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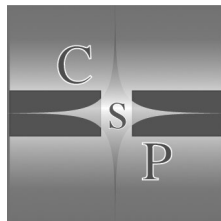
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Methods and the Medievalist: Current Approaches in Medieval Studies

Edited by

Marko Lamberg, Jesse Keskiaho, Elina Räsänen
and Olga Timofeeva,
with Leila Virtanen



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THE VISIBLE AND THE TANGIBLE: QUESTIONS OF MATERIALITY IN THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL IMAGES AND OBJECTS¹

SOFIA LAHTI & ELINA RÄSÄNEN

Research may make visible the absence that death is, but it also perpetually resurrects the desire to make meaning where it no longer exists.

—Michael Ann Holly, “What is Research in Art History Anyway?,” 224

Introduction

Visuality and visual culture have been key concepts in many new approaches in art historical studies, including those focused on the Middle Ages. These studies have concentrated on varying aspects of visibility; some have focused on vision, visual experience, and sight, others more on the cultural contexts of the chosen images or objects, whereas still others have been inclined to thematic and theoretical concerns.² Consequently, the ways to interpret medieval images have diversified; methods have

¹ This article closely reflects our previous work. Sofia Lahti has given related papers in the NORDIK conference in Bergen 23rd of September 2006 and in the Dies mediaevales conference in Jyväskylä 13th of October 2006, and Elina Räsänen has developed the presented themes in several of her lectures and public presentations; for instance, in a panel discussion concerning visual studies held at the Department of Art History in Helsinki University in 3rd of November 2006. For good advice and inspiring discussions we would like to thank Mirja-Liisa Waismaa-Pietarila, Helena Edgren and Åsa Ringbom, along with Hanna Johansson and Kati Kivinen.

² This is a simplification of large literature and hybrid viewpoints. For the first “group,” see for instance, Biernoff, “Carnal Relations: Embodied Sight in Merleau-Ponty, Roger Bacon and St Francis,” 39-52, and Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting*; for the second, Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*. For the third, see, for instance, Mills, *Suspended Animation. Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture*. On the history of the concept of visibility, see Mirzoeff, “On Visuality.”

become less tied to the iconological tradition, but are instead appropriating theories from various discourses. These are often based on multiple ways of seeing the images, depending on the position of the viewer, whether it is that of the present-day scholar or the reconstructed medieval beholder.

Many of the new scholarly approaches have brought forth compelling and thought-provoking analyses, invigorating academic discussion. However, some contributions, while attentive to visual features and introducing theoretical patterns, have tended to dismiss the studied object itself, and its material and historical elements. "The so-called new art history," says the art historian Michael Ann Holly, "explicitly champions 'theory' at the expense of empirical research as it concentrates on the politics and subjectivity of both history and history writing." According to her, the center is not holding.³ W. J. T. Mitchell argues compellingly for thorough knowledge of the material: "The erosion of the forensic skills of connoisseurship and authentication among art historians in favor of a generalized 'iconological' interpretive expertise is a trade-off that ought to trouble us."⁴

It is this interplay between the visual and the material in medieval art we have sought to explore in this article. Hence, what we are discussing here is how much we need to know about an object before analyzing it and what kinds of questions we can and need to ask. We argue that in understanding and interpreting medieval images, their materiality should not be neglected; their factual, material characteristics are essential, not only on the premise of giving the studied work the attention it deserves, but also because these components affect the visual factors *per se*.

What can an art historian do, then, with an object that is no longer available, and whose visuality and materiality need to be reconstructed? How much can we imagine about its background? How much can we venture to guess, while still remaining scientific? When trying to track down these vanished objects and their meanings, the slide from art history towards cultural, economical, social, and religious history is inevitable. The possible reconstruction is predestined to be a hypothesis, but it can still reveal something of the visual framework of the object.

³ Holly, "What is Research in Art History Anyway?," 222. She has expressed this concern also in her other writings; see "Now and then," 240; "Visual Studies, Historiography and Aesthetics," 77, *passim*. See also Liepe, "Den groteska medeltiden. Forskarna och medeltidens baksida," 9.

⁴ Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 88. On images as material objects, see also Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?* On historical interpretations of images, see also Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 10-1 and 48-53; Baschet, "Introduction: L'image-objet," 7-26.

We will elaborate on these issues through two case studies concerning late-medieval ecclesiastical artifacts; one whose origin and “identity” is unknown, and another which is outstandingly visual yet dependent on its material display. The first object is a lost reliquary, represented today only by a group of relics, a skull and two arm bones wrapped in fragmentary pieces of cloth. The bones now appear more material rather than visual, because of the loss of their decorative and visual dimension, the reliquary. Consequently, the reliquary has been absent from art historical discourse. Nonetheless, the lost visuality needs to be recognized in order to understand the validity of the object itself. In our second case, the situation is quite the opposite: we will explore the interpretations of a late medieval altarpiece whose visuality, in turn, is striking. But its visual outcome may be misleading if the material elements of the altarpiece are not fully credited: its present condition has been drastically altered from the original setting—a fact that some researchers seem to have overlooked. The discussed altarpiece, or reredos, is a work by Master Francke of Hamburg, dated ca. 1420. Both objects under scrutiny have been in devotional use in the medieval Turku (Lat. Aboa, Sw. Åbo) Diocese, then the Finnish part of the Swedish realm.

