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Andrew Russell Sears   April 19, 2011

Seeing and Not Seeing the Reliquary Bust of Saint Yrieix

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Abstract

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In this thesis, I construct a devotional framework within which the early thirteenth-century Limousin reliquary bust of Saint Yrieix operated. Using museological literature as a lead-in, I consider the primacy modern-day scholars give to object experience over object beholding, and how we should consider medieval reliquaries not only as objects to be looked at, but as objects to be experienced. With that in mind, I articulate the medieval lay mode of experiencing the reliquary of Yrieix and how it was rooted in a system of unseen devotion, far different from the museum experience of taking on an appraising gaze. Yrieix's relics operated in the realm of the unseen, and despite the splendor of the reliquary image that housed them, the reliquary did, as well. The object was shrouded from public view and only seen for short periods of time and for distinct purposes, either for feast days or communal processions. The reliquary was experienced through an orchestrated system of punctuated non-sight, suggesting that experiencing was not about seeing, but believing.

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Prologue

This honors thesis began during my sophomore year. I was enrolled in Dr. Elizabeth Pastan's "Medieval Treasury Arts" class, a seminar held at the High Museum of Art in conjunction with a traveling exhibition from the Victoria and Albert Museum, and sought to write my term paper about the early Renaissance reliquary bust of Saint Antigius. Because of the lack of any detailed *vita* or hagiographical text mentioning Antigius, my paper took shape as an imaginative kind of consideration of how the object contained relics and translated some kind of relic-related meaning to the beholder. I looked at countless reliquary forms—some purse-shaped, some architectonic, some portrait-like—as a means of constructing my own vision for what pious viewing would have entailed for a portrait bust reliquary.

Thanks to Dr. Pastan and Dr. Sidney Kasfir, my engagement with the subject of reliquaries continued during a summer at The Cloisters, where I prepared a gallery talk, titled "Containing the Sacred: Medieval Reliquaries." I conducted research throughout the summer, had numerous conversations with reliquary expert Barbara Boehm, but upon writing my script in August, I was stumped. I had hoped to take all I had thought about with my paper on Antigius—all of my exploration of what beholding might have been like for the medieval viewer—and, with The Cloisters' collection at my disposal, recreate the medieval process of beholding for the museum beholder. However, recreation seemed close to impossible. Everything seemed to fall flat, and I became frustrated. When discussing the reliquary bust of Saint Juliana, I attempted to explain why she was a venerated figure through her biography in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*. The story of her martyrdom—how she was a virgin who had molten lead poured over her and was stretched on a wheel until the marrow spurted out of her bones—was preposterous, rather than meaningful, to the audience. The fact that her skull was enshrined in a bust with a

hinged crown to allow access and touch was even more so. The fact that beholders of this bust saw miracles occur and smelled the sweet aroma of Juliana's relic was perhaps the weirdest. My attempt to explain the medieval process of beholding reliquaries seemed to situate the objects in a medieval circus, rather than a culture of piety.

I began to think that the way the museum promoted sight of the object had something to do with it. In the museum, one can look and see to understand, but in the Middle Ages, belief in the unseen was the most important aspect of understanding. So, I decided to write this honors thesis to explore the issue of beholding medieval reliquaries, specifically that of St. Yrieix (Figures 1 and 2) in its home of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I originally wanted to explore the nature of the museum barrier and what it takes to overcome it, so I immersed myself in museological literature and received a grant to visit the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and study its displays. However, upon taking a directed reading course on saints' lives with Dr. Pastan, as well as auditing a graduate seminar on portraiture with Dr. Jean Campbell, I came to combine my museological leanings with coursework rooted in contextualization, as a means of producing a hybrid topic that is about how the museum setting raises questions of what it means to contextualize an object. In other words, this thesis is not just about the challenges of seeing and experiencing in the museum, but about how those challenges give rise to a discussion of how to go about understanding.

My project is much indebted to the legacy of Peter Brown. In distilling his persuasive theme that interaction with medieval relics was just as much about not seeing as seeing, his work guided me to consider how medieval reliquaries could be subject to the same juxtaposition. I am examining how the reliquary of St. Yrieix, a highly visual object, operated in this mode of limited visual disclosure; I am discussing how the object was nested in a belief system that made

sight of it not so necessary for experience. Accordingly, I will structure my discussion to elucidate this paradoxical process of seeing and not seeing: firstly, I will contextualize the questions of object beholding raised by its placement in the museum; secondly, I will situate the object in the cult of St. Yrieix to explore how interaction with the saint involved sight of the saint's relics only in limited ways; thirdly, I will consider how the reliquary object was born of an ultimately non-visual cult and what purpose it was meant to serve; and finally, I will propose ways of beholding the object in an embodied space and with an embodied beholder. It is my hope that the project of contextualizing the object within a system of cultic practices will serve my twofold goal of understanding how the object was interacted with and how to recreate that interaction in the museum in the best way possible.

Chapter 1

To access the reliquary bust of St. Yrieix in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one walks into the Fifth Avenue entrance, through the foyer, and to the main stairs. On each side of the stairs is a hallway that houses early Christian archeological objects. Rooms connecting the hallways are lodged underneath the stairs. Displays are simple, and materials are bright and natural. Off-white display cases are lined with oatmeal-colored linen, which also covers object podiums inside the cases. In the squat rooms underneath the stairs, the exposed brick vaulting unintentionally but aptly recalls excavation practices—how something like a Byzantine pendant brooch might have gotten to the museum. As one moves along the hallways, objects progress from Mesopotamian, to Byzantine, to Visigothic. Cases of Visigothic gems and brooches at the end of the hallways spill into a large, laterally-oriented, high-ceilinged room: the first of the medieval galleries. The floors are now black and white marble instead of pale wood, the walls are steel blue instead of beige, and the cases are now the color of rich cherry wood instead of white. The space is relatively dark, but focused spotlighting makes cases glow and gilded objects inside sparkle. A large baldachin marks the entrance of the room. Moving past the baldachin and to the right, one sees a stand-alone case containing a single object: the reliquary bust of St. Yrieix (Figures 1-2). The podium rises to about tabletop height, with the object sitting in the middle and surrounded by glass that rises about six feet off the ground. A spotlight located on the ceiling shines directly onto the object.

The museum makes it easy to see the object. The fact that the case stands on its own allows attentive viewing from all sides; one can stand, stare, move around, and stare some more. Moreover, the fact that the object sits by itself in this stand-alone case allows even closer, unobstructed viewing. Displaying the object on its own without any kind of visual comparanda

means there are no distinct instructions for how to begin the viewing and thinking process.

Instead, the object is simply offered up for what it is, and it is up to beholder to see and construct

an understanding. Most readily visible and comprehensible is the fact that the object is in the

form of a human bust—a fairly naturalistic human bust of human-like proportions. The face is

cleanly modeled and has balanced, portrait-like features. Facial details—a gentle brow arch,

almond-shaped eyes, a straight nose, and sculpted lips—are crisp and almost "knife-cut." And, if

one wants to discover how this high level of detail and naturalism was achieved, one is directed

to look in a separate case to the left, which houses the wooden core (Figure 2) that served as the

frame for the gilded silver.

Lighting also shapes the viewing process. A strong and strategically placed spotlight

ensures ample lighting and promotes attention to materials and textures. Light makes the gilded

silver form sparkle. Light also makes apparent the textures that convey various elements of a

human bust form and reveal the symmetry, regularity of detail, and idealization of the head.

Skin is smooth and supple—almost as if liquid silver were cast, rather than hard silver hammered

over a wooden frame. The tonsured head has gold hair with waves and curls. The gilded beard

is punctured with stippling that almost humorously connotes facial stubble. There are also

various accoutrements adorning the human form. On the neck sits a thick, gilded, filigree band

covered with colored glass and crystal cabachons. The top of the head is surmounted by a

hinged metal plate, added later, that covers the hole in the wooden core where the relics of Yrieix

once were.[1]

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[1] Much of the data regarding the reliquary bust of St. Yrieix is indebted to Barbara Boehm's encyclopedic dissertation on head reliquaries, which includes an entry on the head of Yrieix: Barbara Drake Boehm, *Medieval Head Reliquaries of the Massif Central*, diss. New York University, 1990 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1990) 240-253.

The reliquary has been offered up for this kind of viewing for quite some time. It was gifted to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by J. Pierpont Morgan in 1917 and has remained a central feature of medieval galleries ever since.[2] Though specific placement has undoubtedly changed as a result of renovations over time, it is safe to assume that the nature of the object's framing—the way it is offered up for easy, close, and attentive looking—has remained the same throughout its stay in the Met. In many ways, this kind of display works quite naturally. The reliquary bust of St. Yrieix is objectively a beautiful work of art, and promoting visual examination promotes acknowledgement of that beauty, as well as appreciation for the skill of the medieval craftsmen who made it.

In many ways, though, this kind of display does not work. The object was not created to be in a museum, so elements of original context are inevitably lost and overtaken by the museum context. There are inherent and unavoidable discontinuities between then and now. Early thirteenth-century Limousin is not the same as twentieth-century Fifth Avenue. Processing the reliquary in religious rituals is not the same as keeping it stationary, offering it up for extended examination, and sealing it off with a climate-controlled case. The museum attempts to bridge the disparity, namely through the inclusion of an informative object label that gives us some basic facts. This label identifies the work as the "Reliquary Bust of Saint Yrieix," and tells us that it was created between 1200 and 1240 in Limoges, that it is constructed of silver and gold (and adorned with rock crystal, gems, and glass), that it measures around fifteen inches high and ten in diameter, and that it was a gift from J. Pierpont Morgan in 1917. The label also contains a short contextual description:

> Saint Yrieix, whose skull was once contained in this reliquary, was the sixth-century
> founder of a monastery in the town south of Limoges that now bears his name. A special

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[2] Charles T. Little and Willibald Sauerländer, *Set in Stone: The Face in Medieval Sculpture* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006) 177.

veneration of reliquaries in the form of the heads of local saints developed in the Limoges region during the Middle Ages, a devotion that continues to the present day. On feast days the image would have been carried in procession through the streets and then placed on the altar for veneration by the faithful.

The silver image originally covered a wooden core, which is exhibited nearby. Though carefully carved, it was not originally intended to be seen, but to give shape to and to provide support for the precious metal sheathing. Once the skull was set in place this wooden core, though sensitively carved, would have been completely obscured by sheets of silver. The precious material evoked the saint's heavenly countenance, while the skull imparted a sense of his abiding authority.

This label covers a lot of ground; it situates the object within the cult of relics of thirteenth-century Limoges, activates its usage, and explains the general purpose of that usage within ritual. However, covering so much ground in so few words suggests that a lot is left out. Though the label succeeds in translating information, it is also a glaring manifestation of the fact that not everything about the object can be translated to the viewer. Moreover, the information given is so rooted in the distant and unfamiliar medieval past—with a slight nod to present religious practices—that it, as a stand-alone text, is vaguely unsatisfying. Unfortunately, the museum's attempt to make the object closer to the viewer in fact distances him or her; the label should be a conduit for understanding, but in many ways works more like a place-marker to indicate just how difficult it is to achieve understanding.

Thus, in this museum space, there is an inherent gap between the then and the now that no label, regardless how expertly written, can bridge. The reliquary of Yrieix was not created with the museum context in mind, it is not at home there, and perhaps never will be entirely. There are ways to shorten the distance between original and current, though, and those ways come in the form of African museological literature. Museology and African art go hand-in-hand. African art is not meant to be in a museum—scholars know this and so does the public—

and a wealth of literature surrounds the subject.[3] The urgency of the theme can be seen in the

formation of the collection of critical essays on museum display, titled *Exhibiting Cultures: The*

Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, which includes contributions by acknowledged experts

such as Susan Vogel, Michael Baxandall, and Svetlana Alpers, as well as literary critic Stephen

Greenblatt. In this collection, all the scholars assembled—no matter what their specialization

is—take part in considering the role of objects in museums.

