Part 2

Byzantine Things in the World: Animating Museum Spaces

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Chapter 3

PRELUDE ON TRANSFIGURING EXHIBITION

Exhibition is a difficult thing. It means selecting and installing and arguing, and it is improvisational, a way things on display also show their ongoing precocity and autonomy. I wrote the following text in the months before *Byzantine Things in the World* opened at the Menil Collection in Houston, and this text was the gallery guide for the show. The exhibition ran from May 3 to August 18, 2013. The Menil provides very little verbal guidance to visitors, and no wall texts (beyond title and sponsors, and very basic wall labels) were included. For those who did not purchase the catalogue and who still wanted some information, this text written for the gallery guide was the only real resource. I include this text here in order the provide a prelude to the chapter following, because some of the arguments presented here were preliminary, as it turned out, and they needed more careful consideration after spending the summer of 2013, on and off, in Byzantine things' company.

Byzantine Things in the World Gallery Guide (March 2, 2013)

Byzantine things do work and act in the world in ways that art never can. On the one hand, Byzantine *art* concerns the aesthetic qualities of such objects, the exquisite qualities that allow them to be displayed and hung like easel paintings done by Titian or Ingres. On the other hand, things perform actively in the world and change all the other things (and here people are included) in their vicinity. They are not inert and passive, waiting to be seen by a person standing in front of them (though the things here will appear, in some ways, to be waiting, too—they're not). The company things keep often determines that appearance of attendance on our gallery-going attention.

Defined by our notions of discrete culture and chronological periods, Byzantine *art* falls into a larger system that we devised to order the past; and so we parallel Byzantine with Romanesque and Gothic from Western Europe, and those three categories precede the Renaissance—thus *medieval*, the long "middle age" between antiquity and its "rediscovery." But those categories for the past, however convenient they are for us, also distort those cultures and often force them to resemble us more than they in fact do. This exhibition offers the first opportunity, to my knowledge, to see Byzantine things outside of that environment that we made for them. It doesn't claim that this environment is natural to these things, either, but it aims to allow the things to speak in new ways that are unfettered by our insistence on Byzantine things belonging to a distinct set of rooms or cases in our chronologically ordered museums.

So, conversations that are open in this exhibition should lead to new experiences of this culture's made things. They aren't about Byzantium as a new modernism (and yet Matisse closely studied Byzantine coins, de Kooning compared New York City to Constantinople, and Mark Rothko was deeply sensitive to the Byzantine monuments he saw in and around Venice). They are partly about ways that modernism allows us to see new

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aspects in Byzantine culture. So, Barnett Newman knew about ideals of the Byzantine world, and his *Onement* series may owe its inspiration to writings by Matisse's son-in-law, Georges Duthuit. But his modelling of body to work, the zip or vertical line running through the centre of the painting in the exhibition, concerns the viewing body being called back to itself by the painting. In that way, bodies before Byzantine things were always completed by facing bodies on these painted panels, like Onuphrios here, that determined and dictated how a viewer became more fully an orthodox body before it.

Likewise, this conversation between modernism and these things lead one to know aspects of the material world for Byzantines that we think should be natural and self-evident—but never are, since we are in many ways an exception to how humans have encountered the world in the past. In the first place, Byzantines understood the world to be composed of a constituent form that is present in almost all reality: the cross. From face to outstretched arms to ships' masts, the cross defined the world, like an essential building block, which was recognized only after the Incarnation of Christ. The swirl of crosses and the deeply embedded crosses in the Ad Reinhardt here speak about surface and depth of that ever-latent form that promised salvation to all who could see it and *do* the cross, in prayer for example; and likewise wearing these crosses on one's body is a reminder and recapitulation and catalyst to *be* the cross in one's life.

Gold is another aspect of the Byzantine world that would appear transparent to us in its work and meaning. Our geology lets us know that gold is a precious, inert metal that is also highly workable. Its symbol as chemical element is Au, after *aurum*, in Latin, dawn's first glow, which also recalls Homer's "rosy-fingered" and Paul the Silentiary's variation for Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, "rosy-ankled." Those descriptive terms come closer to getting at the way Byzantines understood gold, as a potentially living element in the world that brought its animate and animating qualities to every thing it made. The Byzantine gold box is a tiny treasure, and yet it worked oversized to its scale. It contained, likely, a relic of a saint, a remnant of a holy person deeply saturated with the divine, and both box and bone were real presences. Not just a reminder in a suitably beautiful setting, these things (only the box remains—it's empty) were also living agents of the divine in world. The saint was truly there, in the same way that gold was a living element: Byzantines, like Greeks and Romans before them, understood minerals and ores to be living features of the world, not living like us, but much slower and older, literally a kind of nearly frozen blood in the earth with different rhythms and paces than our blood, but not dissimilar in essence.

Gold demonstrates its animate nature through its material qualities, and so the deep luminosity it raises is like dawn's body, her lambent ankles and fingers. Such things never get to show themselves this way any longer, but the company here lets the box glow closer to a natural state. Klein, Rauschenberg, and Byars are good company for this miniature thing; they produced giants to this miniature, but their conversation is held through their deeply open halations. They absorb and reflect, they pull one in, and their glowing fields include one. The box, despite fighting in a lower weight class, still gives as good as it gets. It is the one animate thing in the room, except for visitors, and its life is irrepressible once it's allowed to say so.

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African objects also tread a fine line between art and thing, and perhaps their balancing act in Western museums provides a good model for how like-minded Byzantine things ought to be treated. The *boli* is both inside and outside of container, for example, and it operated as a full participant in its culture. The charismatic materiality of the thing cannot be ignored, wherever it lives, and it worked out its performance through its powerful agglomeration. Byzantine relics and reliquaries and the whole multimedia environment that serviced them can't be replicated here any more than the *boli*'s environment can be. But the intensity of their effects is still bodied forth for any viewer who takes the time and attentiveness for that embodied encounter.

That larger world of bodies or things is an open field where all things interacted and acted on each other. This world is a kind of animism, where the Byzantines' New Economy, initiated after the Incarnation of God on earth, distributed God's energies, presences, and flows throughout creation. In Byzantium, each living thing and every such thing in this exhibition can still be strong currency. However we choose to classify them, these things still circulate and make new relations among themselves and other things. This exhibition asks that we recognize that economy and, perhaps, enter into a newly enchanted relation with our own world.

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Chapter 4

TRANSFIGURING MATERIALITIES: RELATIONAL ABSTRACTION IN BYZANTIUM AND ITS EXHIBITION

I ATTEMPTED AN argument about how analogical, anachronic exhibition revealed a comprehension, or rather perception, of the Byzantine objects in *Byzantine Things in the World*, a perception that such things could not provide under normal conditions, neither through conventional display nor in isolated study. The eponymous book accompanying the exhibition tried to make arguments for certain readings of and positions against those objects, but those arguments necessarily preceded the exhibition itself. What forcefully emerged, and what I will proceed to describe and argue below, is that the objects argued for their own fluidarity, to use Félix Guattari's term from *The Three Ecologies*—that their worlds could be united in a flux that we can only now retrieve, imagine, and explain historically through these objects' dynamic showing of their inner lives.[1] So the goal here is to describe and to explain what the objects did and showed during the exhibition and in particular how the exhibition demonstrated alchemy, in the literal sense of showing the mutability, interconnectedness, and irreducible fluidarity of things that ancient and medieval alchemy so energetically concerned itself with and explained so provisionally. Alchemy emerged forcefully not only as a magical element within our experience as visitors to the show, but also as a historical way to explain material conditions of these objects perceptible only in that environment. Alchemy revealed a fundamental understanding in that world, its belief in the essential relationships of matter in which we all share.

In their characteristic ways, objects abstract themselves under varying conditions. Lambent materials such as gold and silver reflect and absorb light to the degree that individual qualities of colour and texture shift to sheen and generalization. Figuration loses its identity in objects, and regardless of iconographic content, the integrity of the object is always lost under sensual scrutiny of the user, holder, and/or viewer. Where integrity dissolves, transforming relations among objects and human subjects come into play.[2]

This book uses abstraction as a guiding principle for alchemical exhibition in two ways, and it does so in accordance with—however hoary the conceit—meanings made available by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). In the first place, it examines these Byzantine objects abstractly, that is to say, it regards an object: "independently of its

1 "Fluidarity" is adapted from Guattari 2000; see 54, where he signals his indebtedness to Gregory Bateson. See Bateson 2000, 339: "In a word, schizophrenia, deuteron-learning, and the double bind ceases to be a matter of individual psychology and become part of the ecology of ideas in systems or 'minds' whose boundaries no longer coincide with the skins of the participant individuals."

2 My position resists any such allegorization as argued for, say, in Kessler, 2011.

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associations or attributes, and isolating properties or characteristics common to a number of diverse objects, events, etc., without reference to the peculiar properties of particular examples or instances." This approach to abstraction runs the risk of essentializing matter and experience in the Byzantine world, but it aims to examine objects for their realizations of the irreducible encounter among a thing and its materials, maker(s) and subject(s). In the second place, this book seeks to undermine assumptions about representation, that is *re*-presentation, that are so natural to us (to generalize, of course). It takes a position, in this way, divergent from a Platonic understanding of images standing in diminishing authenticity as they proceed away from the prototype or model; in other words, a portrait is *not* a lesser version of a discrete human subject. My position thus follows another definition of abstraction literally: "freedom from or absence of representational qualities; a style or method characterized by this freedom." So examining these Byzantine objects abstractly entails no representational qualities, in the sense of there being no figuration needed on an object, but also no representation involved even if figures are present: some of the object's meaning may derive from reference to a prototype, but the life and agency it possesses are limited to the object itself at an essential level of its signifying work. This position is the freedom of non-re-presentation, an attempted move away altogether from human-centred, human-determined perception and away from dichotomies such as abstraction and figuration.[3]

Animism and the Atomic Principle

The particular relation in play among objects and persons in late antiquity and Byzantium was a Christian animism. Despite the protestations of theologians in their always-interested texts, that world revealed itself to be fully open and transformative, when looked at with the "right questions" in mind.[4] It is evoked in the "atomic principle" described by Flann O'Brien (pseudonym of Brian O'Nolan) in his posthumously published novel *The Third Policeman* (1967).[5] The principle holds that like makes like, so in the logic of that book, someone who persistently stands with one foot resting against a wall will idle themselves into a state of a bicycle resting on its kickstand—and become a bicycle, literally. Too much idling in this way leads to a transformation, a sympathetic union of natures, that makes like things more obviously similar to themselves in the world.

