ENCOUNTERING THE INAUTHENTIC

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

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

¹ For more on the museum, visit Glencairn Museum [website], 2009: http://www.glencairnmuseum.org. Another example of this era’s medievalism as expressed in domestic architecture is Hammond Castle in Gloucester, Massachusetts at Hammond Castle Museum [website], 2012-2013: www.hammondcastle.org.
² Certainly a similar phenomenon is seen in many museums that hold medieval collections, such as the Musée national du Moyen Age
This may seem a strange argument for a historian, but in fact, it is precisely in questioning what it means to be a

in Paris, the Cloisters in New York, or the medieval galleries at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Such mixture old and new is of course a hallmark of medieval and early modern architecture as well, and is therefore quite “authentic.”
historian that led to me to such a potentially heretical position. As a university professor, I have struggled to find ways to teach about medieval objects and spaces without having access to “real” medieval objects, and I have come to realize the value of alternatives like Glencairn. These tactics have been invaluable in helping my students think about, and engage with, the experiences of medieval viewers, and as such, may also prompt us to reassess our own scholarly attachments to “authentic” historical things. Therefore, this essay explores the pedagogical and scholarly value of ostensibly inauthentic experiences; it further asserts that some approaches dealing with the absence of the “authentic” create experiences that are even better than the real thing.

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

You may be asking why I seem so concerned with medieval experiences anyway. In both my teaching and research, I have been compelled by questions about how viewers understand and engage with images, objects, and spaces. Since it is impossible to know how past viewers may have experienced something, I’ve sought ways to link our own contemporary experiences of the same objects or spaces to open up our thinking about medieval experience. But talking
about experience is fundamentally problematic; there are numerous challenges in using written or spoken formats to explore experience. This brings to mind the work of Christopher Tilley, a scholar of material culture, who reminds us that, “words [can] never capture experience.”3 The irony is that even a text concerned with phenomenological experience inevitably “cannot itself avoid being a representation.”4 This is the challenge of articulating (in words) spatial or phenomenological experiences, or the immediacy of the material — does one need to be present to fully realize that immediacy? Tilley argues that material culture “does not necessarily require a process of decoding, or a verbal exegesis of meaning, to have power and significance.”5 Is it possible to “decode” without verbal expression, without words? Is there another method by which we can explore such concepts in a public forum? In this essay I aim to get at that experience, by thinking about situations in which the medieval object is not tangible, not accessible. How do these “inauthentic” experiences encourage reflection about our own processes? And how do these fleeting moments of experience matter in our own scholarship?

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

3 Christopher Y. Tilley, with the assistance of Wayne Bennett, Body and Image: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology 2 (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008).
4 Tilley, Body and Image, 266–267.
5 Tilley, Body and Image, 37.
Figure 3. Artist Valery Butyrsky painting frescos, St. George Greek Orthodox Church, Fresno, CA. Photo: John Walker, Fresno Bee.

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

6 Ron Orozco, “Russian painter dedicates years of his life to painting ceiling of Orthodox church,” The Ventura County Star [website],
The church’s pastor was extremely welcoming to my class and our questions, and was excited to share what he knew about the building’s history as well as the new frescos being installed. Students who were interested were even invited up

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

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

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

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

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fascination with medieval building techniques [figs. 7-8].

The publicity materials for such projects often make claims about the “authenticity” of their building methods, emphasizing the importance of perceived historical accuracy for these endeavors. On a much smaller scale, Moorhead, Minnesota boasts two medieval replicas: a full-scale replica of the eleventh- or twelfth-century Hopperstad Church in Vik, Norway, built 1997-1998 [figs. 9-10]; and the Hjemkomst Viking Ship, a copy of the ninth-century Gokstad ship [fig. 11]. The Hjemkomst was completed in 1980 and sailed from Minnesota to Norway in 1982.

These projects were both realized by particularly motivated individuals who sought to learn more about their own Norwegian heritage, but also offer provocative material for the exploration of the nexus between cultural traditions, community, and historical “recreation.”

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

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

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

Figure 7. Ozark Medieval Fortress, Lead Hill, AR.
Figure 8. Ozark Medieval Fortress, Lead Hill, AR.
**Figure 9.** Norwegian Stave Church, Moorhead, MN, built 1997-1998. Photo: author.

**Figure 10.** Detail of decoration, Norwegian Stave Church, Moorhead, MN, built 1997-1998. Photo: author.
Figure 11. Hjemkomst Viking Ship, Moorhead, MN, completed 1980. Photo: author.
Figure 12. Exterior, Bryn Athyn Cathedral, 1913-1928, Bryn Athyn, PA. Photo: author.

