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**Defining, Transforming, and Providing Sacred Presence: A
Sarcophagus Reliquary in the Menil Collection**

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**Defining, Transforming, and Providing Sacred Presence: A
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by

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One has to pay dearly for immortality; one has to die several times while one is still alive.

Friedrich Nietzsche

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Abstract

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This thesis attempts a complete object biography of a fifth-century sarcophagus reliquary currently held by the Menil Collection in Houston. This thesis proposes that the Menil reliquary is a container with acute agency in its original context that continues into its modern museum context. This stone container has openings on its lid and front face, a pattern of carved birds and crosses, and is shaped like a Roman sarcophagus. The relics contained by this reliquary are completely concealed. This makes an analysis of their container even more vital, as the Menil reliquary carries the signifiers for the material inside. Without reliquaries surrounding them, relics would be unrecognizable fragments. Reliquaries define relics. Due to its iconographic program and complete circulation system for liquids, the Menil sarcophagus reliquary was displayed visibly in a late-antique pilgrimage church. A common belief in Late Antiquity was that sacred power could be transferred via touch. Liquids poured into the tops of sarcophagus reliquaries touched the relics, sources of sacred power, inside. When they exited the second opening in the

reliquary, these substances had also become sacred material. Audiences of these reliquaries could then interact directly with the sacred power they desired by touching, tasting, and otherwise experiencing these sanctified fluids. Reliquaries with this ability, including the Menil reliquary, transformed and provided a means of contacting otherwise-inaccessible sacred presences. The Menil sarcophagus reliquary was a visible object that communicated the above abilities to its late-antique audience through its various physical features. The Menil reliquary continues to be a tangible point of recognition of and access to invisible, distant worlds in its modern location. As a museum object, the Menil sarcophagus reliquary has become a relic like those it once contained, while the institution of the Menil Collection acts a reliquary. This object has an ongoing vitality and, in both its late-antique and modern contexts, makes tangible the otherwise unattainable.

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	ix
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Locating the Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary in Late Antiquity.....	18
The Menil Reliquary's Display in Late Antiquity.....	23
Chapter 2: Envisioning Divine Presence on the Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary.....	37
Visual Analysis.....	39
Seeing, Touching, and Taking: Finding Power in Late Antiquity.....	53
Chapter 3: Modern Worship: The Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary as a Museum Object..	62
The Menil Collection: Beginnings and Byzantium.....	64
The Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary: Acquisition and Subsequent Life.....	70
Museum as Reliquary, Collected Objects as Relics.....	78
Conclusion.....	88
Bibliography.....	121

List of Figures

- Figure 1: Sarcophagus reliquary, front. X 613. Fifth century CE. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor, or Syria. Limestone. 14.3 x 15.3 x 10.8 cm. Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.....92
- Figure 2: Sarcophagus reliquary, back. X 613. Fifth century CE. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor, or Syria. Limestone. 14.3 x 15.3 x 10.8 cm. Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.....93
- Figure 3: Set of Reliquary Boxes. ca. 350-450 CE. Varna, Bulgaria. Varna Archaeological Museum. After Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 2011.....94
- Figure 4: Reliquary. 1/88. Fifth/sixth century CE. Syria. Gypsum. 36 x 38 x 23 cm. Photo by Antje Voigt, Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art of the National Museums in Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz.....95
- Figure 5: Dome mosaic program with Baptism of Christ with dove. 450-470 CE. Orthodox Baptistry of Neon, Ravenna, Italy.....96
- Figure 6: Pilgrim Flask of St. Menas. 48.2541. Sixth century CE. Abu Mina, Egypt. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.....97
- Figure 7: Sancta Sanctorum reliquary. Sixth century CE. After Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 2011.....98
- Figure 8: Interior view of vitrine where the Menil reliquary was previously displayed in the Byzantine Gallery in 2013. The Menil Collection, Houston.....99

Figure 9:	Pilgrimage site of Abu Mina. ca. 363 CE. Egypt. After Bagnall, <i>Egypt</i> , 2003. Original plan after Grossman, “The Pilgrimage Center of Abû Mînâ,” 1998.....	100
Figure 10:	Altar-base with sarcophagus reliquary (its top opening visible) still in its loculus. 594 CE. Church of St. Basil, Rihab, Jordan. Photo by Harding, 1936. After Andreescu-Treadgold, “Early Byzantine Reliquary,” 1992.....	101
Figure 11:	Reliquary deposited at consecration of church. Early Byzantine. Pomorie, Bulgaria. Photo by Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism. After Lazaridou, <i>Transition to Christianity</i> , 2011.....	102
Figure 12:	Sarcophagus reliquary, interior of base. X 613. Fifth century CE. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor, or Syria. Limestone. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo by author	103
Figure 13:	Sarcophagus reliquary, bottom of lid. X 613. Fifth century CE. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor, or Syria. Limestone. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo by author.....	104
Figure 14:	Reliquary in the Shape of a Sarcophagus. Y1945-249 a-b. Sixth century CE. Eastern Mediterranean. Marble. 13 x 15.5 x 9 cm. Princeton University Art Museum.....	105

Figure 15:	Reliquary in sarcophagus form. 10/87. Fifth/sixth century CE. Syria, Apamene. Gypsum. 30.5 x 39.5 x 18 cm. Photo by Jürgen Liepe, Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art of the National Museums in Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz.....	106
Figure 16:	Garland sarcophagus. 23.29. ca. 150-180 CE. Asia Minor. Marble. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. After Bagnoli, <i>Treasures of Heaven</i> , 2011.....	107
Figure 17:	Reliquary of the Staff of Peter. ca. 980 CE. Limburg an der Lahn, Germany, St. Georg Cathedral Treasury. Gold, copper, gems. After Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do,” 2010.....	108
Figure 18:	Reliquary bust of a companion of Saint Ursula with opening on chest through which relics would have been visible. 17.190.728. ca. 1520-30 CE. Belgian, oak, paint, gold, and plaster. 45.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.....	109
Figure 19:	The Pola Casket, or Capsella of Samagher. 440 CE. Discovered beneath altar of the Church of Sant’Ermagora di Samagher, Croatia. Wood, ivory. Archaeological Museum of Venice. After Bagnoli, <i>Treasures of Heaven</i> , 2011	110
Figure 20:	Relief of a Stylite Saint. (9/63). Fifth-sixth century CE. Syria. Basalt. 84.5 x 76 x 18.5 cm. Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Berlin.....	111

Figure 21:	Clay <i>eulogia</i> token of Saint Symeon the Younger, obverse and reverse. Seventh century CE. Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.....	112
Figure 22:	Rothko Chapel, interior. The Rothko Chapel, Houston.....	112
Figure 23:	Main Menil Collection building, exterior. The Menil Collection, Houston.....	113
Figure 24:	Restored apse mural. Thirteenth century. Lysi, Cyprus. After Carr, <i>Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered</i> , 1991.....	114
Figure 25:	Restored dome mural. Thirteenth century. Lysi, Cyprus. After Carr, <i>Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered</i> , 1991.....	115
Figure 26:	Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior. Photo by Paul Warchol. The Menil Collection, Houston.....	116
Figure 27:	Menil Collection Byzantine gallery as of 2013. The Menil Collection, Houston.....	117
Figure 28:	Object file of the Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary (X613). Courtesy of The Menil Collection, Houston.....	118
Figure 29:	Reliquary. X 819. ca. 500 CE. Possibly Macedonia. Gold. 4.4 x 6.7 x 3.8 cm. Photo by Hickey-Robertson, Houston. The Menil Collection, Houston.....	119
Figure 30:	Floor plan of first floor of the Art Institute of Chicago showing Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Art in galleries 150-154. Image by Chris Lake. The Art Institute of Chicago.....	120

Introduction

In an upstairs storeroom of the Menil Collection in Houston, a glass vitrine holds many small, devotional Byzantine objects.¹ On one shelf, in stark contrast to the carpet of hundreds of dark metal coins, keys, and tokens surrounding it, sits a small, late-antique box of white stone (figs. 1-2).² The box is shaped like a sarcophagus. It has a pointed, sliding roof with corner and central *acroteria*. A round projection with a hole at the center straddles the summit of the pitched roof. A pattern of carved birds and crosses wraps around the box's exterior. On one side, a second small hole sits below one cross and above a projection resembling an up-turned clam's shell.

This box is most likely a reliquary.³ Due to the lack of a known provenance of the Menil box, its identification is based on comparisons to similar, contemporary containers with recorded archaeological contexts. An object with similar features is a box found near Varna, Bulgaria in the controlled, well documented excavations of a 350-450 AD church altar (fig. 3). The box, containing two more metal containers, was discovered beneath the church's altar. This marble container is also shaped like a sarcophagus with a pitched, removable lid and *acroteria*. There is no hole in this lid, but rather a spoon-shaped indentation at the roof's apex. The Varna box does not have any figural imagery, projections, or additional openings. Its overall shape and size, however, parallel the Menil

¹ This and following observations of the objects in the Menil Collection took place between September 2016 and April 2018.

² While the Menil Collection identifies the material of the box as limestone, attempts to confirm this were unsuccessful. I remain hesitant to identify the material, although the type of stone from which the box was formed is likely on the same spectrum as limestone, with a similar density but more fragile composition.

³ The box has been catalogued as a reliquary by the Menil since at least 1967. Letter from John de Menil to Marvin Ross, 24 February 1967, Object File, The Menil Collection, Houston.

box.⁴ This stone casket also contained two smaller boxes: one of silver and one of gold.⁵ The area of the church where this group of containers was discovered was dated by the garnet inlays, a style popular in the fourth century, on the gold box discovered there, and a coin of Emperor Constantine (d. 337) also found beneath the altar.⁶ The gold box held two bone fragments and a piece of wood.⁷ These fragments are relics, physical objects that “are understood to carry the *virtus* of a saint or Christ, literally the virtue but more accurately the power of the holy person.”⁸ Followers of the holy figures to whom the relics belonged believed they could gain divine favor and protection from saints by being in proximity to those saints’ relics and by extension, to those saints. This potential of relics, according to Cynthia Hahn, is only defined

through the recognition by some audience of the presence of power that leads to a certain desirability. The power may be represented by miracles or simply be acknowledged by institutional affirmation. Most important is that without some form of recognition, a relic is merely bone, dust, or scraps of cloth. An audience is essential. Its attention authenticates the relic.⁹

The boxes designed for the containment, and recognition, of relics are reliquaries. Reliquaries are a primary means by which the attention of a faithful audience can be directed to otherwise unidentifiable objects, because reliquaries “carry messages about the

⁴ The Varna reliquary is 22.4 x 15.5 x 15.6 cm, larger than the Menil box but of a similar ratio.

⁵ It is worth noting that the Menil reliquary, at one time, may have also included smaller boxes like those in the Varna example. If these containers were ever present, they have been separated from the Menil box, so neither their presence, nor their absence, can be confirmed.

⁶ *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, eds. Martina Bagnoli and Holger A. Klein (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2011), 39.

⁷ A similar gold box, though without gem stones, is also currently in the collection of the Menil (X 819) and was acquired in the same group of objects, at the same time, as the Menil sarcophagus reliquary (X 613). Bertrand Davezac, “A Gold Byzantine Reliquary,” in *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 74-78.

⁸ Cynthia Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?” *Numen* 57 (2010): 290.

⁹ Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do”, 291.

significance, authenticity, and meanings of the relics” they contain.¹⁰ For now, we should recognize that both the Varna and Menil boxes acted as reliquaries. While the Varna reliquary was interred beneath the altar of a church, however, I will argue that the Menil reliquary has features that indicate an alternate application of its power.

The relationship audiences could have with relics is intensified by reliquaries that share additional traits with the Menil box. Two openings at the top and front of the Menil container, which the Varna box lacks, find parallel cases. One is a fifth/sixth-century reliquary sarcophagus of gypsum with libation openings (fig. 4).¹¹ Its sarcophagus shape is like the Menil box, with acroteria at its corners and openings at the peak of its roof and at its front. Contemporary literary accounts and archaeological evidence suggest that the practice of collecting oil from martyrs’ shrines was widespread by the late fourth century, particularly in Syria-Palestine. Reliquaries were installed on stone pedestals and placed in dedicated chapels, rather than being buried beneath altars.¹² The funnels and outlets found on both the Menil reliquary and the example in Berlin are presumed to be for pouring and collection of liquids (including oil and water). Liquids would be poured through the top of the reliquary so that they mingled with the relics contained within, thus becoming secondary or contact relics via their physical contact with another relic. The liquids could then be gathered from the same top opening or collected from a lower opening near the bottom of the container.

¹⁰ Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do”, 291.

¹¹ The reliquary is currently held by the Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (1/88).

¹² Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 32.

This placement would have allowed for both visual and physical access to the object, though this access may also have been controlled by other means more ephemeral than a floor or altar, such as a screen or human supervision. Such barricades may sound familiar to modern museum-goers, who are restricted from direct contact with objects by glass vitrines and human guards. In Late Antiquity,

the highly coded and ritualized material conditions of the relics' installation constructed the fragments' status as relics much the same way that the institutional authority of a museum today can be seen to define an object displayed within as art instead of as an ordinary object. A modern museum deploys...display cases, didactic labels, and classificatory systems to recontextualize objects, redefine their status, and circumscribe visitors' interaction with them.¹³

The efforts taken by churches and shrines of Late Antiquity to contextualize their relics are radically different from the ways modern museums choose to manage their objects. I only mean to suggest that relics, in Late Antiquity, had little use without the people, practices, and environments that framed them. The Menil box is a prime example of a Late Antique effort to contextualize its contents. I will return to these parallels between late-antique and modern access to this object. For now, the Menil reliquary's traits as they were chosen and used in framing their contents in Late Antiquity are our focus. Due to the previously expressed physical commonalities between the Menil box and other objects known to be reliquaries, I can confirm that the Menil box is also a reliquary and functions in a way similar to many other containers: to protect and present its contents.

¹³ Ann Marie Yasin, "Sacred Installations: The Materials Conditions of Relic Collections in Late Antique Churches," in *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, eds. Cynthia Hahn and Holger Klein (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2015), 134.

This thesis attempts to compile as complete an object biography as possible of the Menil sarcophagus reliquary.¹⁴ The bulk of this thesis will be devoted to proposing a Late Antique context for the Menil reliquary. I will first argue that the Menil reliquary was a visible object. This fifth-century substance-transforming reliquary was most likely accessibly displayed at a site of pilgrimage.¹⁵ This visibility gave the Menil reliquary an opportunity for agency. The reliquary responds to this opportunity via its iconographic program and its most basic form, that of a sarcophagus, to communicate the power and significance of its concealed contents to its audiences. This thesis will conclude with a discussion of the Menil reliquary in its modern context. As a museum object, the Menil reliquary acts as a relic and thus still exudes agency and power.

When suggesting the Late Antique context of this object, I mean that the Menil sarcophagus reliquary was designed for a particular purpose. There is no way to know, however, whether it ever acted in any certain capacity. Examination of the object shows very little wear of any kind on its interior, prompting the necessity for doubt that it was ever used as a container. In any case, this thesis attempts to propose how the reliquary would have functioned in its most likely original context. I acknowledge that the object's lack of provenance prevents absolute certainty that it ever occupied the proposed context, but an analysis of the Menil reliquary illuminates potential aspects of the box and of sarcophagus-shaped reliquaries as a group of objects.

¹⁴ For the concept of object biography, see Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Things" *World Archaeology* 31, 2 (1999): 169-178.

¹⁵ The site at which the Menil reliquary was originally displayed was most likely in Syria or Palestine, where this type of display was popular, but this cannot be determined with any certainty.

Following the proposition that the Menil reliquary was a visible object in Late Antiquity, the box's visible features will be presented, and their potential functions will be proposed. To begin, I will briefly discuss the sarcophagus shape of the reliquary.¹⁶ With dimensions of 14.3 x 15.3 x 10.8 cm, the Menil reliquary can be held in one's flat, outstretched hands. Atop the box's cavity is a sliding lid, its two diagonal surfaces meeting at a central peak with pointed corner and center accents. This overall form is reminiscent of Greek and Roman sarcophagi (the Latinized plural of σαρκοφάγος, "flesh-eater"), containers for human remains intended for inhumation (the burial of an intact corpse). Sarcophagi were likely used to hold the deceased bodies of saints in Late Antiquity.

The choice to maintain the form of sarcophagi, even as containers grew smaller, ensured that audiences would recognize the contents of reliquaries as human remains (relics). Meanwhile, the continued use of the sarcophagus form also ensured that audiences would acknowledge that contents as complete, rather than fragmented. As expressed by Victricius, bishop of Rouen (ca. 330-407), "The physical remains of the martyrs, he says, are not simply vehicles for the sacred, they are one and the same with it; moreover, the smallest part of a saint's body partakes in the whole."¹⁷ Sarcophagi, by their size, implied their concealment of a complete body. If a saint's body is wholly present in even the

¹⁶ What scholarship there is on the development of sarcophagus reliquaries is brief. Cynthia Hahn mentions only that the sarcophagus form of this reliquary type was an "obvious choice" because it connotes the death of its contents. Otherwise, those sarcophagus reliquaries mentioned in, indirect, comparison to either objects are those reliquaries listed as chronologically following larger sarcophagi in catalogs. See Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400-circa 1204* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 70.

¹⁷ Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2010), 23.

smallest fragment, that fragment should be housed by a container that visually implies its wholeness: a sarcophagus reliquary.

The iconography of the Menil reliquary sets it apart from comparable examples, most of which lack any figural imagery. One might think that the addition of such imagery clarifies the meaning of an otherwise austere, geometric object, but a single, unlabeled figure lends itself to many interpretations and may even be intentionally vague. All four sides of the reliquary are divided into three lateral registers. In each central register of the container's longer sides are two birds carved in high relief. The front and rear pairs of birds flank crosses. While the cross at the front of the reliquary, over the spout that once emitted the sanctified liquid produced inside, is deeply in-carved, that at the back is in high relief. There is also a single bird on each of the shorter sides. Their heads turn toward the front panel, which is the visual focus of the object.

Whether the birds are intended to be doves or peacocks, their presence testifies to the sanctity of the container's contents.¹⁸ One reading of these carved birds attests the presence of the Holy Spirit, made physical by the sacred human remains inside the container. Doves as symbols of the Holy Spirit often refer to Christ's baptism in scripture. These include John 1:29-33, in which John the Baptist witnesses the Holy Spirit descending "like a dove." The visual language of doves as symbols of the Holy Spirit is most

¹⁸ While it is unclear whether the birds on the Menil reliquary are intended to be doves or peacocks, the use of both appear by the fifth century. Images of doves, often signifying the Holy Spirit, are included in scenes of Christ's baptism and on images of saints such as the Stylites, whose commitments to life atop pillars placed them in proximity to God and thus to the Holy Spirit (pictured as a dove). Images of peacocks were also known in the fifth century, including those on the Pola casket. For more on Saint Simeon the Stylite, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "The Sense of a Stylite: Perspectives on Simeon the Elder," *Vigiliae Christianae* 42, no. 4 (1988): 376-394. For the Pola Casket, see Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 40.

commonly found in narrative depictions that also include baptismal scenes. A prominent example contemporary to the Menil reliquary is the central mosaic composition of the fifth-century Baptistery of Neon in Ravenna, which includes a dove in its scene of Christ's baptism in the Jordan (fig. 5). Such imagery was rarely used outside of a complete baptismal narrative, but the Menil reliquary's doves exist independently of any other figures, human or otherwise.¹⁹ This independence of the doves from other motifs on the Menil object suggest that their points of reference were external to the object, and thus their dependence upon the setting of that object. Rather than including a full visual narrative, the reliquary and its function (to produce holy substances), set in a wider context (namely, a fifth-century church), were subject to the active, lived narrative of worshippers. The meaning, or meanings, of these doves are multivalent, but various combinations of those meanings could have been understood via the collective literacy (both verbal and visual) of the audience. Like the waters of Christ's baptism, the liquid produced by this reliquary may provide connection to the Holy Spirit for those who interact with it. Meanwhile, its ambiguous reading allowed for a multiplicity of meanings that were as ever-renewing as the Jordan.

An audience did not only visually or emotionally interact with the Menil reliquary. Direct physical contact was at the core of its use. Relics were hosts of divine power and presence, and allowed for human interaction with holy women and men. Just as saints

¹⁹ Other examples include a fourth-fifth century epitaph that includes a baptismal scene of the deceased (Aquileia, Museo Archaeologico di Aquileia) and a piece of rock crystal with a carved scene of Christ's baptism, over which a dove descends (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 31.123). For full descriptions of each, see *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (Westford, MA: Murray Printing Company, 1979), 437-438.

performed miracles while they were alive, miracles were performed by their relics. Miracles via relics usually required physical contact with a relic. The power of miracles was also extended to secondary relics, or *eulogia*: a blessing that had met with a holy person, place, or other object.²⁰ The term *eulogia* alludes to a lively action, the act of speech (*logos*, from *lego*, to speak/say), thus further suggesting the liveliness of sanctified material and its ability to act. Such blessings were most often received by way of common substances such as earth, oil, or water. The Piacenza pilgrim provides an account of the creation of such substances.²¹ He sees the

chamber where the wood of the holy cross is placed, which we adored and kissed...While the cross is being worshipped, the star [appearing from heaven] stands above it, and oil is brought to it to be blessed in moderate-sized flasks. At the time, however, when the wood of the cross touches these flasks, the oil boils up out of them, and unless they are quickly closed, it all pours out.²²

The liquids produced by the Menil reliquary, having passed over the bones or some other part of the saint inside, were also *eulogia* and were believed to carry the same powers as the saint they had come into contact with. Followers of St. Menas (who was martyred in 296 CE and buried in the desert west of Alexandria) collected his *eulogia* by means similar to the Menil reliquary. Those followers experienced miracles when using that *eulogia*. One account claims that “a pilgrim suspended a lamp before the grave [of St. Menas] ...it burned day and night and was filled with fragrant oil. And when anyone took of this lamp

²⁰ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 3.