The cross operated in late antiquity on the atomic principle in the sense of providing a permeable form by which like, the originary Christ, can make like—Christian believers. Believers simply needed to find physical unity with that essential form of a Christian universe, the cross, either through prayer or other attitudes or gestures that made alike forms find unification among themselves.[6]

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3 See the incisive remarks in Siegel 2013.

4 On the disciplinary, productive tensions between theology and religion, see Helmer 2012.

5 Similar ideas are also in O'Brien's *The Dalkey Archive* (1964).

6 See Peers 2013, 67–69, for example.

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Objects, too, themselves declared this "atomic principle" and were active in creating such passages from person to the divine.[7] The range of states along which the principle operates runs in both directions, from humans to things and back again. The bidirectional quality means bikes and men share potentialities between them, and self-othering can occur across ontologies. Objects, including facets of monuments, could enter into sets of relations with their full environments that constantly transformed subjects. Abstraction in the senses already described was deeply invested and operational in materiality here, and it never worked to absent object or subject; it is not transcendent, but fundamentally of the world saturated by God's Incarnation. So the spectrum of transformation is not direct always, as in man to bike, but a larger array of potentialities in which subjects, objects, things, could engage in constant like-minded alterations toward God.

Objects had venerable models for acting out. That ability was always latent, but things did such work frequently. Scholars have often tried to explain away these aspects of objects' work in Byzantium by ascribing any mention of such work in the sources as superstition or textual error. However, both explanations infantilize human reactions to objects in Byzantium or privilege accidents of preservation and transmission over real human knowledge of the world those people lived in. They are neither relevant nor true for explaining any significant aspect of that culture. Such have been the explanations, for instance, of the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter*, a fascinating third-century (?) text. In it, the cross on which Christ was crucified makes a dramatic appearance at the moment of the discovery of the empty tomb, and it has a speaking part. In the first place, the stone appears to withdraw itself to make way for the advance guard that announces the remarkable news to the soldiers. Then a voice from heaven speaks to the cross, who emerges from the tomb and declares its speech capacity:

> And they saw the heavens were being open, and two men descended from there, having much brightness, and they drew near to the tomb. But that stone which had been placed at the entrance rolled away by itself and made way in part and the tomb was opened and both the young men went in. Then those soldiers seeing it awoke the centurion and the elders, for they were present also keeping guard. While they were reporting what they had seen, again they saw coming out from the tomb three men, and the two were supporting the one, and a cross following them. And the head of the two reached as far as heaven, but that of the one being led by them surpassed the heavens. And they were hearing a voice from the heaven saying, 'Have you preached to those who sleep?' And a response was heard from the cross, 'Yes.'[8]

Not to overburden this text by forcing it to say more than it does or by overrepresenting its explanatory power, this passage is a remarkable and not atypical description of the ways in which objects, things—but also the stone that rolls itself away—that are to us inert and passive are shown to be alive and participatory in the world. Taken at its word, the text reveals a strong tendency in that culture to enchant its world.

7 See Basl and Sandler 2013, who argue artifacts' "good of their own" is counterintuitive, though one might have to begin taking what is good for artifacts into account in all of one's practical and moral deliberations: "After all, artifacts are created to serve our purposes, and if we choose to act in ways that are detrimental to them, why should that matter?"

8 See Foster 2010, 202–3 (9.36–10.42), Foster 2013, 89–104, and Foster 2008, 30–42.

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Figure 11. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

And ways to rediscover that enchantment are also available to us in exhibitions. *Byzantine Things in the World* attempted that quixotic task through conversations among diverse works of art and through evocative display. In the first room of the show, a painting by Ad Reinhardt, with its crosses latent on and in its one-note tonality, and another with the overtly Christian mirror crosses by Robert Rauschenberg, revealed the diverse ways crosses emerge and make themselves perceptible and engaged (Figure 11). Likewise, a novalike explosion of crosses on the wall facing the exhibition entrance demonstrated the spread and density—and beauty—of that simple form, constituent of all Christian reality. The single standing cross by Jim Dine on the left-hand side of the wall likewise abstracted that shape, stated the essential form, while insisting on its particularity in itself. One encountered how to see a world motivated and moved by the intersection/intercession of these perpendicular lines. Relation with and among these forms is a fully human way to enter into communication with the divine—or just with the world, to place that project into Menilian practice and ambitions. It happens through abstraction, a reduction to essence in the repetition of the cross form and in the consistent lack of figuration.

Some of the experiences of conceiving and mounting an exhibition that related to these arguments for a certain kind of understanding of late antique and Byzantine materiality inform my position in this book. They showed alchemy in action. One of the key conceits of the exhibition was showing Byzantine objects in novel juxtapositions with modern and non-Western art. Another queried the ways we often encounter historical

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Figure 12. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

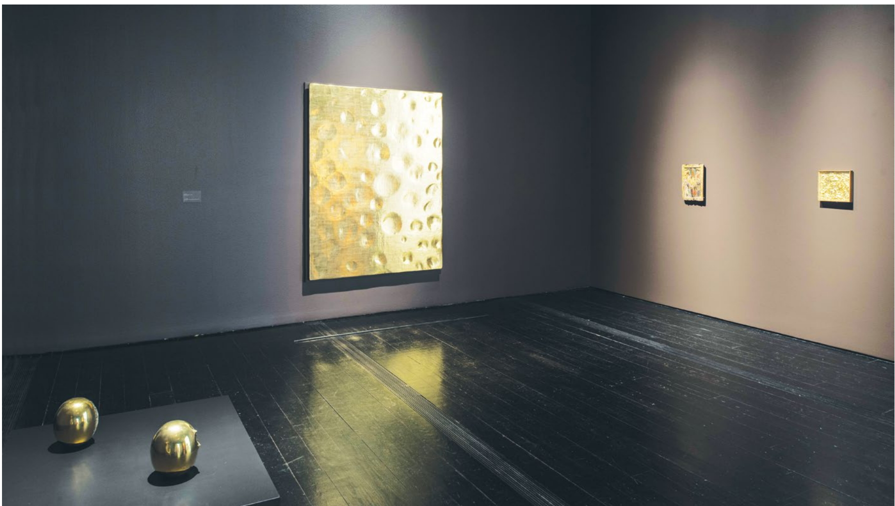

Figure 13. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

objects in museums and tried to indicate misleading qualities of those encounters, and so care was taken, for example, in the installation to avoid overlegibility of illumination. In a room dedicated to the "mystery of vision," a gorgeous gold box (ca. 500) in the collection was a focal point; small in scale, it sat on a plinth in the centre of the floor, where it could interact with other works, namely, *The Halo*, by James Lee Byars, *Monogold*, by Yves Klein, and *Untitled (Gold Painting)*, by Robert Rauschenberg (Figures 12 and 13).

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Figure 14. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

The constellation of golden abstraction produced memorable effects in a room lighted only by a small number of spots on the ceiling; no natural light played a role in the direct perception of objects in the room.

Here, the show showed the argument: each gold object communicated with the ambient environment in the absorption of light and radiation of reflection, and among them, they then modelled alchemy's essential, fluid truth. Dramatically, a painting by Mark Rothko, *No. 21 (Untitled)*, with modular components of orange and yellow, found itself entering those gold fields in the room (Figure 14). Every surface captured and returned elements in the painting, and the painting in turn increased its golden, glowing intensity. The Byars work needed regular polishing, because of the way *The Halo* attracted airborne particles of all kinds, as well as touch—visitors often try to touch this magnetic object, as they do the Klein painting, too.

The interaction among materials, in other words, was active, and the transitive nature of gold emerged as forceful and dynamic. The alchemical relation among them was dramatic. The untarnishable gold box sat still and radiant, but its discretion was not absolute, for its reach extended to other works in the room, including the icons, whose gold backgrounds spoke under these conditions to each other. Remarkably, the gilded-brass halo immediately beside the box reflected, absorbed, and cast back its sheen, and its surface qualities were rich and deep and strikingly like neighbouring gold on a much smaller scale (Figure 12). *The Halo* radiated variable gold shadows on dark wall and floor, so it extended itself while also containing its environment in its convex brass mirror surface. The principle of relation among likes demonstrated itself in the comparable

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Figure 15. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

performances of the two works. One could say the little box was the little piece of yeast that leavened all objects in its vicinity to goldish perfection. Like making like was the mystery under vision in that space; each piece spoke to the other in visible, material terms, and each caught and kept viewers in the reflective intensities.

Touching sources of light and radiance is a compelling need, it seems. But light and radiance in this way came to be more than effects of objects' lighting and placement. They were thinglike, like the objects themselves.[9] They became thingly facets of objects. The intensity and density of radiance emerged when visitors went into the next room, if following the nonprescriptive counterclockwise route most often taken, because there, the effects of a sunlit room were almost overwhelming, especially combined with two bright, flamboyant Willem de Kooning paintings (*Untitled IV* and *Untitled VI*) on the wall inside (Figure 15). In the darkened room, however, the Rauschenberg *Gold Painting (Untitled)* shows gold leaf applied to a surface (of wood, fabric, and cardboard) cockled and ridged almost, but not really, like cloth, so that the radiance is broken and wrinkled, almost (Figure 13 and Figure 16).[10] The abstract surface there stated the same effect under these conditions as the late Byzantine icon of the Ascension beside it, an unex-

9 See King 2002, 27: "Although light exhibits wave phenomena, nevertheless, it is a thing—it is optical material. We don't treat it as such. Instead, we use it very casually to illuminate other things. I'm interested in the revelation of light itself and that it has thingness." And see Taylor 2012, 112.

10 For the first time, the piece hung vertically on the wall, rather than being placed on a plinth out on the floor.

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Figure 16. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Gold Painting)*, 1956, 3.8 × 27.6 × 3.8 cm, gold leaf, wood fabric, and cardboard in wood and glass frame. The Menil Collection (98-001), with permission of The Menil Collection.

pected contingency between the two objects, since several icons were tried next to the Rauschenberg before the Ascension took hold (Figure 16 and Figure 17).

