "Touched for the Very First Time: Losing My Manuscript Virginity," follows Borland's.

Nancy Thompson teaches Art History and Women's and Gender Studies at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. She is working on a project entitled "St. Bonaventure's Theology of Light and Franciscan Stained Glass in Medieval Tuscany and Umbria," which will discuss the place of stained glass in Franciscan choirs and the growth in popularity of the medium through the development of a network of stained-glass artists. Nancy has also published a series of articles on

the revival of medieval stained glass in nineteenth-century Florence. Her contribution, "Close Encounters with Luminous Objects: Reflections on Studying Stained Glass," completes the collection.

And, finally, co-conspirator Maggie M. Williams, who is an accidental medievalist teaching art history to reluctant studio artists, business majors, and assorted undergraduates at William Paterson University in New Jersey. Her book, *Icons of Irishness from the Middle Ages to the Modern World* appeared in 2012 in Palgrave Macmillan's New Middle Ages series. She couldn't be prouder of her co-conspirators in the Material Collective: long may it wave!

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION
DEAR MATERIAL COLLECTIVE

Maggie M. Williams and Karen Eileen Overbey

By the time you read this, things will be different. By the time you read this, we will already be WE, the Collective. By the time you read this, we will be doing a different kind of art history, one that seems so familiar and natural that the version of art history we practiced before will seem quaint, twentieth-century. By the time you, we, I, read this, we will barely remember the before. We will be WE, and our work will be changing.

This is a record of how that began, a snapshot of a moment of becoming. We, you, I, are writing this to remember and to make what happens next — what happened next — real.

* * *

It was like this:

Art historians were mostly (not entirely, and not univocally, but mostly) concerned with figuring out what and how and who. They (we, I, you) wanted to know, to quantify, to ascertain: who made it? When? Which came first? What were the influences? What does it mean? Who made it mean

that? Where did he get the idea that that was a good meaning? And so on, and so forth. There was a particular scholarly apparatus in place.

Then there was, for us, a moment of transparency, of translucence, of surprise and illumination at the 2010 conference, "after the end: the humanities, medieval studies, and the post-catastrophe," the first biennial meeting of the BABEL Working Group in Austin, Texas. Maggie Williams and Rachel Dressler had called for papers that would explore transparencies: of objects, of scholarly practice, of historiography, of pedagogy, of experience. Each of us, in some way, answered that call — and this little volume holds those collected musings.

We took as a shared prompt the chance discovery of a passage in Vladimir Nabokov's *Transparent Things* (1972):

> When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines![1]

For us, as students of medieval material, these tensions between surface and depth, present and past, concentration and skimming are all too familiar. Nabokov vividly evokes the ways in which visual objects entice us with the promise of experiences—emotional, visceral, mnemonic, intellectual, spiritual. The inherent contradictions of medieval objects, their irreducibility to either the purely intellectual or the merely physical, are at once the delights and the dangers of our work. And so this panel offered a dialogue on the question

[1] V. Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Here we must acknowledge a distaste for Nabokov's conservative politics, particularly his rumored dismissal of collective movements. His words remain lovely. We are willing to acknowledge, even celebrate, such contradictions.

of how our encounters with physical things spark a process and how objects might allow unique collisions between the past and the present, the human and the inanimate, the practice of history and lived experience.

For each of us, the contemplation of transparency led to a revelation of personal experience; we each grappled with the role of the historian and with our inevitable desire to know the past. We found ourselves challenging the tradition of a detached scholarly posture, uncovering our own subjectivity as writers, viewers, historians, and human beings. Each of us, rather than suppressing subjectivity and desire, laid it bare. Karen Overbey's movingly somatic "Reflections on the Surface; or, Notes for a Tantric Art History" examines the play between visibility and invisibility in a thirteenth-century True Cross pendant reliquary. Jennifer Borland's "Encountering the Inauthentic" investigates the phenomenological effects of studying medieval visual and material culture without access to actual medieval materials, and she asks how we negotiate our objects of study when they are absent. "Touched for the Very First Time: Losing my Manuscript Virginity," by Angie Segler, is an almost exhibitionary account of library research. And Nancy Thompson humanizes our scholarly activities in wonderfully transparent ways in her "Close Encounters with Luminous Objects: Reflections on Studying Stained Glass."

Nabokov allowed us to think very literally about transparency, about crystals, stained glass and other objects that light passes through. But we also thought about other kinds of transparency in our work as scholars, teachers, historians, and writers. We thought about the kinds of medievalists that we are and that we want to be. The writings collected here, on the one hand, record the proceedings of that panel. But they also document what happened: we came together in Austin.

Right then, we took ownership of our subjectivity and decided to allow the personal, experiential, and sensual to seep into our scholarly production. We — the speakers, the presiders, the audience — organized the Material Collective (www.thematerialcollective.org).

Dear, dear Material Collective: by the time you read this, most of the ideas in these little papers will have moved on, become parts of other texts, or not. As works of medieval studies or art history, these essays are incomplete, awkward, and provisional. Some of them may read, to you, to us, like embarrassing teenage poetry. This collection is that dusty box in the basement: it is full of raw, unedited, transparent expressions of affect, of the sort we have learned to hide.

Dear Material Collective, this is a nostalgic love letter to our present and future selves, a little bit of poetry from the past.

Reflections on the Surface, or, Notes for a Tantric Art History

Karen Eileen Overbey

I think: I don't know where to start. I think this, and then I remember. I'm an art historian. I start with the object.

It's a reliquary for a sliver of the True Cross, probably made in Scotland, or at least for a Scottish church, probably sometime around 1200. It has been in the collection of the British Museum since 1946. Those are things that, as an art historian, I *know*. Probably.[1]

---

[1] The reliquary, sometimes known as the "Ninian Reliquary" (for one of the saints named in the inscription) and sometimes as the "Whithorn Reliquary" (for the church with which it has been associated), was recently part of the *Treasures of Heaven* exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Walters Art Museum, and the British Museum (2010-11). There is little historical or contextual evidence for the patronage of the reliquary or the place of production, though the church of Whithorn in the See of Galloway in southern Scotland is likely. See A. B. Tonnochy, "The Nininan Reliquary," *The British Museum Quarterly* 15 (1952): 77; C. A. Ralegh Radford, "Two reliquaries connected with South-West Scotland," *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural*

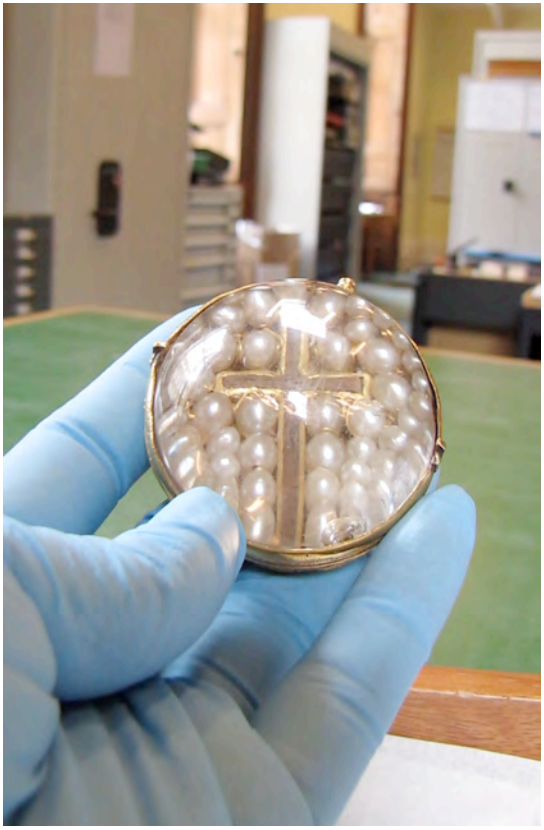

Figure 1. Top of the reliquary, held in my hand, in the Prehistory and Europe Study Room at the British Museum. True-Cross Reliquary [British Museum 1946,0407.1], c. 1200, Scotland [?]. Rock crystal, pearl, wood, gold. Dimensions: 54.5 mm (h) x 52 mm (w) x 28 mm (d). Photo: author.

History and Antiquarian Society for 1953-54, 3rd ser., no. 32 (1955): 119–123; *English Romanesque Art*: *1066-1200*, eds. George Zarnecki, Tristram Holland, and Janet Holt (London: Hayward Gallery, 1984), no. 310; and most recently *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, eds. Martina Bagnoli, Holger Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (London: British Museum, 2011), no. 72.

It is much heavier than I thought. It is between my squeaky, latexy fingers, it is in my palm, palmed, and it is heavy. I hadn't thought about the crystal being solid, heavy, thick — I suppose I expected (because I already expected it and its history and its story before I saw it) I suppose I expected it to be just something to see through, almost an idea. Not hardly a thing, not something thick and heavy in my hand. And so seeing it is already unfamiliar.

It is, now, in two pieces. Each has some damage, some missing parts, and even, while sitting in a back room at the British Museum with clear light and a magnifying glass, I can't figure out how they once fitted together.[2] (I suspect tampering. I blame the nineteenth century.) I could make it up. I will make something up, of course — I'm a historian.

Figure 2. Two parts of the reliquary: the domed crystal set over the wooden cross and pearls; and the circular gold setting for bone fragments and other relics. Photo: ©Trustees of the British Museum.

[2] A conservator's report (1967) suggests that the tiny, threaded screw that holds some of the parts of the band together is a later addition, though no estimate of the date of the repair is given. It is unclear what the original locking mechanism was, or indeed what was the original configuration of the reliquary. The report is available online, in the British Museum's collection database: http://www.britishmuseum.org/csrmellonpdfs/PR02213_u.pdf. The collection database (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx) can be searched by object registration number (1946, 0407.1).

