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## The Life of Things

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While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.

—Wordsworth

How might human beings see into the life of things? The things to which William Wordsworth appeals in his “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798) are not solely material things; and insofar as he was concerned with material things, it was with things in nature: things that exercise “no slight or trivial influence” on those who behold them, as he asserts in this poem, and in others (Wordsworth, 1974: 163-165). Material things are evidently not confined to those in nature, for humans make things: artifacts. But any such firm distinction between things in nature and artificial things has become increasingly problematic in Western thought, as it long has been in various other traditions, so the distinction between things that are natural and things that are artificial has assumed new urgency, whether for purposes of philosophical reflection or historical understanding. Nonetheless, whether one accepts or rejects a firm distinction between natural and artificial things, all material things share the characteristic of being “things in this world that have a material aspect usually apprehensible through the senses.” (For an attempt at a definition of *tangible things*, see Gaskell, forthcoming and Ulrich et al. forthcoming).

If the term *things* poses a host of puzzles, no less so does *life*. Indeed, the term *life* in the phrase “the life of things” might assume a more than metaphorical or catachrestic weight as the puzzles “What things have life, and in what does that life consist?” confront thinkers anew.

Among contemporary Western thinkers, the definition of life remains elusive. The *Catalogue of Life* claims to be “the most comprehensive and authoritative global index of

species currently available” ([www.catalogueoflife.org](http://www.catalogueoflife.org)). Annually revised, in 2013 it listed approximately 1,350,000 species of plants, animals, fungi, and micro-organisms. Yet it offers no definition of what constitutes life or living things. Similarly, the online *Encyclopedia of Life*, described on its website as “information and pictures of all species known to science,” does not pause to define its subject ([eol.org](http://eol.org)). This is hardly surprising, as the definition of life is a vexed and contentious topic.

In an influential 2002 article, the biochemist, Daniel E. Koshland, Jr. (1920-2007) defined life under seven principles or conditions: Program, Improvisation, Compartmentalization, Energy, Regeneration, Adaptability, and Seclusion (Koshland, 2002: 2215-2216). The biologist Radu Popa contended with some 300 definitions of life in his book on the subject published in 2004 (Popa, 2004). Another biologist, Edward Trifinov, analyzed the language used by scientists discussing the issue, and offered a simple descriptive phrase: life is the capacity for “self-reproduction with variations” (Trifinov, 2012: 647-650). Popa epitomizes the widespread bewilderment in the Western scientific community regarding the definition of life by placing a quotation attributed to the Stoic Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (121-180) prominently on the landing page of his research group’s website: “Everything we hear is an opinion not the fact. Everything we see is a perspective not the truth” ([www.rpopa.net](http://www.rpopa.net) - this widely quoted aphorism appears to be derived from Marcus Aurelius’s approbatory attribution of the sentiment, “Remember that all is opinion” to the 4<sup>th</sup>-century BC Cynic philosopher, Monimus of Syracuse). However, the opinion and perspective in all these cases are those of Western scientists working within a biological paradigm.

Is that biological paradigm universally applicable when considering what constitutes life? Clearly no. There are Western thinkers other than biologists, let alone thinkers in other traditions, who attribute life in an admittedly non-biological set of senses to things not susceptible of biological speciation. That is, they discuss things other than self-sustaining organisms in terms of life. Some scholars in the social and human sciences, such as Bruno Latour (sociology), and Alfred Gell (anthropology), have discussed attributing agency to inanimate things, but the assumption that a capacity for exercising agency is a characteristic of life remains questionable. Some thinkers refer to the numinous or sacred realm in which things of kinds that in other circumstances might be considered inanimate acquire properties associated with life. Some subscribe to a belief system in which such exceptions are miraculous rather than magical. Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authorities count as miraculous some images imbued with occasional animation, and sanction their veneration, but only after thorough investigation. (I discuss several instances of this phenomenon in Gaskell 2010a, 60-75). We should recall that the transubstantiation of the host—the bread and wine that becomes the body and blood of Christ in the Roman Catholic mass—is one such investment of seemingly inanimate things with sacred life, no less miraculous for being a frequent occurrence.

Go beyond Western traditions, and ascriptions of life to things few Westerners would acknowledge as animate proliferate. Even if one objects that life in such circumstances is a metaphor or, at best, catachresis, such use nonetheless would seem to imply that organisms and miraculous things, if not identical, at least share characteristics—even if inadequately defined—necessary for the ascription of life to them. Those who would see into the life of things cannot confine themselves to the taxonomic domains of biology, for there is life, in senses numinous or sacred, well beyond their confines.

In this study, I am concerned with how people might see into the life of particular kinds of things: specifically some among those particular kinds of things that are collected and categorized in museums. Some such things are valued for their unique qualities, others as representative specimens. In what sense or senses can Western thinkers associate any or perhaps all such things in museum collections with life? It seems likely that many such things are imbued with life in one sense or another. Some may be currently alive in some sense, others may once have been alive, but now are dead. Some such things formerly alive in a biological sense may remain so in another. How are museum scholars, and others, in a wide variety of fields to make sense of these sometimes apparently contradictory conditions of things? How are they, and how are museum visitors who scrutinize their work, to make sense of the life of things in museums?

People experience things in museums through mediation of one kind or another. By far the most common for most museum visitors is the mediation of gallery display. Indeed, the only way most people experience the life of things in museums is when they are on display in galleries. There are exceptions, and, before turning to the mediation offered by galleries, it is worth noting some of them. Several times a day visitors can take thirty-minute tours of the zoological specimens preserved in liquids stored in the Darwin Centre Spirit Collection of the Natural History Museum, London. Some art museums still operate facilities known as print or study rooms where visitors can request works on paper (prints and drawings) to be brought to them at tables for close study. A few—such as the study room of the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum, London—do not require appointments. Various museums have introduced means of public access to collections known as study storage. For example, the Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture at the New-York Historical Society, New York City, makes thousands of historical objects of many kinds previously kept in off-site storage visually accessible to the public by means of relatively informal, densely packed, large-scale glass-fronted shelving, behind which more things are stored on further shelves or in closed cabinets.

In spite of these forms of access, and others, most museum visitors rely on formal gallery exhibits, whether long-term (often misleadingly called permanent) or temporary, to see things in museum collections. Indeed, so prominent are exhibits in museums of all kinds that many people—including scholars who study museums—believe that museums exist only to exhibit, and that exhibitions account for the work museums do in its entirety. While most museums certainly emphasize their exhibits, nothing can be—nor ought to be—further from the truth.