Fittingly, all the authors preface their discussion of African objects in the museum by

first outlining the fact that such objects are not meant to be there—by explaining just how

foreign the museum setting is—and all tend to agree on one inherent quality of the museum that

is different from the African objects' original contexts: the promotion of close looking. Alpers

identifies this concept as the "museum effect," or the tendency of the museum to isolate objects

from their original setting, offer them up for attentive examination, and in the process turn them

from objects into art objects—art objects like the Cézanne and Picasso paintings of our own

culture, made for the purpose of being looked at.[4] Baxandall notes that the "museum effect" is

not only promoted by the museum itself, but also perpetuated by museum-goers, who go to the

museum for the purpose of being participants in this "museum effect." He identifies museum-

goers as having the "museum set," or a set of eyes desiring to look at visually interesting objects

to gain some semblance of context. This desire to see is part and parcel of the museum

experience; if looking at objects were not important, visitors would stay at home and read about

objects instead.[5] Museums inherently promote looking, museum visitors inherently want to look,

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[3] Susan Vogel, "Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) 192.
[4] Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) 26-27.
[5] Michael Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of

and although this process is ideal for objects made with the museum context in mind, it complicates placement of African works.

Alpers notes that for such objects, the museum, in giving primacy to the process of looking, can paradoxically "make it hard to see."[6] For many African objects, assigning superiority to the aesthetic component diminishes the functional value of the objects, which perhaps was of much more importance than the visual form. Thus, for African objects, much of the problem of museum placement rests in the promotion of sight; promoting aesthetics only promotes a portion of the object's meaning, which ultimately devalues the object and the net cultural weight it originally had.

Launching off of this problem, many Africanists seek to articulate feasible ways of promoting truer sight of African objects in museums—a sight that would ideally encompass and surpass the visual realm. Vogel notes that African objects have not been displayed in museums long enough for their presence to be accepted unthinkingly—they have only recently been accepted into the canon of things appropriate for display in a fine art museum—therefore the current moment is full of scholarly opinions that express problems of museum display, as well as propose ways of solving them.[7] The trend in museological scholarship by Africanists is not just about examining disparities, but about discussing how to create a kind of "formula for display" and thus temper the difference between original and current. This desire for a formula for display is, quite interestingly, more focused on the audience than the museum itself. Many Africanists see understanding as coming not just from an informative display, but from the way in which the display elicits an informed response on the part of the viewer. Thus, the bridge

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Culturally Purposeful Objects," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) 33-34.
[6] Alpers 27.
[7] Vogel, "Always True," 192.

between then and now, in their eyes, can be fortified by giving power to the viewers and allowing them to construct (with of course some aid given by the display) their own understanding of the object at hand.

Some scholars, such as Alpers and Vogel, see this understanding as coming from museum environments that do not force information or recreate anything, but instead merely display objects and acknowledge the inherent and unsolvable disparities between ritual and museum contexts. In other words, Alpers and Vogel promote self-conscious and self-referential displays as being integral to the formula; they suggest that displays should pay less attention to communication of ideas,[8] and instead be honest, open, and perhaps candid with the audience in regards to the difficulty of displaying culturally foreign objects.[9] Others, like Baxandall and Greenblatt, suggest that the closest-to-original understanding of objects can be achieved through strategic displays with brief, but meaningful, information given, which would force the viewer to contemplate how the objects relate to the information. For example, Baxandall proposes that object labels should contain "pregnant cultural facts" to make the reader aware of meaningful distant concepts that he or she may not know the meaning of (and probably never will entirely), but to also inspire the reader to deconstruct the distance and proceed down a path of informed and self-aware contextualization.[10]

Regardless of approach—whether a museum should fully disclose the difficulty of displaying foreign objects or instead sparingly provide information as an impetus for contemplation—all authors agree that the way to promote optimal understanding is not through didactic museum displays, but instead through displays that give the power of meaning-making to the viewer. Overcoming the "museum effect" and promoting understanding rests not in telling

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[8] Alpers 31.
[9] Vogel, "Always True," 201.
[10] Baxandall 41.

the visitor what to see, but rather giving them enough information to be able to teach him or herself how to truly see. Thus, in the realm of African museological literature, active visitor beholding is key in order to be as true as possible to the objects displayed. Hence, fervent discontent surrounds ineffective or insensitive promotion of experience. For example, the Musée du Quai Branly's dark galleries shroud the objects from view and make the experience, in the words of Susan Vogel, a "Western tropical fantasy."[11]

In returning back to the reliquary bust of St. Yrieix, we can conceive of full understanding (or as full of an understanding as possible) and a bridging of the gap between medieval and modern as coming from the process of experiencing the work and having an active role as a viewer. Interestingly, the reliquary does not seem to be promoted in such a way. For example, in the catalogue for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2006 exhibition, *Set in Stone: The Face in the Middle Ages*, which features the St. Yrieix bust, an introduction situates the exhibition to be about the objects themselves, not the audience. The exhibition was organized thematically to "let the sculptures, as much as possible, tell their own stories."[12] Thus, the objects are framed as capable of "speaking for themselves." To some extent, in the context of the exhibition, the objects do. They are exquisite, sophisticated, diverse in nature (from stone to gilded silver), and well-preserved, and all of these characteristics clearly emanate from the objects to the reader of the catalogue or once did for the visitors of the exhibition. But, as so clearly distilled by African museological literature, the process of beholding and experiencing an art object is the crucible for forming optimal understanding, and giving all of the agency to the object and not the viewer, while not necessarily wrong, is not sufficient.

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[11] Vogel, "Shadows on the Seine," 7. Also see Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), which outlines the history of the museum as a means of elucidating why the displays might look the way as they do.
[12] Little *xv*.

However, as tantalizing the prospect is of allowing the viewer to recreate experience, doing so is wrought with problems. Giving agency to the viewer to experience for him or herself what the object means is close to impossible when the original experiential meaning is not re-creatable. For an African art object, this complication is obvious and well-acknowledged in the literature, and it holds equally true for the medieval object. Joan Branham considers the nature of experiential viewing and understanding of sacred objects in the Walters Art Museum, and though she does not deal specifically with medieval art, her opinions remain relevant. She defines sacred art as "naïve" art—art not meant for the museum—and considers how the secular museum setting renders it "silenced."[13] Religious objects are so much a part of religious practices that when devotion is extracted from the experience, creating similitude between original and museum experiences is close to impossible. Museums de-contextualize and de-sacralize art, and are thus left with the task of re-contextualizing, re-sacralizing, and "re-empowering"[14]—a task rooted in the construction of a historically appropriate object-audience interaction, an interaction that Branham describes as "experiential contextualism."[15] Of course, experiential contextualism is quite difficult when the optimal experience would involve prayer and religious devotion, so there are inherent experiential problems—problems that Branham discusses but never quite solves.

Some kind of experiential contextualism can be achieved, though, as suggested by Madeline Caviness. Upon considering Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California, and its staging of a stained-glass reconstruction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, Caviness notes that through certain kinds of presentations, art can perform effectively enough to allow

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[13] Joan R. Branham,"Sacrality and Aura in the Museum: Mute Objects and Articulate Space," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 52/53 (1994/95): 35.

[14] Branham 33.

[15] Branham 38.

construction of experiential context. The way Forest Lawn stages the art within a performance can serve to mimic original ways of staging, and thus recreate an original kind of performance response.[16] For example, staging art as to be unveiled was a medieval ritual convention that could be effectively recreated to allow some experiential quality. Caviness notes trompe l'oeil curtains on Hugo van der Goes' *Adoration of the Shepherds*, c. 1470, which prophets pull back to reveal a scene of the Virgin, Christ Child, and shepherds. There was a medieval tendency to highlight the event of granting permission to see an image or scene, and the same kind of highlighting occurred through the curtains being drawn back to unveil the stained-glass reconstruction at Forest Lawn. Though this unveiling has nothing to do with the nature of the image of the *Last Supper*, it inspires a similar kind of experiential response—an acknowledgement on the part of the beholder that he or she is allowed access and that the sight of the image, whatever it is, is precious.[17] Doing so begins the process of "fill[ing] the narrative void." However, promoting experiential contextualism through staging is not without problems. The value of the staging can end up eclipsing the value of the object; in the case of Forest Lawn, the value of the recreated *Last Supper* fetishizes the art, thereby elevating the recreation and rendering the original irrelevant.

Returning to the bust of St. Yrieix with these museological considerations in mind, it is clear that the object was not meant to be in a museum, however much the museum has preserved the work. There is a tension between the ritual then and the museum now that needs to be resolved. Attempts have been made to resolve this tension. Many of these attempts take the form of museological critique; they outline things the museum does wrong and propose solutions

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[16] Madeline H. Caviness, "Learning from Forest Lawn," *Speculum* 69.4 (1994): 963-966.
[17] Caviness, "Learning," 967-968.

for how to overcome it.[18] Many of these attempts even chart into the territory of museum-

bashing. This is an easy trap to fall into, especially in the realm of display of African art objects,

where display is not only about truth to objects, but also truth to cultures that are in particular

need of a greater understanding. However, we must remind ourselves that tempering tensions is

not just an issue of what the museum is doing to the object, but also an issue of what we are

doing to the object through our ways of interacting with it. Sometimes museums are obstacles,

but ultimately we determine the nature of the interaction and the mode of understanding. The

question then raised by consideration of the Yrieix bust in the museum is not how should the

object work, but how do we, as distant viewers, work? How should we, as viewers, experience

the object? If our task is to recreate experience, what kind of experience are we recreating?

How was the object originally experienced by our medieval lay equivalents?

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[18] See Sally Price, *Paris Primitive*.

Chapter 2

Interestingly, the reliquary of Yrieix, in all its splendor and visual purpose, was rooted in

ritual culture that dealt little with sight. The cult of the saints and their relics was fundamentally

non-visual, and the cult of Yrieix was no different. Information on him is slim, but there are

luckily enough threads to weave some semblance of a *vita* and consider how his cult functioned.

Yrieix, known as Aredius in his lifetime, was born in Limoges around 510. He was the eldest of

three children, all of whom were born into the upper crust of Limousin society; their father

Jocondus was from a powerful Gallo-Roman family, and their mother Pélagie was related to the

son of Clovis. In his adolescence, Yrieix was sent to the court of Theudebert I to be educated,

and there he came to know the Bishop of Trier. He eventually made his way to Trier, where he

made a name for himself. It is said that during mass, a dove landed on his head and stayed with

him for a month's worth of services, despite efforts to remove it and have a reputation as a

modest man. In 530, upon the death of his father, he returned to Limoges and eventually became

a hermit and lived at La Rochette, a small cave located in Attanum, just thirty kilometers south

of Limoges. Years later, he founded a small religious community of his own in Attanum,

composed of a monastery with two churches, Saint-Julien and Sainte-Hilaire, as well as an

oratory, Saint-Maximin. In addition to being founder and patron of the community, he

performed numerous pilgrimages to major sites such as Tours, Puy, and Poitiers, and on these

trips made a name for himself through befriending many esteemed figures of the sixth-century

Limousin: the monk Fortunat (future bishop of Poitiers), queen Radegonde (founder of the

monastery of Sainte-Croix and future saint herself), and most importantly, Gregory of Tours,

who ended up chronicling parts of Yrieix's life. He performed miracles throughout his lifetime,

as noted by Gregory, and died on the 24 August 591. His body was buried in the basilica of

Sainte-Hilaire, probably the location of the church that now bears his name, and he continued to perform miracles posthumously—so many, in fact, that the town of Attanum eventually acquired the name Saint Yrieix.[19]

Much of Yrieix's holiness was vested in his bones, *pignora* or "security deposits" that he had left on earth to demonstrate his continued interest in the human realm.[20] Thus, ever since his death, much of the interest in Yrieix was centered on his relics. Peter Brown sees this focus on relics as being a vestige of the late antique need to centralize the cult of saints around some kind of object. People wanted to make sense of fragmentary, changing society in the last century of the Western Empire and the first century of barbarian rule, and saintly cults gathered around relics helped people to do so; relics of saints proved to be the perfect kind of centralizing factor.[21] According to Patrick Geary, relics were intrinsically valueless because they carried no "fixed code" or sign of their meaning,[22] so relics became objects that people could convene around and give meaning to; relics were centripetal forces that pulled in all desires for communal concord.[23] In doing so, they became concord objectified. And, because of their object-ness, they also became administrators of further concord through being relatable interfaces for religious experiences that everyone could participate in.[24]

The value and role of relics were not entirely communally decided, though. Paul Hayward suggests that relics, while blank canvases, were not like a void or a "vacuum" waiting

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[19] This rough *vita* was constructed from informative pamphlets from the church of St. Yrieix in St.-Yrieix-la-Perche, which compile various parts of Gregory of Tours' texts mentioning Yrieix (Aredius in Gregory's time).

