Animism, Materiality, and Museums

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Published by Arc Humanities Press

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Animism, Materiality, and Museums: How Do Byzantine Things Feel?

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Part I

Animate Materialities
from Icon to Cathedral
Figure 3. Icon of Stephen Protomartyr, 26.5 × 23 cm, tempera and gold leaf on wood, Late Byzantine. The Menil Collection (85-057.03), with permission of The Menil Collection.
Chapter 1

SHOWING BYZANTINE MATERIALITY

IF WE SUPPRESS too much abstract analysis in art history, then relational being and thinking can keep subjecthood in play for things long left for dead. They force understanding away from Cartesian absolutes of mind and body, subject and object, and open art history to experientialized historical human and nonhuman subjects—to full relations among all those subjects, as flesh of our own flesh, to borrow from the title of Kaja Silverman’s book, which invokes Adam’s words in Genesis to argue for similarity, rather than difference, as placing everything in relation.¹

This chapter uses an icon and a box to venture beyond an art history of objects and to advocate for the subjecthood and agency for all Byzantine things. It attempts to demonstrate the materiality of a late Byzantine icon. It argues for sensitivity to the temporal rhythms and material experience that things reveal, and it offers possible strategies for showing in exhibition, where many of us encounter things from the past, how materialities can manifest themselves to us so long after the objects were made and first made active.

Stephen’s Materiality

There is a small, late Byzantine icon of St. Stephen in the Menil Collection (Figure 3).² The icon’s mereness might betray its active agency, but attendance to its sensual surfeit reveals its relational energy. Holding a swinging censer in one hand and a paten, the small plate that holds the Eucharist bread, and a gold box in his covered left, the figure of Stephen performs his transitive acts that span the inside and outside of the picture. The porousness of the picture plane is one thing, but more radically, with transitive senses, Stephen enacts the relational, transformative agency of his presence. Smell (incense that covers all devotional spaces), touch (paradoxically intensified by the cloth-covered hand), taste (the not-tasted alterations in the bread and wine of the Eucharist), sight (the fixed, lazy stare of the saint that betrays the motion, the moving air of the foreground)—Stephen’s silence is the concession to the object state, but it only increases the intensities of the experientialized bodies within and beyond the icon.³

These points of contact permit the experience of an icon to be active beyond our received conception of “icons.” In its terms, an icon is a representation, a theologically sanctioned safe bond between image and prototype. It allows a vertical, anagogic reading of the relations of the human, the icon, and divinity. But these examples give us a way into a horizontal reading wherein all the participants are working analogically, relationally. Silverman argues for an “ontological kinship,” a foundational position for understanding that “everything derives from the same flesh.” This position allows for

¹ Silverman 2009.
² Carr 2011, 44–45.
³ See also Carr 2011, 22–3.
identity and individuality, and it opens possibilities of relation and a "powerful sense of our emplacement within a larger Whole."\(^4\) In that sense, the dividual is an appropriate replacement for the individual, and as an explanatory model, the notion that we—and they—are divisible, porous, open to the transformative flows of the world can help explain the strangeness of materiality’s histories.\(^5\)

Let me try to demonstrate these ideas through an analysis of form—“how it looks.” The icon is small in scale, only measuring 26.5 × 23 cm, but the frame is filled with reflexive potential. The saint is shown as a young man, unbearded and with short hair, and he is dressed in the liturgical vestments of a deacon: he is wearing a white stole over a black surplice, and a thin scarf falls over his left shoulder. In keeping with the description of Stephen as a servant at table, he is a youth, an attendant (see Acts 6:1–7:60). Indeed, Acts states that he had the face of an angel—to be sure, a trope for sexless beauty, but it also works as an indication of his servitude to the word of God, his devotion to the point of self-sacrifice that comes at the end of his earthly life. His angelic appearance was picked up by later writers, but so was his militancy as an indomitable soldier of faith.\(^6\) His gaze also betrays a strength and intensity that correspond to the arguments he so energetically raised against the elders. Here is the unbreaking stare that led to his execution through stoning by a mob of angry dissenters. The gaze takes in more, however, than stubborn servitude, for Stephen is protomartyr, a first witness to the faith that vision at the end of his life confirmed, “Behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man at God’s right hand” (Acts 7:55–56). Gazing into heaven at that nearly last moment, Stephen saw God’s glory. So taking some of the possibilities of Stephen’s gaze, we might say he has seen everything important, and through it, he gained the wisdom to forgive, because his very last words attest to the absolution of his murderers.

