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Devotional Tools and Companions to Everyday Life:
Experiencing Matter in the Gallery of Medieval Art at the National Museum in Warsaw

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Abstract
This essay explores the equivalence of various, occasionally contradictory and hybrid perceptions of materiality experienced in physical and non-physical contact. This includes the manifestation of materiality, such as the shadow of an object cast on a gallery wall or the imagined visual representation of an object by humans. Navigating between chronologies (medieval times and the present), spaces (church, cell, museum), and materialities (empirical, sacred, imaginative), it provides some reflections on how medieval sacred objects, and especially their materiality, sensed physically and imaginatively potentially exerted and still can exert impact on humans. Special attention is given to the sense of touch—physical, direct and indirect, immaterial, spiritual, and profane.

The text discusses three selected cases related to medieval devotion and the experience of matter in the Gallery of Medieval Art at the National Museum in Warsaw. They all center on the objects presented in the permanent exhibition. The first focuses on the shadow cast by an unidentified saint sculpture and its relevance to modern museum practices. It also demonstrates the potential of museum shadows in creating democratic contact zones, allowing interaction and the formation of new connections between the object and its viewer. Secondly, it examines the agency, aura, and devotional potential of Madonna of Ołobok—one of the oldest wooden statues of the Virgin Mary and Child in Poland. Finally, it discusses the historicization and actualization of touch and its significance in the relationship with God and his image, here the sculpted Late Gothic Crucifix attributed to the circle of Michael Pacher.

Over a decade ago, the Gallery of Medieval Art at the National Museum in Warsaw underwent a significant transformation and reopened on a frosty December evening in 2013.[1] In collaboration with the museum team, the gallery's curators at that time, Zofia Herman and Antoni Ziemba, had to make several difficult decisions and

negotiate compromises to provide a new, visually intriguing space for experiencing and exploring sacred medieval art. First, they cut the outdated, leading strings of "national schools," center-periphery perspectives, and fetishized "influences." With their focus on trans-statehood and multi-regionalism, the curators aimed to sharpen our perception of the autonomy and diversity of Christian artworks from areas previously considered peripheral. Given that the Warsaw Gallery of Medieval Art's collection features thirteenth- to sixteenth-century artifacts from north of the Alps, predominantly from contemporary Polish territory, only a narrow group of specialists can fully appreciate the significance of this methodological gesture.[2]

The curators' second major decision, to "return to things," had and still has a much more significant impact. It offers a fresh and multiple-perspective insight into the artworks to a broader audience, being framed by the phenomenon of material, affective, and sensory turns observed in the humanities within the last decades. It also highlights the necessity of restoring awareness of the religious function of these objects, which has been lost in their transformation into museum pieces, where they have been classified based on aesthetic criteria. Inspired mainly by approaches proposed by Bruno Latour and Ewa Domańska, the curators invite the visitors to reflect on the functions and features of medieval objects created exclusively for the Christian liturgy and individual and/or collective devotion. How did these objects accompany people's everyday lives and serve as aids in worship? How and when were they touched, cuddled, kissed, worked with? What was their original religious meaning? All these fundamental questions belong to the broad spectrum of material religion.[3] By generally displaying the works without showcases and protective barriers, visitors can now walk around the objects, experience physical proximity to the art of anonymous masters, and encounter their physical substance. This may be incredibly thrilling, especially for those who see the undeveloped back of a hollowed-out sculpture for the first time. All of this emphasizes the status of these objects as existing between physical matter and artistic form, as well as the belief that medieval art objects still have the power to shape a shared environment for both humans and non-humans.[4]

To emphasize the impact of the curators' efforts, this essay discusses three examples related to medieval devotion and the experience of matter in the Gallery of Medieval Art at the National Museum in Warsaw. These were addressed during an art walk organized in March 2024 for "The Lost-and-Found" symposium's participants, who were primarily artists and contemporary art researchers.[5] The walk provided an opportunity to combine the encounter of medieval art with reflections on issues listed in the symposium's second thematic constellation, called "Siblings," which included: alliances and relations with and between humans, non-humans and other-than-humans; innovative and latent environments for art circulation, reception, and participation by audiences; the role of the arts in fostering potential ancestral connections; and alternative understanding of the commons. Navigating through chronologies (medieval times and the present), spaces (church, cell, museum), and materialities (empirical, sacred, imaginative), this text reflects on how medieval sacred objects, particularly through their materiality, impacted and still can impact humans. Particular attention is given to the sense of touch physical, direct and indirect, immaterial, spiritual, and profane.

