

---

## Framing and Conserving Byzantine Art at the Menil Collection

### Experiences of Relative Identity<sup>1</sup>

*Glenn Peers*

FRAMING NORMALLY IMPLIES art's integrity. It defines and maintains art's distinctive ontology. Because frames often change with owners, they show ownership across disparate objects. They are used for handling, cleanliness, and all manner of practical functions. They also declare painting's status as an aesthetic object and were sometimes valued more highly than the painting within. And only the few portraits that stay in collections over a long period retain their original, historical frame. Each new frame manifests taste and discretion of curators, who are only recently coming to realize the full archaeological and experiential significance of matching frames to works of art.

In most medieval devotional contexts, framing is an unstable, porous, transformative zone, where such normal categories that we assert for frames become less defensible.<sup>2</sup> Social conditions of inter-subject knowing apply in those settings, so frames do not work in the same way at ontological definition, safeguarding, ownership claims, and so on, like in the era of easel painting (or art). Frames establish modes of communication and interaction, but they perform that function differently in various cultures, so that one should really speak of fields of intensity in Byzantine culture, rather than frames in the way we often apply the term. In other words, no clear line between inside and outside a work was possible, in the same way that aspects of ourselves, as human subjects, spread beyond the edge of skin we often take to be our limits. Works of art in that period had reach beyond their (for us) material discretion, and their frames then were their expansiveness, their potency in spreading beyond their apparent surface.

---

<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt thanks go out to Vanessa Applebaum, Elena Boeck, Annemarie Weyl Carr, and Jon Litland for their kind advice, and special thanks to colleagues at the Menil Collection for support and indulgence, especially Bradford Epley and Joseph Newland.

<sup>2</sup> I addressed some case studies from this point of view in *Glenn Peers: Sacred Shock: Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium*, University Park 2004. See also the work of Bissera Pentcheva: *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual and the Senses in Byzantium*, University Park 2010.

I intend to examine some epistemological and corporeal/sensual conditions of our encounters with Byzantine objects in their putative contexts. In this way, another aspect of framing can emerge, the degree to which our re-making those objects and spaces has conditioned our understanding of that historical culture. Conservation and restoration can blur or suppress lines dividing our interventions from an originary object, and they can also quietly assert an experience unintended or inappropriately close to our own expectations. In that way, restoration is a particularly »natural« framing; in our conservation-biased culture, we take for granted that we pursue the historical value' of art works, to invoke one of the categories of Alois Riegl (1858–1905)—that is, a faithful preservation that prevents further loss.<sup>3</sup> Of course, in actual practice, we pursue a wide variety of strategies in the face of decay, damage and neglect, but the effects of all that work on things—their life support as it were—are not always reckoned with. In these ways, frames and sutures are even more complex in our confrontation with particular aspects of historical art, and so we need to address how we come to know—and so, explain—*Byzantine*.

Trying to identify the balancing point in restoration, the point between keeping a »fixed quality« with historical significance *and* survival as displayable object, is crucial for our own apprehensions of the art we try to authenticate and to contextualize.<sup>4</sup> Finding that point is a frequent and necessary discussion among restorers and conservators, but art historians often neglect this essential feature of our objects of study, that is, their long, altered lives and our perceptions of those pro-

---

<sup>3</sup> Alois Riegl: *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin*, trans. Kurt W. Förster and Diane Ghirardo, in: *Oppositions* 25 (1982), pp. 21–51 (=Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen und seine Entstehung, in: Georg Dehio und Alois Riegl (Hg.): *Konservieren, nicht restaurieren. Streitschriften zur Denkmalpflege um 1900*, Braunschweig/Wiesbaden 1988, pp. 43–87), here p. 28: »The postulate that issues about mankind, peoples, country, and church determined historical value became less important and was almost, but not entirely, eliminated. Instead, Kulturgeschichte, cultural history, gained prominence, for which minutiae—and especially minutiae—were significant. The new postulate reside in the conviction that even objective value adhered to objects wherein the material, manufacture, and purpose were otherwise negligible.«; see also Mary M. Brooks: *Decay, Conservation, and the Making of Meaning through Museum Objects*, in: Pamela H. Smith, Amy R. W. Meyers, and Harold J. Cook (eds.): *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge*, Ann Arbor 2014, pp. 377–404; Karen Lang: *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History*, Ithaca/London 2006, pp. 136–78; and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler, Stanford 2012, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Important precedents are Richard Brilliant: *My Laocoon: Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Artworks*, Berkeley 2000; and Leo Steinberg: *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, New York 2001; see Christina Maranci: *The Archaeology and Reconstruction of Zuartnoc*, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 68 (2015), pp. 69–115.

cesses of constant change.<sup>5</sup> The account by Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) of the restoration of the painting of »The Circumcision of Christ« by Luca Signorelli (1445–1523; ca. 1490, National Gallery of Art, London) established basic terms of debate: should the painting be »disturbed« by a restoration, in this case by Sodoma (1477–1549), or left as an incomplete work by the single hand of the master? Vasari opted for the latter, in stating Signorelli's work should remain partial and undisturbed by another hand, and majority opinion of the last century is in agreement to a large degree. But in actual practice, the restorer is the mediator, however invisible the hand tries to be, between an »original« and our modern version of a work. It is that space in which the restorer works that creates new frames for us to encounter historical works, even if art historians do not fully appreciate or comment on that hand's presence.<sup>6</sup>

These questions around integrity of things—people and objects—have exercised philosophers for a very long time, as a set of problems concerning relative identity. For example, the paradox of Chrysippus (ca. 279–ca. 206 B.C.E.) can lead to understanding how we come to know complex identity, which may have implications for Byzantine art. Chrysippus's paradox argues for restrictive identity: once Theon's foot has been cut off, he ceases to exist, and Dion the newly (de)formed man survives intact.<sup>7</sup> In obedience to Leibniz's Law, if two objects are identical, then they share all properties, and so one of the men must perish; identity must be consistent in objects in every respect of that Law.