He relates to us through that “thousand-yard stare,” his look at and beyond us, but he looks fixedly at “me,” too. The absence and presentness of his look pins me, and they make me look for their object, in me and outside me—for God. We could say that in that stare, his behaviour “behaves” me.

**Faciality**

Faces proliferated in Byzantium, not least in churches and public spaces full of icons, frescos, mosaics, and showing stone. Every Byzantine face behaves us. Even modern, secular museum goers are behaved by those faces in icons and other forms that tell us how to look, where to stand, when we can go. From their first face-to-face encounters before their audience, those Byzantine faces were fully in control, for they stated when to be abject, when to speak, when to be grateful. And they still do.

Anyone who, moved and awestruck, has had that stop-dead moment in a Byzantine church knows an echo of those faces’ command. The faces of God, his mother, saints and prophets can still hold one, captivate and melt one’s free will before them. In that

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4 Silverman 2009, 4.
6 Devos 1968; Aubineau 1989.
way, subjects can circulate, what seemed like simple pictures take charge, and humans become all-seen objects of divine gazes. At the centre of these histories is the originary face—the Mandylion—that embodies that reciprocal gaze between and amongst quasi-objects. The Mandylion was the famous touch relic that Christ created as a self-portrait. It created a divine sanction for divine self-portraiture, and through its creation, it recapitulated the act of creation by God of humanity in his image.\(^7\)

Icon gazes are always active, mutual, and livening—in fact, totalizing—and in that way, we can see forcefully other ways in which Byzantine objects worked so energetically on their viewers, why they break down apparent differences in identity of viewer and thing, why they come alive and act as quasi-objects in the world as we do.\(^8\)

In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, face is an absolute foundation of our world.\(^9\) In every face-to-face encounter, an ethical obligation introduces itself; it is not just being close enough to another person to see them, but it is a "proximity" in which human relations are imposed by God through all our faces, including theirs. Levinas’s position does not directly align with the medieval understanding of the face of God, because he wrote, for example, “The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is discarnate, is the manifestation of the height in God revealed. It is our relations with men [...] that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of.”\(^10\) Whereas

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7 Peers 2018b has bibliography and further explorations of the meanings of this foundational relic.
8 See Belting 2005 on this process, too.
10 Levinas 1969, 79.
for Levinas, that manifestation in face was God disincarnate, for medieval Christians, every face was in relation with God’s.

Nevertheless, Levinas allows us to see that the core experience in our existence is through our face, even as we never see that core of self truly. For that encounter, one needs the other, and through him or her, we constitute our social, ethical lives and make our subjecthood. Those ideas also were in operation in the Byzantine world, and Byzantines had those obligations, too, but one insisted on by those faces. Every time a Byzantine looked at a face, an ethical obligation was present. But faces, of course, also had incarnational force, because God assumed humanity and had a face that was originary of all human faces.

From the distinctively Western, fine arts, however, the way in which the face of the icon behaves its beholder is displaced by a teasing out of its emotive qualities and formal particularities as a way into meaning—the aim is the capture and control of the agency involved in the thing. In a passage in *Enchantment: On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*, for example, C. Stephen Jaeger attends to the particular dynamic of face during late antiquity, especially as it is embodied in the glorious icon of the Pantocrator in the Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai (Figure 4).