²¹ While the dates of the Piacenza Pilgrim are uncertain, his travels likely took place around the 570s CE. Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 7. See full translation in Piacenza, *Travels*.

²² John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims: Before the Crusades* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1977), 83.

oil...and rubbed a sick person with it, the sick person was healed of the evil of which he suffered.”²³

The same abilities were granted to icons. Images of saints and Christ are kissed, touched, and given gifts by believers, as though they were the individuals they portrayed.²⁴ According to Ernst Kitzinger, miracle stories often tell of religious images behaving as the subjects themselves were expected to behave. Such images tended to exert power through intermediary substances with curative abilities, as well as directly with viewers. Such uses of images were recent developments to Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries, having been applied to relics much earlier.²⁵

The Menil reliquary was an intermediary between a relic (that supplied divine presence) and the sacred substances (with supernatural abilities) the relic could produce. To use these substances, worshippers may have collected (or were given) them in additional, portable containers. Such containers could have resembled pilgrimage flasks like that of St. Menas (fig. 6). Pilgrimage was a popular way for believers to connect with saints. Gary Vikan, in his discussion of early Byzantine pilgrimage and the physical evidence such pilgrimage produced, states that

In seeking out blessings, pilgrims were giving expression to their belief that ‘sacred power’ was physically concentrated in the objects associated with the *locus sanctus*, and that by being there, in body and not simply in spirit, they could acquire some of that power for themselves.²⁶

²³ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 15.

²⁴ For images as material objects akin to relics, see Christopher R. Sweeney, “Holy Images and Holy Matter: Images in the Performance of Miracles in the Age Before Iconoclasm,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 26, 1 (Spring 2018): 111-138.

²⁵ Kitzinger’s discussion of icons stems from the pre-existence of relics. He argues that icons adopted the roles that relics had already occupied for the previous few centuries. Ernst Kitzinger, “The Cult of Images Before Iconoclasm,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), 116.

²⁶ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 23.

Pilgrims acquired such power at the shrines of saints via the healing (and other) powers of the sacred liquids produced at shrines. Liquids were carried away in small flasks.²⁷ Other pilgrimage souvenirs, including tokens and badges, had prophylactic power to heal and ward off evil. Such souvenirs also acted as signifiers for lived experiences, allowing pilgrims, and others, to relive their experiences by rejuvenating existing memories. This makes pilgrims feel as though they are reconnecting to saints in perpetuity even after they have left the sites of those saints' bodies.²⁸

Another means of collecting the holiness of a saint's remains was by lowering a cloth onto (or into) their tomb, resulting in the creation of a contact relic. This latter practice is described in the sixth-century writings of Gregory of Tours (ca. 540-593/94), who states that "the piece of cloth would soak up the sanctity from the tomb."²⁹ This description echoes that explored previously in the discussion of liquid collection from containers like the Menil reliquary. The collection and possession by a believer of any material, including a liquid, that had encountered a saint's relics was encouraged by statements like that of Gregory of Tours. Assertions like his are evidence that such substances were believed to share the holy power of the saint that they had come into contact with. In Late Antiquity,

²⁷ "Pilgrim Flask of Saint Menas," The Walters Art Museum, accessed February 3, 2018, <http://art.thewalters.org/detail/17342/pilgrim-flask-of-saint-menas/>.

²⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 3-69, 132-169.

²⁹ This practice is shown in the iconographic program of the Pola Casket, a fifth-century ivory chest. The casket was possibly intended as an early reliquary shrine as it was found below the main altar of the early Christian church dedicated to St. Hermagoras near Istria, Italy. The ivory container includes a scene identified as two figures at the shrine of St. Peter lowering a piece of cloth onto the saint's tomb. Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 40.

the power of holy persons, objects, and places was transferable through physical contact.³⁰ The Menil reliquary was a stage upon which this contact and translation of power occurred.

The combination of visual cues presented to late-antique audiences by the Menil sarcophagus reliquary, as stated above, suggest that the physical material the box contained was instilled with significant sacred power. Such relationships with things were widespread, and it has been demonstrated that Christians of Late Antiquity often connected the physical world around them to spiritual power.³¹ Physical matter was a means of understanding, of seeing, the otherwise unseen. Glenn Peers has argued for a Byzantine animism,

...a deeply relational sympathy between late antique Christians and their objects...distinctions among humanity, objects, and world were sometimes blurred or masked... Divinity infused matter, and when properly activated and perceived, that matter mediated and transformed.³²

This statement about Byzantine materiality informs my argument for the agency of the Menil reliquary. This inseparability of things from divinity, and the belief of life's presence in objects like the Menil sarcophagus reliquary, are also found in the sixth-century Sancta Sanctorum reliquary box of stones from the Holy Land (fig. 7). The fragments of wood and stone held inside are labeled by their sources, and each piece corresponds to one of five scenes of Christ's life on the lid of the box. The collector of these objects was likely a

³⁰ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 13.

³¹ Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 3-16.

³² Glenn Peers, "Object Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 971.

pilgrim to Palestine, who gathered souvenirs of the life of Christ. At some point, the box came to Rome and into the care of the popes.³³

In the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary, both sacred material and images connect a viewer to ephemeral events that become ongoing via continued physical and visual presence. Their owner's distance from the fragments' previous contexts in time and, ultimately, space, is closed. Physical fragments act as material anchors, connecting an individual to moments and places from Christ's life, and thus to Christ. For pilgrims, such physical materials can act like modern souvenirs. According to Susan Stewart,

We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us. Events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative. Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin...it is only by means of its material relation to that [context of origin] that it acquires its value.³⁴

The Menil reliquary provides physical materials that allow for a similar relationship with the relics it contains. An examination of how the Menil reliquary accomplishes this task, via its iconographic program and accessible display, will make up a large portion of this thesis. The Menil reliquary, as reflected by its iconographic program and ability to produce touchable, gatherable material beyond the contained relics themselves, placed value on sensory experience in Late Antiquity. The importance of the senses to recognizing and experiencing sacred presences is demonstrated namely by the popularity of *ekphrasis* and of the incorporation of the senses in written descriptions of sacred objects and people in Late Antiquity. The same tactic is employed by the iconographic program of the Menil

³³ Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 36.

³⁴ Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 135.

reliquary. This reliquary uses visual and sensory cues to make tangible its otherwise obscured contents and the immaterial aspects of that contents. This inseparability of the object and its sacred contents will be central to my argument regarding what this object accomplishes for and communicates to its audiences: namely, the ongoing presence and power of the sacred body it simultaneously conceals and reveals.

The affinity many Late Antique peoples had to relics is not so different from the relationships that many modern people have with museum things. The Menil reliquary is now a museum object, acquired by John and Dominique de Menil from New York art dealer John J. Klejman in 1966. It then passed to the Menil Foundation in 1997. The reliquary has been displayed about once every ten years, but never included in any catalog.³⁵ The Menils' collection of Byzantine art began in 1964, and now includes over 1,000 objects. The group includes small objects of everyday commerce and piety, and over 60 icons spanning 1,200 years, from the sixth to the eighteen centuries.³⁶ These Byzantine things have been displayed in various ways in the Menil, an institution that simultaneously prioritizes and rejects the original contexts and experiential qualities of pre-modern art. Great efforts have been made by the Menil to preserve the immersive experience of Byzantine art, such as in the case of the Byzantine Fresco Chapel.³⁷ Other displays reflect

³⁵ X 613 (Reliquary), 1 June 1990, Object File, The Menil Collection, Houston.

³⁶ Bertrand Davezac, ed., *Four Icons in the Menil Collection* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 1992), 11-13.

³⁷ The Byzantine Fresco Chapel is a modern structure built on the grounds of the Menil Collection to hold two thirteenth-century frescoes looted from a church in Lysi, Cyprus. The space, while not an exact replica of the Cyprian church its design was based upon, was consecrated and opened to the public in 1997. As stated by the Menil, the motivation for creating such a space was that "the Menil's mission is the belief that art and spirituality are central to a shared human experience and are powerful forces in contemporary society...A key aspect of the shared vision of the Menil Foundation and the Orthodox Church of Cyprus was that the original spiritual purpose of the frescoes be restored." "Byzantine Fresco Chapel," Menil

the priority given to aesthetic experience by stripping contexts down to their most minimal states. The permanent Byzantine gallery in the Menil's main building, for example, is a white-walled, tombstone-labelled space, containing vibrant Byzantine things that lack any context but the one given to them in that room (fig. 8). Such a modern method of display can be problematic in the case of reliquaries. Beauty and power are relative to temporal and spatial context, and while today the Western world often values visual aesthetics above other traits of objects, reliquaries' physical beauty in Late Antiquity was often secondary to the power they were thought to possess.³⁸

The Menil should also be considered in relation to other public, collecting institutions. Museums are traditionally places of quiet reverence, instruction, and contemplation. In the Western world, such traits are associated with sacred space, namely churches, temples, and cemeteries. According to Carol Duncan, museums embody the beliefs, magic, symbolic sacrifice, miraculous transformations, and changes of consciousness lacking from our post-Enlightenment, secular world.³⁹ Museums “filled the void left in a disenchanted world, providing monumental ceremonial spaces for public rituals: corridors for processions, halls for gatherings, and inner sanctuaries” for the secrets of the art world.⁴⁰

Collection, accessed February 10, 2018, <https://www.menil.org/campus/byzantine-fresco-chapel>. More on the acquisition of the murals and on the unfolding of the project to display them can be found in Annemarie Weyl Carr and Laurence J. Morrocco, *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered, the Thirteenth-Century Murals of Lysi, Cyprus* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 7-14.

³⁸ Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do”, 293.

³⁹ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 7-20.

⁴⁰ While such an observation is most effective when applied to European art museums (which have closer ties to monarchy and imperialism than American institutions), “museum” as concept arose from the ashes of the French revolution, after which the king's palace, having been emptied of royals, was filled with

By claiming this previously vacant space for themselves, museums have become a new authority of distant powers made visible by objects. Things are arranged to construct otherwise invisible narratives, allowing people to connect with forces they cannot see. Such modern relationships with things are reminiscent of those experienced by Byzantine peoples, whose kinships with the intangible divine were projected onto icons, tokens, and relics. By meeting the expectations of Byzantine people by, at least occasionally, bringing about miracles, these same objects appeared to reciprocate that kinship with their users. As a museum object, the Menil reliquary participated, and still participates, in a similar exchange. This reliquary, like other museum objects, stands in for a time that can no longer be directly experienced, just as relics provide contact with a holy presence otherwise invisible, or at least unrecognizable.

I intend to promote the animated life of an understudied object. Little has been said about sarcophagus reliquaries, even though so many survive.⁴¹ Sarcophagus reliquaries lie at the intersection of the Late Antique and Medieval, pagan and Christian, worlds. Having rarely been exhibited, the Menil sarcophagus reliquary is far from a lifeless museum art object. As stated by Glenn Peers, “‘Art’ is a death certificate for Byzantine material culture, because it suppresses all the living, active aspects of these historical things.”⁴² I will propose as full a description as possible of the Menil reliquary’s Byzantine context as a

things for public enjoyment. One locus of public admiration, even worship, was replaced by another. Mary Bouquet, *Museums: A Visual Anthropology* (London and New York: Berg, 2012), 49.

⁴¹ At least 250 survive, having been meticulously catalogued by Marie-Christine Compte, whose volume (resulting from her doctoral dissertation) includes the most recent and significant work on reliquaries of the sarcophagus type. Marie-Christine Compte, *Les reliquaires du Proche-Orient et de Chypre à la période, protobyzantine (IVe-VIIIe siècles): formes, emplacements, fonctions et cultes* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2012), 129-413.

⁴² Glenn Peers, ed., *Byzantine Things in the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 28.

means of exploring the full degree of its potential agency.⁴³ I argue that, despite its current humble appearance and covert display, the Menil sarcophagus reliquary is an object with significant vitality. The Menil reliquary was, and is, a mediator between relic and worshipper, a transformer of substances, and an instiller of power and holy presence.

⁴³ A similar study has been completed by Anne O'Connor. Anne O'Connor, "An Early Christian Reliquary in the Shape of a Sarcophagus in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Collection" (Master's thesis, The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013), 1-3.

Chapter 1: Locating the Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary in Late Antiquity

Dust floats through the cool, dark air around a small, stone box resting on a stone pedestal. The box is shaped like a miniature sarcophagus. The pedestal beneath this box stands in a chapel dedicated to a saint of the Early Christian Church. That saint's relics, remains of the earthly body still saturated with sacred power, lie inside this box. The chapel is part of a larger pilgrimage complex. Devotees of a saint honored within this chapel traveled here to witness that saint and to take a minute ration of that saint's holy power with them when they departed. Just being in the presence of such holy remains earned divine favor, but many believers desired an even closer relationship to relics. Reliquaries were often installed on stone pedestals and placed against church walls or in dedicated chapels. This arrangement gave pilgrims the opportunity to collect holy oil or water from saints' tombs after those liquids had run over, and comingled with, the saint's remains.⁴⁴ Such substances were then applied directly to witnesses' bodies, consumed, or collected in terracotta and metal flasks to be used elsewhere, later. Having touched the relics of a saint, these liquids were (what we call) secondary relics and served as protective tokens with prophylactic power.⁴⁵

The Menil sarcophagus reliquary is the box described above, and it participated in this exchange of power between believer-pilgrims and the saint whose remains the box once contained. Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity and early Byzantium was centered around

⁴⁴ Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 32.

⁴⁵ Robert Ousterhout, "Loca Sancta and the Architectural Response to Pilgrimage," in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. Robert Ousterhout (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 109.

the desire of Christians to decrease their distance from God.⁴⁶ Saints were a means of connecting with God as they witnessed his power firsthand. God chose to act through saints. In turn, worshippers could commune with God via those same saints in a hierarchical relationship. This relationship extended to saints' relics. Saints, having achieved proximity to the divine power of God via their moral lives of sacrifice and service, were living, sacred bodies.⁴⁷ Upon their deaths, saints left their physical bodies, still containing sacred power, on Earth. The same relationship applied to other, non-human material that had interacted with God. Icons were also considered extensions of saints, through whom one could contact the divine. Such objects could act on their own, and while they were extensions of other beings, they could also be their own creatures.⁴⁸ John of Damascus (ca. 675-749) referred to holy sites and relics as "receptacles of divine energy."⁴⁹ In seeking out these people, sites, and other objects that had witnessed the presence of God, pilgrims were expressing their belief that sacred power was concentrated in such material. Just by being in proximity to holy sites or relics, pilgrims would "acquire some of that power for themselves."⁵⁰

A brief outline of the development of the cult of relics will assist in the following analysis of the Menil reliquary, a container for relics that I argue directly participated in the ability of worshippers to recognize and access divine energy. The tombs of the saints,

⁴⁶ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.

⁴⁷ Sabine MacCormack, "Loca Sancta: The Organization of Sacred Topography in Late Antiquity," in Ousterhout, *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, 8.

⁴⁸ Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 32.

⁴⁹ Cynthia Hahn, "Loca Sancta Souvenirs: Sealing the Pilgrim's Experience," in Ousterhout, *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, 91.

⁵⁰ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 23.

which included the sarcophagi holding saints' holy bodies, were central to the early worship of sacred figures. Saints were typically venerated by believers via the taking of vows, petitions for cures and other miracles, incubation at saints' tombs, and offerings of goods to the clerics in charge of the tombs. An anonymous fifth-century author describes the pilgrimage shrine of St. Thecla, whose primary shrine is in southern Turkey, as never without pilgrims, who "streamed there from all sides; one group on account of the grandeur of the place in order to pray and to bring their offerings, and the other in order to receive healing and help against sickness...pain, and demons."⁵¹ Pilgrims collected bits of earth from burial sites, liquids that had passed over the bones of the interred saint (via the holes found in many reliquaries, including the Menil box), or other tokens of their visit to take away with them as permanent reminders of their momentary interaction with the saint. Such substances originating from sites of saints' bodies or even having interacted with the holy remains were considered intercessors themselves between worshippers and the holy dead.

These beliefs lead to the preservation and honor of saints' bodies to ensure deceased saints' continued interest in the living. The rise of the Christian cult of saints brought about new monumental structures for the worship of holy women and men. Such structures were known as martyria, sites that bear witness to the Christian faith either by referring to an event in Christ's life or Passion, or by sheltering the grave of a martyr. An early example of a martyrrium is the second-century building of a shrine on Vatican hill, located above the

⁵¹ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 8.

presumed site of St. Peter's grave.⁵² Such intentions, and the official status of Christianity in the Roman Empire by the fourth century, lead to increasingly elaborate tombs.⁵³ Saints' tombs became known as martyria, "monumental *memoriae* over saints' remains."⁵⁴ Many martyria became major pilgrimage sites and cities of their own, such as Abu Mina, the monastery and pilgrimage site devoted to Menas of Alexandria since at least the late fourth century (fig. 9).⁵⁵ This type of site should be kept in mind, as I will argue that the Menil reliquary was intended for a martyrium or similar, pilgrimage-focused structure.

At this point in time, even the holiest of human remains were still held back from the realm of the living, but it was not long before Christians invited their holy dead, as relics, back into cities.⁵⁶ Churches were eventually granted the same privileges as martyria as permanent houses for the holy dead, and relics were moved into church buildings via the translation of saints' bodies inside their sarcophagi. In 385, Bishop Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339-397) brought the relics of two martyrs into the city proper, placing them in his newly built cathedral.⁵⁷ As the number of churches throughout the Christian world

⁵² Glen W. Bowersock, "Peter and Constantine," in William Tronzo, ed., *St. Peter's in the Vatican* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

⁵³ Nancy Mandeville Caciola, *Afterlives: The Return of the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 34.

⁵⁴ Ann Marie Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

⁵⁵ The foundation of the church has been dated to the late-fourth century, but it is uncertain how the site was used at the time or whether it was devoted to St. Menas. See Roger S. Bagnall and Dominic W. Rathbone, eds., *Egypt: From Alexander to the Early Christians* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004), 115-120, and Peter Grossman, "The Pilgrimage Center of Abû Minâ," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 1998), 281-302.

⁵⁶ *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Thomas F.X. Noble and Thomas Head (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), xxii.

⁵⁷ These two martyrs were Gervasius and Protasius, thought to have been tortured and killed in the second century, the discovery of which Bishop Ambrose recounts in a letter to his sister. See Ambrose of Milan, "Letter 22: The Finding of SS. Gervasius and Protasius," *Early Church Fathers Nicene and Post-Nicene*

increased, and the demand for relics grew, saints' bodies were broken apart to meet that demand. This division and diffusion of relics required smaller containers to hold smaller amounts. This shift in the use and display of relics by the fifth century resulted in, I believe, the creation and popularity of the smaller reliquaries at the center of this thesis.

There were various strategies, based on numerous beliefs and hopes, for the accumulation of sacred power. Some pilgrims travelled to the sites of sacred material, employing mimesis by following the routes of the holy people whose presence and actions brought about that sacred material.⁵⁸ Believers could also identify and connect with sacred material by contact with additional substances, whether at the site of their creation or at a distance. Touch was a common means of identifying and acquiring sacred power. In discussing the earthen tokens from the Holy Sepulchre, made by the gathering and pressing of soil from the tomb of Christ into the shape of a coin, Gregory of Tours observed that "faith believes that everything the sacred body touches is holy."⁵⁹ Contact between devotees and Christ was made, via tokens like those produced at the Holy Sepulchre, through the touching of soil from the site of Christ's death in the absence of his physical, living or dead, body. Contact was also made via liquids like water and oil, a strategy that I will argue involved reliquaries like the Menil example. Such substances were poured through containers holding bodily relics, often via openings like those at the top and front

Fathers, Series II, Vol. X, Christian Classics Ethereal Library via Medieval Sourcebook, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/ambrose-letter22.asp>.

⁵⁸ Gary Vikan, "Pilgrims in Magi's Clothing: The Impact of Mimesis on Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art," in Ousterhout, *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, 97-124.

⁵⁹ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 24.

of the Menil reliquary. These liquids were sanctified by their physical contact with the relics inside such reliquaries and collected by the faithful.

In this chapter, I will argue that the Menil reliquary was a visible object, displayed in a church, martyrium, or adjoining crypt. The Menil reliquary fits the same narrative assigned to other sarcophagus reliquaries known to have been displayed accessibly for direct visual and physical interaction with audiences. Many of these examples are from Syria or nearby regions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Devotees to the saint whose relics the box contained could see the reliquary and the secondary relic, a sanctified liquid, being produced. I will address the specific fifth-century functions of the Menil reliquary. Many surviving sarcophagus reliquaries comparable to the Menil box were invisible, deposited below the altars of churches in Late Antiquity. At the core of this chapter is the argument that unlike many sarcophagus reliquaries, the Menil example was a visible object with acute agency. Sarcophagus reliquaries, including the Menil box, were agents that shrouded and magnified their contents. They were intercessors and gatekeepers to sacred power, and vital to the identification and exchange of that power.

The Menil Reliquary's Display in Late Antiquity

The Menil reliquary was a visible object, displayed where it could be interacted with by devotees to the saint whose bodily remains it contained. The powers of these relics were limited to what the Menil reliquary said about them and by what their secondary contact relics could accomplish for them. These hidden, inaccessible human remains were dependent on the objects and materials around them to legitimize and demonstrate their

power.⁶⁰ An in-depth analysis of the Menil reliquary and its original context, then, is vital for understanding the power of the relics this container held and the possible motivations of the people who desired those relics' power. The following section of this chapter will argue that the Menil reliquary was a visible object.

