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INTRODUCTION

Holy Things and the Problem of Likeness

When a medieval nun spoke of the dangers of soiling her garment of chastity or of the duty of weaving a garland of roses for Mary the Virgin by saying the rosary, what was the meaning of the dress or the flower? Did the praying nun, clothed herself in the veil of a virgin, really think chastity was an intact garment ripped or dirtied by impure thoughts or bodily acts? Did she think she emitted a rose from her mouth while praying, as some preachers and some panel paintings might suggest? (See figure I.1.)¹ When craftsmen in Tuscany in the fourteenth or fifteenth century fashioned a crystal container that nestles in curling golden vine tendrils for the tooth of Mary Magdalen, did they or those who commissioned it think the fragment was Mary present behind the crystal? (See figure I.2.)² When, in 1383, a priest at Wilsnack in northern Germany discovered three Eucharistic hosts, intact yet bleeding after a fire, did he and his parishioners really hold, as they claimed, that the wafers were the visible flesh of Christ — and that this was so even if the hosts had not been consecrated?³ What can it mean for chastity to be a garment, for a prayer to be a rose, for a tooth to be a person, for a bit of bread to be the body of God? And are these objects, which modern commentators tend to differentiate sharply as literary metaphor (garment of chastity), work of art (reliquary or panel painting), sacrament (consecrated Eucharistic host), or physical body part (tooth of a saint), presences in the same way? They have usually been discussed by theorists in isolation from each other. Yet the striking fact that confronts even casual readers or observers about the later Middle Ages is this ever-increasing plethora of holy objects. Is anything at all to be gained by considering them together as “things”?



Figure 1.2. Reliquary of Mary Magdalen, fourteenth or fifteenth century. Made in Tuscany, Italy. Gilded copper, gilded silver, rock crystal, and gilded glass. 55.9 × 23.8 × 20.2 cm. The object revered in the central container is allegedly Mary Magdalen's tooth. Preserved behind crystal, which suggests the hardening of eternity, the tooth is also presented within curling vines, which suggest that it is still living and unfolding. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession number 17.190.504. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917.

A Plethora of Things

Objects proliferated in all religious texts and venues in the later Middle Ages. Liturgy and devotional writings are filled with references to them; theological treatises analyzed their meaning and value. Churches were crowded with them. Containers called reliquaries (themselves of an immense variety of shapes, sizes, and appearances) held all sorts of bones and body parts, bits of natural materials, fragments of cloth, and so forth.⁴ (See figures I.3a–d and I.4.) Referred to by different names (*reliquiae*, remains, or *pignora*, pledges, or sometimes simply *res sanctae*, holy things) and not yet organized into the categories of first-, second-, and third-class relic familiar in modern canon law, relics included not only bits of bodies but also objects that had touched holy people or holy sites or that were understood to transfer the power of the holy by some sort of resemblance to or contact with it. They were inserted (sometimes visibly and sometimes hidden under the surfaces of paint or wood) into crucifixes, frescoes, wall paintings, and sculptures, displayed on altars, even worn by the faithful as a kind of jewelry or talisman.⁵

Ordinary domestic objects were also infused with religious power.⁶ They acted. Oats blessed on New Year's Eve were understood to protect a farmer's cattle from disease; holy water restored health (spiritual and physical). Even unconsecrated objects were understood to act both up close and at a distance.⁷ Amulets bearing religious or magical incantations warded off misfortune and made one lucky in love. A girdle depicting the wound in Christ's side might open the womb of a laboring woman and grant her a safe delivery.⁸ As far as the power of objects is concerned, the line between holy and ordinary or domestic was porous indeed; almost anything might acquire the charge or spark of sacrality. According to what cultural anthropologists and folklorists call the principle of *similia similibus*—the conviction found in many cultures that like affects or effects like—objects could act to empower or protect against characteristics they in some sense resembled. Something red, for example, might stop or induce bleeding.⁹

In paintings and sculpture, a stunning array of objects was depicted. These objects (for example, swords, chalices, towers, dragons, lions, keys, griddles, and so forth) were sometimes understood as attributes—that is, as a kind of code for the saint in question and often for the form of his or her martyrdom as well. St. Jerome could, for example, be identified by his faithful lion, St. Peter by the keys he



Figures I.3a–d. Containers called reliquaries held all sorts of material (bones and body parts, fragments of cloth, earth, stones, and so forth) and were of an immense variety of shapes, sizes, and appearances, some of which reveal and some of which obscure the nature of the holy matter within.

a. Reliquary of St. Stephen, French, c. 1200. Princeton Art Museum, accession no. y1943–91. The little casket is shaped like a church, which suggests the gathering together of the saint’s body parts and the communion of all the saints in heaven.

b. Arm reliquary of St. Nicholas of Myra, showing a mummified finger within, from Halberstadt Cathedral. Made shortly after 1225.





c. Reliquary of St. Thekla. Late fifteenth–early sixteenth century. German. Princeton Art Museum, accession no. y1954–127. The column and lion are attributes, representing some of the various forms of attempted martyrdom to which the saint was subjected. The relic (which has now disappeared, as is usual for reliquaries in museums) was probably in a crystal in the breast.

d. Reliquary pendant, Spanish, from 1550–1600, 5.4 × 4.13 cm, gold, *basse-taille* enamel, and glass. Walters Art Gallery, 46.10, acquired by Henry Walters. By the later Middle Ages, relics could be worn by laypeople as a kind of jewelry. This pendant has a relic inside; the mount is later.