[20] Patrick J. Geary, "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics," *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 202.

[21] Peter Brown, "Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change," *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 318.

[22] Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 5. Also see Brown, "Society and the Supernatural," 317-322 for further discussion on relics' inherent valuelessness and early medieval society's ways of assigning value to them.

[23] Geary, "Sacred Commodities," 200.

[24] Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 318.

to be filled with society-wide aspirations of concord.[25] He notes how many of the sources

Brown uses to describe the cult of relics are not by any means ethnographic, and are instead

written by early medieval religious elites, such as Gregory of Tours. Gregory's description of

the concord that relics and relic veneration could provide was perhaps less a reflection of

communal decision and more a reflection of the elites' desire to offer a "solution to the problem

of seeing visible proof of holiness."[26] That relics' power and efficacy were the result of

orchestration on the part of the elite is an astute point, but it is important to note that the

orchestration of power would have no foundation to operate on unless there was some already

extant belief that relics were capable of holding such power in the first place. Therefore, the

importance of the relics for the cult of Yrieix were equally organically determined and expertly

fashioned.

Because so much of the importance of Yrieix's relics rested in society's projections, the

belief in them—that they existed, that they were holy, and that they could promote concord—

was more important than sight of them. As Peter Brown states, the *praesentia*, or physical

presence of the holy, "was the greatest blessing that a late-antique Christian could enjoy."[27] In

the case of Yrieix's relics and those of other saints, one could have interacted with them without

actually seeing them; one just had to be in their presence. The ability of relics to operate in such

a way has its roots in the degree to which most relic cults were embedded in communities, and

we can use Gregory of Tours' discussion of Yrieix as a litmus test for determining his relevance

in Attanum both during his lifetime and after.

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[25] Paul Anthony Hayward, "Demystifying the Role of Sanctity in Western Christendom," *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, eds. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 139.

[26] Hayward 126.

[27] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1982) 88.

Most of Gregory's accounts involving Yrieix serve to tie him to the legacy of St. Martin of Tours. Gregory refers to Yrieix as a "special foster son" of St. Martin.[28] Yrieix is depicted as an ardent promoter of the cult of St. Martin. He informed Gregory of the miraculous power of the grapes from the vine that Martin had planted as a means of facilitating miracles.[29] And on a more monumental scale, he inspired Vulfilaic, monk at Yrieix's monastery, to embark on a pilgrimage to the church of St. Martin, an experience so moving to Vulfilaic that he built a church in honor of St. Martin just outside of Trier and dedicated it with a flask of oil from Martin's church at Tours.[30] In addition to promoting Martin's cult, Yrieix also worked miracles through Martin's relics:

> Aredius [Yrieix] came to [St. Martin's] festival [on November 11, 583] with his usual kindness, humility, and love. Upon his departure he took with him a small jar filled with oil from the holy tomb and said: "Perhaps on my journey there is some ill person who is anguished in his heart and desires to receive a blessing from the shrine of the blessed Martin." Then in another place a pious woman approached him, held out another container [filled] with oil, and said: "Servant of Christ, I ask you to sanctify this oil with your blessing." But Aredius [Yrieix], lest he appear to be overcome by arrogance, said: "My power is slight; but if it pleases you, I have oil from the tomb of the blessed Martin who poured out this oil. If you believe in his great power, you will drink salvation from this oil." The woman rejoiced and sought to do what the priest recommended. Aredius's container was half-full. After he poured out some of the liquid that had been taken from the saint's church, immediately the oil bubbled up and filled the container to the top. Once the woman saw this, she marveled at the power of the blessed confessor and returned home rejoicing.[31]

Through being a conduit for the power of St. Martin, Yrieix became a saint in his own right. And, given St. Martin's hugely popular cult in France, and Europe in general, Yrieix's role as holy mediator undoubtedly established a name for himself as a saint worth venerating.[32] In fact,

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[28] Raymond Van Dam et al, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 81.
[29] Van Dam 137.
[30] Van Dam 140.
[31] Van Dam 270.
[32] For information on St. Martin, see his entry in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*: Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

his acting on behalf of Martin impacted religious devotees on such a level that Gregory notes how when Yrieix stroked a paralyzed woman, she felt "the hand of the blessed Martin."[33]

These accounts of Yrieix's actions demonstrate just how planted Yrieix was in the Limousin, both in his life and into the high Middle Ages. He was working in a relatively small area of land, namely at Attanum, Tours, and in between. Given the nature of these sites, he was likely interacting with a fairly small number of individuals: those living in Attanum, those living in Tours, and those who were on pilgrimages in between (who were most likely Attanum residents about to visit or having just visited the church of St. Martin of Tours). Therefore, his cult was not widespread and instead was embedded into the culture of the Limousin. In short, despite having prestigious connections, he was a locally oriented hero—a hero that devotees would have considered themselves lucky to have nearby and working on their behalf. So, when considering Yrieix's relics' role within his cultic formation, seeing the relics would have been of little importance. As we have seen, not unlike the hermit crab that borrows another's shell, Yrieix first came to prominence by working through Martin and Martin's relics; the level of regional awareness of his holiness suggests that people could consider themselves capable of interacting with Yrieix without his relics. People knew that his relics were present, and that he was present through his relics' presence, and as a result, sight of them had little to do with veneration.

Knowledge of the presence of the relics of Yrieix likely eclipsed sight of them not only in the realm of cultic awareness, but also in ceremonial associated with the relics. In 1181, the relics of Yrieix were removed in solemn procession from their longtime home, the Romanesque basilica of St. Hilaire, to a nearby church in order to safeguard them during the building process

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And, for a historiography of hagiographical texts relating to St. Martin and the ways they promoted his cult, see: Sherry L. Reames, "Saint Martin of Tours in the 'Legenda aurea' and Before," *Viator* 12 (1981): 131-164.
[33] Van Dam 81.

of a new Gothic structure to replace the Romanesque one. And, on 21 August 1183, the relics of

Yrieix were reinstalled in an almost-finished Gothic chapel. This kind of ceremony is known as

an *adventus*, a term used in classical antiquity to celebrate the triumphal arrival of a ruler and

then appropriated to describe the triumphal arrival of a saint's relic.[34]

Though we have no documentation of the nature of the translation of Yrieix's relic from

the neighboring chapel to its newly renovated home, we can look to Kenneth Holum and Gary

Vikan's study of the Trier Ivory (Figure 3), a plaque that gives a visible face to the nature of such

a ceremony, as a means of understanding just how little sight of relics was involved. Much of

Holum and Vikan's discussion is concerned with juxtaposing *vitas* and other textual accounts of

translations with visual cues on the ivory in order to attach a specific, historical *adventus*

ceremony to the making of the plaque, which they eventually conclude may refer to the event of

Byzantine Empress Pulcheria receiving a relic of Saint Stephen in 421.[35] However, of interest

here is not how image relates to text, but how the image looks in depicting the nature of

translation. The ivory far predates the twelfth-century translation of Yrieix's relics, but

regardless of date, it shows us a rendering of how *adventus* ceremonies were imagined.

What can first be gleaned from this image is the importance of the event. The relics, in a

gabled box, are in the care of two bishops, identified by their dalmatic and *omophorion*, who ride

atop a wagon (perhaps an imperial wagon), drawn by mules. This wagon is then escorted by

four *chlamydati*, the first of which, and the leader of the entire procession, is an emperor.[36]

Great care is taken to bring the relics through the gates on the left, and through the town, in order

to give them to the empress Pulcheria, waiting on the right. Moreover, the event is crowded.

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[34] Kenneth G. Holum and Gary Vikan, "The Trier Ivory, *Adventus* Ceremonial, and the Relics of St. Stephen," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979): 115.
[35] Holum and Vikan 131.
[36] Holum and Vikan 121.

Faces and figures line the arcades and windows and participate, as much as they can, in the event, with those on the second story holding censers.[37]

The image articulates the importance of *adventus*, but also the purpose of such a communal event: to honor the installation of the relics into the basilical church, and to thus honor the establishment of the relics' *praesentia* within the community.[38] The composition of the plaque makes it very clear that installation of the relics is the ultimate goal. Figures move toward empress Pulcheria and the basilican church she stands in front of; the momentum of the figures is clearly going in her direction. Figures atop the basilica continue construction, suggesting that this event is about establishing the *praesentia* of the relics, as well as constructing an appropriate setting for the soon-to-be cult of St. Stephen.

Ironically, although the ivory depicts the event of St. Stephen's relics arriving at the site, there is little to no attention paid to Stephen's actual relics, suggesting that this event is more about the establishment of the relics' *praesentia*, rather than any kind of interaction with the relics themselves. The box containing the relics is small and opaque. People cannot see the relics; they can only see—or, rather, believe—that the relics are present inside. However, people do not even seem to be attempting to see this chasse and look at the relics' arrival. Instead, all looking is directed towards Pulcheria and the basilica under construction; attention is paid not to the arrival of the relics, but to the establishment of their *praesentia*. The same was probably the case for the reinstallation of Yrieix's relics. The event's splendor rested not in the sight of the relics, but in the way the ceremony verified and celebrated the fact that the relics were being reestablished—that their presence was being renewed—and that they were ready to work once

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[37] Holum and Vikan 124.
[38] Holum and Vikan 122.

again. The only sight involved was that of the newly constructed Gothic chapel and the way it

memorialized the event.

Even medieval legislation attests to the prevailing importance of presence over sight.

The Council of Carthage of 410 mandated the presence of relics at altars for consecration, and

that notion was perpetuated and modified throughout the Middle Ages. Two canons of the

Council of Frankfurt in 794 made presence of relics a requirement, the Second Council of Nicaea

in 797 did the same, and the capitulary of Aix mandated bishops to investigate the status of relics

at churches and verify their placement.[39] None of these legislations deal with how visible these

relics were, which suggests the weight that presence, not sight, of relics had in determining

devotion.

Unfortunately, we have no documentation about how the relics were installed after the

adventus or how believers continued their veneration of Yrieix, but we can assume that the

veneration of Yrieix's relics was not centered exclusively on the visual, as the sight of a

reliquary in a museum might suggest. For most cults, miracles relating to relics occurred not in

sight of them, but in physical proximity to them. Gregory of Tours, for example, notes the power

of the relics of St. Martin to heal the ill and blind upon their arrival to Tours; it is not sight of the

relics that does so, but the mere knowledge that *praesentia* is about to take hold.[40] Late

thirteenth and early fourteenth-century women were healed from physical ailments like paralysis

by traveling to the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis and being in the presence of the relics of Saint

Louis.[41] If there was any sight involved in this process, it was the sight of the way the relics

exercised their power or *potentia* on human subjects. In the words of Peter Brown, "nothing

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[39] Patrick J. Geary, "The Ninth-Century Relic Trade: A Response to Popular Piety?" *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 183-185.
[40] Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 108-109.
[41] Sharon Farmer, "Down and Out Female in Thirteenth-Century Paris," *The American Historical Review* 103.2 (1998): 363

gave a more palpable face to the unseen *praesentia* of the saint than did the heavy cries of the possessed."[42] Gregory of Tours himself notes the same mode of operation; when describing the eruption of shouting by the possessed at the tomb of Saint Julian at Brioude, Gregory notes that "in this way they bring home the presence of the saints of God to human minds, that there should be no doubt that the saints are present at their tombs."[43] The *potentia* of relics' *praesentia* was in fact so compelling that the knowledge of relic presence, however far, still oriented people's lives. Saint Louis' relics in Saint-Denis were perpetually on the minds of "down and out" women in Paris—relevant enough to inspire travel to Saint-Denis time and time again to receive the healing power of being in proximity to Louis' relics. Even if it was actually the ties among the community of poor women that helped them to pull one another through, aid and concord was credited to the fact that the women travelled the distance to be in the presence of Louis.[44]

There are also contemporaneous cults where relevance was so internalized among a community and so removed from relic interaction that relics came to not really matter. Julia Smith, in discussing the cult of saints in Brittany, notes how lack of clerically coordinated cults rendered a cult of saints almost entirely without an accompanying cult of relics; the subject of contact with a relic or even being in proximity to a relic became irrelevant for veneration.[45] The miraculous was found in natural phenomena such as springs rising without the help of relics and far away from where the relics would have been.[46] For this reason, Breton churches that had given relics to French churches during Viking invasions had little concern with getting their

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[42] Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 108-109.

