



Relics of Another Age: Art History, the ‘Decorative Arts’ and the Museum

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When Isabella d'Este – marchesa of Mantua and one of the greatest collectors of her day – died in 1539, her belongings were divided among her heirs according to contemporary notions of each object's significance: to her daughters, who were nuns, she left carved ivories from her oratory; to her son Cardinal Ercole she left an emerald carved with the head of Christ which had belonged to her father; to her son Federigo she left her most prized possessions, the wondrous contents of her *Grotta* (art and curiosity cabinet); to each of her favourite ladies-in-waiting she left a painting of their choice.¹

The examination of the material culture of pre-Enlightenment Europe within the discipline of art history has been acknowledged, for some time now, as beset by problems. The charged labels of 'minor arts', 'applied arts', 'mechanical arts' and 'decorative arts' attached to the modes whereby objects of past material culture were produced are symptomatic of these problems. Cultural historian Brigitte Buettnier draws attention to the exclusion of the products of these 'qualified' arts from Vasari's second edition of the *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* of 1568, the text which was taken up as the foundation narrative of the nascent discipline of Art History during the Enlightenment.² But in a world where the notion of 'art' in its modern post-Enlightenment sense did not exist – 'art' instead referring to a craft or a skill – the traditional interests and concerns of the whole apparatus of art history must be questioned.

Isabella d'Este's distribution of her legacy highlights this issue. The hierarchy of the arts has shaped the art-historical discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the manner in which museums have collected and displayed art. Yet it clearly cannot be applied indiscriminately to the pre-Enlightenment age when the value and function of objects was apparently so different from that ascribed to them by the Enlightenment rationalists. The distinction between art and craft – between painting, sculpture and architecture on the one hand, and the applied arts, *arte minore* or decorative arts, on the other hand – was unknown to Isabella, who placed painting at the bottom of the hierarchy of relative values of objects when allocating her legacy to her beneficiaries. True, the origins of the hierarchy of aesthetic values which lies behind the modern – and postmodern – notions of art can be traced to the sixteenth century and the writings of Vasari. They are founded in his contention that *disegno* (creative design drawing), being an intellectual rather than a manual pursuit, was self-evidently superior. But in the sixteenth century Vasari's so-called hierarchy was only ever a theoretical proposition which never reflected the actualities of Renaissance culture where a multiplicity of objects in diverse media was valued.³

Fig. 1
France, Limoges
Reliquary casket c.1200 (recto)
24.2 x 22.3 x 11.3 cm
enamel (champlevé) on copper, gilt-copper, wood
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1936 (3650-D3)

With the Enlightenment came the birth of aesthetics as a formal discipline. It is only as a result of this new science of sensory perception inspired by natural philosophy that a definition of the fine arts (as opposed to other arts) begins to establish itself as one in which a distinction between the notions of pleasure and utility is used to separate fields of aesthetic endeavour.⁴ The 1751 *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert proffered a definition of the fine arts as consisting of painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry and music. It was the widespread authority of this publication that lent this grouping considerable currency and acceptance. The definition of art as an intellectual pursuit, as opposed to a manual craft, established the artist as one guided by genius (and charisma) and the source of aesthetic merit in an artistic production. This contrasts profoundly with the pre-Enlightenment notion that it is the properties of the materials employed and the rank of the patron for whom the object is manufactured, and thereby the social function which the object fulfils that determines an object's significance.

Art historian Marina Belozerskaya charts a history of the devaluation of the decorative arts in the modern art-historical discourse and attempts to recover Renaissance applied art for art history.⁵ This study stands as one of the most recent in a growing list of works that, over the past few decades, have attempted to reassess the manner in which we view Western art of the pre-Enlightenment period. The issue remains vexed, however, and fundamental problems of epistemology continue to confound attempts to view pre-Enlightenment material culture without the anachronistic lens of the post-Enlightenment aesthetic hierarchy of art and craft. A recent handbook on the Italian Renaissance collections of the British Museum highlights the extent of the problem:

Patrician and aristocratic owners [of objects made of precious materials] certainly needed to mark social distinctions between themselves and their social inferiors, and here a 'noble' medium might play a part. Only a few could afford gold, hardstones or silver for drinking cups, serving dishes and eating utensils. Many – though perhaps not all – of the richest men and women of Italy were equally concerned that such pieces, even if they were made of precious metal, should demonstrate discernment. In an age when 'luxury' (*lussuria*) had profoundly negative connotations, their belongings had, in effect, to modify or disguise their luxuriousness in order to add up to more than just conspicuous consumption. However, even if we agree that 'luxury goods', a term that is often applied to such pieces, is not an adequate classification, are we entitled to dignify them (as we have done throughout this book) with the grandiose term 'art objects'?⁶

At the heart of the matter is the very word 'art' itself. Paul Kristeller, the scholar of Renaissance Humanism, rightly asserts that the term 'art' in its modern sense, and its even more semantically loaded offspring 'fine art' – along with the concepts of taste, sentiment, genius, originality and creative imagination which so dominate modern aesthetics – are, in their contemporary meanings, products of the eighteenth century.⁷ The modern discipline of art history has its origins in the eighteenth-century written genre of Salon criticism, just as the modern art gallery has its origins in the painting-dominated displays of the Salons: the history of the discipline of art history and the history of modern collecting and display practices go hand in hand. Attempts to rehabilitate understandings of Baroque, Renaissance and medieval art – especially artefacts that are neither architecture, sculpture nor painting – from within the discipline of art history itself must constantly struggle against the very language of the art-historical discourse. The analytical tools of art history embody the aesthetic theory that discounts the value of craft as art.