The examples of the three medieval sculptures present both historical and contemporary viewpoints, and explore ways to physically engage with old art that challenge accepted norms. Each of the analyzed artifacts formerly supported Christian devotional practices and has been removed from its original context, losing its original functions and meanings over time. Their appearance and artistic qualities have also changed. The unfamiliar locations of these objects and their architectural contexts emphasize the importance of contemporary framing and the opportunity to reactivate these works. This discussion examines the typical constraints for museum visitors and the bold actions of an artist who pushed these boundaries three decades ago.

The presence of religious artifacts in museum collections and their materiality have attracted attention from numerous scholars and remain promising fields for further study.[6] Interdisciplinary in nature and originating in museums at a time of ongoing interest in decolonizing, they foreground inclusivity and diversity in heritage research.[7] Additionally, the balance between the virtual and the real world of museums remains a challenge. This art historical analysis employs various methodologies rather than adhering to a single approach. One inspiration comes from studies in phenomenological art history, particularly Bissera V. Pentcheva's research that illuminates the staging and experience of small-scale medieval artifacts.[8] Specializing in Byzantine art, Pantcheva has focused on the aural and visual aspects of non-representational iconicity. She seeks to highlight the circumstances (visual, acoustic, haptic) in which divine presence manifests and to underscore the multisensory nature of medieval art perception, which in museums is often removed. In addition, Stephanie Rumpza's study, which explores the phenomenology of the icon to address the longstanding question faced by medievalists about how finite objects can mediate an infinite God, seems significant.[9]

Another source of methodological inspiration is the approach to materiality and connectivity presented by Martin Saxer and Philipp Schorch.[10] Inspired by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, they acknowledged that materiality is not an object's fixed property but is dynamic and dependent on time and relationships. Here, I explore the issue of the equivalence of various, occasionally contradictory and hybrid perceptions of materiality experienced in the context of physical and non-physical contact. This includes the manifestation of materiality, such as the shadow of an object cast on a gallery wall, or humans' imagined visual representation of an object. Charlotte Klonk's ideas, which do not define experience as a universal, trans-historical, and essentializing category, seem legitimate in the current context. According to Klonk, the experience "is itself subject to social and historical forces," and therefore it can not provide us "access to the past."[11] Choosing a trajectory that embraces the various experiences of artworks both shortly and long after their creation, and combining knowledge of medieval art with reception studies, has proven very fruitful, as demonstrated by a publication edited by Ellie Crookes and Ika Willis.[12] Consequently, I situate the contemporary experience of medieval art as equally significant to how these objects affected and activated people in the past.

(Not that Short) Shadows

The guided tour of the exhibition during "The Lost-and Found" symposium started in a location that deviated from my original plan because of activities taking place in the first room, which had been invaded by three groups of children aged 8 10. The pupils' squeals, laughter, and shouting indicated that learning and playing among the crucifixes, pietas, beautiful Madonnas, and figures of saints was in full swing; it would have been a shame to spoil all that. As a result, our group faced a polychrome wooden sculpture of an unidentified female saint wearing a crown, lacking any other attributes. Researchers suggest that this 128-centimeter-tall statue may have been created in Hans Multscher's circle, around 1450 60.[13] It was installed in one of Breslau's (now Wrocław, Poland) churches under unknown circumstances. It was probably placed on one of the church's pillars or on a console within the side altar space. Embarking on a stroll in front of this sculpture of a saint with somewhat stocky proportions and a stern expression on an angular face caused some consternation. It was even more unsettling when I gleefully admitted that this was my favorite spot in the gallery. The rather awkward silence that followed my admission ended as we shifted our attention from the sculpture to the horned, hunched figure emerging from the shadow cast by the statue on the wall (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Circle of Hans Multscher, Statue of unknown Saint, 1460 60, National Museum in Warsaw; photo: author

What information can a shadow provide about the materiality and display of an object? The shadow appears to reveal something obvious: the object occupies space, where the shadow authenticates the presence of a physical body; it has at least three dimensions; it is constructed from an opaque material; and it is positioned at a certain distance from the wall. Young children previously reached similar conclusions in Jean Piaget's study.[14] The statue has cast the same dominant shadow since 2013, indicating that it does not move, which is not surprising, just as the source of its artificial illumination has remained stationary and single. The gallery's near-total lack of sunlight is essential for preserving the artworks.[15] To preserve artifacts, museums and their conservators have created conditions of a timeless existence. This also ensures that the petrified shadows of objects consistently appear in the same places when the light is switched on. It is no longer possible to witness the mesmerising and unpredictable spectacle caused by moving sunlight and ever-changing daylight conditions with the shadows cyclically lengthening and shortening according to the time of the day and seasons of the year. Visiting museums at different times, as suggested by connoisseurs, has therefore become less inspiring. Walter Benjamin's aphoristic writings reveal that the lack of sunlight has made us lose the perception of the works in their true essence and independent existence:

> Toward noon, shadows are no more than the sharp, black edges at the feet of things, preparing to retreat silently [...] into their secret. Then, in its compressed, cowering fullness, comes the hour of Zarathustra-the thinker in "the noon of life," in "the summer garden." For it is knowledge that gives objects their sharpest outline, like the sun at its zenith.[16]

Does this mean that the shadow always distorts our perception of the work and conceals some of its features? We might have considered asking this question as we witnessed the horned figure emerge from behind the nameless saint at the Warsaw exhibition.

Numerous writers, artists, and scholars have explored the shadow, its meaning and essence, its inseparable connection to the physical body, and its supernatural power. These findings have been extensively examined from an art historical perspective by Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann, Ernst H. Gombrich, Michael Baxandall, and Victor I. Stoichita, to name but a few.[17] Undoubtedly, ontologically, and in most cases visually, the shadow,

understood as an ephemeral image, differs from the object that casts it. Their dialectical relationship, based on physical existence and non-existence and visual discrepancies, generates the most creative tension. The shadow is devoid of substance, sound, and odor. It is intangible and volatile. Under natural conditions, its shape is variable, created unintentionally and without human involvement, determined by the changing light and the surface onto which it is projected, with the exception of so-called shadow sculptures and spaces with deliberately designed lighting.[18]

Contrary to the most popular myths about the birth of painting and sculpture, experience has taught us that a shadow rarely resembles the object projecting it. A perfect illustration of this is the case of the statue from the National Museum in Warsaw. Let's follow the steps of the daughter of Corinthian potter Butades of Sicyon, who fell in love with a young man who was going abroad. To immortalize his image, she wielded a shard of coal, tracing the silhouette of her lover's shadow on the wall.[19] When we do the same, drawing the shadow of the saint on Warsaw's gallery wall, the resulting image depicts a body with different proportions and shapes lacking the third dimension, colors, facial features, and clothes. Instead of a crown, it has horns on its head. Only Plato would have nodded in mild amusement and understanding. Unlike the case of Butades's daughter, this experiment did not provide us with an image that would help prolong the memory of the sculpture's appearance. It turns out, though, that outlining the shadow of a figure in profile aids our recognition of it.[20] We receive a "trace of the shadow owner's presence," as Pliny the Elder argued.[21] According to Stoichita, this substitute has an index value and is dynamically and spatially connected to a given object and linked to the memory of the person to whom it serves as a sign.[22] This particular Warsaw skiagram has no traditionally understood documentary value. It is more of a souvenir, visualizing a specific moment in the sculpture's existence, which can also outlive it.[23] In museum practice, it can be mounted on the wall when the work is undergoing conservation or on loan for an exhibition, "rendering the absent," as Kueny puts it.[24] However, analyzing shadows by way of traditional art history methods does not address key questions of who, when, where, and why, and other vital issues need to be brought under art historical scrutiny.

When considering the role of shadows in revealing the essence of an object, one should note that the artwork in Warsaw casts a shadow that challenges the presumed sanctity of the depicted figure. Furthermore, it undermines its credibility as an object that likely inspired a devotional response.[25] Therefore, it fails to evoke emphatic emotions and encourage prayer.[26] Another, more metaphysically conceived area of analysis of the shadow, offers an alternative understanding; it situates it as a projection of the soul, an emanation, and an externalization of personality. Within this understanding, the absence of shadow, an all-important *topos*, no longer just refers to the extraterrestrial nature of physically non-existent figures. Instead, it affords a story about selling one's soul, losing identity, becoming enslaved, and facing punishment for sins and wrong decisions, such as in the novella *Peter Schlemiel: The Man Who Sold His Shadow* (1814) by Adelbert von Chamisso.

In broader Christian and Western culture, the concept of the shadow as a lack of light (there is no God) has acquired negative connotations, with it often being viewed as a dark aspect of the human ego and the "whole unconscious" as outlined by Carl Jung.[27] It has been perceived as a reservoir of negative emotions and even as a physical embodiment of evil. According to Stoichita, the negative or even demonic perception of the shadow in Western art may have been related to its attribution of otherness, alter ego, expression of autonomous power, distortion, and overscaling.[28] Visual evidence of this approach was demonstrated by Athanasius Kirchner, who 1659 described a device that could bring the shadow of the devil directly out of hell (Fig. 2).[29] Another particularly striking one was provided by Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627 1678), who depicted Melpomene entering Vulcan's dark forge with a burning glass (Fig. 3).[30] Among the shadows cast on the forge's wall, many demonic figures are discernible, as if the muse of tragedy had summoned them from the darkness using artificial light. Our

example, the Warsaw sculpture, gained its current demonic shadow, and a new soul (?), due to artificial lighting too.