[43] Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 108-109.

[44] Farmer 355. For further discussion of lay devotion and how it was promoted or channeled in various ways, see: Alexander Murray, "Religion Among the Poor in Thirteenth-Century France: The Testimony of Humbert de Romans," *Traditio* 30 (1974): 285-324.

[45] Julia M.H. Smith, "Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c. 850-1250" *Speculum* 65.2 (1990): 326. Smith also notes that this was the case in Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, p. 338.

[46] Smith 323.

patrons' relics back.[47] Though this is a particular regional example, it underscores the possibility

for just how much beliefs could overshadow visual experience. Functioning of the cult of relics

varied in how important relics actually were, but the idea remains throughout that ultimately

what is not important is sight of the relics, or even closeness to the relics, but internalized

awareness of the possibility of the power of relics, wherever they might have been.

As a result, the promotion of cults capitalized on the notion that the strongest bonds

between believer and saint were non-visual. The cult of Saint Helen of Athyra, largely a

fabrication of thirteenth-century Troyes that needed a cult to raise funds for the reconstruction of

the cathedral after a fire in 1188, was a successful enterprise because it constructed an armature

into which belief could seep that was not based on visual accoutrements.[48] As noted by Patrick

Geary, the construction of a cult required "researching or even creating a market for the cult,

publicizing it, promoting it, and selling it to the public."[49] To do so for St. Helen, the cathedral

chapter went to great ends to create a powerful, sanctity-verifying *vita* that could be disseminated

throughout the community at Troyes. The *Vita beatae Helenae*, likely fabricated in

Constantinople at the request of the chapter, was given a fictitious lineage through an

accompanying letter. Supposedly written by Angemer, native of Courbetaux in Champagne and

lector of the church of Chalcedon, the letter attests to the preexistence of the *vita* and his twelfth-

century translation of the *vita* into Latin, as commissioned by John, the cleric of Troyes.[50]

The cult of Helen was also promoted through temporal orchestration. Helen's feast day

was strategically placed on the calendar. She was given a feast day of May 4th, in the middle of

the most important religious week in Troyes—a week that incorporated the feasts of Saints Philip

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[47] Smith 336.
[48] Patrick J. Geary, "Saint Helen of Athyra and the Cathedral of Troyes in the Thirteenth Century," *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 224.
[49] Geary, "Saint Helen," 221-222.
[50] Geary, "Saint Helen," 231.

and James the Lesser on May 1, the feast of the Invention of the True Cross (a celebration of empress Helene's discovery of the true cross) on May 3, and feast day of Saint Mastidia on May 7.[51] Visual promotion was employed to an extent; a window dedicated to Helen was installed in the choir clerestory as an oblique reminder of her cult. But the other, non-visual modes of promotion employed suggests that the strongest relic cult was not the one with the most images—after all, Troyes had many other major saints' relics like James, Philip, and Margaret—but the one that best captured public attention. The strongest cult was not primarily visual—not based on interacting with a given object like a relic—but rather internalized and based on personal belief of a given relic's efficacy, and reinforced by the totality of the experience.

Hence, the cult of St. Yrieix operated in a fundamentally non-visual mode. Yrieix's regional miracle-working laid the foundation for the building of a saintly identity that was locally-known and applicable to local needs. As a result, sight of his relics and their visual solidarity was not needed for veneration to occur. Ceremonies such as the translation of his relics to the newly constructed Gothic chapel confirmed beholders' internalized faith, but was not based on close examination of the relics. Subsequent interactions with Yrieix worked via a faith-based and cerebral system of reciprocity, and, like St. Helen's clerestory window, served as a cultic accoutrement to reinforce and recall the saint's power that was already present and felt.

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[51] Geary, "Saint Helen," 235-6.

Chapter 3

According to Emile Mâle, saints were "heroes of the history of the world." Saints

influenced the naming of people and craft guilds.[52] Holy sites dedicated to them oriented

people's lives geographically,[53] and feast day celebrations oriented temporal and devotional

habits.[54] But above all, saints were "intercessors and patrons" and mingled in people's lives.[55]

Saints were liminal figures because they had interest in both the earthly and human realm, a role

made manifest by the existence of their holy relics on earth. Peter Brown notes early evidence of

this view on relics through the fourth-century writing of Pinhas ben Hama:

> If the fathers of the world (the patriarchs) had wished that their resting place should be in
> the Above, they would have been able to have it there: but it is when they died and the
> rock closed on their tombs here below that they deserved to be called "saints."[56]

The presence of saints' relics on earth signified their desire to make their holy power and mercy

available to earthly devotees. The relics themselves were the "privileged places" where the

heavenly and earthly met. This notion was firmly established by the sixth century, when it was

widely understood that heaven was made present through relics, whether it be in a tomb or a

reliquary. For example, the inscription on St. Martin's tomb at Tours states: "Here lies Martin the

bishop, of holy memory, whose soul is in the hand of God; but he is full here, present and made

plain in miracles of every kind."[57]

As noted in the last chapter, being in proximity to Yrieix's relics would have been

enough to interact with him and invoke his intercessory power. But, cultic images would have

fortified that interaction and reinforced beliefs. Images made invisible saints present and

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[52] Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France, The Thirteenth Century: A Study of Medieval Iconography and its Sources* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 268.
[53] Mâle 269.
[54] Mâle 271.
[55] Mâle 268.
[56] Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 3-4.
[57] Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 3-4.

attainable in a way belief on its own did not. To use Cynthia Hahn's terminology from her

discussion of early medieval shrine imagery, the "visual rhetoric of sanctity" would have made a

saint's holy past present through representation. And, just as shrines condensed the past and

present within a monumental structure to orient faith, images of Yrieix would have made him

present, relevant, and active to the beholder.[58] The temporal collapsing of the "visual rhetoric of

sanctity" would have reinforced the spatial, terrestrial-celestial collapsing of his relics; the

rhetoric of the image would have displaced its own power to strengthen the rhetorical power of

the relics, steeped in liminality.

Because images would have fortified the cult of Yrieix's relics, images would have

abounded.[59] Mâle notes the zeal with which dioceses gave their local cults images; after images

of apostles, those of saints were given primacy in the church setting, with stained glass or portals

being dedicated to images of their lives, deaths, and miracles.[60] Such images had a strong impact

on cultic establishment and perpetuation. In fact, images related to cults were so influential that

they could change the cult itself, even so far as to change the saintly *vita*. Early artistic

representations of St. Denis holding his head, probably demonstrations of his martyrdom through

decapitation, evolved into a legend of St. Denis in which he carried his own head to the site of

his basilica, which was recorded in the *Legenda aurea* and widely transmitted. St. Martin being

accompanied by a goose was intended, as suggested by Mâle, to remind the beholder of his

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[58] Cynthia Hahn, "Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saints' Shrines," *Speculum* 72.4 (1997): 1079. This condensing of past and present was also the case with portal imagery, as noted by Dorothy Gillerman when discussing the portal of St.-Thibault-en-Auxois: Dorothy Gillerman, "The Portal of St.-Thibault-en-Auxois: A Problem of Thirteenth-Century Burgundian Patronage and Founder Imagery," *The Art Bulletin* 68.4 (1986): 567-580. This theme also applies to treasury arts, as seen in discussion of the way the typological format of an Ottonian diptych makes past a part of the present *mentalité*: William J. Diebold, "Except I shall see…I will not believe" (John 20:25): Typology, Theology, and Historiography in an Ottonian Ivory Diptych," *Objects, Images, and the Word: Art in the Service of the Liturgy*, ed. Colum Horihane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 257-273. Also see Christopher Hughes, "Visual typology: an Ottonian Example," *Words & Image* 17 (2001): 185-198.

[59] Mâle 314.

[60] Mâle 310.

early-winter feast day, just around the time when the birds began their migration. However, this image became widely known, was incorporated into texts, and is now a conventional attribute of representations of Martin. There are no extant monumental images of Yrieix, but judging from Mâle, it is probable that some kind of glazing or sculptural program at the church of St. Yrieix would have portrayed him as a means of disseminating the knowledge of his relics' intercessory power.[61]

Fortunately, the reliquary image of St. Yrieix is extant, and was perhaps the most influential image of his cult. Rather than strengthening the cult of his relics like most images would have done, the reliquary image of Yrieix overtook the relics' intercessory powers through containing them; the image co-opted the intercessory power of the a skull fragment of Yrieix for its own purposes. In this chapter, I am addressing the purpose of the reliquary image of St. Yrieix. I hope to explain why his relics were given a face—a literal face, in fact—and how the nature of that face altered non-visual veneration practices and gave way to an object-based cultic experience.

Housing Yrieix's relics in terrestrial materials made its power quantifiable in terrestrial, human terms. On the most basic level, the value of the materials attested to the value of the relic inside. A sculptural image rendered in gold was the most expensive kind of image to create.[62] The image is also adorned with filigree panels, crystal cabachons, and colored glass, all of which would have required the participation of multiple artist guilds and substantial funding.[63] In the process of being contained, the relic acquired the material status of its precious container; the

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[61] Mâle 286.

[62] Elizabeth Sears, "Ivory and Ivory Workers in Medieval Paris." *Images in Ivory: Precious Objects of the Gothic Age*, ed. Peter Barnet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 21-22.

[63] Sears 29.

relic became a gem in its own right.[64] Hence, as suggested by Abbot Suger, the more precious

the saint was, the more precious his reliquary should have been: "the most sacred bones of those

whose venerable spirits, radiant as the sun, attend the Almighty God, [should be covered] with

the most precious material we possibly can, with refined gold and a profusion of hyacinths,

emeralds and other precious stones."[65]

In a similar vein of correlation, the nature of the containing materials attested to the

nature of the contained relic. Gold and stones exceeded the visual realm—they produced optical

effects that "[tugged] the visible away from the legible"—suggesting that the relics inside

exceeded the earthly, human realm.[66] Gold and stones were glorious enough to describe the

glory of the Heavenly Jerusalem. In Revelations, the celestial city is described as being built of

the most precious of materials; the walls are "of jasper, and the city is pure gold…The

foundations of the wall of the city are garnished with all manner of precious stones," such as

sapphire, emerald, sardonyx, amethyst, and pearls.[67] Through precious earthly materials that

defied boundaries between earth and heaven, the spatially defying nature of Yrieix's relics could

be understood anagogically.[68] However, metaphorical materials were not all lofty. The walnut

core of the reliquary, which contained the actual skull fragment,[69] was a living material and

associated with human flesh.[70] Though the relic operated through celestial metaphor, that

metaphor had as its framework—literally—terrestrial matter.

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[64] Brigitte Buettner, "From Bones to Stones: Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries," *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, eds. Bruno Reudenbach and Gia Toussaint (Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 2005) 46. See also Ellert Dahl, "Heavenly Images: The Statue of St. Foy of Conques and the Signification of the Medieval 'Cult-Image' in the West," *Acta ad archaeologiam et atrium historiam pertinentia* 8 (1978): 184-5.