It is this very conundrum that lies at the origins of the term 'decorative arts'. Awareness of the problematic devaluation in aesthetic worth of major forms of pre-Enlightenment material production is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Already in the mid nineteenth century the aesthetic hierarchy was being questioned. But the questions were unavoidably framed in terms of the discourse of art history and the arguments pursued in that discourse's language. The Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations held in London's Hyde Park in 1851 inaugurated the astonishing nineteenth-century Great Exhibitions movement, a phenomenon which had as its generative impulse a renewed interest in the production of objects that both

fulfilled functional needs and provided visual delight, thus challenging the Enlightenment opposition of pleasure versus utility. The London 1851 Great Exhibition largely excluded fine art (sculpture and painting) and focused upon manufactured objects – both industrial and handcrafted – and their ornament, as well as, through displays of the natural resources made available by Britain's global empire, the materials from which objects were crafted. Its aim was to improve national taste and encourage the production of functional objects of visual beauty.⁸ The 1851 Great Exhibition was an important impetus for the various design reform movements that appeared in Britain and the rest of Europe during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The funds generated by the Great Exhibition were used in part to establish the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) and works acquired from the exhibition formed the core of the museum's collections.⁹ The museum's mission was to provide artisans with an aesthetic education, benefiting the artistic quality of their productions by offering improving examples of decorated objects from around the world and across the ages. But the attempt represented by the Victoria and Albert Museum to rehabilitate furniture, metalwork, glass, ceramics and textiles as works of art was thwarted from the outset by its nature as a museum independent of the National Gallery. The paradigmatic art-historical relationship between fine art and other, 'minor', arts was enshrined in this institutional structure. The Victoria and Albert Museum inspired similar institutions in both America and Europe, all of which embodied the entrenched aesthetic hierarchy. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was founded for the express purpose of 'encouraging and developing the study of fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life.'¹⁰ Here we find the notion, explicitly stated, that the elevation of the mechanical arts is to be achieved by exposing artisans to the fine arts. The aesthetic lessons thus learned may then be applied to the crafts of manufacture. The crafting of objects is, in this way, 'applied art'; the art of decorating an object, 'decorative art'. Indeed, the aesthetic hierarchy implicit in this nomenclature remains inscribed in the very space of the Metropolitan Museum and the manner in which its collections are displayed: decorative arts are displayed on the ground floor, paintings on the first floor above.

Design-reform theorists such as John Ruskin and William Morris in Britain, Hermann Muthesius in Germany and, a little later, Josef Hoffmann and the *Wiener Sezession* (Viennese Secession) in Austria, sought to promulgate, each in their own way, the notion of unity between the fine and decorative arts.¹¹ Morris in particular advocated the involvement of fine artists in the decorative arts in order to effect a reintegration of art and craft. All of these attempts at eliding the fine and decorative arts ultimately failed, not simply because the regnant aesthetic hierarchy was already so firmly entrenched,¹² but because the language of the discourse itself undermined the arguments as they unfolded – to speak of integrating fine and decorative art is, immediately, to identify the two realms of cultural production as distinct and different; the Arts and Crafts Movement evokes the art-historical opposition it aims to overcome in its very name.

The difficulties in critiquing the categories of art history from within the art-historical discourse are well illustrated in a recent essay on the decorative arts by Élizabeth Lavezzi who explores the origin of the category 'decorative arts', a concept that did not exist in the eighteenth century.¹³ Indeed, the first occurrence of the phrase *arts décoratifs* appears to be in the 1877 *Dictionnaire* of Maximilien Littré, and even there it appears under the entry *décoratif*, not *art*.¹⁴ Lavezzi traces a genealogy of the concept of the decorative arts from its beginnings in ambiguities in the contents of the headings *décorateur* and *décoration* in the *Encyclopédie*, through the treatment of *mosaïque* (mosaic) and *marqueterie* (marquetry) by J.-R. Lucotte as at once 'dependent arts' (derivative from painting), and 'mechanical arts', thus confounding the *Encyclopédistes'* definition of these fields as two distinct categories. According to the 1676 treatise of André Félibien, marquetry is dependent on mosaic, which in turn depends on painting, but marquetry also adorns furniture, the utilitarian product of the mechanical arts.¹⁵ This ambiguity allows Lucotte to define a group of 'arts of assembly', such as marquetry, carpentry, stone-cutting, mosaic and cabinetmaking while placing an emphasis on process over materials employed. It is this disruption of the classificatory scheme of the *Encyclopédie* that makes possible the establishment in the nineteenth century of cabinetmaking, weaving, metalwork and ceramics as decorative arts, a category which stands beside beaux arts, liberal arts and mechanical arts as categories of art.

Fig. 2
Installation view of the exhibition *Chinoiserie:
Asia in Europe 1620–1840*

Lavezzi's delineation of the development of the decorative arts as an order of knowledge within the Enlightenment framework established by the *Encyclopédie* is at every turn dominated by the aesthetic supremacy of the fine arts of painting, sculpture and architecture. It is only in relationship to these arts that the other modes of material culture production that Lavezzi examines can be defined as art. The shift in emphasis from the object to process and mode of production which Lavezzi identifies as central to the nineteenth-century acknowledgement of these objects as categories of art subsumes the objects entirely into the art-historical paradigm where the artist as author of a work and source of its aesthetic merit dominates. Such an understanding of the decorative arts renders the category wholly problematic for considering pre-Enlightenment material culture.