The top — the big heavy piece that surprised me with its mass — is a dome of rock crystal about two inches in diameter and more than an inch high, and it's encircled with a band of gold engraved with abbreviated Latin names of Christ and eight saints: Mary, Norbert, Margaret, Ninian, George, Boniface, Fergus, and Andrew. The band also holds a backing plate under the crystal: a gold disk to which pearls are sewn around a gold-edged wooden cross. That visible, presentable cross was probably not the relic. The real relic, the sliver of holy, True-Cross wood, was never meant to be seen. That relic (now absent, no surprise there) — or rather those *relics*, because there were twelve, from the looks of it — were set into a second gold disk, rough-edged as if pressed out by hand, with a ring of eleven irregular bezels around a twelfth-century setting. The missing Cross must have occupied the center, with each little hollow holding a fragment of bone or hair or cloth, probably, ostensibly, belonging to the saints named in the inscribed band. A whole cast of holy characters, supporting, framing the Cross. And all of this was hidden from view, contained, somehow, inside my crystal.[3]

[3] And there must have been more to it, now lost. Perhaps a second dome of crystal or some other precious stone, mirroring the extant crystal to make the whole thing a sphere, a globe, with the holy relics tucked inside. Such a reliquary could hang over an altar, catching light on all sides as it turned on a long chain; it might also have been a personal object of devotion for a bishop or cleric, like the small crystal containing relics of the saints that hung on the bedstead of Hathumoda, abbess of Gandersheim, as she lay dying in fever dreams; see chapter 15 of *Vita Hathumodae*, trans. Frederick S. Paxton, in *Anchoress and Abbess in Ninth-Century Saxony: The Lives of Liutbirga of Wenhausen and Hathumoda of Gandersheim* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 132. Alternately, the reverse of the pendant could have been flat — perhaps with an engraved and nielloed scene of the Crucifixion, or an image of the patron's church or saint — so that the heavy reliquary could be worn around the neck of the celebrant during Mass or in extra-liturgical processions.

Seeing the Surface

Figure 3. The underside of the reliquary, showing gold wire threaded through the pearls to attach them to the backing plate. The wire is also visible around the pearls in figure 2. Photo: author.

So much of this reliquary was not meant to be seen: the rustic, mosaic-like relic plate; the dynamic pattern of gold wire stitches on the underside of the pearled disc [fig. 3].

But what *I* didn't see in the photograph from the Museum's online database (which I'd been studying for months before I could make the trip, and from which I'd made my expectations) was that crystal: the photo flattens it; Photoshop or good lighting has erased most of the glare [fig. 2]. Of course I knew the crystal was there. But I'd expected it to be transparent: I'd been explaining already (in conference papers, in articles "in preparation") that it functioned as a magnifying lens to enlarge the holy objects beneath it (as in fig. 4).[4]

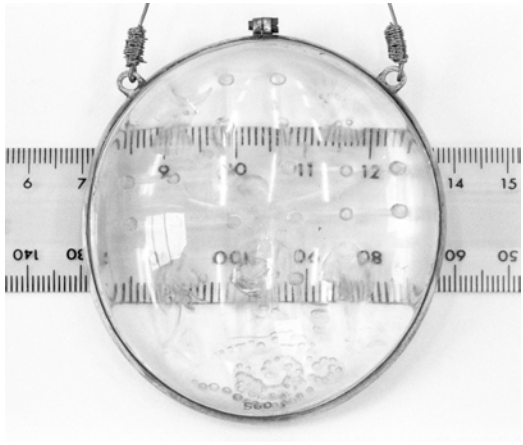

Figure 4. Crystal intaglio with ruler. Crystal [British Museum 67,7-5.14], c. 825-50, Metz. Photo: ©Genevra Kornbluth.

[4] This point is made by Genevra Kornbluth in *Engraved Gems of the Carolingian Empire* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 20, and through her photograph above; for additional images of engraved rock crystal, see her historical archive of rock crystal: http://www.kornbluthphoto.com/RockCrystal3.html.

In my hand, though, it is difficult to see *through* the crystal, difficult *not* to see the crystal. I see the scratches [fig. 5]. I see the unevenness and the imperfect fit around the edges. I turn the disc around [fig. 6], and I see the big divot in the side of what I'd thought was smooth and transparent. From this angle I can't see through it at all.

Figure 5. Scratches and irregularities on the surface of the crystal. Photo: author.

Figure 6. The reliquary viewed from the side; the large notch just above the rim is also visible in figure 5 along the lower right edge. Photo: author.

I had taken as my *entrée* to this object Abbot Suger's description of the anagogical experience of precious stones — the "loveliness" of gems that could transport him from "material to immaterial"[5] — in combination with the opening of Nabokov's *Transparent Things*, through which "the past shines": "When we concentrate on a material object . . . the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment."[6] But this crystal is not a transparent thing after all, or not only transparent. The surface, in its relationship to light, is emphatic, haptic. I have a hard time falling through this surface. I'd been picturing Nabokov's novice as a gangly youth on ice skates, falling on his skinny ass and cracking the delicate surface of the pond that separates him from the cold seduction of historicity. By contrast, you could drive a truck of hijacked Canadian whiskey over the surface of this reliquary.

Figure 7. Another side, with reflection. Photo: author.

[5] Suger, *Liber de Rebus in Administratione Sua Gestis*, ca. 1144-49, rpt. in *Abbot Suger*, ed. Erwin Panofsky, 2nd edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979): 40–81.

[6] Vladimir Nabakov, *Transparent Things: A Novel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 1.

I turn the reliquary over and around. I rotate the crystal, twisting my fingers. From one angle, I see the cross and the pearls: clear, magnified, perfect. Another small rotation and the cross disappears, and I am back to a solid surface [fig. 7]. The crystal is a plano-convex lens, thickest in the middle, and so when I turn it, it refracts light to give me a reversed image of the room around me. I turn the reliquary around again, trying to see myself. But I can't. Some Lacanian trick (I later learn it's just physics — something about my position relative to the central axis of the lens), some *trick* keeps me from seeing myself in the crystal. And that's when I realize: *I wanted to.*

The hide-and-seek of the crystal's surface, reminds me of Krista Thompson's essay on the visual culture of hip-hop. The shine of "bling," Thompson argues, "denotes an investment in the light of visibility," and at the same time "pinpoint[s] the limits of the visible world: the instant that reflected light bounces off a shiny object, it denies and obliterates vision." Like jewelry in a Hype Willams video, the crystal reliquary "conveys a state between hypervisibility and blinding invisibility, between visual surplus and disappearance. It signals . . . [the] limits of vision."[7]

Suger and Nabakov, I think, didn't mention this. They tell me about passing through matter — as if passing through was as easy, was just the same, as looking through. But I can't even do that. The surface is emphatic, and it is resistant. I understand this in the limitations it imposes on me, in my desire to see myself reflected. This thing is not reflective; it does not give me back to myself.

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[7] Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *Art Bulletin* 91 (Dec. 2009): 481–505. I am grateful to Ben Tilghman for pointing me toward Thompson's essay.

Figure 8. Ultra-bling, with eye patch. San Francisco, 2006. Photo: Volker Neumann.

Anxiety on the Surface (or, Don't Stand so Close to Me)

What stops me here, of course, is not the object itself, but *my*self. I am thrown off by the sudden problem of my own corporeality — by that gap between sight and knowledge. I can't see my face in the fish-eyed version of the room. I think: the sheer Cartesian duality is just too much for me.

And so I dive back down, pull my focus, and re-attend the surface of the object.

Figure 9. Gaps, damage, repair. Photo: author.

The insistent surface now makes me aware of its multiple histories, and I slow my interpretive roll to look at it. I linger on the surface, and I see the fissures, the ruptures, the nicks. I see the bodies of the curators across the room from me reversed on the lens; I think about the catalog entries for this reliquary, and I recall that none of them mention how broken and incomplete it is. (Only a brief report on the x-ray diffraction and emission spectro-scopy conducted on the reliquary in 1967 mentions that part of the assembly is paler and harder than the surrounding metal: the little screw on the outer rim, visible most clearly in figs. 2 and 5, is a gold-silver-copper alloy, a later addition.[8]) The cracks and scratches on

[8] See note 2, above.

the crystal, and the dents in the gold band, remind me that there is a postmedieval history of the reliquary, in which it has been repaired and reassembled and fragmented and bought and sold and curated and displayed.

The surface insists I consider not simply a single, singular moment of ideal use and meaning, but rather multiple histories, implications. I think about rupture and suture, about fissure and erasure. I can't figure out how this fits, how this once fitted together. I think about the violence of history, and I wonder what I'm ignoring. I wonder about the arguments I've already won with this object. I think about the importance of wholeness to modernist histories.

I think that perhaps art historians have taken too seriously the notions of "skill" and "expertise" suggested in that book by Nabakov — that is, that we aim to hold matter still in a single moment so that we can pin it down, capture it, name it, write its label. Art history remains, in many ways, defined by stylistic and iconographic analysis, and medieval art history in particular is a solidly *contextual* pursuit.[9] And so I think, as I look at the scratched and pitted and reworked crystal of the reliquary, that maybe I want to be a novice. Maybe I don't want matter to stay at the level of the moment. Maybe I want to fall on my ass and break the surface and let some of the dark, icy histories loose.

My own history, my interaction with the object, is another intervention, of course: I can't look for long at the surface, letting the dents and scratches tell me about all the other hands on the object, without also being aware of my own. Even if I can't see myself reflected, I wonder how my traumatic encounter with myself at the surface can be, or become, (or already is) a part of this object's history.

I have to think, then, about what this object already is to

[9] See especially Georges Didi-Huberman's important critique of the "science of iconology": *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 2005) [originally published in 1990 as *Devant l'image: Question posée aux fin d'une histoire de l'art* (Paris: Editions de Minuit)].

me. Where have I placed it in my own history? Whatever history of this crystal I write is now, I suspect, going to be about me. And so I work backwards, from the reliquary, to ask myself what it reminds me of. This, I think, is some crazy-ass art-historical psychotherapy session.

Figure 10. Me and the Reliquary Bust of Charlemagne. Cathedral Treasury, Aachen. Photo: author.

The crystal, the transparent surface, is, for me, the reliquary; the vitrine; the bell jar; the cabinet of curiosities; the medical specimen. For me, glass always seems to encase fragments. In all my associations, the glass surface is the border between sight and knowledge. Reliquaries, specimen jars, museum displays: all these glass surfaces, these transparent skins, remind me of my own partialness.

* * *

I think that maybe I could do that, then. I could use all of that self-knowledge: I could write about this object as being on the border between sight and knowledge — and that even sounds medieval.