Abstract in the sense being used in this book, the pieces manifested an essentialized quality, each reduced to a formal and material mutuality and also without re-presentation. The abraded surface of the icon took on the same dynamic intensity of field as the Rauschenberg, but without the three-dimensional effects, since the icon was scumbled, in the sense of appearing to be given a softer, glowing opacity through the loss of detailing in the centre of the panel.[11] In this case, the icon's figural definition has been lost through accidents of time, though the Ascension iconography is clear in outline, and

11 The conservation report (1985-57-9) is highly evocative: "Very badly damaged paint surface [...]. The wear and successive intervention by restorers make it difficult to see the original design: even a lot of the very damaged gold which at first would seem original is in fact a later addition [...]. The craquelure on the original ground is a very fine hair-line net, overlaid by a stronger pattern following the wood grain. These more defined cracks are strongest in areas where a granular pigment has been mixed with large amounts of white, and least evident where the pigment is finely ground and of homogenous nature. Although it is difficult to see the original boundaries of the gold because of all the later restoration—at the point where one can see the original vermillion border, it is also possible to see traces of gold beneath this. The leaf was laid on a transparent organic mordant [...] From the infra-red photograph there seems to be no detailed preliminary drawing [...]. [The] same freedom therefore [that] allowed the brush work explains the fluidity of the paint work and the balanced relationship between solid forms and stylized modeling."

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Figure 17. Ascension Icon, tempera and gold leaf on wood, Late Byzantine. The Menil Collection (85-57.09), with permission of The Menil Collection.

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Figure 18. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

the material abstraction emerged forcefully from the panel through its proximity to and unexpected agreement with the Rauschenberg and the Klein. The icon's troubled conservation history, ironically, allowed it to find common purpose with the neighbouring modernist works, and it also showed the active, fluid brushwork and productive tensions among ground, field and human forms—all of which resonated and articulated through that splendid Rauschenberg.

Light in some rooms was golden, and in the alchemical sense of Byzantium, the material spirit of the objects was transcending the object limits we normal ascribe to inert, dead things (Figures 12, 13, 14, 18, and 19).[12] Photography was inadequate to capture this quality of experience—on the one hand, the effects were so fugitive, and on the other, they became fully evident only as one spent more time among the objects—and so the chance to photograph was lost. Here the expansiveness of silver and gold's reach outside its (for us, normal) boundaries revealed a material essence reduced to the irreducible and sharing its perfect golden and silver states across object type and substance (say, from gold to brass to paint).[13] The individual properties matter less than the

12 See Lazaris 2018 on gold as the divine realm's splendour in this world.

13 Stones and gems also play into that spread. Gems participated in this process of extraordinary genesis, of course, formed and coloured by divine fire and earthly exhalations. See Halleux 1981, 50–51. Gems have special qualities, but these are not always discernible to the eye, except the degree of colour and grain. For example, the Menil possesses a number of small stones of variable origins and identity. One small red and green medallion of the Annunciation (thirteenth century?) is described as glass paste, while a nearly contemporary (?) bloodstone or hematite with the Virgin and Child was shown in the exhibition alongside it—neither was discernibly different. But the sympathetic red of the blood, in alchemical logic, makes like.

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Figure 19. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

characteristics common to these works, the spread among things and viewing subjects that allowed each thing, human and otherwise, to enter into relation. That relation was encouraged (for us), indeed, dictated (for them), by attitudes about metals and minerals, geology and chemistry, and the transformation of matter in the Byzantine world.

Alchemy and Matter

Alchemical theory and practice reveal a fundamental aspect of late antique and Byzantine materiality, consistent, too, with understanding the cross as the core of creation. Alchemy's search for similar essential abstractions, its insistence on colour as a sign of essence, and its revelation of living, transmutable qualities consistent across all matter make that esoteric science an important testimony to late antique and Byzantine assumptions about matter and the world.[14] One does not have to claim that that culture believed in all the tenets of alchemy to assert that its basic understandings were widely held. Some general notions about alchemy, as we know them from the range of sources that have survived, are important for this book: the belief in a *prima materia*, the basic, primeval stuff of the universe (derived from Aristotle, Empedocles, and Plato, largely) and in the four elements that make up the material world and in their exchanges form the fluxes and flows of the world we see and know. But also, and this assertion mirrors some of the arguments for a Christian animism, "the alchemists envisioned a universe that was sentient and filled with life, reflecting the permeation of the spirit

14 Alchemy has been applied to understandings of art making and to Byzantine art previously. See Ingold 2013, 46–49; Elkins 1999; and James 1996, 36–41.

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of God throughout its vastness."[15] So Byzantine alchemy is a way into understanding a worldview, and it also shows fundamental interpretations—and interpretations fundamentally different from our own—of materials, especially metals, of course, used for the creation of things in that world.[16] It shared a whole range of vocabulary, processes, and premises with cognate fields, such as dyeing, pharmacology, and cooking. Each field adapted shared notions concerning the conventions and ends typical of each area of work.[17] Each built a Christian worldview that attempted to explain all aspects of the material world.[18]

Alchemy was a kind of empirical investigation of the world, and it developed by means of practical knowledge and experiments. The engagement not only with process, but also with sensory data, is a striking aspect of alchemical researches and writings.[19] Some of the surviving writings from the late antique period deal with deception, such as the papyri now in Leiden and Stockholm from the late third century (?). They give recipes for achieving the effects of precious materials through base ones, for instance, gold colouring,

> To colour gold to render it fit for usage. Misy, salt, and vinegar accruing from the purification of gold; mix it all and throw in the vessel (which contains it) the gold described in the preceding preparation; let it remain some time, (and then) having drawn (the gold) from the vessel, heat it upon coals; then again throw it in the vessel which contains the above-mentioned preparation; do this several times until it becomes fit for use.[20]

Those writings reveal a practical approach to something we might call chemistry, of course, but they also show full confidence in the ability to show philosophical knowledge in otherwise mundane-sounding recipes for the transmutation of metals from one state to another. They share that position with more heavily intellectualized, allegorical approaches to metals' lives, such as Zosimus of Panopolis (fl. ca. 300).[21] For a theorist such as Zosimus, alchemy was a route to the purified soul by means of the philosophy of discovery of the hidden structures of the world and their examination and contemplation.[22] But his writings also presupposed a unifying system at work in the world, with spirit as a privileged catalyst for its workings and changes: "The composition of waters, the movement, growth, removal, and restitution of corporeal nature, the separation of the spirit from the body, and the fixation of the spirit on the body are not due to foreign

15 Linden 2003, 15.

16 See Principe 2013 and Principe 2014.

17 See Kerssenbrock-Krosigk, et al. 20014, 13; Schreiner and Oltrogge 2011, 13–14, 50–61, and 108–9; and Mertens 1995, cxiii.

18 See Goltz 1972, 31–49.

19 See Smith 2010.

20 Halleux 1981, 87 (14), trans. Linden 2003, 47; from Caley 1926, 1149–66 and Caley 1927. See also Newman 2014, 116, and plate at 22–23.

21 See Mertens 1995 and trans. in Taylor 1937a, 88–92.

22 See Fowden 1993, 123.

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natures, but to one single nature reacting on itself, a single species, such as the hard bodies of metals and the moist juices of plants."[23]

Zosimus represents the beginning of a tendency toward highly elevated and often obscure language in the service of alchemical mysteries. Texts such as these are not self-evidently practical guides, unlike the recipes in the Leiden and Stockholm papyri, for example, with their indications of practical experience behind them. Together, this set of texts reveals essential aspects of this early stage of chemistry: experience overtaken by theory, but both engaged in a unifying system that assumed movement and change throughout matter and that sought the abstract, essential meanings of the world.

How matter maintains and regulates its unity is due to universal sympathy, where everything sublunar is in alignment. Toward the end of late antiquity, Stephanus of Alexandria (ca. 550/5–ca. 622) reveals the earlier tendencies, perhaps even more rarified than before: "O heavenly nature making the spiritual existence to shine forth, O bodiless body, making bodies bodiless, O course of the moon illuminating the whole order of the universe, O most generic species and most specific genus, O nature truly superior to nature conquering the natures, tell what sort of nature thou art."[24]

Evidently, Stephanus's position relies on a highly intellectualized analysis of metals and on a mystical view of creation—unlike the "rational" method of the later alchemist Michael Psellus (1017/18–1078/96), who still shared his premises.[25] It is dismissive of actual craft, because such handiwork is disingenuous in its assertion of skill and knowledge.[26] Indeed, his position eschews the actual stuff altogether in favour of a vitalism in and uniting everything, "Put away the material theory so that ye may be deemed worthy to see with your intellectual eyes the hidden mystery. For there is need of a single

23 Mertens 1995, 34 (10.1), trans. in Linden 2003, 50; and continuing, Mertens 1995, 35 (10.1), trans. in Taylor 1937a, 89: "And in this system, single and of many colours, is comprised a research, multiple and varied, subordinated to lunar influences and to the measure of time, which rule the end and the increase according to which the nature transforms itself."

24 Ideler 1842/1963, 199.20–25. See trans. in Linden 2003, 55, and Taylor 1937b, 121. For analysis of his work, see Papathanassiou 1996, 1990, and, more generally, Papathanassiou 2007, 121–27.

25 Katsiampoura 2008; Albini 1988; Healy 1978, 298; and Grosdidier de Matons 1976, 329–31. For a brief overview of Byzantine alchemy, see Papathanassiou 2006 and Mertens 2004. On the terms of appropriate divination, according to Psellus, see Magdalino 2019, 194–96, and Filimon 2019, 281n150.

26 The similarities between alchemy and art, as well as its competitive aspects, are well attested over the entire history of that field of inquiry. See, for example, Newman 2014 and Göttler 2014 and Göttler 2013, 504. The relationship is complicated, however: see Haug 2014, 97: "The discussion of early modern theories on metallogenesis has shown, that the creative process of the human artist and artisan was compared to the natural genesis of the divine artifex. The same primordial matters are available to the goldsmith and the metalworker, to the alchemist and to 'nature'. All four follow the same working processes, only their ability differentiates the final products. The juxtaposition of form and matter, which is thought of as a dichotomy of active force-shaping power and passive shape-receiving material, is of greatest importance with regard to God and his creation, which stands as a model both for the visual artist as well as the alchemist, who tries to recreate natural processes according to his will."