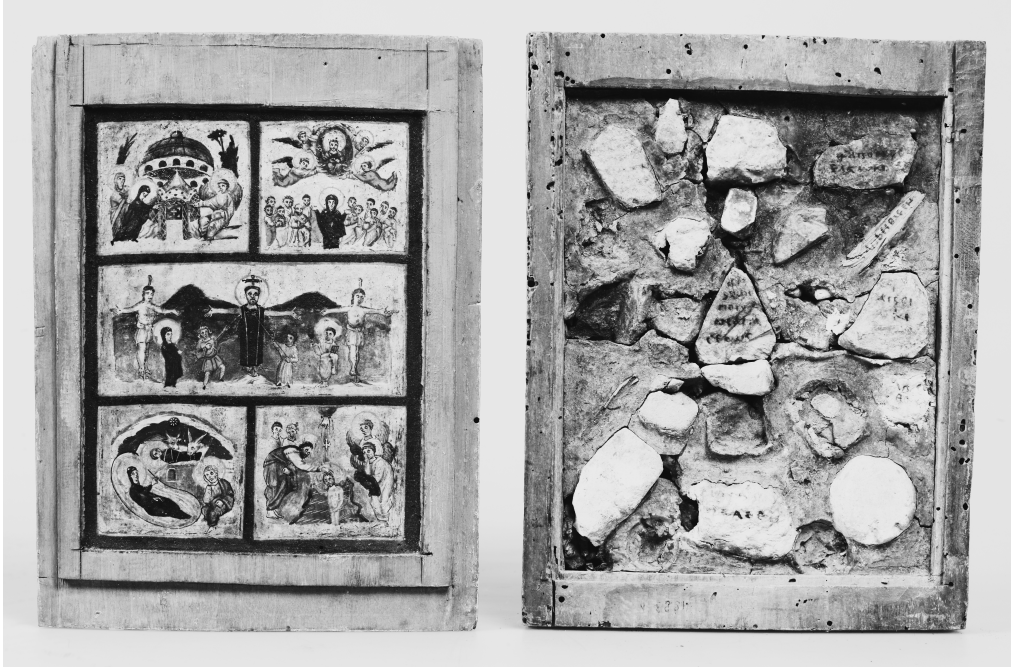


Figure I.4. Reliquary box with stones and wood fragments from the Holy Land. Sixth to seventh century. 24 × 18.4 × 3 cm. From the Sancta Sanctorum treasure, Rome, Vatican, Museo Sacro, Inv. Nr. 61883.

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carried, St. Margaret of Antioch by the dragon from whose belly she escaped, St. Lawrence by the griddle used to roast him, and so forth. (See figure I.5.) On altarpieces and panel paintings, things — often quite ordinary things — served as symbols or allegories that could both be enjoyed for what they were and also decoded as doctrinal statements. For example, a lily in the bedroom of the Virgin of the Annunciation signaled her purity; an oven or a fire behind a fire screen could suggest her bearing of Christ within her belly and also the Eucharistic bread that became him in the mass. A coral necklace worn by the Christ Child visually associated him with both the ancient tradition of coral amulets as protection from disease and the redness of Christ's blood, shed for humankind's redemption. (See figures I.6 – I.8.) Christ himself was depicted in various sorts of physical or mechanical apparatuses: as a wafer ground out by a host mill, a pool or fountain of blood squeezed out by a wine press, a figure whose hands and feet are pierced by vines and sheaves of wheat so that he almost becomes a garden plot. (See figure I.9.)¹⁰

In the liturgy chanted by clergy and heard by parishioners, in the private prayers of monks, nuns, and laypeople, and in the theological speculation the liturgy often inspired and impregnated, things proliferated. Although certain writers theorized God as “unknown” or “hidden,” as obscurity itself, the writings of contemplatives and visionaries were ever more enthusiastically populated with figures and objects — the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of glory. For example, the thirteenth-century beguine become nun Mechtild of Magdeburg described the souls of the blessed in heaven as darting about like fish in the sea but also as clear crystal containers (that is, reliquaries) through which their virtues gleamed like light.¹¹

As Rachel Fulton Brown has shown with wonderful learning, the Virgin Mary became in the high Middle Ages the “container of the uncontainable.” Mary's unbroken virginity stood in for the whole creation, which God entered without destroying, like light shining through a jewel.¹² An anonymous early thirteenth-century author of a series of sermons on the antiphon *Salve regina* exclaimed:

Not only heaven and earth but also other names and words of things (*rerum vocabulis*) fittingly designate the Lady. She is the tabernacle of God, the temple, the house, the entry-hall, the bedchamber, the bridal-bed, the bride, the daughter, the ark of the flood, the ark of the covenant, the golden urn, the



Figure 1.5. The saints were often identified by objects they carried, known as attributes, which served as a kind of code for the saint. This rood screen from St. Helen's Church, Ranworth, Norfolk, England—recognized as one of the finest examples of the genre—was probably painted in the fifteenth century and has figures of male and female saints. In this portion, devoted to the twelve apostles (of which we see four here), the saints depicted are Bartholomew (with the attributes of knife and book), James the Major (associated with one of the greatest pilgrimages of the Middle Ages and identified by the pilgrim staff), Andrew (identified here by the diagonal cross on which he was crucified), and Peter (with his attribute of the keys of heaven, given to him by Christ).



Figure 1.6. Annunciation Triptych (known as the Merode altarpiece). Netherlandish. Workshop of Robert Campin, 1427–32. In the right-hand panel, the mousetrap that Joseph, Jesus’s foster father, has just made is an example of the theological loading ordinary objects could have in late medieval images, for Christ himself is a trap to catch the devil. But the altarpiece is also a sophisticated exploration of levels of seeing and reality. The patrons looking through the open doorway, Mary receiving the angel, and the tiny baby sliding down the beam of light toward her womb are not all on the same ontological, visible, and physical level. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cloisters Collection, 1956; accession no. 56.70a–c.