It is not only the nineteenth-century design reformers who find their attempts to rehabilitate craft as art hampered by the very nature of the language and categories they are forced to employ. A recent series of three academic handbooks which touts a revisionist approach to the study of Renaissance art evidences similar problems navigating the pitfalls presented by the traditional concerns of art-history scholarship. The preface common to all three volumes proclaims:

These books aim to familiarise readers with art produced in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a ... period conventionally associated with the Italian Renaissance and with Florence in particular. In line with contemporary art-historical study, this series reconsiders the traditional bias towards Italian centres of production and its exclusive focus on the so-called 'fine arts' of painting, sculpture and architecture. Hence although some chapters deal exclusively with Italian art, others broaden the boundaries by considering the art of Italy alongside that produced in northern Europe or focus exclusively on the Netherlands, England, France or Crete. The so-called 'crafts' of print-making, tapestry weaving and manuscript illumination are also explored.¹⁶

Here the traditional geographical boundaries of Renaissance culture are reconsidered.¹⁷ An attempt is made to view Renaissance works of art in light of their original social and cultural significance, to bring to our modern-day viewing of Renaissance art the interests of prestige, social class and devotion that patrons and consumers of art entertained at the time. Categories of object other than the so-called fine arts are scrutinised as 'art'.

It is with this last point, however, that flaws in the conception of the books appear. The catalogue of so-called crafts which are examined as examples of Renaissance art on a par with the so-called fine arts is distinguished by the absence of goldsmithing, the armourer's craft, woodcarving and furniture-making, ceramic decoration, the making of musical instruments, and other 'crafts' responsible for the production of prestige objects commissioned by Renaissance elites. Those that are considered – printmaking, tapestry weaving and manuscript illumination – are those crafts most closely associated with *disegno*: examples of the 'dependent arts', in the language of the *Encyclopédie*. Indeed, manuscript illumination has long been assimilated as a variant of painting for the purposes of Medieval art history.¹⁸ The categories of artefact selected in an attempt to extend the traditional range of objects examined by art history fail to escape the shadow of the established art-historical typologies. The failure of the authors to fully internalise the methodological innovations they attempt is tellingly revealed in the introductory remarks to the chapter entitled 'Art, class and wealth':

We are choosing to begin this book with an entirely different approach in which works of art are examined not as inventive, meaningful objects to be deciphered, but as commodities that were bought and owned just as a piece of furniture or a garment might be bought and owned: in other words, as part of the material culture of the day.¹⁹



That objects are not inherently possessed of meaning imbued them by the genius of their creator and awaiting the viewer's apprehension is worthy of repeated statement. Objects derive meaning from their contexts, meanings the viewer brings to them. But the comparison drawn here between 'works of art' and other commodities such as 'a piece of furniture or a garment' is telling. Furniture and garments, clearly, are not understood here as works of art. Series editor Kim Woods inadvertently reveals how difficult it is even for an intentionally revisionist project to escape the language and typologies of traditional art history.

The semantically loaded nature of the qualifications of the word 'art' – such as minor arts, applied arts, decorative arts, all possessed of connotations of inferiority when compared to unqualified 'art' – has inspired some writers to employ new terms to refer to the material culture of the pre-Enlightenment period. Belozerskaya speaks of the 'luxury arts' of the Renaissance, while Brigitte Buettner discusses Medieval 'sumptuous arts'. In each case, an attempt is made to qualify the word 'art' in a semantically positive fashion. 'Luxury arts' has the advantage of emphasising the precious materials employed in many objects produced for Renaissance elites, while 'sumptuous arts' draws attention to the effect of much Medieval art on the viewer. These minor positive gains aside, the fact remains that no type of qualification can overcome the fundamental problems associated with the category 'art' itself. When the term 'luxury' has a powerfully negative connotation in a Renaissance context, being equated with excessive and conspicuous consumption, and when, in the same context, the word 'art' in its modern sense does not exist, one is surely justified in calling into question the utility of a category of 'luxury arts' for the study of Renaissance material culture.

The word 'art', alone and in combination with various qualifiers, is not the only problematic term to be considered when addressing the issues associated with the treatment by art history of the material culture of the pre-Enlightenment period. Another term critical to this discussion is 'value' and its derivatives and synonyms. It is a term that appears frequently in the literature: Marina Belozerskaya refers to 'the inhabitants of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe [who] valued a multiplicity of objects in diverse media'; Woods observes, 'Although painting has long enjoyed a high status in our own culture ... Rembrandt Duits stresses anew that this scale of values differs significantly from that of the Renaissance'; Brigitte Buettner states, 'the substitution of the charged labels of "minor," "industrial," "applied," or "decorative" art with more neutral designations has not done away with the stigma of a devaluation in aesthetic worth'.²⁰ Indeed, relative value is clearly a core concept behind any hierarchical construction such as that of the Enlightenment notion of art. But the term 'value' also has modern connotations and associations which impact upon the interpretation of the past. A strategy employed by revisionist art historians to alert us to the different significance attributed to objects by past cultures is to attach to them, where known, their relative monetary values in the period when they were produced. Thus Duits structures his chapter in *Viewing Renaissance Art* around the relative incomes of the various social classes of Italian Renaissance society, from labourers through to princes, providing examples of objects or artworks that members of each of these classes are known to have possessed and their cost. This index of monetary value results in a hierarchy of objects where examples of the goldsmith's art occupy the pre-eminent position and works such as paintings sit modestly somewhere close to midway down the scale.²¹ This certainly results in a hierarchy of 'values' of objects at odds with the aesthetic hierarchy of traditional art history, and serves to make a reader accustomed to that traditional hierarchy take pause. But this strategy is dangerous because it suggests that those objects most esteemed by Renaissance society were so because of their monetary value, when the situation is, in fact, quite the opposite: any monetary value was due to their significance as objects.