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natural <thing> and of one nature conquering all."[27] That single nature expresses itself through a spirit that is shared across creation, from humanity to ores and metals and to other parts of creation. Profound sympathies among all aspects of the world informed not only alchemy, but also notions about farming and agriculture, astronomy and physics.[28] Stephanus knew that copper, for example, had both soul and spirit, and he said so explicitly, even to the point of ascribing those same natural attributes to copper as humanity.[29] Fire gives spirit to metallic bodies, though in different measure, and copper can achieve gold's perfection through that element, even more stainless than gold.[30]

This common energy or spirit allowed the possibility of transmutation of metals, and if all these materials, like humanity, were enspirited, recipes for changes could leaven the process of alteration. In this sense, sulphur water can work like yeast on metals. It aids spirit in lessening any resistance on the part of the metal and allows that metal body to be transformed into a purer form. Likewise, gold leavens: "In fact, just as yeast, though in small quantity, ferments a great mass of dough, likewise also this little portion of gold perfects all the *xerion* and makes everything ferment."[31] A small amount acts as a catalyst for the movement of spirit and for the realization of an alteration of base matter toward a larger quantity of gold, optimally.[32]

Colour and Soul

Such views were not held universally, and these sources themselves reveal some of the points of contention between this particular type of philosopher and those arguing from other positions. However, one does not have to assert that alchemists were typical to understand that aspects of their position had wide currency in late antiquity and Byzantium. Their language, method, and goals were special to them, but their understanding of the world as somehow ensouled and mutable was a commonly assumed position among many in this period. An early eighth-century poem, commonly attributed to a Theophrastus, shows that these notions continued to be expounded and explored, sometimes—it seems—in the face of opposition,

> How then can those vile critics censure us,
> They who in secret learning are inept,

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27 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,200.32–34; Linden 2003, 55; Taylor 1937b, 123.

28 Sympathies and antipathies in nature are also seen in agricultural and botanical handbooks, such as Lelli 2010; Dalby 2011; Grélois and Lefort 2012; and Thomson 1955, 66–73. See also Lefort 2013.

29 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,210.11–12.

30 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,210.12–20. And see Papathanassiou 1990, 126: "The physical bodies are said to be composed of the four cosmic elements, which are in a dynamic state having births, destructions, changes, and reversions from one to another. This is the physical principle underlying the possibility of the transmutation of various metals to gold."

31 Berthelot and Ruelle 1888/1963, 2:145 (3.10.3).

32 See Halleux 1975 and Hopkins 1938.

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And who in sophic wisdom have no share?
[…]. They ask how gold is ever to be made,
How that can change which has a nature fixed,
Placed there of old by God the demiurge,
Who formed its substance never to be moved
From that position which from early time
Was its abode and destined resting place;
They say gold thus abides, nor suffers change,
For naught can be transmuted from the class
Or species where its origin took place.[33]

Evidently, critics of these philosophers had argued that nature could not be changed, once formed by God. But changeability in nature is still latent in the natural and made worlds, as attested by numerous accounts in chronicles, hagiographies, and council acts. The goal of making gold is the serious divergence, I would argue, in these conflicting positions revealed in that passage of the poem. And indeed, the unchanging aspect of matter was readily conceded by Theophrastus as a sign of agreement with those who diverged from his position. But that concession was only partial, since altering matter was not the object of alchemists' enterprise, but rather altering the outward appearance of matter; the essence, the abstract nature, remained the same, but the alchemical change directs itself at form. Likewise, the process was compared to the sun, which passes through seasons of hot and cold, dry and moist, and yet remains the same essential body throughout.[34] Theophrastus claimed a clear path to knowledge, but neither language nor meaning is fully lucid—or else the knowledge would have been commonplace, one presumes. And yet he insisted on the facility of the method leading to recognition of essence at the centre of all creation:

But we will show the end of this our art,
An end most useful and most quickly learned,
For nothing strange it needs save that one stock
From which all things by Nature are produced.[35]

The question that arises then, naturally, is how one recognizes when change in the form of an essential component in matter occurs, regardless of the technique employed to effect that change. The answer is the most obvious, but also the most difficult in many ways: colour.[36] This visual but vital aspect attached itself to metals, which were otherwise unstable; once it was joined, metals such as gold became themselves, as it were. Olympiodorus the Younger (ca. 495–570) wrote that colour is deeply dyed into matter and in fact fixes its state,[37] and as stated above, the language and terminology of alchemy moved across many disciplines, including dyeing. Moreover, the word used to describe a

33 Ideler 1842/1963, 330.7–21; Linden 2003, 63; Browne 1920, 196.

34 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,330.22–29; Browne 1920, 196–97.

35 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,330.30–34; Linden 2003, 63; Browne 1920, 197.

36 See Mertens 1995, cxxx–clii; James 1996, 41–46; James 2003; Papathanassiou 1990, 123; Lindsay 1970, 111–12; Hopkins 1938; Hopkins 1927; Pfister 1925; as well as Smith 2010.

37 Berthelot and Ruelle 1888/1963, 2: 77–78 (2.4.15); and see Hopkins 1938, 328.

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dipping process whereby a metal might approach goldness in some manner is a cognate for baptism or *baptizein*, that is, *baptein*. The dyeing, tincturing, and colouring of metals were often conflated with the sacrament of baptism, as well as with death and resurrection: "Each metal, the same as man, becomes endowed with the triple hypostacy of body, soul, and spirit [sic]."[38] The colour or tincture is the indelible aspect of their state, but one that could be changed, so that gold was not only a colour, but also a sign that a material shared in goldness, the quality most elevated among metals and most sought after by alchemists across the ages. Theophrastus stated this belief as clearly as alchemy's conventions permitted,

> The white, augmented thrice within a fire,
> In three days' time is altogether changed
> To lasting yellow and this yellow then
> Will give its hue to every whitened form.
> This power to tinge and shape produces gold
> And thus a wondrous marvel is revealed.[39]

That process of colouration is ascendant and determinant of purity, though here, the final and best colour is not mentioned: purple. The range of coloration runs in value from black to white to yellow to purple, so that if the alchemist can manage to create the colour, along the ascending scale, he has, on some essential level not knowable beyond visual perception, made the real thing. In other words, everything that glows like gold is gold.[40]

Many types of gold were possible, just as many types of apples once were available—and as with that variety now diminished, we find one gold valued in our culture.[41] The processes by which colours were changed and essences arrived at also revealed these types. At the end of the whitening process, or *lefkosis*, silver possesses a golden gleam, and that coloured shimmer showed the presence of gold in the silver and the distance along the spectrum that metal had travelled to get closer to purity.[42] In the same way, copper could receive that enspiriting colour by combining with silver to produce a straw-tinted alloy, the colour revealing its relative proximity to purity.[43] And in theory—alchemical, that is—even the commonest metal could become gold.

Mercury was the catalyst for changes in many versions of alchemical technique and belief. It was the basic component that spanned the properties and natures of metals, because it could alter from a silvery, fluid condition to vapor when heated; it was both matter and spirit in these varying conditions.[44] Such views are attested in late antiquity

38 Browne 1920, 203. And on soul and body, according to Stephanus; see Papathanassiou 2005, 123–27.

39 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,331.30–35; Linden 2003, 64–65; Browne 1920, 203.

40 But Psellus warned against greed for just that reason; the soul of the alchemist needs purification, just as he purifies matter. See Albini 1988, 56–58.

41 A comparison made by Wallert 1990.

42 See Hopkins 1938, 328–29.

43 See Browne 1948–49, 19.

44 See Smith 2010, 39–41.

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and Byzantium and continued to circulate well into the early modern period. For example, Synesius of Cyrene (ca. 373–ca. 414) wrote a letter to Dioscurus with annotations on a treatise by pseudo-Democritus, and in it, he described the power of mercury to control other metals and cause colour change in each:

> For just as wax takes the color that it received, so also mercury, o philosopher, whitens all metals and attracts their spirits, refines them for cooking and absorbs them. It is arranged for the purpose and has in itself the principle of each liquid, once it has undergone decomposition, causes every color change. It forms the permanent base, as colors have no foundation of their own. Or rather, mercury, coming then to find itself deprived of its foundation, becomes modifiable by treatments performed on the bodies and their materials.[45]

The material traverses the metallic spectrum on account of its motility, and it gives the basis for colour to set, to fix. In other words, colour is the means by which the true identity of materials is revealed. As Synesius wrote, "Mercury has been classed in both catalogues, both in the yellow, which means gold, and in the white, which means silver."[46] And by that description of mercury's ambivalence, he was noting the element's presence in the colours—and natures—of silver and gold.

Gold and Silver Abstracted in Exhibition

This discussion of alchemical processes and beliefs is necessary not only for understanding the possible meanings inherent in materiality of late antiquity and Byzantium, but also for describing the effects and agencies objects had—and can still have—when in the world.[47] A history of materials—of their perceptions and explanations—is naturally a social history,[48] and exhibition provides environments where those perceptions and explanations can be explored, justified, and imagined.[49] Contemporary exhibition attempts these processes in the historical presentation of a development of making and speculation among alchemists, but also among modern artists, for some of whom alchemy was a compelling way to think through transformation of and through materials.[50] The transformative aspect of James Lee Byars's making of *The Halo* is impressive: 219.7 cm in diameter, the PVC piping was covered in brass and gilded (Figure 24).

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45 Martelli 2011, 234.136–236.144; Garzya 1989, 810.134–42; modified trans. from Hopkins 1927, 11–12.

46 Martelli 2011, 234.122–24; Garzya 1989, 808.119–21; trans. Hopkins 1927, 13.

47 Remarks on the early modern period by current scholars can be productively applied to Byzantium, I believe. See Smith 2010 and also Rublack 2013, 43: "A strictly sociological perspective occludes the ways in which matter interrelates with the meanings humans ascribe to things and how matter can therefore become an aesthetic category. In short, how objects were made and what they were made from may have a bearing on how they were perceived and gained significance."

48 Conneller 2011, 4–7, uses examples of descriptions of gold in a modern chemistry textbook and an eighth-century Persian text on alchemy to ask what a material *is*.

