Byzantine Things *in the* World

The Menil Collection May 3–August 18, 2013

Byzantine things do work and act in the world in way that art never can. The Christian icons, pilgrim tokens, reliquaries, and the like have traditionally been considered *art*, and rightly so if we restrict our concern to their aesthetic qualities; the exquisite objects easily hold their own next to easel paintings by Titian or Ingres. Contrary to the contemporary conception, however, in which works of art are considered inert and passive, dependent upon the viewer's gaze, Byzantines saw these objects as dynamic and changeable, fully capable of affecting the world. And in that sense, to call them "art" is to sign the death certificate for Byzantine material culture; it suppresses their living, active aspects. So here we call them "things." Things perform actively in the world and change all other things (people included) in their vicinity. They are not waiting to be seen by a person standing in front of them (though the things here will appear, in some ways, to be waiting—they're not).

In our attempts to order the past, to define discrete cultures and chronological periods, art falls into a larger system that we devised; and so we parallel Byzantine things with Romanesque and Gothic works from western Europe and those three categories precede the Renaissance—thus *medieval*, the long "middle age" between Antiquity and its "rediscovery." But this categorization of the past, however convenient for us, distorts these cultures and often forces them to resemble us, or each other, more than they in fact do. This exhibition offers the opportunity to see Byzantine things outside of this environment that we made for them. By placing them in constellation with like-minded things modern and non-western rather than sequestering them in a distinct set of chronologically determined rooms or cases, *Byzantine Things in the World* allows them to speak in new ways. We do not claim that this environment is natural to these things, that we have recreated the Byzantine experience, but in creating one that resonates with it and is sufficiently different from our habitual ways of seeing and understanding, we can have a fresh (and perhaps truer) encounter with the culture's strange things.

So, conversations that are open in the exhibition should lead to new experiences of this culture's made things. The intention of showing modernist and Byzantine things together is not to present Byzantium as a new modernism nor is it to tease out intellectual and formal Byzantine roots in modern art (though Henri Matisse closely studied Byzantine

Crosses, Byzantine. Bronze and soapstone, heights 1–4 inches (2.5–10.2 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston

coins, Willem de Kooning compared New York City to Constantinople, and Mark Rothko was deeply sensitive to the Byzantine monuments he saw in and around Venice). Rather, our purpose, at least partially, is to explore the ways that modernism allows us to see new aspects of Byzantine culture. Barnett Newman's painting in the exhibition, for example, uses the zip or vertical line running up the painting to call the viewing body back to itself. In a similar way, bodies in front of Byzantine icons were always completed by the facing bodies on these painted panels, like Saint Onouphrios here, that forced the petitioner to encounter him or herself. Byzantine notions of unity and oneness may help us to better understand aspects of Newman's project, and likewise Newman's position allows Byzantine relations to emerge more clearly and forcefully than is allowed under normal museum conditions.

This conversation between modernism and Byzantine things leads one to understand aspects of the material world that would have seemed natural and self-evident throughout most of history, but are foreign to a modern, western audience (in our conception of the world as a being filled with inert objects we are, in fact, in the minority). For one, Byzantines understood the world to be composed of an ever-present constituent form: the cross. The essential building block of the world, the cross could be found everywhere from the face (nose and brow) and body (outstretched arms and torso) to a ship's mast, though it was only recognized after the Incarnation of Christ. The swirl of Byzantine

crosses and the deeply embedded cross in Ad Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting, 1954–1960, 80 x 50,* speak to both the surface and depth of that ever-latent form that promised salvation to all who could see and *do* the cross, as in crossing oneself in prayer. Likewise wearing these crosses on one's body is a reminder, recapitulation, and catalyst to *be* the cross in one's life.

Gold is another aspect of the Byzantine world that would appear to be transparent to us in its work and meaning, but had additional layers for the Byzantines. We know that gold is a precious, inert metal that is highly workable. Its symbol as chemical element is Au, after *aurum,* in Latin, "dawn's first glow," recalling Homer's "rosy-fingered dawn" and Paul the Silentiary's "rosy-ankled dawn" in his description of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. These descriptive terms come closer to getting at the way Byzantines understood gold, as a potentially living element that brought its animate and animating qualities to every thing it made. The Byzantine gold box is a tiny treasure, and yet it worked oversized to its scale. It likely contained a relic of a saint, a remnant of a holy person deeply saturated with the divine, and both box and bone were real presence. Not just a reminder in a suitably beautiful setting, these things (only the box remains now—it's empty) were living agents of the divine in the world. The saint was truly there, in the same way that gold was a living element: Byzantines, like Greek and Romans before them, understood minerals and ores to be living: not alive in quite the same way as us, but with a much slower and older energy. They were seen as a kind of nearly-frozen blood in the earth with different rhythms and paces than our blood, but not dissimilar in essence.