However unexceptionable that Law may *appear*, people and art so often skate around it, and indeed Chrysippus could claim that the two men could share the same substance, if not occupy the same space. One of the men' endures, if changed and diminished, while the other, who is unchanged, must perish. Diminution and change are inevitable, it seems, and few conditions across this existence are consistent, predictable, and controllable by experiencing bodies. And so here we, as contemporary bodies wishing to know, run up against impediments to our own knowing. One easy way to think about this conundrum of Dion and Theon is to consider the two men as co-existent. The leg of López de Santa Anna (1794–1876), moreover, makes this point vividly, because his amputated leg went on to become

<sup>5</sup> See, however, Miriam Clavir: *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations*. Vancouver/Toronto 2002, pp. 26–66; and the essays in Andrew Oddy (ed.): *Restoration: Is It Acceptable?*, London 1994.

<sup>6</sup> See David Bomford: *Changing Taste in the Restoration of Paintings*, in: Andrew Oddy (ed.): *Restoration: Is It Acceptable?*, London 1994, pp. 33–40.

<sup>7</sup> A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley: *The Hellenistic philosophers, Volume 1: Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary*, Cambridge 1987, pp. 171–172. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley: *The Hellenistic philosophers, Volume 2: Greek and Latin Texts, with Notes and Bibliography*, Cambridge 1987, p. 177.

many things, as did the prosthetics the Mexican statesman and general used to replace his lost limb.<sup>8</sup> With each change, new identities were formed,<sup>9</sup> and so the original limb was given its own burial and monument by Santa Anna, and in lieu of the whole body, the limb was later disinterred and desecrated by rioters. Likewise, various replacement prosthetics are found in several museums in the United States to this day. If not only Dion and Theion can co-exist, but also his foot, then we are truly confronted by actively relative identities.

And yet we often treat these identities in art-historical discourse as self-consistent. In descriptions of the church/mosque/museum Hagia Sophia, for example, Byzantinists analyze the conditions of that medieval Christian monument by filtering out experience divergent from that imagining of a particular past. We assume the building's fixed qualities are evident and comprehensible, and we describe its splendor by positing qualities the church timelessly has, but the building no longer does possess. So, we give the same name (Hagia Sophia or Ayasofya), ascribe (intuitively) relative identity, and determine bodies' knowing in terms (somewhere) between Byzantine and us. Art historians perhaps too often describe Theon before amputation, when we are really examining Dion—as well as the fractured parts that result in so many changing lives of objects and humans.

In its persistence *and* change over time, historical art cannot conform to Leibniz's Law, and a question always answered by deduction, imagination and science has been the limits of our knowing a past culture through our bodies. Take the frescoes from the Church of St. Evphemianos, originally from Lysi, Cyprus, as an extreme, but revealing, example.

Severed from its original context by looters, the frescoes were purchased and restored by the Menil Collection in Houston; they were housed in a purpose-built chapel there from 1997–2012, when they returned to Cyprus for display in the Archbishop's Museum in Nicosia. Each phase of this existence, still unfolding toward a hoped-for completion of a circular journey back to Lysi, determines our understanding of that artifact. Each challenges assertion of identity as well.

The Byzantine Chapel Fresco Museum, as it was called for some of its time in Texas, was neither only chapel nor museum, and that hybridity was the foundation of its productive work on the Menil campus. Open for worship and meditation, the pavilion deeply, subtly revealed the original context of the frescoes through the reconstructed chapel within the interior. That happy marriage of Byzantium and post-modernism was eventually sundered by concerns and interests larger than

<sup>8</sup> See Luis Camnitzer: *Santa Anna's Leg and Other Things*, in: Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski (eds.): *Aesthetics and Modern Art*, Berlin 2011, pp. 221–239.

<sup>9</sup> A graphic novel, *The Leg*, even narrates the vigilante exploits of the leg long after Santa Anna himself is gone. See Van Jensen: *The Leg: A Graphic Novel with a Kick*, Greenville, SC 2014.

itself. The divorce occurred in March 2012, and one should celebrate and mourn that departure. In the first place, the repatriation of an important work of art is always noteworthy, and the frescoes are not in storage, an ongoing benefit to us all. In the second place, however, that repatriation marked the loss of an important resource for teaching and outreach in a North American museum, and any celebration should be lessened by the admission that the frescoes are not going to their real home, only another museum setting. These issues are worth raising: is their return to Cyprus sufficient to overcome their still-orphaned status? Is this installation more productive, intellectually and spiritually authentic in Nicosia than in Houston? And does it trump education beyond the boundaries of the home state (even when those boundaries are still in dispute)?<sup>10</sup>

The Byzantine Fresco Chapel was an historical moment in the display of Byzantine art in the United States. The Menil also celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2012, and as part of that marking, the Collection mounted a small, but packed, exhibition called *Dear John & Dominique: Letters and Drawings from the Menil Archives*. The show presented two documents about the Chapel from 1997 from the Archbishop of Cyprus, Chrysostomos I (1927–2007), and from 1989, from Mrs. Dominique de Menil (1908–97), the founder of the Collection. These isolated documents call attention only to apparent motivations of each side. The first document is a congratulatory missive with a strongly expressed political directive of raising awareness of the situation of Turkish occupation of a part of the island. The body of the letter reads:

»I consider the Church of the Cyprus and myself as lucky, in that frescoes from Saint Themonianos ended up in your Foundation and that you built that wonderful Chapel to host them. I am sure that the people visiting the Chapel will always remember Cyprus and that in the occupied areas churches are looted and sacred vessels are stolen. Only the freedom of Cyprus will guarantee that the Church of St. Barnabas, founded in the first century after Christ, will continue to exist. Please exercise your influence on the officials of the USA and stress to them that they should demand from Turkey to withdraw its military forces and Turkish settlers from our island and should work for the restoration of human rights of all Cyprus people.«<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Annemarie Weyl Carr and Lawrence J. Morrocco: *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered: The Thirteenth-Century Murals of Lysi, Cyprus*, Austin 1991; but also my introductory essay in Glenn Peers (ed.): *Byzantine Things in the World*, Houston 2013, pp. 21–35, and Glenn Peers: *Utopia and Heterotopia: Byzantine Modernisms in America*, in Karl Fugelso (ed.): *Defining Neomedievalism(s)* (Studies in Medievalism, vol. 19), Cambridge 2010, pp. 77–113.