49 See the stimulating remarks by Cole 2011.

50 I am thinking particularly of the exhibition *Kunst und Alchemie: Das Geheimnis der Verwandlung*, held at the Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf from April 5 to August 10, 2014, with an excellent

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The transcendence is implied in the title, and the piece nearly reaches that level of existence, but leaning against a wall, it also is always grounded, active within perceptual reach. Byars's other work likewise plays on these transformative positions.[51] For example, "Einstein, Stein and Wittgenstein," and "The Three B's: Beuys, Broodthaers, Byars" (both 1984–89, gilded stones) are altogether six small rocks coated in gold leaf, but the stones are named and become material metaphors, one might say, for personal transfiguration that leads toward an unself-assuming perfection. Alchemy was never about personal gain, among its most dedicated practitioners, but was concerned with the exaltation and perfection of matter, including the human. These small gestures in the stones parallel other performance pieces Byars performed over his life that ironically and playfully mapped possibilities of transformation in our world-bound existence. No one working with gilding and natural or machine-made materials could not be aware of the alchemical basis of his or her operations. Indeed, that awareness permitted a means to overcome even the limitations of "artist," for real alchemists discovered secrets of materiality and did not simply mimic those deep truths, as painters and sculptors could have been accused of doing.[52] Alchemy could provide someone like Byars a way to exceed his entire enterprise.[53]

Figure 20. James Lee Byars, *The Halo*, 1985, 220 cm diameter overall, brass ring 20 cm diameter, gilded brass. The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

The metaphor of alchemy is still used for a transformative, enchanting heightening of common experience, and exhibition can also perform alchemy in that sense, too, while also allowing us to probe implications of understanding more fully than usual what alchemy, or historical chemistry and geology, "do." Analyzing how alchemy, for example, operated as framework within which categories worked and meant can be revelatory for us.[54] Exhibition can work as inspiration, as a catalyst for thinking historically; it can

catalogue (Dupré et al. 2014). Less successful, in my opinion, but still noteworthy is the exhibition held at the Kunsthalle Bremen from October 19, 2019 to March 1, 2020, *Ikonen: Was wir Menschen anbeten*; see Grunenberg and Fischer-Hausdorf 2019.

51 See Seegers 2014, 195–201; Wagner 2001, 293–300; and now Merianos 2017.

52 For example, see Newman 2014, 118.

53 See Peers 2018c.

54 I am thinking in particular of Morel 1998; but also Didi-Huberman 1995. See, also, Merianos 2017.

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begin with an argument and still lead to another explanation that gives unanticipated historical grounding.

In that same way, geology can be demonstrative of widespread assumptions about the nature and activities of the earth, even if not everyone in that culture would have expressed those common assumptions in similar terms. The belief in an organic nature of metals is largely impossible for us now, but it was widespread in the ancient world, including Byzantium. Metals could grow like plants, and so they were dependent on environment for their qualities and peculiarities.[55] For example, the amount of silver in gold was not explained by natural occurrences of alloys in the earth, but in terms of the natural occurrence of silver in gold that was transforming, eventually, into full gold.[56] Stones, likewise, grew and formed, rather like plants again, but also with a stony logic and pace that often stood outside human abilities to perceive and measure. Descriptions of how stone made itself and transformed, too, paralleled alchemical discussion in its insistence on vitalism and primary matter as foundational aspects of the natural world's order. Stones and minerals aided in health, generation, and fertility throughout creation, including in humans.[57] Modern science is revealing it, too. Scientists have studied the spermatozoa of gold miners and have found that traces of gold in sperm increase the motility of sperm. In the past, gold was vital, and now science is explaining it in a different way.[58] Gold—like all matter—transforms life mutually.[59]

The investigation of nature was infused—or infected, depending on one's perspective—by a kind of animism, with or without the word being uttered.[60] Moreover, workers who dealt with the earth for their livelihood knew that extrahuman forces were at

55 On the earth's womb and the early modern move to the extractionist position that we carry on, see Usher 2019, 42–48.

56 See Conneller 2011, 11–13 and, more generally, Craddock 2008 and Craddock 1995; Baboula 2014; and Vryonis 1962.

57 Usher 2019, 34.

58 See Sahab et al. 2011.

59 And see Haug 2014, 90: "Almost all theories offer a dualistic system that operates on the dichotomy of a primary passive substance acted on by a potent cause. The involved antagonists are matter and an active formative power, or in other words: a creator and a material in which the creation can manifest. This duality of primordial passive matter and active forming principle can be thought of in terms of natural procreational processes which approximates the third—mineralistic—to the other two reigns, the floral and the animalistic, where by seed or semen procreation and growth is initiated. If this biological analogy taken from the animal and herbal kingdoms is applied to the mineral, it can be extended to metallogenesis: if in the field of animals and plants male and female beings can be found who procreate by the union of the active and formative male seeds or semen and the female passive receiving matter—and if this means that this species can recreate self-reliantly— then it is not too far fetched to suspect comparable ways of reproduction and growth in the reign of minerals and assume the existence of metal 'semen.'"

60 On animism and its modernist enemies, see Peers 2012b; for geological and alchemical commonalities, see Morel 1998, 37–38; and on animism's presence in the absence of its naming, 26–27: "Même si toute reference animiste est à exclure, la terre en gestation est donnée à voir comme une sorte d'organisme pourvu d'une circulation interne et de cavités-réceptacles qui sont les conditions physiques (de lieu et de movement) de ce processus générateur."

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Figure 21. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

work on the materials they sought. Stars and planets affected the growth and quality of metals, so naturally sympathetic bodies played a role in the generation and regeneration of metals, most clearly the sun on gold and moon on silver.[61] Exhibition can show that life, too, as it turns out. It can show the ways in which sympathetic things enter into fluid communities where materials and forms show common purpose and where they can also reveal their irreducible selfness, freed from the constrictive regime of representation.

Habit-Deadened Life

This chapter has argued, elliptically, against symbolism, against representation, and it adheres strongly to materialist understandings of the world, to taking the world, including its Byzantine antecedent, as itself and nothing more. In one sense, it colludes with T. J. Clark's description of Picasso's project in 1920, when the artist was "wrestling with the problem of how best to state—to show—what it is to *be* an object."[62] Imagining how to be an object entails equalizing the world—adopting a fundamentally democratic approach to materiality.[63] Everything is an object or a thing. Such a position is nearly impossible, and it constantly challenges itself. Historically, it is even harder to sustain.

61 See, for example, Bailly-Maître 2002, 159–75; Sébillot 1894; and Daubrée 1890. And gendering of the natural world, sometimes a kind of human projection of binaries, also occurred. See Browne 1920, 205–6, as well as Foxhall 1998.

62 Clark 2013, 42.

63 This position has a long literary history in modernism, though not a happy one. See Steiner 2011 and Steiner 2010.

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Not that it was hard in the historical past, but it is very difficult for *us* to believe in a divergent set of assumptions about being a subject or thing in the world.

The last work one saw when leaving *Byzantine Things* at the Menil was *Untitled* by Cy Twombly, a large canvas with grey wash and trailing horizontal lines that do not parallel, coalesce, or directly signify (the materials are oil, house paint, and wax/oil crayon on canvas) (Figure 21). The lines and ground do not provide symbols, nor do they represent, but they strongly realize in their similarities and relationships a concomitant, spontaneous development and growth.[64] The rich grey ground of the painting is evocative of other fields outside it, but it is also just itself; its elusive qualities enfold and open out, and its gentle instability denies reference and just allows reception, absorption. The picture is a sensitive guide, especially as articulated by Richard Shiff, to the recognition of the flows of life among nondiscrete things when we instead are accustomed to seeing habitually, regularly, all the apparent "dead things" in the world. The philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce wrote in 1891 about this dispiriting aspect of our perceptions, "Matter is merely mind deadened by the development of habit."[65] One too easily loses the charm of the world.

Abstraction in part restores needed enchantment and charm. It provides means to recognize unexpected, arbitrary, unpredictable, and deep workings of our world. The glow of the Menil's gold box abstracted it to its essence of pure relation, and the figures on the silver plate reduced and expanded to a sheen that enlivened and touched one. Alchemy, for all its logical, epistemological shortcomings, was more than a historical curiosity, and it allowed a transformational wonder, even as it constantly pushed back at habit. So, by analogy, can exhibition.

64 This passage owes a great deal to Shiff 2008.

65 Pierce 1958–60, 8:215.

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Chapter 5

FRAMING AND CONSERVING BYZANTINE ART: EXPERIENCES OF RELATIVE IDENTITY

FRAMING NORMALLY IMPLIES art's integrity. It defines and maintains art's distinctive ontology. Because frames often change with owners, they show ownership across disparate objects. They're used for handling, cleanliness—all manner of practical functions. They also declare painting's status as aesthetic object and were sometimes valued more highly than the painting within. And only a few portraits that stay in collections over a long period retain their original, historical frame; portraits tend to stay in collections, while other subjects often have weaker claim to loyalties, as it turns out. Each new frame manifests the taste and discretion of curators, who are only recently coming to realize the full archaeological and experiential significance of matching frames to works of art.

In most medieval devotional contexts, framing is an unstable, porous, transformative zone where such normal categories that we assert for frames become less defendable.[1] Social conditions of intersubjective knowing apply in those settings, so frames do not work in the same way at ontological definition, safeguarding, ownership claims, and so on as in the era of easel painting (or "art"). Frames establish modes of communication and interaction, but they perform that function differently in various cultures, so that one should really speak of fields of intensity in Byzantine culture, rather than frames in the way we often apply the term. In other words, no clear line between inside and outside a work was possible, in the same way that aspects of ourselves, as human subjects, spread beyond the edge of skin we often take to be *our* limits. Works of art in that period had reach beyond their (for us) material discretion, and their frames then were their expansiveness, their potency in spreading beyond their apparent surfaces.