Figure 1.7. The Virgin Mary and Christ before a fire screen. Follower of Robert Campin, early fifteenth century. The National Gallery, London. NG2609. The oven or fire behind a fire screen suggests Mary's bearing of Christ within her belly as well as the Eucharistic bread that becomes him in the mass. The large wicker fire screen behind the Virgin frames her as if it were a halo.



Figure 1.8. Madonna and Child with Angels. Giovanni dal Ponte, 1410s. Florence, Italy. Tempera and tooled gold leaf on wood panel. Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin; bequest of Jack G. Taylor, 1991, accession no. 1991.101. The child Jesus looks out at the viewer and raises his right hand in a gesture of blessing. In his left hand he holds a finch, a foreshadowing of the Crucifixion that refers to a legend that this bird removed a thorn from Jesus's crown and was marked by a drop of blood. Around his neck he wears a piece of coral, which both associates him with the ancient tradition of coral amulets as protection from disease and foreshadows the redness of the blood Christ will later shed for humankind's redemption.

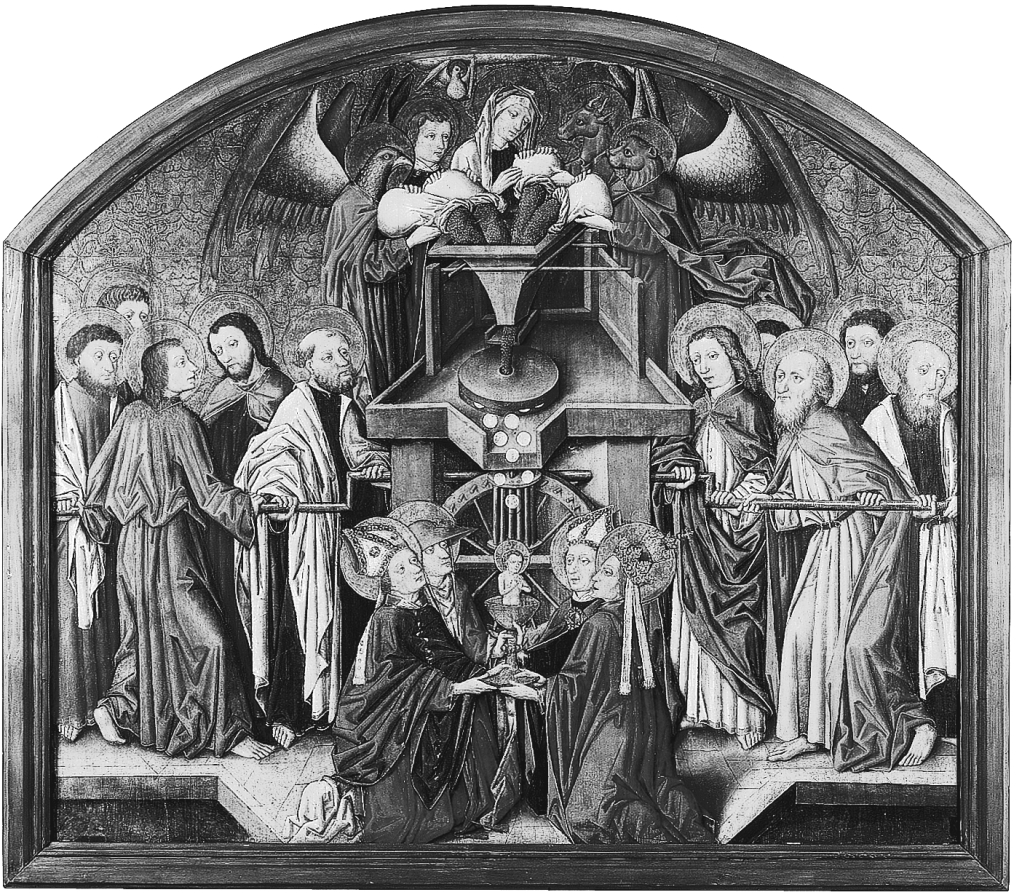


Figure 1.9. Host mill on a Swabian retable of about 1470, open state. Oil on wood. From the Old Master Collection, Ulm Museum Inv. Nr. AV 2150. Mary, with the assistance of the four Evangelists, provides the stuff of salvation by pouring grain into the funnel. The saints turn the mill. The prelates assembled below receive wafers that seem to become the baby Christ. The offer of grace in the Eucharist is here imagined as the product of mechanical apparatus and Christ comes to humankind as wafers of bread.

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manna, the rod of Aaron, the fleece of Gideon, the gate of Ezekiel, the city of God, the heaven, the earth, the sun, the moon, the morning star, the dawn, the lamp, the trumpet, the mountain, the fountain of the garden and the lily of the valley, the desert, the land of promise flowing with milk and honey, the star of the sea, the ship, the way in the sea, the fishing net, the vine, the field, the ark, the granary, the stable, the manger of the beast of burden, the store-room, the court, the tower, the castle, the battle-line, the people, the kingdom, the priesthood.¹³

Making a theological and/or devotional point, these references stress not just containing (“ark,” “urn,” “net,” “manger”) but the containing of fertility (“bridal-bed,” “dawn,” “vine,” and so forth). Even the “desert” is paired with a land “flowing with milk and honey.”

For a medieval worshipper, to use things in their specific materiality to talk about that which is clearly other or beyond or unfamiliar is not, as is sometimes thought, either an arbitrary or simply a traditional move. The anonymous commentator on the *Salve regina* glosses “names” as “words” that refer to “things,” not to abstractions or concepts. Moreover, they refer “fittingly.” And “fittingly” means both appropriately in theological terms and powerfully. As the modern critic James Wood has said: “independent, generative life . . . comes from likening something to something else. . . . As soon as you liken x to y , x has changed, and is now $x + y$, which has its own parallel life.”¹⁴ The medieval writer clearly understands that if you liken Mary the mother of God to a trumpet or a fishing net, a manger or a storeroom, it changes your perception of and access to Mary. It may also change your perception of trumpets and mangers, so that, forever after, encountering the objects may remind you of a specific Other in heaven. The reference calls up, or to, a physical reality — a concrete content — that is more than evocative or elegant, more than simply rooted in, or echoing, its scriptural or liturgical source. It asserts something basic about the relationship of an Other to creation, underlining the Other as an engendering or a flowing out.