[65] Dahl 184.

[66] Buettner, "Bones to Stones," 51.

[67] Dahl 182.

[68] Dahl 183.

[69] Boehm 240-242.

[70] Joan A. Holladay, "Relics, Reliquaries, and Religious Women: Visualizing the Holy Virgins of Cologne," *Studies in Iconography* 18 (1997): 87.

Beyond the actual value and metaphorical weight of the materials used, the fact that the

object has a human form deserves consideration.[71] It had for a long time been thought that the

exterior form had a certain qualifying function for the relics inside—whether a foot, arm, or

entire body. Just as a valuable, luminous material suggested that interior relics had the same

exalted properties, a reliquary in a certain human form authenticated the kind of human remains

inside. However, Cynthia Hahn, in her study of arm reliquaries (Figure 4), explains that body-

part reliquaries did not describe their contents. She notes that most arm reliquaries do not

contain single arm bones; the thirteenth-century arm reliquary at St. Gereon in Cologne,

according to its inscription, contained relics of Sixtus, Agapitus, Felicissimus, Nereus, and

Achilleus, and another arm reliquary at that site contained around thirty saints. Some do not

even contain arm bones; the arm reliquary of Peter, circa 1230, apparently contains a leg bone.

And, interestingly, some do not contain bones at all; the eleventh-century *Vita Gauzlini* describes

a part of the burial shroud of Christ contained in a gilded and gem-encrusted right arm

reliquary.[72] The disconnect is the same for non-arm reliquaries, a discovery documented by

Hugh of Poitiers upon inspecting a Sedes Sapientiae statue from the church of Madeleine at

Vézelay after a fire, c. 1161-1165:

> The occasion of its repair revealed an inestimable treasure lying hidden in [the statue of
> the Virgin]…it was said by [the] restorer, that the image as it seemed to him, had a secret
> little door hidden between the shoulders. Having heard this, Gilles, the prior…opened the
> little door with his own hands, and found a lock of the Immaculate Virgin…and a part of
> the tunic of the same Mary, Mother of God, and one of the bones of John the Baptist. He
> even found bones of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and a ligature of Andrew; also a
> bit of the thumb of St. James, brother of the Lord; and also two ligatures from the bones
> of St. Bartholomew, of the Apostles; and one arm, as it were, of the Innocents; and relics
> of St. Clement; and one mass of the hair of St. Radegond the queen; besides some of the
> vestments of the three children, Shadrach, Mishac and Abednego; and some of the purple

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[71] Reliquaries in human forms emerged from a longstanding tradition of chasse reliquaries. See Clair Wheeler Solt,
"Romanesque French Reliquaries," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, eds. J.A.S. Evans and R. W.
Unger, vol. 9 (New York: AMS Press, 1987) 165-235.
[72] Cynthia Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries," *Gesta* 36.1 (1997): 21-22.

vestment which the Lord Jesus Christ wore in his Passion.[73]

Aside from the fact that the contents do not match the exterior, it was not even known that this Virgin cult statue had relics at all, which only furthers the notion of the reliquary image doing more than identifying. Though we do know that the bust-shaped reliquary of St. Yrieix once contained a single skull fragment—that the exterior did reflect the nature of the interior—Hahn's discussion and Hugh of Poitiers' account ask us to re-evaluate the nature of the image of St. Yrieix and consider that the human form was employed for reasons more than just identification of the contents. The reliquary container, released from merely describing its interior contents, in fact becomes even more intriguing.

Giving the reliquary a human form meant endowing the relic with the power to act as if human. In the case of Hahn's example, this means that the arm form bestowed a relic, regardless of nature, with the gestural power of a human arm; it funneled the intercessory power of a saint in the form of a human action. Just as a saint's hand would make a sign of blessing to heal the ill, or a bishop would do the same to sanctify a congregation, an arm-shaped reliquary with fingers in the form of a benediction seal would act as a conduit to allow the relic to bless the viewer.[74] This arm form was more than a "frozen attitude of fingers." The implied gesture of the arm form could be used by a priest, who could raise the object as a holy extension of his own arm. This was the case at Rheims, Amiens, and Essen, whose ordinaries all attest to this practice of the priest co-opting the gestural power of the arm reliquary to bless the congregation during liturgical performances.[75] Aside from liturgical purposes, arm reliquaries were also enacted by priests when a holy helping hand was needed to address problems out of their own hands. As

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[73] Ilene Hearing Forsyth, "Magi and Majesty: A Study of Romanesque Sculpture and Liturgical Drama," *The Art Bulletin* 50.3 (1968): 216.
[74] Hahn, "Speaking," 23-25.
[75] Hahn, "Speaking," 22-23.

Abbot Suger describes, the abbey's arm reliquary of Simeon was used to temper a storm that was

threatening the progress of his new Gothic choir:

> when the venerable Bishop of Chartres, Geoffroy, was solemnly celebrating at the main
> altar a conventual Mass…such a force of contrary gales hurled itself against the aforesaid
> arches…that they threatened baneful ruin at any moment, miserably trembling and, as it
> were, swaying hither and thither. The Bishop, alarmed…extended his blessing hand in
> the direction of that part and urgently held out toward it, while making the sign of the
> cross, the arm of the Aged Simeon; so that he escaped disaster, manifestly not through his
> own strength of mind but by the grace of God and the merit of the Saints.[76]

The bust reliquary of St. Yrieix is by no means an active image—it is quite static, in

fact—and would likely not have been employed in such an emphatic gesture, which leads us to

ask what purpose the bust form served and what kind of human agency it promoted. Joan

Holladay's examination of the busts of the Virgins of Cologne is useful here (Figure 5), both for

the way in which she considers motives for the utilization of the human bust form, and for the

relatively contemporaneous making of the Virgin busts to the Yrieix bust. The Virgins of

Cologne, companions of St. Ursula, were a group of female martyrs who died around 300. Their

numbers range in some texts between two and eleven, and in other texts (perhaps due to misread

abbreviations of Latin inscriptions) thousands, but by the tenth century, the number was firmly

established as eleven thousand.[77] Though they died in the early fourth century, their relics were

not discovered until 1106. And, starting in the 1260s, mass numbers of bodies and fragments

were dispersed throughout Europe,[78] with some of the dispersed skulls contained in female

reliquary busts, production of which continued through the fourteenth century. There are

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[76] Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, Erwin Panofsky, and Gerda Panofsky-Soergel, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) 108-109. See also Marvin Trachtenberg, "Suger's Miracles, Branner's Bourges: Reflections on "Gothic Architecture" as Medieval Modernism," *Gesta* 39.2 (2000): 196.

[77] Holladay 72.

[78] Holladay 80. The Dominican foundation in Cologne received six hundred bodies; William, abbot of St. Trond in Belgium, acquired 136 heads, which he redistributed locally; heads were sent to Spain and Italy; inventories of Queen Isabella of England and her son Edward III document the receiving of heads.

currently 160 preserved busts, and Holladay looks to them to articulate the nature of their human

bust forms as a conduit for the relics they contained.[79]

As Hahn showed using arm reliquaries, the human form endows relics with human

capabilities, and in the case of the busts of the Virgins of Cologne, the naturalistic bust forms

endow the relics with human-like identities. The busts' human characteristics are extreme and

exaggerated. Each is life-sized (standing about forty centimeters high), carved in the round,

polychromed in flesh tones, and has fashionably brocaded clothing and a hairstyle that was up-

to-date for the thirteenth century. The wooden composition makes the degree of naturalism

possible; even if economic constraints dictated the use of wood, it is also likely that wood was

employed for its ability, as a living and natural material, to closely resemble the look and texture

of human flesh and, as is the case with the core of the reliquary of Yrieix, ground the image in

the earthly, living realm. The creators of the Virgin busts seem to have considered that by way of

naturalistic forms, they were evoking a real presence. The objects adhere to anatomical

standards that the viewer cannot even see; all objects have the skulls placed in hollowed out

chambers in the heads, which approximates the relationship of bones to flesh in a real person.[80]

Creating these human-looking objects was not just about creating a human mode for the relics to

act within, but also about creating actual and real people. Moreover, there is no kind of object

framing like a pedestal or base to disclose a given bust's status as object. Instead, all busts are

cut off at the bottom, so when placed on a surface, they appear as real women behind the surface,

rather than women-like objects sitting atop. Hence, when placed along the city walls of Cologne

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[79] Holladay 85-86.
[80] Holladay 87.

to protect the city from Archbishop Engelbert's attempted siege (Figure 6), they were like real women actively aiding the defense.[81]

We can conceive of Yrieix's image as having a somewhat similar purpose. Though he is rendered in gilded silver and adorned with precious stones, the form of his features approaches the naturalism of the Cologne busts. After all, the form of his face was first sculpted in wood and then covered in metal, so there was certainly a motive to make his form appear as human-like as possible. Therefore, Holladay's assertion that the Virgin busts were rendered in such a form to become active, live, and human interfaces for viewers holds true—at least to a certain extent—for Yrieix, as well. Such objects anchored the cults with terrestrial agency, endowed the cults with human relevancy, and ultimately established a corporeal rapport with the beholder.

Holladay defines the particulars of this rapport—who the objects were speaking to and how that audience perceived of and experienced the interaction—which is an exercise useful for our consideration of the larger purpose and functioning of Yrieix's human-like reliquary image. The overwhelmingly female nature of the Virgins make their relationship to a female audience unavoidable, so Holladay situates the objects as a part of devotional practices of women in late medieval Cologne.[82] Beginning in the early thirteenth century, Beguines turned away from traditional convents in search of religious lifestyles based on good works and service to the community. These women either lived with their families, or in small groups in convent-like houses, all with the goal of committing their lives to charity.[83] This new kind of religious woman was beneficial to the church; the groups of women would rent land from the church, and thus the two groups had a pragmatic business arrangement. But, as the number of Beguines rose drastically in the fourteenth century, the church became more uneasy with this increasingly

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[81] Holladay 80-81.
[82] Holladay 70.
[83] Holladay 89.

popular lifestyle that challenged proper religious authority in favor of a self-constructed kind of religious life.[84] Holladay sees the timely creation of naturalistic, feminine reliquary busts as an attempt on the part of the church to co-opt the growing number of non-church-affiliated women in Cologne. The busts could have served as role models for these women, or for women struggling to find their place in devotional and religious culture of the time. The busts established a "precedent for piety"—human-like piety, that is.[85] And that precedent, made attainable through the humanly, relatable forms, allowed women to see saint-like piety as something possible for them to achieve through participation in the church. Through the human form, women saw these objects as real people—real and relevant "predecessors and prototypes" to direct their spiritual and devotional practices.[86]

Holladay's understanding opens the possibility for us to consider the Yrieix bust as a pious model. We have no documentation of religious movements in the town of St. Yrieix that would make the creation of such an image necessary, but the monastic nature of his church suggests that the object could have addressed the chapter in an effective, guiding manner. Moreover, the level to which Yrieix's cult was embedded in communal devotional culture ensures that both the chapter and lay devotees would have considered Yrieix to be a living presence already, thereby making his embodiment in a human-like reliquary image all the more influential.