This chapter examines some epistemological and corporeal/sensual conditions of our encounters with Byzantine objects in their putative contexts. In this way, another aspect of framing can emerge: the degree to which our remaking those objects and spaces has conditioned our understanding of that historical culture. Conservation and restoration can blur or suppress lines dividing our interventions from an originary object, and they can also quietly assert an experience unintended or inappropriately close to our own expectations. In that way, restoration is a particularly "natural" framing; in our conservation-biased culture, we take for granted that we pursue the "historical value" of artworks, to invoke one of the categories of Alois Riegl—that is, a faithful preservation that prevents further loss.[2] Of course, in actual practice, we pursue a wide

1 In Peers 2004, I addressed some case studies from this point of view. See also Pentcheva 2010.

2 Riegl 1982, 28: "The postulate that issues about mankind, peoples, country, and church determined historical value became less important and was almost, but not entirely, eliminated. Instead, *Kulturgeschichte*, cultural history, gained prominence, for which minutiae—and especially minutiae—were significant. The new postulate resided in the conviction that even objective value

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variety of strategies in the face of decay, damage, and neglect, but the effects on things of all that work—their life support, as it were—are not always reckoned with. In these ways, frames and conservators' sutures are even more complex in our confrontation with particular aspects of historical art, and so we need to address how we come to know—and so, explain—*Byzantine*.

Trying to identify the balancing point in restoration, the point between keeping a "fixed quality" with historical significance *and* survival as a displayable object, is crucial for our own apprehensions of the art we try to authenticate and to contextualize.[3] Finding that point is a frequent and necessary discussion among restorers and conservators, but art historians often neglect this essential feature of our objects of study, that is, their long, altered lives and our perceptions of those processes of constant change.[4] The account by Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) of the restoration of the painting of "The Circumcision of Christ" by Luca Signorelli (1445–1523; ca. 1490, National Gallery of Art, London) established the basic terms of debate: should the painting be "disturbed" by a restoration, in this case by Sodoma (1477–1549), or left as an incomplete work by the single hand of the master? Vasari opted for the latter, stating that Signorelli's work should remain partial and undisturbed by another hand, and the majority opinion of the last century is in agreement to a large degree. But in actual practice, the restorer is the mediator, however invisible the hand tries to be, between an "original" and our modern version of a work. It is the space in which the restorer works that creates new frames for us to encounter historical works, even if art historians do not fully appreciate or comment on that hand's presence.[5]

These questions around the integrity of things—people and objects—have exercised philosophers for a very long time as a set of problems concerning relative identity. For example, the paradox of Chrysippus (ca. 279–ca. 206 BCE) can lead to understanding how we come to know complex identity, which may have implications for Byzantine art. Chrysippus's paradox argues for restrictive identity: once Theon's foot has been cut off, he ceases to exist, and Dion, the newly (de)formed man survives intact.[6] In obedience to Leibniz's Law, if two objects are identical, then they share all properties, and so one of the men must perish; identity must be consistent in objects in every respect, according to that law.

However unexceptionable that Leibniz's Law may *appear*, people and art often skate around it, and indeed, Chrysippus could claim that the "two" men could share the same substance, if not occupy the same space. One of the "men" endures, if changed and diminished, while the other, who is unchanged, must perish. Diminution and change are inevitable, it seems, and few conditions across this existence are consistent, predictable, or controllable by experiencing bodies. And so here we, as contemporary bodies wish-

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adhered to objects wherein the material, manufacture, and purpose were otherwise negligible." See also Brooks 2014; Lang 2006, 136–78; and Gumbrecht 2012, 128.

3 Important precedents are Brilliant 2000 and Steinberg 2001. See also Maranci 2014.

4 See, however, Clavir 2002, 26–66, and the essays in Oddy 1994.

5 See Bomford 1994.

6 Long and Sedley 1987a, 171–72; Long and Sedley 1987b, 177.

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ing to know, run up against impediments to our own knowing. One easy way to think about this conundrum of Dion and Theon is to consider the two men as coexistent. The leg of López de Santa Anna (1794–1876) makes this point vividly, because his amputated leg went on to become many things, as did the prosthetics that the Mexican statesman and general used to replace his lost limb.[7] With each change, new identities were formed,[8] and so the original limb was given its own burial and monument by Santa Anna, and in lieu of the whole body, the limb was later disinterred and desecrated by rioters. Likewise, various replacement prosthetics are found in several museums in the United States to this day. If not only Dion and Theon can coexist, but also Theon's foot, then we are truly confronted by actively relative identities.

And yet we often treat these identities in art-historical discourse as self-consistent. In descriptions of the church/mosque/museum Hagia Sophia, for example, Byzantinists analyze the conditions of that medieval Christian monument by filtering out experience divergent from that imagining of a particular past. We assume the building's fixed qualities are evident and comprehensible, and we describe its splendour by positing qualities the "church" timelessly has, but the "building" no longer possesses. So we give the same name (Hagia Sophia or Ayasofya), ascribe (intuitively) relative identity, and determine bodies' knowing in terms (somewhere) between the Byzantine and us. Art historians perhaps too often describe Theon before amputation, when we are really examining Dion—as well as the fractured parts that result in so many changing lives of objects and humans.

The Lives of the Frescoes

In its persistence *and* change over time, historical art cannot conform to Leibnitz's Law, and a question always answered by deduction, imagination, and science has been the limits of our knowing a past culture through our bodies. Take again the frescoes from the Church of St. Evphemianos, originally from Lysi in Cyprus, as an extreme but revealing example (Figures 14, 15, and 18). Severed from its original context by looters, the frescoes were purchased and restored by the Menil Collection in Houston and housed in the purpose-built chapel there from 1997 to 2012, when they returned to Cyprus for display in the Archbishop's Museum in Nicosia. Each phase of this existence, still unfolding toward a hoped-for completion of a circular journey back to Lysi, determines our understanding of that artifact. Each challenges the assertion of identity, as well. These issues are worth raising in relation to the frescoes: Is their return to Cyprus sufficient to overcome their still-orphaned status? Is this installation more productive, intellectually and spiritually authentic, in Nicosia than in Houston? And does it trump education beyond the boundaries of the home state, even when those boundaries are still in dispute?[9]

7 See Camnitzer 2011.

8 A graphic novel, *The Leg*, even narrates the vigilante exploits of the leg long after Santa Anna himself is gone. See Jensen 2014.

9 See Carr and Morrocco 1991; but also Peers 2013, 21–35 and Peers 2010.

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The Byzantine Fresco Chapel was a historical moment in the display of Byzantine art in the United States. The Menil also celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2012, and as part of that marking, the collection mounted a small, but packed exhibition called *Dear John & Dominique: Letters and Drawings from the Menil Archives*. The show presented two documents about the chapel from 1997 from the Archbishop of Cyprus, Chrysostomos I, and from 1989, from Mrs. Dominique de Menil, the founder of the collection. These isolated documents call attention only to the apparent motivations of each side. The first document is a congratulatory missive with a strongly expressed political directive of raising awareness of the situation of Turkish occupation of a part of the island. The body of the letter reads:

> I consider the Church of the Cyprus and myself as lucky, in that frescoes from Saint Themonianos ended up in your Foundation and that you built that wonderful Chapel to host them. I am sure that the people visiting the Chapel will always remember Cyprus and that in the occupied areas churches are looted and sacred vessels are stolen. Only the freedom of Cyprus will guarantee that the Church of St. Barnabas, founded in the first century after Christ, will continue to exist. Please exercise your influence on the officials of the USA and stress to them that they should demand from Turkey to withdraw its military forces and Turkish settlers from our island and should work for the restoration of human rights of all Cyprus people.[10]

Mrs. de Menil's letter to her son is also an official letter, and it raises all of the challenges of the chapel's equilibrium in Houston that came to make the space and paintings so compelling together: her concern over the possible tension between the study and the experience of art, between the secular missions of museums and the frescoes' undeniable spiritual power, between distant cultures and American modernism, between the past and lives lived fully in the present:

> I need you. I need your help to design a building for the Cypriot frescoes. We have to be ready to build a 'chapel' if the Archbishop of Cyprus reminds us of our contract. The plans we have developed have been justly criticized: without being an exact replica of the Lysi chapel, they are reminiscent of it […]. It was my intention to reconstruct in Houston a chapel similar to the one from which the frescoes had been ripped off. I thought this would be the way to do justice to the frescoes. Obviously, it is not the best way to look at them. Bertrand Davezac, for one, has argued in favour of a museum presentation, somewhat like the one we have now in the basement: frescoes are at eye level and well lit. If this is the best way for study purposes, it leaves out an intangible element, difficult to weigh and express, yet very real. It leaves out their spiritual importance, and betrays their original significance. Only a consecrated chapel, used for liturgical functions, would do spiritual justice to the frescoes. It is with this in mind that we entered into a negotiation with the Church of Cyprus, which owns forever the frescoes. The agreement we reached represents an innovation in museum policy. For the first time, important fragments of a religious building are not considered only as antiquities. They are approached also as relics and consideration is given to their religious nature. The legitimacy of reviving the religious context of these thirteenth century frescoes can be questioned. It could be observed that the African art, which is so abundantly present in the Museum, could be presented in a true functional setting, and that it would be the right way to approach it

10 Nicosia, October 17, 1997. Byzantine Fresco Chapel Papers, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

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> and understand it. But the African treasures in the Museum, though they may move and inspire Afro-Americans today, belong to a culture that does not exist in America. Restoring them to their original function, except for a cultural demonstration, makes no sense. On the other hand, the frescoes have not only resonance, but a very real impact on Greek-Americans, and also on those who have converted to orthodoxy. A tradition fully alive.[11]

The several identities—living tradition being just one—that the fresco cycle has possessed over the last forty years of its life reveal just how provisional and elusive meaning can be in historical art. When the fresco pieces were taken through their long restoration process, necessary to repair all the damage the looters had done in ripping the plaster-and-paint ground from the walls of the chapel at Lysi, features of the original setting had been lost. For example, the orientation of the Pantocrator in the dome was not self-evident and needed careful deduction before being faced toward the west; the extent of the ground on which the angels were treading in the register below the Pantocrator was also not clear. because their feet had been damaged; and the height of the Virgin and Child flanked by angels in the apse area also needed consideration. Having been flattened and dissected in their illicit moves, the fresco grounds needed to be returned to contours that matched the original setting of the chapel building. Decision-making was done, it appears, through a great deal of consultation and careful thought, which included examination of the original church at Lysi. And the book that resulted, an excellent study by Annemarie Weyl Carr and Laurence Morrocco, was written while the dome and apse frescoes were still separated from an architectural context; Carr analyzed style and iconography with great sensitivity, and the general context of the frescoes on late medieval Cyprus became clear, but the experience of encountering these frescoes in anything resembling spatial consistency was not possible, because the chapel had not yet been constructed.