This chapter should begin with a brief overview of reliquaries that are the same type of container as the Menil example. This includes reliquaries shaped like traditional Roman sarcophagi, with a small average size of about 18 x 21 x 16 cm.⁶¹ Those reliquaries whose provenance is known are most often discovered in situ beneath the altars of late-antique churches (fig. 10).⁶² This context has allowed for the most accurate dating of these objects, which usually falls between the fourth and sixth centuries CE. Most are made of marble or gypsum. Atop the boxes' cavities are either fitted or sliding lids. The reliquaries we are interested in here, and the group of objects into which the Menil reliquary falls, are those sarcophagus-shaped reliquaries with openings at the peaks of their pitched roofs and additional openings at their fronts and/or sides. These openings allow for a complete

⁶⁰ I acknowledge that these objects were also dependent on their makers, being both the artisans who carved the reliquaries and the patrons who ordered, paid for and, presumably, designed them. I did not, however, discover any evidence of who these individuals might have been in any case of a visible reliquary. At the very least, I suggest that the "patrons" of such containers were members of the clergy of churches who possessed the remains of saints. This would likely have been a response to both the demands of the public for access to the holy bodies, as well as a reflection of standard practice by the fifth century when the cult of relics was both widespread and accepted by the Church. In 401, the Sixth Council of Carthage recommended the destruction of any altar that did not contain relics. If the Church decided on this initial requirement for relics, they also likely controlled the creation of reliquaries. This does not rule out the possibility of lay patrons. Caciola, *Afterlives*, 36.

⁶¹ This average is based on my own data collection and is derived from the average size of a group of a dozen sarcophagus reliquaries, all from Late Antiquity but from various geographical locations and contexts.

⁶² For a discussion of various degrees of access some contexts have allowed to a few sarcophagus reliquaries discovered in situ, see Irina Andreescu-Treadgold, "The Early Byzantine Reliquary Discovered at Torcello," *Venezia arti* 6 (1992): 5-13.

circulation of liquids into and out from the reliquaries. Other sarcophagus reliquaries have no openings at all, or perhaps only one opening or indentation on their lids. This latter arrangement allows for the pouring of substances, but not their convenient retrieval.

The provenience of the Menil reliquary remains unknown.⁶³ As mentioned above, most sarcophagus reliquaries that can be dated with any certainty and assigned to an accurate original context are those discovered in situ beneath the altars of churches. In fact, sarcophagus reliquaries found beneath altars outnumber those found in any alternate context. The boxes beneath altars, however, only occasionally have any openings (if they do, it's usually only one on their lids) and rarely have any iconography beyond their basic sarcophagus shape. These observations already make the Menil reliquary distinct from most sarcophagus reliquaries. Exploring the under-altar context of most surviving sarcophagus reliquaries, however, will make my following proposal for the potential original context of the Menil reliquary clearer in comparison.

The archaeological context of small, sarcophagus-shaped boxes deposited beneath late-antique church altars is a well-known phenomenon. In fact, the most widespread and consistently attested location for relics in churches of the fourth to seventh centuries is underground.⁶⁴ By the fourth century, the installation of relics in churches had become standard practice, after it had been mandated by some councils for the consecration of altars.⁶⁵ While evidence of the practice of burying relics beneath altars exists from much earlier, by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, “the already pervasive practice was

⁶³ See this thesis, 69-72.

⁶⁴ Yasin, “Sacred Installations”, 135.

⁶⁵ Caciola, *Afterlives*, 36.

officially and uniformly codified...The bishops assembled at Nicaea ratified a canon which prescribed that all altars must be associated with the remains of saints.”⁶⁶

What were these buried, and thus completely concealed, reliquaries doing? Namely, relics’ presence beneath altars sanctified churches by underscoring their altar’s ritual and sacred centrality.⁶⁷ Ann Marie Yasin’s recent essay on the relic collections of Late Antique churches is one of the most thorough studies on the use of sarcophagus reliquaries thus far.⁶⁸ Yasin argues that the handling and deposition of relics into architectural settings established relics as particularly extraordinary things. Relics incorporated into church structures brought the proximity to the sacred previously only known by sites in the Holy Land and of saints’ tombs into regulated Church space. Relics buried beneath altars were defined “as physically invisible yet conceptually foundational, as integral to the material structure and the institutional authority of the church, and as tomblike but not cadaverous, as bodies that were turned into possessions.”⁶⁹

Yasin and others suggest that even concealed reliquaries were not always entirely inaccessible. Some sites retain evidence of access to the hidden containers, often via holes pierced through the floor that lead to (and often directly into) the reliquary beneath. Those reliquaries typically had holes in the centers of their lids not different from the lid of the Menil reliquary, as if substances could be poured into them. These access points were

⁶⁶ Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 154-155.

⁶⁷ Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 155.

⁶⁸ Yasin, “Sacred Installations”, 133-151.

⁶⁹ Yasin, “Sacred Installations”, 135.

visible to onlookers, thus providing an awareness of the relics below.⁷⁰ Cynthia Hahn shares a similar arrangement in which a reliquary was

located in proximity to the altar and accessible through a *fenestella* (little window)-like [sic] opening at the exterior of the church, through which devotees could pour oil over [the relics] and retrieve newly sacral oil as a relic-like substance...in Rome, as early as the 6th century, the grave of St. Peter was accessible through a *fenestella* and one could carry away its blessing via *brandea*- that is, tiny cloths that were lowered into the tomb to touch the grave.⁷¹

Both Hahn and Yasin establish the popularity of burying, and thus concealing, relics beneath the altars of churches. Admittedly, the surviving evidence suggests that most reliquaries used in this way were of the sarcophagus type. Before continuing, I would briefly like to question that archeological evidence by proposing a few reasons for why so many sarcophagus reliquaries have been found below altars in comparison to the number found in side chapels or other visible places. Buried objects are more likely to survive than objects exposed to the elements, natural and human. Unseen objects can also more easily fade from living memory, forgotten (and thus left untouched) until they are discovered again. Exposed things are subject to theft, damage, and repurposing. The latter could also be the reason for the few sarcophagus reliquaries with multiple openings that we do know of. Perhaps the Menil reliquary has survived through the present day because it was made with a pilgrimage church in mind, but was ultimately repurposed as an under-altar container when the practice of interring relics beneath altars grew in popularity.

⁷⁰ Yasin, "Sacred Installations", 146-148.

⁷¹ Cynthia Hahn, *The Reliquary Effect: Enshrining the Sacred Object* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2017), 67-68.

In any case, there are many reasons why the archaeological record appears to suggest that most sarcophagus reliquaries were buried beneath altars, and why so little evidence exists to the contrary. This thesis assumes that, as will be expanded upon below and in following chapters, the activity of displaying reliquaries visibly for direct interaction with devotees was a common practice in certain regions in Late Antiquity. The Menil reliquary is a physical manifestation of this practice, and many of its features - its system of liquid circulation, basic sarcophagus shape, and iconography – reflect the visibility of and access to the object while it participated in this method of display.

Let us return to these features in more detail. There are certain traits present in some sarcophagus reliquaries that I believe separate concealed reliquaries from visible, accessible ones. The most well-published and thoroughly studied example of a sarcophagus reliquary found in situ is the case discovered near Varna, Bulgaria, described in the Introduction of this thesis.⁷² This sarcophagus reliquary also contained two smaller, casket-shaped boxes. One was of silver, and the smallest was gold (fig. 3). The gold box contained three tiny fragments of bone and wood thought to be relics. The relics were wrapped in cloth. This set of sarcophagus reliquaries, the largest of which closely resembling the Menil box, were completely buried beneath the main altar of the church.⁷³ Their interment has been dated to the fourth/fifth century, and none of the three containers have any openings like those found on the Menil reliquary.

⁷² See this thesis, 1-3.

⁷³ Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 39.

Another reliquary from Bulgaria found beneath a church altar also shares features with the largest of the Varna boxes and the Menil reliquary. The box is sarcophagus-shaped, complete with acroteria, and is made from marble (fig. 11). Like the Varna reliquary, but unlike the Menil box, this second Bulgarian reliquary lacks any openings for substances.⁷⁴ The number of openings for liquids, in my mind, is significant in determining the display applied to different sarcophagus reliquaries whose late-antique contexts are now lost. Sarcophagus reliquaries known to have been buried beneath altars have no more than one opening, usually in their lids via some type of tubing or pipe, for the pouring in of liquids. These containers lack a second opening for the retrieval of those same liquids. This absence of openings for the retrieval of liquids suggests that most of these boxes were not directly accessible or were only accessible from above. Nor did such concealed containers have any need to announce to a viewer what they contained, as most reliquaries found beneath altars have little to no decoration at all. While concealed, the holiness of the relics contained by those reliquaries beneath church altars penetrated their many layers of containment to make holy the entire church building in a succession of touch. Meanwhile, the Menil type of box is a concession that enables the disbursement of the grace to people, rather than to objects.

While most known examples of sarcophagus reliquaries prescribe to the interred context discussed above, a few do not. This latter context is the one I suggest the Menil reliquary would have functioned in during Late Antiquity. Sarcophagus reliquaries have

⁷⁴ *Transition to Christianity: Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th Century AD*, ed. Anastasia Lazaridou (New York: Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, 2011), 140.

also been found placed on stone platforms and pedestals, most often in side chapels of churches or in separate martyria adjacent to later church buildings.⁷⁵ Like the Menil example, sarcophagus-shaped reliquaries found in these contexts almost invariably “provided communication with the interior cavity by means of drilled channels” in both their bases and lids.

These conduits would have allowed for the introduction of liquids...into the reliquary cavity from the hole in the lid. Likewise, an aperture in the reliquary base, frequently positioned slightly lower than the bottom of the interior relic cavity itself, would have allowed for the egress of the liquid after it had passed in contact with the relics within.⁷⁶

This description of the function of sarcophagus reliquaries with holes at the peaks of their roofs and on their sides reflects the appearance of the Menil reliquary.

The interior of the Menil reliquary also suggests its function as a depositor of liquids. The bottom of the carved cavity of the box is crudely scraped out, the surface most deeply gauged near the front opening (fig. 12). This change of depth would have encouraged the flow of liquids toward the front opening of the container. The bottom of the lid reflects a similar concern for liquid flow. The opening into the reliquary from the peak of its roof is not only a hole, but a long tunnel through the thick lid. This tunnel increases in diameter as it nears the interior of the box (fig. 13). This funnel shape was probably meant to offset the soaking of the liquid into the stone as substances were poured in from the outside. Overall, the interior of the box reflects its utility as a transformer and

⁷⁵ Other evidence for this display method includes the modern discovery of now-empty, reliquary-sized niches in the walls of churches and martyria. Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 166-168.

⁷⁶ Yasin specifically identifies sarcophagus-shaped reliquaries, “rectangular caskets covered by gabled lids with acroteria at the corners,” as being the type of container found with these features. Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 165-167.

producer of liquid substances while its exterior, as will be expanded upon in the following chapter, was designed to transcend this utility.⁷⁷

This reliquary design may have been more common to certain regions of the Late Antique world than others. According to Ignacio Peña, for example, “The reliquaries [of Syria] were kept, not under the altar, as in the West, but in a martyr’s chapel, or *Beth Qadisha* in Syriac, on the right of the apse.”⁷⁸ Some Syrian churches also used their crypts for relic veneration. When the crypt of the monastic church of Qal’at al-Tuffah received the body of a saintly monk, the small space could not cope with the influx of visitors to his tomb. A commemorative basilica was built over the tomb with its altar centered directly above the remains. Stairways enter and exit the crypt on opposite ends of the new structure.⁷⁹ The new building did not have to make the precious remains accessible, as they were already in a place of honor and veneration beneath the altar. The stairways into and out from the crypt, however, suggest that the church’s possession of the relics was not enough. This layout accommodated the high number of pilgrims visiting the site and suggests that the accessibility of the relics was paramount to their value.

The Menil reliquary was probably treated similarly, though we can never know if the box was displayed in a crypt or a martyr’s chapel.⁸⁰ The likelihood of the Menil reliquary coming from such a context, and locality, is strengthened by a few reliquaries found

⁷⁷ This is likely similar to the design of interiors of sarcophagus reliquaries with complete liquid circulation systems, but those examples that have been published or made available in online collections rarely supply images of the insides of the boxes.

⁷⁸ Ignacio Peña, *The Christian Art of Byzantine Syria*, trans. Eileen Brophy and Francisco Reina (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd., 1996), 133.

⁷⁹ For more examples of Syrian pilgrimage shrines, see Peña, *The Christian Art of Byzantine Syria*, 132-148.

⁸⁰ For an example of a martyr’s chapel, see Compte, *Les Reliquaries de Proche-Orient*, 341.

in contexts allowing for their visibility that also share features with the Menil reliquary, including its pair of openings.⁸¹ Two sarcophagus-shaped reliquaries were found arranged against the walls of the church of Bābisqā, Syria, dated 390-407/8. In a fifth-century church at Behyo, Syria, three sarcophagus reliquaries were found in situ in a chamber to the south of the choir, each positioned against a different wall of the space. The reliquaries found at Behyo bore relief carvings on their exterior facades including arches, medallions, and crosses that accentuated the position of the small outlet receptacles for liquid poured through the relic cavities.⁸²

A few other examples of reliquaries with systems for the circulation of liquids do still survive, though most lack any certain original context. A sarcophagus reliquary with a hole in its lid and on its side (the latter now filled in) is currently at the Princeton University Art Museum (fig. 14). Another example, possibly from Syria and held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has both an opening in its lid and a front hole framed by what appears to be an arched doorway (fig. 4).⁸³ A sarcophagus reliquary with multiple openings is the reliquary possibly from Apamene, Syria, now held in Berlin (fig. 15).⁸⁴ This box also has iconography, two encircled crosses on each side. Such iconography is a rarity when one considers the larger body of surviving sarcophagus reliquaries.⁸⁵ Two

⁸¹ Peña also mentions that reliquaries typical of Syria had multiple openings, describing Syrian reliquaries as “covered with a sloping stone lid, in the center of which was a hole in the form of a funnel. A second hole, closed with a metal tap, was inserted in the lower part of the coffer.” Peña, *The Christian Art of Byzantine Syria*, 132-133.

⁸² Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 167-168.

⁸³ Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art, Berlin (1/88). Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 32.

⁸⁴ Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art, Berlin (10/87). Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 70.

⁸⁵ Several other examples of reliquaries from Syria with full liquid circulation systems, many with iconography accenting the front (most visible) opening, can be found in Compte, *Les reliquaires du Proche-Orient*, 129-413.

examples from central Syria, near modern Hama, also have complete systems for the circulation of oil. The front openings of both reliquaries are accented by crosses and architectural features.⁸⁶

The tendency for Late Antique reliquaries from Syria to exhibit features in common with the Menil reliquary, namely the inclusion of a full liquid circulation system and iconography, is significant. I argue that these objects were most likely visible, rather than concealed beneath church altars. I propose that the presence of iconography and the inclusion of openings at the sides of the containers suggests the visibility and accessibility of these reliquaries. Although I am hesitant to assign an original geographical context to the Menil reliquary, I will suggest that the above common traits the Menil reliquary shares with reliquaries and other objects from Syria should not go unnoticed.

In any case, the arrangement of reliquaries along the exterior walls of structures facilitated the safeguarding, display, and ritualized access to the holy relics those reliquaries contained. Visitors (whether locals or pilgrims) to these sites could move along a regulated path through the space, from one displayed reliquary to another. “It was a space in which visitors, or clergy facilitating them, could collect holy oil from...different sources, which presumably had come into contact with relics of...different saints.”⁸⁷ Arrangements like this one have been found in Syria, Palestine, and North Africa. While surviving cases of these visibly displayed reliquaries are not as common as the known cases in which

⁸⁶ Comte, *Les reliquaires du Proche-Orient*, 377-379.

⁸⁷ Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 168.

sarcophagus-shaped reliquaries have been discovered concealed under altars, the number and spread of the former do suggest a popularity of this type of relic veneration.⁸⁸

Other evidence of relic veneration beyond archaeological contexts suggests the popularity of visible reliquaries for the creation and collection of sacred liquids. The sheer number of surviving flasks, or amphora, suggests that the practice of collecting oil from the tombs of saints was a widespread and long-lasting phenomenon. For example, hundreds of flasks with images of St. Menas still survive (fig. 6). Visitors to the shrine of St. Menas, at Abu Mina near Alexandria, likely collected oil in these small containers so that they could take the liquid away with them.⁸⁹ The flasks themselves acted as souvenirs, often with imagery of the saint whose secondary relic they held or of the location of their origin.⁹⁰ The Piacenza pilgrim, in recounting his visit to the Holy Sepulchre, mentions the “small room where they keep the Wood of the Cross...and they offer oil to be blessed in little flasks. When the mouth of one of the little flasks touches the wood of the cross, the oil instantly bubbles over, and unless it is closed very quickly it all spills out.”⁹¹ Presumably, the type of flasks seen by the Piacenza pilgrim in the sixth century are this same type of container as those described above used to collect oil from the fifth to seventh-century sites of other saints, including St. Menas.

Accounts like those above of the collection of oil sanctified by its contact with relics, and the large number of surviving flasks used to collect such substances, attest to

⁸⁸ Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 170.

⁸⁹ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 33.

⁹⁰ Hahn, “Loca Sancta Souvenirs”, 87-89.

⁹¹ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 14. For a full translation of this passage, see Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 83.

the popularity among early Christians of seeking out secondary relics. A means of both creating and collecting of sanctified liquids was accomplished in the use of sarcophagus reliquaries like the Menil example. Holes at the tops and sides of these containers allowed for the passing through of liquids, newly sanctified as they left the reliquaries' front receptacles. Displayed visibly along the sides of liturgical buildings, access to these objects was granted to pilgrims without the disturbance of routine liturgical practices occurring at pilgrimage sites. Perhaps this suggests that the demand for interaction with relics was high enough that these arrangements needed to be made to accommodate the flow of many people through such sites.

Conclusions

I contend that a visible, accessible context is the one for which the Menil reliquary was designed. Contact with the Menil reliquary was a culmination of pilgrims' efforts to become closer to saints via their travel, sacrifice, and very likely other rites within the space of the pilgrimage church. All of these activities decrease the distance a pilgrim lives from the divine. The goal of contact, therefore, is central to the function of the Menil reliquary because physical touch was the most direct and fulfilling form of contact with the divine in Late Antiquity. The Menil reliquary made its contents accessible by touch via holes at the top and side of the container. Fluid was poured into the top, likely by a person with the authority to do so, and then collected from the front spout by means of a flask or similar container. Furthermore, the inclusion of a detailed iconographic program suggests that the object was visible and thus needed to express itself and its contents to an audience. Furthermore, the above traits are common to sarcophagus reliquaries from the Late Antique

Mediterranean, especially Syria and Palestine, which may suggest an original geographic location for the Menil reliquary. The following chapter will expand upon and substantiate the above assertions. First, an analysis of the Menil reliquary's form and iconographic program will confirm that this container visually announces its relationship with its onlookers. This supports its role as a visible, accessible object, as the presence of such a message implies an audience. Then, a discussion of the Late Antique and Early Byzantine popularity of touching holy objects to earn their power will clarify the significance of the visibility and accessibility allowed by the design and display of the Menil reliquary.

Chapter 2: Envisioning Divine Presence on the Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary

As argued in Chapter 1, the Menil reliquary was a visible object. This container was most likely displayed on a platform or podium where it was seen by and interacted directly with audiences. The Menil reliquary is a physical manifestation of this practice, as many of its features reflect the visibility of and access to the object while it participated in this method of display. Devotees to the saint whose relic(s) were contained inside the Menil box would have received, whether directly or through an intermediary actor (a clergyman or otherwise qualified individual) contact relics of the concealed saint. These contact relics were liquids that had passed through the Menil reliquary's two openings, touching the saint's remains inside the container, and were then retrieved from the front spout. This process of creating and collecting contact relics was made possible by the multiple openings on the Menil reliquary that allowed for the complete circulation of fluids into and out of the container.

The Menil reliquary was not only a mechanical object used to produce secondary relics. Reliquaries, including the Menil box, are also the frames for such relics: they identify their contents as significant and mediate those contents to audiences. Without a reliquary, a relic remains mute, unidentifiable bones and dust. Once defined by a reliquary, however, a relic can be recognized for what it is. Reliquaries make relics.⁹² To imbue relics with meaning, reliquaries employ material and visual languages. Many reliquaries are made of gold or silver, or are covered in gems, to reflect and magnify the preciousness of

⁹² Hahn, *The Reliquary Effect*, 11.

the relics within. The Menil reliquary utilizes a dialect of this language: different in its execution, but similar in its outcome. Late Antique Christians encountered the Menil reliquary on their search for sacred power. They would have understood the visual language it speaks and recognized the power it held and radiated.

This visual experience of the Menil reliquary worked hand-in-hand with pilgrims' desire to experience sacred material with all of their senses, especially touch.⁹³ When interacting with the Menil reliquary, a pilgrim experiences the relic twice: the reliquary visually identifies the relic and its power, while also producing substances, a means by which the pilgrim may then touch the relic. At the same time, the reliquary itself went untouched. The Menil reliquary was a frame not just in the way it contextualized its contents, but also because, as so many frames do, it went unnoticed by the viewer.⁹⁴

Audiences of relics do not seek out reliquaries. As expressed by Cynthia Hahn,

The reliquary performs a function of presentation, and then it is thoroughly and efficiently forgotten in the assertive presence of the relic. No one comes away from a church treasury saying they saw the reliquary of the True Cross. Devout and non-devout alike profess to having seen the *relic* of the True Cross.⁹⁵

I aim to identify how the Menil sarcophagus reliquary functioned in its Late Antique context. This object was not intended to be the center of anyone's attention. At the

⁹³ Dee Dyas, "To Be a Pilgrim: Tactile Piety, Virtual Pilgrimage and the Experience of Place in Christian Pilgrimage," in *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, eds. James Robinson and Lloyd de Beers (London: The British Museum, 2014), 1-7.