Something of this notion of a hierarchy of monetary worth may be detected in the use of terms such as 'luxury arts' and 'sumptuous arts'. 'Luxury' has, for a modern audience, connotations of wealth, valuable materials and excess. While the materials from which a Renaissance artisan's creations were made were instrumental for determining the prestige of the object, it is difficult to disassociate this notion from a modern concern for the monetary value of the materials. Sumptuousness may bear similar connotations of richness of materials and value. Sumptuary laws are more often construed as attempts to curtail ostentatious expenditure, rather than as attempts to prevent the donning of insignia of prestige by those of low status.²²

If the modern association of value and monetary worth is problematic when considering Renaissance material culture, the difficulty is even further exaggerated when we consider medieval artefacts. The *ornatus* of the medieval church – the collection of exquisitely wrought, 'sumptuous' objects (chalices, ciboria, crosses, candelabra, reliquaries) that furnished the altar – is particularly susceptible to the logic of the treasure-hoard, the accumulation of objects for their material or (at best) symbolic worth, leading to the pre-eminence of the notion of a collection's 'value', even in matters of religious, intellectual or ritual significance. It is this logic that orders every modern museum collection of Medieval (and, arguably, Renaissance) art.²³ The impact of the treasure-hoard logic is twofold. First, the object whose core significance consisted of some characteristic no longer acknowledged by modern discourses, rather than presenting a problem to the logic of the collection, is attributed a value, even if it is a social or mythical one, so that it may sit with other treasures in commanding a high monetary worth. Second, when the logic of the treasure-hoard ascribes such a value to an object, the item loses its intrinsic qualities: its original, affective power is lost.²⁴

An object in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria illustrates this point. The Limoges *Reliquary casket* (fig. 1), acquired through the Felton Bequest in 1936, is a fine and representative example of the type of *chasse* reliquary being produced in the great enamelling workshops of the Limousin at the turn of the thirteenth century. Probably a product of serial production rather than the result of a specific commission, as the rather generic character of the iconography suggests, the Melbourne reliquary is nevertheless characterised by the high quality of its execution and exemplifies the first tempering of the Late Romanesque style in Limoges enamels by the softer, rhythmic lines of the early Gothic.²⁵

Medieval reliquaries, of which the Melbourne *chasse* reliquary is an example, are a class of artefact that has long been collected. The world's art museums contain numerous examples of these objects, wrought from precious metals, ornamented with gemstones and enamels. They assume a wide range of forms, from the *chasse* to body-part reliquaries, philatories and monstrances. They are collected and displayed as objects of aesthetic merit, examples of the skill in handling precious materials of the craftsmen who created them and of the taste and power of the patrons who commissioned or acquired them.

But an important feature characterises all of these reliquaries in museum collections: they are all empty. The relics themselves are gone. The *raison d'être* for these objects is missing. There is a disjuncture between the value that the museum – and, by extension, art history – attributes to the reliquary and its actual function in the medieval church. The museum has transformed the reliquary into a work of art. Yet the real treasure which the reliquary was made to house, the fragment of the bodily remains of the living saint that marked the site within the medieval church of the *praesentia* of the saint and the point at which the earthly and the divine intersected, has been discarded or lost.²⁶

This brings us to the very crux of the matter. The modern categories of art and the value imputed to it are revealed as irrelevant to Medieval material culture. 'Art' here is revealed as a category that, in the post-Enlightenment period, comes to be applied to pre-modern artefacts to void them of much of their original cultural significance and to allow them to be examined without the need to consider such 'distasteful' and 'primitive' notions as their supernatural powers, spiritual significance and ritual function. The spectre of Reformation polemic is all too readily felt here. A negative valence associated with the term 'ritual' – empty formalism, devoid of real meaning – is typical of the reformers' characterisations of papism and, in turn, the paganism with which the Church of Rome was believed to be irretrievably contaminated.²⁷ Such polemic permeates the intellectual discourse of the Enlightenment and itself becomes embedded in the discourses of the disciplines to which the Enlightenment gives rise, art history included.

If traditional art history, with its freight of Enlightenment aesthetic hierarchies, can be the source of such difficulties when examining the visual culture of the European past, how much greater must be the issues when examining material of non-European origin? The Antiquities galleries of the NGV contain numerous objects which have been recovered from funerary contexts, both from the Mediterranean basin and from



Mesoamerica. For example, a *Basal-flange bowl with jaguar-effigy lid* (fig. 3) from the ceramic tradition associated with the Maya ritual centre of Tikal in Northern Petén, Guatemala, and dated to the Early Classic period AD 300–600. This vessel was interred with the deceased and was intended to hold food for its owner to consume on her or his journey through the Maya Underworld, *Xibalba*, before apotheosis into the afterlife. The lid of the vessel is adorned with a jaguar figure which may represent the god of the Underworld, an aspect of the sun on its night-time flight through the Abode of the Dead before its dawn ascension in the east as *K'inich Ahua*, god of the daytime sun. The lid and body of the covered bowl are adorned with abstracted serpent head motifs which may reference the snake's role as a metaphor for the entrance to the Underworld in Maya culture.²⁸