Visitors to the Darwin Centre learn that there are scientists at the Natural History Museum, London, researching the collections in laboratories. They would see similar sights in the research and conservation laboratories of many anthropology, archaeology, and art museums, where scientists and conservators not only conserve and restore fragile items of all kinds, but develop and conduct scientific analyses of their materials. Occasionally, museums contrive conditions in which such work is publicly visible, by temporarily adapting a gallery so that conservators and scientists can work in public view. For instance, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston has embraced making conservation work publicly visible through its “Conservation in Action” program. Its seven laboratories and studios participate in the public presentation of analytical and

conservation projects in various curatorial departments, several projects being visible to visitors in galleries temporarily adapted to be conservation laboratories at any one time. Across the Charles River in Cambridge, between 2011 and 2013 Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology studied and conserved five Alutiiq kayaks from Alaska. "Conservators at Work: Alaska's Historic Kayaks Renewed" was a collaboration between the Peabody Museum, the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository in Kodiak, and the last traditionally trained Kodiak Alutiiq kayak maker. Three times a week conservators and scientists worked on the items in a public gallery, and answered visitors' questions (Peabody Museum 2013a and 2013b). Before considering in a little more detail the place of the values of originating communities in museums' strategies for dealing with things imbued with life in some sense, we might acknowledge that the term *life* covers a variety of often puzzling characteristics, whether biological or numinous, not explored in museums by exhibiting alone.

### **The Values of Originating Communities**

Projects such as "Conservators at Work: Alaska's Historic Kayaks Renewed" have consequences beyond making behind-the-scenes work known and, to an extent, visible to museum visitors. Collaborations between Western museums and Native representatives and organizations, have led Western institutions, such as museums that hold material of great social, cultural, symbolic, and often religious significance to Indigenous communities, to realize that dominant Western modes of collection care and exhibition are often at odds with the values of those communities. Some Western collecting institutions reject or ignore claims regarding the life of things; that is, that certain things regarded in Western terms as inanimate are imbued with life. Such rejection leads to what members of originating communities regard as the improper treatment of numinous or living things by some museums, to the extent of causing distress and profound offence (Young, 2005: 135-146).

Many Western collecting institutions now take the values of Indigenous communities into account in the care of things that originated in those communities. This can have a positive effect on modes of exhibiting. In institutions that are attempting to work sensitively, certain things that would once have been revealed to the public gaze remain concealed, such as the contents of Plains Indians' medicine bundles, and the dangerous medicinal designs on warriors' shields. Certain powerful items are stored and displayed with small offerings of tobacco, sweetgrass, or sage. Various museums in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia honor prohibitions and obligations associated with Indigenous items. Yet in most Western museums, fundamental assumptions regarding the treatment of things in their collections often remain at odds with fundamental assumptions regarding their treatment held by the communities from which they originate. This concerns not only precautions in view of their latent powers, but obligations to sustain their health and efficacy.

In the USA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 has led to the return to source communities of considerable numbers of items in certain categories—human remains, grave goods, things required for religious purposes, objects of cultural patrimony—often, though far from invariably, with the enthusiastic collaboration of the institutions concerned. That enthusiasm springs not only from a recognition of moral obligations, but from the prospect of long-term collaborative

relationships for research, exhibition, and publication between Indigenous communities and museum scholars. Some inhibitions inevitably remain. Certain items repatriated under the terms of NAGPRA cannot be used in accordance with their religious functions owing to inexpungible contamination with pesticides while in museum care in attempts to protect them from destructive infestation. Thus dance regalia repatriated in 1998 from the Peabody Museum at Harvard to the Hoopa Valley Tribe in northwest California present an acute danger to celebrants from arsenic and mercury poisons applied in the museum in the early twentieth century (Gaskell, 2003: 149-162). The items are brought from the Hoopa Tribal Museum to the dance sites to be present, though in their poisoned state they cannot be used.

Many items invested with sacred significance remain in American museums. Museum rules governing the handling of collection objects can interfere with ritual interactions between such sacred items and Native visitors. Some of these rules, such as those designed to protect people from pesticides, or to protect items from destructive secretions on human hands, are practically motivated. Others appear to protect the power privileges of museum staff rather than serve demonstrable utilitarian purposes. To override some of these Western prohibitions—whether practical or themselves symbolic—in accordance with a conviction that present use can trump the ideal of infinite preservation is not easy. Yet some institutions have moved in this direction. For instance, in 2010 five men’s shirts of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot Confederacy), acquired in 1841 by Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and in the Pitt-Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford since 1893, were exhibited at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, and the Galt Museum, Lethbridge, Alberta under the title, *Kaahsinnooniksi Ao’toksisawooyawa. Our Ancestors have come to Visit: Reconnections with Historic Blackfoot Shirts*. The exhibitions were preceded by workshops for members of the Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika nations to “examine the shirts, research how to preserve the shirts physically and spiritually, and discuss how the Blackfoot people can further access the shirts once they return to Oxford, England.” ([www.glenbow.org](http://www.glenbow.org); Gaskell, 2012, 93). Three of the shirts and their 2010 visit to the Niitsitapi formed the subject of a further exhibition at the Pitt-Rivers Museum in 2013 entitled *Visiting with the Ancestors: The Blackfoot Shirts Project*. The organizers of the exhibition in Calgary and Lethbridge sincerely attempted to overcome the barriers to appropriate interaction between members of Indigenous communities and the shirts as living sacralia.

Although of great urgency in settler societies with Native populations worldwide, such as those studied by James Belich (Belich, 2009), considerations regarding the proper treatment and exhibition—if appropriate—of Indigenous things of animate or sacred status far from exhaust the obligations of museums. Certain things from hegemonic as well as from subaltern societies retain their sacred status, no matter what.<sup>1</sup> These include Christian Orthodox icons (for a case study in the perpetuity of the sacredness of a Russian Orthodox icon, see Gaskell, 2003). The same principle applies to Ethiopian, Greek, Syriac, and other Orthodox icons, and icons of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Many Orthodox icons in museum collections, private collections, and the art trade are treated in a purely secular manner. However, unlike Roman Catholic images, which, if not declared miraculous, lose any sacred status they may once have had during use in devotional settings when removed, Orthodox icons remain numinous items of veneration for members of Orthodox communities in perpetuity.