Box (reliquary), Byzantine, possibly Macedonia, ca. 1500. Gold, 1¾ x 2⅝ x 1½ inches (4.4 x 6.7 x 3.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston

James Lee Byars, *The Halo*, 1985. Brass, overall: diam. 86 1/2 inches (219.7 cm); brass ring: diam. 8 inches (20.3 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2013 The Estate of James Lee Byars

Gold demonstrates its animate nature through its material qualities, and so the deep luminosity it raises is like dawn's body, her lambent ankles and fingers. In the absence of the candles, lamps, and shifting sunlight with which they were traditionally lit, things like the gold box no longer flicker or radiate in the same way, but the company it keeps in this exhibition gives it a glow that is at least reminiscent of its natural state. Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg and James Lee Byars produced giants to this miniature, but their works' deeply open halations resonate with those of the gold box. They absorb and reflect, they pull one in, and their glowing fields include the viewer. The box, despite fighting in a lower weight-class, still gives as good as it gets. It is an animate thing in the room and its life is irrepressible once it's allowed to speak.

African objects also tread a fine line between art and thing, and perhaps their balancing act in European and American museums provides a good model for how like-minded Byzantine things ought to be treated. The *boli*, for example, both is and is not a container/contained, and it operated as a full participant in its culture. Taking form in a thick flow of energy called *nyama,* a pervasive animating force charging people, the landscape, and objects with life, as a living entity the *boli* digests and incorporates such materials as grass, mud, semen, spit, urine, blood, and dirt. This accretion means that it in its native habitat it is an ever-changing, shape-shifting entity, and its radical external surface emerges from the internal. But the charismatic materiality of the thing cannot be ignored wherever it lives. The whole complex sensory environment that serviced Byzantine relics and reliquaries can't be replicated here any more than the *boli*'s traditional backdrop can be. Yet the intensity of their effects is still there for any viewer who takes the time and attentiveness for that embodied encounter.

The Byzantine world, the world of bodies, of things, was an open field where all things interacted and acted on each other. In this animism by which God's energies and presence flowed throughout creation, the lines between humans, objects, and world often blurred or even erased themselves. In Byzantium, each living thing, and every such thing in this exhibition, was capable of transforming and being transformed. And however we choose to classify them, these things still circulate and make new connections among themselves and other things. This exhibition asks that we recognize that power, that life, and, perhaps, enter into a newly enchanted relationship with our own world.

—Glenn Peers

Boli, Bamana, Middle Niger River Valley, Mali. Animal and vegetable materials, clay, sacrificial materials (possibly blood), and possibly wood, 18 x 21 x 8 inches (45.8 x 53.4 x 20.3 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston

Byzantine Things in the World is curated by Glenn Peers, Professor of Early and Medieval and Byzantine Art at the University of Texas at Austin.

This exhibition is generously supported by David and Anne Kirkland, Louisa Stude Sarofim, Anne and Bill Stewart, Still Water Foundation, Baker Hughes Foundation, W.S. Bellows Construction Corporation, and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Thursday May 2, 6:00 p.m.
Lecture
Exhibition curator Glenn Peers discusses the ideas behind *Byzantine Things in the World*.

Thursday, June 20, noon
A Conversation Among Things
Glenn Peers, exhibition curator; Susan Sutton, curatorial assistant at the Menil Collection; and Rex Koontz, director of the University of Houston School of Art, give a guided tour of the exhibition.

BOOK

Byzantine Things in the World
Glenn Peers, with additional contributions by Charles Barber, Stephen Caffey, Henri Franses, Caitlin Haskell, James Rodriguez, Richard Shiff, Shannon Steiner, Susan Sutton, and Robin K. Williams
192 pp., 106 color illustrations, $45
Available at the Menil Bookstore

front cover:
Emmanuel Lambardos, Saint Onouphrios, Creto-Venetian, Iraklion, Crete, early to mid-17th century.Tempera and gold leaf on wood, 21⅞ x 14⅜ x 1⅞ inches (55.5 x 36 x 4.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston

back cover:
Barnett Newman, *Untitled (Number 2)*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 48 x 5¼ x 2½ inches (122 x 13 x 6.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2013 The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

All photographs by Paul Hester

THE MENIL COLLECTION
1533 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400 menil.org

Printed with low VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) inks on recycled paper containing at least 40% post-consumer waste.