So: I will write, in a voice of authority and persuasion: *Like all precious stones in the Middle Ages, rock crystal was*

understood as some combination of natural and supernatural — rock crystal, which is polished clear quartz, was (according to a game of hermeneutic telephone stretching from Pliny to Albertus Magnus) pure water from the heavens, hardened fast and at incredibly high altitudes: a flash-frozen souvenir of the celestial realm. And so it became a metaphor, and a symbol, for Christ's body. Here (I will write) *on this reliquary, the crystal relies on that symbolism, and encodes the paradox of the Christian Incarnation: it reveals simultaneously the vision of the Cross, and the limits of corporeal sight.*

What we see — what medieval viewers saw — is not Real, but representation.

I study reliquaries, and I write about the relationship between the container/contained. And reflecting on the surface of the little crystal reliquary, I think (I know) that when I write about containers and containeds, I am thinking about my own struggles with embodiment, with what it means, to me, to be embodied. The sometimes-permeable edges of my skin; my scars and tattoos; my own history of brokenness and fragmentation and violence and history upon my surface. My desire to experience grace, and the compassionate union of self and other. My awkward and sometimes traumatic movements between container and contained.

And now: The surface of the crystal reliquary vibrates for me between transparent and reflective.[10]

The Tantric Part, or: does this mean I have to become one with my object?

I remain unsatisfied both by a dualist separation of mind and body, and by a pure phenomenology. I am learning about *prajna*, wisdom, and nonduality. But, still, I am not sure I can quite embrace the alternative view of corporeality that would posit a radical union between art historian and artifact, in which my selfhood resides in my reliquaries. I can imagine the

[10] My naked debt here is to, among others, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Jane Bennett, and Cathy Caruth.

act of getting inside. But I haven't yet been able to *be* the inside. So what do I mean by "Tantric Art History"?

So I mean: how might we transform our desire for the object? (That is, as I am coming to understand it, the essence of *tantrayana* — the transformation of desire. Loosing my grip on expectation. On teleology. Experiencing the fullness of the present.) Desire. I'm thinking of our collective, disciplinary desire to historicize, to pin our material to moments and locales; to make objects into anchors and paperweights, keeping history from blowing around, from blowing away. To define, to defend, to bound. To put under glass. To make disappear the gap between sight and knowledge. To know, by sight.

Can we un-desire this?

If one thing we are asking ourselves to do is to re-imagine medieval history (and medieval art history) after history, then I want to start, as I did, with the object. I'm an art historian. What that means for me is that I am good at looking. And I wonder: what do I desire, when I look? How can I recognize that desire? And then: how can I transform that desire? I don't know. And at the moment I don't want to pretend that I know. But I think, *maybe*. I think: I can start with the object, with my transparent thing. And even if it freaks me out (because I don't see myself, because my desire is made visible and therefore exposed and raw) — even if it destabilizes me, I think I want to look at the surface. I want to look at the surfaces of things, not through them, because I don't agree with Nabokov or with Suger that the histories of matter that matter are either back in a swampy past or up in some ethereal future. What matters in matter is, I think, present. Even if that matter is "medieval."

Can we pull our focus, stay, see the scratchy surface and somehow, have art history without History? Can we write the histories of art objects, rather than an art history?

ENCOUNTERING THE INAUTHENTIC

Jennifer Borland

In the former home of Raymond Pitcairn and his wife Mildred, built in 1928-1939, and now the Glencairn Museum in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania [figs. 1-2], the lines between medieval and modern are overtly, and successfully, blurred. Although described as "Romanesque in style," its form is decidedly from the 1930s.[1] When one visits the museum today, the fabric of the structure includes 1930's stained glass and mosaic, created using "medieval techniques," alongside actual medieval stained glass windows, sculptures, and architectural elements such as archways that have been integrated into the fabric of the structure. What is old, and what is new, are often rather indistinguishable. As historians, we might be inclined to criticize this aspect of its construction for misleading its visitors and disregarding the difference between old and new.

In this essay, however, I propose that examples like Glencairn remind us that the distinctions between past and present are often less significant than we make them out to be.[2]

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[1] For more on the museum, visit *Glencairn Museum* [website], 2009: http://www.glencairnmuseum.org. Another example of this era's medievalism as expressed in domestic architecture is Hammond Castle in Gloucester, Massachusetts at *Hammond Castle Museum* [website], 2012-2013: www.hammond castle.org.

[2] Certainly a similar phenomenon is seen in many museums that hold medieval collections, such as the Musée national du Moyen Age

Figure 1. Exterior, Glencairn Museum, Bryn Athyn, PA. Photo: author.

Figure 2. Interior, Glencairn Museum, Bryn Athyn, PA. Photo: author.

This may seem a strange argument for a historian, but in fact, it is precisely in questioning what it means to be a

in Paris, the Cloisters in New York, or the medieval galleries at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Such mixture old and new is of course a hallmark of medieval and early modern architecture as well, and is therefore quite "authentic."

historian that led to me to such a potentially heretical position. As a university professor, I have struggled to find ways to teach about medieval objects and spaces without having access to "real" medieval objects, and I have come to realize the value of alternatives like Glencairn. These tactics have been invaluable in helping my students think about, and engage with, the experiences of medieval viewers, and as such, may also prompt us to reassess our own scholarly attachments to "authentic" historical things. Therefore, this essay explores the pedagogical and scholarly value of ostensibly inauthentic experiences; it further asserts that some approaches dealing with the absence of the "authentic" create experiences that are even better than the real thing.

The use of "inauthentic" in my title certainly suggests that there is such a thing as an "authentic" medieval thing, place, image, or experience. It perhaps goes without saying that the study of the Middle Ages is founded upon a prioritizing (even fetishizing?) of the thought-to-be medieval thing. For instance, we certainly open ourselves up to scrutiny and suspicion if we try to publish scholarship on medieval materials that we haven't seen in person. Yet, I would argue, not only does this preoccupation often lead us away from more interesting questions, it is also founded on an unattainable ideal in the first place: that with enough research it is possible to definitively know the past. If we are as interested in the experiences viewers have of medieval things as we are in the things themselves, it behooves us to decenter the object in favor of the experience, and considering experience through "inauthentic" means may be one route to take. The ostensibly inauthentic, then, is actually as authentic as anything.

You may be asking why I seem so concerned with medieval experiences anyway. In both my teaching and research, I have been compelled by questions about how viewers understand and engage with images, objects, and spaces. Since it is impossible to know how past viewers may have experienced something, I've sought ways to link our own contemporary experiences of the same objects or spaces to open up our thinking about medieval experience. But talking

about experience is fundamentally problematic; there are numerous challenges in using written or spoken formats to explore experience. This brings to mind the work of Christopher Tilley, a scholar of material culture, who reminds us that, "words [can] never capture experience."[3] The irony is that even a text concerned with phenomenological experience inevitably "cannot itself avoid being a representation."[4] This is the challenge of articulating (in words) spatial or phenomenological experiences, or the immediacy of the material — does one need to be present to fully realize that immediacy? Tilley argues that material culture "does not necessarily require a process of decoding, or a verbal exegesis of meaning, to have power and significance."[5] Is it possible to "decode" without verbal expression, without words? Is there another method by which we can explore such concepts in a public forum? In this essay I aim to get at that experience, by thinking about situations in which the medieval object is not tangible, not accessible. How do these "inauthentic" experiences encourage reflection about our own processes? And how do these fleeting moments of experience matter in our own scholarship?

* * *

As I mentioned in the opening of this essay, in my own teaching I've come to rely on alternatives to help students better understand medieval art and architecture without having access to any actual medieval art — first in Fresno, California and now in Stillwater, Oklahoma. I am certain many teachers across the country rely on such strategies, but here are some examples of what I have been able to do in the places where I have taught.

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[3] Christopher Y. Tilley, with the assistance of Wayne Bennett, *Body and Image*: *Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology 2* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008).
[4] Tilley, *Body and Image*, 266–267.
[5] Tilley, *Body and Image*, 37.

Figure 3. Artist Valery Butyrsky painting frescos, St. George Greek Orthodox Church, Fresno, CA. Photo: John Walker, *Fresno Bee*.

Demonstrations and field trips were especially important to a course I taught in 2007 at California State University, Fresno, entitled "The Making of Medieval Art." It was a course designed around production techniques used in the Middle Ages, to foster a better understanding of the objects and buildings we would be studying, but also to appeal to the studio art majors in the department. We observed glassmaking in the department's studio, watched an icon painter work with egg tempera, and visited several local churches known for their architecture. It was especially exciting to discover that one of those churches, St. George Greek Orthodox Church, was actively installing an extensive fresco program [figs. 3-4]. The Russian artist Valery Butyrsky had been hired to paint the entire interior of the previously bare church, and it took him several years to complete (2006-2008).[6]

[6] Ron Orozco, "Russian painter dedicates years of his life to painting ceiling of Orthodox church," *The Ventura County Star* [website],

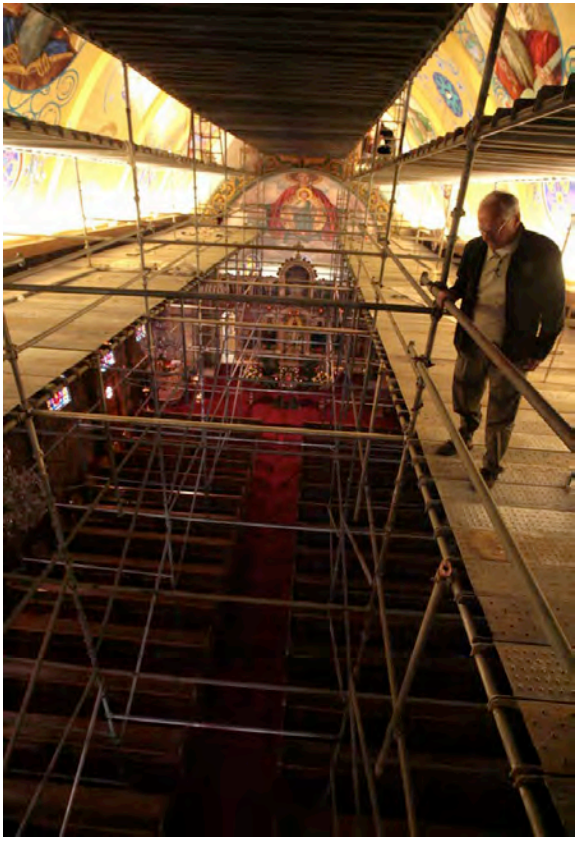

Figure 4. Scaffolding, St. George Greek Orthodox Church, Fresno, CA. Photo: John Walker, *Fresno Bee*.