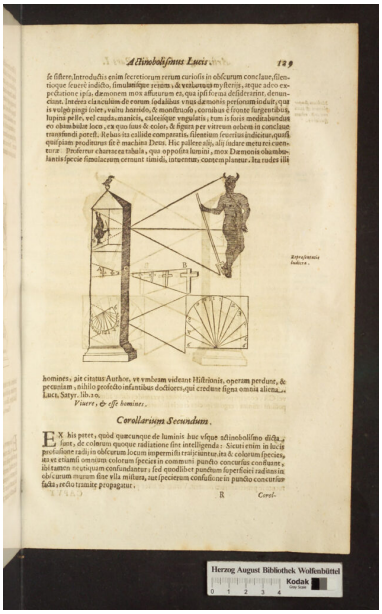

Figure 2: Athanasius Kirchner, *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, Romae: Scheus, 1646, p. 129; photo: Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel

Figure 3: Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst*: Anders de Zichtbaere Werelt, Rotterdam, 1678, p. 160; photo: National Gallery of Art London

Attributing a soul to an inanimate object or a devotional figure is akin to idolatry. However, in the case of the Warsaw statue, we face a unique situation. The sculpture's musealization was not the sole factor contributing to its devotional function's "deactivation." It was affected by previous incidents, such as damage, loss of attributes, and, consequently, the fading memory of its original identity. The primary purpose of this type of sacred object was to mediate between the person praying and the saint who was supposed to hear the prayers. The loss of its attributes results in prayers having no recipient and no intercessor, making the sculpture useless for devotional practice. Could the sculpture be possessed by the devil, having lost the protection of the sacred space and the prayers of the faithful? Or have the evil powers within it only just found an outlet? Or maybe we are facing a perfect illustration of Leszek Kołakowski's idea that "the devil is an inextricable component of a meaningful world

and perhaps its disappearance should not be hoped for"?[31]

The matter becomes less obscure when we step outside the framework of Western European cultural codes into a territory where the symbolic meaning of horns is multifaceted and often positive.[32] In the hieroglyphic alphabet, for instance, they are part of words meaning exaltation, prestige, and glory. Etymologically, horns are close to the Greek and Latin word for crown, and their spikes are said to symbolise the same strength as the horns.[33] Even in the Bible, horns carry many positive meanings, including one with critical artistic implications, when they are understood as referencing rays. In the Vulgate, Moses's radiant face is referred to as *facies cornuta*, whereby both Claus Sluter and Michelangelo added horns to Moses's forehead.[34] The polysemy of the horns in the shadow of the museum statue may therefore not entirely dismiss its religious significance related to the Western tradition, but may also result in new insights and perspectives.

How can the shadow help us experience the materiality and devotional nature of the object it projects? Museums, where "do not touch" signs guide their audience's experience, usually prohibit physical interaction with exhibits of artistic and historical value.[35] Does this rule also apply to the walls and floors onto which the shadows of specific objects are cast? When attempting to physically touch the shadow on the wall, instead of its matter, one will only sense the cold roughness of the surface. One may feel disappointment, like Narcissus felt when attempting to touch his reflection. Observing the shadow on the wall can remind us that we also have one, or that we exist in the museum in two forms ourselves: a physical one, which is relatively unchangeable and must maintain a physical distance, and an immaterial one that cannot harm the artifacts with its shadow. This is where the potential for a new understanding and interaction with the work of art in the museum emerges.

In the film *Perfect Days* (2023, directed by Wim Wenders), a seemingly insignificant scene unfolds when the main protagonist Hirayama plays tag with a man he has just met by chasing his shadow and avoiding physical contact. This has inspired me to consider that visitors to the Warsaw Museum, equipped with a shadow, can come into contact with the work of art in the gallery without physically touching it. Ontologically, viewers diverge from the museum exhibits, but the shadow zone escapes the anthropocentric perspective and breaks with the binarity of human and non-human classifications. In the shadow zone, human and non-human beings have equal status; they are the same in their non-substantiality. This creates one of the most egalitarian contact zones, in which no one is harmed and no artifact is affected.