Ritual on earth mirrored heaven not only in the language of analogy but also physically. Nuns not only sang praises to a Christ crowned in glory; they also received cloth crowns of their own at their investiture in hope of future crowning. Dukes and merchants who wanted support in war or business commissioned real crowns for statues of Christ and his mother in churches.¹⁵ When people gave to the Virgin or the saints or to God those objects we call



Figure 1.10. In the room of miracles in the church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim, in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, dozens of wax images of body parts hang from the ceiling. These models of healed body parts are objects called *ex-votos*, from the vow made by the petitioner or penitent to give back to God the physical reality God is understood to have healed or saved, a gift given in return for a gift.

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ex-votos — objects such as models of healed arms and legs, the shoes of babies saved from death, crutches thrown away, and so forth — they were giving back to God the physical reality he was understood to have healed, a gift given in return for a gift.¹⁶ (See figure I.10.) Measures of the length of Christ's body or body parts brought back by pilgrims from the Holy Land were understood to transport the presence of Christ. Leather or linen strings that measured Christ's footprints or Mary's, and even measures of relics (such as thorns from the crown of thorns or the body parts or clothing of saints), carried not so much memory or a proof of travel to holy places as the presence of the holy itself. (See figure 6.8.) Even the power of statues could be transported by their "lengths" or measures.¹⁷ Hence, objects could carry presence, power, or even identity by mathematical rather than visual similarity. In the later Middle Ages, worshippers sometimes gave to a church or its saint an amount of wick or candle wax calibrated to their own height or weight, as if they were in some sense giving themselves by offering their measures.¹⁸

Increasingly in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, religious experience was literalized into encounter with objects. A twelfth-century monastic author could speak of nails in the hand as a metaphor of cloistered obedience, but by the thirteenth century religious writers claimed that the nails of the crucified appeared physically in the body of Francis of Assisi as stigmata (wounds) with clearly visible and tactile black nailheads inside the wounds. Crusaders and pilgrims wore iron or cloth crosses on their garments; but some went further and claimed to see crosses miraculously incised on bodies themselves.¹⁹ As veneration of the physical crucifix increased, claims that it spoke or moved increased also. Depictions of Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata show him marked not by Christ but by an object — a crucifix — bearing the carved or painted figure of Christ.²⁰ (See figure I.11.) By the fifteenth century, we find the sophisticated Franciscan theologian Johannes Bremer grouping under the rubric *reliquiae* what modern analysts see as relics of the Crucifixion proper (both things in contact with Christ's body, such as the holy lance or a thorn from the crown of thorns, and bits of Christ's body itself, such as Christ's foreskin or blood) and the Eucharist (invisibly Christ's body but visibly bread and wine). In such analysis, the Eucharist is an object among objects, albeit a religiously superior one.²¹

Living as we do in a hyperacquisitive and image-saturated world,



Figure 1.11. Hand-colored woodcut made by one Caspar (active in Regensburg about 1470–80) and later pasted into a book from the Franciscan house of Ingolstadt. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar.327–1/4#1. On this little prayer card, the wounds in Francis’s body seem to be made not so much directly by Christ as by a devotional object, the crucifix.

ever bombarded by visual and auditory stimuli, we are inclined to see late medieval religious experience as similarly saturated, as if the gaudily painted late medieval church (and churches *were* gaudily colored) was a kind of Times Square, shrieking and blinking with light and sound. Inured perhaps to stimuli because we experience so many of them, we forget how image-poor much medieval experience was. We need to imagine the power of a medieval prayer card or an altarpiece or relic, or the impact of a chant, in a world where such an object or sound might be all we had to conjure up — to relate us to — an unknown realm of power. In such a world we might have to return again and again to a single depiction or prayer, object or sound, to find in it ever new, even radically new, meaning.

A glance at one of the many representations of the so-called “arms of Christ” (*arma Christi*) makes this clear.²² (See figure I.12.) Such depictions of Christ surrounded by objects of torture are not narratives of the events of the Crucifixion. Judas’s kiss in betraying Christ, the bag of silver he received, and his subsequent hanging are often telescoped into one image; objects such as the knife of Christ’s circumcision (as a baby) are included to evoke and link the many blood-sheddings of his life. The devotee would move around such a picture in meditation, choosing whatever thing seemed most appropriate to the religious need he or she felt at that particular moment of prayer.²³ In the so-called Sunday Christ (also known as “Christ crucified by the sins of the world”) such depictions were used to associate various occupations (such as carpentry, plowing, and so forth) with sinning against the Sabbath or against God. (See figure I.13.) Even here the occupations and the sins committed are represented not by human figures but by things — the tools of the workers or, occasionally, by a kind of partial figure that serves as shorthand for the act (spitting, gossiping, and the like).²⁴ The meditating person travels around the image, identifying Christ’s suffering and human responsibility for it in object after object, accessed through ever new and varied sensual and intellectual paths. Or, to give a parallel example: if we study the depiction of one of the Seven Sorrows of Mary in the extremely popular devotional book *The Mirror of Human Salvation*, we find that, in some variants, not only are the *arma Christi* arranged around Mary but a little image of a green hump with footprints on it serves almost as an attribute signaling the Ascension (which left Mary behind and therefore sorrowing). A geographical location becomes an object

among other objects.²⁵ Indeed, moving around images of objects is what the anonymous commentator on the *Salve regina* is doing when he lays dozens of comparisons over the greeting to Mary that will itself be repeated in ritual after ritual. If Mary is like the whole of creation, a single reference in a single liturgical text becomes the entire universe, changing the way the hearer understands both Mary and the world and making both a place of almost infinite devotional creativity.