The church's pastor was extremely welcoming to my class and our questions, and was excited to share what he knew about the building's history as well as the new frescos being installed. Students who were interested were even invited up

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May 10, 2008: http://www.vcstar.com/news/2008/may/10/blessings-from-above/.

onto the scaffolding, to get a better look and to meet the artist.

With this unique opportunity, we all had a chance to think about the process by which many other church paintings were installed. The environment fostered our consideration of issues including the composition, layout, scale, and complexity of the overall design of such programs of decoration. It also made particularly clear the fact that the medieval forms we were studying — the imagery, the techniques, the shape of the sanctuary itself — were often very similar to what is still in practice today. When such examples emphasize that these centuries-old forms remain in use, and are clearly still compelling to us, it also reinforces how strongly the past remains linked to the present.

Of course, examples of medievalism are available in just about any region of the country and beyond; furthermore, each instance offers a unique set of questions and concerns. Whether structures were built explicitly as replicas of something medieval, or are evidence of medieval forms surviving through more modern techniques, such works can bring medieval material into greater focus. The network of mission architecture in California demonstrates clear reliance on medieval architectural forms, particularly those of monastic complexes. An excellent example is the church at Old Mission San Juan Bautista, California, founded in 1797 with buildings dating from the early nineteenth century [figs. 5-6]. Even the simple structure of the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Stillwater, OK, built in the 1950s, has proved particularly useful to my students for similar reasons.

In contrast, intentionally revivalist "medieval" building projects like those at Guèdelon Castle in France (begun 1997)[7] and the Ozark Medieval Fortress in Lead Hill, Arkansas, (projected completion: 2030)[8] demonstrate today's persistent

[7] "A Castle in the Making," *Guédelon Chantier Médiéval* [website]: http://www.guedelon.fr/.

[8] "A Castle in the Making . . . ," *Ozark Medieval Fortress* [website], 2009-2013: http://ozarkmedievalfortress.com/.

fascination with medieval building techniques [figs. 7-8].[9] The publicity materials for such projects often make claims about the "authenticity" of their building methods, emphasizing the importance of perceived historical accuracy for these endeavors. On a much smaller scale, Moorhead, Minnesota boasts two medieval replicas: a full-scale replica of the eleventh- or twelfth-century Hopperstad Church in Vik, Norway, built 1997-1998 [figs. 9-10]; and the Hjemkomst Viking Ship, a copy of the ninth-century Gokstad ship [fig. 11]. The Hjemkomst was completed in 1980 and sailed from Minnesota to Norway in 1982.[10] These projects were both realized by particularly motivated individuals who sought to learn more about their own Norwegian heritage, but also offer provocative material for the exploration of the nexus between cultural traditions, community, and historical "recreation."

Figure 5. Exterior of church, Old Mission San Juan Bautista, CA. Photo: author.

[9] Additional examples of similar projects include the Sacred Stones project of the Abbey of New Clairvaux at Vina, CA (http://www.sacredstones.org/) or the building of a castle at a winery in Calistoga, CA (http://www.castellodiamorosa.com/).

[10] *Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County* [website], 2012: http://www.hcscconline.org/index.html.

Figure 6. Interior of church, Old Mission San Juan Bautista, CA. Photo: author.

Figure 7. Ozark Medieval Fortress, Lead Hill, AR.

Figure 8. Ozark Medieval Fortress, Lead Hill, AR.

Figure 9. Norwegian Stave Church, Moorhead, MN, built 1997-1998. Photo: author.

Figure 10. Detail of decoration, Norwegian Stave Church, Moorhead, MN, built 1997-1998. Photo: author.

Figure 11. Hjemkomst Viking Ship, Moorhead, MN, completed 1980. Photo: author.

Figure 12. Exterior, Bryn Athyn Cathedral, 1913-1928, Bryn Athyn, PA. Photo: author.

Figure 13. Interior, Bryn Athyn Cathedral, 1913-1928, Bryn Athyn, PA. Photo: author.

In the suburbs of Philadelphia, the passion for medieval techniques, evident at Glencairn, was likewise embraced by those involved in the building of Bryn Athyn Cathedral (1913-1928), which boasts a Romanesque- and Gothic-inspired structure constructed using "medieval methods" [figs. 12-13].[11] Overseen by Raymond Pitcairn (also the patron of Glencairn), whose father John was the primary benefactor, this structure was built with "workshops for stone, wood, metal, and stained glass . . . on site allowing designers and craftsmen to collaborate."[12] This nearly obsessive drive to use what were understood to be medieval techniques, and to eschew "modern" technologies, speaks to the allure of revivalism. The perceived authenticity of a building constructed with plaster models, workshops on site, and medieval stained-glass techniques was clearly perceived as more impressive, more significant, because it was built in this way. According to Arthur Kingsley Porter, a well-known medieval architectural historian of the early twentieth century, the Cathedral "alone of modern buildings, is worthy of comparison with the best the Middle Ages produced."[13]

While architecture seems to be the most common instance of medieval forms playing a role in modern production, contemporary book art is another area where the allure of the

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[11] *Bryn Athyn Historic District: National Historic Landmark* [website], 2013: http://bahistoricdistrict.org/.

[12] "About Bryn Athyn Cathedral," *Bryn Athyn Church* [website], 2013: http://www.brynathyncathedral.org/.

[13] A. Kingsley Porter, Letter to Raymond Pitcairn, 24 October 1917 (Glencairn Museum Archives, Bryn Athyn, PA): "I had expected much of the Bryn Athyn church, but nothing like what I found. If it existed in Europe, in France or England, it would still be at once six centuries behind, and a hundred years ahead of its time. But on the soil of great architectural traditions, it would be in a measure comprehensible, and the presence in the neighborhood of the great works of the past would in a way prepare the mind for this achievement of the present age. For your church, alone of modern buildings, in my judgment, is worthy of comparison with the best the Middle Ages produced."

past is often evident. There is of course the well-known example of the Saint John's Bible, begun in 2000 as a collaboration between artists based in Wales and scholars associated with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Saint Johns University, Minnesota.[14] This ambitious project reflects the use of both medieval and modern techniques alongside very contemporary aesthetics in terms of decoration and script. Employing dozens of calligraphers and contemporary book artists, this project is particularly important for the way it has emphasized the medieval legacy prevalent within contemporary art forms.

Such convergences of past and present have played an important role in my teaching as well, as demonstrated by one particularly powerful instance of digitization working in place of "the real thing." Several years ago, the traveling *Mourners* exhibition was in nearby Dallas. This exhibition included forty sculptures from the fifteenth-century tomb of Burgundian ruler John the Fearless, and was accompanied by a particularly compelling website.[15] This site included large, zoom-able, three-dimensional renditions of each figure in the round. We used 3-D glasses in all of my classes and wore them as each student presented on and thus became intimately familiar with one sculpture in particular. This alternative experience with the sculptures was completely unlike seeing them in person but in some ways was even better, providing a kind of heightened, accelerated, exaggerated version of each figure for us to study and allowing us to see much of what wouldn't have been available in the real time and space of the museum exhibition. Many of those students then got to see the figures while on a departmental field trip, giving them a chance to consider the contrasts between the two forms of experience. Student comments from all of these activities reveal a sense that something more has been achieved: "I

[14] *The Saint John's Bible* [website], 2013: http://www.saintjohnsbible.org/.

[15] *The Mourners: Tomb Sculptures from the Tomb of Burgundy* [website], 2010: http://www.mourners.org/.

gained a new perspective"; "I think I will be able to better appreciate other such buildings that come out of the medieval tradition"; "I really enjoyed getting to see a visual representation of what we've been studying — it gave me a new perspective on the importance that these cathedrals would have had to the people building them"; "it was good to see the effect of light from the stained-glass windows"; "being in the physical environment helped me to absorb the information better"; "I really enjoyed the smell of the church." It does not matter that these experiences were created by spaces, objects, and technologies that are decidedly unmedieval; they facilitated a different kind of looking than can be achieved with 2-D reproductions of medieval things.

In a teaching environment, I envision a scenario where students first see the medieval images on a projection screen at the front of the classroom and don't really get it (especially architecture, which is notoriously difficult to convey in 2-D visual form). Then they are exposed to something contemporary that creates analogous (and arguably authentic) phenomenological responses; they return to class and begin to think about their own experience in relation to medieval viewers and, as a result, understand the medieval object differently. In Tilley's words, I would hope this means that they are "never the same again."[16]

As we think about how this teaching process might inform our scholarly enterprise, we might ask ourselves whether the things we think we are talking about, as art historians, are really our primary objects of study. On the contrary, often we are really talking about the experiences of those objects and spaces (or at least we should be!). Can we move beyond the object — when, as Nabokov says, the object becomes transparent — so that we can get at that experience, authentic regardless of the object under consideration? It is the experience of the thing, not the thing itself, which is worthy of interest.

Indeed, this is corroborated by the scholarly process itself.

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[16] Tilley, *Body and Image*, 39.

After all, we so often must negotiate the absence of the objects of study. And there are certainly cases where that absence has created experiences that are "better" than the real thing. We have all also had the experience of dealing with medieval art in the form of images: zooming in and discovering something in the reproductions that we would not have been able to see in the moment when the object was in front of us.[17] When we want to get at medieval experience, sometimes the best way to see the medieval thing may be to look at something else entirely.

Figure 14. Tightening the skin on the stretcher, The University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, 2008 Research Seminar in "Medieval Manuscript Studies and Contemporary Book Arts: Extreme Materialist Readings of Medieval Books." Photo: author.

[17] Karen Overbey's contribution to this volume is one such example — it is completely facilitated by the photos and video she took while viewing the reliquary.