This covered bowl is displayed in the context of a range of objects from numerous cultures and periods across the Mesoamerican region. It is finely decorated, painted in coloured slips in a range of reds, browns and creams. It is a beautifully formed ceramic of pleasing shape and proportion. But putting aside for one moment the writer's highly subjective aesthetic response to this work, the covered bowl represents an object which was never intended for viewing or use by the living. Such beauty as this object possesses was intended for its dead owner, as was the food which the vessel once contained. Through collection and display in the context of a museum space, the Maya ceramic is evacuated of much of its original meaning and function. While visual and emotional effectiveness may be deemed to have been at least a portion of its intended function, through the agency of the museum the bowl is totally aestheticised and transformed into a work of art. Like the Limoges *chasse* reliquary, the supernatural power of the object is carefully excised from its attributed significance.

The circumstances of the covered bowl's display within the galleries of the NGV may also be fruitfully scrutinised. The Mesoamerican collections are considered a part of the Antiquities collections and are displayed in gallery spaces devoted to this category. The covered bowl is thus displayed adjacent to the Gallery's Classical Greek and South Italian vase collection. The proximity of these ceramic works to each other invites a visual comparison to be made, reinforced by the similarities between palette and technique



Fig. 3
Maya, Tikal, Peten, Guatemala
 Early Classic AD 300–600
Basal-flange bowl with jaguar-effigy lid
 polychrome earthenware
 (a–b) 27.8 x 34.0 cm diameter (overall)
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 Presented through the NGV Foundation by
 John Warner, Founder Benefactor, 2002
 (2002.219.a-b)

employed in the production of both the Maya and Greek ceramics. Geographical and diachronic distinctions between the groups of works are, as a consequence, elided. The antiquities from the Central and Eastern Mediterranean are presented as the background to the European collections which are displayed in the galleries on the floors above – they are the ‘prehistory’ of the European art history which commences on the first floor, this vertical, spatial hierarchy reflecting an implicit hierarchy of material. In the same way, the Mesoamerican collections are presented as elements of this very same ‘antiquity’ – despite thousands of years separating some of the Mediterranean and American materials in age – and are subsumed into the prehistory of a European global history. Implicit in the strategy of display is the notion that history in the Americas begins with European subduing of indigenous civilizations in the early sixteenth century. Everything prior to this period of European presence is to be considered ‘antiquity’.²⁹

An examination of the problematic relationship between the categories of the decorative arts and the fine arts in the discipline of art history has led to a questioning of the fundamental assumptions which stand behind the entire category known as ‘art’ in post-Enlightenment thought. Art is something which is revealed to be a construction of the narratives of art history, and by the ancillary strategies of taxonomic display embodied in museums and their collections. In the process the explicitly colonial character of art history is revealed. Objects are evacuated of their original meaning and significance and reinscribed with significance germane to the concerns of the art-historical discourse. Furthermore, the art-historical project is seen to be universal in its scope – any element of world material culture may be subsumed into the category ‘art’ and be incorporated into the narratives of European art history.

Is it possible to engage with the visual and material cultures of the past without invoking the anachronistic and distorting aesthetic hierarchies of traditional art history? An attempt at such an approach was already pioneered at the turn of the twentieth century by the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl. His theorising about the history of art was characterised by what might today be termed cultural pluralism. By recognising the existence of alien aims and values – that is, different aesthetic ideals – in different times and places, Riegl sought to avoid subjective criticism. He formulated the celebrated but much misunderstood concept of the *Kunstwollen* – an historically contingent tendency of an era that informs the creative impulse without respect to mimetic or technological concerns – as a means of countering narrowly empiricist, determinist, functionalist and materialist tendencies in art history and theory.³⁰ For Riegl, art makes explicit the implicit values and presuppositions that structure people’s experience of the world, and the *Kunstwollen* is the agency by which these values achieve expression.³¹

Riegl’s major study, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* of 1901, was among the first works of modern scholarship to consider the aesthetic characteristics of the art of Late Antiquity on their own terms and not as representing the collapse and degeneration of Classical Greek and Roman art, challenging Winckelmann’s widely accepted assessment that art began a slow, inexorable decline after the death of Alexander the Great. In the *Kunstindustrie* Riegl undertook an examination of Roman architecture, decorative arts, sculpture and painting from the fourth to sixth centuries AD, adopting an abstract, value-free formal analysis where belt buckles and brooches from the Austrian provinces were given equal weight with the Arch of Constantine and the mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna. All of these forms were, according to Riegl, generated by the *Kunstwollen*, or ‘artistic will’ of Late Antique culture. As such, every form is possessed of equal value as evidence in any attempt to understand the formal characteristics of the material culture of this era.