Opaque Past of Opaque Objects

Within art history, the division between art and material culture has lost its centrality as the emphasis has shifted from the canonic concept of art towards the wider concepts of image and visuality. Visual culture studies, as this field of inquiry, or “movement”⁵ is often called, has been on the front line. As one of its promoters, Keith Moxey has formulated, “[V]isual studies -- refuses to restrict its interests to a consideration of those objects with which aesthetic claims have traditionally been associated.”⁶ In other words, visual studies appropriate all kinds of visual material around us including images produced, for instance, by minorities and amateurs. Likewise, advertisements or other commercial output has attracted a great deal of scholarly interest.⁷

When focusing on the Middle Ages, however, the idea of questioning the aesthetically built boundaries of the art historical discipline, which

⁵ This is the term Mieke Bal has suggested for visual culture studies. See Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” 6.

⁶ Moxey, “Disciplines of the Visual: Art History, Visual Studies, and Globalization,” 170.

⁷ Of this kind, see, for example, Moxey, “Disciplines of the Visual”; Vänskä, “Why are there no Lesbian Advertisements?”

formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is not so dramatic. Medieval images and objects are commonly exhibited in historical museums, not in art museums. Like the art of the 'world cultures,' medieval art has primarily been presented as the material expression of a certain culture or religion. Furthermore, iconographical interest, more or less indispensable in the study of medieval art, has always been directed to the minor, less appreciated objects and everyday material as well.⁸ Nevertheless, interest in the "marginalized" visualizations has evidently increased in recent decades.⁹

The importance of paintings, sculptures, and other ecclesiastical objects in conveying and interpreting the Christian faith is well known and documented. Power, social status, and legal actions were underlined with visual magnificence. However, the regimes of power affecting the visual world of the Middle Ages are often hypothetical and not so easy to discern as has been suggested; works of art did not merely illustrate the thoughts of the best known theologians and, furthermore, the religious and theological imagination was wide and inventive.¹⁰ As several researchers have remarked in recent years, art, visibility, or attitudes towards the human body, to name a few concepts, were not homogenous entities in the long course of the Middle Ages.¹¹ Thus, contrary to the claims presented by Keith Moxey, who suggests that historical distance enables us to see the epistemic systems supporting the production of religious art or courtly cultures while the present is often opaque to us,¹² our contention is that the historical distance makes it more demanding.

Medieval meanings of concepts like image and vision are among the common interests of historians of art, culture, and philosophy. In comparison to our own time, everyday life in the Middle Ages included fewer images, but the relation to each image is considered to have been

⁸ See Holly, "Visual Studies," 81–3; Sears, "Pictorial Conventions," 140-1.

⁹ See for instance Edgren, "'Primitive' Paintings: the Visual World of Populus Rusticus"; Armstead, "Interpreting Images of Women with Books in Misericords." Many contributions have concerned obscene acts or images depicting compelling bodily representations. Of which, see for instance the anthology *Medieval obscenities*; Camille, "At the sign of the 'Spinning Sow': the 'other' Chartres and images of everyday life of the medieval street". For a critical view on the results of this trend, see Liepe, "Den groteske medeltiden," 6-11.

¹⁰ Newman, *God and the Goddesses. Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*, esp. 294-305.

¹¹ Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*; Baschet, "Pourquoi élaborer de bases de données d'image? Propositions pour une iconographique sérielle," 61-2.

¹² Moxey, "Disciplines of the Visual," 166 and 172.

more intense.¹³ Moreover, seeing and looking were understood as a “quasi-tactile” activity.¹⁴ Following the Aristotelian tradition, several medieval thinkers described the visual perception as a process where the object physically affects the spectator through the eye.¹⁵ The Augustinian explanation implied a different conception of active seeing, where the soul uses the eye to reach out and meet the object.¹⁶ Accordingly, Mark Poster has argued that the importance of vision and visual observation in the Middle Ages might have been even more fundamental as several now measurable phenomena were then determined with the eye.¹⁷

Eyesight and visual observation are still indispensable tools for the history or critique of art, but even those need to be compromised in certain cases in order not to ignore a work of art that cannot be seen. The earliest written descriptions of artistic images, from the Roman Pliny the Elder to Giorgio Vasari in sixteenth-century Italy, refer to many no-longer-existing works of art. Before the era of easy and convenient travel and detailed color reproductions, art historians based a large part of their work on such verbal descriptions, memory, drawings, or black and white reproductions of prevailing or lost images.¹⁸ By now, any deeper analysis of an existing work of art not based on first-hand knowledge can be called dubious. Nonetheless, the vanished objects continue to call for a different approach, based on all the available substitutes for actual seeing.

It has been pointed out that art history cannot escape, and should not deny, the relative impossibility of a complete and final interpretation, verbalization, reconstruction, or knowledge of an image, especially when it belongs to a different time and culture from ours.¹⁹ The immaterialized reliquaries discussed below may perhaps be conceived as an extreme example or allegory of all the knowledge lost in the temporal distance that separates us from medieval images.

¹³ Baschet, “Introduction: L’image-objet,” 14-5; Bann, “Shrines, Curiosities, and the Rhetoric of Display,” 15-29. Belting, *Bild und Kult*, passim.

¹⁴ O’Daly, *Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind*, 82.

¹⁵ See, for example, Spruit, *Species intelligibilis*, 36-49.

¹⁶ See, for example, O’Daly, 82-6. For an art historical approach to the medieval theories of seeing, see Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, esp. 95-103. A “cinematic” interpretation of the Augustinian mode of seeing is suggested by Desmond & Sheingorn, *Myth, Montage, & Visuality in Late Medieval Manuscript Culture*, 2-3.

¹⁷ Poster, “Visual Studies as Media Studies,” 67-70.

¹⁸ Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 8-9; Mitchell, “Showing Seeing,” 88; Holly, *Past Looking*, 1-2.

¹⁹ Didi-Huberman, *Devant l’image*, 9-17, 29-30, 48-9 etc.; Mitchell, “Showing Seeing,” 91.