Figure 15. Sanding the skin in the preparation of parchment, The University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies 2008 Research Seminar: "Medieval Manuscript Studies and Contemporary Book Arts: Extreme Materialist Readings of Medieval Books." Photo: author.

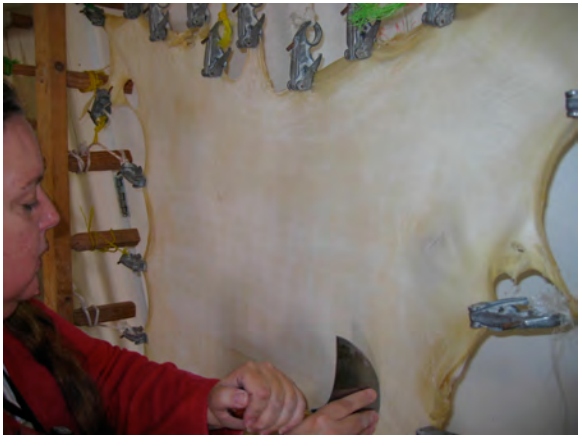

Figure 16. Using a lunellum to prepare parchment, The University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies 2008 Research Seminar in "Medieval Manuscript Studies and Contemporary Book Arts: extreme Materialist Readings of Medieval Books." Photo: author.

Figure 17. The Passion of Saint Margaret, 12th century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm. 1133, fol. 69v-70r. Photo: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Germany.

I had the great fortune to be part of a workshop/seminar a few years ago that was focused on the materiality of medieval manuscripts.[18] It brought together contemporary book artists and medieval scholars, and we spent a good amount of our time over the two weeks thinking about how these things were made. We prepared our own parchment, trimmed and lined our samples, wrote on them with quills and oak-gall ink, and studied different binding techniques through the excellent models at the University of Iowa library [figs. 14-16].[19] We became intimately familiar with smell of treated animal hide, the feeling of being covered by the powder that resulted from

[18] The University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies 2008 Research Seminar in "Medieval Manuscript Studies and Contemporary Book Arts: Extreme Materialist Readings of Medieval Books."

[19] "University of Iowa Libraries Bookbinding Models," *The University of Iowa Libraries* [website], 2013: http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/binding/index.php.

sanding the skins for smoothness, the discovery that this powder was essentially gelatin, which turns into glue when wet; the incredible slowness of every step of the process. And it was an epiphany, one that I enjoy sharing with students in my classes by bringing in samples and insisting that they see the shape of the animal, that they feel the skin. The experience has illuminated every project I have worked on since then, and especially informed my work on one particular manuscript, a version of St. Margaret's Life in Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm. 1133 [fig. 17].[20]

This manuscript is particularly compelling because several of its pages were pointedly, precisely, and violently altered at some point after its creation. Experiencing the production, texture, thickness, and strength of parchment was invaluable to understanding better the kind of effort and tools that might have gone into this book's defacement. Moreover, high-quality scans of the manuscript's pages allowed me to continue to develop that project, prompting new questions, long after I saw the manuscript in person. Examples such as this demonstrate the value of "inauthentic" experiences, be they through modern recreations or new technologies. Indeed, the modern "replica" I made at the workshop helped me to understand the nature of the object in a way the surviving medieval object itself could not.

This kind of approach provokes an experience of one's own presence through the actions that connect at once to the medieval viewer's body. Perhaps this is what all viewers share: simply that it is an experience that multiple individuals might have. This requires a different language, a different way of

[20] Jennifer Borland, "Violence on Vellum: Saint Margaret's Transgressive Body and Its Audience," in *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600-1530*, eds. Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 67–88; and "Unruly Reading: The Consuming Role of Touch in the Experience of a Medieval Manuscript," in *Scraped, Stroked, and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

understanding "evidence" or "proof" in scholarship. It requires an acknowledgement that viewers, at whatever time, help to create an object's meaning. The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has suggested, "the power of images resides in the event of their perception."[21] It is then the experience of that object or image, the moment that it is engaged with by a viewer, which is most significant to the image's impact. Perhaps this is the moment that we can link across time, connecting all viewers through their shared corporeal experiences.

In some sense, then, we ourselves become methodological tools, connecting our present experiences to the past: "we inhabit the present of which the past is a part."[22] Time is collapsed in the present state of the object, which carries with it both the past and present experiences of its users or viewers. These different times in the life of an object fold in onto themselves, allowing the present to engage with the past. As Tilley argues, "first-person experience can be used to gain access to experience of other persons,"[23] both in the present and in the past. I want to be able to use my own experience to think about the medieval person's experience. Indeed, traditional history can even serve as a pronounced distraction from gaining an understanding of experience.

If we accept that authentic experience is not necessarily tied to an authentic object, then the next question may be, how do we create a legitimate method for this? How do we demonstrate that we are learning new and important things from such inquiry? And this is why I have repeatedly turned to the ideas of phenomenology.[24] Phenomenology provides a

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[21] Marilyn Strathern, "Artefacts of History: Events and the Interpretation of Images," in Jukka Siikala, ed., *Culture and History in the Pacific*: *Finnish Anthropological Society Transactions* 27 (1990): 24–44. Cited in Tilley, *Body and Image*, 37.

[22] Tilley, *Body and Image*, 264.

[23] Christopher Y. Tilley, with the assistance of Wayne Bennett, *The Materiality of Stone*: *Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 30.

[24] Jennifer Borland, "Audience and Spatial Experience in the Nuns'

way to find a shared experience, in at least the parts of that experience that are or can be shared: the shared experience of being in a body and the shared experience of such over time. But how do we reconcile this with history?

As Tilley has stated so succinctly, "the aim of phenolmenological analysis . . . involves attempting to exploit the full nature of our language in such a way as to seek the invisible in the visible, the intangible in the tangible."[25] But to return to a question posed earlier, how do we get around the fact that words are often imprecise, imperfect tools for describing what is indescribable? We must grapple with the inevitable privileging of the text in academia, which implies that experience cannot be possibly, or be adequately, educational, much less scholarly. Can experience replace the text? And what are the implications of such a strategy? There are certainly instances when visual or sensory evidence succeeds to communicate where words cannot — we shouldn't disregard such potential. For example, I would love to see what a completely video-based article could do, creating scholarship with no written text at all. New publishing venues may allow for such experiments — let's see if we can move beyond language. Naturally, one of the most compelling things about experiences is also that which makes them so difficult to discuss; they are specific to each person, while also containing much that is shared. Yet at the same time, the desire to share experiences — to find something in common across that vast divide — is incredibly powerful. It seems that the object is the place where that meeting can happen.

Church at Clonmacnoise," in *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives in Medieval Art* (September 2011): 1–45; Borland, "Unruly Reading."

[25] Tilley, *The Materiality of Stone*, 30.

TOUCHED FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME
LOSING MY MANUSCRIPT VIRGINITY

Angela R. Bennett Segler

FRONTMATTER

As you may have gathered from the title, this essay is going to be a bit dirty, and a lot personal; it may likewise contain content inappropriate for young or sensitive readers. With that disclaimer on the table, allow me to frame this project as one that is slightly different from others in this collection. I am not an art historian, a historian, or an object specialist of any kind. In fact, in my field, while *things* aren't exactly forbidden, there is a sort of unspoken taboo against *reading* them. I am a literary scholar in the early stages of my career, and the expectations of my discipline — the translation, editing, and reproduction of medieval texts — make thinking outside the construct of the abstract "text" difficult, if not nearly impossible.[1] Literary scholars are trained to produce

[1] This is not to say that the effort to do materialist readings is not being made whatsoever, just that at the time I first wrote and presented this essay, the currents of the discipline flowed away from this trend. In fact, we are now witnessing the emergence of many

readings: interpretations of existing texts built upon a body of literary, historical, and theoretical knowledge that *originates in other texts*. I, however, have a mite of difficulty doing what I'm *supposed* to do, and I have good deal more difficulty keeping my hands off of things.

The Middle Ages have been, for some centuries now, a space of the rejects, or even the abjects, from modernity; it is the locus for all that we deem irrecoverable, *not*-modern, and (usually) uncivilized.[2] Even within the academic apparatus, what has been recovered, and even rehabilitated in some cases, still often participates in a Hegelian narrative of progress. In the study of medieval literature, the last generation of great editors and scholars[3] were firmly entrenched within a print paradigm dominated by a desire for the "original" that was governed by the myth of the author's intent. Recensional editing attempted to recover the lost whole of the author at the expense of the "spurious intrusions" of other voices onto the medieval work.[4]

"new materialisms."

[2] This is an argument made by Carolyn Dinshaw in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 186, though the conversation about periodization reaches back beyond her work and carries forward from it.

[3] These august individuals' tireless and often thankless work made so many medieval texts available for students and researchers of the next generation, and without them the study of medieval literature would likely be impossible, or at least significantly less organized.

[4] An example of this kind of editing can be seen anywhere there are multiple manuscript copies of the same text. The editorial practices for *Piers Plowman*, for example, actually changed rather little between the late nineteenth century, with Walter Skeat's work, and the late twentieth, with the work of Kane, Donaldson, and Russell. The latter's justification for their editorial practices was better couched, and more carefully positioned against Skeat's obviously nationalist and laureate-culture influenced practices; however, the later editions likewise exclude the communal work of textual production and circulation in their attempt to recover a mythological Langland, who is at the core of the *Piers Plowman* narrative first written by Skeat. See Skeat's introductions to his EETS editions:

Thus, the medieval "text" was produced: streamlined, sterilized, and reference-able. As the *text* — i.e. the Platonic form of any given work that is always, inherently superior to any specific, material copy of it — emerged, the *thing* containing it disappeared. The manuscripts in which these works exist have largely disappeared from the critical conversation in order to allow the "real" or "original" past to shine through the *text*.[5]

William Langland, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman, together with Richard the Redeles*, ed. Rev. W.W. Skeat, vol. 1, EETS o.s. 28 (London: Trübner, 1867); William Langland, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers Plowman together with Vita de Dowel, Dobet and Dobest secundum Wit et Reason*, ed. Rev. W.W. Skeat, vols. 2-4 (London: Trübner, 1881-1885); William Langland, *Piers Plowman (The A Version)*, ed. George Kane (Berkeley: The Athlone Press, 1960); William Langland, *Piers Plowman, The B Version: Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-well, Do-better, and Do-best*, eds. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (Berkely: The Athlone Press, 1975); William Langland, *Piers Plowman, The C Version: Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-well, Do-better, and Do-best*, eds. George Kane and G.H. Russell (Berkeley: The Athlone Press, 1997).