There can be no denying that Riegl’s thought is very much a product of its time. From a twenty-first-century vantage point, it can appear hopelessly mired in orientalist tropes and formalist, linear models of cultural development that owe much to misappropriated thinking associated with the natural sciences – Riegl was writing at a time when European art history had aspirations to be counted a scientific discipline. Nor can Riegl’s work be treated as a systematic exposition of a coherent theory of art history. His thought develops and changes over the course of his short career and even key terms like *Kunstwollen* appear to vary in meaning according to context.³² Riegl’s work was ignored for much of the twentieth century and

his impact outside the German-speaking world was minimal – the first English translation of any of his major studies was only carried out in 1985.³³ Nevertheless, there are aspects of Riegl’s work which have renewed relevance with the advent of anti-empiricist histories in our own time and, in his acknowledgment of the significance of all products of material culture in investigating the aesthetic characteristics of a given cultural context and period, Riegl provides possible directions for an art-historical enterprise which mitigates traditional aesthetic hierarchies and definitions of art. And indeed, there are examples of recent art-historical scholarship which suggest movement in such directions.

Brigitte Buettnner in her sketch of an historiography of the medieval ‘sumptuous’ arts suggests that a renaissance in the academic study of medieval art may be beginning; one that combines the enterprises typical of nineteenth-century scholarship, the corpus and catalogue – with their concerns for taxonomies of period, style and technique – with academic studies concerned with issues such as function, production and consumption.³⁴ Certainly the notion of ‘thick description’ is an advance over the older taxonomic approaches of traditional art history. But is a sociologically inflected reading of objects already identified as medieval ‘art’, even when this identification takes the form of a revisionist ‘rearguard’ action, sufficient? The issues surrounding the category ‘art’ still stand in the background. As the example of the medieval reliquary so clearly demonstrates, art history and the museum can create art from objects whose original significance and function were quite different.

Can other disciplines offer helpful insights? It is tempting to look to archaeology, a discipline devoted to finding meaning in past material culture, for possible inspiration. Unfortunately, this is not a straightforward exercise. Since the 1960s and the New Archaeology initiated by figures like Lewis Binford, the archaeological discipline has been in a state of methodological turmoil.³⁵ The New Archaeology saw a revolt against culture-historical and descriptive approaches to the material past based upon the development of taxonomies of archaeological artefact. It identified itself as a branch of the anthropological sciences and established explanation of the past, rather than description of the past, as its goal. It emphasised identifying the processes which produced the archaeological record (which is to say, material culture), thus leading to the label ‘processual archaeology’ frequently encountered in the literature. Processual archaeology adopted both language and methodologies explicitly modelled on the hard sciences, emphasising a nomothetical ‘theory-building’ approach. The past was construed as something about which objective, positive knowledge could be obtained.³⁶

Naturally the positivism of processual archaeology prompted a reaction against (and supersession of) this framework. ‘Post-processual’ archaeologies have centred upon the forms of knowledge appropriate to a social science, as opposed to an empirical anthropological science, questioning the aspirations to value-freedom and positive knowledge of the past pursued by the processual methodologies. Ongoing debate and polarisation of positions between the processual and post-processual camps has ensued and it does not serve our purposes to venture too far into these disputes here. But what we might take from postmodern archaeology – despite the current methodological debates which can at times seem to overwhelm the discipline – is its holistic approach to past material culture: the entirety of a material culture, such as it can be recovered, and not merely particular classes of object, are examined in an attempt to posit interpretations of the past. This, I would argue, is a key step in overcoming the methodological impasse which traditional art history would appear to face. Those objects identified as works of art – painting, sculpture, architecture – are only one small part of the material culture of the past. If the aim of the contemporary art historian is to examine the history of visual culture, then the entirety of the past visual environment must be subjected to investigation. This includes all manufactured objects, the built environment, the landscape and ritual practices: the range of evidence traditionally examined by the archaeologist. Like the archaeologist, the art historian must attend to the social mechanisms which produce and shape the visual environment and how it is read, including how people behave in and form part of that visual environment. This requires attention be given to the full range of concerns of the cultural historian, not merely the narrow range of material objects and social questions with which art history has previously concerned itself. In this sense, the interests

Fig. 4
Installation view of the exhibition *Chinoiserie:
Asia in Europe 1620–1840*



of post-processual archaeology can be seen to parallel Riegl's program for the history of art, where all human-made material can be considered to reflect deeply embedded values and presuppositions about people's self-perceptions of place in time and space, and can provide the basis upon which to attempt the reconstruction of these deep structures of culture.

Attempts to move in this direction may be observed. In the introductory essay to a volume of the journal *Gesta* devoted to studies on Medieval body-part reliquaries, Caroline Bynum and Paula Gerson state that body-part reliquaries 'collapse any distinctions we might be tempted to make between object and sign, art and cult, politics and religion, art history and history'.³⁷ Other essays in this volume consider questions such as the role of relics and reliquaries in ritual performance within both the liturgical space of the church and within secular civic spaces.³⁸ Reliquaries are considered as the basis for political texts claiming the episcopal primacy of Trier within the late-tenth-century Ottonian kingdom, thus reversing the usual trend of reading objects and their ritual usages as reflections of pre-existing textual sources.³⁹ Endeavours are made to treat this class of object, the body-part reliquary, in a fashion fully integrated into the general concerns of cultural history.