<sup>11</sup> Nicosia, 17 October 1997. *Byzantine Fresco Chapel Papers*, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

Mrs. de Menil's letter to her son is also an official letter, and it raises all of the challenges of the Chapel's equilibrium in Houston that came to make the space and paintings so compelling together: her concern over the possible tension between study and experience of art, between secular missions of museums and the frescoes' undeniable spiritual power, between distant cultures and American modernism, between the past and lives lived fully in the present. The body of the letter reads:

»I need you. I need your help to design a building for the Cypriot frescoes. We have to be ready to build a ›chapel‹ if the Archbishop of Cyprus reminds us of our contract. The plans we have developed have been justly criticized: without being an exact replica of the Lysi chapel, they are reminiscent of it [...] It was my intention to reconstruct in Houston a chapel similar to the one from which the frescoes had been ripped off. I thought this would be the way to do justice to the frescoes. Obviously, it is not the best way to look at them. Bertrand Davezac, for one, has argued in favour of a museum presentation, somewhat like the one we have now in the basement: frescoes are at eye level and well lit. If this is the best way for study purposes, it leaves out an intangible element, difficult to weigh and express, yet very real. It leaves out their spiritual importance, and betrays their original significance. Only a consecrated chapel, used for liturgical functions, would do spiritual justice to the frescoes. It is with this in mind that we entered into a negotiation with the Church of Cyprus, which owns forever the frescoes. The agreement we reached represents an innovation in museum policy. For the first time, important fragments of a religious building are not considered only as antiquities. They are approached also as relics and consideration is given to their religious nature. The legitimacy of reviving the religious context of these thirteenth century frescoes can be questioned. It could be observed that the African art, which is so abundantly present in the Museum, could be presented in a true functional setting, and that it would be the right way to approach it and understand it. But the African treasures in the Museum, though they may move and inspire Afro-Americans today, belong to a culture that does exist in America. Restoring them to their original function, except for a cultural demonstration, makes no sense. On the other hand, the frescoes have not only resonance, but a very real impact on Greek-Americans, and also on those who have converted to orthodoxy. A tradition fully alive [...].«<sup>12</sup>

The several identities—living tradition being just one—that the fresco cycle has possessed over the last forty years of its life reveal just how provisional, elusive meaning can be in historical art. When the fresco pieces were taken through their long restoration process, necessary to repair all the damage the looters had done

---

<sup>12</sup> 25 April 1989. Byzantine Fresco Chapel Papers, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

in ripping the plaster-and-paint ground from the walls of the chapel at Lysi, features of the original setting had been lost. For example, the orientation of the Pantocrator in the dome was not self-evident and needed careful deduction before being faced toward the west; the extent of the ground on which the angels were treading in the register below the Pantocrator was also not clear because their feet had been damaged; and the height of the Virgin and Child flanked by angels in the apse area also needed consideration. Having been flattened and dissected in their illicit moves, the fresco grounds needed to be returned to contours that matched the original setting of the chapel building. Decision-making was done, it appears, through a great deal of consultation and careful thought, which included examination of the original church at Lysi. And the book that resulted, an excellent study by Annemarie Weyl Carr and Laurence Morrocco, was written while the dome and apse frescoes were still separated from an architectural context; Carr analyzed style and iconography with great sensitivity, and the general context of the frescoes on late medieval Cyprus became clear, but the experience of encountering these frescoes in anything resembling spatial consistency was not possible, because the chapel had not yet been constructed.

That art-conservation and historical identity was replaced in 1997 by the opening of the Byzantine Chapel Fresco Museum, a purpose-built pavilion for the frescoes' display. Those previous identities deriving from conservation and original context have not been fully erased. In the wake of the closing of the Menil pavilion, they are in fact the paramount witness to the frescoes' life off Cyprus. Nonetheless, the particular ways in which the frescoes were framed within a profoundly evocative space and re-made according to metal and glass sutures can be probed with profit for what they show us about how we came to know Byzantium in Texas for that period of time.

The pavilion was designed by François de Menil (1945-) and it demonstrated the ways framing experience can de-familiarize and heighten, enhance understanding. The building's interior was entered through a decompression chamber that rose in a strongly vertical manner and also bridged a stream running under the floor. Visitors were openly shown a traversing of worlds, and on entering the main display area, they were also confronted with compelling fields of light and dark, of void and mass. On the perimeter of the room, light ran down the wall from unseen openings; in the middle zone, the dark shell of the ceiling created a frame of relative dark; and in the center of the room, a kind of mirage rose up, a semi-transparent building within a building that recreated the scale and layout of the chapel at Lysi.