[5] There are, of course, literary scholars who are working on manuscripts. This comment is in no way meant to undermine the contributions of paleographers, codicologists, and art historians who have indeed been working on the manuscript object, even putting its signification in conversation with the other (more traditionally recognized) modes of signifying — words and images. I mean merely to point out that the long tradition of literary scholarship on medieval works has not tended generally toward including these multiple registers. To name a few significant contributions to this work I mention Michael Camille's *Mirror in Parchment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Kathryn Smith's *Art, Identity, and Devotion* (London: British Library, 2003), both of which work through the object, the images, and the text to make meaning; Martha Rust explores the multifold matrix through which the codex accesses symbolic power in *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Mary Carruthers, in *The Book of Memory*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), thoroughly outlines the way in which multiple modes and

When I first encountered this panel entitled "Transparent Things," I was immediately attracted by the opportunity to think seriously about reading more *materially*. The narrative of the transparent thing — the one that disappears on contact, that has no visibility in the physical interaction despite its material presence — is the unsung song of the medieval codex; in a field where the thing disappears altogether too often, this narrative might be re-appropriated, and transparency put to work in the service of making the *thing* visible and the experience of the past all that much more shining.

This essay, then, is an attempt to recover the thing and its significance in a field in which its thingness has so often been elided, to transform the object's invisibility that obscures the specificity of the past into a transparency that retains its presence and allows a less-mediated experience of the contingent past. And so I focus here on touching, rather than just seeing (or especially reading), the material object of the past. Here I deconstruct my print-induced expectations of a medieval book and experience it in a way that is not only unorthodox, but hopefully open to alternate experiences of what this category of objects from the past can offer scholars, even literary ones.

BODY

I'm not going to lie to you about some feigned purity: I've fooled around with manuscripts before, dodging the watchful eyes of the Morgan chaperone, enjoying manuscripts on the edge of the Columbia rare book curator's peripheral vision, lusting after the untouchable silver ink on a deluxe Carolingian beauty who stamped forever my image of what such a medieval codicological belle should be. I've paid to see the supernatural figures of Catherine of Cleves, and I've even had a passing glance at Chaucer while the judgmental librarian disdainfully asked which of us could have possibly

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registers were married in medieval meaning-making because of the inherently memorial nature of medieval culture.

had the base desire to see the Chaucer manuscript. There have even been countless hours surfing the internet, perusing the figures of celebrity psalters, visually feasting on the naked flesh of Books of Hours, mentally tracing the curves of the Lindisfarne Gospels, feeling the delectable pull of the Book of Kells.

I have fantasized, I have desired, and until the fall preceding my doctoral exams, I had never touched, and certainly had not penetrated. In September I headed for Oxford, ostensibly to give a paper at a conference on religion, literature, and culture, but with the secret agenda of a pleasure tourist: staying on extra days, coming early, leaving late so that I could spend some time in the Bodleian looking at anchoritic manuscripts that I thought I knew fairly well from years of research, and a handful of devotional manuscripts that might be relevant to the expanding landscape of my dissertation.

I had expected many things, and as is so often the experience of first times, I got little of what I expected. Upon arrival, I was tested, vetted, and checked out before admitted. I was then sent, not to the Duke Humphreys reading room (the imagined ideal setting for my prom night encounter), but instead to the Radcliffe Science Library's special collections reading room, with its 1970's style interior and rust-orange acoustic-cloth walls. It was in fact a much more business-like arrangement than made me comfortable, and it took some getting used to.

I had also expected to encounter a Barthes-ian erotic body of bliss within the page, one that would adumbrate the shape of the creators as I thumbed the pages of the codices.[6] Instead, what I encountered was a multiplicity of bodies reaching out through the pages. Seeking a lover, I stumbled upon and into an orgy. I ran my hands along the bodies of animals that had given their skins for the production, sometimes one animal for a single bifolium, or two-page opening, supplying the flesh

[6] See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

upon which the artisans acted. I encountered the hands of scribes, the personalities of the little rounded hand of English documentary cursive, the careful, methodical application of pointed gothic letters, the attention (or inattention) to the applied feet elevating the grade of the rotunda to the quadrata.[7] I felt the change of scribe as I turned through the pages, and as one transitioned to the next, it was like changing companions — at first I missed the old one, and all the things I'd gotten used to, and even the faults I had glossed in my memory because I *had* been understanding and now I was deciphering all over again. Then when I got used to the new scribe and the page was once more open and comfortable, I understood new qualities, eccentricities, and preferences.

Figure 1. Oxford, Bodley MS Barlow 47 f. 93. A 15th-century English Book of Hours. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

[7] Grades of gothic text are determined by the consistency, quality, and kind of feet applied to the vertical minims of letters. For more information, see Michelle P. Brown, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) or Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Paleography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Figure 2. Oxford, Bodley MS Laud Latin Liturg. 82 f.236r. An early 14th-century English Book of Hours and Psalter. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

In the more decorated even lavish manuscripts I can feel the illuminator at work. In the smaller books, I find the careful attention to the execution of the smallest details, with the Barlows[8] exhibiting anxiety over clarity while the Laud Latin 82 clearly displays a profusion of illumination exploding in border decoration, miniatures, and tiny grotesques sometimes done in single-hair brushstrokes [figs. 1-2]. As I scrutinize the detail, the tiny figures become more and more

[8] That is Oxford, Bodley MSS Barlow 38, 46, and 47, all of which are small Books of Hours containing varying degrees of modest decoration and very careful, if not very fine, gothic hands.

real; I marvel at the illuminator's eyesight, his[9] dexterity and dedication, the tenacity it must have taken to illuminate over eighty of the roughly two-and-a-half- by three-and-a-half-inch pages. In another volume, there is a different sense of the illuminator's (perhaps) laziness and — ahem — efficiency in a Book of Hours created for the royal house of Edward III: an expensive book, opulently illuminated with miniatures, grotesques, and animal line fillers, and written in an inconsistent, large gothic hand [figs. 3 and 4].

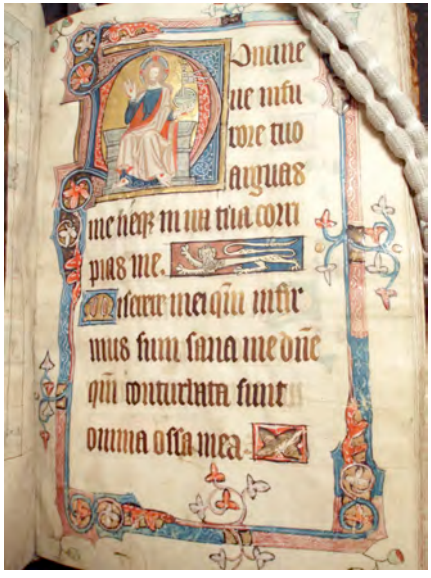

Figure 3. Oxford, Bodley MS Liturg. 104 f. 94r. An English Book of Hours, ca. 1340, likely produced for a member of Edward III's court. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

[9] While I acknowledge that there may have been female scribes and illuminators in England at this juncture, it is considerably more likely that these contributors were all male, so I will be using masculine pronouns to refer to them even while allowing for the possibility of an invisible female contributor.

Figure 4. Oxford Bodley MS Liturg. 104, one of many unfinished border decorations in the body pages between highly illuminated openings. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

The inconsistency of the hand and the sloppiness (even snarkiness) of the illuminations increase as one gets further away from the most trafficked pages — the miniatures, and particularly the historiated initial appearing on the page with Edward's coat of arms. The bishop-headed flying beast appears on folio 44r, well away from 20r's scene depicting the betrayal of Jesus, and at a safe distance from Jesus' face and the vernacular prayers to the five wounds beginning on the recto of 49. By folio 80 the illuminator carelessly slaps in some figures, not finishing all of them and repeating some filler figures from earlier before cleaning up her act again in the area surrounding the penitential psalms. You tell me that the job that illuminator is trying to pull over on the patron is not linked to the personality of the programmer! That artisan was aware of the areas of most traffic in a Book of Hours, and, as the wear on the illuminated pages testifies, he was right to think that no one would likely see his sloppiest work, and that no one's devotions would be disrupted by the inattention

given to pages between miniatures and favored prayers.[10]

Here, and especially in this manuscript, even the donors and patrons are present (or not) in the manuscript's spaces. We find the royal readers of Liturgical MS 104 — and their dirty fingers — on the fancy pages and the vernacular pages, but not in the pages filled with Latin texts and figures critiquing (or at least making some kind of statement about) a church authority. In other manuscripts as well we can find the readers and devotees gravitating toward, and perhaps meditating upon, the well-worn decorated pages marking the beginnings of the individual Hours. The English books with Flemish miniatures and borders, likely made for the bourgeoning bourgeoisie [as in fig. 5], were clearly meditative (and even speculative) objects rather than devotional guides designed to take the reader/pray-er through the Latin prayers themselves. The smaller, more portable Books of Hours [fig. 6] displayed their more constant use in greater wear, much more filthy pages, and the disappearance of color, vellum/parchment, and binding material. In some books, the generations of families and usage are felt not only in the family tree (as in MS Wood C.12, fig. 7), but also in the insertion of marginalia, careful maniculae, and later drawings — a St. George, for example, in the Edward manuscript, some saint's portrayals, doodles, and chivalric drawings in the Whetenhall Psalter [fig. 8]. Faces rubbed out and names scrawled in the margins (as late as the eighteenth century) likewise mark the presence of the readers, and their disparate attitudes towards the codices themselves.

These touches were unexpected — nothing like the aura or singularity I had anticipated experiencing.[11] I was not awed by

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[10] For a quantitative study of readers' dirt see Kathryn Rudy's "Dirty Books: Quantifying Patterns of Use in Medieval Manuscripts Using a Densitometer," in *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, vol. 2, nos. 1–2 (2010); doi:10.5092/jhna.2010.2.1.1.