The results evident in these essays are encouraging. But the heritage of traditional art history still lingers in the background. Barbara Boehm asserts that, where the study of body-part reliquaries is concerned, 'a large dosage of "old" art history must remain in the mix' and that 'art historians ... need to reaffirm their focus on visual evidence and aesthetic issues'.⁴⁰ Boehm's call for continued attention to issues of style and quality, and of attribution, is, in effect, a claim for the continued relevance of connoisseurship.⁴¹ But connoisseurship, with its application of Linnaean typological classification drawn from the natural sciences to art and its inherent concern with establishing a hierarchy of values attributed to cultural artefacts, is of little relevance for the cultural historian of the pre-modern period. The work of two centuries in the discipline of art history has established an archive of data which is of continuing value and relevance – it would be churlish to suggest otherwise. But the modern art historian must now extend his or her interest beyond the materials with which their counterparts in the past have concerned themselves. The questions posed of body-part reliquaries in the Bynum edited volume of *Gesta* are indicative of the way forward for scholars of medieval visual culture. But these kinds of questions must now be asked of other classes of material. The body-part reliquaries, as a group of artefacts, have been selected for investigation because of their existing interest to traditional art history. The next step is to ask similar questions of material which was never deemed of sufficient aesthetic value by connoisseurship to warrant detailed examination. What of vernacular materials – objects not found in church or court treasuries, or, frequently, the collections of our art museums? These, surely, are of equal significance in attempting to understand the visual culture of women and men in the Medieval period who viewed and used such objects, imputing them with meaning. An understanding of visual cultures of the past can only be achieved successfully through a holistic approach to material culture in general.

It might be argued that the incorporation of non-European material into the collections and displays of art museums has already initiated this process. The heritage of cultural pluralism advocated by Riegl and others has seen material which was once the exclusive purview of the ethnographer and anthropologist come to be embraced as 'art' of the non-Western other. Objects arising out of both elite and vernacular contexts are displayed in galleries as products of art traditions deemed independent of, but analogous with, those of Europe. But how that material is displayed can remain problematic. As we observed with the Maya covered *Basal-flange bowl*, the indigenous significance and function of an object can be evacuated in favour of the object's reclassification as a work of art, something towards which *only* an aesthetic response is appropriate. And the display of non-European materials in discrete gallery spaces serves only to emphasise their taxonomic distinctiveness when compared to European material. The objects are effectively reduced to the status of footnotes to the primary narrative of the evolution of European art.

The art museum, through the act of collecting and through strategies for the display of its collections, may be seen literally to embody narratives of art history. A visitor to the St Kilda Road campus of the National Gallery of Victoria who wanders through sequentially arranged gallery spaces, working upwards through the building, physically re-enacts a traditional narrative of European art history. The Asian Art collections, arranged in largely synchronic fashion according to geographical origin of the material, may be viewed or not viewed – as it takes the visitor's fancy – without interfering with the physical journey through the chronology of European art history. Given this ability of the art museum to represent in concrete fashion art history's narratives and taxonomies, it follows that the art museum is also capable of playing an important role in subverting these narratives and presenting new perspectives on visual culture and the relationship of the viewer to these objects. The disruption of taxonomic displays – breaking down traditional museum groupings based upon medium, cultural and/or geographical origin and chronological ordering – is an obvious first step. New juxtapositions of materials can bring to the fore new insights and form the basis of new cultural and historical narratives, or bring into view suppressed narratives.

Here it is illuminating to consider the work of United States artist Fred Wilson and his practice of museum interventions. Wilson conducts an examination of the relationship between museums and the objects in their collections, inquiring into issues of racial bias, gender, class, politics and aesthetics through the mimicking of museum practices – exhibition design and display, lighting, curator's labels, and wall colours – a process he calls 'a trompe l'oeil of curating', in order to create unexpected and often startling installations of objects that question the museum's complicity in perpetuating certain social inequalities. Wilson makes visible the implicit narratives of power embodied in museum displays, confronting and perhaps changing the viewer's notion of the museum itself. In his groundbreaking exhibition *Mining the Museum*, 1992, Wilson transformed the Baltimore Historical Society's collection to highlight the history of slavery in America. Occupying eight rooms on the third floor of the society's building, Wilson's intervention included, among other things, the juxtaposition of colonial repoussé silver vessels with a pair of rusty iron slave shackles, the spotlighting of African servants in the backgrounds of family portraits, and the arrangement of elegant salon chairs in the company of a cruciform whipping post. Wilson's visual recontextualising of materials, all drawn from the society's collection but not necessarily all on permanent view, revealed suppressed narratives of the African slaves whose lives ran parallel to those of the members of white colonial Baltimore society celebrated by the museum's regular displays.⁴² It might be argued by some that Wilson's exhibition concerns itself primarily with social history rather than aesthetics and that, as such, its relevance to the display practices of an art museum is limited. But it should be remembered that Wilson identifies as an artist and presents his practice as art. His work invariably concerns itself with aesthetics – with notions of beauty – but he also reveals that aesthetic standards do not exist in abstract isolation and that they cannot be considered morally neutral.

Such is what the introduction of iron manacles and a whipping post into displays of American colonial material culture achieved. It is impossible to construe beauty in either of these objects from the history of slavery in the Americas – their ugliness is both physical and moral. But through their juxtaposition with 'works of art' – artefacts traditionally deemed worthy objects of aesthetic appreciation – Wilson opens up a space where the historical narratives of power inherent in both sets of objects, in the manner in which they are displayed, and in our aesthetic responses to them, become apparent.