Lonely Bones and the Missing Monstrances of St Henrik

The medieval Diocese of Turku possessed dozens of relics with reliquaries. Unfortunately, only little remains to study; most of the objects have either disappeared completely, or no longer possess their proper visuality and identity.²⁰ The most treasured relics in the Turku Cathedral were undoubtedly the head and arms of the martyred Bishop Henrik, who, according to legend, came to Christianize Finns in the twelfth century.²¹ He was the patron saint of the Cathedral together with the Virgin Mary and later St Erik of Sweden.²² The skull and two arm-bones still survive, but not their reliquaries—in practice, the relics are reduced to lonely bones. Their “loneliness” is at least threefold: they are deprived of their intended visuality, their place in the cult context, and they are out of place among conventional art historical objects. The bones have been secluded in museum collections and unavailable for public viewing. The lost reliquary has not been a subject of research or interpretations as such, but it is mentioned in studies concerning Turku Cathedral, St Henrik, the Swedish church silver confiscations, and the like.²³

The head reliquary of St Henrik was probably the largest and most valuable ecclesiastical silver object in the cathedral. During the Reformation, in 1557 to be precise, it was confiscated along with almost all of the ecclesiastical silver found in the diocese by the Swedish king Gustav Vasa.²⁴ The cranium and arm bones were later found with remains of silk wrappings hidden in a niche in the sacristy of the cathedral.²⁵ It seems likely that they were placed there before or during the upheaval of Reformation in order to keep them safe yet, at the same time, they were withdrawn from the official cult; hiding relics and images of saints was a

²⁰ On relics and reliquaries in the Turku Cathedral, see Lahti, “Capse pro reliquiis”; Rinne, *Pyhä Henrik, piispa ja marttyyri*.

²¹ For a recent critical edition of the legend, see Heikkilä, *Pyhän Henrikin legenda*.

²² *Finlands Medeltidsurkunder (FMU)* 1517.

²³ Rinne, *Pyhä Henrik*, 349-353; Källström, *Medeltida kyrksilver*, 117-8, 324-5; Palola, *Maunu Tavast ja Olavi Maununpoika*, 198-9; Lahti, “Capse pro reliquiis,” 12-3; Lahti, “Documents from Gustav Vasa’s administration,” 173-83; Heikkilä, *Pyhän Henrikin legenda*, 109.

²⁴ Källström, *Medeltida kyrksilver från Sverige och Finland förlorat genom Gustav Vasas konfiskationer*, 324-5.

²⁵ Rinne, *Pyhä Henrik, piispa ja marttyyri*, 273-300, 382-97. On other known relics and reliquaries of St Henrik, see Lahti, “Pyhän Henrikin reliikit materiaalisena läsnäolona,” 70-86; Hiekkänen, *Suomen keskiajan kivikirkot*, 209; Heikkilä, *Pyhän Henrikin legenda*, 102-12.

common practice under such circumstances.²⁶

Hence, our materials for an art historical survey are a lost reliquary and the existing bones considered to have been inside it. For the religious context, a relic and a reliquary need each other. Still, there is a difference: a reliquary without a relic can be visually complete, rich, and laden with meaning, whereas a relic without its reliquary (or other legitimate closed space, like an altar niche) has virtually lost its identity. Relics and reliquaries are characterized by their exceptional position between the spiritual, the visual, and the material, or in terms of research, between history and art history. Until recently, they have been analyzed by art and church historians, but often as separate objects. Reliquaries are presented as impressive and luxurious artworks in catalogues and art history books, whereas relics appear in the context of hagiography and in the histories of churches and pilgrimages.²⁷ In this respect, it is not reasonable to approach only one of them. Finally, since the 1990s, the relationship between relic and image in the cult context has indeed attracted more scholarly attention.²⁸

The questions posed to the bones by researchers—State archaeologist Juhani Rinne, who found the bones in the wall-niche in 1924, and his successor C. A. Nordman—mainly concerned attributing the bones to St Henrik and comparing them to other relic bones.²⁹ As the bones were now appreciated in either a Lutheran or profane context, their relic status was not relevant; St Henrik had become simply an eminent—and possibly—historical figure. The skull was measured and analyzed. The medical analysis of the 1920s stated that the owner of the cranium had been a foreigner and a male, just as the Bishop was assumed to be—but with a rather small brain cavity. This was not an encouraging finding, for scientists at the time were largely convinced that the more educated

²⁶ See Tarlow, “Reformation and Transformation,” 108-21; Tegnér, “The Art of the Goldsmith,” 134-9.

²⁷ On reliquaries, see, for instance, Braun, *Die Reliquiare der Christlichen Kulte und ihre Entwicklung*; Legner, *Reliquien in Kunst und Kult*; van Os, *The way to Heaven*. On relics, see, for instance, Geary, *Furta Sacra*; Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints*; Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien*.

²⁸ See e.g., Belting, *Bild und Kult*, passim; Schmitt, “Les reliques et les images,” 145-59; Hahn, “The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries,” 20-31; Drake Boehm, “Body-Part Reliquaries: The State of Research,” 8-19.

²⁹ Rinne, *Pyhä Henrik*, 282-300; Nordman, “En relik av Erik den Helige i Åbo domkyrka,” 309-11. The connection between the bones and St Henrik is not unanimously accepted; see, for example, Hiekkänen, *Suomen keskiajan kivikirkot*, 209, fn 972. As for our article, the connection between these particular bones and the lost reliquaries is not crucial.

classes had larger brains than, say, artisans or servants.³⁰ While research methods develop and new questions are raised, interest in the bones prevails. Catholic communities continue to have bone relics measured, and believers find no contradiction between the medical analysis of the bones and their veneration as relics.³¹ Testing, as such, does not necessarily imply an anachronistic attitude towards the use of relics in the Middle Ages, for then they were examined in order to verify their authenticity and miraculous potential.³²

Today, with a bone relic of a saint at hand, we can pray for miracles or date it with modern methods, but we will still be at loss trying to arrive at the identity of the person. Instead, the questions of art history and visibility can be more interesting. On their own, these bones may now evoke a *memento mori* or a graphic sign of warning—a skull and two crossed bones (see image)—but we can try to go further and envision how the relics have appeared in the eyes of their contemporaries. Was the reliquary made only of silver, or did it have, for example, a core of wood? Was it a bust, or a head and two arm reliquaries, or perhaps a decorated casket? What kind of image or idea of St Henrik could it have represented?

Written descriptions provide us with valuable clues to the original appearances of lost objects or images.³³ As for St Henrik's head reliquary in the Turku Cathedral, two known accounts survive, but both of them are very short and simple—they mainly confirm that the reliquary was made of silver. A priest, implementing the confiscation in 1557, wrote in his list of the cathedral's ecclesiastical silver: "Saint Henrik's gilt monstrance" (*Ett Sancti Henrici förgylt monstrans*).³⁴ Later, in the 1570s the Bishop of Turku, Paulus Juusten, wrote in his chronicle that Henrik's head and arms had been put in or made in silver (*caput et brachia beati Henrici argentea facta*) a hundred years earlier by the Bishop Magnus II Tavast (ca. 1357?-1452).³⁵

³⁰ Rinne, *Pyhä Henrik*, 282-300.

³¹ See, for example, Braccini, *La mano di S. Ubaldo*; Macedo et al, *Esta é a cabeça do São Pantaleão*.

³² See, for example, Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien*, 162.

³³ For good examples of this, see Bann "Shrines, Curiosities, and the Rhetoric of Display," 19-22; Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 1-11.

³⁴ Original: *Sölvkammaren*, 1557-62. See also Lahti, "Documents from Gustav Vasa's administration," 173-83.

³⁵ Juusten, *Catalogus et ordinaria successio episcoporum finlandensium*, 60. The year of the Bishop's birth is uncertain; see Palola, *Maunu Tavast ja Olavi Maununpoika*, 105-6, 427; Juusten, *Catalogus et ordinaria successio episcoporum finlandensium*, 62.

These accounts emphasize the precious materials used to make the reliquary. Although this was surely vital information, it was also one of the easiest things to see and recall about the object. For the priest, the material and weight were crucial because those were the criteria for collecting church treasures for the Crown. For the Bishop Paulus, writing down that the object was made of silver may also have been his tactic to underscore the wealth and generosity of his respected predecessor, Bishop Magnus Tavast. On the other hand, the expression “*argentea facta*” could refer to older, wooden head and arm reliquaries covered or replaced by silver ones.³⁶ Even a thinner gilding of parts of painted wooden surface, as commonly used in fifteenth-century sculpture, could theoretically come into question, but we can leave out that option on the basis of the confiscation: it is highly unlikely that a wooden artifact would have been confiscated with the church silver.

The two accounts lend no clarity to the form of the reliquary or reliquaries of St Henrik. Considering the diversity of silver reliquaries from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a reliquary or monstrance for both the arms and the head would most likely be a casket or a large bust (either a shoulders-and-head bust with a space for the arm bones in the lower part of it, or a bigger one, depicting the saint from head to waist, with hands in a gesturing position).³⁷ However, the head and the both arms probably did have their own reliquaries. In that case, the words *caput et brachia* in Bishop Paulus Juusten’s chronicle would refer directly to the reliquaries, not to the body parts.³⁸ The confiscating priest’s note mentions only one large monstrance of St Henrik, but this does not exclude the separate arm reliquaries, for two reasons: there are other non-specified monstrances on his list, and, secondly, there is also the possibility of the arm reliquaries having been stolen³⁹ or hidden away prior to the confiscation. Among the above-mentioned alternatives, we shall concentrate on the hypothesis of three separate sculptural body-part

³⁶ For a wooden reliquary bust with a later silver casting, see Drake Boehm, 11-3. One solution for combining a skull relic and valuable metal is the gilded skull of St Quentin; see Shortell, “Dismembering Saint Quentin: Gothic Architecture and the Display of Relics,” 38.

³⁷ About the uses of the term ‘monstrance,’ see Belting, *Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter*, 129-30; Braun, *Die Reliquiare*, 55-7, 220.

³⁸ On “caput” and “brachium” as names of reliquaries in medieval inventory lists, see Braun, *Die Reliquiare*, 61-2 and 64-5.

³⁹ There is documentary evidence about robberies in the Cathedral; see *FMU* 5398, 5433.

reliquaries.⁴⁰

For comparison, let us consider later and more detailed verbal descriptions of nearby reliquaries: testimonies of the transfer (*translatio*) of the relics of St Catherine of Vadstena in 1489. Two eyewitnesses report that her bones were wrapped in silk in the tomb, then moved to a decorated coffin and a crystal monstrance with gold and silver, and then an arm was placed in a gilded, hand-shaped silver reliquary. Some relics were placed in a small, beautifully painted, red wooden box lined with red silk, which in turn was inside a bigger reliquary decorated with silk, silver, gold, and gems.⁴¹ The color, materials, and even the form of the arm reliquary were considered worthy of mention. The valuable materials were important for the devotee, but primarily for expressing veneration for the holy relics. Such accounts probably existed from the translation of St Henrik's relics as well.⁴²

Silk was commonly placed between the relic and the reliquary,⁴³ as the softest and most valuable textile, it was deemed worthy of touching the sacred objects. The bones found in the niche in Turku Cathedral also appear to have been wrapped in pieces of silk. Around the skull, a cloth was stitched to follow its form in a way suggesting that the cranial bone was only meant to be partially visible. The silk near the arm bones, however, was only loosely around them, as though it had only been used to protect them in their hiding place after the confiscation of the reliquaries. The study of arm reliquaries from the same period can offer possible models of how the arm bones were placed in a reliquary.

A notable number of silver head and arm reliquaries from the beginning of the fifteenth century have survived in Europe. However, only a few of them are in Northern Europe, where wood was more commonly used for ecclesiastical artifacts.⁴⁴ Bishop Henrik's "monstrance" bust would have been one of the fewer than ten silver head reliquaries in Sweden, and one of the largest among those—according to the confiscation report, it weighed five kilograms—which must have

⁴⁰ A similar example of lost reliquaries for head and arms, only known from medieval documents, is presented in Shortell, "Dismembering Saint Quentin", 38.

⁴¹ *Den stora kyrkofesten för Sankta Katarina i Vadstena år 1489*, 46-9.

⁴² There is one description of a relic translation from the Turku Diocese: a plan for the translation of Bishop Hemming's relics into a new reliquary in 1514. The only reliquary reference in it is a suggestion for a gold-painted oak coffin with the Bishop's coat-of-arms; see *FMU* 5715.

⁴³ See, for example, Laporte, *Le trésor des saints de Chelles*, 133-50; Stauffer, *Die Mittelalterliche Textilien von St. Servatius in Maastricht*, 15-6.

⁴⁴ Källström, *Medeltida kyrksilver från Sverige och Finland*, 146.

enhanced the awe it inspired and its pivotal significance for the cathedral. The silver arm reliquaries were slightly more common. St Henrik's arm reliquaries must have been substantial as well, close to the natural size, in order to accommodate the whole arm bone. The bust and the arms ought to have all carried the episcopal symbols, such as the miter and the bishop's ring, representing St Henrik's liturgical authority and functions.⁴⁵

Hand-shaped fifteenth-century silver reliquaries for the arm bones of St Birgitta and St Eskil are housed in the collections of the Historical Museum in Stockholm.⁴⁶ Each has a lens-shaped crystal 'window' which followed the convention of exposing the bone, as if to confirm the relic's authenticity by showing it.⁴⁷ As it is likely that St Henrik's reliquaries were made during the same period, it is plausible that his bones too were visible through such windows, at least the arms in their hand-shaped reliquaries. To return to the term 'monstrance,' which is used by the confiscating priest, it may actually have been chosen intentionally to refer to the character of the object showing its contents. With increasing demands for visibility, the relics of St Henrik, as the only "local" saint of the Diocese,⁴⁸ would most plausibly be the first ones to be viewed through a lens. This makes the current bareness of the bones appear slightly less distant from their medieval setting: in the fifteenth century, the surface of the bone, albeit often partly wrapped in textile, was part of the visual appearance of the reliquary. This interplay between inside and outside, image and object were highlighted by the window-like lens in the reliquaries.

⁴⁵ According to Cynthia Hahn, arm reliquaries of bishops were usually luxuriously dressed, imitating the hands of living bishops performing liturgical actions; besides, arm reliquaries are often those of bishops. Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints," 26-7. For a discussion of the gestures, contents, uses and meanings of arm reliquaries, see Hahn, *passim*.

⁴⁶ These reliquaries survived the confiscations because they had been buried underground by a Catholic bishop. St Birgitta was a visionary noble woman, but St Eskil was a martyred bishop with a story very similar to that of Bishop Henrik. On the reliquaries, see *Margrete*, 399-400; *Reliker och relikvarier från svenska kyrkor*, 23; *Linköpings domkyrka*, 80.

⁴⁷ The first reliquaries with transparent crystal parts appeared in the beginning of the thirteenth century. On the growing demands for the visibility of the relic, see Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter*, 129; Belting, *Bild und Kult*, 338; Diedrichs, *Vom Glauben zum Sehen*, *passim*; also Hahn, "Seeing and Believing," 1106.

⁴⁸ By that time, the preparations for the beatification of Bishop Hemming of Turku had begun, but they were not finished before the Reformation. See, for example, *FMU* 4619, 5714, 5715, 5725, 5736.

The reliquaries of St Henrik were from the same period as the altarpiece discussed in the next section of our article, and they belonged to the same diocese, apparently having been brought there from abroad. Notwithstanding their ostensible difference they have even more in common; both of them are good examples of the three-dimensionality of the medieval images communicating in the field of the material and the tactile—not just the visual. In addition, their spiritual use is intertwined. According to Hans Belting, one of the factors behind the development of winged altarpieces was, in fact, the tradition of keeping reliquaries behind the altar; the wings of early altarpieces enclosed both images and relics.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Michael Camille has suggested that Master Francke's art, both the conception of images and the viewer's response, were influenced by what he calls a "reliquary aesthetic." This means that the intensity is focused "around the minute sensations not of representations, but of real."⁵⁰ Thus, the fundamental difference between the reliquaries and the altarpiece resides in their physical appearance and how this can serve as a basis for interpretations; while most of the discussion on the St Henrik reliquaries is based on hypotheses, the St Barbara altarpiece by Master Francke still exists and can be encountered and observed.

Dissections of the St Barbara Altarpiece

The St Barbara altarpiece by Master Francke of Hamburg is a wooden polyptych consisting of five parts: a carved centerpiece, or corpus, and two pairs of painted wings.⁵¹ This is a typical structure for northern European altarpieces from the late Middle Ages. The corpus and the images flanking it have a Marianic theme; they depict the life of the Virgin, both her doings here on earth and later interventions from heaven. To the former, earthly sphere belong the two motifs on the left wing showing the Nativity

⁴⁹ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 443-53.

⁵⁰ Camille, "Seductions of the Flesh. Meister Francke's Female 'Man' of Sorrows," 247. On Camille's interpretations on Master Francke's art, see also "Mimetic Identification and Passion Devotion in the Later Middle Ages: A Double-sided Panel by Meister Francke."

⁵¹ On the St Barbara altarpiece, see, for instance, Meinander, *Medeltida altarskåp och träsniderier i Finland*, 157-77; Goldschmidt, "Ein Altarschrein Meister Francke's in Finnland," 17-22; Pauli, "Der Barbara-Altar des Meisters Francke," 106-15; Martens, *Meister Francke*, esp. 40-50; Pylkkänen, *Sancta Barbara*; Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur i Finland*, 323-7; Riska, *Vehmaan rovastikunta*; exhibition catalogue *Meister Francke und die Kunst um 1400*: Liepe, "Barbaraskåpet från Kaland"; Mills, *Suspended Animation*, 106-44.

and the Circumcision of Christ. The latter, the *miracula* part, is on the right wing: on the top visualizing the punishment of a Jew who interfered with the Virgin's funeral, and on the bottom the Theophilus legend.⁵² The corpus of the altarpiece is thus manifesting the transmission between the earthly and heavenly existences of the Virgin Mary, that is, her death and the subsequent Coronation in heaven.

The altarpiece is primarily known for its eloquent paintings. Eight painted panels on the wings, or shutters, of the altarpiece illustrate the cruel yet triumphant legend of St Barbara, a virgin martyr, who purportedly lived in Nicomedia in the fifth century.⁵³ The paintings on the first wings are on the other side of the Marian themes, and on the second wings on their inner side. The visual hagiography of St Barbara is depicted in two rows; the four panels of the upper register show her explaining the Holy Trinity to her father, her escape, pursuit, and capture. The other four panels in the lower row depict her examination by the prefect Martianus, and the ensuing torments; she was flagellated, burnt, her breasts were cut off, and in the end, she was beheaded by her own father. The paintings on the back of the outer wings, those visible when the altarpiece was completely closed, have not survived. The altarpiece was acquired by the National Museum of Finland in 1903 from the parish church of Kalanti (formerly Uusikirkko; Nykyrko in Swedish).

During the past hundred years the altarpiece has, after the early upheaval of its "discovery" and later attribution to the Master Francke of Hamburg, attracted attention from various quarters.⁵⁴ Almost without exception the research has been concerned only with the St Barbara cycle, but not the whole sculptural unity. However, the paintings have commonly had only a peripheral role in studies examining larger contexts, similar iconographical themes, or focusing on other works by the same master, who presumably was a Dominican friar with Flemish contacts.⁵⁵

⁵² On the images of the miracles of the Virgin Mary, see, for instance, Edgren, *Mercy and Justice. Miracles of the Virgin Mary in Finnish Medieval Wall-Paintings*.

⁵³ Nemitz & Thierse offer a general survey of the cult and imagery of St Barbara in *St. Barbara: Weg einer Heiligen durch die Zeit*.

⁵⁴ As the altarpiece had been inside the church and not "covered" at all, it had certainly existed to the parishioners.

⁵⁵ These include Hirschfeld, "Hat meister France für Jean sans Peur von Burgund gearbeitet?," *passim*.; Labuda, "Wort und Bild im späten Mittelalter am Beispiel des Breslauer Barbara-Altars," esp. 42-9; Camille, "Seductions of the Flesh. Meister Francke's Female 'Man' of Sorrows," 257; Stewen, *Beginnings of Being*, 84-90.

Recently, the St Barbara altarpiece has been subjected to a fresh investigation by Robert Mills, a scholar of the visual culture of the Middle Ages. In his book *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* he analyzes the altarpiece suggesting potential responses to it by fifteenth-century viewing subjects. Here, Mills is an advocate of interdisciplinarity and queer studies, and, accordingly, wishes to implement alternative histories of response.⁵⁶ Previously, art historian Madeline Caviness has touched on the question of the reception of these paintings, reading them from a feminist perspective, which, for her, is a process of “teasing out” the repressed and unintended elements from the images.⁵⁷ She has suggested that the paintings of St Barbara’s torture are an example of sado-erotic spectacle and comparable to modern pornography, the audience being aligned with the tormentors. According to her, the images of virgin martyrs, such as the ones of St Barbara, reinforced the fear of female sexuality and in fact taught women to be masochistic and men sadistic.⁵⁸ Mills, on the other hand, maintains that the ability to identify with the saint—among both male and female viewers—was characterized by diversity. Both men and women may have found reasons to identify with St Barbara as an icon of invincibility.⁵⁹ Similarly, other scholars have stressed the holy aspect of body and martyrdom for the pious beholders.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Mills, *Suspended Animation*, 21-2, 121. In his own words he is committed not only to interdisciplinarity, but also to antidisciplinarity.

⁵⁷ Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, 87, 119. This idea reflects the widely used method in the feminist studies of “reading against the grain” in the interpretation of texts, and later images as well. On criticism of the methodology appropriated by Caviness, see Wirth, “Les marges à drôleries des manuscrits gothiques: problèmes de méthode,” 292-3.

⁵⁸ Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, passim, esp. 87, 94, 115. See also Camille, “Seductions of the Flesh,” 257, who detects similar “passivity of female pain” also in Master Francke’s Man of Sorrow painting. According to him, this should not, however, be confused with modern masochism. Ruth Mellinkoff has earlier presented the paintings as an example of vulgar gestures in late medieval paintings; see her *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, 204.

⁵⁹ Mills, *Suspended Animation*, 121, 128, 138, 142, 144.

⁶⁰ See Liepe, “Barbaraskåpet från Kaland,” who contests the pornographic interpretations of the paintings. She has investigated different ways of encountering the bodily representations in the paintings differentiating, among other categories, the courtly aspect of St Barbara’s presence and her gestures. The effect of the altarpiece mediating sanctity and spiritual enlivenment has been emphasized by Elina Räsänen, “Pyhien ruumiillisuus myöhäiskeskiajalla”, 56-72.

The two events depicted in the St Barbara cycle, namely the circumcision of Christ and the first torture scene of cutting St Barbara's breast have aroused special interest. These acts, displaying nakedness and sexual/ritual violence, indeed constitute an intriguing visual pair when placed side by side. Robert Mills, who put the mastectomy drama to the cover of his book, writes,

When the altarpiece is opened to reveal the carved Life of the Virgin scenes, we see that the painted panels representing Barbara's burning and mastectomy are juxtaposed with carved scenes representing, to the bottom left and right, the circumcision of Christ.⁶¹

Oddly enough, he writes in the plural and points to *both* left and right sides when referring to the Circumcision motif; is he counting the representation of the Theophilus legend as another *mise en scène* of the Circumcision?⁶² Be that as it may, Mills connects this juxtaposition to the visual alignment of the bodies of St Barbara and Christ and sees this within the Christological framework.⁶³ The same idea of juxtaposing the two episodes has been previously addressed by Madeline Caviness. She deploys it as a starting point for a more far-reaching neo-Freudian discussion. After having analyzed the corporeal absence/presence of St Barbara in the two images of escape—according to Caviness St Barbara is “virtually eliminated”⁶⁴—she states that even more important to her theme is the “dramatic juxtaposition of the mutilation scenes of Christ and St Barbara, so as to powerfully evoke castration anxiety and the displacement of breast envy by penis envy, as elucidated below.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ Mills, *Suspended Animation*, 127.

⁶² Also see Mills on page 128: “--the Virgin who looks after the baby Jesus in scenes of circumcision--” Our emphasis.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ See also Mills, *Suspended Animation*, 127. Unfortunately, the authors seem to have been unaware of the insightful analysis by Riikka Stewen, (p. 88-90), who has previously touched upon the same question. Stewen suggests that the painter has developed the theme of belief as a vision in order to show the earthly and the divine concept of vision. According to her analysis, a lack of religious faith has been rendered as blindness in the upper row of paintings while the contrasting voyeuristic paintings on the lower register would suggest that Barbara's martyrdom consists of her “being-seen” by everybody. Cf. Räsänen, “Pyhien ruumiillisuus myöhäiskeskiajalla” (p. 64), who considers that although Barbara is diminutive on the upper register, her presence is underscored by the pictorial elements.

⁶⁵ Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, 116.

To accentuate her thesis Caviness deems the Circumcision “an unusual choice in isolation from other events in his [Christ’s] life.”⁶⁶ This notion is rather at odds, to say the least, with the Nativity included in the iconography of the altarpiece. A closer look at the table in Caviness’s book, which shows the layout of the motifs of the altarpiece, clarifies her baffling statement. She has failed to recognize the Nativity and has marked it as follows: “? Blessed Virgin Mary & soul.”⁶⁷ Although the baby Jesus is now lost, the iconography of the motif is obvious—it even includes the oxen in the background. Besides, the Circumcision here is undoubtedly an intentional element in the Marianic theme; the 1st of January, the Feast of the Circumcision, was and continues to be, a Marian feast as well.

Let us return to the juxtaposition of the scenes of Circumcision and mastectomy. In her discussion Caviness refers to a photographic illustration (that is, fig. 53 in her book), indeed showing the incidents side by side, and allegedly *elucidating* her argument. A similar photograph is published in Mills’ study, too.⁶⁸ But how reliably does a late-twentieth-century photograph shed light on the studied sculptural unity? The reason why we are dwelling on these details is that the motifs in question, the Circumcision and the breast cutting, were *not* originally, in actual fact, side by side. In fact, they were back to back, and it was impossible to experience the images simultaneously. To repeat—at the risk of belaboring the point—the St Barbara cycle was painted onto the outer sides of the inner wings, that is, on the other side of the four sequences from the Virgin cycle, and onto the inner sides of the outer wings.

In 1922, when the altarpiece was taken to Hamburg for conservation and for the subsequent exhibition in the *Kunsthalle*, the panel paintings were removed from their original setting. Now the object itself—following the fate of its two protagonists—became a victim of injurious dissection. After the conservation the images were not put back where they belonged, and henceforth the work has been exhibited in a dismantled state. The partition was most likely done for two reasons. Firstly, the paintings were considered aesthetically superior to the carvings; in fact, the woodwork was not unanimously attributed to the master himself.⁶⁹ Indeed, the Virgin cycle carries a lesser subtlety due to the nineteenth-century overpainting, which is only partly removed today. Secondly, the reason was to allow the public to see as much as possible at the same time; the object had novelty value as it had only recently been transported from a peripheral church to

⁶⁶ Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, 115.

⁶⁷ Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, 116.

⁶⁸ Mills, *Suspended Animation*, 127.

⁶⁹ For more on this discussion, see Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur i Finland*, 323-5.

the international sphere of museums and collections. The practice of “dismembering” altarpieces was hardly unheard of; a more renowned work of art was subjected to the same sort of mutilation when the paintings by Matthis Grünewald were separated from the Isenheim altarpiece upon its being moved to Musée d’Unterlinden in the mid nineteenth century.⁷⁰

The present display at the Hall of Medieval Ecclesiastical Art at the National Museum in Helsinki does not provide a clarification of the work’s original setting; in fact, it may even lead the visitor astray. Moreover, the booklet published in 1966 by Dr. Riitta Pylkkänen is somewhat misleading due to its binding: although the folding supposedly imitates the actual altarpiece, it actually further obscures an understanding of the structure of the piece. Nonetheless, the more than adequate scholarship on the work clearly conveys not only its iconography, but also its structure, material history, and exhibition trajectory.⁷¹ What is more, one can observe, practically with the naked eye, that its present setting, two wings displayed side by side, is longer than its original measurements (width with the wings opened was 260 cm).

Unless one is solely searching for a modern response, it is crucial that, until ca. 1925, it was impossible to view the images of St Barbara’s mastectomy and the Circumcision of Christ side by side. This has significance for any coherent interpretation; just as we are today, fifteenth-century beholders were bound to be affected by perceiving images in juxtaposition—we too would cringe at the sight of an image of an infant being circumcised placed beside one of the infamous photos from Abu Ghraib. The knowledge of what is on the other side of the image does not affect us in the same way.

Lost and Found?

Cultural critic Mieke Bal has suggested an “object domain” for visual culture studies. According to her, visual studies should be truly interdisciplinary and create or reinvent its objects; in Barthesian terms, this

⁷⁰ Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece. God’s Medicine and the Painter’s Vision*, 3-6.

⁷¹ Art conservator Mirja-Liisa Waismaa-Pietarila has examined the material history of the altarpiece, offering several drawings of its various settings as well. See Waismaa-Pietarila, “From Turku Cathedral to the National Museum of Finland: The Metamorphosis of Meister Francke’s Double-Winged Reredos” and *Kaksoissiivet: Meister Francken Maria-Barbara alttarikaapin historiaa*, esp. xx-xxiii.

implies the study of a new object, which *belongs to no one*.⁷² A theoretical approach akin to this perhaps underlies the readings of the St Barbara altarpiece by Caviness and Mills. While they presented it, to quote Bal's characterization for the praxis of visual culture, "from a theoretically informed and savvy perspective,"⁷³ and thus rendered it anew, the altarpiece simultaneously became a new object also in another way; the wings were "virtually" remodeled to unite the scenes of Circumcision and mastectomy. This, as we have clarified, was possible due to the earlier—and irremediable—deformation done in the 1920s. The "remix" of the St Barbara altarpiece by Caviness and Mills is not, however, the only new object presented in this article. The possible monstrosities embodying the "*caput et brachia*" of St Henrik stand for our suggestion for another "new object".

The relics have left behind two bodies: first, the living body of the human being, and later, the new body, the reliquary. The altarpiece has not lost its body, but it has been mutilated. Both have lost their original place in the cult continuity of a church. They both have their own respective and continuous histories at least on three levels: as sacred objects, as historical objects, and as museum objects (the third implying archival status for the both, display presently only for the altarpiece). The conventions of the museum display are based on the curiosity cabinets, which were inspired by medieval relic displays in churches.⁷⁴ A museum object can be exhibited with written information about its background, history, material, and so forth, or, as in our case, displayed in a manner that actually conceals its real structure. When placed in a museum a religious work of art turns into a museum object; it is conserved, exhibited for all to see, and also available for closer scrutiny, but it is bereft of the meanings it had in the original setting—and thus we are reminded of our outsider status.⁷⁵ On top of their medieval and material history, the objects now carry the posterior discussions and receptions of medieval art and particularly those directed at them. They convey the new meanings our time has attached to their subject matter, material, and form.

When we look at an altarpiece or a relic, we grasp it in the light (or shadow) of our current notions about images, bones, and bodies. As

⁷² Bal, "Visual Essentialism," 7-11 and *passim*.

⁷³ Bal, "Visual Essentialism," 7.

⁷⁴ See Bann, "Shrines, curiosities, and the rhetoric of display," 5-29.

⁷⁵ See Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 63-4; Carrier, *Museum Skepticism. A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries*. For the discussion on the outsider's view, see *The Insider-Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*; Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 105-37.

Thelma K. Thomas has aptly remarked,

Understanding objects involves reading their material clues, reconstructing experiences of them at various moments in the entire span of their existence, and recognizing that our own disciplinary expectations are historically contingent, based upon available knowledge, training, and practices, and further shaped by the places and modes of our encounters with the objects.⁷⁶

As researchers we need not succumb to despair over this, but instead cultivate an open yet conscious attitude *vis-à-vis* our methods and source materials. Respect for the organic and material integrity of the studied object—if it indeed still exists—may well be a profitable approach.

Figures

Figure 1. Skull and arm bones, assumed to be St Henrik's relics, in a sacristy wall niche in Turku Cathedral (Finland). Photo: National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.

Figure 2. The silver arm reliquary of St Eskil from Linköping Cathedral (Sweden), 1400s. Photo: Historical Museum, Stockholm.

Figure 3. The Kalanti Virgin Mary/St Barbara altarpiece in its present state; the carvings and paintings of the first wings are now side by side. Photo: National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.

Figure 4. The Kalanti altarpiece displayed at the Ateneum Art Museum in 1903. Soon after the altarpiece was bought from the congregation of Kalanti to the collections of the Historical Museum (later to become the National Museum). Photo: The National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.

⁷⁶ Thomas, "Understanding Objects," 13.

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



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