The frescoes were only visible when one entered the inner chapel form, since they comprise only the dome and conch of the apse. The encounter with the figural passages was revelatory and came at the end of a series of preparatory movements

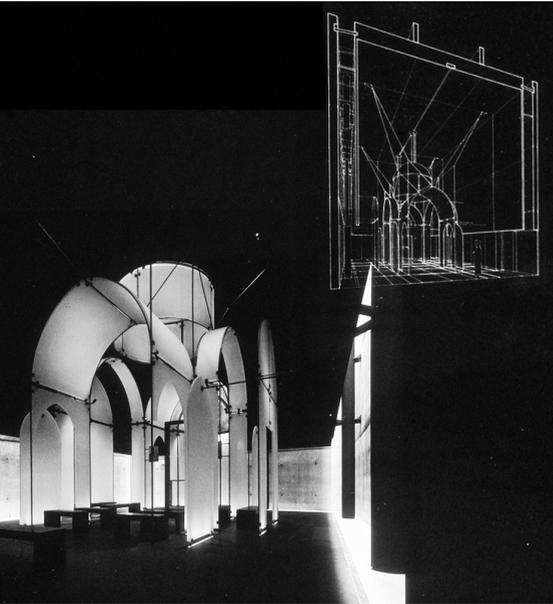


Fig. 1: Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior view to the east. The Menil Collection, 1997–2012. Architect: François de Menil. Source: *Architecture* (April 1997).

on the part of visitors. That encounter was on one level a meeting with a real thing: one saw art clearly of the past in its appearance and content. The restored aspects of the frescoes were not immediately evident, though some passages on the perimeter of the fields were incomplete and testified to the partial quality of the frescoes' survival. Moreover, the restoration showed the ongoing process of revision that the frescoes had potentially witnessed; the technique used was true fresco, pigments applied to a wet plaster ground, but examination revealed that some touching-up or later additions in *secco* had also occurred.

On another level of experience, the framing within this glass form demonstrated the special tension of displaying Byzantine art in a foreign setting like Texas. The glass chapel was both enclosing and open; the semi-transparent glass was both inside and outside at the same time, and the skeleton of the chapel showed a kind of suturing that held together the provisionality of enclosure.

Of course, one was not bound by the original door, set in the south wall of the chapel, and one could pass between glass-panel walls and so part the sutures temporarily. The body of the chapel could work in several ways, fields of flesh stitched together by metal rods and joins, or as a skeleton on which flesh or skin only partly reached, but however one describes it, the chapel was never fully settled. It was architecture, but solid and evocation both; it was marked space, inside and outside, but it belonged to a continuum of space, too. Artificial light was captured within the glass frame, but it spilled out, as it received natural light below from the light descending the perimeter walls, and so light sources and stability were indecisive, in flow, especially given the naturally active skies in east Texas.

The result, I believe, was a remarkable equilibrium between two normally irreconcilable modes of encounter with Byzantine art, objective (or historical value, which would not place value in fragility and mortality in things) and aesthetic (or art value, which is a relative and not durative, but subject to constant change).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Riegl: *The Modern Cult of Monuments* (as note 3).

Timelessness was a goal of the architect, since the shell was also called an ‘infinity box,’ but the encounter with the installation was also entirely contingent on the bodied, in–time presence of viewers. A chapel without sutures and without that active framing would have been sealed, intact, and impervious to movements of atmosphere. In other words, the *original* chapel would have been less productive experientially, or at least less faceted, than this temporary state the frescoes had in Houston.

So the point along which these frescoes have fallen at any given point in time in the spectrum from ›real‹ to ›remade‹ was neither entirely clear nor stable. Another way to come at this situation may be through the ancient philosophical problem of the Ship of Theseus, which examines the constancy and identity of an object. Plutarch (ca. 46–120) stated that the Ship became a standard nut for philosophers, one side holding that even a restored ship, with planks being replaced as they decayed, remained the same, and the other contending that it was therefore altered to another thing. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) took this problem one step further: if the replaced, decaying planks were used in the same way for another ship, would it be possible for two Ships of Theseus to exist simultaneously?<sup>14</sup>

At the Menil, that identity of the frescoes was constantly faceting, or changing its perspective, from Houston to Lysi, but never entirely or ever one or the other. The line between the authentic ship of Theseus and its recreation through cast-off materials is movable when trying to define authenticity of objects and perception of them.<sup>15</sup> The relative identity of works, which can be separately original *and* restored, makes it possible to have two works occupying the same space at the same time. Our perception of the space in Houston was both the one we persistently call ›Byzantine‹—focused on sacred, numinous, hieratic forms—and one we also recognize as modern, in the broad sense—interpretative, ironic, conceptual and sensual.

The framing and suturing were the elements that gave the space of the chapel the ability simultaneously to present as authentic document and interpretative text. The open joins, in particular, created passage and containment, and their mechanical aspect lent a restrained quality to their roles as support and perforation. Likewise, the framing black–ceiling within the chapel pavilion was both evocative

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Francis W. Dauer: How Not to Reidentify the Parthenon, in: *Analysis* 33/2 (1972), pp. 63–64.

<sup>15</sup> See Ivan Gaskell: Museum Display, an Algonquin Bow, and the Ship of Theseus, in: Peter N. Miller (ed.): *Cultural Histories of the Material World*, Ann Arbor 2013, p. 70: ›Cultural historians can, and should, make use of curatorial manipulations of material things to explore their contingencies and interrogate their immaterial, as well as the material, aspects. In doing so, they might take note of the consequences of the Ship of Theseus paradox: while things may perdure, they never stop changing.«

of infinity, as was intended, but also, and strangely, of snow-roofs found on mountain churches in the interior of Cyprus. The framing space between ceiling and chapel was where many of the contingencies became possible, and the zone around the chapel proper became more intense, more focused because of the bridging space surrounding the chapel. Those fields of intensity raised around the periphery of the space and in the framing structure holding the frescoes in place then proposed means for visitors to know ›Byzantine.‹ That cultural and historical category may not be in full accord with the chapel, according to convention in the academic discipline, but in the same way, perhaps, that Arthur Evans (1851–1941) brought his Bronze Age Cretans to life through painted concrete, so Byzantium was made alive to us through this new version of itself.

