

which I keep returning. My work puts forward a decoy, something that takes a familiar shape but that attracts people toward something else—an object or event, perhaps—that opens a door to a rather different set of concerns. The decoy challenges a naive concreteness, a common-sense positivist-empiricist view of things. Its thingness may be apparent, depthless while still impenetrable, yet it becomes, in effect, transparent in its wooden insistence on being there in front of you, with you. Looking for meaning, you are forced to look through it. Change the conversation! A “Garage Sale,” a messy salesroom of discarded ordinary items . . . why is this array of unworthy objects in the art gallery? Propositions may lurk among the objects of desire and disgust—but where exactly is the work of art? That video of a woman reading the manual for an electric wok; is there something worth considering in an appliance manual?

Here is a room full of books, with tables and comfortable seating; a traveling library. The books can be read and pages photocopied; where is the artwork here? If it is the library, is it looking at the artist or at the viewer, or does it make visible a universe of discourse out of which art is made, thought, performed? Photographs of skid-row storefronts are paired with lists of words, while the ostensible subject, the drunks, are nowhere to be seen; portraiture by other means, perhaps, but of whom—“us” or “them”? A partly erased TV newscast is

overlaid with snippets of the newsman’s words, making that flow suddenly visible, if not material. Images from a theater of war coincide, in the same frames, as anodyne ads for happy homes; we know about them both, but not in the same thought. Or take these flat-footed photographs of airports, ordinary roads, streets: we have been there, but what are they doing here?

The decoy, the “as-if”-ness, depends on a materiality that like any text is realized only in the contexts of its reception, which means that while materiality powerfully sets up a work, the thing itself, whatever it is, is not fixed, static, as a generation of audience studies has set out to prove. As Allan Kaprow observed, “Today,” thanks to Duchamp, “critical discourse is inseparable from whatever other stuff art is made of.” My work, standing amid the world of cultural objects, also wishes to make propositions and hypotheses for the receiver to make her own.

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Caroline Walker Bynum

We have long been told that theology in the European Middle Ages attributed to religious images a threefold function of teaching doctrine, preserving memory, and triggering a turn toward the divine. Or, as the titles of two important recent volumes put it, they induced “looking beyond” or “spiritual seeing.” Yet we are coming to realize that medieval devotional objects—panel paintings, three-dimensional sculptures, winged altarpieces, relics in their reliquaries, books of hours, altar furnishings, and so forth—should be understood as the immediate presence of the holy more than as indexes, icons, or symbols pointing to something else. They are not merely Lorraine Daston’s “things that talk” but vibrantly active stuff, a locus of divine agency.¹ Although sacraments, relics, and images make the holy present in different ways, they were far less distinct to the medieval devout than modern studies suggest. And in the later Middle Ages, they all demanded of the viewer/recipient responses that were tactile, sometimes even gustatory, as well as visual. Pietàs and manuscript pages as well as relics and reliquaries were grasped, stroked, even kissed and tasted. We hear of devout persons who bit into relics or who, while praying, felt the stone of a statue become living flesh under their hands.

I focus here on the subset of religious objects modern scholars usually characterize as “images” or “art,” although it is important to realize that the word *imago* in medieval discussions more often refers to a textual image, such as an analogy or concept. I want to argue that medieval images call

attention to, indeed, thematize, materiality in ways art historians have not fully understood.

First, medieval images refer to their specific stuffness as what it is. The point of the leather that is pasted onto the robe of a wooden Madonna or the oval crystals inserted into the stomachs of Mary and Elizabeth in a Visitation group is not illusion or naturalism. The added materials call attention to themselves as such. The crystal is a crystal as well as a womb; its material announces it to be a valuable container parallel to a reliquary. In a Renaissance painting where the damask backdrop of a Madonna is painted to convincingly mimic cloth, the illusion calls attention to the painterly skill that produced it; exactly by tricking our eyes, it announces that it is not what it appears to be. When a medieval Madonna is literally clothed in brocade, the viewer admires not the skill of the execution but the actual stuff, which remains, to our eyes, stuff.