⁹⁴ Frames often go unnoticed because they are thought of as inseparable from the material they frame. In the Byzantine period, frames could be interactive in that Byzantine viewers "expected and received an interactive sense of presence in their art, that is, in the inhabitation, possession, and manipulation of art by divinity...the Byzantine frame was...fluid in its forms and lively in its work." Reliquaries, as frames, worked in a similar way. They were what they contained, and what they contained was very much alive. See Glenn Peers, *Sacred Shock: Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 1-11.

⁹⁵ Hahn, *The Reliquary Effect*, 7.

same time, the presence, proximity, and transformation of sacred power described above can be identified because the Menil reliquary lies at the intersection of these terms.

This is supported by the Menil reliquary's form and iconographic program, which presented the box's contents with sensory experience at the core of that presentation. This object makes a visual proclamation of the power of its contents. Meanwhile, the reliquary's iconography also suggests how its contents were to be received: with touch, sight, taste, and smell, and thus with direct interaction. Through a more general discussion of the presence of sacred power in the material world and that power's transfer through the senses, I will expand on the importance of the relationship the Menil reliquary allowed for between the relics it held and the human audiences that interacted with this object. I will suggest that the value placed on sensory experience in Late Antiquity, demonstrated namely by the popularity of *ekphrasis* and of the incorporation of the senses in descriptions of sacred objects and people, demonstrates the same tactic employed by the iconographic program of the Menil reliquary. The metaphysical and physical worlds mingled around the Menil reliquary. I will now argue that this reliquary uses visual and sensory cues to make tangible its otherwise obscured contents and the immaterial aspects of that contents.

Visual Analysis

The Menil reliquary, along with most sarcophagus reliquaries, is shaped like a miniaturized sarcophagus (hence their name). Like large-scale sarcophagi, the Menil reliquary is rectangular (fig. 16). Atop the box's main cavity is a sliding lid with a pitched roof decorated with pointed central and corner accents known as *acroteria* (fig. 1-2). This basic form, I argue, should not be overlooked, as sarcophagi held the complete bodies of

saints and the tombs of saints were vital to the centralization of saint worship in Late Antiquity.⁹⁶ Cynthia Hahn states that tomb and sarcophagus-shaped reliquaries are “the most obvious expression of an appropriate container for a body no longer living...a metaphor for the grave [because] many of the earliest words used to refer to reliquaries – arca, vas, loculus, feretrum – also carry that meaning.”⁹⁷ The celebrations of early saints were often observed at their tombs. Devotees would travel

out from the cities to gather at suburban cemeteries in order to retell the violent passion stories of the martyrs at the sites of their tortured remains, to make offerings and pour out prayers in their presence, to eat meals and share the Eucharist above their gravesites...the symbolic terrain of early Christianity was a grid of graves.⁹⁸

While few full-sized sarcophagi for saints still survive, and none with identifiable remains, there have been a few discovered at early churches and pilgrimage centers.⁹⁹ Perhaps the Menil reliquary is carrying on the form of these earlier tombs of saints to remain their roles as physical focuses of worship. Furthermore, by acting monumental, reliquaries became monumental in a way that defied scale. The Menil reliquary was a full-sized tomb, and had the power of a large tomb, even though the box itself was actually miniscule. The reliquary’s true size was overcome by the power it held and, thus, ignored by viewers who believed in that power.

The ongoing monumentality of reliquaries became vital as Christianity spread. Relics, by the fifth century, became a standard inclusion in churches as they were mandated

⁹⁶ Caciola, *Afterlives*, 24.

⁹⁷ Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 70.

⁹⁸ Caciola, *Afterlives*, 34. See also Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 621-622.

⁹⁹ Peña, *The Christian Art of Byzantine Syria*, 132-145, and Compte, *Les Reliquaries de Proche-Orient*, 383.

by some councils for the consecration of altars.¹⁰⁰ As the number of churches throughout the Christian world increased, and the demand for relics grew, saints' bodies were broken apart to meet that demand. This division and diffusion of relics created smaller containers to hold smaller and smaller amounts: hence, small-scale sarcophagus reliquaries like the Menil box.

This shrinking of relic containers was possible because Early Christians believed that the smallest fragments of saints' bodies still held the full power those saints knew in life.¹⁰¹ In the Middle Ages, "the relic did not just represent the saint...it was the saint, with all of the religious and magical functions associated with him."¹⁰² I argue that the form of the Menil reliquary is a direct response to this belief. The continued application of the sarcophagus form to reliquaries ensured that Late Antique audiences would recognize the relics contained within sarcophagus reliquaries as physically and powerfully complete holy bodies, even as those relics became more and more fragmented.

Once established, general beliefs about the power and presence of relics had remained consistent even while the containers and sizes of those relics changed. Opinion about the power of small objects did shift, but this change was generally in favor of relics.¹⁰³ The power thought to be held by pieces of sanctified material had grown in importance by Late Antiquity. According to Patricia Cox Miller, "one aspect of the material

¹⁰⁰ In 401, the Sixth Council of Carthage recommended the destruction of any altar that did not contain relics. Caciola, *Afterlives*, 36.

¹⁰¹ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 23.

¹⁰² Ousterhout, *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, 7.

¹⁰³ Some writers of Late Antiquity did feel negatively toward the translation and division of human remains, especially those of the saints. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 22-114.

turn in Late Antiquity was the development of an aesthetics that emphasized the visual and tactile immediacy of the part – a piece of bone, a single mosaic tile, a word in a poem – at the expense of the whole.”¹⁰⁴ The Menil reliquary reflects this aesthetic because the “full” power of the relic is perpetuated despite its small physical size via the Menil reliquary’s maintenance of the sarcophagus form.

As expressed by Victricius, bishop of Rouen, “The physical remains of the martyrs...are not simply vehicles for the sacred, they are one and the same with it; moreover, the smallest part of a saint’s body partakes in the whole.”¹⁰⁵ Gregory of Nyssa echoes these same sentiments on the presence of saints in their relics, stating that the faithful, when witnessing relics, “bring forward their supplications to the martyr as though he were present and complete.”¹⁰⁶ Edward Hunt summarizes these statements succinctly by saying that

The sheer visual realism here portrayed is exactly that of the pilgrim at the holy places, now evoked by scraps of a saint’s remains. The conclusion is simple, but effective: through the circulation of relics, no matter how meagre, the saint could be present, and above all be seen to be present, in any number of places at once.¹⁰⁷

Meanwhile, the choice to house a mere fragment of sacred material in a form that implies a complete deceased body maintains the presumed level of sanctity of the relic while also carrying forward the importance of the tomb (and thus the life despite death) of the saint. What I mean is that by completely concealing a small part of an object inside a

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*, 42.

¹⁰⁵ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 23.

¹⁰⁶ Original translation from *Patrologia Graeca* (ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris 1844-64), 45, 740a-b. Edward David Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, AD 312-460* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 133.

¹⁰⁷ Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 133-134.

container that appears to hold that complete object, a viewer must assume that the complete object in question is present in its entirety. The shape of the Menil reliquary, a reference to full-sized sarcophagi that contained entire bodies, suggests a whole and undamaged relic.¹⁰⁸ The same principle is applied to relics elsewhere in time and space. Cynthia Hahn offers the case of the *Reliquary of the Staff of Peter* in Trier (fig. 17). Even though the enclosed (invisible) relic is only fragmentary, the (visible) reliquary is a recreation of a complete, six-foot-tall staff.¹⁰⁹ This phenomenon commonly reoccurs in cases of body-part reliquaries, including foot, hand, and bust reliquaries that often only contain mere bone fragments of the body parts they depict.¹¹⁰ The Ursula busts of Cologne, Germany, for example, are shaped and decorated like the complete heads of women, even though the relics they contain are often visibly fragmentary through small openings at the fronts of the reliquaries (fig. 18).¹¹¹

While the tomb-like shape of the Menil reliquary is generally similar to other Christian reliquaries of the fifth century, the iconography of the Menil box sets it apart from comparable examples, most of which lack any figural imagery. The iconographic

¹⁰⁸ For more on how Christian belief in bodily resurrection contributed to the importance of the intact and complete presence of relics, see Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 59-114.

¹⁰⁹ Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do", 285-287.

¹¹⁰ Bodily relics were depicted as complete, living bodies of saints as early as the third century CE. Anthony Cutler describes a depiction of uncorrupted relics on a mural from the Dura-Europos synagogue, in which Ezekiel "conjures dismembered limbs and heads back to life...these are 'dry bones.'" But to be recognized as potentially risen, they must be partially incarnate; they must be virtually alive." Anthony Cutler, "The Relics of Scholarship: On the Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation of Hallowed Remains in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, Early Islam, and the Medieval West," in *Saints and Sacred Matter*, 313-314. For more on body part reliquaries, see Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 117-141.

¹¹¹ These reliquaries were, and continue to be, displayed visibly throughout the twelfth/thirteenth-century Basilica of St. Ursula in Cologne and elsewhere in the surrounding Rhineland region. Joan Holladay, "Relics, Reliquaries, and Religious Women: Visualizing the Holy Virgins of Cologne," *Studies in Iconography* 18 (1997): 74-97.

program of the Menil reliquary is specific to this container as a setting for its contents and an appropriate program for its Late Antique context. This context, proposed in Chapter 1, allowed for direct interaction between the Menil reliquary and its audience. The container's iconography reflects this direct interaction by magnifying the power of the box's contents and implicating the ability of devotees to touch that contents.

Before continuing, I will provide a brief description of the Menil reliquary's iconographic program (figs. 1-2). All four sides of the reliquary are divided into three lateral registers. In each central register of the container's longer sides are two birds carved in high relief. The front and rear pairs of birds flank crosses. While the cross at the front of the reliquary, over the spout that once emitted the sanctified liquid produced inside, is in sunken relief; that at the back is in high relief. There is also a single bird on each of the shorter sides. Their heads turn toward the front panel and its spout, which is the visual focus of the object. The spout, shaped like an upturned clam shell, is prominent, jutting outward from the surface of the reliquary.

An iconographic analysis of the Menil sarcophagus reliquary demonstrates the exchange of sacred power at the forefront of the object's design. A definitive identification of what type of bird the winged creatures on the Menil reliquary represent is impossible. Their form, however, does closely resemble the birds on the Pola casket, an ivory box dating to the first half of the fifth century CE (fig. 19). The Pola casket was found under the altar of a church in Samagher (modern Croatia), where it was being used as a

reliquary.¹¹² The majority of the object's iconographic program is dominated by human figures and architectural forms. The figures in each scene seek out in various ways the presence of Christ, just as worshippers who may have witnessed the casket in its Late Antique context pursued the container's contents. In any case, it is the birds along the outer edge of the lid that interest us now. The register of the iconographic program made up by the lip of the casket's lid, resting atop the base, shows on each of its four sides four birds. Jas Elsner identifies these birds as doves, two on each side of a jeweled cross.¹¹³

The inclusion of doves in the iconographic programs of Christian objects and buildings was common by the fifth century. Representations of doves attested the presence of the Holy Spirit. Their meaning as symbols of the Holy Spirit originate with Christ's baptism in scripture. In John 1:29-33, John the Baptist witnesses the Holy Spirit descending "like a dove." The presence of doves in images indicated the presence of the Holy Spirit in that image and, by extension, in the space around that image. In the dome mosaic of the fifth-century Baptistry of Neon in Ravenna, the dove above Christ's image is not only present at Christ's baptism (fig. 5). This image, and thus the presence of the Holy Spirit it represents, is also present at the baptisms of Ravenna's Christian initiates taking place in the baptistry below the image. This Holy Spirit, for our purposes, is comparable to the sacred power thought to be present in relics.

¹¹² It is uncertain whether this was its original function or if the box was repurposed as a reliquary. Jas Elsner, "Relic, Icon, and Architecture: The Material Articulation of the Holy in East Christian Art," in *Saints and Sacred Matter*, 20-21.

¹¹³ Jas Elsner, "Closure and Penetration: Reflections on the Pola Casket," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 26 (2013): 185.

The inclusion of doves in iconographic programs, however, not only symbolizes the presence of sacred power. Doves may also suggest the proximity of that power to the viewer while they witnessed an object like the Menil reliquary. A fragment of basalt, appearing to have been broken from a longer composition, is carved with a scene of two figures (fig. 20).¹¹⁴ A bearded man in monk's garb is perched atop a column while a dove places a wreath over his hood. Another figure, swinging an oil censer, climbs a ladder not quite to the level of the first man. The figure atop the pillar is a stylite saint, and the other man, one of his followers. Stylites were ascetics who lived atop pillars for years, even decades, because the farther they lived from the Earth, the closer they lived to God.¹¹⁵ The inclusion of a dove in this scene not only indicates this saint's communion with the Holy Spirit, but also his proximity to that sacred power.¹¹⁶ Pilgrims recognized these saints' proximity to God, and they collected soil from the foot of the saints' pillars and chipped away pieces of the pillars themselves to take with them as relic-souvenirs. These pieces of pillar, like the tokens produced for pilgrims with St. Simeon's likeness on them, "were intensified by presence...treasured in the world for their extensions of the saint's agency."¹¹⁷ These pieces of pillars and tokens were secondary relics much like the substances produced by the Menil reliquary.

¹¹⁴ The relief was likely made in Syria in the fifth-sixth century. It is 84.5 x 76 x 18.5 cm. Found near Qal'at Sem'an, the saint may be Saint Symeon the Elder "whose pilgrimage site there drew the devout from across the ancient world." "Relief of a Stylite Saint," Metropolitan Museum of Art, 9/63, accessed March 14, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?oid=479062>.

¹¹⁵ This also includes ascetics' commitment to *imitatio crucis*, in which they experienced the suffering of Christ. In the case of stylite saints, their ascension of pillars may have referenced the Crucifixion itself. Charles M. Stang, "Digging Holes and Building Pillars: Simeon Stylites and the 'Geometry' of Ascetic Practice," *The Harvard Theological Review* 103, no. 4 (2010): 452.

¹¹⁶ Harvey, "The Sense of a Stylite", 379.

¹¹⁷ Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 74-76.

While all of these representations of doves may have signified the presence and/or proximity of divine power to viewers, I would also like to address the number of doves on both Menil reliquary and the Pola casket. I argue that, at the very least, the redundancy of the dove motif on these two containers reinforces the doves' function: to signal the proximity of divine power. The multitude of birds on these objects could also reflect the multitude of power contained inside the boxes. While the representation of Christ's baptism in Ravenna with a single dove refers to a past moment of holy presence as it was recorded in scripture, the reliquaries with multiple birds are powerfully present in the moment they are experienced. While the heraldic arrangement of birds on these objects may serve other functions, perhaps having to do with the liturgical practices occurring around the objects in Late Antiquity, not enough evidence survives for a reconstruction of what else these figures might have meant. Still, the doves' suggestion of the proximity of divine power, via the presence of actual holy bodies and not just the representations of those bodies, is certain.

Proximity, however, was not enough. Touch was a central tenet of the exchange of sacred power in Late Antiquity and Byzantium because the power of holy persons, objects, and places was transferable through physical contact.¹¹⁸ While this belief can be traced to a much earlier date, the power of touch is expressed succinctly by John of Damascus, who stated "that honorable and most truly venerable tree upon which Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for us is itself to be adored, because it has been sanctified by contact with the

¹¹⁸ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 13.

sacred body and blood.”¹¹⁹ It is notable, then, that crosses are also present on the Menil reliquary. The front of the box has a cross carved in sunken relief, while the cross on the back of the container is carved in high relief. The doves, in both cases, all face the crosses, one on each side of each cross.¹²⁰ The True Cross, having encountered Christ’s body and blood, was a contact relic itself and a referent of crosses henceforth. This includes the cross on the front of the Menil reliquary. The True Cross became a relic, absorbing sacred power from Christ by touching him. In the same way, the secondary relics (oil or water) produced by the Menil reliquary became secondary relics by touching the primary relics, the body of a saint, inside the container.

Patricia Cox Miller makes a similar argument for the iconography on a group of sixth-/seventh-century ampullae from Palestine.¹²¹ Such containers are used by pilgrims in tandem with sarcophagus reliquaries to collect the liquids produced by the reliquaries. Common inclusions in the visual programs of these objects are Christ’s bust atop a cross and crosses depicted as blooming palm trees.¹²² Miller suggests that these motifs refer to moments of transformation (namely, via the Crucifixion and subsequent Resurrection of Christ) in the Christian imagination, thus acting as referents to the substance inside the container that had been transformed via contact with a relic.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 24.

¹²⁰ This is the same arrangement of doves and crosses as on the Pola casket, although the number of doves on the Menil reliquary is half that on the Pola casket, most likely because the smaller size of the former does not allow for so many figures.

¹²¹ Patricia Cox Miller, “Figuring Relics: The Poetics of Enshrinement,” in *Saints and Sacred Matter*, 101-107.

¹²² Miller, “Figuring Relics”, 103-104.

¹²³ The iconography on reliquaries acting as referents to their contents results from a longer discussion of the interchangeability of reliquaries and relics. Miller denies that this is always a possibility, stating that imagery on containers referring to their contents integrates container and contained rather than conflating

Crosses, being associated with and even extensions of Christ, had apotropaic power. In Mark 6:25-34, a bleeding woman is healed by touching the robe of Christ. Touch, the primary means by which sacred power could be transferred from one object or being to another in Late Antiquity, will be discussed at greater length below. For now, we should acknowledge that Christ's ability to heal is directly related to saints' healing abilities. Saints, like Christ, are living extensions of the sacred power emanating from God. This power was still present in the bodily relics contained within the Menil reliquary, as proven by the miraculous healing powers of the secondary relics said to be produced by similar reliquaries.

The ability of the reliquary to produce secondary relics is announced even more emphatically by the prominence of the spout at the box's front. The little basin below the front opening appears carved from the same single piece of stone as the rest of the reliquary's base. It sits below the hole under the cross at the front of the reliquary as if always ready to receive the sanctified liquid pouring forth from the concealed interior of the container. This spout implies the potential energy of the reliquary, as well as the possibility of contact between viewers and the saint's body hidden beyond the opening.

All the above features of the Menil reliquary were, obviously, carved from a stone material. The Menil Collection has identified this material as limestone. The box itself, however, demonstrates more delicacy than one might expect for an object of limestone: the material has a propensity to flake off. Meanwhile, the box is heavier than it looks,

them. The two remain distinct while working together to accomplish a single goal. Miller, "Figuring Relics", 105-106.

suggesting its density. Whether the Menil reliquary is made of limestone or some other material on the same spectrum, its color and texture may suggest certain traits to a general audience that likely knew little of the differences between stone types.

Limestone and its close relative, marble, for instance, have been used as building and art materials for millennia, including throughout the Greek and Roman worlds.¹²⁴ Limestone and marble are the materials used for many surviving sarcophagus reliquaries, though other types of stone are also used. In any case, both limestone and marble recall the long history of these materials and their uses in monumental structures of Antiquity as well as in sarcophagi, which often used limestone, marble, and other sturdy but attractive stones.¹²⁵

Gypsum, another close relative of limestone, may also be the material from which the reliquary was made. Gypsum, or alabaster, is a soft material likely to mix with any water, oil, or other liquid running over its surface.¹²⁶ The celebrated Greek physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia wrote about the potential healing powers of gypsum in the first century CE. Aretaeus writes of the use of gypsum to retard sweating: “And slaked lime and roasted gypsum sifted in a small sieve, are to be applied to the moist parts. A sponge out of cold water applied to the face has sometimes stopped the sweats, by occasioning

¹²⁴ Marble results from the metamorphism of sedimentary carbonate rock, this most commonly being limestone. Bernard J. Smith, editor. *Limestone in the Built Environment: Present-Day Challenges for the Preservation of the Past* (London: The Geological Society, 2010), 1-2, and Frederick J. North, *Limestones: Their Origins, Distribution, and Uses* (London: Thomas Murby & Co., 1930), 1-24.

¹²⁵ Janet Huskinson, *Roman Strigillated Sarcophagi* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 19, 36-38.

¹²⁶ “Gypsum: the ‘Magic’ Mineral Indefinitely Recyclable,” Eurogypsum, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://www.eurogypsum.org/about-gypsum/what-is-gypsum/>.

congelation of the running fluids, and by condensation of the pores.”¹²⁷ It is, of course, uncertain whether such claims motivated the material chosen for this reliquary. In any case, the nearly-white stone of the Menil reliquary may have carried connotations of the longevity and precedent of the Greek and Roman worlds, and of the stone’s ability to heal, even if these connotations were ambiguous in the fifth century. They may have been intentionally vague to allow for multivalent readings.

We should also briefly consider the power attributed to stone more generally in Late Antiquity and Byzantium. Stones were often assigned agency, including the abilities to act of their own accord and through the will of God. Some stones became images or even portraits, while others “caught the divine current and lighted, and could remain lighted, once God opened the circuit.”¹²⁸ Stone could even take on the features of living bodies. For example, the veins in marble were veins flowing with blood in some descriptions of the Hagia Sophia’s interior.¹²⁹

Such equations of stone with living bodies in Late Antiquity, particularly with types of stones that are the same as or related to the material that makes up the Menil reliquary, can be exploited. If we assume that Late Antique audiences of the Menil reliquary shared the above opinions on the capabilities of stone, then this container may have even more closely related itself to the relic(s) it held than already suggested. If the stone of the reliquary could live, and the body inside the reliquary could express the same power it did

¹²⁷ Aretaeus, "The Cure of Cardiac Affections," in *De curatione acutorum morborum libri duo*, trans. Francis Adams (Boston: Milford House Inc., 1972): 434.