In this aspect of response, praying before a medieval altarpiece or prayer card, hearing a chant, viewing a reliquary, even listening to a saint's story, was probably more like clicking on a site on the worldwide web and connecting to whatever comes up than like standing passively in Times Square bombarded by sound and movement. Indeed modern historians have drawn an analogy between the internet and the medieval gloss, which, even as it presents itself on the manuscript page, looks something like a modern hypertext. (See figure I.14.) But the interactivity, so to speak, of medieval devotion would have taken more effort and required more knowledge by the viewer or hearer than our own hyperconnected world requires. And the individual object would have been far more central to religious experience because accompanied by, and cluttered by, far fewer other objects of power. Thus, while it is helpful to draw an analogy between some contemporary ways of experiencing and the nonlinearity with which a medieval person moved around a text or object, we must not forget that the objects which a medieval nun or monk, layperson or schoolchild, encountered and used devotionally had their power in part because they were few as well as valuable.²⁶ It is true that the extremely wealthy attempted to amass vast collections of relics, and rich churches commissioned ever more images of the

Figure I.12. This image of the *Schmerzensmann* (Man of Suffering) with the *arma Christi* (arms of Christ) is a colored woodcut from about 1470–85, now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg. The Christ figure is surrounded by the instruments used to torture him, but many moments of his life are pictured simultaneously here, for the instruments include the knife of his circumcision as a baby, Judas's kiss of betrayal in the garden, and the column of the flagellation as well as the nails of the Crucifixion. Such depictions are not so much narratives of the gospel story as objects the devotee might use in meditation, moving around the image as spiritual needs seemed to demand. It is striking that most of the abuses of Christ are pictured here as committed by things.





Figure 1.13. The figure known as the “Sunday Christ” or “Christ crucified by the sins of the world” was found on parish churches to warn the laity against violating the Sabbath or other days of obligatory church attendance by working or engaging in frivolous activities such as games or gossiping. These sins were depicted as the worker’s instruments (ploughs, hammers, and so forth) that attack Christ, the suffering servant, and draw from his wounds fresh streams of blood. The motif of the Sunday Christ is found especially in southern England and Wales and on the continent in Alpine regions. This monumental example is from St. Breage’s Church, Cornwall, England.

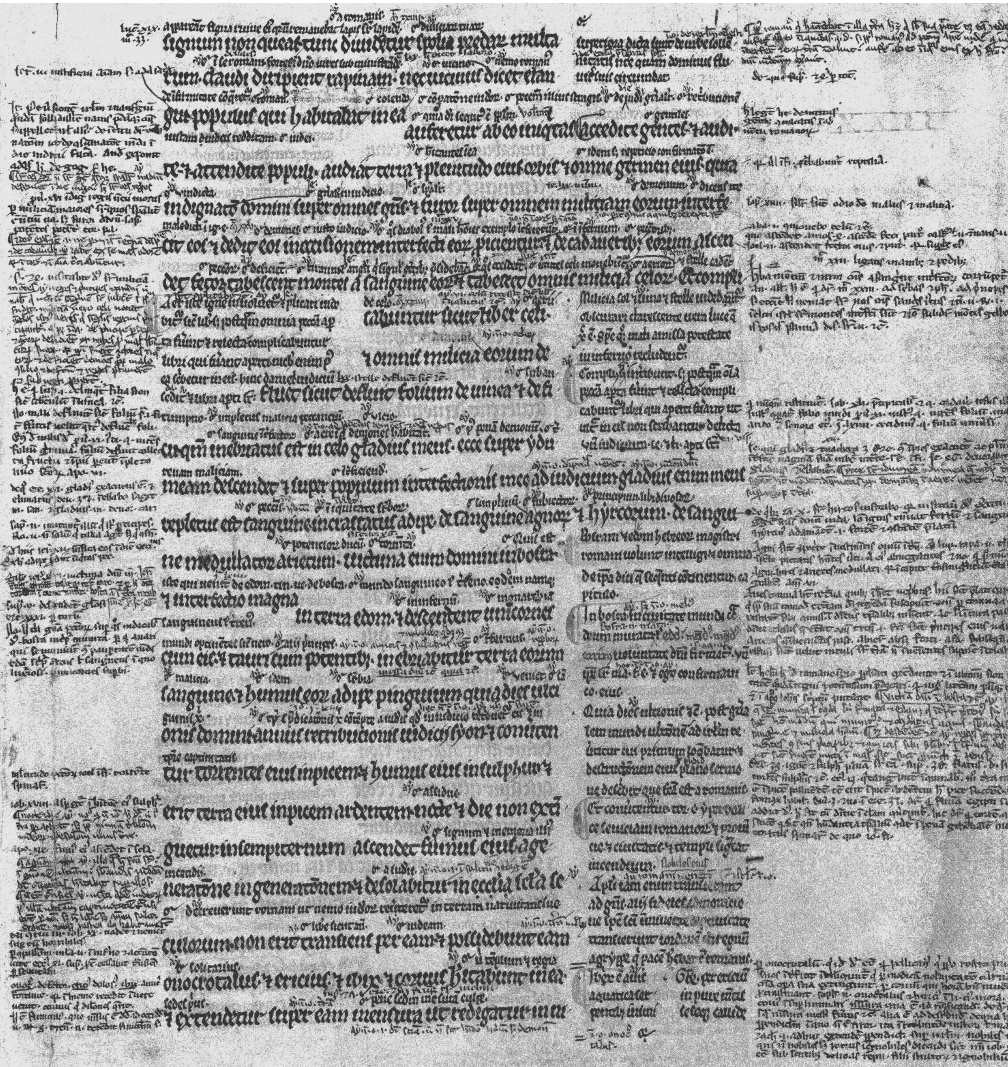


Figure 1.14. Bible with commentary from the *Glossa Ordinaria*, text material from c. 850–1499. Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, MO389, Medieval Manuscript fragments, box 1, folder 9. Around the biblical text are added glosses (Commentaries) from the famous medieval “Ordinary Gloss.” The image shows clearly the way in which medieval glossing made what was almost a hypertext of a central manuscript, so that the student or reader could go back and forth between main text and information about and interpretations of it.