Second, medieval images thematize their materiality not merely by making crystals, brocade, and so forth apparent as such but also by referring explicitly to themselves as material. In an example I discussed in my recent book, *Christian Materiality*, the artist depicts on a manuscript page (that is, on parchment) Christ’s body as a charter offering salvation. The image presents Christ as skin (body) becoming skin (document) that is on skin (parchment). Or to take another example, images of the side wound of Christ announce in rubrics written inside the wound that it is a length that can be

multiplied to obtain the real measure of Christ's wound or of his height; such images were also reproduced on girdles tied around women to ease the pain of childbirth. Thus, the image of an opening speaks explicitly (by means of a text written on it) of itself as a physical measure; it also speaks metonymically of another opening (vagina or womb) parallel to Christ's, because, as a mother gives birth to a baby, so Christ gives birth to the world. The image refers to itself both as what it represents (an opening) and as what it is (a mark of a certain length on the page).

Third, the stuff these images thematize is paradoxical. By its nature, it sublimates what it depicts. For example, winged altarpieces (which emerged in the European north about 1400) tend to be flat and sometimes even painted in grisaille on the outside; when opened (in the feast-day position), the side panels, although more highly colored, are also usually flat; the inner shrine tends, however, to be sculpted in high relief or in the round. Therefore, the closer the viewer comes to the central encounter with the holy, the more tactile and three-dimensional the scene. Space is left for viewers in their imaginations to move into the central shrine among the figures. Yet the inner scene is usually not so much painted as gilded. More tactile, it is also more heavenly, sparkling in gold. In this way, the inner shrine both emphasizes and sublimates its stuffiness. Paradoxically, then, it displays earthly, mutable, malleable stuff as lifted into heavenly changelessness.

Art historians have spent much time puzzling over the reaction of medieval Christians to the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing . . . in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or . . . in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not

adore them nor serve them" (Exodus 20:4–5).² How could such vibrant, three-dimensional religious art emerge in a tradition so suspicious of graven images? The very materiality of medieval objects is, oddly enough, a partial answer. For medieval believers understood another book of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis, to assert that the entire universe is God's creation and manifestation, or as Bonaventura said, God's footprints. Hence, the thirteenth-century nun Mechtild of Hackeborn could see, in a vision, that all earth's flora and fauna down to the smallest fleck of dust are caught up in the humanity of Christ, and the mystic Nicholas of Cusa could argue that Christ not only leads all creation back to God but also gives God to the world in creation. What medieval painters, sculptors, visionaries, and pilgrims encountered in churches was not so much images or "likenesses" as God in his handiwork. When statues and altarpieces, like relics and sacraments, called attention to themselves as material stuff, they asserted themselves to be creation, the expression of the divine.

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Notes

1. Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).
2. Douay-Rheims translation, 1609.

Natasha Eaton

Holi—the coming of the Hindu New Year (Fig. 1)—is associated not only with the love between Radha and Krishna but also with the bravery of Holika, who, to save her devout nephew Prahlad from his evil father, sacrificed herself by immolation. Holi, as either Krishna's water play—the spraying of colored liquid at revelers—or as an instance of the royal carnivalesque, may have been a subject much celebrated by Indian artists, but it was avidly avoided, perhaps even feared, by European painters. The chucking, rubbing, or mixing pigments that take place at the beginning of the Hindu spring month of Phalguna during Holi, with their tactility, enact their own kind of painting, while to throw dry and wet colors at the paper is to perform painting as a kind of Holi—that is, to partake joyously in sanctified games of playing with color. Although once ground from flowers (also used for medicinal purposes), today many of Holi's pigments are toxic. Color as sacred waste is noxious, even contagious.¹ Vertiginous and disorienting, color wreaks havoc with the conventions of its gendered coding and its engendering of what Edward Said has famously termed the colonial power

politics of Western attempts to dominate the "East"—"Orientalism."

Maybe we can view the chromatic materiality of the artist's palette as one force field for approaching anew the visual cultures of colonialism. European artists and collectors *imitated to appropriate* the enchanted, color-filled technologies of Indian miniatures, which they deemed desirable rarities but which also carried the threat of becoming waste. The Hapsburg empress Maria Theresa ordered her court artists to cut, paste, and, in places, supplement the colors and compositions of precious Indo-Islamic images for their display in the Millionenzimmer of her palace in Schönbrunn, Vienna. With exposure to direct sunlight, their colors soon atrophied, giving them the appearance of sepia drawings—an art form viewed by her court as even more singular than painstakingly colored miniatures. This is just one of many instances where the mechanism of chromatic waste became an object of imperial desire: waste operates as the defining principle in affluent societies driven by the anxiety of scarcity.² Waste is not only nonproductive expenditure, it also inhabits a theory