For Jaeger, this face is the place of the humanity, not the divinity, of Christ, in the serenity, gentleness, and strength displayed in that portion of the panel that constitutes the face. Jaeger also brings to bear the proposition that the face is a white wall/black hole, famously expounded by the philosophers Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze in terms of the concept of the “abstract machine of faciality” in which “significance” and “subjectification” are both at play: “Significance is never without a white wall on which it inscribes its signs and redundancies,” an inscription that says “child, woman, mother, man, father, boss, teacher, police officer”—or “Christ”—and is “an affair not of ideology but of economy and the organization of power,” while subjectification “is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion, and redundancies.” In this model, as applied by Jaeger, the Pantocrator face is “given entirely to a deep and embracing consciousness, full of expressive force, but ultimately ineffable, inexhaustible via words. That is characteristic of many icons; the meaning is invested in the conventional signs and postures,” but “the religious force radiates from the face, and it works because the zone of the face is freed from semiotic function” as a “white wall” reflecting objective categories “and given over entirely to an individual emotionality and passion,” a “black hole” of subjectivity “that is virtually hypnotic, at the minimum riveting, in its effect on the viewer.”

The issues are multiple, and Jaeger is just a useful foil, since his scholarship is deeply learned and admired. But in the first place, Jaeger certainly falls into a heretical position, if we take seriously the theology of post-Chalcedonian Christians of the Greek-speaking East. In stressing the “elevated humanity” of Christ in the icon, divine relationality is neglected: it is God there in that face. And reading that face in terms of its effect on one

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11 Jaeger 2012, 98–133.
is natural for Jaeger's concept of charisma, which is fundamentally about reception, its human-focused gravitational centre.

But the face itself divides and multiplies its effects, according to the white wall/black hole dynamic dichotomy. Most viewers (indeed, every group of students that has ever discussed the icon with me) instinctively put a hand in front of their face in order to distinguish the differences between the two sides of the face. The significance of the difference is not ultimately determinable (probably the dyophysite nature of Jesus), but the open-endedness is a source of its richly unending work on us; the icon is in control of its effects and charisma, not its viewers. And the terms of its current state, this version of the icon is not a fair or accurate version of its late antique or Byzantine self, which would have been clad in revetment and votives, and enclosed by an inscription. That obscuring of the face, not just the encroachment of the frame, but also the light perception that results from the reflective surface, has to be reckoned with. The face withdraws, in fact, as the halation emanates from the surround, and the field that is most legible in our photographs folds into a series of veiling effects. The mysteries intensify, and the face fluctuates between presence and absence, but the icon knows its own charisma and always puts the viewer in a deficit position.\footnote{Of course, Pentcheva 2006 and 2010 has made some of these points, but as I made clear in the Introduction, her version of the phenomenology of icons is skin deep. I have also made arguments that parallel these above in Peers 2004, 101–31.}

**Stephen's Bodies**

In the Menil icon, Stephen's gaze is not vertical; it is not directed to heaven, as his last moments were. It is horizontal, it is encompassing, and his actions are likewise directed. The panel is really performing itself, its own special relation. The combination of actions is awkward: the covered left hand somehow steadies the paten and a small box, which may be an incense box, a box for remnants of the Eucharist, or a reliquary. That awkwardness is not arbitrary, because the loop at the end of the chain is evidently between thumb and forefinger—the thumbnail is clearly described, and shadow plainly falls in the area around the middle of his chest, where the paten touches the body from the pressure of the left hand over the outer rim of the paten. Both space and contact are present. The body of the saint is in control of the actions taking place, but it is also not fully determinant; the things he holds have their own provisional nature that his body takes into account.

The body of the saint cannot be taken too literally here. It is clearly not the body of the saint during his lifetime, because he is performing the work of a deacon in the medieval Byzantine world; it is not the martyred body, because he is undamaged, and only the circles of hair cascading from the crown draw attention to the skull shattering that led to this death. He is closer to his angelic self here, heavenly and ethereal in his perfected, beautiful form.\footnote{See Carr 2011, 25: the “sweet fullness of Stephen's nubile body.”} And eros is never far: in the fifth century, the empress Pulcheria (398/9–453) took his relics to her bedchamber, like a husband, a metaphor for...
virginity, mystical union, and so on, but her strong desire was long remembered. Stephen appeared to Pulcheria and told her that her desire has been realized, according to the Theophanes Confessor (ca. 758/60–817/8), and according to Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopulus (fl. ca. 1320), she let herself be controlled by an "unutterable yearning" for the saint.