Consciously using one's shadow in the gallery space also has a significant performative value. Viewers can co-create their own experiences, inspire other gallery visitors, and participate in a process whose scenario depends to a large extent on their actions. Such measures can also help viewers actively engage in arranging the exhibition, positioning themselves in its space, and gaining awareness of their materiality and its projection in the form of shadow. We should not forget that such a contact zone establishes a new bond with the object, which is an entirely different relationship with the artwork than we previously imagined, catalyzing the agency of objects' shadows, understood as projections of their materiality, which could activate human beings and their environment by encouraging them to interact with the object in that way.

(In)direct touch

The subsequent stages of "The Lost-and-Found" symposium walk proceeded smoothly. Wandering through the Gallery of Medieval Art's three spacious rooms, whose internal divisions accomodate larger-scale exhibits, our attention turned to the group of the smallest-scale artworks, including several sculptures (made of wood, ivory, alabaster) and paintings. They were meant to be closely inspected, touched, handled, kissed, and cuddled by

their owners.[36] They were likely carried during prayers and on journeys, or kept within the chapel, side altar, or cloister cell. What determined their inclusion in the showcases was not only their size and weight but also their potential for establishing close bonds, as well as their energy and aura.[37] These qualities, some of which providing extra agency to their users,[38] captivated the viewers, despite the awareness of their unattainability and the indelible distance that separates sacred objects from their users, as described by Benjamin.[39] Anyone who has experienced the shock of their nose unexpectedly bouncing against the cold surface of glass knows that despite being deracinated and decontextualised, and contrary to the beliefs of some pessimists, sacred objects displayed in museums are not entirely silenced.[40] The human desire to connect with an object transcends sight, and involves a multisensory and emotional response generated in the human brain and subconscious, which in many ways is irrational.[41]

Figure 4. Madonna of Ołobok, ca. 1200, National Musuem in Warsaw; photo: National Museum in Warsaw

Figure 5. Gallery of Medieval Art at the National Museum in Warsaw, 2014; photo: National Museum in Warsaw

The most appealing of all the smaller-scale works presented in the exhibition seems to be the so-called Madonna of Ołobok (Fig. 4). Made of linden wood and measuring 40 cm in height, this in-the-round, free-

standing sculpture was created in France (in the Auvergne?) or southern Germany (possibly in Franconia?) around 1200.[42] It originates from the Cistercian convent in Ołobok, founded in the second decade of the thirteenth century. Iconographically, it represents one of the most popular types of Marian images of the time, called *Sedes Sapientiae*, an illustration of the dogma of the Divine Maternity of Mary Mary as *Theotokos*, meaning "God-bearer" approved by the Council of Ephesus in 431.[43] Here, Mary is the mother of Christ in both his corporeal and divine forms, becoming the throne for the God-Savior, the incarnate logos. The sculpture's display requires us to bow or even genuflect in front of it to get a closer look at Mary's still-youthful face (Fig. 5). The curators have given it due reverence, perhaps compelled by the auratic powers of the statue itself. As if proving that, despite its museum surroundings, the sculpture still has the potential to be a cult image and deserves to be honored.[44] Upon closer examination, we can use our imagination to trace our fingers along the rhythmically shaped wavy hair covering the back and shoulders. We can also, imaginatively, examine the sharp edges of the cavities left by the infant's head and the hands of the two figures, try to smell the scent of the statue likely a combination of wood, chemicals, paint, primer, and dust and, finally, determine the depth of all the cracks and the number of layers of polychrome applied over the centuries.

Figure 6. The so-called *St Hedwig's Triptych*, ca. 1440, National Museum in Warsaw; photo: National Museum in Warsaw

Adopting the perspective of the female users of Madonna of Ołobok, this sacred object's original meaning and purpose should be considered within the context of medieval female monastic piety, which focused on the Virgin Mary.[45] In medieval nunneries, small devotional items were often recorded in inventories, chronicles, and visitation texts.[46] The latter were frequently filled with disapproving comments from male authorities and various directives disciplining women who had created their own devotional space. As early as the thirteenth century, regulations forbade nuns from keeping painted and sculpted images in oratories, choir stalls, and private cells, indicating that such practices were widespread.[47]

The life of St. Hedwig (ca. 1440), on display in the Warsaw gallery close to the sculpture from Ołobok with selected scenes from her legend, is an exciting example of Marian devotion linked to the Cistercians (Fig. 6).[48] While residing in the Cistercian nunnery in Trzebnica, which she had founded with her husband in 1202, St. Hedwig habitually went from altar to altar, offering prayers after the service.[49] One of the Warsaw panels depicting her life shows a scene of her prayer before the altar: Hedwig, clutching to her breast an ivory figurine of the Virgin with Child, kneels before the altar on which she has placed a reliquary and images of two saints (Fig.