Although most Western museums make no special provision for the veneration of Orthodox icons, on occasion they accommodate these needs. For instance, monks from the Monastery of St. Catherine, the Holy Mountain of God-Trodden Mount Sinai, Egypt, were always present when items from the monastery, founded by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (r. 527-565), were exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1997 and 2004, and at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, in 2006-7.<sup>2</sup> These museums made special provisions to honor the status of the items borrowed from the monastery, the sensibilities of the lenders, and of other Orthodox adherents. The Metropolitan Museum hosted a blessing of the gallery of items from St. Catherine's Monastery in the 2004 exhibition. It was conferred by Archbishop Damianos of Sinai, Farran and Raitho, the abbot of the monastery, and echoed the blessing he had offered at the reopening of the monastery treasury, for the installation of which the Metropolitan Museum had provided extensive expertise (Helen Evans, curator of the exhibition, email, August 4, 2013). The website of the J. Paul Getty Museum states:

Couriers from the lending museum travel with the artwork, watching it from the moment it leaves home to the moment it is installed in the galleries of the borrowing museum. But while most couriers go home when the artwork is delivered, monks from Saint Catherine's will stay in Los Angeles for the duration of the exhibition. They are seen in the galleries, overseeing the holy objects that are in their charge. The monks' presence serves to remind us that these objects are not only art objects, but a living part of the practice of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. (Getty Museum)

Given the extraordinary survival of early Byzantine icons at the Monastery of St. Catherine, and their immense significance for cultural continuity from classical antiquity, it might be objected that these museums were making exceptions to their ordinary secular practice solely in order to procure the loan of unique materials. Even if this were so, the curators' exposure to devotions in their galleries may have encouraged them to acquiesce favorably in such behavior subsequently. The curator of Byzantine art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Helen Evans, notes that "priests do often bring groups to the Museum's Byzantine Galleries and individuals have been seen venerating works in the cases."<sup>3</sup>

The case of the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, Massachusetts, is subtly different. Founded in 2006 by Gordon B. Lankton, the museum is based on his private collection. According to the Museum of Russian Icons' website,

Gordon approached several local museums to determine their interest. Though the icons were well received, only a few icons would be exhibited at a time, and the remainder would be placed in storage. (Museum of Russian Icons)

Containing "more than 500 Russian icons and artifacts," Lankton's museum is billed as the largest collection of Russian icons in North America. Lankton is the chair of the board of the plastics manufacturer Nypro, Inc. Lankton developed an enthusiasm for Russian icons during his regular business visits to Russia where Nypro had acquired a factory. In a relatively short time, Lankton built a large icon collection, which the museum makes available to his local community. Regarding the status of the icons, the

museum's website is somewhat disingenuous. In response to the frequently asked question: "Are we viewing original icons?" the website states:

In the Orthodox tradition, icons were produced by monks. Icons were, and still are hand-painted using ancient methods and symbolically significant materials. The monks often recreated important, miracle-working icons and disseminated them across Russia. While monks used the format of specific icons, some details were altered. The icons you see before you are not the original painting. All original icons are kept in sacred spaces, or have been lost during the 2000 year history of icon painting.

Nonetheless, the icons in the Museum collection are quite old and created by monks who studied the craft and perfected the technique of icon writing. Also, though monks recreated the format of specific icons, many details were altered to balance personal taste, region, and styles of the day. While these are not the original, miracle-working icons from the legends, they are considered to be original art. (Museum of Russian Icons)

This explanation implies that the icons in the museum, while original art, are no more than that. This is not strictly accurate. Respect for the prototype of an icon as a particular iconographic model is an important element in the creation of a new icon. Therefore, even if that new icon does not partake of the specifically miraculous quality of the prototype—the particular icon known as the *Virgin of Vladimir*, for instance—such derivatives, if properly made as acts of devotion—"written" is the usual term—are themselves ineluctably sacred items. That is, they are more than "original art" (see Gaskell, 2003; Cormack, 2007). Although the exhibits in the museum address the making of icons by monks "using ancient methods and symbolically significant materials," as the website states, treating them as art alone appears to be an attempt to absolve the collector and the museum staff from having to address the sacred status of the greater part of the collection directly. Interestingly, the "Museum Vision Statement" makes no mention of the religious status or even function of Russian icons, stressing international relations, implicitly as a condition for the sustained successful conduct of business. It states simply: "The Museum of Russian Icons enhances relations between Russia and the United States through the medium of art, especially Russian icons" (Museum of Russian Icons, 2013)

The Museum of Russian Icons is just one of many Western institutions—museums and the trade—that choose to treat Orthodox icons in a predominantly or in some cases exclusively secular manner. To many non-Orthodox adherents they are works of art on a par with Roman Catholic religious paintings no longer in sacred settings. Yet in terms of perceived status among any community of makers and original users, there is a category difference between perpetually sacred icons and Catholic religious paintings (and sculptures) removed from devotional settings, despite their physical similarity. Similarly, for its community of makers and original users a Plains Indian medicine bundle is far more than the ethnographic item it may be for museum anthropologists.

The British Museum, London, chooses to address Orthodox icons in a slightly different way from the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, Massachusetts. If the latter is the largest collection of such things in North America, the former—numbering 100, of which 72 are Russian—is the largest in the United Kingdom. The British Museum is an

encyclopedic museum of human history, not an art museum, although it contains and deploys many things amenable to consideration and use as art.<sup>4</sup> Orthodox icons are among those things. Although there is no gallery dedicated to Orthodox icons, eleven are on view with other works from various parts of Europe in two galleries. Five Byzantine icons dating from the mid-thirteenth to the early fifteenth centuries are on view in the “Medieval Europe A.D. 1050-1500” gallery together with one Russian example: the *Miracle of St. George and the Dragon*, made in Novgorod province in the late fourteenth century. Five Cretan icons from between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries are on display in the gallery devoted to “Europe 1400-1800,” one of which is on loan from a private collection. This means that only ten percent of the museum’s icon holdings are on view—a rather more generous proportion than in many Western museums with icons in their collections, but indicative of the state of affairs that Lankton specifically sought to avoid by founding his own museum rather than donate his collection to an existing museum.

That ninety percent of the icons in the British Museum are in storage does not mean that they are neglected or ignored: far from it. In a systematic online catalogue edited by British Museum curator Chris Entwistle, and launched in 2008, Yuri Bobrov discusses the 72 Russian icons in the collection (Bobrov, 2008). A similar online catalogue of the Byzantine, Cretan and post-Byzantine icons by Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki is in preparation. Between 2005 and 2007, the Department of Conservation and Scientific Research collaborated with the curatorial department responsible for the icons—Prehistory and Europe—to understand their condition and history of use in preparation for a methodical conservation campaign. This acknowledged that icons are “tools of worship in the Orthodox Church,” and that they “become worn and damaged through acts of worship by kissing, handling and exposure to incense and candles.” The web page on this project continues: “Repeated cleaning and re-painting for continued use in the church are part of their normal history. It is common to find icons structurally and visually altered” (British Museum 2005-7).