However, we cannot avoid the fact that the Yrieix bust is not a fully naturalistic image; he is constructed of silver and gilt. In order to address this tension, we can look to Ellert Dahl on the reliquary of St. Foy of Conques (Figure 7). Like Yrieix, the St. Foy reliquary is a human form rendered in gilded metal and encrusted with gems. There are a few disparities—Foy is a

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[84] Holladay 92.
[85] Holladay 94.
[86] Holladay 96.

full-scale body, rather than a bust, and Foy is from about two centuries earlier—but it still allows us to imagine image intention and activation. And, because St. Foy is the earliest known metal reliquary in the human form, created in the ninth century, we can also speculate upon the power of such an image and image experience in influencing reliquaries centuries later.[87]

As with the Virgins of Cologne, St. Foy's human form facilitated a human-to-human interaction. Her form is not nearly as naturalistic and is actually quite bizarre looking—her head is a reused fifth-century Roman emperor effigy—but she is still easily identifiable as human-like, which still gives her image a certain kind of human agency.[88] She acts through her eyes, and her piercing and fixed gaze make the experience of the image about looking and being looked at. Through such a gaze, the image played upon medieval notions of human-to-human interactions. Her eyes allow her relic's *praesentia* to funnel out and penetrate the viewer on a corporeal level. This gaze was so human-like and mesmerizing that Bernard of Angers said of the reliquary: "so strikingly was the face of the human figure portrayed that it seemed to several people as if it were fixing its beholders with a piercing glance, as well as sometimes graciously granting the petitions of her supplicants with a twinkle of the eye."[89] The human-to-human and eye-to-eye interaction associated with the saint's image was so fixating that it came to conflate with her *vita*, and she became known as having an interesting in healing injured eyes.[90]

However, the St. Foy reliquary also asserts itself as more than human, shown through its lustrous surface that attests to Foy's heavenly presence; hence, for Dahl she is a "heavenly image." The human form admits Foy's earthly guise, but the form's encrusting transfigures it

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[87] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 301.
[88] Dahl 176.
[89] Dahl 188.
[90] Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, "An Unsentimental View of Ritual in the Middle Ages or, Sainte Foy was No Snow White," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6.1 (1992): 77.

into a heavenly body. Through the hybrid of human bust form and lustrous material, St. Foy's

image is one of her in glory. This heavenly being, made visual to the viewer, facilitated a

relationship between the object and beholder that was both palpable and sacred. As Dahl

suggests, the saint 'became physically present to those before her and also raised the beholder to

be allowed to participate in heavenly glory.'[91] In the form of the reliquary, the heaven was

brought to the earth, and the earth to heaven; the intercessory power of the saint was objectified.

As Peter Brown said of the meeting of heaven and earth around relics, there was a

"strange flash that occurred when the two hitherto distinct categories joined." The reliquary of

Foy was such a flash, embodied in the form of an object.[92] Therefore, even visual interactions

with the object were likely not-so-visual and more about the reliquary as a liminal point of

contact. As St. Foy became famous through healing the blind, the reliquary image was altered,

with the metal casing "entirely renovated" and adorned with gifts of stones and gems.[93] Acts of

earthly seeing and giving only made Foy's form more heavenly and glorious, and her flash

brighter. Thus, interaction with the Yrieix image *was* interacting with heaven; the image

compressed heaven and earth in a form digestible for the eyes. The image was powerful not for

its rhetoric of sanctity, but for the field of heavenly proximity and interaction it established. As a

result, beholding the image was not about seeing visually, but rather about seeing, in the words

of Thiofriend of Echternach, with "spiritual eyes."[94] There were transcendent truths lying behind

powerful images, as noted by Gregory of Tours, who condemned unmeritorious beholders at the

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[91] Dahl 180.
[92] Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 3.
[93] Belting 301.
[94] Buettner, "Bones to Stones," 51.

martyrium of St. Martin for simply gaping at the frescoes.[95] The reliquary of St. Yrieix fortified

non-visual belief, rather than served as visual evidence to create belief.

The reliquary of St. Yrieix was a field for non-visual interactions, thereby making its

visual form peculiarly effective and wrought with paradox. The image's form and materials

were important. The human form shone, suggesting that Yrieix did, too, in the celestial realm.

But the sparkling human form did more than indicate Yrieix's nature. The form gave a place for

his nature to be made manifest on earth; as with St. Foy, the statue would have shone not just

because of the materials, but because of "the overflowing of the glory of the saint in the body."[96]

Because the image would have made Yrieix's intercessory spirit present, interaction with that

image could not have occurred entirely visually. Hence, the paradox of seen and unseen;

incorporeal sight required a corporeal image. Even Bernard of Angers' incorporeal dream of St.

Foy functioned on the basis of seeing Foy not as an abstracted form, or even a girl, but rather as

in the form of her "sacred image."[97] However, the fact that Foy's reliquary form, invoked in a

dream, was just as powerful and worth noting as a dream of Foy herself suggests that perhaps

what was most important was memory of the image and knowledge of its function, rather than

the object itself. Thus, incorporeal interaction with Yrieix would have required some kind of

visual image as impetus, but that visual image could have been only seen once, committed to

memory, and harbored by the mind. The experience of the reliquary, then, was a fundamentally

mental exercise and about the satisfaction that came from an intercessory mental image.

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[95] Hahn, "Seeing and Believing," 1095.

[96] Dahl 186.

[97] Ashley and Sheingorn 77. Also see Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000-1215* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987) 37-38. The third chapter of her book focuses on miracles enacted by various saints, and implicit within this discussion is the way in which images of saints served as points of corporeal, yet incorporeal contact. For example it is documented that, Saint Faith appeared to subjects in the form of her reliquary, thus miracles were granted based on a juxtaposition of sight and non-sight.

Chapter 4

Regardless of the fact that the reliquary of Yrieix *could* have operated through the unseen, devotees would have still desired to visually see the object. And, when considering the way in which the sacred image of Yrieix would have operated in habits of sight, there is little literature to look to. Most discussions of reliquaries as seen objects—Dahl, Holladay, and Hahn—seem to focus entirely on the reliquary as an interface between the terrestrial and the celestial, and fail to note the experience of that interface within space and time. Reliquaries operated in distinct spaces and moments, which nuanced, or even changed, the nature of the experience, and the previously discussed authors only abstractly give shape to these operating modes. Hahn attests to the practice of arm reliquaries being raised; this claim situates the objects in a liturgical ritual moment, which undoubtedly would have occurred in some kind of church location, but makes little effort to detail the region of the church in which this gestural activation would have occurred.[98] Holladay articulates the placement of Virgin busts "on altars with reliquaries of other forms," but gives no indication to where those altars might have been.[99] Dahl refers to the process of beholding reliquaries placed on altars—"when seen upon the altars by the medieval worshiper, shining with gold and surrounded by lights, they must have had a magnetic effect"—but similarly gives no bearings of when or where this experience would have taken place.[100] It is my goal in this chapter to articulate the way in which the Yrieix reliquary performed in space and time. This performance was heavenly orchestrated—access to the object was limited—making the orchestration a performance in its own right. As a result, experiencing the object was perhaps equally about experiencing the limitations of interaction with it.

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[98] Hahn, "Speaking," 23-25.
[99] Holladay 88.
[100] Dahl 175.

Failure to explore this orchestration would lead to not just an incomplete discussion, but a misleading one. Merely explaining the intercessory nature of reliquary performance renders a vision of them as being available for an appraising gaze that led the eyes to something beyond. This kind of close interaction was the case for the chapter of the church. As Paul Crossley notes of St. Laurence of Nuremberg, reliquaries were set up on altars forming a spatial sequence that acted as "stations of a symbolic but abbreviated [spiritual] journey" (Figure 8).[101] But, as documented in Figure 8, this arrangement was behind a choir screen, so such a journey was only something the chapter had privilege to. For the average beholder, object interaction was impeded by the choir screen, and face-to-face contact occurred only occasionally when objects were brought out for feast days or other liturgical events.[102] Lay access to the reliquary was spatially and temporally limited, so we must consider the nature of these limitations in order to understand the mode of beholding the object.

In regards to spatial orchestration at the site, information is scarce, but situating it within the context of contemporaneous sites can help our enterprise. The church of St. Yrieix is a product of the late twelfth century (Figures 9-13). Upon the demolition of the Romanesque church of Saint Hilaire, construction of the new structure began around 1180, and though it was not completed until the late thirteenth century, the largest portion of the building campaign took place around 1183, when the relics of Yrieix were translated into the new Gothic choir.[103] For contemporaneous and well-documented comparanda, we can look to the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis, Notre-Dame de Chartres, and the Sainte-Chapelle. Saint-Denis is the most obvious

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[101] Paul Crossley, "The Man from Inner Space: Architecture and Meditation in the Choir of St. Laurence in Nuremberg," *Medieval Art: Recent Perspectives. A Memorial Tribute to Reginald Dodwell*, eds. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Timothy Graham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 166.
[102] Jacqueline E. Jung, "Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches," *The Art Bulletin* 82.4 (2000): 622.
[103] Materials on site at the church of Saint Yrieix, France.

counterpart; it is an almost exact contemporary and had a large monastic presence. Chartres and

the Sainte-Chapelle are less obvious choices; they are later structures, Chartres is a cathedral, and

the Sainte-Chapelle is a personal chapel commissioned by King Louis IX. Despite the inherent

differences, all structures are relatively close to each other and thus within the same kind of relic

and reliquary culture. And more importantly, the wealth of documentation in regards to items in

the treasury and the location of those items within the structures provide and ideal launching

point for imaginatively constructing the ritual space of the St. Yrieix reliquary.

Upon consideration of the reliquaries in their ritual spaces at these sites, we can begin to

understand that Saint-Denis, as well as Chartres and the Sainte-Chapelle, tended to hide their

relics and reliquaries, at least from the everyday beholder. Early eighteenth-century engravings

depicting the armoires of the treasury of Sainte-Denis (Figure 14) suggest that the objects were

on permanent display for the public, but in fact, treasury objects were largely hidden from

view.[104] A ground plan by Clark Maines indicates locations of treasury objects with inscriptions

mentioning Abbot Suger (Figure 15), but a ground plan of later St. Denis with the choir screen in

place (Figure 16) suggests that while some objects were likely in public places—a vase and ewer

were on a movable altar close to the nave—the majority were not. Objects relating to relics and

reliquaries, such as the Main Altar and Altar of the Martyrs, were in the choir and blocked by a

tall, opaque choir screen. Abbot Suger himself attested to the limited sight allowed to church-

goers. In *De administratione*, he describes the most sacred bodies of the church's patron saints

as being enclosed in receptacles "with gilded panels of cast copper and with polished stones,

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[104] Sumner M. Crosby et al, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the Time of Abbot Suger (1122-1151)* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981) 101-102. These engravings come from the 1706 publication *Histoire de l'abbaye de Saint-Denys en France*, which has five engravings, one for each armoire, with objects ranging from chalices to censers to crowns to reliquary arms (such at the one of St. Simeon, mentioned in Chp. 3) to busts.

[that were] fixed close to the inner stone vaults [of the choir], and also with continuous gates to hold off disturbances by crowds."[105]

The same was the case at Chartres. The site's primary relic, the Sancta Camisia, was contained in an elaborate reliquary box known as the Saint Châsse, which was a cedar box created in the tenth century to protect the Sancta Camisia and some small secondary relics and reliquaries. The reliquary no longer exists, but a late seventeenth-century engraving (Figure 17) allows us to envision it; it was covered with gold plaques, encrusted with precious and semi-precious stones, cameos, and antique intaglios.[106] Despite its splendor, it was more of an obstacle than something to look at. It hid the relics and reliquaries inside from view, and for a long while; once the Sancta Camisia and other minor relics were placed inside the chasse in the tenth century, the chasse was not opened again until 1712, when there was an inventory of its contents.[107]

The placement of the Sainte Châsse within the cathedral facilitated even less visual interaction with relics like the Sancta Camisia, at least in regards to public access. The Saint Châsse was in immediate proximity to the high altar (Figure 18, around letter C) and set upon a platform just slightly taller than the altar. The majority of the rest of the cathedral's relic and reliquary holdings were also located in this region. There were two altars behind the high altar, and above the second was another platform, or a tribune, on which compartments containing chasses and other kinds of reliquaries were arranged in a pyramid.[108] Chartres' Charlemagne window may picture the tribune's pyramid organization (Figure 19). This entire region of the

[105] Suger 55-57.
[106] Claudine Lautier, "The Sacred Topography of Chartres Cathedral: The Reliquary Chasse of the Virgin in the Liturgical Choir and Stained-Glass Decoration," *The Four Modes of Seeing: Approaches to Medieval Imagery in Honor of Madeline Harrison Caviness*, eds. Evelyn Staudinger Lane, Elizabeth Carson Pastan, and Ellen M. Shortell (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009) 174-175.
[107] Lautier 176.
[108] Lautier 184.

cathedral was closed off by curtains and tapestries, and when the choir screen was built around

1230 (as shown in Figure 18), this section was even more secluded, spatially and visually.[109]

The medieval churchgoer had virtually no sight or interaction with the Saint Châsse or any

reliquaries, really; everything inside this choir precinct was guarded day and night by wards.