Soon after their return to Nicosia, the frescoes were installed in the Byzantine Museum of the Archbishop Makarios III Foundation among other fresco fragments from the island. No reference to their short life in Houston is found in the display there, and the memory of that self that the frescoes had is disappeared there. The frescoes are set into ceiling and wall, and are much more approachable than they had been in Houston, where the sacral atmosphere was accentuated through provocative lighting, accentuated iconostasis and high-drummed dome. Paradoxically, in the Nicosia museum, the sacred character is suppressed or mimicked in favor of quasi-objective encounter; the frescoes are just another display among treasures of Cypriot orthodoxy. But in trying to speak the western, institutionalized language of museum exhibition, curators in Nicosia have drained blood from a vibrant object. The same guiding principle that determined the tone and position taken by the Archbishop in his letter to Mrs. de Menil in his letter of 1997 informed this position. Here, a particular ideology—ethnic and confessional pride, perhaps—are the motivations.<sup>16</sup> While the frescoes endure, their patience and forbearance before our apparent care were dignified counterpoints to the power-moves they have been subjected to. Undoing the interpretative framework from Houston was a means for Cypriot officials to reclaim property, and at least, to my knowledge, none of the restoration was undone, but now the Lysi frescoes have quietly allowed themselves to be placed in a historical, confessional framework that gives them no special intensity, no particular voice. They endure as orphans still, like Santa Anna's leg.

---

<sup>16</sup> Put another way: Seymour Howard: *Antiquity Restored: Essays on the Afterlife of the Antique*, Vienna 1990, p. 27: ›The phenomenon of ›Antiquity restored‹ can be seen, then, as essentially self-fulfilling, reflecting desires to return to, to know, to control, and to transcend a preferred image of ancestry, a witting regression (through the agency of history) in the service of the ego, an attempt of the will and the imagination to knit and to extend the fabric of self and time.‹

In the exhibition *Byzantine Things in the World* at the Menil in 2013, many of the icons from the Collection were introduced to objects that normally travel in different circles. The argument was focused on revealing the liveliness of things from the Byzantine past through experiential contact among human, Byzantine and non-Byzantine things. The animated quality of things emerged forcefully in these installation contexts, and part of that work was naturally, but not always obviously, done by things whose historical identity was fundamentally relative, as it were—of this era and their past, ›original‹ life.

A number of icons at the Menil Collection have salvaged passages of paint that make clear their subjects, but still openly declare their relative selves.<sup>17</sup> Since damage was extreme, several of the icons needed restoration before they could be shown, and the icons in this group betray unmistakable evidence of these interventions. The figural passages are partial, but strong and legible, and they show that the icons were at one time impressive and beautiful objects. Those qualities are still evident, but the wooden beds used as settings for those passages are no minor part of the objects.

The Late Byzantine icons of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel and of the Virgin Mary entered the Collection at the same time, and their restoration history allows us to follow some of the conditions that led to their present appearance, so divergent from their original presentation and state.<sup>18</sup>

The framing and suturing that embed these icon fragments in a new surround opens up fresh, and not very Byzantine, ways of experiencing that art. The guiding principle behind the conservation was clearly not a return to a faux-byzantine surround, but one that allowed the conservation to be visible, understated, and true in some fashion to a fixed state of the original, or at least of that original type. Here we

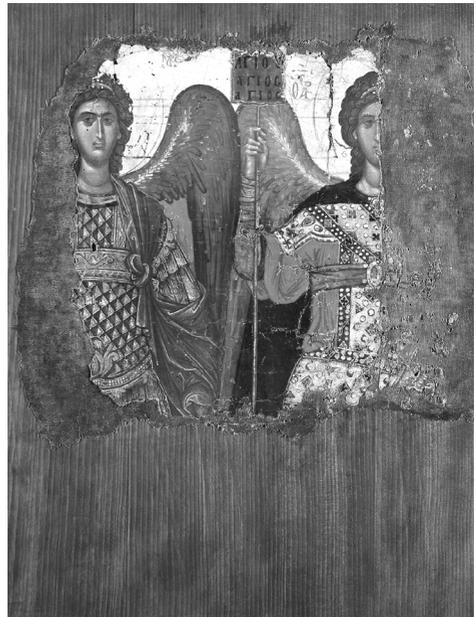


Fig. 2: Icon of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, Late Byzantine. The Menil Collection.

<sup>17</sup> The group came from the collection of Eric Bradley and was dealt to the Menil Collection in the 1980s by Yanni Petsopoulos.

<sup>18</sup> 85-057.06 and 85-057.05, respectively. See Annemarie Weyl Carr (ed.): *Imprinting the Divine: Byzantine Icons from The Menil Collection*, Houston 2011.



Fig. 3: Installation view of an icon of the Virgin Mary in *Byzantine Things in the World*, The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester.

have something approaching Riegl's historical value in operation, but not entirely, »The more faithfully a monument's original state is preserved, the greater its historical value: disfiguration and decay detract from it.«<sup>19</sup> Decay was halted, and so some necessary part of the objects was preserved, but the original state was simply irretrievable by our standards, so that the icons escape full adherence to Riegl's definition of historical value

The restorers were evidently aiming at a level of authenticity in returning the disconnected passages to a plausibly historical state. In the first place, the scale of the framing bed was significant, since it was desirable that it accommodate the figural passage at least in outline like the original state had. Yanni Petsopoulou wrote on this subject to Walter Hopps (1932–2005), director of the Menil, on 21 July 1988, about the process of determining the best way to make the icon showable:

»Laurie [Lawrence Morrocco] and I spent the entire afternoon yesterday on the problem of reconstruction of the original size of the panel of the Virgin and the Archangels. We first worked from the fragments themselves and the information contained therein as to the extent and size of the missing areas. We then pulled out a few hundred comparative illustrations from my files, both to confirm our guesses as to proportion...and to fill in information not available from the fragments themselves. We arrived at what we felt was a size of panel common and natural to both fragments. We then went back to my files and looked for some of the standard proportions in icon panels of that period. We were gratified to find that many of them were in a proportion of 4 to 5, which as it happens is exactly the proportion that we arrived at independently. We think, therefore, that the panel would have been 106 x 85 cm [...]. The aesthetic effect we would like to aim for is not dissimilar to that on the famous head of Christ by Rublev [...]. Unless we hear to the contrary, we propose to mount both pieces on separate but identical panels, which could be displayed either back-to-back or separately.«<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Riegl: *The Modern Cult of Monuments* (as note 3), pp. 34–38.