saints, but this amassing was not because of any loss of significance by individual objects. More was better exactly because each object had power. Even that precursor to the museum — the early modern “cabinet of wonders” — was initially a collection of powerful (not merely valuable) things; that is why they were denominated marvels or “wonders.”²⁷

People in the Middle Ages encountered ordinary buckets and milking stools, cows, birds, and babies, of course. But almost anything could become charged with special power — holy, magical, or simply unusual (nor, as I explained earlier, were types of power always sharply differentiated).²⁸ Even a part of a bone or the inner organ of a holy person could transmit his or her entire presence, *pars pro toto*.²⁹ A column in an Italian church that looked like a column in Jerusalem might come to be treated as what Anthony Cutler denominates a “visual contact relic” and Nadine Mai calls (with greater precision) a “similarity relic” — that is, an object that has the same effect as the holy place or object it exactly resembles and evokes.³⁰ In such cases, the likeness of an object (that is, its visible or optical likeness) itself confers power and agency, even without contact to the original.³¹

Indeed, in considering the efficacy of objects, we need to expand the category of “visual contact relic” or “similarity relic” to include parallels of dimensionality as well as of shape and appearance. The column of the flagellation in Bologna, studied by Nadine Mai, acquires holiness from its exact duplication of dimensions, not just its appearance, and documents explicitly refer to this likeness as *similitudo*.³² (See figure I.15.) “Similarity” could be mathematical — that is, a sameness of length or breadth as well as of appearance. As I discussed earlier, exact measures of Christ’s body or Mary’s, or even of statues and relics, carried the holy. The Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich possesses measures of a statue of a pope, of a thorn from the crown of thorns, of the statues of Mary and the Christ Child at Loreto, and of St. Sebastian’s footprints in Rome, which were considered useful to induce pregnancy, cure illness, and protect from enemies, fire, and flood.³³ Color itself, without similarity of shape or other aspects of appearance, could carry likeness and hence power. The birthing girdle that was thought to reduce birth pangs and to open the laboring womb was understood to be effective because it reproduces, as a parallel structure and shape, the vagina-shaped



Figure I.15. Here we see a pillar in Bologna, known as the “column of the flagellation,” that acquires its holiness from its exact duplication of both the dimensions and the appearance of the column of the flagellation in Jerusalem. Documents explicitly refer to this as *similitudo*, so that likeness here almost acquires a power to act on its own.

wound in Christ's side from which he gave birth to the salvation of humankind.³⁴ The Christ Child wears coral in a number of paintings not just because medieval babies did sometimes wear coral as an amulet against bleeding and injury but also because its redness evokes Christ's blood as a talisman against destruction and damnation. (See figure I.8.) In wearing a red amulet or tying around the wrist a red string, a medieval devotee might "put on" Christ's blood for physical and spiritual healing, just as the baby held by his mother in this painting puts on, proleptically, his own accomplishment of salvation.

Such objects were understood not only as protective but also as dangerous in the variety of their potentialities. The fear of images, of relics, and of realist interpretations of the Eucharist, found already in the fifteenth century not only among Lollards and other dissident groups but also in much orthodox preaching and advising of the laity and the cloistered, grew at least initially from a sense that objects were perilously powerful — and powerful especially in their similitude to the holy Other — not from any mere disdain for them. Long before Calvinist iconoclasm, theologians and preachers warned against making holy objects into "idols."³⁵ The Dominican Bartholomew of Florence, for example, attacked the wooden tablets carved with Jesus's holy name whose popularity was rapidly spread by San Bernardino in the fifteenth century. However much Bernardino maintained that the tablets were only triggers of devotion, opponents attacked them as idols, arguing that no manmade circle but only the Eucharist could "represent" God.³⁶ In this case, even the circular shape of the devotional object, mimicking the shape of the Eucharistic wafer, was opposed by some theologians as a threat to God's singular power. Often aware of the potential contradiction in their discussions, theologians and spiritual directors supported the education of both the literate and the illiterate by objects and images yet tried to uphold "imageless contemplation" as a higher form of access to God.³⁷

The objects I study in each of these chapters are all holy objects, freighted with such power and such contradiction. That is, they are things or stuff used by worshippers to lift their earthly experiences and beliefs toward an Other that is beyond or outside the here and now, or to bring that beyond (sometimes literally, as in the case of stigmata, animated wall paintings, or Eucharistic miracles) into a

time and space that is here. The issue at stake in my discussion is not, however, the nature of their materiality. Materiality has been keenly discussed for the past ten years by anthropologists, art historians, literary critics, philosophers, and historians of religion.³⁸ But that is not my topic here.