Stephen’s relational energy is at work here and in other traces. The red cloth over his left hand is meaningful, not only because it matches the red of the embers within the censer; but because it also picks up the red lining of the sleeve of Stephen’s right arm. The earthly remnants of the body of the saint are, of course, significant: his cult really dates only from the discovery of his body in 415, north of the walls of Jerusalem, and from that point, his body and cult travelled throughout the Mediterranean. His right hand was especially venerated at his monastery in Constantinople and at the Konstamonitou Monastery on Mount Athos, and other parts were strongly venerated elsewhere, too. The careful description of his right hand on the icon reveals his relation to his relics and to his miraculous energy in the world; the box on the paten may refer to his very own reliquary. That hand was and continues to be a powerful relic—pilgrims still travel to Athos for Stephen’s relics and icons.

A number of icons, such as examples in St. Petersburg and at St. Catherine’s Monastery on Sinai, share the characteristics of the Menil icon. These icons evidently copy a common model—one suspects they copy a prototype from the monastery at the capital that is now claimed as itself a miraculous icon at the monastery on Athos. These three icons each have a deacon Stephen with paten, box, and censer; they all date to circa 1300, and they all seem to respond to a particular agency the original possessed. Of course, the icons are individuals: for one thing, the other examples are standing figures, and moreover, the panels are differently scaled, the example in the Hermitage being 32 × 18.5 cm and the example from Sinai much larger at 96.8 × 63.8 cm. The original, now lost, it seems, transmitted the agency of the saint to these copies; they share the DNA of that powerful first testimony of the saint in bone, wood, and paint. Those things are in relation to each other, iterations of that original apostolic body.

Transitive senses, here, the expectation of smell, prove the porousness of the picture plane and show the individual expression of the Menil panel. All three examples share a set of actions by Stephen as deacon, but the Menil panel has the censer swinging full,
and Stephen is packed tightly within the frame. In this way, Stephen enacts the relational, transformative agency of his presence. Smell, the incense in his right hand, blankets devotional spaces and bridges that space and ours. It is worth recalling that Stephen’s relics were found through the suffusion of the air with a paradisiac fragrance that healed seventy-three Christians right away. The sense of touch paradoxically intensifies through the cloth-covered hand, the hand that emphasizes the relic right hand, Stephen’s own. Censing occurs at points of invocation and divine attendance in the liturgy. Incense is divine presence, and the burning embers in the censer on the panel implicate all those present in the smoke’s reach. (Smoke is not literally shown or yet emanating.)

Other senses are in play. The Eucharist may be in the box, too, and the censing proves that implicated presence. Taste is also present in the sensation of smelling incense, as well as in the memory of the not-tasted alterations in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Sight is in equilibrium in the fixed, unforced stare of the saint, which betrays the motion, the moving air of the foreground. The contingency is in the necessity of the arc of the censer reversing and the clutch of the paten and box needing to be adjusted consequently. Stephen’s silence only increases the intensities of the experientialized bodies within and beyond the icon. The sound of the censer, instinctively supplied by other subjects, is in the ring of the chains and in the clatter as it catches the top of its swing and descends again. Moreover, sound is not simply like the material; it constitutes a form of material action. Yet the chatter of things is all too easily overlooked. Things are all too often treated as silent.

Stephen’s verbal withholding goes strongly against what we know of him from Christian scripture, the elaborate prolixity of his speech in Acts that led to his condemnation and his execution by the hysterical crowd. Stephen’s closed lips paradoxically bring to mind the saint’s extravagant verbal charisma, which gained him his singular vision of Jesus and God and heaven in his last mortal moments. But that silence is also an object state that gives space for our own enlargements and interpretative body memory, because it pulls us, through itself and its opposite—sound—into materiality and living in the world. The icon is profoundly of the past, but it is sound that paradoxically entangles past and present. The habitus of sound completes Stephen’s presence; in fact, sound and silence work its essential weaving of our world with his.