¹²⁸ Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 76-77.

¹²⁹ Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 77.

while alive, the container and its contents could have been further integrated because the very material of the reliquary, regardless of its iconography or abilities, had the capability of life. In other words, both the Menil reliquary's visible material and concealed contents were lively. The object practically boiled over with a potential for life, and viewers of the object would have recognized this potential instantly when they witnessed the color and quality of the material from which the reliquary was formed. In this way, the stone from which the Menil reliquary was carved is an additional visual cue about the capabilities of the container and its contents.

The Menil reliquary is a tomb, monumental and undiminished in power despite its size. Doves, reflective of the presence and proximity of the Holy Spirit, frame the cross and spout at the front of the Menil reliquary. Like the other features of the object, this carved cross is multivalent. It reminds viewers of the extension of Christ's power via saints' relics contained inside the reliquary. The central cross also underlines the transformation occurring inside this container. As Christ created relics and healed the sick through touch, so, too, does the Menil reliquary produce contact relics with apotropaic power. The prominent spout below this cross suggests the constant potential for sanctified liquid to pour forth from the reliquary. Meanwhile, the very material the object and its iconography were carved from expresses the relics' value and the reliquary's relationship to the past, including the antiquity and death of the saint it contains. This combination of visual features implies the presence of sacred power, via the bodily relics contained by the Menil reliquary, and the potential for worshippers to connect with that sacred power via the reliquary's transformation and supply of certain liquids.

Seeing, Touching, and Taking: Finding Power in Late Antiquity

The following section of this chapter aims to expand upon the observations above. I will explore the culture of relics, focusing on the motivations of pilgrims who may have interacted with the Menil reliquary. This exploration will help illuminate why the Menil reliquary's imagery was chosen for this object and why it was effective. Early Christians desired sacred power as a means of decreasing their distance from God, thus increasing their divine favor. This sacred power was transferred primarily by touch. The Menil reliquary was a container for relics, physical material containing sacred power, and allowed for a means of producing additional sanctified material that devotees could touch (as an alternative to touching the precious relics). Saints, and by extension their relics, were intermediaries between God and his followers. The secondary relics produced by the Menil reliquary were additional intermediaries between saints' relics and early Christians. Secondary relics were effective because they could be infinitely produced, taken away from the site of the primary relics, and used however a worshipper desired to use them without destruction of the Christian world's finite supply of holy relics.¹³⁰ I argue that the Menil reliquary was effective because it allowed for a process that resulted in the creation and benefits of secondary relics by presenting the relic(s) it contained with sensory experience at the center of those contents' visual presentation.

By including symbols of the invisible Holy Spirit (doves), the ongoing power of Christ, and the hidden (inside the container) transformation of sacred substances (crosses),

¹³⁰ Patrick Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 194-220.

the Menil reliquary makes the intangible tangible and even readable. This tactic is usually employed in written texts, such as *ekphrasis*, to incorporate the senses of Christians into their imagined interactions with the sacred. Images, meanwhile, acted as a visual “text” to be read by multiple audiences involved in relic veneration, including the illiterate or those who knew any language at all. This ability to read the images on the Menil reliquary united viewers in their common awareness of the visual language of Christ, and allowed for the understanding and consumption of the material contained by the Menil reliquary. Its visibility, and how it used that visibility, contribute directly to its function as a container for relics. An exploration of these concepts is valuable in presenting as complete a picture as possible of this vigorous object in its Late Antique context.

Let us begin with the transfer of sacred power in Late Antiquity. As mentioned above, it was believed that “everything the sacred body touches is holy.”¹³¹ Touch was the primary means by which sacred power was transferred from a place, object, or person to other places, objects, or people. The acquisition of sacred power was valuable because it increased divine favor for recipients. In Early Byzantine pilgrimage narratives, for example, almost all healing occurs through some type of touch.¹³² Paulinus of Nola (353-431) wrote that “the principal motive which draws people to Jerusalem is the desire to see and touch the places where Christ was present in the body.” Seeing was not enough for the early Christian pilgrim, who “wanted most of all to touch- to be closely proximate to and

¹³¹ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 24.

¹³² Shannon Steiner, “Agent of Touch and Transformation: A Pilgrimage Token of Saint Symeon the Younger in the Menil Collection” (Master’s thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 2011), 36.

physically involved with holy places, holy objects, and holy men, and thereby draw from them a dose of their spiritual power, their *eulogia*.”¹³³

While the chain of physical contact (from holy bodies, to pilgrimage objects, to pilgrims) was important, saints’ bodies as points of origin for sacred power are essential to the function of their *eulogia*.¹³⁴ The primacy placed on bodily relics themselves was expressed by Gregory of Nyssa (340-ca.394) when he described contact with relics of St. Theodore. He begins by presenting the art surrounding a relic as “a lens through which to see and thus understand the significance of the martyr’s relics...art is a lure: it delights the bodily senses, especially sight, and in so doing draws the venerator near to the martyr’s tomb.”¹³⁵ For our purposes, the Menil reliquary is the art luring spectators into the relic it contains. Gregory continues to discuss the power of the relic, the saint’s body, itself, stating

If somebody gives permission to take away the dust that lies upon the surface of the resting place, then that soil is taken away as a gift and the earth is preserved as a treasure. But to touch the relics themselves, as chance on occasion provides the opportunity, that is much-desired and the gift for the prayers to the Most High, as is known to those who have had this experience and have fulfilled this kind of longing. For as it is the same body, still alive and flourishing, those beholding it embrace it with the eyes, the mouth, the ears...And as he is whole and manifest, they address to the martyr a plea that he would intercede on their behalf.¹³⁶

After describing what a reliquary does for a relic, Gregory returns to St. Theodore’s presence, presenting it as lively. According to Glenn Peers, the above translation suggests that Gregory believed the saint “was alive, whole, manifest, and that the pilgrims sensually

¹³³ Vikan, “Pilgrims in Magi’s Clothing”, 98.

¹³⁴ Steiner, “Agent of Touch and Transformation”, 31.

¹³⁵ Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*, 3.

¹³⁶ Modified translation in Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 65-66. Original translation in “*Let Us Die That We May Live*”: *Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine, and Syria c. AD 350-AD 450*, ed. Johan Leemans, et. al. (London: Routledge, 2003), 85. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on Saint Theodore*.

apprehended that reality, even if the relics were just bones...that vivid power expanded from them, to the dust and soil, in a relational radiance, from saint to devotee.”¹³⁷ Gregory’s appeal to the senses (embracing relics with ‘the eyes, the mouth, the ears’) in order to “convey the surplus value of the human body was part of a broader...phenomenon in late ancient Christianity.”¹³⁸ This latter concept will be returned to below.

Devotees could rarely ever touch relics directly, so the value placed on the saint is extended to the treatment of those saints’ contact relics. In the case of the Menil reliquary, these contact relics are the liquids the object transformed and produced. Contact relics were a means of touching, as it was believed that whatever touched a relic then adopted its power. In Gary Vikan’s discussion of a pilgrimage token made from the soil at the foot of St. Simeon’s pillar, Vikan calls the token “an intermediary agent, at one remove from the saint.”¹³⁹ The token has an image of St. Simeon on one side, and a palmprint, perhaps suggesting the saint’s own direct touch, on its obverse (fig. 21). These visual cues identified the object as a secondary relic while also retaining its connection to a specific saint, the object’s source of sacred power.

The liquid collected from the Menil reliquary would have had a similar agency but, lacking a referential image of the saint whose power it had adopted, it would have depended on other objects to prove its identity and legitimacy. One such object would have been the container it was collected into. Like those flasks discussed above, this container would likely resemble the type of portable flasks most well-known from the Shrine of St. Menas

¹³⁷ Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 66.

¹³⁸ Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*, 3.

¹³⁹ Vikan, *Early Pilgrimage Art*, 57.

(fig. 6). These containers were also subject to the sanctified-by-touch and -experience system of belief, “incomplete until the pilgrim ‘filled’ them with his or her experiences—specifically, used them in a ritual blessing in which they were filled with holy oil or water and then sealed.”¹⁴⁰ The authentic creation of that substance, however, would have depended on the object from whence it came: the Menil reliquary. The reliquary’s visual references to the presence and proximity of the Holy Spirit and to the contained saint’s connection to Christ would have validated the power of the substance it produced. Having been legitimately created and continually identified as a relic, this liquid was the saint’s body and presence and adopted the same abilities of the saint from which it poured. Gregory of Tours wrote of the miraculous cures at St. Martin’s shrine, claiming that

Many people were healed when they consumed dust scraped from the saint’s tomb, a great number were freed from disease after being anointed with the oil that is found there, and the water used for washing the tomb before Easter was a cure for not a few.¹⁴¹

These physical (and thus sensory) experiences of relics were vital to the continuation of relics’ power and prove the belief that “one important implication of the idea that God assumed a body in the person of Jesus was that God now infused the entire material world, including places, bodies, and objects.”¹⁴² The turn of late ancient Christians toward the material world discovered

radiant bodies - holy men, relics, icons – that disclosed the reality of an invisible spiritual world...the pictorial turn in ancient Christian writers can be explained by pointing to their propensity to look out at the material world – at aesthetic bodies, bones, dust – and ‘see more than was there.’

¹⁴⁰ Cynthia Hahn, “Loca Santa Souvenirs”, 91.

¹⁴¹ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 248-249. Original translation from Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Martini* 2.

¹⁴² Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 14.

Or more accurately, “seeing the more that they believed was there.”¹⁴³ The Menil reliquary responded to this belief, visually showing the otherwise invisible power it contained. Both relics and the liquids sanctified by touching them were part of this material world and thus able to hold and convey sacred power. This infusion of power into the physical world was legitimized by the miracles often achieved using sanctified materials like the fluids from sarcophagus reliquaries.

The connection between the human senses and the transfer of immaterial, divine power was common in Late Antiquity and Byzantium. Vision has often been equated with touch. In an examination of a sermon on the mosaic program of the Hagia Sophia by Photios (ca. 810-893), Robert Nelson identifies a Byzantine experience of sight. He says that Photios presents a “...version of the ancient extramission theory of vision, by which optical rays emerge from the eye, extend to the object of vision, touch it, and return to the eye bearing the ‘essence of the thing seen,’ which is conveyed to the mind and to the memory.”¹⁴⁴ Vision connected a viewer with an object, and aspects of the holy person depicted in an image were transmitted to the viewer through the agency of two tactile senses simultaneously: vision and touch.¹⁴⁵

Recent scholarship has questioned the equity of sight and touch. For example, Roland Betancourt’s essay includes a fourth-century description of pilgrims’ interactions with relics, which he says betrays what appears at first to be a conflation of touch and sight.

¹⁴³ Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*, 9.

¹⁴⁴ Robert Nelson, “To Say and To See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium,” in *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert Nelson (Cambridge, UK: 2000), 150.

¹⁴⁵ Nelson, “To Say and To See”, 153.

In his *Homily on Saint Theodore*, Gregory of Nyssa writes, “Taking delight in the seeing of such works of art that can be observed, one longs for the rest, in particular to approach the tomb, trusting that touching it results in sanctification and blessing.”¹⁴⁶ These “works of art” are likely reliquaries or other containers for St. Theodore’s remains, though these containers would have simultaneously been equated with their contents and forgotten.¹⁴⁷ Gregory identifies the desire not only to see but also to touch the object-relics and, in doing so, acquire the sacred power contained within. It seems clear that to Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century, seeing is not touching. The importance of touch, however, is still being highlighted, even if it is not being equated with sight.

What I aim to highlight with the discussion of sight theory above is the importance of touch, and the senses generally, to the relationship between late-antique Christians and sacred power. Whether sight was a form of touching or distinct from it, touching was a sense consistently present in written descriptions of objects, including icons and relics, thought to be gateways to sacred power. When objects could be touched, the desire to do so was expressed because touch was the means by which contact with and transfer of sacred power could be made. In cases of untouchable objects, including the apse mosaics of the Hagia Sophia, sight became touch. The sacred power present in images became attainable by the mere suggestion that seeing them was equivalent to touching them. In the same way, merely witnessing relics was not enough. Touch was vital, and the Menil reliquary allowed for such interaction, via tactile experience, with the relics it held.

¹⁴⁶ Roland Betancourt, “Tempted to Touch: Tactility, Ritual, and Mediation in Byzantine Visuality,” *Speculum* 9, 13 (July, 2016): 672.

¹⁴⁷ This refers to the statements by Cynthia Hahn discussed above. Hahn, *The Reliquary Effect*, 7.

According to Patricia Cox Miller, in texts like those of Gregory of Nyssa above, relics, the unseen bodies of saints in hagiography, and saints' presence in icons take on visual and tactile presence. By achieving such a presence, these texts require a reader to sense something that cannot be strictly or literally seen, namely, "divine energy in action in the world." Such a

corporeal imagination also designates textual images whose ocular and affective immediacy contributes to, or even creates, the religious significance of the things that are their focus...the body part of a dead human being only becomes a relic, a spiritual object, when aesthetically enhanced by this kind of writing.¹⁴⁸

I expand this phenomenon beyond the frame of writing. Objects, too, can be frames for other objects. I suggest that the Menil reliquary's appeal to and engagement of the senses via its visible iconography and ability to produce touchable, consumable, and likely even scented liquids also works to convey the value of the body this container held.

Conclusions

According to Victricius, "the material piety associated with relics demanded vividly sensory expression in images that conveyed the tangible, palpable aspects of relic veneration."¹⁴⁹ The Menil reliquary's visible display and iconographic program were a vivid sensory expression. Sarcophagus reliquaries helped to bridge a gap between Christian worshipper and deceased saint by allowing for a means of touching the relics they contained. Sensory experience was at the core of the cults of saints and of relics, and pilgrimage to sites and individuals that had witnessed sacred power was a primary means of obtaining that power. Devotees could witness (through any number of their physical

¹⁴⁸ Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*, 8, 62-81.

¹⁴⁹ Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*, 66.

senses) that sanctified material, thus extending the chain of contact transfer from God, to saints, to themselves. This transfer was rarely allowed via direct contact with bodily relics (surely for the relics' safety and preservation), so an intermediary substance was used instead of a supplicant's own imprudent hands. Liquids, poured through reliquaries, over the holy bones inside, and then collected as they exited the container were this intermediate material. Having touched the relics of a saint, the beliefs on power transfer explored above also apply to these liquids: they were now sanctified, extensions of the saint they had touched. After leaving a reliquary, these fluids were often poured into other receptacles to be taken away by worshippers and used as extensions of a saint's power, and the power of God. These substances were used to heal and protect.

Chapter 3: Modern Worship: The Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary as a Museum Object

In an upstairs storeroom of the Menil Collection in Houston, a glass vitrine holds a variety of Byzantine objects. Coins, keys, and tokens, in a dozen shades of brown and oxidized-green, cover the shelves. Nestled among this array of small objects is the Menil sarcophagus reliquary.¹⁵⁰ Its nearly-white stone surface stands out from the crowd of darker things. The first two chapters of this thesis have examined the Late Antique context and functions of the Menil sarcophagus reliquary. The following, final chapter traces the modern biography of the Menil reliquary from its acquisition by John and Dominique de Menil in 1966 to its present place in the Menil institution.

1966 is a noteworthy jump from the fifth century on which the previous chapters' discussions were focused. The 1,500 or so years between the Late Antique context of the Menil reliquary and its modern one remain uncertain. This uncertainty is primarily due to a lack of provenance for the object. There is little surviving documentation, at least available to me during this project, that gives any suggestion as to the whereabouts of the Menil reliquary before it was collected by the Menils. What little evidence I did find for the extraction of the object from its original context will be discussed below. This extraction was most likely illegal, or at least vaguely clandestine, if the reliquary was discovered before the existence of excavation and antiquity regulations. Before this extraction, which most likely took place in the twentieth century, we can only imagine where the Menil reliquary was or how it was acting. The reliquary may have remained in

¹⁵⁰ These observations were current as of April 2018.

its original context while the structure around it crumbled. The box might also have been reused as an under-altar reliquary. This latter possibility would have been more likely to result in its largely-intact survival, as it would have been protected from the elements until its modern excavation. In any case, the Menil reliquary did survive for 1,500 years.

In this chapter, I will argue that the Menil reliquary, now a museum object, still has agency as a participant in the exchange and supply of knowledge and power. This reliquary, like other museum objects, stands in for a specific time and experience that can no longer be directly participated in. Relics work similarly as physical, tangible objects that can provide individuals a means of contacting saints who are no longer alive and connecting believers to holy presences otherwise invisible. Dominique de Menil described this phenomenon herself, writing “And what is art if it does not enchant? Art is incantation. Like Jacob’s Ladder, it leads to higher realities, to timelessness, to paradise. It is a fusion of the tangible and the intangible; the old hierogamy myth- the marriage of heaven and earth.”¹⁵¹ The Menil reliquary not only unites Heaven and Earth, but also brings the past and present together by providing physical proof of the former. The Menil sarcophagus reliquary, once a setting for a relic, is now a relic itself. Meanwhile, the museum around the reliquary identifies the object as valuable and worthy of attention. The Menil Collection has taken on the role of reliquary.

¹⁵¹ Dominique de Menil, “Foreword,” in *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 8.

The Menil Collection: Beginnings and Byzantium

John (1904-1973) and Dominique de Menil (1908-1997) became major art patrons and collectors following years of successful business and investment endeavors.¹⁵² Their relationship with the art world began with a partnership with Max Ernst in the 1930s when the artist painted a portrait of Dominique.¹⁵³ The Menils became active art collectors after they arrived in the United States, where they had relocated their family business, in 1941.¹⁵⁴ The effects of World War II on Europe meant that European artists and collectors needed an alternate place to flourish. Many individuals who escaped or were exiled made their way to the Americas, creating, for the U.S. in particular, a lively art market and community the region would not otherwise have seen. This was the community the Menils became involved with, and out of which much of their collection began and later developed.¹⁵⁵

The Menils have had a long-standing fascination with religious spaces and objects. Mrs. de Menil stated that a major influence on her and her husband's interest in the relationship between faith and art was Father Courturier, a French Dominican friar and Catholic priest who was committed to "freeing liturgical art from the confines of academicism."¹⁵⁶ Courturier's efforts were rooted in the *renouveau catholique*, an effort to

¹⁵² Dominique de Menil was heiress to the Schlumberger Limited oil-equipment fortune, while John was a banker before becoming president of certain divisions of the Schlumberger Limited company.

¹⁵³ The couple contacted Ernst with the intention of assisting him in the promotion of his work. The portrait of Dominique was lost for many years during World War II, and its rediscovery after the war prompted Dominique de Menil to state that her "eyes had been opened" to the artist's potential. The Menil currently holds at least 30 Max Ernst works. Walter Hopps, "Introduction," in *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 10.

¹⁵⁴ This business was Schlumberger, Ltd. Hopps, "Introduction", 10.

¹⁵⁵ Hopps, "Introduction", 10-12.

¹⁵⁶ The Menils had certainly met with Courturier by 1952, as stated by Mrs. de Menil, but perhaps had contact earlier. Pamela G. Smart, *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 22.

move Catholicism into the present, rather than to maintain its connections to the past, after WWII.¹⁵⁷ In the introduction to a selection of writings by Couturier, Mrs. de Menil states that “Art, [Couturier] tells us, when it is approached through the intuition of the senses, perpetuates and makes the spirit present.”¹⁵⁸ This relationship between Dominique de Menil and Couturier, who was also a stained glass artist, continued throughout the 1950s, thus suggesting the ongoing influence of Couturier on some of the Menils’ earliest major projects and patronage.

This priority of sensual experience, and an interest in uniting modern art and spiritual experience, shaped several projects undertaken by the Menils in following years. In 1964, the de Menils commissioned the Rothko Chapel (fig. 22). This nondenominational chapel, on the site of the modern Menil museum campus, is dedicated to the display and contemplation of several of Mark Rothko’s works.¹⁵⁹ The building is shaped like an octagon inscribed in a Greek cross. This design was largely influenced by the artist. In fact, the Menils commissioned Rothko to create the space as a display for the fourteen, site-specific, works by the artist that the building contains. The Chapel has been described as “a place of worship, a place of meditation and prayer for people to gather and explore spiritual bonds common to all” and “a holy place open to all religions and belonging to none.”¹⁶⁰ The patronage of a spiritual space like the Chapel demonstrates a keen interest on the part of the Menils in religion and religion’s relationship with art. This priority

¹⁵⁷ Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 23.

¹⁵⁸ Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 25-26.

¹⁵⁹ William Middleton, *Double Vision: The Unerring Eye of Art World Avatars Dominique and John de Menil* (New York: Knopf, 2018), 475-492.

¹⁶⁰ Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 29.

continued to affect the Menils' collecting habits, including their interest in Byzantine art like the Menil sarcophagus reliquary.

John de Menil died in 1973, and the vision for the Menils' collection fell solely into the hands of Dominique. That vision included the building of a permanent display and storage facility for the Menil art collection.¹⁶¹ In 1980, Renzo Piano was engaged by Dominique to build a facility in Houston adjacent to the land previously acquired for the Rothko Chapel. Several traits of the new structure were deemed essential: that it appear small on the outside but large on the inside, its harmony with the surrounding Houston neighborhood, the allowance for "alive" natural light into the interior, and that priority be placed on the professional and study facilities of the building.¹⁶² The Collection's free-standing gallery opened to the public in 1987 (fig. 23).