7).[50] As Corine Schleif put it, Hedwig, alone in front of the altar, "kept herself away from the male-dominated and male-controlled liturgical realm."[51] The size and preservation status of the Ołobok statue indicate that it was a portable sacred object that could accompany its owner in prayer and contemplation, in her private cell or placed on altars of her choosing. The connection between these statues and the altar is confirmed by numerous visual and written sources.[52] The statue from Ołobok also housed holy relics, as evidenced by the deep hole in the lower part of its reverse, which not only entitled it being placed on the altar mensa but also elevated its status as a sculpture containing the bodily remains of a saint, their essence.[53] This made any physical contact with this particular Madonna all the more significant.

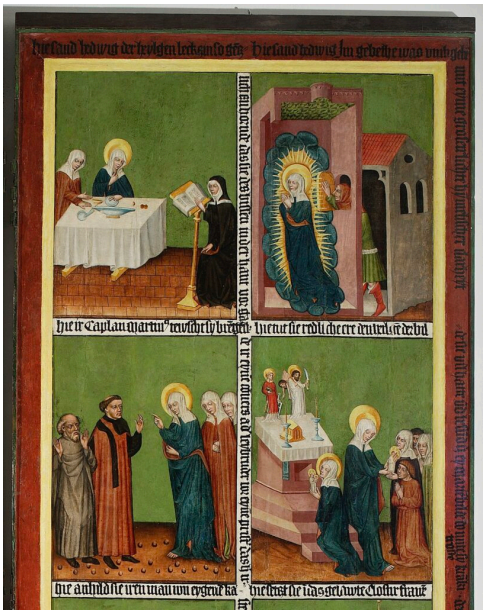

Figure 7. Scene from the so-called St Hedwig's Triptych, ca. 1440, National Museum in Warsaw; photo: National Museum in Warsaw

The Madonna of Ołobok may have also helped contemplate a crucial aspect of female monastic devotion: portraying the Virgin Mary as the primary ideal of devout woman, the only being to whom Christ was accessible as both God and human. Spiritual touch and sensual contact with God and Mary, the consequence of unwavering faith and deep meditation, became a matter of pious consideration for numerous medieval authority figures, including St. Clare of Assisi (1194 1253). In her letter written to Princess Agnes of Bohemia (b.1205 1211, d. 1282), St. Clare stated: "May you cling to his most sweet Mother who gave birth to the kind of Son whom the heavens could not contain, and yet, she carried him in the tiny enclosure of her sacred womb and held him on her young girl's lap."[54]

One can presume that the "clinging to" Mary served as one of the paths to reach God. The Latin word *ădhaerĕo*, translated as "clinging to," can be understood as maintaining physical proximity, including touch, and more conceptually, being attached to somebody. According to St. Clare, Mary carried Christ in her sacred womb, which was more extensive than the heavens. The metaphor, a reference to the words in the first book of Kings (8:27), "lo, the heavens, and the heavens of the heavens do not contain Thee," is an obvious allusion to the pregnant Mary. The theme of a mystical pregnancy particularly appealed to the nuns. This is evidenced, for example, by the mystical visions of Lukarda of Oberweimar (1275 1309) in which she experienced Mary's labour pains, desiring to share suffering with Christ and his mother.[55] The nun's veneration of Christ from the moment of his birth until his death on the cross, when he was also human, was practiced in direct relation to him and his images. This is underpinned, among other things, by accounts of nuns cuddling small statues of Christ Child, like mothers cuddle their babies.[56] The "clinging to" Mary recommended by St. Clare, understood broadly also in the

category of touch, seems intended to help nuns to adore and unite with the unborn on the one hand, and the Risen Christ on the other. Mary was the only "vessel" capable of holding the God who had not yet taken on human form, and she was the only human allowed to touch her son after his resurrection.[57]

The recommendation to "cling to" Mary, in every sense of the word, was followed by St. Hedwig, which she demonstrated by carrying the ivory figurine, "which she often took up in her hands to envelop it in love."[58] The miraculous nature of this image manifested itself during Hedwig's lifetime, giving her the power to heal the sick (Fig. 6). As a physically available companion to devotional practices, Madonna of Ołobok could provide the praying nun a trigger sparking mystic unions and ecstasies, as well as a vehicle for deepening her pursuit of "clinging to" Mary. Through Mary's mediation, including her body, the meditating nun could approach Christ in his divine form. The work in question could be touched physically and through the eyes of faith. It transcended the visible and tactile and acted as a catalyst for a metaphysical indirect "touch."