That art-conservation and art-historical identity was replaced in 1997 by the opening of the Byzantine Chapel Fresco Museum, a purpose-built pavilion for the frescoes' display. Those previous identities deriving from conservation and original context had not been fully erased. In the wake of the closing of the Menil pavilion, they are now in fact the paramount witness to the frescoes' life off Cyprus. Nonetheless, the particular ways in which the frescoes were framed within a profoundly evocative space and remade according to metal and glass sutures can be probed with profit for what they show us about how we came to know Byzantium in Texas for that period of time.

The pavilion was designed by François de Menil, and it demonstrated the ways in which framing experience can defamiliarize and heighten and enhance understanding. As I explained in Chapter 2, the frescoes were visible only when one entered the inner chapel form, since they constitute only the dome and conch of the apse. The encounter with the figural passages at the end of a series of preparatory movements on the part of visitors was on one level a meeting with a real thing: one saw art that is clearly of the past in its appearance and content. The restored aspects of the frescoes were not immediately evident, though some passages on the perimeter of the fields were incomplete and testified to the partial quality of the frescoes' survival. Moreover, the restoration

11 April 25, 1989. Byzantine Fresco Chapel Papers, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

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showed the ongoing process of revision that the frescoes had potentially witnessed; the technique used was true fresco, pigments applied to a wet plaster ground, but examination revealed that some touching-up or later additions in *secco* had also occurred.

On another level of experience, the framing within this glass form demonstrated the special tension of displaying Byzantine art in a foreign setting such as Texas. The glass chapel was both enclosing and open: the semitransparent glass was both inside and outside at the same time, and the skeleton of the chapel showed a kind of suturing that held together the provisionality of the enclosure. Of course, one was not bound by the original door, set in the south wall of the chapel, and one could pass between glass-panel walls and so part the sutures temporarily. The body of the chapel could work in several ways— as fields of flesh stitched together by metal rods and joins or as a skeleton on which flesh or skin only partly reached—but however one describes it, the chapel was never fully settled. It was architecture, but solid and evocation both; it was marked space, inside and outside, but it belonged to a continuum of space, too. Artificial light was captured within the glass frame, but it spilled out, because it received natural light below from the light descending the perimeter walls, and so light sources and stability were indecisive in their flows, especially given the naturally active skies in east Texas.

The result, I believe, was a remarkable equilibrium between two normally irreconcilable modes of encounter with Byzantine art: objective (or historical) value, which would not place value in the fragility and mortality in things, and aesthetic (or art) value, which is relative and not durative, but subject to constant change.[12] Timelessness was a goal of the architect, since the shell was also called an "infinity box," but the encounter with the installation was also entirely contingent on the bodied, in-time presence of viewers. A chapel without sutures and without that active framing would have been sealed, intact, impervious to movements of the atmosphere. In other words, the *original* chapel would have been less productive experientially, or at least less faceted, than this temporary state that the frescoes had in Houston.[13]

So the point along which these frescoes have fallen at any given point in time in the spectrum from "real" to "remade" was neither entirely clear nor stable. Another way to come at this situation may be through the ancient philosophical problem of the Ship of Theseus, which examines the constancy and identity of an object. Plutarch (ca. 46–120) stated that the ship became a standard nut for philosophers, one side holding that even a restored ship, with planks being replaced as they decayed, remained the same, and the other contending that it was therefore altered to another thing. Thomas Hobbes took this problem one step further: if the replaced, decaying planks were used in the same way for another ship, would it be possible for two Ships of Theseus to exist simultaneously?[14]

At the Menil, the identity of the frescoes was constantly faceting, or changing its perspective, from Houston to Lysi, but never entirely or ever one or the other. The line between the authentic Ship of Theseus and its recreation through cast-off materials is

12 Riegl 1982.

13 See Batario 2018 on the post-2012 uses of the pavilion.

14 See, for example, Dauer 1972.

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movable when trying to define authenticity of objects and perception of them.[15] The relative identity of works, which can be separately original *and* restored, makes it possible to have two works occupying the same space at the same time. Our perception of the space in Houston was both the one we persistently call "Byzantine"—focused on sacred, numinous, hieratic forms—and one we also recognize as modern, in the broad sense: interpretative, ironic, conceptual, and sensual.

The framing and suturing were the elements that gave the space of the chapel the ability simultaneously to present as authentic document and an interpretative text. The open joins, in particular, created passage and containment, and their mechanical aspect lent a restrained quality to their roles as support and perforation. Likewise, the framing black ceiling within the chapel pavilion was evocative of infinity, as was intended, but also, and strangely, of snow roofs found on mountain churches in the interior of Cyprus. The framing space between ceiling and chapel was where many of the contingencies became possible, and the zone around the chapel proper became more intense, more focused, because of the bridging space surrounding the chapel. Those fields of intensity raised around the periphery of the space and in the framing structure holding the frescoes in place then proposed means for visitors to know "Byzantine." That cultural and historical category may not be in full accord with the chapel, according to convention in the academic discipline, but in the same way, perhaps, that Arthur Evans brought his Bronze Age Cretans to life through painted concrete, Byzantium was made alive to us through this new version of itself, with a comparable set of gains and losses.

Soon after their return to Nicosia, the frescoes were installed in the Byzantine Museum of the Archbishop Makarios III Foundation among other fresco fragments from the island. No reference to their short life in Houston is found in the display there, and the memory of that self that the frescoes had is disappeared. The frescoes are set into ceiling and wall, and each is much more approachable than it had had been in Houston, where the sacral atmosphere was accentuated through provocative lighting, accentuated iconostasis, and the high-drummed dome. Paradoxically, in the Nicosia museum, the sacred character is suppressed or mimicked in favour of quasi-objective encounter; the frescoes are just another display among treasures of Cypriot Orthodoxy. But in trying to speak the Western, institutionalized language of museum exhibition, curators in Nicosia have drained blood from a vibrant object. The same guiding principle that determined the tone and position taken by the archbishop in his 1997 letter to Mrs. de Menil informed this position. Here, a particular ideology—ethnic and confessional pride, perhaps—is the motivation.[16] While the frescoes endure, their patience and forbearance before our apparent care were dignified counterpoints to the power moves to which

15 See Gaskell 2013, 70: "Cultural historians can, and should, make use of curatorial manipulations of material things to explore their contingencies and interrogate their immaterial, as well as the material, aspects. In doing so, they might take note of the consequences of the Ship of Theseus paradox: while things may perdure, they never stop changing."

16 As put another way, Howard 1990, 27: "The phenomenon of 'Antiquity restored' can be seen, then, as essentially self-fulfilling, reflecting desires to return to, to know, to control, and to transcend a preferred image of ancestry, a witting regression (through the agency of history) in the service of the ego, an attempt of the will and the imagination to knit and to extend the fabric of self and time."

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Figure 22. Icon of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, tempera and gold leaf on wood, Late Byzantine. The Menil Collection. Photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

they have been subjected.[17] Undoing the interpretative framework from Houston was a means for Cypriot officials to reclaim property, and at least to my knowledge, none of the restoration was undone, but now the Lysi frescoes have quietly allowed themselves to be placed in a historical, confessional framework that gives them no special intensity, no particular voice. They endure as orphans still, like Santa Anna's leg.

The Lives of Things in the World: An Icon

A number of icons at the Menil Collection have salvaged passages of paint that make clear their subjects, but still openly declare their relative selves.[18] Since the damage was extreme, several of the icons needed restoration before they could be shown, and the

17 On long "lives" of medieval art, see Feltman and Thompson 2019, though for them, "lives is a metaphor only.

18 The group came from the collection of Eric Bradley and was dealt to the Menil Collection in the 1980s by Yanni Petsopoulos.

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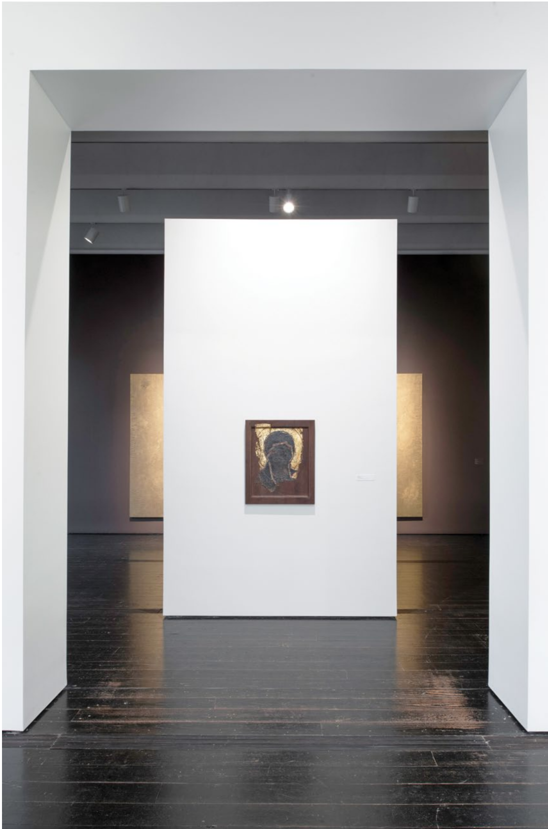

Figure 23. Installation view icon of the Virgin Mary in *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester.

icons in this group betray unmistakable evidence of these interventions. The figural passages are partial, but strong and legible, and they show that the icons were at one time impressive and beautiful objects. Those qualities are still evident, but the wooden beds used as settings for those passages are no minor part of the objects.

The late Byzantine icons of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel and of the Virgin Mary entered the collection at the same time, and their restoration history allows us to follow some of the conditions that led to their present appearance, so divergent from their original presentation and state (Figures 22 and 23).[19] The framing and suturing that embed these icon fragments in a new surround opens up fresh and not very Byzantine ways of experiencing that art. The guiding principle behind the conservation was clearly not a return to a faux-Byzantine surround, but one that allowed the conservation to be visible, understated, and true in some fashion to a fixed state of the original, or at least of that original type. Here we have something approaching Riegl's historical value in operation, but not entirely: "The more faithfully a monument's original state is preserved, the greater its historical value: disfiguration and decay detract from it."[20] Decay was halted, and so some necessary parts of the objects were preserved, but their original state was simply irretrievable by our standards, so that the icons escape full adherence to Riegl's definition of historical value.