Nor is my topic the relationship of such objects to Eucharistic theology, especially the doctrine of transubstantiation, although in considering the problem of likeness I do consider the Eucharist at some length in the articles collected here. A number of scholars, chief among them Peter Browe and Gavin Langmuir, have argued that the doctrine of transubstantiation led to an increase in Eucharistic miracles because literalist Eucharistic theology stimulated skepticism and hence miracles that refuted such skepticism or assuaged the guilt it caused.³⁹ Building in part on such reasoning, some recent historians have not so much argued as assumed that the metaphysics of transubstantiation became the basic way of thinking about change and representation in Christianity in the late Middle Ages and Reformation.⁴⁰ Yet the fundamental aspect of medieval Christianity that distinguished it from its sister religions, Judaism and Islam, and would come to distinguish it from early modern Protestantism was not Eucharistic theology per se but the proliferation of increasingly tactile and insistent things — winged altarpieces, moveable statues, prayer cards with raised, Braille-like images and text, oozing wall paintings, bodies and body parts of saints — that to the horror of some and the delight of others hovered on the brink of animation, sometimes tipping over into life.⁴¹ Given the late medieval enthusiasm for enactments of transformation generally (in, for example, stories of werewolves and other shape-changers, in the proliferation of claims of miraculous bodily changes such as stigmata or mystical pregnancy, and in increasing philosophical and scientific acceptance of efforts at species transformation such as alchemy), it seems wrong to privilege transubstantiation and Eucharistic theology as the ontology underlying assumptions about the world rather than to understand the increasing realism of Eucharistic theory as one manifestation of a more wide-ranging and general attitude.⁴²

My concern here, however, is neither the understanding of materiality that underlay the power of objects nor the theories of transformation that were sometimes used to explain it. My concern is the

question of “likeness.”⁴³ That is, assuming as they did that heaven exists and access to it is possible, how did medieval Christian worshippers understand earthly stuff (down to the lowliest rock or worm) to mediate between earth and heaven, representing or communicating each to the other? For to medieval Christians, God is Other. “No man hath seen God at any time” (John 1:18).⁴⁴ Moreover, as Exodus 20:4 enjoined; human beings should make and worship no graven images nor “the *likeness* of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, [or] in the waters under the earth.” *Similitudo* itself is a problem. Nothing “like” earth in any sense should be understood or revered as representing God. Yet God is also creator, and as creator, he is the author of everything here below. Human beings are made in his image (*imago*) and likeness (*similitudo*) (Genesis 1:27) just as Christ is his image in a special sense; and nature is God’s book, containing traces of himself.⁴⁵ The concept of *imago*, used in many senses by theologians, conveyed an idea of mimesis (not necessarily identity) and was therefore a way of thinking about how things relate or refer to God.⁴⁶ Moreover, theologians from the early church to that opponent of images John Calvin maintained that God’s signatures, traces, and footprints, are in the world so that humankind should be able to argue from them to him.⁴⁷ But how can objects be “like” something that is Other — something that cannot, and should not, be represented, named, or imaged? The essays collected here consider then not medieval theories of matter and change but rather how, in the Middle Ages, particular things were understood to point to, look like, refer to, even convey the un-representable. The kind of holy objects I treat here raise questions about “representation” and “likeness” much debated recently by art historians, semioticians, and students of religion, as well as questions concerning the agency of objects and access to them discussed by anthropologists and cognitive scientists.

***Approaches to the Power of Things:
Historical, Art Historical, and Anthropological***

Any study of how medieval things refer or make present must begin with the brilliant and often misunderstood work of Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (first Dutch edition 1919), published in a flowing but not literal English translation, shortened and lacking most of its documentation, in 1923.⁴⁸ Historians must still ask,

as Huizinga asked long ago: Why was there such a proliferation of things, which Huizinga calls a search for “concrete expression,” at the heart of late medieval religious experience? What did such expression enable? Was it in danger of becoming petrified, mechanical, or overly familiar? In an example he made famous, Huizinga describes the fourteenth-century saint Henry Suso dividing each apple he eats into four parts, three for the Trinity and one for the love with which the Virgin Mary offers an apple to her young son. Suso leaves the fourth piece unpeeled because little boys do not like their apples peeled.⁴⁹ Huizinga views such behavior, which seems as odd to modern readers as it did to some medieval theologians and to the early Protestants who reacted against it, not as unholy or superstitious but as a “sanctification of all aspects of life” — a sanctification that, however, “overloads belief.”⁵⁰ Although himself critical of such fusing of what modern thinkers consider to be separate worldly and religious spheres, Huizinga treated the increased materiality and literalism of late medieval practice with profound understanding of how it made faith stable and immediate to worshippers. He also argued that it threatened to tip devotion into ordinary day-to-day experiences that can be ignored or even ridiculed. Huizinga’s work — one of the dozen great treatments of the Middle Ages written in the twentieth century — thus raises the question of the power and the danger of likeness. If that which gestures toward the eternal, the divine, the “other,” is too close to earth, too literally like the ordinary, can it lift the worshipper to heaven? How can cutting an apple be “like” approaching or loving God?

The past century has seen a number of major theorizings of medieval objects that have focused on only a part of the range Huizinga considered. The great Erwin Panofsky, drawing on Aby Warburg’s enthusiasm for objects, especially folk material and other items and motifs not usually considered by art historians, expanded older ideas of iconography from the identification of painter, subject, venue, and so forth to an iconological theory of how one might decode the objects (such as, for example, the ovens and coral necklaces mentioned above) in medieval painting using theology, exegesis, or devotional writing. Much art historical writing in the mid-twentieth century followed Panofsky’s lead.⁵¹ Art historians have also attempted, using C. S. Peirce’s semiotic theory, to describe objects such as relics and religious images with his threefold categories of index (a sign

that denotes its object by virtue of an actual connection), icon (also called “likeness” or “semblance” — a sign that denotes its object by virtue of a quality that is shared by them, that is, that “imitates” or “resembles” its object), and symbol (a sign that points to another entity or concept because it is assigned in a system of signifiers to do so).⁵² Hence, a painting or statue is an icon, because it “looks like” or “depicts” a holy figure; a relic is an index, because it comes from (that is, has a “real relation” to) what it stands for; an image such as a lily in the liturgy or on an altarpiece is a symbol, because it designates its referent (purity) only in a known system of signs.