The complete collection now held by the Menil includes around 16,000 objects. It is concentrated in a few major areas: African art, art of the Americas and the Pacific Northwest, art of the Pacific Islands, Ancient Art, Byzantine art, and Modern and Contemporary art (the latter, dominated by Surrealism).¹⁶³ The Menil Collection is different from most major art institutions, simultaneously lacking a distinct area of focus, while also not quite managing to be encyclopedic. This group of objects is the result of a private collection. Rather than being absorbed, as so many private collections become, into a larger museum endeavor by an encyclopedic institution (think the Metropolitan Museum

¹⁶¹ Middleton, *Double Vision*, 545-553.

¹⁶² Hopps, "Introduction", 12.

¹⁶³ These categories reflect those supplied by the Menil on their website. "Collection," Menil Collection, accessed March 12, 2018, www.menil.org/collection.

of Art, or the British Museum), the Menil Collection has remained intact and reflective of the interests of its assemblers.

The Menil Collection is one of the few private collections in the United States to begin as a private collection and remain so, even after becoming a public institution. As stated by Walter Hopps, “It is the intent of The Menil Collection, even as it becomes a public institution, to preserve and proceed from the characteristics that have been unique to it in its formation.”¹⁶⁴ At the forefront of these characteristics is the fact that the Menil Collection, including what objects it contains and how those objects have been treated, resulted largely from the personal interests and decisions of two people: John and Dominique de Menil. These personal interests affected the Menil reliquary, even beyond its initial acquisition, as will be returned to later in this chapter.

The Byzantine collection, into which the Menil sarcophagus reliquary falls, is affected by the above history. The Menils’ collection of Byzantine art began in 1964 with the purchase of several hundred Byzantine artifacts at once from the New York dealer John J. Klejman.¹⁶⁵ The Menils’ interest in Byzantine art at this moment may have been due to a 1964 exhibition of Byzantine art in Athens. The show was titled “Byzantine Art: An European Art” and ran in the Zappeion Exhibition Hall of Athens from April 1 through June 15, 1964. The publication produced for the exhibition includes scholarship by significant Byzantine scholars of the mid-20th century, including Andre Grabar, Kurt

¹⁶⁴ Hopps, “Introduction,” 13.

¹⁶⁵ Multiple scholars were hired in the 1960s and 1970s to catalog the collection, including Marvin Ross and Gary Vikan. Middleton, *Double Vision*, 603-604.

Weitzmann, and Marvin C. Ross.¹⁶⁶ The latter was later engaged by the Menils to catalog their initial Byzantine collection. Whether the Menils approached Ross because of his involvement in this exhibition is uncertain. In any case, there was a spark in both scholarly and public interest in Byzantine art around 1964 which may have influenced both the Menils' collecting priorities and the supply of Byzantine art objects available to them in New York at that time.

The Menil now holds over 1,000 Byzantine objects.¹⁶⁷ The group includes small items of everyday commerce and piety, and over 60 icons from the sixth to the eighteenth centuries.¹⁶⁸ Major publications on the Menil's Byzantine collection include *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered* (1991),¹⁶⁹ *Four Icons in the Menil Collection* (1992),¹⁷⁰ *Imprinting the Divine* (2011),¹⁷¹ and *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013).¹⁷² These publications typically focus on either major exhibitions of objects from the Byzantine collection or objects with figural imagery (in other words, paintings).

These Byzantine things have been displayed in various ways in the Menil, an institution that simultaneously prioritizes and rejects the original contexts and experiential qualities of pre-modern art. Great efforts have been made by the Menil to preserve the immersive experience of Byzantine art, such as in the case of the former Byzantine Fresco

¹⁶⁶ *Byzantine Art: An European Art* (Athens: Department of Antiquities and Archaeological Restoration, 1964), 51-66.

¹⁶⁷ 1964 is also the same year the Rothko Chapel was commissioned.

¹⁶⁸ Davezac, *Four Icons*, 11-13.

¹⁶⁹ Carr, *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered*, 7-14.

¹⁷⁰ Davezac, *Four Icons*, 11-13.

¹⁷¹ Annemarie Weyl Carr, *Imprinting the Divine: Byzantine and Russian Icons from the Menil Collection* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2011), 9-17.

¹⁷² Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 21-35.

Chapel.¹⁷³ The Byzantine Fresco Chapel is a modern structure built on the grounds of the Menil Collection to hold two thirteenth-century frescoes looted from a church in Lysi, Cyprus (fig. 24-25).¹⁷⁴ The space, while not an exact replica of the Cypriot church its design was based upon, was consecrated and opened to the public in 1997 (fig. 26). The exhibition closed in March 2012, when the frescoes were returned to Cyprus.¹⁷⁵ As stated by the Menil, the motivation for creating such a space was that

the Menil's mission is the belief that art and spirituality are central to a shared human experience and are powerful forces in contemporary society...A key aspect of the shared vision of the Menil Foundation and the Orthodox Church of Cyprus was that the original spiritual purpose of the frescoes be restored.¹⁷⁶

Other displays reflect the priority given to modern aesthetic experience by stripping contexts down to their most minimal states. The permanent Byzantine gallery in the Menil's main building, for example, is a white-walled, tombstone-labelled exhibition space filled with vibrant Byzantine things. These objects are displayed at standard intervals and lack any context but the one given to them in that room (fig. 27).¹⁷⁷

As a matter of policy, the Menil Collection uses spare labelling, typically giving only the title, date, and the name of the artist [if the artist is known] ...Walter Hopps, the inaugural director of the Collection...would have preferred that the museum eschew labeling altogether, offering instead informational pamphlets for

¹⁷³ "Byzantine Fresco Chapel," Menil Collection, Houston, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.menil.org/campus/byzantine-fresco-chapel>. More on the acquisition of the murals and on the unfolding of the project to display them can be found in Carr, *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered*, 7-14.

¹⁷⁴ Middleton, *Double Vision*, 606-617.

¹⁷⁵ For more on the issues surrounding the display and return of the frescoes, see Glenn Peers, "Framing and Conserving Byzantine Art at the Menil Collection: Experiences of Relative Identity," *Zeitschrift für Medien-und Kulturforschung* 6.1 (2015): 28-34.

¹⁷⁶ "Byzantine Fresco Chapel," The Menil Collection, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.menil.org/campus/byzantine-fresco-chapel>.

¹⁷⁷ The Menil Collection was in the midst of reinstalling its permanent galleries when this thesis was completed in May 2018.

those who particularly wanted such material and relieving others of the distraction.¹⁷⁸

Such a method of display can be problematic in the case of reliquaries, whose beauty is often secondary to the power they are thought to possess.¹⁷⁹ This issue will be returned to later in this chapter.

The Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary: Acquisition and Subsequent Life

The Menil reliquary was acquired by John and Dominique de Menil from New York art dealer John J. Klejman in the 1960s, before later passing to the Menil Foundation in 1997. Klejman was a noted dealer of antiquities and African art.¹⁸⁰ The dealer lived near the Menils' New York residence, and Mrs. Menil has alluded to the fact that their relationship was close and consistent.¹⁸¹ The dealer's 1964 invoice for more than 800 Byzantine objects includes a description of the material acquired at this time.

A collection of impressed glass seals used as gold and coin weights, bronze stamps of different shapes...bronze weights engraved with emperors and saints and the units of weight; seals with handles...religious rings with various inscriptions and engravings of heads and busts of saints; bronze birds and animals; a great number of crosses in different metals...many icons in bronze; implements for religious purposes; supports for oil lamps; bronze keys...¹⁸²

This was a significant new area of collection for the Menils, whose previous acquisitions were mostly made up of contemporary and African arts.¹⁸³ Dominique de Menil's interest

¹⁷⁸ Brackets are my own. Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 5.

¹⁷⁹ Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do", 293.

¹⁸⁰ Klejman can also be connected to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery, and the British Museum. Carr, *Imprinting the Divine*, 10.

¹⁸¹ Middleton, *Double Vision*, 372-373.

¹⁸² Quoted in Object Files, X 490.001-834, The Menil Collection, Houston.

¹⁸³ Other objects also acquired by the Menils from J.J. Klejman range from a carved bone from the Paleolithic period to a Pre-Columbian figure from 1000-1500 CE. Email correspondence, David Aylsworth, registrar, April 3, 2018.

in Byzantium appears to have been a primary motivation for the purchase.¹⁸⁴ Mrs. de Menil stated that “There was always a love and reverence for Byzantium in my family...I have been attracted, almost compelled, to acquire a few artifacts from Byzantium as tangible proof of its past existence.”¹⁸⁵

One of the Byzantine objects acting as tangible proof for Dominique was the Menil sarcophagus reliquary. While the Menils acquired the reliquary in 1966, there is little clear evidence of Klejman’s own acquisition of the object.¹⁸⁶ William Middleton suggests that the 800 objects collected by the Menils in 1964 were first assembled, over the course of thirty years, by collector and dealer George Zacos, who “had a stand in the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul.”¹⁸⁷ A letter from John de Menil to Marvin Ross states that the reliquary is “said to have come from Istanbul,” but there is no further mention of provenance in any other document I found nor any indication of when the object might have come from Istanbul

¹⁸⁴ This interest was demonstrated once again around 1980, when a second group of Byzantine objects was acquired by Dominique de Menil. This was also followed by a traveling exhibition of the Menil’s Byzantine objects, “Security in Byzantium: Locking, Sealing, Weighing,” organized by Gary Vikan. Carr, *Imprinting the Divine*, 11.

¹⁸⁵ Dominique’s familial connection to Byzantine art includes her great-great uncle, Gustave Schlumberger, who was a noted Byzantinist. Carr, *Imprinting the Divine*, 10-11.

¹⁸⁶ What little information is available on John Klejman suggests that his collecting practices were suspicious at best. In 1990, Turkey filed a suit against the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in Washington, claiming that over 200 objects in these institutions, many purchased from John J. Klejman, had been illegally excavated and exported. Thomas Hoving, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1967-1977 (around the same time the Menils were collecting from Klejman), identifies Klejman as “another of my favorite dealer-smugglers...the smuggled goods came primarily from Syria and Lebanon.” Hoving recounts some of the purchases he made from Klejman, which were mostly Greek, Roman, and Early Christian. These claims were made by Hoving in his memoir, published shortly before his passing in 2009 in serial form by Artnet. William H. Honan, “Judge Clears Way for Trial Over Turkish Art at the Met,” *New York Times*, Jul. 20, 1990, and Thomas Hoving, “Artful Tom: A Memoir, Chapter 24: Getting Restless,” Artnet, accessed 14 April, 2018, <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/hoving/artful-tom-chapter-twenty-four6-1-09.asp>.

¹⁸⁷ This group of 800 objects was sent directly to Marvin Ross, curator of the Marjorie Merriweather Post Collection at the Hillwood Estate Museum, who had also previously worked at Dumbarton Oaks. The Menils hired him to catalog the collection. Middleton, *Double Vision*, 603.

(whether it was made there originally or simply came from Istanbul to Klejman).¹⁸⁸ While this correspondence does not reveal much about the Menil reliquary before it was acquired by the Menils, the existence of this exchange and the ones described below reflect John de Menil's interest in the reliquary. John, and assumedly also Dominique, created this series of correspondence about their reliquary. Now preserved in the reliquary's object files, these letters contain answers to the questions the Menils were asking about this object. These questions are concentrated on discovering the reliquary's Late Antique context, suggesting that the Menils were interested in this object beyond its modern role in their own collection.¹⁸⁹

Other files held by the Menil Collection reflect a keen interest in the reliquary. In a letter to John de Menil, Marvin Ross provides an example of a sarcophagus reliquary lid with a hole in its center because someone "raised an objection to [the Menil reliquary] because of the hole in the cover."¹⁹⁰ There is no further mention of what exactly this objection was. Ross also mentions a publication of a sarcophagus reliquary found in the Pantocrator Church in Constantinople. The article to which he refers provides a single sentence about a sarcophagus reliquary and a black-and-white image of the box.¹⁹¹ The final document significant to the Menils' efforts to research the reliquary is a four-page compilation of all the information a P. Verdier could provide about the Menils' reliquary

¹⁸⁸ John de Menil to Marvin Ross, 24 February 1967, Object Files, X613, The Menil Collection, Houston.

¹⁸⁹ 24 February 1967, Object Files, X613.

¹⁹⁰ The example Ross provides was excavated by the Cypriote Department of Antiquities in Salamis, Cyprus and was, in 1966, held in the Museum at Nicosia. Brackets are my own. Marvin Ross to John de Menil, 29 October 1966, Object Files, X613.

¹⁹¹ The report states that "A marble reliquary 0.21 m. long with a cross in low relief on one long side could well be that which was deposited in the loculus found on the site of the altar. Arthur H.S. Megaw, "Notes on Recent Work of the Byzantine Institute in Istanbul," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* vol. 17 (1963): 348.

and on sarcophagus reliquaries in general.¹⁹² Due to John de Menil's passing in June of 1973, this exchange was most likely prompted by Dominique de Menil or other researchers working for the Menil Collection. In the document, Verdier describes the iconography of the Menil reliquary. They then provide brief summaries of the development of the cult of relics and multiple types and contexts of sarcophagus reliquaries, including the observation that few known examples of this reliquary type exhibit a "complete system for the circulation of oil."¹⁹³ Verdier attributes the Menil reliquary to sixth-century Syria due to its

obvious connection with the bigger reliquaries found in the Syrian martyria churches, and for its place in the evolution of this type of reliquary from functional to purely liturgical. Given the curative virtues of the oil, it may have been used in a xenodochium (hospital for pilgrims) or even in a private chapel.¹⁹⁴

What this document tells us is that in 1984, the Menils still had a vested interest in their Byzantine reliquary and had devoted effort to research its Late Antique context even if they demonstrated little intention to translate that context for the public.

The reliquary has been displayed about once every ten years and does not appear to have been loaned to any outside institutions for nearly four decades. In 1968, it was lent to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for an exhibition organized by the University of St. Thomas.¹⁹⁵ The reliquary was loaned to the Museum of Fine Arts again in 1971 for an

¹⁹² P. Verdier, April 1984, Object Files, X613, The Menil Collection, Houston.

¹⁹³ Verdier points out that most known examples of sarcophagus reliquaries have holes only on their lids and were usually buried beneath the bemas of churches, becoming "invisible and useless." I disagree with the latter bit of this statement, i.e. this thesis. Verdier, April 1984.

¹⁹⁴ Verdier provides a vague bibliography and no direct citations, making it nearly impossible to trace the above deductions directly. I have, however, come to some of the same conclusions. See this thesis, 23-36. Parentheses are Verdier's. Verdier, April 1984.

¹⁹⁵ The Menil Collection has a long-standing relationship with Houston's University of St. Thomas and the nearby Rice University.

exhibition entitled “Devotional Art of Living Religions.” In 1981, the reliquary was included in Rice University’s exhibition “Security in Byzantium: Locking, Sealing, Weighing,” organized by Gary Vikan.¹⁹⁶ This is the final recorded exhibition of the object according to its object file, which was last updated in 2009 (fig. 28). All three entries under the section of the document titled “Exhibited” include the notation that the object was “not listed in catalog,” as well as the notes “supplemental item” and “did not travel to other venues.”¹⁹⁷

There are a few potential explanations for the infrequency of the exhibition of the Menil reliquary. With a collection of 16,000 items, 1,000 of which are Byzantine, the Menil has plenty else to show. There is also, I argue, a lack of communication between the Menil reliquary and modern audiences. The Menil reliquary, as demonstrated in the former chapters of this thesis, was created for a specific purpose and speaks to viewers with a language shaped by and intended for a Late Antique world. While a few of the reliquary’s features are readable by most modern, Western audiences, including its sarcophagus shape and carved crosses, its functions as a frame for invisible holy presence and a transformer of sacred substances are lost on most Menil visitors (and not at any fault of those visitors).

The Menil’s labeling and display techniques are partly to blame for the losses in translation between this Late Antique object and 21st-century audiences, in addition to a simple lack of awareness of this type of object in modern American society. If we compare the display of the Menil reliquary to the small gold box also held by the Menil Collection,

¹⁹⁶ Gary Vikan, *Security in Byzantium: Locking, Sealing, and Weighing* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1980).

¹⁹⁷ X613 (Reliquary), 1 June 1990, Object Files, X613, The Menil Collection, Houston.

a bias for (and against) certain objects becomes clearer (fig. 29). The gold reliquary (X 819) has been included in at least three publications in the last 20 years.¹⁹⁸ This is three more publications than the sarcophagus reliquary, which has never been included in any publication. The gold box has also been on display quite consistently in the Menil's Byzantine gallery and was a featured object in Glenn Peers' 2013 exhibition, *Byzantine Things in the World*.¹⁹⁹ This box is a reliquary whose role in Late Antiquity as a container for relics closely parallels the function of our sarcophagus reliquary. Regardless, I argue that this gold reliquary is more relatable to modern audiences than the stone sarcophagus reliquary because of the former's recognizable, obviously valuable material (gold) and its comparably simple appearance (with no figural motifs or liquid circulation systems to unpack). The gold reliquary's shimmering surface attacks the senses with a vivacity that rivals almost all other materials.

While the display of the Menil reliquary may be limited by its specific features and original function, the disinterest in its public exposure may also be due in part to a disinterest in Byzantine art.²⁰⁰ Byzantine art more generally has faced some resistance, or perhaps simply some neglect, in the academic and art museum worlds. Perhaps the display

¹⁹⁸ Carr, *Imprinting the Divine*, 11 and Davezac, "A Gold Byzantine Reliquary", 74-78.

¹⁹⁹ The gold box is featured on the cover, and in the content, of the book. Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 56-67.

²⁰⁰ There have been "blockbuster" exhibitions of Byzantine art, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art's series of three shows, "The Age of Spirituality" (1977), "The Glory of Byzantium" (1997), and "Byzantium: Faith and Power" (2004). The 1997 show attracted 127,600 in its first three weeks. Much like the exhibitions of Byzantine material culture already examined in this chapter, these exhibitions usually featured painted icons and objects made of gold, silver, and other materials still considered precious in modern Western society. Glenn Collins, "The Met markets 'Glory of Byzantium' exhibition to those whose ancestors helped make it glorious," *New York Times*, April 10, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/10/business/met-markets-glory-byzantium-exhibition-those-whose-ancestors-helped-make-it.html>.

of only the most vibrant, modernly-accepted Byzantine objects is an attempt to overcome public disinterest in Byzantine art by making the culture as appealing as possible despite the misleading ratio of precious to everyday objects. In his 1996 article “Living on the Byzantine Borders of Western Art,” Robert Nelson proposes that art history survey textbooks “created a conceptual break between Byzantium/Islam and Western Europe” by treating Byzantine art in the same way as other “Orientalized” cultures have been treated (like those categorized under “Islamic,” or the arts of Asia and Africa).²⁰¹ Nelson also suggests that by placing Byzantine art in a chronological position that follows ancient Rome but precedes Western European art, the impression is given that “Byzantine art is somewhat early or at least not coeval with Western art.”²⁰²

This treatment of Byzantine art is observable in the physical arrangements of objects in major museums, including the Menil. In the Art Institute of Chicago, for example, Byzantine art is separated by two floors from the rest of the Medieval galleries. Rather, Byzantine objects share gallery space with the Greek and Roman collections (fig. 30). The Menil Collection arranges its Byzantine objects in a similar way, although in a literal “dead-end” not unlike Nelson’s observation of Byzantine art’s chronological position acting as a “cultural cul-de-sac in art history’s teleology.”²⁰³ Byzantine art is presented as not leading to any other cultures by being placed at the very end of a space

²⁰¹ Robert S. Nelson, “Living on the Byzantine Borders of Western Art,” *Gesta*, vol. 35, no. 1 (1996), 4.

²⁰² Nelson, “Living on the Byzantine Borders”, 5

²⁰³ This observation was made before the Menil Collection’s reinstallation of its galleries in 2018.

containing ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian objects.²⁰⁴ Once reaching the Byzantine gallery, visitors must turn around and walk back the way they came to exit the space.

Perhaps this arrangement can also be conceived as a different kind of value judgement, one that identifies Byzantine art as a culmination of these other cultures, and thus an elevation of Byzantine objects. The Menil, additionally, does not have the extensive Western European collections of other major institutions like the Art Institute, and so the Byzantine objects are not so much separated from those things as they are simply placed with the most closely related objects available. In any case, such a consideration of the narrative constructed by the Menil, within which the Menil reliquary has been housed and occasionally displayed, is valuable to conceptualizing what meanings have been applied to the reliquary in its modern context and how those meanings have been understood.

When the Menil reliquary has been displayed, its tombstone label most likely included basic information similar to that now recorded in its object file: “Reliquary. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor or Syria. Byzantine, fifth century.”²⁰⁵ The term “reliquary,” while accessible to some, was unlikely to have been displayed in tandem with any explanation.²⁰⁶ The geographical region the object has been assigned to is broad, its culture and time of creation distant. This distance, I believe, is vital to the modern function

²⁰⁴ Nelson, “Living on the Byzantine Borders”, 5.

²⁰⁵ Object File, X613.