<sup>20</sup> Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

The series of deductions are natural for conservationists and dealers, because value resides in the historical clarity and authenticity of the work. For that reason, the damaged passages needed to be made to appear normal («common and natural»). Not only was the frame expanded to fit authenticity, it also gained true aesthetic stature by assimilating to the restored icon of Christ, originally painted by the great Russian artist, Andrei Rublev (1360s–1427/30). The space within which these restorers proposed to work was that void between the disfigured painting, literally hanging by threads, and the modern sublime of Rublev's superb achievement. That space actually covers a great deal of distance, and in large part, it is traversed by that wooden surround. The Menil icons were anonymous, very fine examples, but not of the aesthetic, national or historical order of Rublev's work in Moscow. But the restoration project clearly presented itself to the owners in ways that transformed some of that significant authenticity to the «new» icons. That reach of the Menil icons to an authenticity effect is almost entirely conveyed by the new backing. Carol Mancusi Ungaro, the chief conservator at the time, replied to Morrocco on 30 August 1988, to raise questions about the treatment «of the bare space» that the wooded enlargements would create:

»We would like to know how you propose to treat the bare space on the enlarged replacement panels, i.e., will you use aged wood, will you treat new wood to look old, will the panel be toned, rubbed, or covered with fabric? We remain concerned about the amount of exposed space in relation to the fragment and would appreciate your comments.«<sup>21</sup>

No reply is present in the object files, so the continuation of the discussion possibly occurred by telephone or in person. Certainly, some negotiation unfolded that took into account the desires and sensibilities of the Menil side of the conversation, for Petsopoulos had proposed in his letter that the wooden ground be expanded to 106 × 85 cm, in scale comparable, if not the same as Rublyev's restored icon, which measures 158 × 106 cm. In the end and for reasons not entirely clear now, the Archangels panel is larger than the Virgin according to the restorers' final dimensions. The latter measures 76 × 57.5 × 2.5 cm, while the former is 95.3 × 72.4 × 3.8 cm.

The framing of these icons then distinguished the two, probably because of a double figure icon requiring a more spacious surround, but the meeting of icon and backing diverges in each case, too. The Virgin Mary panel is described as «tempera and metal leaf on wood without fabric,» while the Archangels are «tempera and gold leaf on fabric transferred to modern wooden panel.» According to a conservation report of October 1995, written by Morrocco's studio, the painted

---

<sup>21</sup> Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

surface was subsequently removed from the panel and the backing canvas, which was detaching, was also removed; the canvas and gesso backing was then reapplied to the panel; canvas fragments were added to the left-hand side and the bottom of the fragment.

In keeping with the principles not only of the *Byzantine Things* project, but also of the Menil as an institution, achronic comparisons can make aspects of experience and history emerge that would otherwise be suppressed in habitual exhibition practice—and habitually by our expectations, of how these things feel. An example of a modern work, then, puts into relief some of the issues at stake for this paper: framing experience, restoration and authenticity, and, finally, extended subjecthood in made things from the past. At the beginning of the exhibition, crosses exploded and settled on the walls, from small metal objects to masterworks of American modernism. The non-Byzantine things were constantly productive as reminders of the need for slow, meditative, attentive looking. The painting by Ad Reinhardt (1913–67) in the first room is an exceptionally good example of his later work, and like good painting, it really is reactive, sensitive to its environment.<sup>22</sup> His fields of color in a picture like this one are adjacencies rather than distinct zones—no lines separate those areas in a real Reinhardt, just tonal modulations across a canvas.<sup>23</sup> His volatile painting process was never quite in his control and those paintings live lives, and over time, they show *their* experience of this world.

Take another example of an encounter with a Reinhardt at the Situation Kunst installation at Bochum, Germany. The first, immediately indeterminate experience is of a black field, partly because it is hung in a bright space, so the face-to-face contrast is very stark. From the floor below, the contrast between fields in the painting is remarkably high; the zones emerge distinctly and clearly—not good for a real Reinhardt, where subtlety is prized. I don't know the history of this one painting, but the fact that this viewing angle is permitted indicates that the surface qualities visible from below are intended by the curator to be seen. Those qualities are so disturbing because they are divergent from the experience of a picture from the artist's own hand.<sup>24</sup> As Bradford Epley, chief conservator at the Menil, has

---

<sup>22</sup> See now the brilliant analysis by Annika Marie: Ad Reinhardt: Mystic or Materialist, Priest or Proletarian?, in: *Art Bulletin* 94/4 (2014), pp. 463–484.

<sup>23</sup> See Bradford K. Epley: Indivisibility Undone, in: *Brooklyn Rail* (16 January 2014) under: [http://brooklynrail.org/special/AD\\_REINHARDT/black-paintings/indivisibility-undone](http://brooklynrail.org/special/AD_REINHARDT/black-paintings/indivisibility-undone) (16 June 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Reinhardt himself: »Painting that is almost possible, almost does not exist, that is not quite known, not quite seen,« from Ad Reinhardt: *Imageless Icons*, in: Barbara Rose (ed.): *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, New York 1975, pp. 108–109, here p. 109 (undated and no period at end of statement, as the text is like a poem), and: »No ordinary seeing but absolute seeing in which there is neither seer nor seen.«

recently written, »Over time, rather than reintegrating the artist's paint surface, the restorer-applied layers reinforce only themselves as distinct and unfortunate presences, a tinted glass sarcophagus permitting only glimpses of what is buried underneath.«<sup>25</sup> Testing our own experiences against this distortion is challenging; we need to compare constantly, between what we recall and what we see, and to keep doubt and acceptance in equilibrium. Our perceptual error is to undervalue that experience of contingency, of doubt, and overvalue our apparent capture of that object's (that person's) experience. In part, our error is due to trusting what we say out loud in words—it's a one-way experience. And we could profitably rely on that pre-articulate, intuitive way of thinking before such work.<sup>26</sup> The one-way route to knowing another and oneself is not a method we trust in social situation with humans, and we should also resist solipsism before works, art, things. The other side deserves a voice, too.