Museum Materiality

Can such things themselves tell their stories, speak their minds, without all this repetitive verbalization on my part—can an exhibition say something “true” about these very old things? The Menil Collection reinstalled its medieval collection in its main pavillion in 2018, and the ways in which the curators mobilized the objects into new configurations and with new meanings and experience emerging is proper testimony to the continuing strength of the institutional mission.

22 See Carr 2011, 23.
23 Clark 1982, 141–42.
24 Harvey 2006.
More than thirty years had passed since the original publication of *Inside the White Cube*, by Brian O’Doherty, but that critique of the ideology of gallery space retains its bite, even after that interval. The St. Stephen icon was previously in a wall vitrine along with other objects selected from the collection’s Byzantine holdings and occasionally in exhibitions (Figure 5). An implicit connection to devotion and ritual unified the objects in this vitrine, such as a cross, a lamp, a gold box, and a small limestone (?) reliquary with spout, but the objects were diverse in date, provenance, and materials. And yet all cues that these objects are not art in the way we mean it had been eliminated from the presentation.\(^{26}\)

Lighting, isolation, artful spacing, depth within the wall absent the objects, positioned them in placelessness. O’Doherty used a striking simile to evoke this utopia within the frame. The stability of the frame is as necessary, he wrote, as an oxygen tank for a diver: “Its limiting security completely defines the experience within.”\(^{27}\) A new context is created for these objects, in other words, that is entirely constructed, and of course this assertion is not news. Museums make utopias: “Art museums, in the past, were not just displaying art, but were narrating art history, or presenting art in the mirror of its own history,” as Hans Belting has written.\(^{28}\) They are objects, “things,” that contest and invert our constructed expectations and represent them at the same time: a version of a heterotopic world for things.\(^{29}\)

As of 2018, the new Menil installation makes an entirely different dialogue possible for Stephen’s icon (Figure 6). The icon is now in a dynamic spatial relationship with a gold reliquary box dating to the late antique period with a likely provenance of Stobi in the Republic of North Macedonia, as it is known after a name change in 2019.\(^{30}\) Flanking the icon, on the other side of the door, is a Russian icon of the Anastasis, and viewed from deep within the room, as in this photograph, one can synoptically take in these three things, as well as a large early modern painting of a church interior on the facing wall of the adjacent gallery. The aesthetic appeal and satisfactions, like so much in the Menil, are great. The things here resonate and echo their mutual goldenness. The transition from light to dark, as one enters the gallery room with the gold box in the centre, intensifies focus in a shift of mood and intimacy. The experiential content here is rich. Stephen, for one, is as free as he can be in the current museum world to speak his mind and likewise work his spreading presence.

The Menil Collection is an ideal context for that spread’s unfolding. Until March 2012, it preserved the very most stimulating heterotopic monuments of Byzantium in its Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum (originally so-called). From 1997 until its departure, it was a perfect confluence of that medieval world and our own. Moreover, it was able to work in concert with the Rothko Chapel across the street as moving spaces of

\(^{26}\) O’Doherty 1999, 14.

\(^{27}\) O’Doherty 1999, 18. For a useful overview of the problem of such religious objects in secular museums, see Paine 2013. See now *The Aura* 2020.

\(^{28}\) Belting 2009, 54, his italics.

\(^{29}\) I have tried to pursue this position further in Peers 2012b and 2013.