The authors of the account of the treatment of two of the icons acknowledged that the icons had migrated from a liturgical to a secular setting where “different priorities apply” (Harrison, et al., 2006: 317). They acknowledge, though, that “although no longer used in liturgy, they retain an intangible spiritual function” in consequence of which,

It is therefore essential to document fully, through scientific examination and art historical research, their complex technical and cultural history to inform an ethical conservation strategy that addresses the physical, visual, and spiritual integrity of the icons (Harrison, et al., 2006: 317).

I infer that although the British Museum curators, conservators, and scientists believe that secular museum considerations should take priority in the care of the icons, they nonetheless sought to honor their perceived moral obligation to do nothing to the icons that might compromise their ability to function as devotional objects. The curator responsible for the icons, Chris Entwistle, acknowledged that no special provision is in place for Orthodox adherents, but would welcome the provision of a “small discrete gallery in which they could be shown in a more contemplative context.” He points out

that “visitors are always welcome to come and view (and worship) any of the icons in the reserve collections.”<sup>5</sup>

Although Orthodox adherents, and members of other belief communities, will adapt to the circumstances of museum galleries to venerate the things they value that for them are imbued with numinous qualities, some of which might be expressed by the term *life*, such galleries are scarcely ideal for such purposes. Their mediation serves other purposes: making things visible, certainly, but preventing or inhibiting touch, which can damage items of many kinds, as the oils from human skin can be deleterious to many substances. Yet touching is an ineluctable part of satisfactory devotional encounters with many kinds of numinous things, from the kissing of an icon to the manipulation of the contents of a Native American medicine bundle or the shaking of a sacred rattle. Touch is a matter in exhibition mediation to which I shall return (see also the chapters in this volume by Erkki Huhtamo, Fiona Candlin and Beat Hächler) .

In addition to touch, certain kinds of veneration require rendering offerings. Few, if any, Western museums permit the devotional application of substances to things in their collections—foods and liquids—such as occurs in many societies, from sub-Saharan Africa, to sub-continental India, and Andean South America. Bathing in incense, or smudging, with the smoke of burning dried plants or resins is generally prohibited in galleries. However, some museums have recently introduced special provisions to accommodate devotion employing offerings. An example is the change in treatment of the spectacular early nineteenth-century Hawaiian *heiau* (temple) figure of the deity associated with warfare, Kū, or Kūka’ilimoku, in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. Press speculation in 2006 prompted the museum to acknowledge that “groups have made planned offerings at PEM” (Edgers, 2006). In 2010, the three surviving large-scale figures of Kūka’ilimoku (Peabody Essex Museum; The British Museum, London; Bishop Museum, Honolulu) were united at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Honolulu in an exhibition, *E Kū Ana Ka Paia: Unification, Responsibility and the Kū Images*. The museum website noted:

Coinciding with the bicentennial of the unification of the Hawaiian Kingdom, the unification of these Kū images provides an unprecedented opportunity to explore issues such as cultural identity, family and community responsibility, political sovereignty, and the role of museums in fostering cross-cultural dialogue. The images will be on display during the season of Kauwela, a time traditionally associated with Kū. (Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum)

On its return to the Peabody Essex Museum in October 2010, the figure of Kū was ritually honored by a Native Hawaiian delegation, including staff from the Bishop Museum. Since then, the museum has accommodated the devotions and offerings of Native Hawaiian visitors more openly than previously. The figure is shown in a prominent gallery, but away from other items, emphasizing its special status, and secluding any ritual attention or offerings paid to it.

Such changes are not the initiatives of individual museums alone. In August 2006, the Association of Art Museum Directors (an influential body in the American museum world) posted the *Report of the AAMD Subcommittee on the Acquisition and Stewardship of Sacred Objects* on its website. This describes museums’ obligations to Indigenous

sacred things, including their ritual servicing (AAMD 2006). It can scarcely be coincidental that one of the authors of the report was Dan L. Monroe, the director of the Peabody Essex Museum.

As Chris Entwistle indicated in the case of the Orthodox icons in the British Museum, some museums accommodate devotional attention by visitors beyond the exhibition galleries. The Division of Anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), New York, used to welcome those who wished to interact ritually or devotionally with things in the collection to do so in the office of the curator of North American ethnology. Recently, however, a room has been exclusively dedicated to just these occasions, and the museum's safety regulations have even been modified to permit ritual acts such as smudging (the application of smoke from dried plant materials including sage and sweetgrass). Most members of Indigenous communities understand the need for restrictions, such as the prohibition of burning materials in public galleries, but by making provision for such actions in a dedicated space, museums such as the AMNH demonstrate that they take the needs of originating communities seriously, thereby helping to foster improved long-term relations.

A second means of building improved relations between originating communities and Western museums is to question the institutional assumption that the flow of items for mediated exhibition naturally and inevitably is one way; that is, from originating communities to metropolitan institutions, many of which are encyclopedic museums. The attitude that such institutions are unequivocally beneficial is immensely destructive of trust, for their proponents take for granted the inequitable distribution of collected things, all encyclopedic museums being Western or First World. (A leading proponent of encyclopedic museums is James Cuno, former director of the Art Institute of Chicago, now president of the J. Paul Getty Trust. See Cuno 2008 and Cuno 2011). A pair of exemplary exhibitions in 2011 demonstrated that there is no reason whatsoever that materials should not be exchanged reciprocally. While the Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau, Dresden hosted an exhibition of 67 masks, vessels, and items of regalia from the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples preserved in the U'Mista Cultural Centre, the Centre in Alert Bay, Vancouver Island, British Columbia hosted an exhibition of 61 mostly European diplomatic and princely gifts, including ceremonial weapons and porcelain from the collections of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. This equal exchange conforms with the cultural conventions of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples, while also conforming with the conventions of Western museum practice of loan reciprocity, though in a novel form.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Power of Touch**