In the busy museum environment, visitors will never be able to share the experiences of medieval nuns. Deprived of tactile proximity to the works, contemporary viewers must engage with the museum objects through new stimuli: artificial light, a blend of scents from items in the collection, passing visitors, the smell of cleaning detergents, but primarily relying on sight. Their emotional responses are influenced by the sculpture's shape, damage, and peeling paint. Despite this, the Madonna of Ołobok captivates many people who, by forming a relationship with the piece, can generate new, fully developed meanings.

Blasphemous Touch

For the third reflection on the experience of matter and devotional objects in the Medieval Art Gallery at the National Museum in Warsaw I was compelled to journey back in time by the captivating and sensual wooden crucifix attributed to the workshop of Michael Pacher (ca. 1500, Fig. 8), which now hangs high above the floor. This is presumably also how it was initially displayed in the sacred space on the rood beam, in the side altar space, or within the cloister. The lack of any information regarding its initial placement again forces us to rely on our imagination. This artwork reminded me of a previous incident, which took place in the same gallery but in a different setting. It is worth recalling, not only for the scandal and the religious fervour it provoked, albeit with some delay. Acknowledging the artistic gesture that sparked public debate and reflection on the historicization and actualization of touch and its significance in the relationship with God is far more critical. It appears that only with proper distance in time and the advancements in museology can we truly appreciate an event that should not have occurred.

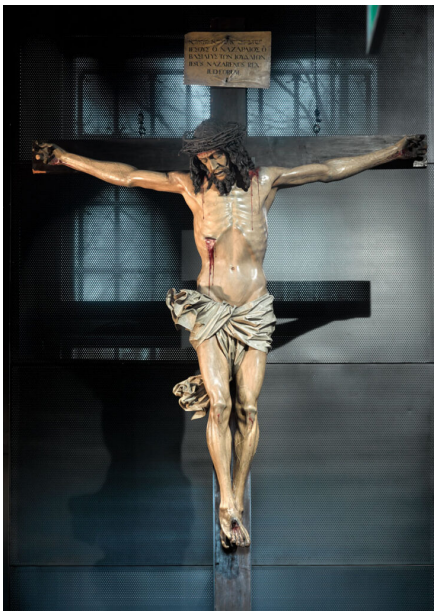

Figure 8. Workshop of Michael Pacher, crucifix, ca. 1500, National Musuem in Warsaw; photo: National Museum in Warsaw

In 1992, while Jacek Markiewicz (b. 1964) was still a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, he received permission to use a medieval crucifix attributed to Pacher's workshop for a video work he was developing.[59] The crucifix was on display in the Gallery of Medieval Art at the National Museum in Warsaw. However, he did not inform anyone that he intended to record himself performing a sexual act with a wooden statue of Christ. On July 27, the cross was removed from the wall and placed on a white sheet on the gallery floor. In the video, we see the naked artist lying next to a medieval crucifix, gently touching and then boldly caressing and rubbing the tormented Christ's body.[60] At the video's first exhibition shortly after its creation in the exhibition titled "Mystical Perseverance and the Rose" in Sopot, some interpreted Christ's open mount as a sign of ecstasy rather than passion and sought homoerotic motifs in the video work. A year later, Markiewicz screened the footage as part of his graduation project in a small room for two guests, who were both employees of his company, one of whom was his father.[61] A camera recorded the viewers' reactions and transmitted the footage to another monitor. Markiewicz barely passed.

Asked about the origins of this work, Markiewicz said:

> When I entered a church in Warsaw and saw people praying to a sculpted pseudo-god, it shocked me. The work in which I fondle Christ was motivated by the desire to insult everything that is not God. And despite everything, it is a religious work about the adoration of God. By licking a huge medieval crucifix and touching it with my naked body, by insulting it as it lies beneath me, I pray to the Real God.[62]

The true nature of his intentions cannot be judged, although as a young man he was a person of deep faith.[63] Shortly after arriving in Warsaw he lost it, but biblical motifs were present in his later projects, such as quotations from his favorite book, *Song of Songs*, which perfectly matched the artist's sensual approach in the video work.[64]