[11] This was an expectation based on Walter Benjamin's description of the aura of an original artwork in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–252.

the object as a masterminded work of art, I did not even find the originally intended reader anywhere; I was instead incorporated into the codex's communal production and presence.[12] I, too, became one of the bodies reaching through that manuscript into its purview and its future community. I experienced the presence of all the people, animals, and things that touched, or *were*, the fleshly page. I found not just the hands of the anchorite that I had *come* to touch: it was the hands of the readers, their personalities and regard (or disregard as the case may be), the illuminators' reverence (or lack thereof), the scribes' method and breakdown, the interplay of the hands in/on the manuscript all touching my own, taking vitality from my lividity and putting it back into the page to keep it supple and living for future readers.

Figure 5. Oxford Bodley MS Liturg. 401 ff. 7v-8r. This is a 15th-century Book of Hours with Flemish borders and miniatures and English text. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

[12] See Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, for work on the communal nature of both composition and book production in the Middle Ages.

Figure 6. Oxford Bodley MS Liturg. 186 ff. 38v-39r. A particularly dirty opening of an early 15th-century English Book of Hours. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

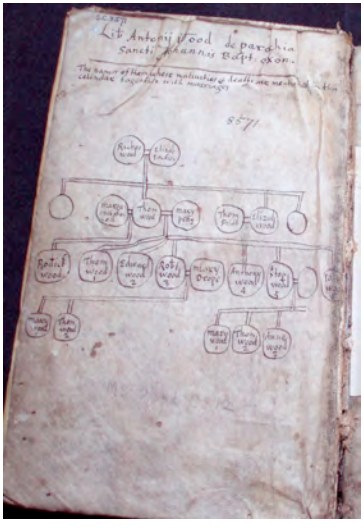

Figure 7. Oxford Bodley MS Wood C.12. A family tree written onto the front paste down of this late 15th-century English Book of Hours. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

Figure 8. Oxford Bodley MS Don. d. 85 f. 1r. The arms of Whetenhal added to this early 15th-century Psalter. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

Figure 9. Oxford Bodley MS Liturg. 299 ff. 22v-23r. A great example of later marginal additions; early 15th-century English Book of Hours. Photo: author; used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

I had expected a claustrophilic enclosure.[13] I was prepared for the texts to touch me, but what I found was a material, embodied opening: openings in the touch of the codex, the material object containing the erotic body of the textual/codicological performance that I hadn't even seen for the pornographic wrapper containing it. I had expected to reverently hold hands with my anchorites in a chaste, familiar love. Instead, the desire for and of the codex took over, and I was driven into a frenzied repetition of first encounters, this one and that, until I was indiscriminately shelfmarking as fast and frequently as I could, touching as many as the library would let me. I ploughed through my orgy of manuscripts: Breviaries, fragments, Psalters, even an enormous Missal that was so huge it required its own table. The more I looked, the harder satisfaction came as my appetite became voracious and the time I had allotted began to dwindle.

I walked away, not with questions answered and riddles solved, but with a chaotic explosion of new questions, new explorations, new needs to touch again. The text will never be the same for me after the codex. Meaning will never inhere solely in the phallogocentric sign again. The page will never be blank.

This experience of the embodied "text" — an inadequate appellation — "erupted across the centuries"[14] to envelop me within an experience of contemporaneity between touching, brushing bodies. The codex community dissolved my subjectivity within its collective objectivity, breaking down everything I perceived to separate me from the past, the text, the manuscript itself; it also completely displaced any potential desire for lost wholeness and plenitude that a nostalgic being would project onto the past for her own fetishistic aims. Instead, the codex escapes the phallic linguistic economy, not

[13] Akin to that articulated in Cary Howie's *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[14] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

by being strictly independent of it, since there are after all, words on these pages, but rather by operating tangentially to the phallogos and engaging methods of communication — or perhaps communing — in which the gap between sign and signified is closed or non-existent: it says what it is.

The touch avoids nomination, the Babel paradox, and instead inhabits the forbidden space of language that *is*. Babel itself is a naming that is not a name; it is a dissolution of identity in a multiplicity of languages. A codex creates, supports, *is* a synchronous Babel community that allows participants to reach the knowledge of God — an eternal, atemporal, non-linguistic knowledge that *is*, where sign and signified are not separate.[15] (Perhaps this is only another description of bliss — an experience of wholeness and plenitude outside lack or even desire.) The touch of the manuscript flesh occupies the cohabitation of languages — or signifying economies — in a side-by-side existence that is a condition of the experience of *jouissance*. Here, as Barthes mentions a time or two, the name does not cross the text's lips, nor does it cross the signifying apparatus of the manu-script in any way; the nomination — the naming of the/a subject, the agent, the specific — is instead fragmented into the discernible, unreconstructible pieces, and it is these pieces, these anonymous fragments that lacerate the bodies incarnate in the manuscript flesh itself and dissolve subjectivity into the anonymity of participatory community. I become one of the unnamed participants in the manuscript — no future reader will know my name, but he or she will certainly feel my presence alongside the other bodies touching the pages, my fingers caressing theirs and his and hers as well.

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[15] This thought draws upon the vocabularies developed first by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations,* and then picked up by both Paul de Man, "Conclusions: On the Task of the Translator," in "50 Years of Yale French Studies: A Commemorative Anthology. Part 2: 1980-1998," special issue, *Yale French Studies* 97 (2000): 10–35, and Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–248.

In his attempt to hypothesize an aesthetic of textual pleasure, Barthes implicates the voice, the speaking of such a text so that the "grain of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language" can "make us hear in [its] materiality, [its] sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence of the human muzzle . . . to succeed in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the [human] into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss."[16] To extend his logic, I say that the roughness of the hands, the dirt under the fingernails, the haze in the clouded and fatigued eyes, the creaks in the hunched backs "speak" with timbre through the touching object itself. The edges of those lives, the seam, the appearance-just-to-become-disappearance of those bodies cuts through the pages, the distance, the ages; it lacerates the ostensibly homogeneous flow of time and the subject/reader-become-object in order to allow the once-subject self to flow into the contingent community of this object, to have a transparent experience not of history but the ongoing moment of the object's community.

FLYLEAVES

By way of some closure, I just want to point toward the potential for such an embodied and non-linguistic (and certainly not scholarly or "objective") engagement with the Middle Ages open to those who are inherently touchers — ones with the need to touch, to feel, to experience, to penetrate and be penetrated. I think the shift away from the need for a unified source, identity, or text and towards a more multiple and fragmented consciousness creates only more opportunities to allow the voices and bodies of manuscripts to challenge the symbolic order's monopoly on literary meaning-making. Drawing our eyes away from the illusion of a Platonic form, *literature* can allow us to rediscover the idiosyncrasies,

[16] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 66–67.

eccentricities, and contingencies of the past by *touching* objects rather than *reading* abstractions. Moreover, it can allow the past to touch us, to fall through the surface of the thing into *our* moment, to be contemporaneous and continuous rather than distant, irretrievable, and sterile.

Close encounters with luminous objects
Reflections on studying stained glass

Nancy M. Thompson

Figure 1. Detail of the figure of St. Jerome from the stained-glass window in the Bardi di Vernio chapel in Santa Croce, Florence. 1320s. Photograph taken by the author from the restorers' scaffolding in 1997.

I have an almost religious reverence for the objects that I study.[1] When I come into close contact with a stained-glass

[1] I thank Maggie Williams for encouraging me to write this essay and the members of the Material Collective for their thoughtful feedback

window that I am researching, I am in awe. For one, the windows are most often in high places, *in situ*, where they were intended to be, and to inspect them closely I need binoculars. For an art historian who seeks to understand what objects meant in context, this is a good thing. But it also means that all of the windows I have examined closely, without the aid of magnification, have been under restoration and either covered up by scaffolding that allowed me close access to the window or in a restorer's studio. I remember these moments of close contact distinctly because they are so rare and intimate. Fourteenth-century glass viewed and (secretly) touched from a restorer's scaffolding, allowing me to imagine the centuries of hands that have also touched that cool rippled surface [fig. 1]. A dismantled and de-leaded thirteenth-century window studied with my scholarly grandmother on a light table in a restorer's studio in Siena.[2] Another fourteenth-century window with restorations by a nineteenth-century revivalist viewed closely and photographed in a Florentine studio built by a student of the very revivalist who restored the window [fig. 2].[3] And, a long afternoon spent completely alone on the exterior scaffolding in the courtyard behind Santa Croce, inspecting almost every

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and suggestions. I also thank my dear husband Gregory Luce, who edited both the text and images.

[2] The results of the restoration of Duccio's window in the Siena cathedral are published in Marilena Caciorgna, Roberto Guerrini, and Mario Lorenzoni, eds. *Oculus Cordis: La vetrata di Duccio: stile, iconografia, indagini tecniche, restauro*. (Siena: Opera della Metropolitana, 2007).

[3] For more on the studio founded by Guido Pollini in 1919 in Florence, see Francesco Gurrieri, Alessia Lenzi and Alessandro Becattini, *L'officina dei maestri vetrai: La 'bottega' dei Polloni a Firenze* (Florence: Polistampa, 2003). To visit the Polloni studio, find information on their website: http://pollonivetrate.it/. On Ulisse De Matteis (ca. 1827-1910), the mentor of Guido Polloni, see Nancy Thompson, "The State of Stained Glass in Nineteenth-Century Italy: Ulisse De Matteis and the *vitrail archéologique*," *Journal of Glass Studies* 52 (2010): 217–231.

piece of glass in a window to distinguish the medieval pieces from the modern [fig. 3] For an art historian who spends a lot of time sitting on church pews and digging through archives, these moments of visual and physical contact — so different in nature from the original viewing experiences — are revelatory.

Figure 2. Detail of the figure of St. Bartholomew from the stained-glass window in the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce, Florence, ca. 1325. Ulisse De Matteis (Florence ca. 1827-1910) restored the window in 1869 and created a new face and beard for Bartholomew. Photograph taken by the author in 2003 while the window was under restoration in the Polloni studio in Florence.