Though the Saint Châsse was almost always blocked from view (except for on feast days), the

beholder could get a glimpse of the other reliquaries on the tribune, but only if he or she was far

west—back to the west façade. The choir screen would have blocked sight of the tribune if one

was too far east, but if far westward, one could have sight over the choir screen and see the

tribune—almost as high as the forty-five-foot main arcades—supporting a pyramid of

reliquaries.[110]

It is at the Sainte-Chapelle where limited access is most extreme. Upon Louis IX's

acquisition of the Crown of Thorns from the Emperor of Constantinople,[111] as well as additional

Passion relics, in 1241,[112] he had reliquaries made, with the reliquary once enshrining the Crown

of Thorns shaped like a chalice and surmounted by a crown of lilies (unfortunately it is no longer

extant, but it is evoked by Viollet-le-Duc's rendering).[113] Following the formation of these

reliquaries was the construction of a large reliquary box, known as the Grande Châsse, to house

the site's—and Louis'—relic holdings.[114] Though the Grande Châsse no longer exists, there are

engravings that depict it (Figure 20). It was an entirely opaque box, covered in three scenes: the

Flagellation on the left, the Crucifixion in the middle, and the Resurrection on the right—all

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[109] Lautier 186.

[110] Lautier 187-188.

[111] Beat Brenk, "The Sainte-Chapelle as a Capetian Political Program," *Artistic Integration in Gothic Buildings*, eds. Virginia Chieffo Raguin, Kathryn Brush, and Peter Draper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 196.

[112] Alyce Jordan, "Stained Glass and the Liturgy: Performing Sacral Kingship in Capetian France," *Objects, Images, and the Word: Art in the Service of the Liturgy*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 274.

[113] Brenk 196.

[114] Robert Branner, "The Grande Chasse of the Sainte-Chapelle," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 77 (1971): 5.

fitting motifs considering the box contained reliquaries for passion relics.[115] Originally, the

chasse was elevated and behind the chapel altar, with the reliquaries inside retrieved using a

ladder. Later on, a tribune was built—along the lines of the one at Chartres—that included stairs

and allowed easier, though restricted, access to the chasse and its contents.[116] The tribune screen

was set within the apsidial bay of the chapel (Figure 21); it was affixed to the northern and

southern walls at the pier adjoining the apse and nave.[117] And, atop this tribune platform was the

Grande Châsse, covered by a baldachin, as shown in a seventeenth-century engraving (Figure

22).[118] Though the reliquaries were in close proximity to the church-goer—after all, the chapel

is quite small—the box was opaque and fervently seems to have disallowed routine sight of its

contents.[119]

It is likely that the reliquary of St. Yrieix was also contained in such a chasse. When the

relics were exhumed in 1181 to keep them safe during reconstruction, a chasse was used to both

take them away and reinstall them in 1183. Bernardus Guidonus in the fourteenth century

described a precious chasse of St. Yrieix atop the saint's altar, which, given the other sites

discussed, likely contained Yrieix's head reliquary.[120] This practice continued through the

seventeenth century and probably even later; in 1638 a reliquary chasse was ordered in Limoges

to contain the head, probably to replace the previous one.[121] It is also likely that the reliquary,

inside its chasse atop the altar, was behind a choir screen. Placement of the screen is uncertain.

It could have ran along the westernmost side of the transept crossing (Figure 9), as was the case

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[115] Branner 6.
[116] Branner 14.
[117] Daniel H. Weiss, "Architectural Symbolism and the Decoration of the Ste.-Chapelle," *The Art Bulletin* 77.2 (1995): 310.
[118] Weiss 308.
[119] See Willibald Sauerländer, "Architecture gothique et mise en scène des reliques. L'exemple de la Sainte-Chapelle," *La Sainte-Chapelle de Paris: Royaume de France ou Jérusalem céleste? Actes du colloque (Paris, Collège de France, 2001)*, ed. Christine Ediger. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007) 113-136.
[120] Boehm 246-7.
[121] Boehm 246-7.

at Angers cathedral (Figure 23), which would have left the transept and everything eastwards to the chapter. However, given that there was a substantial entrance on the south transept arm, it is likely that the transept was a public space, and that the choir screen closed off only space east of the transept. Regardless of exact placement, opportunities to view the reliquary would have been rare, and this limited sight was made quite apparent to the beholder. While at Chartres, a glimpse of the pyramid of reliquaries could be caught over the choir screen with strained looking from far westwards, the small size of the church of St. Yrieix suggests that the choir screen would have been quite imposing, and sight over it close to impossible. In that sense, sight (or lack thereof) functioned more as at the Sainte-Chapelle, where the opacity of the barrier was fully imposing to the viewer.[122]

It seems likely that the limited sight of the reliquary would have promoted looking at other objects of visual interest, namely stained glass, which could have supplemented the experience and lead the beholder to consider the reliquary as working in space and with other art forms. Stained glass windows, functioning like the mural paintings that Mary Carruthers discusses in the context of building orchestration, "can mean nothing unless the reader wishes to making something of them," and seeing glazing programs as relating to relics and reliquaries was a viable way of reading them.[123] For example, the trajectory from limited reliquary sight to sight of windows could have promoted an understanding of the windows as a physical manifestation of the reliquary power—as a testament to the *potentia* of the relics' *praesentia*, regardless of seen or not seen.[124]

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[122] Granted, the Sainte-Chapelle's barrier was more dramatized—the barrier was a manifestation of the king's control over relic access—but it still promoted a similar vision of inhibited access made extremely known to the viewer.

[123] Mary Carruthers, "The Poet as Master Builder: Composition and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 24.4 (1993): 887.

[124] On the subject of relics relating to glazing programs, see Elizabeth Carson Pastan, "Dating Medieval Work: the Case of the Miracles of Saint Andrew Window from Troyes Cathedral," *Feud, Violence, and Practice: Essays in*

For example, strained seeing at Saint-Denis could have invited the viewer to come close to the choir and wander through the glowing halls of the ambulatory, lit by gem-toned stained glass, and conceive of the structure and as having footings in the unseen saint. The "beauty of the house of God [St. Denis]…and the loveliness of the many-colored gems" led Abbot Suger to say that he saw himself "dwelling, as it were, in some strange universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven."[125] However, for any beholder, such an anagogical experience would have been inextricably tied to the acknowledgement that the relics made that experience possible; the relics allowed for the construction of the space, and their presence, though unseen, facilitated spiritual transcendence.

Strained seeing at Chartres could have invited the viewer close to the west façade to consider the windows of the choir clerestory hemicycle, wrought with imagery of the Virgin and Child, as a reference to the nature of the site's marian affiliation.[126] The Charlemagne window in the choir, which Elizabeth Pastan suggests is not so much about Charlemagne as it is about his acquisition and gifting of the primary relic of the Sancta Camisia to Chartres, gave a pedigree to the site's relics and served as an oblique reminder of the relics' role in establishing and giving value to the cathedral.[127] At the Sainte-Chapelle, blocked sight was framed by glazing that cast a heavenly, denaturalized glow upon the chasse; blocked sight promoted consideration of the visual splendor that the relics made possible, and also invited looking throughout the chapel's extensive glazing program to consider its images in light of the relics withheld from view.[128]

Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White, ed. Belle S. Tuten and Tracey L. Billado (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010).

[125] Crosby, 10.

[126] Madeline H. Caviness, "Stained Glass Windows in Gothic Chapels, and the Feasts of the Saints," *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana: Kunst und Liturgie im Mittelalter* 33 (2000): 146.

[127] Elizabeth Carson Pastan, "Charlemagne as Saint? Relics and the Choice of Window Subjects at Chartres Cathedral," *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade*, eds. Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 97-135.

[128] Sauerländer 118-119.

The repetition, or *expolitio*, of images of crowns and coronation scenes gave the Crown of

Thorns a visible, if evanescent, presence.[129]

So, in the case of St. Yrieix, sight was an impetus for looking at other kinds of images;

lack of sight acted as a conduit to lead the viewer to consider the space, as well as the role of the

relics and reliquaries in determining the nature of the space. Reliquary performance was a

complex reverberation of seeing and not seeing. Not seeing was made monumental and

imposing, yet that inability led to sight of other things—such as the stained glass—that portrayed

monumental notions of saintly intercessory power. When accompanied by the fact that the

beholder did not need to see the reliquary physically to experience it, the blocked sight

arrangement of the church would have served as a powerful enhancement to the cult of Yrieix.[130]

This spatial model is only so useful, though, in that it creates a rather static rendering of

the object experience. This limited sight was not perpetual and static; it was punctuated by

powerful moments of sight. The reliquary would have been brought out for various kinds of

liturgical rituals, allowing for endless kinds of enactments within a single space.[131] According to

the *Decreta Lanfranci*, space was only secondary to the sacred drama of the liturgy, suggesting

that ritual enactment of the reliquary was perhaps more important than spatial enactment.[132]

These processional enactments had quite little to do with the nature of the spaces around them;

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[129] Brenk 199. These scenes with crowns are also quite ambiguous in regards to who is participating. Coronation scenes could be identified as those of Christ or those of the king, which conflated Christ and Louis, as well as the Crown of Thorns and the Crown of France, thereby suggesting that ownership of the relic of the Crown of Thorns attested to Louis' right as sacral king. So, blocked sight at the Sainte-Chapelle promoted not just consideration of the relics, but consideration of administration of the relics, and consideration of Louis as sacred administrator. See Weiss 308, Brenk 201, and Jordan 287.

[130] There are problems with this model, at least we know with Chartres. There were not always such clear trajectories from unseen reliquaries to windows. Not all important relics had windows; Madeline Caviness notes that less than half of the saints who had nine lessons did not have glazing programs dedicated to them. Caviness, "Stained Glass," 146.

[131] Arnold William Klukas, "The Architectural Implications of the *Decreta Lanfranci*." *Anglo-Norman Studies* 6 (1983): 148. The *Decreta Lanfranci*, c. 1070, details customs new Norman archbishop wished to implement for his new English subjects upon the time of the Norman Conquest.

[132] Klukas 136.

they were driven by the liturgical calendar and were conducted where space was available.[133] As

a result, during these events, the value of space dissolved. Glazing programs were no longer

relevant—rituals were enacted where there was space, not where there were appropriate window

images—hence, Madeline Caviness' statement that windows were "at best a complementary role

in relation to the temporal liturgical cycle."[134] Therefore, in these cases of processions,

experiencing the reliquary was about the event in time, rather the event amidst a system of visual

cues.

However, these events in which sight was allowed were seldom. The temporal mode of

the reliquary experience, just as the spatial mode, was rooted in the largely unseen nature of the

reliquary. As discussed by Rita Tekippe, there was usually a distinct reason why reliquaries

were seen. Sometimes, sight was scheduled into the calendar; celebratory processions occurred

on saintly feast days, a joyous commemoration of the moment of translation and establishment of

relic *praesentia*, as well as on liturgical feast days, such as those on Pentecost and Palm

Sunday.[135] There were also many impromptu processions, which Tekippe refers to as "*grand*

processions," as well as solemn petitions asking for help, such as for rain, a good harvest,

defense against a spreading disease, or the solving of disputes.[136]

Interestingly, too close and too prolonged sight of the reliquary would have meant

something was wrong. At Saint Martin of Tours, offering reliquaries up for full viewing was a

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[133] Geary, "Saint Helen," 235-236.

[134] Caviness, "Stained Glass," 148. Caviness notes how few dedicated altars at Chartres have accompanying windows that relate.