²⁰⁶ This is an assumption based on the display of other objects in the Menil, since the Menil sarcophagus reliquary was not on display at any point during the research or writing of this thesis. A small gold reliquary from about the same period as the Menil reliquary, X 819, was displayed in the last two years. Its label both in the Menil gallery and on the Menil’s online collection includes a title, date, culture, geographic attribution, measurements, and an acquisition number. There is no further information provided on its original use or context. “Reliquary,” The Menil Collection, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://www.menil.org/collection/objects/6518-reliquary>.

of the Menil reliquary. While the display and documentation of the object is frustratingly unspecific, this same uncertainty also creates an aura of mystery around this Byzantine thing. Removed from its original context by thousands of miles and 1,500 years, this object acts as a relic of an inaccessible moment. Like the fragmentary relics this container once held, the Menil reliquary is a fragment of a past culture that can now connect modern audiences to that culture regardless of the “true” nature of the object. With this concept in mind, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a consideration of the role of objects, including the Menil reliquary, in museums. This discussion will, I hope, provide some closure to the 1,500-year narrative this thesis has attempted. The Menil reliquary, once a Late Antique object, has been re-contextualized as a modern museum thing. The modern, Western forces of the Menil Collection have been applied to this reliquary, causing the object to respond by adopting the characteristics of a relic.

Museum as Reliquary, Collected Objects as Relics

“We are thus engaged, it would seem, in the study of a sort of object that resists most of the categories of conventional art history. Their beauty is secondary, their originality suspect, and their meaning and contents often obscure.”²⁰⁷ Here, Cynthia Hahn refers to reliquaries. In addition to the issues discussed above, the Menil reliquary faces this resistance to categorization, making it a difficult object to display in a modern museum. In the Middle Ages, relics were often displayed in particular architectural settings or even with labels to help combat issues of display. According to Cynthia Hahn, it was

context and story that arouses the interest of the audience and makes the contact with the relic significant and even wondrous. In the milieu of Late Antique

²⁰⁷ Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do”, 293.

pilgrimage, contexts could be and were supplied in many forms- spoken words, architectural settings, and even simple labels.²⁰⁸

Identification was vital to relic display, because it authenticates the relic.²⁰⁹ Relic labels are often written in ink on tiny slips of parchment or fabric, or even directly onto relics, as can be seen in the case of the relics in the Sancta Sanctorum box (fig. 7).

This act of labelling things to authenticate and contextualize also occurs in museums. Every object on display has a standardized label to identify them, thus justifying the objects' containment in a museum. Ann Marie Yasin compares the display of Medieval relics and reliquaries directly to the display of objects in modern museums.

For late-antique Christians, the highly coded and ritualized material conditions of the relics' installation constructed the fragments' status as relics much the same way that the institutional authority of a museum today can be seen to define an object displayed within as art instead of as an ordinary object of daily life. A modern museum deploys various material and architectural mechanisms, such as display cases, didactic labels, and classificatory systems to recontextualize objects, redefine their status, and circumscribe visitors' interaction with them. So too the spatial and material mechanics of relics' installations in churches condition the way these objects are perceived, categorized, and understood...in both cases the installations draw on a set of material practices common to the type of institution as a whole in order to shape observers' understanding of and attitudes toward the objects they house.²¹⁰

Modern museums have many methods of display and design in common with earlier institutions, including Christian churches. Museums are traditionally places of quiet reverence, instruction, and contemplation. In the Western world, such traits are associated

²⁰⁸ Hahn points out that the reading of a story, "whether Gospel text or the vita of a saint," was performed at pilgrimage sites, solidifying the importance of placing objects in an identifiable and relatable narrative. Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do", 301.

²⁰⁹ Cynthia Hahn and Holger Klein, "Introduction", in *Saints and Sacred Matter*, 6.

²¹⁰ Yasin, "Sacred Installations", 134.

with sacred space, namely churches, temples, and cemeteries.²¹¹ The comparison of museums to sacred spaces is not new. According to Carol Duncan, museums embody the beliefs, magic, symbolic sacrifice, miraculous transformations, and changes of consciousness lacking from our post-Enlightenment, secular world.²¹² Museums “filled the void left in a disenchanted world, providing monumental ceremonial spaces for public rituals: corridors for processions, halls for gatherings, and inner sanctuaries” for the secrets of the art world.²¹³

By claiming this vacated space for themselves, museums have become a new authority of distant powers made visible by objects. As discussed in previous chapters of this thesis, the Menil reliquary acted as a frame for the relic(s) it contained by bringing attention to those relics and identifying them as powerful.²¹⁴ Modern museums also visually construct otherwise invisible narratives, allowing people to connect with forces they cannot see. Museums, or at least history museums, can be seen to respond directly to the nostalgia of our “disenchanted world.”²¹⁵ Nostalgia, according to Susan Stewart, is a call for objects. “Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience...the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative.”²¹⁶ Objects in museums respond to this

²¹¹ For more on museums as temples, see Duncan Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or a Forum?” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 14, 1 (1971): 11-24.

²¹² Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 7-20.

²¹³ Bouquet, *Museums*, 49.

²¹⁴ See this thesis, 37-38.

²¹⁵ Bouquet, *Museums*, 49.

²¹⁶ Stewart, *On Longing*, 23.

nostalgia by acting as signifiers for lived experiences that are now distant or past and can no longer be lived.²¹⁷

Such modern relationships with things are reminiscent of those experienced by Byzantine peoples, who channeled their relationships with the divine through icons, tokens, and relics. These objects helped people to connect visually and physically with distant places, people, and powers perceived to be present and made more proximate with the assistance of objects. Objects held by modern museums also often make visible otherwise distant or unrecognizable places, periods, and phenomena. Even zoos, museums for living animals, display certain creatures that would be otherwise inaccessible to local populations. In this way, museums do what reliquaries, including the Menil example, do: make tangible otherwise distant, invisible, inaccessible worlds via the containment and display of physical material connected to those unreachable realms. The Menil reliquary, an orphan from its own time and culture, is made desirable again via its enshrinement in a museum, just as the relic(s) this container once held were defined and authenticated by their containment. As mentioned above, one means of accomplishing this authentication is with labels. If an object can be proven to connect to a distant time or place, then it deserves its enshrinement and the power provided by that enshrinement.

The Menil reliquary directed the attention of Early Christians to the relic(s) it contained, and the religious building housing that reliquary in Late Antiquity authenticated its presence in the space and mediated visitors' interactions with the reliquary. In a

²¹⁷ Souvenirs, including pilgrim souvenirs from Late Antiquity, work similarly by providing a physical sign for a lived experience. Stewart, *On Longing*, 24.

comparable way, the Menil Collection can direct audiences' attentions to the reliquary, an otherwise functionless object in the modern world now that it lacks the relic(s) whose power it once channeled and the late-antique audiences that could read the reliquary's visual cues. By placing the object behind glass, with a label, and in a carefully constructed narrative of the history of art (supplied by the other objects housed and displayed around it), our reliquary becomes a relic. The reliquary, now as a relic, is defined, authenticated, and identified as valuable, and therefore as powerful, via its containment in a museum.

Meanwhile, the work reliquaries do is often forgotten by worshippers seeking the power of the bodily relics they contain.²¹⁸ The influence museums have on the objects they present is also often overlooked by the visitors focusing on those objects. This disregarded influence is a common subject of anthropological and sociological studies of museums. Such studies intend to make visible the otherwise unnoticed forces affecting the choices and experiences of modern populations. In one anthropological study of museums, a term used to describe museums' repurposing and classification of foreign or old material is "objectification." According to Mary Bouquet,

Objectification in the museum context involves the appropriation of cultural property and its reconfiguration within a systematic framework of knowledge. Once objectified in public, visible form, Culture can be discussed, used, and manipulated- exactly because it has been transformed. Glass cases are a classic device for creating distance between a viewer and the object. All museum collections involve the removal of objects from one context and the recontextualization as part of a collection and/or as part of a display in which new meanings are attributed.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Hahn, *The Reliquary Effect*, 7.

²¹⁹ The capital "C" in Culture is Bouquet's. Bouquet, *Museums*, 123.

In other words, museums remove objects from their original, complete contexts and place them into a modern context determined by the culture that museum belongs to. Traditional Western museums, for example, prioritize sterile, simplified aesthetics and display techniques. This includes the Menil Collection, whose tombstone labels and monochromatic interior colors attempt not to “distract” viewers from the objects in the environment.²²⁰ Meanwhile, the Menil and other museums lose the ephemeral aspects of culture, like sound, smell, and movement, which were vital to objects’ uses in their original contexts. These carefully constructed displays, designed to go unnoticed, reinterpret the objects they contain.

A similar method of display was used by late-antique Christians who framed relics. Bodily relics began as living human bodies no different from any other body moving through the material world. Even once those bodies became the remains of saints, they still only appeared as any other human remains: skeletal and fragmentary. While believers of the power of relics claim that that power is intrinsic to holy bodies whether they are recognized as relics or not, close study of reliquaries destabilizes such assertions. At first sight, without any miraculous cues, a body is, and was in Late Antiquity, nothing more than a body. Human remains’ containment in a reliquary is what identifies them as exceptional relics.

The Menil reliquary brings further complexity to the subject of display. As outlined above, the reliquary’s exhibition history is brief. The object has only been displayed outside of the Menil three times. Exhibition of the reliquary inside of the Menil Collection’s

²²⁰ Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 5.

permanent galleries, which do rotate objects, do not appear to have been recorded, though the reliquary has been displayed. During the research and writing of this thesis, the Menil reliquary was in storage amongst the rest of the stored Byzantine collection held by the Menil. The reliquary was, however, at least briefly on display in 2013, around the time of the publication of Glenn Peers' *Byzantine Things in the World*. A two-page spread showing and image of the Menil's permanent gallery devoted to Byzantine objects includes the sarcophagus reliquary, which sits in a vitrine with two icons, a cross, and other metal devotional objects (fig. 27).²²¹

Where, and what, has the Menil reliquary been while not on display? This modern relic has been, as it is now during the writing of this thesis, in storage. This means that the object is not on display to a public audience, but rather it is concealed from view except upon request (which requires prior knowledge that the object even exists). This reliquary is not entirely devoid of power in its current location, but it is hidden, muted, and unable to act. This muffling of the object began when it was taken from or forgotten by its original context, the backdrop before which it could still function as it was originally intended. The loss of this object's context is made especially poignant by the fact that this and analogous things are not as expressive or attractive to the modern eye as reliquaries of more precious materials.²²² The Menil reliquary is not a painting, has no named artist, and resembles at

²²¹ Peers, *Byzantine Things in the World*, 50-51.

²²² Jas Elsner relates a story (unfortunately, with few details) of an excavation in 1885, during which 10 sarcophagi were discovered in Rome. The decorated examples were exported to Baltimore and elsewhere in Rome, while the undecorated sarcophagus was destroyed shortly after discovery. See *Life, Death, and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, eds. Jas Elsner and Janet Huskinson (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 2011), 6.

first glance the remains of a pagan religion long dead.²²³ Of course, such objects must be art because they've always been seen as precious either for their cultural function or for their rarity, and museums hold onto them in perpetuity. However, once these objects arrive in the modern West, they don't meet aesthetic cultural expectations or modern ritual needs and remain hidden in most collections. They are trapped between being precious enough to be collected, but not precious enough to be displayed or deeply understood. The same situation can be applied to the boxes upon boxes of pottery shards so often piling up in museum store rooms: once they are unearthed and removed from their archaeological context, they cannot go back, nor do they fit into this modern moment. They are often undisplayable and yet too precious to be discarded, while also too fragmentary to be shaped back into a functioning vessel. So, what is this thing? What is its current function? It has lost its utility and original purpose, and it cannot be high art.

Having been removed from its intended context and role, and now considered an outsider to its current context, this object exists in a liminal space. As a "liminal object," the Menil reliquary is no longer in anything resembling its original context, nor does it fully belong to its current one. Similar theory has been applied to objects that completely lack provenance, so-called "orphan objects," whose current legal owners (and any potential future owners) do not want them for the risk they present but cannot return the material anywhere else because its origins are unknown.²²⁴ This type of object, I think, still has a

²²³ The Menil has published at least two books on their Byzantine icon collection, including Davezac, *Four Icons*, 11-13, and Carr, *Imprinting the Divine*, 9-17.

²²⁴ Richard M. Leventhal and Brian I. Daniels, "Orphaned Objects, Ethical Standards, and the Acquisition of Antiquities," *DePaul Journal of Art, Technology & Intellectual Property Law* 23, 2 (Spring 2013): 339.

lot to tell us, even though its archaeological context is lost. While the fight for provenance currently prioritizes archaeological context, this is only one of an antiquity's contexts and is not even its original context. What we call "archaeological context" is, after all, a modern Western notion. The many ways a thing is used and changes hands, from the moment it was made to where it sits now, are all separate and can be equally important.²²⁵ While looting and the prevention of archaeological context destruction is a serious battle and should be severely discouraged, things do not lose all value if this one moment of their lives falls into shadow.²²⁶ This is why antiquities' modern use and value still matters even if we can know nothing else, and why the analysis of the Menil sarcophagus reliquary is important to its understanding as an object, even if its original and archaeological lives were not recorded and its current function is uncertain.

Conclusions

As demonstrated in previous chapters of this thesis, the Menil reliquary was created as a means of demonstrating the power of a relic. Its style and function resulted from the early Christian popularization of the cult of martyrs, and its role was likely a liturgical one. Its transfer from a living thing to an archaeological thing, and later to a museum thing, is unknown. The reliquary reappears for us at the Menil, 1,500 years later, in a vastly different context. While so many museum objects are quite easily incorporated into Western culture, the Menil sarcophagus reliquary complicates the museum-as-reliquary relationship.

²²⁵ James Cuno, *Whose Culture?: The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities* (Princeton University Press: 2012), 12.

²²⁶ The Menil Collection is no stranger to objects facing this uncertainty. See Carr, *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered*, 9-17, and Peers, "Framing and Conserving", 28-34.

I argue that despite the lack of a known Late Antique context and its modern concealment, the Menil reliquary still has agency. As we have already seen in the case of many relics worshipped in Late Antiquity, believers in the power of those holy remains could not directly witness the power relics held. That audience still trusted in the authenticity of reliquaries' contents, knew that those contents were present and powerful, and considered those relics to be a primary source of sacred power. While the Menil reliquary may have had agency in its identification and concealment of its contents in Late Antiquity, those contents, too, possessed the power given to them by their devotees' attention and belief. In this way, despite its oscillation between display and concealment, the Menil reliquary functions as a modern relic. Art objects are time travelers, and as they continue moving farther into the future, they must continue to adjust in order to survive. I hope to have demonstrated the Menil reliquary's longevity.²²⁷ This reliquary's power is defined by its containment in a museum, but the connection to Late Antiquity that it can provide for scholars and museum-goers alike is a power all its own.

²²⁷ Jessamine Batario, "Introduction: Horizontals, Verticals, and the Risks of Being Wrong" (lecture, Vivian L. Smith Foundation Symposium, Houston, TX, April 13, 2018).

Conclusion

The Menil reliquary is an understudied object with acute vitality and agency. In Late Antiquity, this object communicated the power of its contents through both its iconography and its basic form. The relic that the Menil reliquary contained would have gone undefined and, thus, unrecognized and silent, if not for the container that delineated that sacred material's boundaries and communicated its capabilities. The Menil reliquary did not only identify its contents as sacred. It also provided a means by which the sacred material it concealed could still be interacted with by believers in that material's power. The Menil reliquary provided access to a saint, and thus sacred power and divine favor. It also held power of its own as a transformer of additional substances, which it produced as sacred, unlimited extensions of the sacred power in its relics. This unassuming container was a vital component in the relationship between late-antique Christians and God's sacred presence. This reliquary also continues to provide a means of connecting with unreachable worlds and concepts in its modern context as a museum object. As precious material now contained, and often concealed, in the exclusive enclosure of a museum, the Menil reliquary has become a relic.

I have argued that the Menil sarcophagus reliquary was a visible, substance-transforming and -producing reliquary from a pilgrimage site in the fifth-century CE Eastern Mediterranean, likely near modern Syria. Many of the Menil reliquary's traits, including the presence of iconography and the box's complete system for the circulation of liquids, are common to sarcophagus reliquaries known to be from this region. A few reliquaries exhibiting similar traits to the Menil box have been found in situ against the

walls of churches and chapels through the Eastern Mediterranean in Late Antiquity. This method of display permitted some degree of public access to the container and its contents while also accommodating for the movement of pilgrims and the potential volume of visitors in the space. Devotees to the saint whose relics the Menil reliquary contained could see the reliquary and the secondary relic, a sanctified liquid, being produced. This visibility of the object was vital to its function.

The sarcophagus shape of the Menil reliquary referred to a body of objects (namely, large-scale Roman sarcophagi) meant to contain complete, deceased bodies whose remains, and the memory of the soul that once occupied them, were believed to be eternal. The continuity of a sarcophagus shape, despite the small size of most sarcophagus reliquaries by the fifth century, references full-sized sarcophagi that contained entire bodies. This form suggested a whole and undamaged relic. Medieval Christians believed that relics provided the unmitigated presence of holy persons. As expressed by Victricius, bishop of Rouen, "...the smallest part of a saint's body partakes in the whole."²²⁸ The Menil reliquary is a physical manifestation of this belief.

Meanwhile, the iconographic program of the Menil reliquary depends upon and emphasizes the object's direct communication with its Late Antique audiences. The iconography of the reliquary presents the power, presence, and potential of the box's contents, with sensory experience at the core of that presentation. This value placed on sensory experience in Late Antiquity was a popular means of making tangible the otherwise immaterial aspects of a sacred Christian world. This method of presentation is also

²²⁸ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 23.

demonstrated in written descriptions of sacred material including images of saints and their relics. The Menil reliquary's appeal to the senses via the visible display of its iconography and its ability to produce touchable liquids also works to convey the value and potential of the body this container held.

In 1966, the Menil reliquary was acquired by John and Dominique de Menil. It later became part of the Menil's public Byzantine collection. Now a museum object, the reliquary still has agency as a participant in the exchange and supply of exclusive knowledge and power. This reliquary, like other museum objects, stands in for a specific time and experience that can no longer be directly participated in. This is similar to how relics provide individuals a means of contacting saints who are no longer alive and with a holy presence otherwise invisible. While there is some limitation on how well the late-antique language employed by the Menil reliquary translates to modern viewers, this lack of communication only further contributes to the appeal of the object to 21st-century audiences. Its provenance is unknown, and its acquisition is suspect. This reliquary remains a relic as mysterious and distant as the material it once contained. Of course, this object is given this ability via the agency of myself, as well as the modern collectors, curators, and other scholars who have determined, and continue to determine, the power the object contains and offers. The Menil sarcophagus reliquary, once a setting for a relic, is now a relic itself, while the museum around it has taken on the role of a reliquary.

Both late-antique and modern encounters with the Menil reliquary, I suggest, can result in communication with the otherwise unseen and inaccessible worlds its audiences desire. In Late Antiquity, this object made visible the sacred power believed to be held in

the material the reliquary contained. The Menil reliquary also supplied a means of extending that power to believers while still keeping those relics concealed via the transformation of sacred substances. The Menil reliquary, an intermediary between relics and worshippers, was understood as equivalent to its contents. The fact that the relics themselves were invisible did not matter to Late Antique viewers who equated their witnessing of the container to its contents.²²⁹ The Menil reliquary allowed for this belief by being a visual representation of the power of its contents and by providing a means of physical access to those contents while still protecting them from both damage and doubt.

Today, the Menil reliquary supplies museum-goers and researchers with a physical manifestation of distant, unreachable phenomena including early Christian pilgrimage and more general late-antique beliefs about sacred presence and power. Even if modern audiences remain unaware of the Late Antique context of the Menil reliquary, this object's enshrinement in the exclusive space of a museum instills it with the power of a rare, valuable, untouchable thing from a distant time and place. This thesis has attempted as thorough an object biography as possible for the Menil sarcophagus reliquary. In so doing, I hope to have promoted the liveliness of this Byzantine thing. The Menil reliquary, in both Late Antiquity and now, was and is an object with significant agency as a mediator between relic and worshipper, a transformer of substances, and an instiller of otherwise-absent power and presence.

²²⁹ Hahn, *The Reliquary Effect*, 7.