The scandal over *The Adoration of Christ* did not erupt until 20 years after its creation, when it caught the eye of right-wing Catholic circles in the exhibition "British British Polish Polish: The Art of the Edge of Europe in the 1990s" organized at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw. Many Polish art historians made

a new statement about the artwork, trying to find a balance between adoration and denunciation. Maria Poprzędzka, commenting on the situation,[65] emphasized that the work "was created during the early capitalist era when young artists manifested their aversion towards the ubiquitous Church, which, in the previous system, was the only buffer of freedom."[66] Antoni Ziemba attended to two aspects of Markiewicz's artistic gesture, situating his actions in the history of medieval religious practices.[67] First, he observed that the artist had ambiguously played with the empathetic, sensual way of interacting with devotional objects common in the late Middle Ages. These objects, made before "the era of art" as Hans Belting has called it, were undoubtedly kissed and cuddled, as evidenced, for example, by the scuffs still present on their surface.[68] Secondly, Ziemba argued that the artist's nudity did not undermine the sacred but could and should be understood as dramatically directing attention to the relationship between human corporeality and the incarnation of God in Jesus, an idea expounded in fifteenth-century religious writings. Thus, according to Ziemba, the artist perfectly captured the essence of the body depicted in the crucifix, and simultaneously the dogma of the incarnation.

In addition to these observations, one more aspect requires elaboration. Markiewicz declared his intention to adore the true God instead of his wooden image. Intuitively or consciously, the artist referenced the fundamental reason for the existence and meaning of medieval images of the crucified Christ. St. Bonaventure (1221 1274), a highly influential Franciscan whose texts had a significant impact on medieval devotion, recommended praying before a crucifix and to touch Christ and his wounds and approach him through employing imagination and meditation: "Not only put your finger into the place of the nails, not only put your hand into his side but enter with your whole being through the door of his side into Jesus— heart itself. There [you will be] transformed into Christ by your burning love for the crucified."[69] What St. Bonaventure meant was to touch Christ through the eyes of faith, paraphrasing Donna Sadler.[70] In medieval mystical devotion, human contact with God was only spiritual; it occurred through prayer and meditation, usually before a physical image, but by transcending earthly materiality and touch. Christ on the cross communicated with and laid hands on numerous praying individuals such as St. Bernard, St. Francis, St. Clare, and others beyond the earthly realm. A haptic vision allowed individuals to experience something similar to actual physical reality. Therefore, all images served as "vehicles for transcendence," and touching them physically in the human world was meaningless.[71] Markiewicz seemed convinced that God was elsewhere, and therefore he could not offend him with his actions. By extension, he mocked the ritualized gestures, sometimes verging on idolatry, performed by the faithful in church, such as the still-practiced kissing of Christ's feet on Good Friday. The artist believed that these actions lacked depth and potential for meditation and could also be observed outside the sacred sphere.

From an art historian perspective, Markiewicz's work seems to depict the clash between the contemporary perception of old images as cult "icons" and their original function in late medieval piety. But there is one more noteworthy issue. The significance of Markiewicz's action, which was ill-considered, offensive, and blasphemous from a religious perspective and unacceptable on conservation grounds, is demonstrated by the reaction from conservative Catholic groups. Their representatives occupied the exhibition halls of Ujazdowski Castle, praying for the "purification" of the insulted cross. Thanks to Markiewicz, the crucifix has arguably enjoyed a revival as a devotional and cult object for the first time since its removal from the sacred space. What is significant is that the crucifix did not need to leave the museum walls to encourage people to pray. Such situations do not occur very often though.[72] When writing this text, I asked Ziemba about the absence of any attempt to initiate a dialogue between new and old art in the Medieval Art Gallery of the National Museum in Warsaw, aside from a few performances and one designer chair. During our phone call in June 2024, he replied that, in his opinion, Markiewicz's spontaneous action had fully exploited the curatorial and artistic potential.

Conclusion

One can hardly disagree with Jeffrey Hamburger, who, in the introduction to one of his most significant books *The Visual and Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (1998) declared that "[h]istory, we are told, tells us as much, if not more, about ourselves than about our predecessors; it is, paradoxically, about the present, not the past."[73] This fairly obvious thought seems to link all three cases described here. The curators are, as Michael Baxandall argued, responsible for offering a "historical explanation" of the objects to ensure that they have some kind of "resonance" with the audience.[74] However, the ongoing perception of exhibited artworks seems just as important as the experiences of their original users. Museums seem unable to detach objects from contemporary contexts, visitors' needs, people's imagination, disobedience, and intuition. Thus, the materiality of medieval devotional objects can be experienced on multiple levels physical, meditative and through various projections, which are not limited to digital ones. As demonstrated, museums cannot strip sacred objects of their power and potential to establish a relationship with human beings. Even if, as James Clifton suggests, they are no longer explicitly "informed by religious meaning," they have agency and still unexplored ranges of materiality.[75] In the three case studies discussed, these works still compel the viewer to kneel or get closer. They evoke a desire for physical contact, which may result in unconventional or illegal actions. However, this allows old art objects in museums to gain new meanings and reveal unexpected aspects of their materiality, helping them gain independence from traditional museum narratives.

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