Figure 13. Interior, Bryn Athyn Cathedral, 1913-1928, Bryn Athyn, PA. Photo: author.
In the suburbs of Philadelphia, the passion for medieval techniques, evident at Glencairn, was likewise embraced by those involved in the building of Bryn Athyn Cathedral (1913-1928), which boasts a Romanesque- and Gothic-inspired structure constructed using “medieval methods” [figs. 12-13].\footnote{Bryn Athyn Historic District: National Historic Landmark [website], 2013: http://bahistoricdistrict.org/} Overseen by Raymond Pitcairn (also the patron of Glencairn), whose father John was the primary benefactor, this structure was built with “workshops for stone, wood, metal, and stained glass . . . on site allowing designers and craftsmen to collaborate.”\footnote{“About Bryn Athyn Cathedral,” Bryn Athyn Church [website], 2013: http://www.brynthyncathedral.org/} This nearly obsessive drive to use what were understood to be medieval techniques, and to eschew “modern” technologies, speaks to the allure of revivalism. The perceived authenticity of a building constructed with plaster models, workshops on site, and medieval stained-glass techniques was clearly perceived as more impressive, more significant, because it was built in this way. According to Arthur Kingsley Porter, a well-known medieval architectural historian of the early twentieth century, the Cathedral "alone of modern buildings, is worthy of comparison with the best the Middle Ages produced."\footnote{A. Kingsley Porter, Letter to Raymond Pitcairn, 24 October 1917 (Glencairn Museum Archives, Bryn Athyn, PA): “I had expected much of the Bryn Athyn church, but nothing like what I found. If it existed in Europe, in France or England, it would still be at once six centuries behind, and a hundred years ahead of its time. But on the soil of great architectural traditions, it would be in a measure comprehensible, and the presence in the neighborhood of the great works of the past would in a way prepare the mind for this achievement of the present age. For your church, alone of modern buildings, in my judgment, is worthy of comparison with the best the Middle Ages produced.”}

While architecture seems to be the most common instance of medieval forms playing a role in modern production, contemporary book art is another area where the allure of the
past is often evident. There is of course the well-known example of the Saint John’s Bible, begun in 2000 as a collaboration between artists based in Wales and scholars associated with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Saint Johns University, Minnesota.14 This ambitious project reflects the use of both medieval and modern techniques alongside very contemporary aesthetics in terms of decoration and script. Employing dozens of calligraphers and contemporary book artists, this project is particularly important for the way it has emphasized the medieval legacy prevalent within contemporary art forms.

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

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

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

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

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

Indeed, this is corroborated by the scholarly process itself.

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16 Tilley, Body and Image, 39.
After all, we so often must negotiate the absence of the objects of study. And there are certainly cases where that absence has created experiences that are “better” than the real thing. We have all also had the experience of dealing with medieval art in the form of images: zooming in and discovering something in the reproductions that we would not have been able to see in the moment when the object was in front of us. When we want to get at medieval experience, sometimes the best way to see the medieval thing may be to look at something else entirely.

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

Karen Overbey’s contribution to this volume is one such example — it is completely facilitated by the photos and video she took while viewing the reliquary.
Figure 15. Sanding the skin in the preparation of parchment, The University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies 2008 Research Seminar: “Medieval Manuscript Studies and Contemporary Book Arts: Extreme Materialist Readings of Medieval Books.” Photo: author.

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

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18 The University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies 2008 Research Seminar in “Medieval Manuscript Studies and Contemporary Book Arts: Extreme Materialist Readings of Medieval Books.”
sanding the skins for smoothness, the discovery that this powder was essentially gelatin, which turns into glue when wet; the incredible slowness of every step of the process. And it was an epiphany, one that I enjoy sharing with students in my classes by bringing in samples and insisting that they see the shape of the animal, that they feel the skin. The experience has illuminated every project I have worked on since then, and especially informed my work on one particular manuscript, a version of St. Margaret’s Life in Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm. 1133 [fig. 17].

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

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

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understanding “evidence” or “proof” in scholarship. It requires an acknowledgement that viewers, at whatever time, help to create an object’s meaning. The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has suggested, “the power of images resides in the event of their perception.”

It is then the experience of that object or image, the moment that it is engaged with by a viewer, which is most significant to the image’s impact. Perhaps this is the moment that we can link across time, connecting all viewers through their shared corporeal experiences.

In some sense, then, we ourselves become methodological tools, connecting our present experiences to the past: “we inhabit the present of which the past is a part.”

Time is collapsed in the present state of the object, which carries with it both the past and present experiences of its users or viewers. These different times in the life of an object fold in onto themselves, allowing the present to engage with the past. As Tilley argues, “first-person experience can be used to gain access to experience of other persons,” both in the present and in the past. I want to be able to use my own experience to think about the medieval person’s experience. Indeed, traditional history can even serve as a pronounced distraction from gaining an understanding of experience.

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


22 Tilley, Body and Image, 264.


24 Jennifer Borland, “Audience and Spatial Experience in the Nuns’
way to find a shared experience, in at least the parts of that experience that are or can be shared: the shared experience of being in a body and the shared experience of such over time. But how do we reconcile this with history?

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

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