Figure 1. Sarcophagus reliquary, front. X 613. Fifth century CE. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor, or Syria. Limestone. 14.3 x 15.3 x 10.8 cm. Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

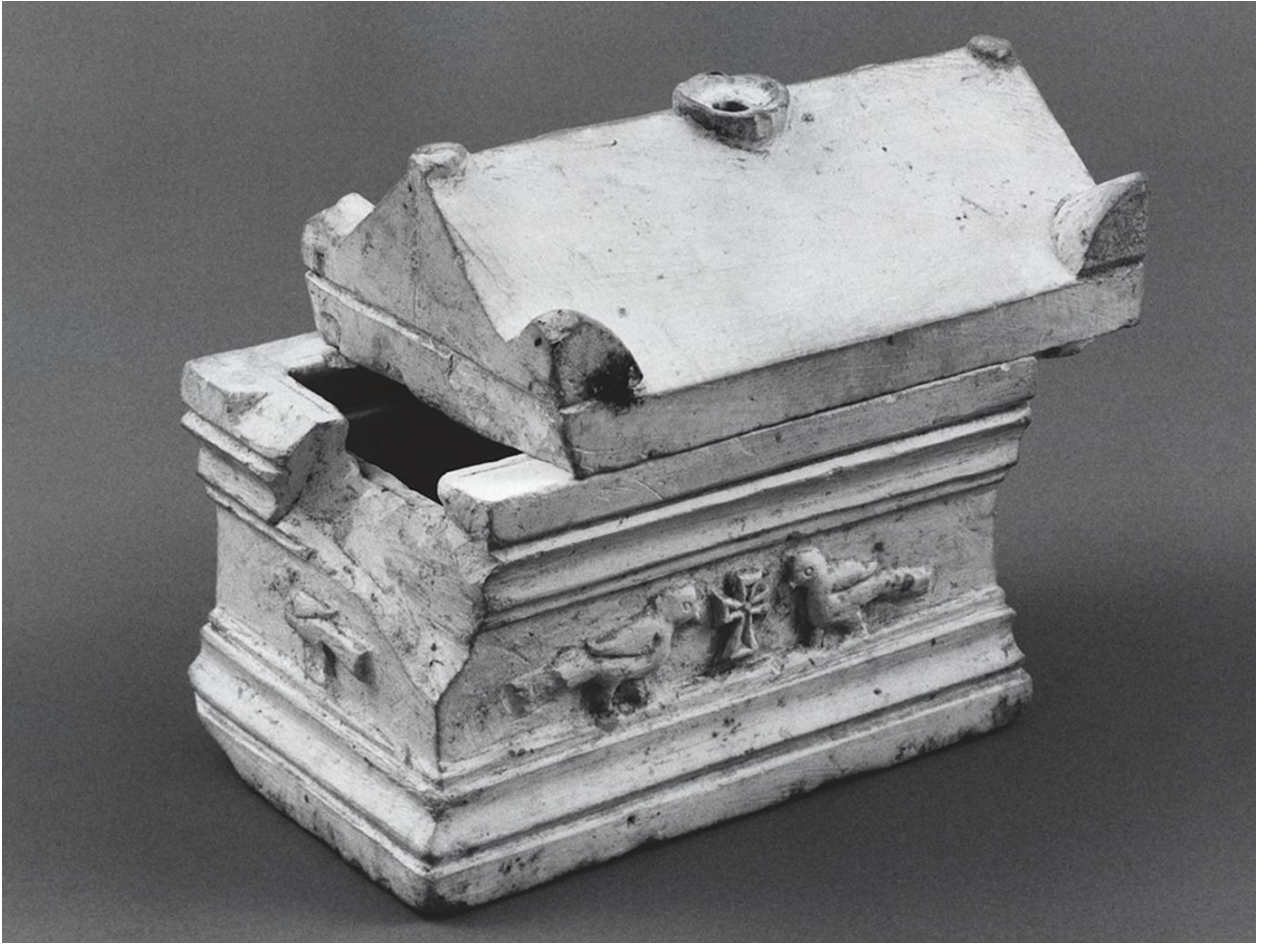


Figure 2. Sarcophagus reliquary, back. X 613. Fifth century CE. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor, or Syria. Limestone. 14.3 x 15.3 x 10.8 cm. Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.



Figure 3. Set of Reliquary Boxes. ca. 350-450 CE. Varna, Bulgaria. Varna Archaeological Museum. After Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 2011.



Figure 4. Reliquary. 1/88. Fifth/sixth century CE. Syria. Gypsum. 36 x 38 x 23 cm. Photo by Antje Voigt, Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art of the National Museums in Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz.



Figure 5. Dome mosaic program with Baptism of Christ with dove. 450-470 CE.
Orthodox Baptistry of Neon, Ravenna, Italy.



Figure 6. Pilgrim Flask of St. Menas. 48.2541. Sixth century CE. Abu Mina, Egypt. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.



Figure 7. Sancta Sanctorum reliquary. Sixth century CE. After Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 2011.



Figure 8. Interior view of vitrine where the Menil reliquary was previously displayed in the Byzantine Gallery in 2013. The Menil Collection, Houston.

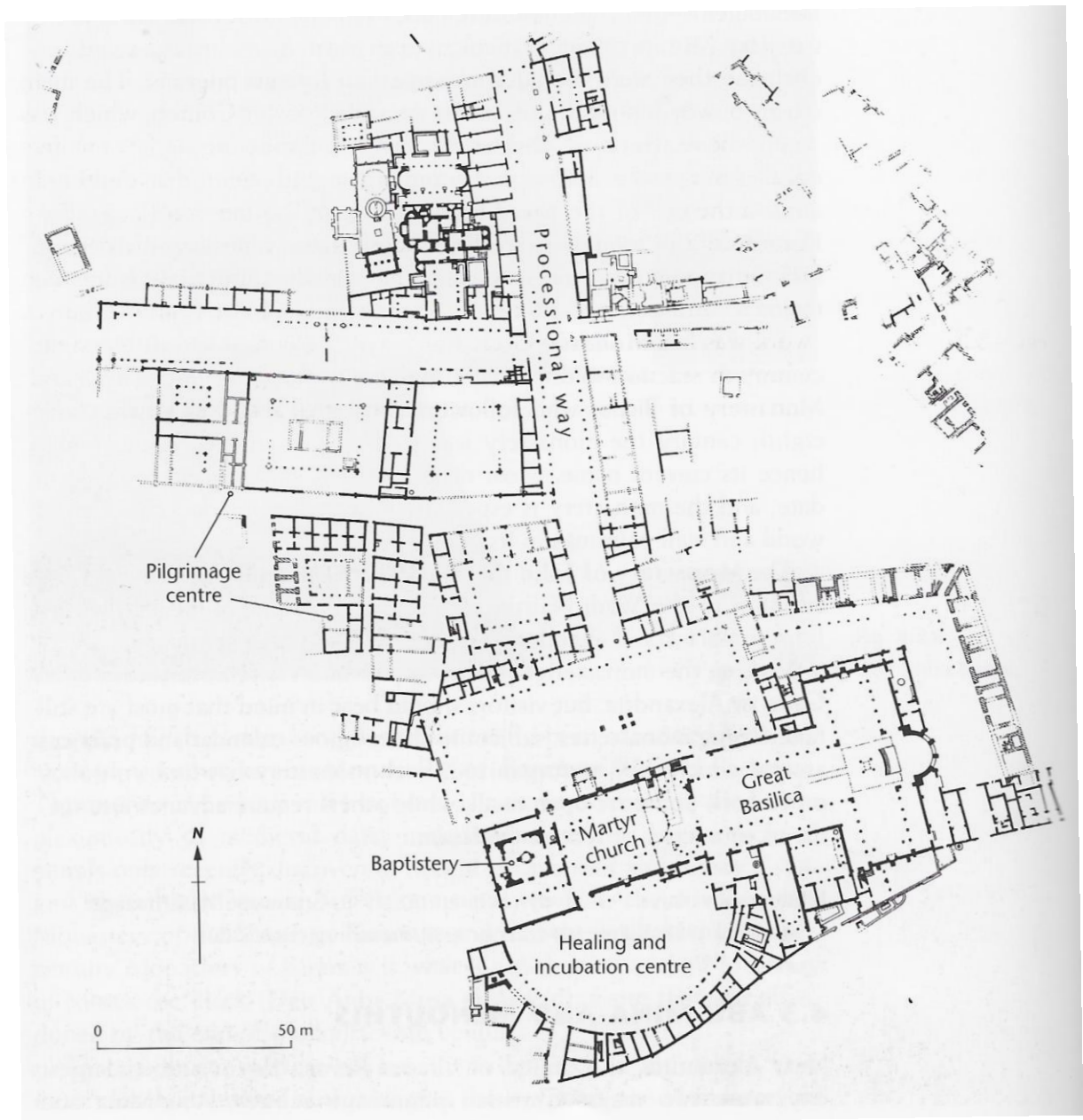


Figure 9. Pilgrimage site of Abu Mina. ca. 363 CE. Egypt. After Bagnall, *Egypt*, 2004. Original plan after Grossman, "The Pilgrimage Center of Abû Mînâ," 1998.

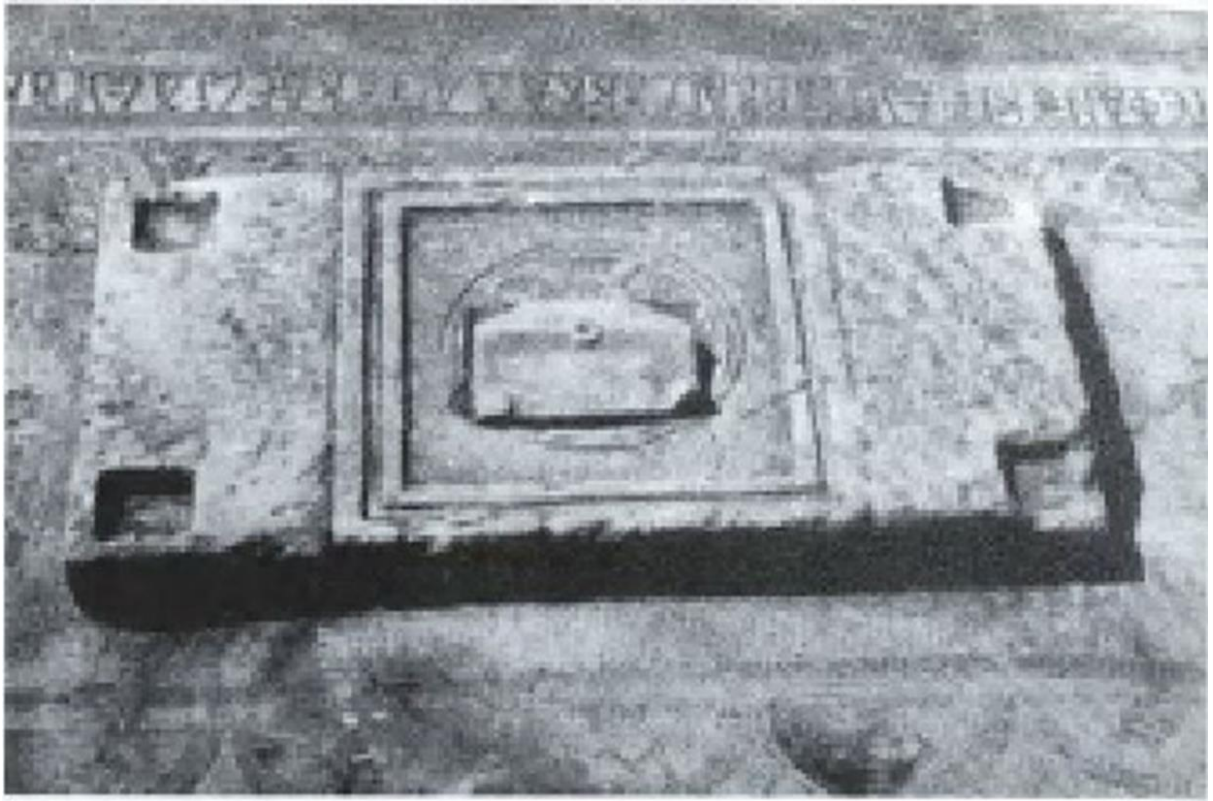


Figure 10. Altar-base with sarcophagus reliquary (its top opening visible) still in its
loculus. 594 CE. Church of St. Basil, Rihab, Jordan. Photo by Harding, 1936. After
Andreescu-Treadgold, "Early Byzantine Reliquary," 1992.



Figure 11. Reliquary deposited at consecration of church. Early Byzantine. Pomorie, Bulgaria. Photo by Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism. After Lazaridou, *Transition to Christianity*, 2011.



Figure 12. Sarcophagus reliquary, interior of base. X 613. Fifth century CE. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor, or Syria. Limestone. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo by author.



Figure 13. Sarcophagus reliquary, bottom of lid. X 613. Fifth century CE. Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor, or Syria. Limestone. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo by author.



Figure 14. Reliquary in the Shape of a Sarcophagus. Y1945-249 a-b. Sixth century CE. Eastern Mediterranean. Marble. 13 x 15.5 x 9 cm. Princeton University Art Museum.



Figure 15. Reliquary in sarcophagus form. 10/87. Fifth/sixth century CE. Syria, Apamene. Gypsum. 30.5 x 39.5 x 18 cm. Photo by Jürgen Liepe, Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art of the National Museums in Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz.



Figure 16. Garland sarcophagus. 23.29. ca. 150-180 CE. Asia Minor. Marble. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. After Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 2011.



Figure 17. Reliquary of the Staff of Peter. ca. 980 CE. Limburg an der Lahn, Germany, St. Georg Cathedral Treasury. Gold, copper, gems. After Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do," 2010.



Figure 18. Reliquary bust of a companion of Saint Ursula with opening on chest through which relics would have been visible. 17.190.728. ca. 1520-30 CE. Belgian, oak, paint, gold, and plaster. 45.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 19. The Pola Casket, or Capsella of Samagher. 440 CE. Discovered beneath altar of the Church of Sant'Ermagora di Samagher, Croatia. Wood, ivory. Archaeological Museum of Venice. After Bagnoli, *Treasures of Heaven*, 2011.



Figure 20. Relief of a Stylite Saint. (9/63). Fifth-sixth century CE. Syria. Basalt. 84.5 x 76 x 18.5 cm. Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Berlin.



Figure 21. Clay *eulogia* token of Saint Symeon the Younger, obverse and reverse. Seventh century CE. Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

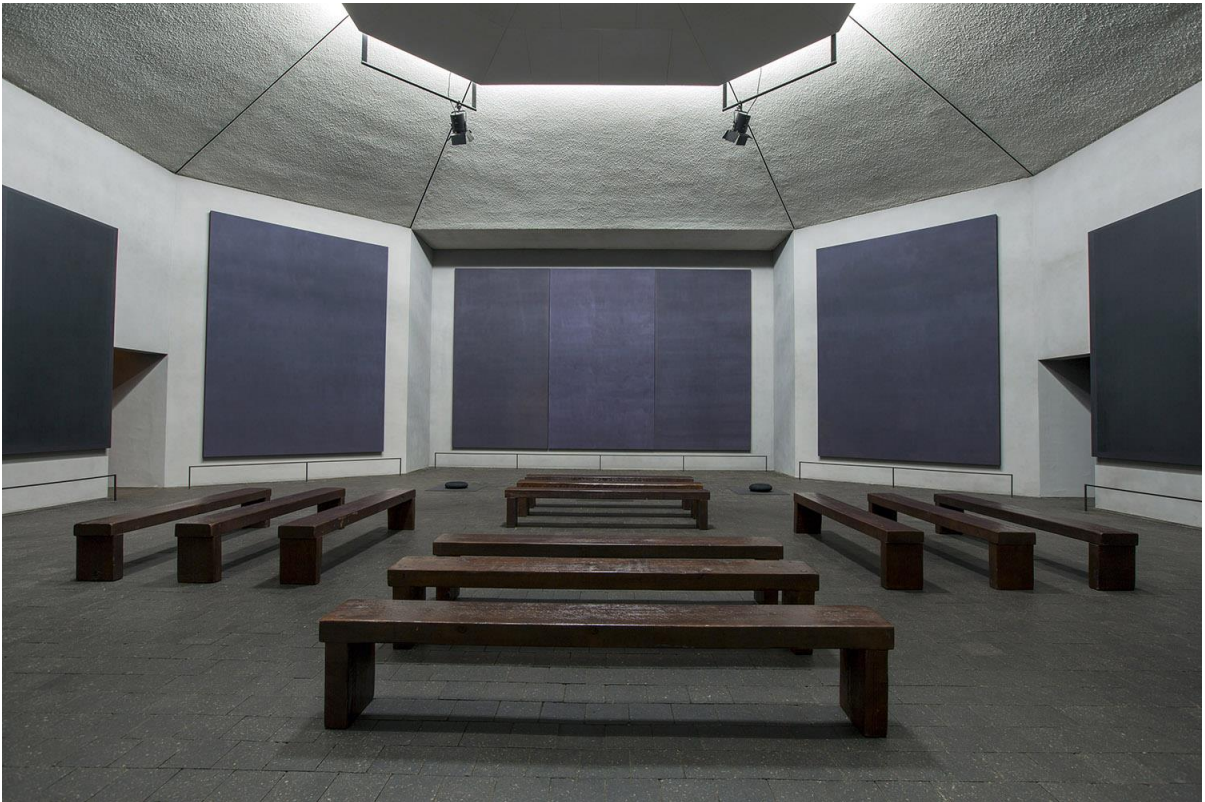


Figure 22. Rothko Chapel, interior. The Rothko Chapel, Houston.



Figure 23. Main Menil Collection building, exterior. The Menil Collection, Houston.



Figure 24. Restored apse mural. Thirteenth century. Lysi, Cyprus. After Carr, *Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered*, 1991.



Figure 25. Restored dome mural. Thirteenth century. Lysi, Cyprus. After Carr, *Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered*, 1991.



Figure 26. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior. Photo by Paul Warchol. The Menil Collection, Houston.



Figure 27. Menil Collection Byzantine gallery as of 2013. The Menil Collection, Houston.

X 613
Reliquary
Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor or Syria; Byzantine
5th century
Limestone
5-3/8 x 6 x 4-1/4 inches
14.3 x 15.3 x 10.8 cm

12/21/2009

X 613
Reliquary
Southwestern Europe, Asia Minor or Syria
Byzantine, 5th century
Limestone
5-3/8 x 6 x 4-1/4 inches
14.3 x 15.3 x 10.8 cm
Credit Line: The Menil Collection, Houston

Source of entry: TMC gall. label 06/01/90

Credit Line: The Menil Collection, Houston

PROVENANCE:

- J. J. Klejman, N.Y.
- John and Dominique de Menil (1966)
- Menil Foundation, Inc. (1995) 1997



EXHIBITED:

- Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. *A Young Teaching Collection* (organized by the Art Dept., University of St. Thomas) (Nov. 7, 1968 - Jan. 12, 1969), not in catalog
- Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. *Devotional Art of Living Religions* (1971), no catalog
- Rice Museum, Rice University, Houston. *Security in Byzantium: Locking, Sealing, Weighing* (Mar. 15 - May 24, 1981), Supplemental item - not listed in catalog. Did not travel to other venues.



5/20/2003

Figure 28. Object file of the Menil Sarcophagus Reliquary (X613). Courtesy of The Menil Collection, Houston.



Figure 29. Reliquary. X 819. ca. 500 CE. Possibly Macedonia. Gold. 4.4 x 6.7 x 3.8 cm.
Photo by Hickey-Robertson, Houston. The Menil Collection, Houston.

The Art Institute is made up of many different buildings. All buildings are connected on the first level only.

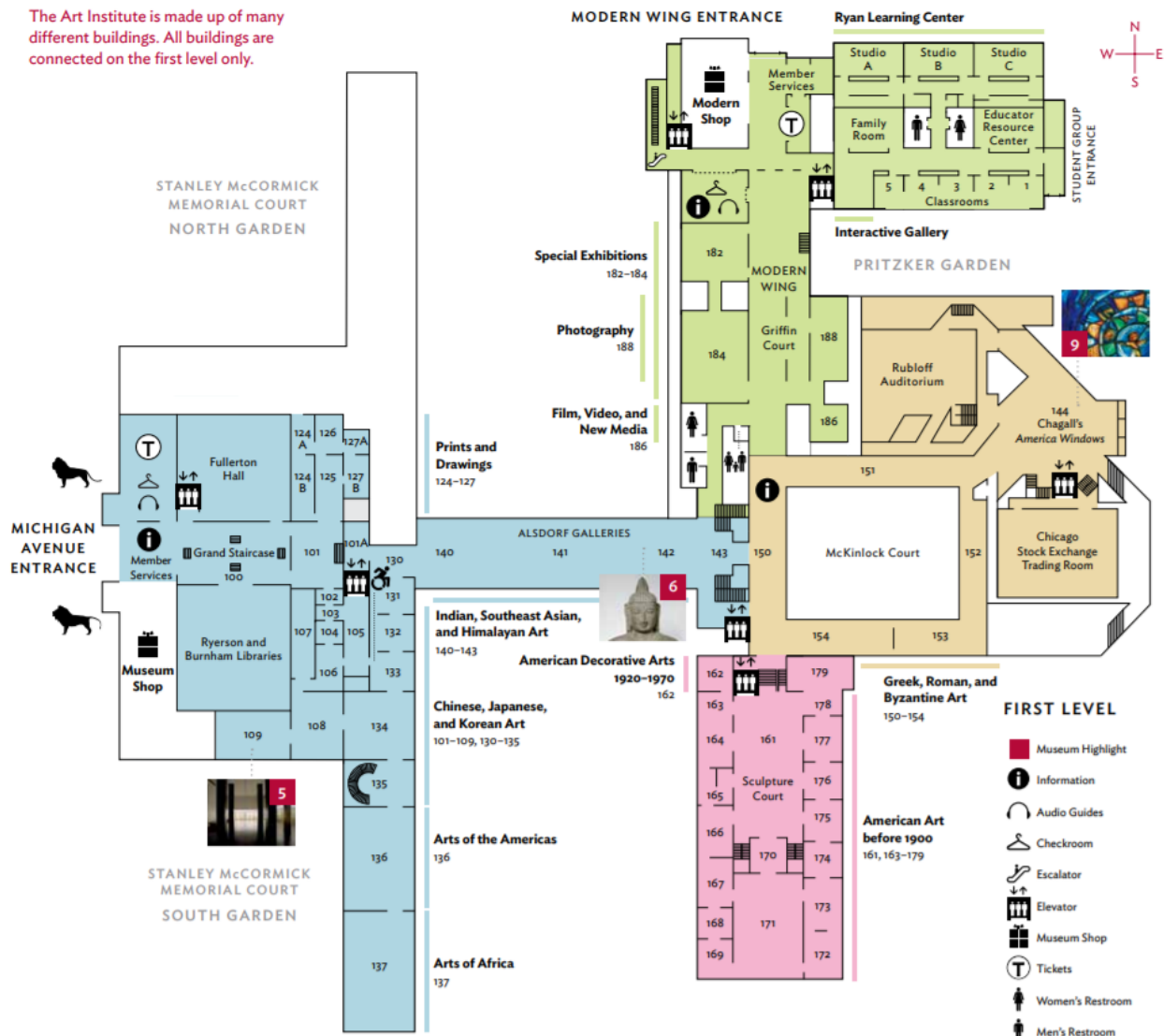


Figure 30. Floor plan, First floor of the Art Institute of Chicago showing Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Art in galleries 150-154. Image by Chris Lake. The Art Institute of Chicago.

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