All these types of mediation—accommodating offerings, the provision of secluded spaces, loans at appropriate calendar times, equitably reciprocal exchanges—skirt the huge mediational issue that arises when it comes to addressing devotional attention to numinously charged material things—how to satisfy the sense of touch. Not every form of devotional encounter entails physical contact between devotee and the object of veneration, but many do, and—as we have seen—museums generally hedge touching things in their collections with a variety of restrictions. There are exceptions – some museums exhibit objects ranging from sculptures and decorative arts objects to natural specimens, such as mammal pelts, with specific invitations to visitors to touch them,

either for visually impaired visitors, or to enhance the sensory engagement of visitors generally. But usually, restrictions on touch range from absolute prohibition in most museum galleries to qualified prohibitions in museum storage and study areas, where in many instances gloves appropriate to the material of the things concerned must be worn, and only those who have received training in object handling—curators, conservators, scientists, registrars, preparators, installers—may touch the things concerned. On the face of it, this would seem to be a reasonable precaution. Inept handling can cause serious damage, and even careful handling without adequate precautions can result in incremental harm. Yet prohibitions for practical reasons can also be symbolic: a way of establishing, enforcing or contesting power hierarchies. A university scholar visiting a museum storage area, study room, or conservation laboratory, intent on closely examining material in the collection, is usually wholly dependent on a curator, collections manager or conservator to move those things at each and every turn. Those museum personnel privileged to handle collection items are truly hierophantic: like priests, they are the indispensable mediators. By contrast, the helpless university scholar—like any other visitor—is a mere member of the laity.

Power assertions expressed by means of access to, and handling of, collection items can take place within the museum hierarchy no less than between museum personnel and outsiders. Some museums in the USA are promoting the rise of collections managers—also known as registrars—the employees who physically track and store all collection items. This is an indispensable responsibility, requiring considerable professional skill in the higher positions, but it is not a scholarly role. Increasingly, collections managers are gaining the upper hand in a variety of American museums. In some, they have asserted their claims to power even to the extent of persuading museum directors—who should know better—that only they—collections managers—should have access to museum collection storage areas.

The heart of every museum is not its galleries, but its collection storage. This is where in most museums the majority of their collections are to be found. The conditions of mediation in museum storage are quite different from in exhibition galleries. Regardless of whether any given museum covers many fields or is specialized, collection items occupy case upon case of shelving—sometimes moveable compact shelving—in seemingly endless ranks; sliding racks on which pictures hang; solander box after solander box, each containing a stack of mounted and matted prints or drawings; drawer upon drawer containing small items, from beetles to bird skins, snuff boxes to bladder stones. All these things are sorted—by culture, material, size, type—but so crowded as to produce a sense in the viewer of limitless profusion.

In these circumstances, juxtapositions of seemingly scarcely related things occur unpredictably and serendipitously, suggesting relationships and affinities that no computer database could ever provide. The practiced curatorial eye can scan the contents of a large drawer of ancient Roman miniature terracotta votive models of body parts—arms, eyes, wombs—and discern qualities comparatively with a speed, accuracy, and acuity impossible when consulting images of the same things—however high in quality—in a computer database. Access to such stored materials is indispensable for curatorial scholarship. However, in museum after museum, at least in the USA, collections managers, citing security concerns, are successfully claiming exclusive privileges of access. Curators and conservators—who equally require access to

collections in storage to discharge their responsibility of alertness and care—are all too frequently reduced to requesting specific items identified by means of an inevitably inadequate database, which are then brought to them, one at a time or in small groups, in a study room. This exclusionary move is an internal assertion of power, and threatens the end of scholarship in the museums affected. Yet even in such attenuated circumstances, curators and conservators can still touch: something that visitors to study rooms usually cannot do (again, there are exceptions, for instance, some art museums arrange special handling sessions in study rooms for groups—college classes, or members of societies dedicated to silver, furniture, or ceramics, for example).

People generally want to touch the things they are examining. One of the lesser-known facts about museums is that in spite of notices urging visitors not to do so, they touch exhibits not covered by glass or plexiglass surreptitiously not once in a while, but constantly. Some items are seemingly irresistible. Visitors constantly want to touch the casts after Edgar Degas's two-thirds life-size wax sculpture, *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (c. 1881), each of which wears a real fabric hair ribbon and tutu (At least 30 examples of the sculpture were cast posthumously in plaster and bronze, most of which are in museums: see Kendall 1998.) Just as common a motive as prurience may be curiosity about the character of the fabric. A visitor may wonder: Is it actually real or a representation? This supposition is suggested by a comparison with the surreptitious actions of visitors, to be described below, to an exhibition of Spanish art, *Time to Hope*, held at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City, in the fall of 2002.

### **The Power of Touch Exemplified: *Time to Hope***

While the forms of mediation in museum galleries tend to inhibit rather than encourage devotional attention to the things exhibited, the same cannot be said of Christian churches in which ecclesiastical authorities usually recognize that visitors attend to items displayed in a variety of not necessarily mutually exclusive ways, including devotionally and aesthetically. In addition to sites of worship, ecclesiastical authorities may also set aside spaces for predominantly aesthetic engagement with objects, as in treasuries and ecclesiastical museums. The result is that within sacred spaces, as opposed to secular museums, viewers in aggregate almost inevitably engage in a broad range of forms of attention to religious artifacts, from the overtly devotional to the wholly secular. Yet interestingly, ecclesiastical authorities do not inevitably acquiesce in accepting secular aesthetic attention to objects within their precincts. Ecclesiastical authorities sometimes articulate the hope that vestigially religious or wholly secular aesthetic contemplation of such objects might inadvertently lead viewers to the sacred dimension of those same objects, whether by stimulating feelings already present within them but dormant or subordinate, or as a new realization or intuition. This was the organizers' explicit aim in producing the exhibition *Time to Hope*, held at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City, in the fall of 2002.

*Time to Hope* was an exhibition of 101 religious objects from churches throughout the Spanish province of Castilla y León. The exhibition was organized for New York in response to the terrorist outrage there on September 11, 2001. While seeking to provide consolation to the inhabitants of New York, the aim of the Spanish "Las Edades del Hombre" Foundation that organized it was frankly evangelical. That purpose was

complicated by the confessional difference between the foundation itself, as a Roman Catholic entity, and its Episcopalian host. The ecumenical magnanimity of St. John the Divine is of long-standing. The cathedral chapter, headed by the dean, James Kowalski, hoped that the exhibition would serve a spiritual purpose more broadly encompassing than that envisaged by the foundation. As long as visitors attended, both foundation and cathedral chapter could feel vindicated, for spiritual solace in viewers of artworks is impossible to quantify, or even detect reliably. Some may have been spiritually affected without realizing it. Some may have been aware of the purposes of the organizers and consciously resisted them. Some of these may have been among those affected spiritually despite themselves. It is impossible to ascertain whether any of the many visitors were actually affected in the way the organizers intended, yet equally impossible to assert that none was. Rather than dispute imponderables, it would seem more directly informative to look at actual responses to objects as they were occurring, especially as they relate to touch.