[135] Rita Tekippe, "Pilgrimage and Procession: Correlations of Meaning, Practice, and Effects." *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, eds. Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 710. Also see Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, "*Sainte Foy* on the Loose, or, The Possibilities of Procession," *Moving Subjects: Processional Performance in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, eds. Kathleen Ashley and Wim Hüsken (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001) 53-67.

[136] Tekippe 731-733. See also M. Cecilia Gaposchkin, "Portals, Processions, Pilgrimage, and Piety: Saints Firmin and Honoré at Amiens, " *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, eds. Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 217-242. Gaposchkin, through the examination of the early thirteenth-century at Amiens, constructs a vivid vision of what procession of reliquaries of saints Firmin and Honoré would have looked like, from the streets it would have travelled on and who would have been present to see.

ceremony that "humiliated" them. In light of extreme predicaments in the community, the humiliation ceremony was enacted, where all of the reliquaries of the treasury were laid on the floor before the subdean's seat, the tomb of St. Martin was covered in thorns, and the canons would lie prostrate on the ground. Saints were supposed to be the patrons of the community, and the canons were supposed to ensure the role of the saint as a benevolent patron,[137] and when both groups failed to fulfill their duties, they were placed on the floor for full physical disclosure, and thus humiliated, punished, and humbled.[138] Moreover, as long as the problem that generated the ritual ensued, the longer the reliquary would remain visible; the relics of the monastery of Saint-Médard of Soissons were humiliated for a year, while the monastery's land loss disputes were being settled.[139]

Punctuated non-sight would have made the reliquary more powerful when unveiled—an inversion of the norm—whether for purposes of celebration or solemnity. As noted with the reliquary of St. Foy, upon the onset of processions, "all the people rushed out of their houses and fell prostrate before the image," and when moving into the countryside, people "rejoiced greatly and approached such a great patron on bare feet and with highest reverence."[140] However, just as important as sight was merely experiencing the event of sight being granted. After all, close examination was likely not possible (except for in the case of the humiliation). In processions, the object would have been moving by quickly, and for certain kinds of processions, in relative darkness. Moreover, crowds trying to catch a glimpse would have been so packed that sight of the object was close to impossible. When the reliquary of St. Foy was processed, "a little old

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[137] Patrick J. Geary, "Humiliation of Saints," *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 97.

[138] Geary, "Humiliation," 99.

[139] Geary, "Humiliation," 114. However, Geary notes how resolution did not just occur miraculously, but through litigation, social pressure, and the passage of time—all things that were spurred by the concern among the populace that this kind of sight caused.

[140] Ashley and Sheingorn, "Foy on the Loose," 55.

woman whose whole body had been afflicted with rheumatism for six years was carried down to the procession in a shabby litter, for she was poor and completely without means…[however] she was lying there in the midst of the crowds violently pushing forward to converge on the statue." Upon this event, the crowds were so great, that the reliquary itself was an "obstacle to the swarms of people."[141] Even when sight was granted, the crowds made it hard to see. Therefore, ultimately, we can understand that the process of seeing had little to do with visual examination, and a lot to do with spiritual verification; even if sight was not possible, knowledge of sight being granted was enough assurance.

Thus, regardless of whether the reliquary of Yrieix was experienced as an off-limits object in the church or an object to be seen in a procession, both experiences were not-so-visual and ultimately contingent upon inner belief. Whether monumentally blocked or monumentally staged, any kind of framing had the ultimate function of amplifying inner sight. That inner sight could have been the recalling of a memory of the reliquary image, whenever it may have been seen, and how Yrieix was working on a person-to-person level. That inner sight could have been the consideration of how the saint was working on behalf of the community—so much, in fact, that he made the construction of the new Gothic chapel possible. In whatever mode, all of the visual and spatial and temporal accoutrements of the cult of Yrieix were quite paradoxically not about sight, and instead addressed a very basic enterprise of non-visual, internalized faith.

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[141] Ashley and Sheingorn, "Foy on the Loose," 57.

Conclusion

Perhaps I should not have been so hard on myself when preparing my gallery talk at The Cloisters. The difficulty I encountered was not about me, or even the museum; it was rooted in the overarching impossibility of recreating medieval beholding practices in the museum, no matter who the audience was. Because ritual is not recreatable, we should not be burdened by the desire to try. Perhaps we can merely accept the way in which the museum gives agency to our corporeal eyes and make the best of the inevitable. Even though the reliquary of Yrieix was not seen in its ritual context does not mean that it should not be seen in today's context. What the museum does is not wrong; the museum does not facilitate a failed object experience. Rather, it merely promotes a different kind of experience.

However, the medieval mode of beholding can be recreated if belief is extant, and that is the case in the town of St. Yrieix, where belief in the saint is embedded. There is a prevailing understanding among community members that Yrieix, as well as his saintly companions like Martin, continue to work on their behalf. Because of embedded beliefs, experience of the reliquary continues, even though the object was taken to New York over one hundred years ago and was replaced by an early nineteenth-century copy.[142] This copy is housed in the church, hidden, and enacted in occasional processions (Figures 24-26), just as the original. The continued existence of this kind of veneration, despite the fact that the reliquary is a copy, attests to the belief that is the real mode of experience, and that belief has the power to turn the copy into a "vrai-faux," or "real fake."

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[142] Boehm 247-248. When the state assumed control over the object in 1905, the object was sold, and in 1906 made its way to the London dealer Duveen, who sent it to F. Joubert on King's Road, the manufacturer of the copy and referred to as the "Chelsea Wizard." The original was sold to J.P. Morgan in 1906, making its way to the Met in 1917, and the acknowledgement of the existence of the copy emerged in 1962, in preparation for the exhibition "Trésors des églises de France."

This thesis has sought to elucidate the nature of the experience of the reliquary of St. Yrieix and inspire the consideration of other reliquary forms in a similar manner. And more importantly, this consideration of experiential practices and the agency of non-visual belief raises bigger and broader questions of why such practices might have existed (and continue to), and what such practices say about the role of the art object within larger communal operations. To a great extent, medieval reliquaries have not been considered in such a way,[143] and I hope they will eventually receive the same treatment that has been given to, say, Renaissance,[144] or even African,[145] art objects.

However, I have faith that we are on the verge. A new exhibition at the Walters Art Museum, "Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe," serves to raise awareness of reliquaries as object. Even more fascinating is Cynthia Hahn's coinciding exhibition, titled "Objects of Devotion and Desire: Medieval Relic to Contemporary Art," at the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery of Hunter College, which juxtaposes objects of medieval relic culture with modern-day relics, like the art of Duchamp, as a means of raising questions about the purposes behind assigning objects with meaning, the nature in which that meaning is experienced, and the place that experience occupies within some kind of cultural framework.

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[143] Although see Scott B. Montgomery, "*Mittite capud meum…ad matrem meam ut osculetur eum*: The Form and Meaning of the Reliquary Bust of Saint Just," *Gesta* 36 (1997): 48-64. Also: Anita Moskowitz, "Donatello's Reliquary Bust of Saint Rossore," *Art Bulletin* 63 (1981): 41-48.

[144] See C. Jean Campbell, "Simone Martini, Petrarch, and the Vernacular Poetics of Early Renaissance Art," *Dialogues in Art History, from Mesopotamian to Modern: Readings for a New Century*, ed. Elizabeth Cropper (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2009) 206-221. Also C. Jean Campbell, "'Symoni nostro senensi nuper iocundissima:' The Court Artist: Heart, Mind, and Hand," *Artists at Court: Image-Making and Identity, 1300-1550*, ed. Stephen J. Campbell (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2004) 33-45+202-207.

[145] See Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow," *African Arts* 25.2 (1992): 40-53+96-97.

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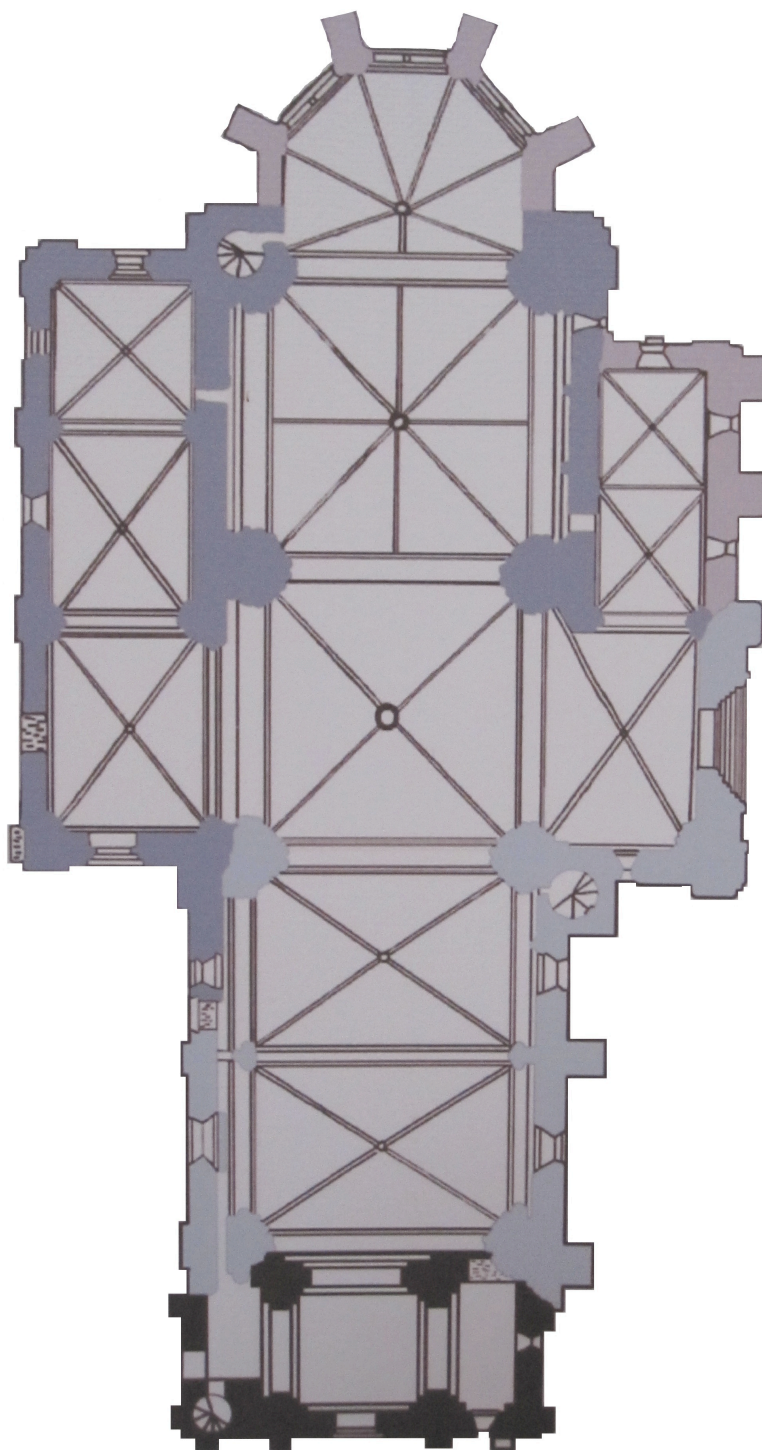
Figures

Figure 9. Church of St. Yrieix, St.-Yrieix-la-Perche, ground plan
(photo: author)

Figure 10. Church of St. Yrieix, St.-Yrieix-la-Perche, view from southeast
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Figure 13. Church of St. Yrieix, St.-Yrieix-la-Perche, interior looking east
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Figure 24. Church of St. Yrieix, St.-Yrieix-la-Perche, procession of St. Yrieix's relics, 1953
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Figure 25. Church of St. Yrieix, St.-Yrieix-la-Perche, procession of Yrieix's relics, 1953
(photo: author)

Figure 26. Church of St. Yrieix, St.-Yrieix-la-Perche, procession of Yrieix's relics, 1953
(photo: author)