Part 2

Byzantine Things in the World: Animating Museum Spaces
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 attention 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
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.
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.