And yet we insist on our own priority. For example, Amy Knight Powell wrote a very acute description of encountering a Reinhardt in an issue of *Brooklyn Rail* celebrating the centenary of Reinhardt's birth:

»[...] the appearance of a black painting does not change over time because of something the viewer actively does. It changes by virtue of an involuntary process of vision. Beyond holding still and looking in the direction of the painting, no calculable effort is involved. So, if the viewer were really paying attention to a black painting, the currency spent would be simply time, that is, time free of labor [...]. Having invested your precious time in watching a figure (a grid) slowly emerge from blackness, you feel satisfied that the process has reached something of an end. You decide it is time to walk away. You move on to other paintings in the gallery, but before leaving the room entirely, you glance back over your shoulder at the black painting to which you had patiently devoted yourself, maybe hoping to take home something of its elusiveness. But when you turn to look, you discover that the painting has returned to being the black monochrome it was when you first laid eyes on it; the figure has disappeared. You discover, in other words, that your *experience* of it did not leave a trace, at least not on the painting.«<sup>27</sup>

The first sentence leads you to believe agency is going to be democratized, accorded to viewer and viewed. But the action specified here is involuntary: one looks and discerns meaning, taking time to puzzle out and to accept the painter's

<sup>25</sup> See Epley: Indivisibility Undone (as note 23).

<sup>26</sup> See Richard Shiff: As It Feels, in: *Brooklyn Rail* (4 February 2014) under: <http://brooklynrail.org/2014/02/criticspage/as-it-feels> (16 June 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Amy Knight Powell: Time Is (Not) Money, in: *Brooklyn Rail* (16 January 2014) under: [http://brooklynrail.org/special/AD\\_REINHARDT/black-paintings/time-is-not-money#bio](http://brooklynrail.org/special/AD_REINHARDT/black-paintings/time-is-not-money#bio) (16 June 2015).

message. One decides one's accomplishment and moves on. The vertical subject is fully in control.

But generalizing in this fashion leaves a great deal open to discussion. The state of the work needs careful consideration, and the painting tells one how to position and re-position to try to get that encounter right. More than just time, the painting demands a physical and perceptual effort, and it contains its history until one is ready to realize its presence. And these works are part of a constantly changing world like we are (or another way, one does not expect a friend, with whom one has just concluded a conversation, to retain the expression and pose after one turns away—he or she goes back to life in progress). I would argue that here with Reinhardt is one antidote to the sardine can of Jacques Lacan (1901–1981); Lacan spent a great deal of time explaining away the ability of the can to »see« him—it could not, he argued, but he wanted to know why we think so. Reinhardt's work, however, is not a question of self- and world-alienation, but a mutualizing thing in which sensitive looking and thinking reveals a reality only it contains. This work in the Menil, as an example (*pace* Situation Kunst), does sense one; it does read one like a book, revealing what it needs us to know. Amy describes this passage from knowing to starting over as a loss on the part of the viewer, but I would switch the subject position onto the object, the other person, and suggest thinking about how it itself shows loss, manipulation and responsiveness.<sup>28</sup>

Those paintings' genuineness, modern and Byzantine, is always questionable, though we mostly do not do that questioning, since we are accepting of this retrieval and maintenance of a sufficient amount of historical matter—especially with an artist like Reinhardt who died only fifty years ago.<sup>29</sup> As long as no arbitrary intervention occurs, a monument or object has age value, according to Riegl, but very few historical monuments, let alone modern, have been immune to intervention, and determining what constitutes arbitrary is difficult indeed.

---

<sup>28</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman: *How to Open Your Eyes*, in: Harun Farocki: *Against What? Against Whom?*, trans. Patrick Kremer, London 2009, pp. 38–50, here p. 39: »We should, in front of each image, ask ourselves the question of how it gazes (at us), how it thinks (us) and how it touches (us) at the same time.«

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Nelson Goodman: *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis 1976, pp. 103–104: »Although I see no difference now between the two pictures in question, I may learn to see difference between them. I cannot determine now by merely looking at them, or in any other way, that I shall be able to learn. But the information that they are very different, that the one is the original and the other the forgery, argues against any inference to the conclusion that I shall not be able to learn. And the fact that I may later be able to make a perceptual distinction between the pictures that I cannot make now constitutes an aesthetic different between them that is important to me now.«

In that vein, the Menil icons have additions that are aesthetic in modern terms, according to norms of warm wood and spacious bedding for original passages, as well as the not-necessary outspread linen connecting paint and wood.<sup>30</sup> While not arbitrary, given the deliberations described already, the alterations certainly pose questions of a level of ›genuine‹ in an historical sense.

The final result of the icons' restorations, in the event, is a successor to each of the original objects, true to some comforting degree. Some of the comfort may derive to a viewer from the evident rescue of fine art, so that one can understand the partial quality being a retrieval of the past nearly denied. But to what degree is either of these icons playing a role that just approximates the manner and self of the first holder of this icon identity?<sup>31</sup> The icons are recognizably historical, and so they retain reference to a fixed quality we call ›Byzantine,‹ but at the same time, essential aspects of their historical selves are only apparent and recognizable by feats of imagination, by experiential leaps to contexts not so much where whole icons are the dominant format—where fixed values prevail—but to contexts where aestheticizing, conscientious re-making is possible or probable, that is to say museums. In other words, multiple identities in the same object: Dion, Theon and the foot, all co-existing, but in highly specialized, imbricated contexts.