*Time to Hope* was installed in the ambulatory and apse chapels of the cathedral. The entire area was transformed from sacred space into an exhibition space by indicators at once practical and symbolic. These included close-fitting red carpeting, and elaborately designed wall paneling colored a mottled gold. The same mottled gold was used for the bases of the cases that contained many of the objects displayed. These display cases themselves signaled that this was, for now, exhibition space rather than devotional space.

The illuminated manuscripts, paintings, vestments, and polychrome sculpture were arranged in seven thematic sections. The seven sections were: “According to the Scriptures,” “The Illusion of Happiness,” “At the Right Time, God and Man,” “Solidarity in Pain and Death,” “The Sculpture of Man,” “Ecstasy and Emotion,” and “Finally Hope.” The penultimate in the sequence, “Ecstasy and Emotion,” was in some respects its discursive climax. The evangelical rhetoric suggested that the temptation to despair in the face of terrible events, including Christ’s Passion, might be countered by considering the emotive and at times mystical responses of the Virgin Mary, and the saints. The abused dead body of Christ is a particular focus of fervid emotional meditation and devotion, particularly in this context. The center of the apse chapel devoted to “Ecstasy and Emotion” was occupied by an arresting likeness of Christ’s dead body, reclining in an open, shallow box on elaborately carved and gilded feet placed on a low, mottled gold plinth. The strikingly lifelike polychromed figure was naked, but for a green perizonium (loin cloth) draped across his groin leaving his right hip exposed. He lay on his back on an elaborately edged white shroud, shoulders and head turned slightly to the right, supported by an intricately patterned pillow. Because of its position in the chapel, entering visitors approached the ensemble from the direction of the figure’s feet. The figure appeared to have been contrived so that the wounds—notably that in Christ’s side—should be prominently visible from this viewpoint. A small label was attached to the horizontal lower right corner of the plinth stating that this *Reclining Christ* was by Gregorio Fernández (1576-1636), and came from the Museo del Convento de Santa Clara, Medina del Pomar (Burgos). Perhaps drawn by Christ’s face, turned to his right, most visitors moved up the left side of the box.

Even the most acute observer cannot read the thoughts of those who saw this thing, and thereby learn their reactions. No one could draw more than the grossest inferences from watching visitors’ behavior towards it. Yet even these indicate a variety of

responses from which the observer can deduce a variety of uses. Many visitors were in all likelihood drawn from a wide range of Christian convictions. Some, therefore, would have been predisposed to find such an object devotionally valid and even welcome, whilst to others it might have been repugnant. Yet other visitors—adherents of religions other than Christianity, and atheists—might have regarded such a representation as marginal to, or beyond what they might care about from a religious standpoint.

As an observer of visitors to this chapel, I distinguished four types of behavior towards the *Reclining Christ*: first, cursory viewing without reading the label, and swift turning away (dismissal); second, viewing—whether brief or lingering—that sometimes but not invariably included perusal of the label (inspection); third, engagement that progressed to the tactile realm, as viewers touched the object, (engagement); and, fourth, overt devotional attention to the object made manifest by gestures of prayer (devotion). This order of description does not imply a hierarchy of quality of attention among them. Touching in itself does not necessarily imply a deeper level of engagement than mere visual inspection, though it can. Furthermore, some viewers touch such an item out of curiosity; others are motivated by a devotional urge to secure a spiritual benefit.

One of the first questions an observer might ask when confronted with this ensemble is: How is such lifelikeness achieved? Most would realize that the figure is painted to render a corpse whose appearance physically registers the abuses inflicted on Christ in the course of the Passion. Similarly, the pillow supporting Christ's head and shoulders is elaborately painted so as to render an intricately woven fabric. Most viewers presumably almost instantaneously deduced that the body itself is an artful depiction. Those with previous experience of other, similar figures must have realized that it is made of painted wood.

The fabric, though, is another matter. The white cloth or shroud on which Christ lies appears to be edged with actual braid, and indeed may not be a depiction, but real cloth stiffened with some once liquid agent. The green brocade fabric covering the exterior of the box is even less ambiguously real cloth edged with gold braid, and is clearly not a depiction. It is a real presence within the fictive world of the sculpture, and as such enhances the reality effect of the purely depictive elements by encouraging the viewer to elide the distinction between reality and artifice. This fabric was the object of several visitors' tactile curiosity. They did not touch the figure, but rather what appeared to be fabric, presumably because so much in a perceptual sense depends on being able to distinguish between the real and the illusory. Other elements enhance the reality effect, and the uncertainty of the place of this ensemble between reality and artifice. The half-closed eyes of the figure enhance the reality effect by artificial means, for they are made of glass, which gives them a translucent depth unavailable to a painted surface. The teeth, on the other hand, though fashioned by human hand, are ivory—the material of actual teeth—so, like the real fabric, they blur the boundary between depiction and actuality.

What can be established about viewers' uses of this artifact? The observer can infer nothing specific about the use that visitors who either dismiss, or visually inspect, or tactilely engage with the *Reclining Christ* are making of it. One can only surmise that those who inspect it are doing so according to the familiar range of terms available to more or less practiced exhibition visitors. Whatever else they may also be doing, they are using it as an exhibit. What does it mean for a viewer to use an artifact as an exhibit? One element is surely an attempt to satisfy curiosity about the physical composition of the

object. Indeed, this curiosity can be prompted by the mode of display that allows close, all round access, as was the case with the *Reclining Christ*. Such inspection can only take place adequately in circumstances unregulated by ceremony (though still regulated by the decorum of exhibition visiting). “How does it work?” is presumably not a question usually in the forefront of the minds of most people while they are using such a thing devotionally. This question characterizes—though it far from exhausts—exhibit use. The physical circumstances contrived in the *Time to Hope* exhibition, while not determining this use, sanctioned it.