\(^{30}\) Carr 2011, 11.
Figure 5. Installation view of Stephen in prior display. The Menil Collection. Photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

Figure 6. Installation view of Stephen in current display. The Menil Collection. Photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.
relational experience. And based on the collecting and presentation values of the found-
ers, Dominique and John de Menil, the collection has remained active in imaginative
Byzantine exhibition, a tradition continued by a show guest curated by Annemarie Weyl

Inventive and revealing strategies of display can be found by reconceiving what
museums can do for historical periods that are not really like ours. Heterotopia opens up
possibilities. Michel Foucault proposed heterotopia as a necessary inverse of utopia, and
he characterized heterotopia as countersite, "simultaneously represented, contested
and inverted." The creative appropriation of Byzantium by American modernists gives
some licence to imagining Byzantine objects in a revealing fashion, as long we are honest
and self-examining about our own motives. For example, Willem de Kooning called New
York City a "Byzantine city," and in performing Byzantium even on that level, he remade
Constantinople as an American city. In his art, he also remade Byzantine forms into an
authoritative argument for modernism. I would argue that a creative reimagining of
Byzantium in a museum context should likewise contend with Byzantium on this level
of inversion and appropriation. By recognizing that the museum is a heterotopic site, we
can open ways of exploring deep structures of that historical materiality. Paradoxically,
admitting we cannot fully know the period historically and recognizing we must not dis-
play it like any other object in the world-art tradition gives us the freedom to explore the
particularities of Byzantine objects’ objectness and of their not-textness. The sensory,
sensual extensions of the Stephen icon spreads into the community of things who sit
with him or who come into the galleries to visit briefly—that is, we humans.

Thinking about exhibitions as verbs helps do this, even conceiving them as active
verbs, not declaratives, as if the world exhibitions *declare* is naturally an extension
of our own. Our mode of display often gives the impression of extratemporality; it is
not in itself neutral, because "it produces a powerful and continually repeated social
experience that enhances the viewer’s sense of autonomy and independence," as Mary
Anne Staniszewski writes regarding exhibition innovations of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., at the
Museum of Modern Art. Barr’s legacy is important because he established the default
position for Western exhibition practice for the last seventy-five years or so. The verb
then cannot be "to be," but must be interpretative. In active ways, exhibitions of Byzan-
tine objects can make the experience challenging to notions we think are true, and on
close examination, they always force those notions to yield.

In that way, Byzantine art can be made thinglike, too, joining things from indigenous
cultures that have long been treated as craftwork, folklore, ethnographic “cultural mate-
rial,” and making the art less about art and religion and more about the world and rela-

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31 Shkapich and de Menil 2004; Nodelman 1997; Carr and Morrocco 1991; Smart 2010.
33 Peers 2010.
34 See Conn 2010, 7–8.
tions in it. The argument is that the idea of art should extend to all cultures, and we need to take back art from this period we are concerned with, along with all the implications of these things doing their work in a different key. The social life of these things is crucial for our understandings of them, but it needs to be embedded in recognition of the strangeness and complexity of that life.

Removed from the museum experience is everything not within sight’s limited control, and one can justly ask what is lacking from our understanding of Byzantine objects. We might recapture some of the sensory range of Byzantine things through witnessing contemporary Orthodox icon piety, and that experience opens the imagination to historical reactions, but it can also be misleading, because any contemporary anthropological work has shortcomings for historical analysis. Another risk is the belief that modern Orthodoxy resembles medieval Christianity to the degree that it allows us to understand fully what people in the Middle Ages did and felt. And yet anyone who has stood watch in an Orthodox church or who is Orthodox either in belief or habit knows that the total engagement of the senses is necessary for correct worship, and indeed was also in the medieval world. Belief does not enter into this set of actions; orthopraxy is the key here—doing the right thing. And theology enters indirectly, though not for reason of belief, because the assumption here is that theology did not absolutely determine belief or behaviour.

But objects are another matter, because of Byzantine culture’s total reliance on matter’s relations with the divine. Touching the icons with hands and lips, hearing the words (whispered, spoken, or sung), smelling the candle wax and incense, even tasting the Eucharistic sacrifice are all foldings of the body into the excess offered by religious objects and sites. The sum of looking, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing is greater than the body parts of the worshipper—and of their articulations, for the limits of language are not the limits of the world. The surplus of senses and lack of unity in them in encounters with objects are objects’ puzzle, control, and power.

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37 See, for example, Parani 2007.
38 Joy 2009.
40 For example, Hurcombe 2007.
Figure 7. Hagia Sophia, interior view. Istanbul. Image in Public Domain.