How do these moments shape my interpretations of the objects that I study, shape me as a scholar, as an art historian? I can easily translate these exhilarating encounters into dynamic teaching; my enthusiasm for the objects translates into an enthusiasm in the classroom that ignites intellectual curiosity in my students. But in terms of my scholarship? In terms of the stories that I write concerning the objects for a scholarly audience? Do these close encounters make me a

better art historian? Do they make the story more real, more human? Yes, of course, I want to say. But *how*?

Figure 3. Detail of the exterior of the Bardi di Vernio window in Santa Croce. The smudges all over the window are the result of the first general cleaning of the window by the Polloni studio. The piece of glass at the left of the photograph, just above the metal tie-rod, is pitted from age and pollution. The newest piece of glass is the small triangular piece just below the tie-rod at the center-right of the photograph. Taken by the author from the restorers' scaffolding in 1997.

Figure 4. Detail of the Baroncelli chapel window border. The numerini are visible just to the right of the top part of the yellow leaf's central vein and at the top right tip of the green leaf. Taken by the author in 2003 while the window was under restoration by the Polloni studio.

For one, close encounters with stained-glass windows prompt me to think about the people who made them and to consider specific details about process. It is only from scaffolding that I can see the tiny numbers painted on the small, decorative elements of a medieval window.

These *numerini* give me a glimpse into the assembly line process of constructing these large, complex works of art in a medieval workshop [fig. 4]. I can imagine the glassworker — most probably male — who dipped his blowpipe in a crucible of molten glass, spun the glass into a cylinder and then gently cut and flattened it into a panel as it cooled. A workshop

assistant cut through the irregular surface of the glass with a hot, lead point and formed the piece of glass I see before me. Then, in my mind, I envision the master of the workshop painting the detailed decoration and figural imagery on the colored glass surface with a dark vitreous pigment. The small numbers painted on the individual pieces then guide the artisans to lead the luminous colored pieces into a decorative whole.[4]

The object, this whole formed by so many small pieces of glass, has a physical history, and this history becomes visible only on close inspection. When I touch my nose to a window, I can see the pits that pollution has etched into the glass and the film that centuries of burning candles and incense have glued onto the glass surface. And when I let my imagination take over, I can see the young novitiate who flung a rock at the window and created the spider-webbing of lead that now shoots through the once-solid piece of colored glass. With practice and experience, I can now see the hands of the various restorers who, with most likely good intentions, over-cleaned the surface and removed pigment, or replaced medieval fragments with newly painted but stylistically anomalous hands and faces [fig. 5].

As Nabokov writes, my encounters with windows force me to "involuntarily sink . . . into the history of that object" and reflect not only on the physical history of the window, but also on the object's conceptual significance. My scholarly training leads me to reconstruct an original artistic, political or religious context for the window and speculate about what kinds of meanings it conveyed to a fourteenth- or nineteenth-century audience. I tend to get bogged down in historical and theological detail; in fact, now that I think about it, I recently spent a delightful month researching the history of the

[4] My understanding of the process of making stained glass in medieval Italy is informed by the late fourteenth-century treatise on stained glass by Antonio da Pisa. See Claudine Lautier, ed., *Antoine de Pise: L'art du vitrail vers 1400*. In *Corpus Vitrearum France Etudes* 8 (Paris: Ed. du CTHS, 2008).

doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in order to flesh out the footnotes for two pages of an article I am writing. While writing about this nineteenth-century window of the Immaculate Conception [fig. 6], I became wrapped in even more layers of history. What did the nineteenth-century glazier think about the medieval windows he emulated in his own work? What were the theological and political motivations behind the window's obscure iconography? How do I, a twenty-first-century woman, interpret this nineteenth-century interpretation of the fourteenth-century? This kind of historical speculation drives my thinking when I am in an office or library. And it takes me further and further away from the object itself.

Figure 5. Detail of the St. Stephen window in the Cathedral of Florence. 15th-century. Ulisse De Matteis restored the severely damaged window in 1870 by leading together small fragments of the original glass and creating new pieces to replace those beyond repair. De Matteis' work is most evident in the completely remade faces and hands of the two saints. Photograph taken by author from the floor of Florence Cathedral.

Figure 6. Detail of the Immaculate Conception window in the Spinelli-Sloane chapel in Santa Croce, created by Ulisse De Matteis in 1869. Photo: author.

Sometimes when I am immersed in the historical past, I am reminded of an article I assign my students about the eighteenth-century art historian Johann Winckelmann. In this essay, Whitney Davis argues that, in his study of Greek art, Winckelmann demonstrates a longing for the Greek past when homosexual love was noble and good.[5] While I wouldn't say that I long to *live* in a Florentine past, I do long to understand what my imagined medieval Franciscans thought about the windows in their worshipping space, what they thought about the images in the windows, what the colorful, dark light meant to them. I search for evidence in theological writings. I search in newspaper articles and essays for evidence of what nineteenth-century people thought about the Middle Ages, about their ideas of what the medieval artist was like, how they thought that they were actually reviving the past, or even re-living the past in their neo-medieval stained-glass workshops. In these historical imaginings, I sometimes turn romantic. In the tradition of Horace Walpole or, more recently, Sarah Dunant, I find myself scripting a historical novel that fills in all the detail that I cannot verify in documents or images.

But when I come back to the object, when I remember what it feels like to run my finger along the irregular glass surface and see the vibrant blue cast onto my arm by the sun, I am reminded that a stained glass window is more than the history and meaning I create for it. It exists in the present; it is at its most basic a luminous and brilliantly colored screen that protects an interior sacred world from the elements; it is also, as Abbot Suger implies, akin to colored gems that recall the mystical world of Revelations (if you're into that kind of thing); it is, as St. Bernard believed, an unbroken membrane analogous to the Virgin's hymen; it has true anagogical power. This ascension up Plato's ladder of love, so to speak, evokes feelings that can be often hard for me to put into words. At these moments of experiencing the physical object, the real or

[5] Whitney Davis, "Winckelmann Divided: Mourning the Death of Art History," *Journal of Homosexuality* 27, nos. 1-2 (1994): 141–160.

imagined historical past is remote. But at these moments of what I call "art overwhelmtion" (the phenomenon of being emotionally and spiritually transported by viewing a work of art), I am also taken away, as was Suger, from the transparent stained-glass window itself to a metaphysical level of thinking and experiencing.

Might my metaphysical transportation be akin to what a medieval person felt or thought when she experienced a stained-glass window? Somehow my transformative experiences in the presence of stained glass have felt Franciscan to me. Perhaps that's because my scholarly focus has been Franciscan art; but after further thought and research, I found that my hunch was more than speculation. Upon a close reading of St. Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God* for a course I was teaching, I realized that, in the seraphic doctor's theology, light forms, transforms and unites the physical world. In the tradition of Plato and the pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure saw the sensory perception of light as a means to attain a spiritual connection with the Divine. Might his theology of light have prompted the Franciscan Order to begin the decoration of the upper church in Assisi, the titular church of their order, with stained-glass windows? I think this was indeed the case.[6]

Must we, as Nabokov says, peel away the layers of history to appreciate the object in the present? Probably. But when I am in the presence of a window and can, as much as a historian can, experience it in the present, I can more sensitively construct the window's historical meaning. I notice things through close observation; I take in all the details, the *numerini* on the border pieces of medieval windows, for example, that go into an object's creation. The longing to

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[6] I developed this idea in a paper entiled "The Franciscans and Stained Glass in Tuscany and Umbria," presented at the 46th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 12-15, 2011. The paper is forthcoming in the volume *Word and Deed*, eds. Sally Cornelison, Nirit Debby, and Peter Howard (Brepols, 2014).

connect to the past, not unlike Winckelmann's longing to live the Greek past he so ably constructs, can be somewhat satisfied, I think, by having intense and spiritual moments of connection to an object. And this connection has allowed me to imagine what viewing a stained-glass window might have been like for a medieval person and to explore a more nuanced and experiential interpretation of the medium. Close encounters with stained glass, then, allow me to be finely tuned to the intricacies of a work of art in the present, and make me a more sensitive interpreter of the object's past.

The Material Collective is a collaborative of art historians and students of visual culture who seek to foster a safe space for alternative ways of thinking about objects. Our project touches upon both form and content, as we pursue a lyrical and experimental style of writing along with a more humane, collaborative, and supportive process of scholarship. We encourage spontaneity in writing art history, including an acknowledgement of our subject positions; therefore we embrace the incorporation of personal narrative and reflection in our historical interpretations. Our specific interests vary, but we are all committed to prioritizing the materiality of things, the relationships between those things and the human beings who experience them, and the intimacy of past and present moments in time. As we celebrate, dwell in, and embrace the basic materiality of our objects, we work to find ways to foreground the material of the objects themselves into larger historical analysis. Central to this effort is a desire to support each other as we attempt to create experimental approaches, and to embrace both the successes and potential failures of our ventures into new ways of thinking. We are as much a support group as a scholarly group. We share the joys and sorrows of career, life, and our academic work.

http://thematerialcollective.org

Transparent Things: A Cabinet

Edited by Maggie M. Williams and Karen Eileen Overbey

Inspired by a passage in Vladmir Nabokov's *Transparent Things* (1972), and also written as a future love letter to The Material Collective (http://thematerialcollective.org), the essays collected here play with the transparency of pedagogy, scholarship, and writing, as well as with objects that can be seen through, such as crystals and stained glass. As Nabokov wrote,

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!

For the art and literary historians gathered together in this volume (Angela Bennett Segler, Jennifer Borland, Karen Eileen Overbey, Nancy Thompson, and Maggie M. Williams), all students of medieval material, these tensions between surface and depth, present and past, concentration and skimming are all too familiar. The inherent contradictions of medieval objects, their irreducibility to either the purely intellectual or the merely physical, are at once the delights and the dangers of the art historian's and materialist's work. This book thus offeres a dialogue on the question of how our encounters with physical things spark a process and how objects might allow unique collisions between the past and the present, the human and the inanimate, the practice of history and lived experience. As works of medieval studies or art history, these essays are incomplete, awkward, and provisional. Some of them may even read like embarrassing teenage poetry. This collection is like that dusty box in the basement: it is full of raw, unedited, transparent expressions of affect, of the sort we have learned to hide.

punctum books
spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion