

Abstract

Arm-in-arm. The meaning-making of relics and reliquaries from the Middle Ages to the present

Taking four arm reliquaries of Scandinavian provenance as its point of departure, this paper aims to investigate the interaction between the relic and its container, the reliquary, in the creation and communication of meaning to the beholder in the various settings in which the reliquaries in question have appeared, from the medieval sanctuary to the contemporary museum. The solutions featured by the four reliquaries for the display of the relic within are indicative of the complex approach in the Middle Ages to the visibility of relics: in the later Middle Ages, the increase in popular desire to gaze directly at holy matter such as relics was accommodated by arrangements that made the relics accessible visually, but only to a limit. In a present-day museum context, reliquaries—often sumptuous works made from precious materials—are recontextualized as museum exhibits to be enjoyed aesthetically, as examples of fine craftsmanship. Sometimes the relic remains in the reliquary, at other times it is removed. Both choices raise questions regarding the ontological status of human remains, such as bones, when they become part of museum collections. What does the sight of a piece of human bone, in the context of a museum of arts and crafts or of cultural history, do to the visitor? What did the sight of the bare, or almost bare, bone mounted in a gem-studded golden container do to the medieval beholder who was fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of it? What, ultimately, happens in the physical encounter between organic nature and crafted culture that takes place when relic and reliquary are fused into a whole?