The restorers were evidently aiming at a level of authenticity in returning the disconnected passages to a plausibly historical state. In the first place, the scale of the framing bed was significant, since it was desirable that it accommodate the figural passage

19 These are 85-057.06 and 85-057.05, respectively. See Carr 2011, 42–43 and 50–51.
20 Riegl 1982, 34–38.

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at least in outline, as the original state had. Yanni Petsopoulou wrote on this subject to Walter Hopps, director of the Menil, on July 21, 1988, about the process of determining the best way to make the icon showable,

> Laurie [Lawrence Morrocco] and I spent the entire afternoon yesterday on the problem of reconstruction of the original size of the panel of the Virgin and the Archangels. We first worked from the fragments themselves and the information contained therein as to the extent and size of the missing areas. We then pulled out a few hundred comparative illustrations from my files, both to confirm our guesses as to proportion [...] and to fill in information not available from the fragments themselves. We arrived at what we felt was a size of panel common and natural to both fragments. We then went back to my files and looked for some of the standard proportions in icon panels of that period. We were gratified to find that many of them were in a proportion of 4 to 5, which as it happens is exactly the proportion that we arrived at independently. We think, therefore, that the panel would have been 106 × 85 cm [...].
>
> The aesthetic effect we would like to aim for is not dissimilar to that on the famous head of Christ by Rublev [...].
>
> Unless we hear to the contrary, we propose to mount both pieces on separate but identical panels, which could be displayed either back-to-back or separately.[21]

The series of deductions are natural for conservationists and dealers, because value resides in the historical clarity and authenticity of the work. For that reason, the damaged passages needed to be made to appear normal ("common and natural"). Not only was the frame expanded to fit authenticity, it also gained true aesthetic stature by assimilating to the restored icon of Christ, originally painted by the great Russian painter Andrei Rublev. The space within which these restorers proposed to work was the void between the disfigured painting, literally hanging by threads, and the modern sublime of Rublev's superb achievement.[22] That space actually covers a great distance, and in large part, it is traversed by that wooden surround. The Menil icons were anonymous, very fine examples, but not of the aesthetic, national, or historical order of Rublev's work in Moscow. But the restoration project clearly presented itself to the owners in ways that transformed some of that significant authenticity to the "new" icons. That reach of the Menil icons to an authenticity effect is almost entirely conveyed by the new backing.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, the chief conservator at the time, replied to Morrocco on August 30, 1988, to raise questions about the treatment "of the bare space" that the wooded enlargements would create, "We would like to know how you propose to treat the bare space on the enlarged replacement panels, i.e., will you use aged wood, will you treat new wood to look old, will the panel be toned, rubbed, or covered with fabric? We remain concerned about the amount of exposed space in relation to the fragment and would appreciate your comments."[23]

No reply is present in the object files, so the continuation of the discussion possibly occurred by telephone or in person. Certainly, some negotiation unfolded that took into account the desires and sensibilities of the Menil side of the conversation, for Petsopou-

21 Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

22 Hughes 2003.

23 Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

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los had proposed in his letter that the wooden ground be expanded to 106 × 85 cm, in scale comparable, if not the same as Rublyev's restored icon, which measures 158 × 106 cm. In the end, and for reasons not entirely clear now, the Archangels panel is larger than that of the Virgin according to the restorers' final dimensions. The latter measures 76 × 57.5 × 2.5 cm, while the former is 95.3 × 72.4 × 3.8 cm.

The framing of these icons distinguished the two, probably because a double-figure icon requires a more spacious surround, but the meeting of icon and backing diverges in each case, too. The Virgin Mary panel is described as "tempera and metal leaf on wood without fabric," while the Archangels are "tempera and gold leaf on fabric transferred to modern wooden panel." According to a conservation report of October 1995, written by Morrocco's studio, the painted surface was subsequently removed from the panel and the backing canvas, which was detaching, was also removed; the canvas and its gesso backing were then reapplied to the panel; canvas fragments were added to the left-hand side and the bottom of the fragment. While not arbitrary, given the deliberations described already, the alterations certainly pose questions of the level of what is "genuine" in a historical sense.

The final result of the icons' restorations, in the event, is a successor to each of the original objects, true to some comforting degree. Some of the comfort may derive to a viewer from the evident rescue of fine art, so that one can understand the partial quality being a retrieval of the past nearly denied. But to what degree are either of these icons playing a role that just approximates the manner and self of the first holder of this icon's identity?[24] The icons are recognizably historical, and so they retain reference to a fixed quality we call "Byzantine," but at the same time, essential aspects of their historical selves are apparent and recognizable only by feats of imagination, by experiential leaps to contexts not so much where whole icons are the dominant format—where fixed values prevail—but to contexts where aestheticizing, conscientious remaking is possible or probable, that is to say, museums. In other words, there are multiple identities in the same object: Dion, Theon. and the foot, all coexisting, but in highly specialized, imbricated contexts.

The display and restoration did not aim for and could not achieve an experiential aesthetic value that was accurate to the time of the icons' painting. But they could still reveal perceptual qualities that were once part of the object, then lost to time, and now given back to some degree through exhibition alchemy.[25] In *Byzantine Things*, the contingencies of exhibition made these icons perceptually rich encounters among historical and modern works. Their reflective surfaces and warm, wooden surrounds made them linking bridge objects that were simultaneously modern and medieval. The exchanges were transformative among these icons and their modern neighbours in *Byzantine Things*—including *Untitled* (1970–71), by Michael Tracy, *Glacier (Hoarfrost)* (1974), by Robert Rauschenberg, and *Golden Tondo* (2011), by Stephan Balkenhol (Figures 23 and 24).[26]

24 See De Clercq 2013.

25 De Clercq 2013, 267.

26 Michael Tracy (1943–), *Untitled*, 1970–71, metallic paint on canvas, 259.1 × 119.7 cm; Robert

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Figure 24. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

The contingencies at play within that room and the sight lines from outside it evocatively revealed material qualities of the icons that were fugitive and concrete, of the past and in the present—different shades of true, one might say.[27] The restored icons were placed within a rich brown field in the final room of the exhibition, and that colour accentuated the depth of field that the wooden supports have. Indeed, the effect was striking for the degree to which the painted fields of the icons emerged and withdrew against the chocolate ground of the walls. Especially from a moderate distance, the figural fields of the icons appeared to obscure and assume substance simultaneously. In that way, the icons assumed qualities that related to and supplemented those of the Rauschenberg, Balkenhol, and Tracy works in close proximity: qualities such as illusionistic and nonlogical depths of field, an unexpected interplay of materials, instability or

Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Glacier (Hoarfrost)*, 1974, solvent transfer on satin and chiffon with pillow, 304 × 188 × 14.9 cm; Stephan Balkenhol (1957–), *Golden Tondo*, 2011, poplar, white and red gold leaf foil, acrylic paint, 100 × 11.1 cm.

27 See Rohrbaugh 2003, 178: "To put it crudely, we should think of artworks as objects in and persisting through history, ones which merely have a certain form. This picture of works as historical individuals is at odds with certain tendencies in aesthetics to tie the very identity of a work of art to its form, that look or sound which the artist selects and executes. This tendency is at its strongest, though equally misguided, in the case of photographs and other repeatable works when, abstracting from the particular occurrences, one thinks there is nothing left but the form with which to identify the work."

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Figure 25. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

evocation of figuration, and environmental permeability or porousness. Those qualities were likely otherwise irretrievable from a Byzantine object without intervention, both conservationist and curatorial, having been acted on it.

Moreover, the vivacity gained from those encounters was multiplied by some other associations drawn out across two rooms, not only a malanggan mask from New Ireland and a Duma or Mdédé mask, but also, in another room, a Bamana *boli*, one of the most uncanny museum objects one can experience (Figure 25).[28] Shared materials, primarily exposed wood, allowed currents to run through the rooms and conducted a shared vitalism, so that each of the objects were charged. But faces and forms that could be bodies were consistent among these varied objects, from the altered facial forms of masks and icons to the eerily present body of the *boli*, with its extraordinary mixture of materials and organic, still-living body.

The conception of frames and framing that was introduced at the beginning of this chapter is of course a straw man. No such phenomenon really exists. Such things as were circulating among each other in these two rooms of *Byzantine Things* belie all generalizations about modern, historical or non-Western framing conditions. No one in the rooms stayed still or discrete; in highly expressive, even dramatic ways, each overlapped, softened, and intermingled. Cordoning, closing frames had no role here—if they ever do—because it is nearly impossible for there to be discrete entities in these exhibition settings. (They are possible, but one needs to repress in order to achieve their discretion). Conservation at the Menil, with these icons, as well as with the Fresco Chapel, made more active the possibilities of relative identities as means to assimilation with human subjects or things. The ample wooden surround of the icons triggered assimila-

28 *Boli*, various animal and vegetable materials, clay, wood, sacrificial materials, 116.1 × 135.2 × 32.4 cm; *Malanggan Mask from New Ireland*, wood with pigment, fibre bark, lime and shell, 32.4 × 15.2 × 36.5; and *A Duma or Mdédé Mask*, wood and pigment, 33 × 44.4 × 18.1 cm. On the *boli*, see Sutton 2013, and see also Franses 2013.

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tion with its environmental spread—wall, floor, fellow things. Those damaged bodies might lead us to think with real humility about the multitude of bodies and our mutual, ongoing reliance.[29]

Likewise, the chapel's sutured architecture and its outward and upward rings of darkness and radiance revealed the transformative zones we can experience in such framing spaces. For we participate in these frames as fully as the objects we think we are framing. We occupy the same continuum that those things charge and electrify—if we are fortunate—and we alter in those intensity fields. Restoration is a tricky game: sometimes it doesn't work out, as when we see a disfigured Reinhardt, but sometimes it actualizes potential to work on us, not because it is historically accurate, in a literal sense, but because newly remade objects take on identities relational to our insecure bodies—that is, bodies uncertain and vulnerable to objects' attentive probing.

29 See, for example, Lubar and Shields 2008 and Siebers 2010.

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