However, while there may have been no ceremony enveloping the *Reclining Christ* while displayed in this exhibition, its placement purposefully evoked the physical circumstance of ceremony, for its position in the chapel determined that the visitor’s angle of approach to it should be identical with that of a worshipper using it ceremonially. That is, visitors were obliged to approach its feet. This was just how worshippers approached a very similar, realistic sculpture of the dead Christ in the Cathedral of St. Mary of Toledo, Spain (as observed by the author, December 14, 1987). They had been engaged in formal, devotional attention to the sculpture in a church that was in its ceremonial mode. They stood in line, approached the figure singly in turn, knelt before it, and kissed a foot. Anyone wishing to inspect that figure as though it were an exhibit had to do so from a distance. Was the mediational choice of the curators of the *Time to Hope* exhibition to evoke such devotional use by means of the specific placement of the *Reclining Christ* no more than an attempt to honor the teleology of the artifact for museological reasons—this is how it is meant to be seen, and is best seen—or was it, rather, a surreptitious attempt to trigger a devotional response dormant in some viewers in pursuance of the avowed evangelical aim of the exhibition? The physical consequences of both aims for the display of the object are identical, so there is no way to be sure. Yet in the circumstances it seems reasonable to infer that the organizers intended a calculated ambiguity such as might stand the best possible chance of evoking a religious response. The circumstances may not have directly encouraged devotion in response to the object, but that use was certainly not only possible—in part owing to subtle curatorial encouragement—but demonstrably occurred. I observed a woman approach the ensemble, move to the left (the side that allowed the better view of Christ’s face), cross herself, whisper what was presumably a prayer, cross herself again, and moved on. She was clearly using the object devotionally, albeit informally, and not necessarily to the exclusion of other forms of attention to it. What might the character of that prayerful response to the *Reclining Christ* have been? One purpose of such figures was vividly to evoke the ultimate consequence of Christ’s sacrifice prior to the miracle of the Resurrection in the hearts and minds of devotees. The devout and practiced exponent of meditation and prayer might visualize a saint who imagined union with Christ in this condition, and seek to emulate, or at least identify with that saint. Obviously, one cannot tell whether or not some such notion was a component of the thoughts passing through the mind of the woman in prayer before the *Reclining Christ* in the *Time to Hope* exhibition; but her attention to it was clearly devotional.

Although such a devotional use might—and does—occur in front of Christian artifacts in museums, it is unusual to witness it so overtly, for museum settings, and those who contrive them, generally encourage other forms of attention, and, for the most part, while not prohibiting devotional attention in public galleries, seek to accommodate it in

storage areas, study rooms, or even—as in the case of the American Museum of Natural History—in a room set aside for the purpose. The peculiar ambiguity of the setting and circumstances of the *Time to Hope* exhibition would seem to have allowed a greater play among the various possible uses of the objects displayed than might normally be the case, either in an uncompromisingly ecclesiastical setting (at least when worship is in progress), or in a secular museum. One might therefore conclude that the particular setting of this exhibition in part of a church temporarily adapted for a museum style display, but retaining aspects of its purely ecclesiastical ambiance, and the choice of objects displayed—all directly associated with the practice of Roman Catholic Christianity—combined to promote a variety of uses of those objects on the part of visitors. In particular, some inhibitions—against touching, against informal devotion—appear to have been relatively relaxed in comparison with customary visitor behavior in museums; while inhibitions governing secular curiosity and enquiry that might have been strong in a purely devotional setting were also relatively relaxed. The ambiguity of the setting was in part unavoidable given its character, but was also enhanced by subtle curatorial decisions concerning mediation. This ambiguity appears to have offered visitors opportunities for a wider range of uninhibited response than might have been the case in either an unmodified church, or a museum.

To emphasize this conclusion, it is worth comparing how visitors engaged with Gregorio Fernández's *Reclining Christ* in the *Time for Hope* exhibition with how visitors engaged with another work of the same kind in an exhibition in an art museum. The curator Ronda Kasl included a *Reclining Christ*, dated 1652, attributed to Juan Sánchez Barba, in her exhibition, *Sacred Spain: Art and Belief in the Spanish World* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 2009-10. This work had never previously been loaned from the church of the Hermitage of la Veracruz, Navacarnero, near Madrid, so in this exhibition it was subject to museum mediation for the first time in its existence. Kasl contrived a kind of Spanish devotional *paragone* (competition between the claims of sculpture and painting) by juxtaposing this sculpture with a painting by Mateo Cerezo of a life-size *Entombed Christ* of about 1659 from the church of Nuestra Señora de San Lorenzo, Valladolid. Although the format and frame of the painting appear to have been altered, the bottom edge of the frame has peg holes so that it could be supported as a freestanding object. As such, in appropriate lighting, the painting, like the sculpture, would have appeared strikingly lifelike (Gaskell 2010b, 263-265). Kasl was making a point about the means whereby artists and ecclesiastical authorities in seventeenth-century Spain attempted to create conditions for devotional attention through contriving the verisimilitude of representations of—in these instances—the dead and as yet unrisen Christ. In doing so, they exploited the particular qualities of both polychrome sculpture and illusionistic paintings, implying that artists in these respective media might compete for effectiveness. Both works that Kasl used to this end in the museum had come from unequivocally devotional settings in Spanish churches. As far as I could tell from discreetly observing visitors in the same way as I had done in the *Time for Hope* exhibition, the circumstances—institutional setting, mediation of presentation, and discursive juxtaposition—in the *Sacred Spain* exhibition neither encouraged nor sanctioned devotional attention to these items. Again, although it was equally impossible to read the minds of visitors in the Indianapolis Museum of Art as it had been in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, I observed no explicit devotional attention to either the

*Risen Christ* sculpture or the *Entombed Christ* painting. Although both are properly devotional items—sacred items—in their usual ecclesiastical settings, they appear to have been “devotionally neutralized” by the secular and scholarly setting of the exhibition in the museum.

### **Variable Lives**

The life of things—the things discussed in this chapter—is inordinately complicated, and, as in the case of all things that in some sense live—including human beings—they undergo changes throughout their lives. Some of these things retain their living qualities no matter what their circumstances may be, whether recognized or honored, or not. These include Christian Orthodox icons, and Hawaiian *heiau* figures of Kūka’ilimoku, or Kū. Others can alternate between the sacred and secular realms according to circumstance, such as the figure of the *Reclining Christ* by Gregorio Fernández and the similar figure attributed to Juan Sánchez Barba. Exhibition mediation, whether in museums or elsewhere, can do much to inhibit or to encourage specific forms of attention—devotional, aesthetic, historical—selectively, though mediation can never entirely expunge sacredness, where it exists. Further, museum mediation does not only take place in exhibition galleries. It occurs just as importantly in storage areas, laboratories, study rooms, and, in some instances, in rooms set aside for devotion.