The display and restoration did not aim for and could not achieve an experiential aesthetic value that was accurate to the time of the icons' painting. But they could still reveal perceptual qualities that were once part of the object, then lost to time, and now given back to some degree through exhibition alchemy.<sup>32</sup> In *Byzantine Things*, the contingencies of exhibition made these icons perceptually rich encounters among historical and modern works. Their reflective surfaces and warm, wooden surrounds made them linking bridge-objects that were simultaneously modern and medieval. The exchanges were transformative among these icons and their modern neighbors in *Byzantine Things*—including *Untitled* (1970–71) by Michael Tracy, *Glacier (Hoarfrost)* (1974) by Robert Rauschenberg, and *Golden Tondo* (2011) by Stephan Balkenhol.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> And fake and forgery are near neighbors, categories to which we mostly do not assign prestige. For Riegl, in order for monuments to be preserved in some fashion, historical value even goes so far as to concede a place to copies when originals are lost. The loss is too early to state, but for example, silver objects from a mid-thirteenth-century hoard found by German archaeologists in the central Syrian town of Resafa were replicated and deposited in the LVR-Landesmuseum in Bonn. Handling these items is not without pleasure and usefulness, and their age value is sadly close to being realized, in the last sense Riegl described.

<sup>31</sup> See Rafael De Clercq: *The Metaphysics of Art Restoration*, in: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53/3 (2013), pp. 261–275.

<sup>32</sup> De Clercq: *The Metaphysics of Art Restoration* (as note 31), p. 267.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Tracy (1943–), *Untitled*, 1970–71, metallic paint on canvas, 259.08 x 119.7 cm;



Fig. 4 and 5: Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World*, The Menil Collection, photographs: Paul Hester.



The contingencies at play within that room and sightlines from outside it evocatively revealed material qualities of the icons that were fugitive and concrete, of the past and in the present—different shades of true one might say.<sup>34</sup> The restored icons were placed within a rich brown field in the final room of the exhibition, and that color accentuated the depth of field the wooden supports have. Indeed, the effect was striking for the degree to which the painted fields of the icons emerged and withdrew against the chocolate ground of the walls. Especially from a moderate distance, the figural fields of the icons appeared to obscure and assume substance simultaneously. In that way, the icons assumed qualities that related to and supplemented those of the Rauschenberg, Balkenhol and Tracy works in close proximity: qualities like illusionistic and non-logical depths of field, unexpected interplay of materials, instability or evocation of figuration, and environmental permeability or porousness. Those qualities were likely otherwise irretrievable from a Byzantine object without intervention, both conservationist and curatorial, having been acted on it.

Moreover, the vivacity gained from those encounters was multiplied by some other associations drawn out across two rooms, not only a Malanggan Mask from New Ireland, and a Duma or Mdédé mask, but also, in another room, a Bamana boli, one of the most uncanny museum objects one can experience.<sup>35</sup>

Shared materials, primarily exposed wood, allowed currents to run through the rooms and conducted a shared vitalism, so that each of the objects was charged. But faces and forms that could be bodies were consistent among these varied objects, from the altered facial forms of masks and icons, to the eerily-present body of the boli, with its extraordinary mixture of materials and organic, still-living body.

---

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Glacier (Hoarfrost)*, 1974, solvent transfer on satin and chiffon with pillow, 304 × 187.96 × 14.92 cm; Stephan Balkenhol (1957–), *Golden Tondo*, 2011, poplar, white and red gold leaf foil, acrylic paint, 100.01 × 11.11 cm.

<sup>34</sup> See Guy Rohrbaugh: *Artworks as Historical Individuals*, in: *European Journal of Philosophy* 11 (2003), pp. 177–205, here p. 178: »To put it crudely, we should think of artworks as objects in and persisting through history, ones which merely have a certain form. This picture of works as historical individuals is at odds with certain tendencies in aesthetics to tie the very identity of a work of art to its form, the look or sound which the artist selects and executes. This tendency is at its strongest, though equally misguided, in the case of photographs and other repeatable works when, abstracting from the particular occurrences, one thinks there is nothing left but the form with which to identify the work.«

<sup>35</sup> Boli, various animal and vegetable materials, clay, wood, sacrificial materials, 116.13 × 135.23 × 32.385 cm; Malanggan Mask from New Ireland, wood with pigment, fiber bark, lime and shell, 32.38 × 15.24 × 36.51; and a Duma or Mdédé mask, wood and pigment, 33.02 × 44.45 × 18.1 cm. On the boli, see the essay by Susan Sutton: *Resistant Surfaces*, in: *Byzantine Things in the World*, pp. 141–151.

The frame that was introduced at the beginning of this essay is of course a ›strawman.‹ No such phenomenon really exists. Such things as were circulating among each other in these two rooms of *Byzantine Things* belie all generalizations about modern, historical or non-western framing conditions. No one in the rooms stayed still or discrete; in highly expressive, even dramatic ways, each overlapped, softened, and intermingled. Cordoning, closing frames had no role here—if they ever do—because discrete entities are nearly impossible in these exhibition settings (they are possible, but one needs to repress in order to achieve discretion). Conservation here at the Menil, with these icons, as well as the Fresco Chapel, made more active the possibilities of relative identities as means to assimilation with human subjects or things. The ample wooden surround of the icons triggered assimilation with its environmental spread (wall, floor, fellow things). Likewise, the Chapel's sutured architecture, and its outward and upward rings of darkness and radiance, revealed the transformative zones we can experience in such framing spaces. For we participate in these frames as fully as the objects we think we are framing. We occupy that same continuum that those things charge and electrify—if we are fortunate—and we alter in those intensity fields. Restoration is a tricky game: sometimes it doesn't work out, like when we see a disfigured Reinhardt, but sometimes it actualizes potential to work on us, not because it is historically accurate, in a literal sense, but because newly re-made objects take on identities relational to our insecure bodies—that is, bodies uncertain and vulnerable to objects' attentive probing.