Even a glance at a few of the kind of objects I enumerated earlier makes clear how much such analyses, though advances over many earlier treatments, leave out. For example, one may learn a great deal about the splendid triptych of the Annunciation known as the Merode altarpiece (workshop of Robert Campin) by placing the mousetrap that Joseph, Jesus’s foster father, has just made against the background of discussion, going back to the patristic period, of Christ on the cross as trap for the devil.⁵³ (See figure I.6.) The lily in the Virgin’s bedroom is also clearly a reference to her purity. But such iconological analysis leaves unexplored the way in which viewpoints or even, we might say, ontological levels are explored. How would a medieval viewer actually view or pray before such a religious object; how would he or she, identifying with the patrons on our left for whom the door is open, actually see the event not only of the angel appearing to Mary but also of the tiny baby sliding down a sunbeam into the space of both bedroom and womb? Are patron, Mary, angel, and descending baby all on the same level of see-ability and physical, earthly existence? Moreover, what does the placing, on the far right, of a completed mousetrap on the window ledge toward the town square suggest about how any sinful viewer, perhaps himself or herself part of the townspeople, might be freed by a trapping Christ?

Or, if we turn to another example, the Mary Magdalen reliquary, it seems that Peirce’s distinctions fail to indicate what is really at stake. (See figure I.2.) The tooth, for example, is an index (because physically connected to the holy body from which it comes) and yet also has iconic elements. Although it is probably not a human tooth, it looks like the body fragment it signifies and therefore by a kind of resemblance signifies body.⁵⁴ It is clearly more than a symbol. Not merely signified or pointed to by the tooth, the saint is fully present

behind the crystal in soul and body, just as she is also present in heaven. Not only is she not the part she looks like; the part is also not really a tooth since it is presented by golden vines and rock crystal both as something living and growing and yet also as something frozen into the gem-like permanence of eternity. The power of the object lies, I would suggest, not so much in indexicality as in the paradox of what we might call “dissimilar similitude” — that is, both in the dissimilarity of tooth, body, hardened gem, and unfolding vine to each other and in the wholeness of heaven they, taken together, present and re-present.⁵⁵ If the analytical categories of index, icon, and symbol do not work very well fully to describe the relic in its reliquary, they seem even less helpful for the garment of chastity I discuss above. Clearly not index or icon, it is much more literally what it refers to than we usually think a symbol is.⁵⁶

Such considerations have led historians, art historians, and students of religion to raise questions concerning the agency of objects and access to them recently discussed by anthropologists and cognitive scientists. Some have had recourse to the theories of psychologists to suggest that certain shapes, colors, and so forth, have an impact on the human brain independent of the particular cultures that produce them or the understandings in those cultures of what the objects signify.⁵⁷ With greater sophistication, some art historians have employed the theories of Alfred Gell or Bruno Latour to argue that images are “living pictures” or agents, not symbols or signs pointing to an other but themselves presences. To such scholars, religious objects are less representations of particular moments in a sacred story that need decoding (although there may be elements of this) than participations in the immediate and palpable power of the holy.⁵⁸ Or, following the MET (Material Engagement Theory) of Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew, some scholars propose that we abandon the current mind/object dichotomy entirely and concentrate instead on networks of engagement (sensual, affective, and spiritual as well as cognitive) between people and things.⁵⁹ Hence in the words of Byzantine historian Glenn Peers, separation of object and presence is an illusion: “a reading of late antique animism would view all objects as potentially communicative subjects. This . . . is a relational position: that is, all human and material things relate in transformative and productive ways, and they do so . . . as equal participants.”⁶⁰

The chapters that follow provide many examples that can be

understood as such objective agency or presence. Chapter 6, on the footprints of Christ supposedly left behind on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem when he ascended into heaven, underlines how devotees employed physical traces left by the gone-away Jesus to convey his power from Palestine to Europe. Christ's actual presence traveled not only in depictions or outlines of the prints but also in particles or bits of them (both sand and stone) and in aniconic measurements of their length. The crowns and veils I discuss in the chapter on Wienhausen themselves formed the girl child into a nun. The Judensau, an apotropaic and anti-Semitic image that I discuss in "The Presence of Objects," was understood by Christian contemporaries not only to depict Jewish activities but also to itself act. Placed on the gables of inns, on bridges, and on city gates to ward off Jewish presence, this disgusting object showed Jews suckling from the teats and anus of a pig. It was understood not merely to announce that Jews were unwelcome but to actually repel them, insuring that, if expelled, they would not return.⁶¹

As the case of the Judensau or the nun's garment of chastity suggests, some applications of cognitive theory to images and artifacts seem reductive, hence misleading. The anti-Semitic image of the Judensau is dependent on long-standing cultural assumptions in Christian Europe about the relationship of Jews to money and money to excrement, and it echoes far more than human reactions to the smell of pigs. The depiction of virginity as an intact garment rests not so much on bodily fears of penetration as on medieval assumptions about women's work and about clothing as constituting, not merely reflecting status. Nonetheless, despite some reductive misuse, the recent interest in objects and how exactly they act has been not just productive but positively liberating for medievalists. The understanding of things as agents or presences, especially in the sophisticated analysis given by Alfred Gell to non-Western as well as Western examples, has done much to induce medieval art historians to consider a wider range of objects than the altarpieces, sculptures, and manuscript illuminations that used to be taken as the extent of "medieval art," and to re-embed the things they study in the contexts of liturgical performance, private meditation, and daily life, where they clearly belong. I cite here, as an example of such new attention to the agency of objects, a charming study by Aden Kumler, who analyzes a manuscript in which the movements and positions in a

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