Is any aspect of the character of a tangible thing inalienable? I conclude by returning to consider the one Russian Orthodox icon currently exhibited in the British Museum: the late fourteenth-century *Miracle of St. George and the Dragon*, also known as the “*Black George*” because of the color of the horse ridden by the red-mantled saint as he transfixes the dragon with his spear. The icon has an unusual recent history. The British Museum acquired it in 1986 from the dealers then trading as Axia Art Islamique et Byzantin (since superseded as Axia Art Etablissement, a Lichtenstein company, with a subsidiary trading as Axia Art Consultants Limited in London). The listed previous owner was Maria Vasilievna Rozanova. Rozanova left the Soviet Union with her husband, the prominent dissident writer, Andrei Donatovich Sinyavsky (1925-1997) in 1973 following his release from the gulag two years earlier. They settled in Paris, where they co-founded, and Rozanova edited, the émigré journal, *Sintaksis* between 1978 and 2001. This icon of St. George, then, has had a life as a witness of the early Soviet dissident movement that attracted international attention in 1966 with the trial and conviction of Sinyavsky and his friend and fellow writer, Yuli Markovich Daniel (1925-1988) for anti-Soviet activity: publishing satirical works in France under pseudonyms.

No owner prior to Rozanova is listed in Bobrov’s catalogue, but he gives a very brief account of its unusual discovery in 1959 in a small village, Il’inski Pogost, in the Arkhangel’skaya oblast in northern Russia. It was reportedly being used as a window shutter (Bobrov 2008). Bobrov further reports that the icon was conserved by Adolf Ovchinnikov at the I.E. Grabar State Restoration Workshops in Moscow in 1960: This case is eerily similar to that of a fourteenth-century panel painting, acquired by the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University in two halves, reportedly retrieved from a barn window near Siena in or before 1920. When juxtaposed, a standing figure of a female saint can be discerned on the dismembered and battered panel. The unique character of the punch marks in the halo indicates that it was made in the workshop of the Siene

painter, Pietro Lorenzetti (c. 1280-1348). Although on long-term loan to the Fogg Art Museum, the upper and lower halves remained the property of its one-time director, Edward Forbes, until his death in 1969. He bequeathed them to the museum: 1969.34a, b. Superseded as part of an altarpiece, this panel, and another representing St. John the Baptist (now untraced) were adapted to board up a barn window, presumably much as the late-fourteenth-century icon of the *Miracle of St. George* was adapted for use as a window shutter.

In an earlier study, I used the case of the Sienese panel to propose a modification to Nelson Goodman's contention that the question, "What is art?" is a poor question better replaced by "When is art?" (Gaskell, 2007). Here one might ask the same question of the sacred. That is to say, might not "When is (something) sacred?" be a more fruitful question than "What is [the] sacred?"? Yet to suggest that this is so would be to imply that sacredness is a quality dependent on human use. This is tempting: but, just as Goodman's brilliant suggestion is, at base, an ontological evasion—he carefully never claims that to use something as art is to make it into art—so would be its analogue in the case of the sacred. Those ontological evasions may indeed lead to useful realms of thought—ontology is not a precondition for all useful thinking, and its pursuit may be at times a distraction—but it is an evasion nonetheless. This becomes clear if one seeks to apply the analogy to life: a pressing issue in the circumstances of this chapter that seeks to address the life of things. The viability of the question, "When is life?" in the sense of ascribing life to things on the basis of human use—as in the cases of art and sacredness—is certainly open to doubt. The quality of animation, whether biological or in the extended terms discussed here, is not dependent on human use, for clearly to use a thing as though it were alive is not the same ontologically as for it to be alive.

For things to have lives, then, implies variable worlds in which that quality—life—itself varies. A Niitsítapi world in which an ancestor shirt has life, a Hawaiian world in which a figure of Kūka'ilimoku has life, a Roman Catholic world in which a figure of the dead Christ has life, and a Russian Orthodox world in which an icon of St. George has life can co-exist with a Western secular world in which—in a biological sense—they do not. Museums are the sites of mediation between and among such worlds. That mediation takes place not only in exhibition galleries, but also in other, less generally visible parts of a museum's fabric.

Wherever within a museum such mediated encounters occur, it is that museum's responsibility to foster what Wordsworth termed "the power /Of harmony, and the deep power of joy." This is certainly a strong challenge in the face of the fact that some tangible things evoke the depths of degradation in human behavior, just as others call to mind the heights of human attainment. Yet Wordsworth's insight is that only with the eye made quiet by these powers can human beings see into the life of things. To create the circumstances—in galleries and beyond—in which the eye can thus be quiet is the proper calling of museums.

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<sup>1</sup> I use these terms—hegemonic and subaltern—in the senses defined in Eaton and Gaskell, (2009), p. 235: “By hegemonic we refer to the values of Western societies that sustain their dominance, especially insofar as they place other societies at a disadvantage; by subaltern, following the usage established by a number of Indian historians, we refer to groups at a disadvantage to those exercising power within a society.”

<sup>2</sup> *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture in the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843-1261*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 11 – July 6, 1997; *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 23 – July 5, 2004; *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, November, 2006 – March, 2007. The curator of both exhibitions in New York, Helen Evans, kindly confirmed the presence of monks from St. Catherine’s Monastery throughout both exhibitions (email, August 4, 2013). For the monastery, see, in the first instance, the website of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem: [http://www.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/en/oros\\_sina.htm](http://www.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/en/oros_sina.htm) (accessed August 6, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Helen Evans, email, August 4, 2013. I am grateful to Helen Evans for her readiness to provide much useful information, and also to Peter Barnet, senior curator of the Department of Medieval Art and the Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the use of things as art, rather than whether or not any given thing is an artwork, I follow Nelson Goodman’s observations in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), pp. 57-70, Chap. 4 “When is art?” as qualified in my “After art, beyond beauty,” *Inspiration and Technique: Theories of Beauty and Art from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. John Roe and Michele Stanco (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 311-334.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Entwistle, email, August 4, 2013. I am grateful to Chris Entwistle for his generous response to my enquiry.

<sup>6</sup> The two exhibitions were, in Dresden: *Die Macht des Schenkens: Der Potlatch im Großen Haus der Kwakwaka’wakw an der kanadischen Nordwestküste* (The Power of

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Giving: The Potlatch in the Big House of the Kwakwaka'wakw on the Canadian Northwest Coast); and in Alert Bay: *The Power of Giving: Gifts at the Saxon Rulers' Court in Dresden and the Kwakwaka'wakw Big House*. See further: Gaskell, 2012.