The reconfiguring of gallery exhibits, drawing upon objects from across curatorial departments and across taxonomies of medium and chronology, has the potential to transform the significance of an encyclopaedic collection like that of the National Gallery of Victoria. But simple spatial reconfiguration – the erasure of traditional taxonomic distinctions and the concomitant revelation of alternate cultural and political narratives – is not necessarily sufficient in and of itself. A hypothetical thematic display devoted, for example, to images of divinity might be assembled with material from across the entirety of the collections, exploring the multiplicity of ways in which human cultures from prehistory to the present have represented belief systems and theologies in visual form. Such a display, however, would still be open to critique, for precisely the issues raised above: the objects being displayed would be objects which had entered the collections in

the first instance because, by the late nineteenth century when the NGV's collections began to be amassed, they have been subsumed into the category 'art'. If we wish to present a display of 'images of the divine', rather than a display of 'religious art', we need to open up the possibility of reading collection objects as artefacts with broad cultural and historical significances beyond their acknowledged ability to engender aesthetic pleasure. Taking our cue from Wilson, we might consider the following sorts of 'interventions' in our hypothetical exhibition: humble objects reflecting vernacular traditions of piety; defaced and damaged objects reflecting changes in religious traditions and the archaeology of religious violence. Such interventions are an invitation to read the pre-existing collection objects in their wider cultural and historical contexts, without denying the ability to appreciate their visually and emotionally affective character.

To reconfigure the displays of a large institution like the National Gallery of Victoria in their entirety would be a mammoth task. And perhaps it is not an essential one; the juxtaposition of different display strategies, in and of itself, may be constructive. Traditional forms of taxonomic display could be contrasted with displays organised on thematic grounds, or which incorporate appropriate vernacular, quotidian objects alongside collection works. In this way, the display strategies themselves and the way in which they affect the reading of an object can be brought into view and made a focus of audience scrutiny.

The outcome of such an approach would be the creation of a polysemy where individual objects are revealed capable of bearing multiple meanings and giving rise to different narratives, those meanings and narratives not fixed or inherent in the objects themselves but contingent upon the context in which the objects are construed. At the same time, the part played by, and ethical and moral responsibility of, the museum and the curator in selecting meaning to be imputed to an object is brought to the fore. Similarly, the vital role of temporary exhibitions drawing upon the diverse collections of the institution is also emphasised: objects familiar to the gallery's audience are presented and re-presented in a range of different contexts and juxtaposed with a variety of other collection and non-collection materials, revealing new ways of looking at artefacts and the multiplicity of significances which they can bear.

The NGV's recent *Chinoiserie* exhibition is an example of such an exercise.⁴³ Drawing upon material from the Asian and European collections in a diverse range of media, the exhibition invited a Melbourne audience to consider many familiar collection objects in a wholly new context. Objects arising out of elite contexts were juxtaposed with vernacular objects. Examples of Asian export art – a class of material often slighted by traditional Asian art connoisseurship – placed beside European imitations of Asian art forms invited audiences to consider this material as part of a dynamic, hybrid visual culture to be engaged with on its own terms. Examples of the manner in which European depictions of Asian peoples changed across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries highlighted the xenophobic and racist subtexts which informed much of this imagery. With the conclusion of such a temporary exhibition, the material on display will eventually return to displays in other parts of the building and in other collection contexts. But hopefully an audience will recall some of the possible implications of this material suggested by the temporary exhibition and bring this perspective to bear when viewing the material in its new display context.

It is through educating audiences to look for these contingent significances and, in the process, breaking down colonial narratives of power inherent in traditional display strategies that the encyclopaedic Western museum collection can hope to find some continuing relevance in the postmodern world.

Notes

Relics of Another Age pp. 7–21

- 1 See Jennifer Fletcher, 'Isabella d'Este, patron and collector', in *Splendors of the Gonzaga*, David Chambers & Jane Martineau (eds), Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 1981, p. 62.
- 2 Brigitte Buettner, in Conrad Rudolph (ed.), 'Toward a historiography of the sumptuous arts', in *A Companion to Medieval Art*, Blackwell, London, 2006, p. 466; see also Carlo Ginzburg, 'Battling over Vasari: A tale of three centuries', in Michael Zimmermann (ed.), *The Art Historian: National Traditions and Institutional Practices*, Clark Studies in the Visual Arts, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2003, pp. 41–56.
- 3 See Marina Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, p. 13.
- 4 Iterated succinctly in *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe*, 1746, by Abbé Charles Batteux.
- 5 See Belozerskaya, p. 13.
- 6 Luke Syson & Dora Thornton, *Objects of Virtue. Art in Renaissance Italy*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2001, p. 229.
- 7 See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1990, p. 164.
- 8 See *The Crystal Palace and its Contents: Being an Illustrated Cyclopaedia of the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, 1851*, W. M. Clark, London, 1852.
- 9 See Malcolm Baker & Brenda Richardson (eds), *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 1997.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 40.
- 11 For John Ruskin, see John D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1960; for William Morris, see Peter Stansky, *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1985; for Hermann Muthesius, see John V. Maciuika, *Before the Bauhaus: Architecture, Politics and the German State, 1890–1920*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005; for Josef Hoffmann, see Christian Witt-Döring (ed.), *Josef Hoffmann: Interiors 1902–1913*, Prestel, London, 2006.
- 12 Belozerskaya, pp. 42–3.
- 13 Élisabeth Lavezzi, 'The encyclopédie and the idea of the decorative arts', in Katie Scott & Deborah Cherry (eds), *Between Luxury and the Everyday: Decorative Arts in Eighteenth-Century France*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005, pp. 37–61.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 38.
- 15 See André Félibien, *Principe de l'architecture, de la sculpture, de la peinture et des arts qui en dépendant*, Paris, 1676; see also Lavezzi, pp. 48–9.
- 16 Kim W. Woods, Carol M. Richardson & Angeliki Lymberopoulou (eds), *Viewing Renaissance Art, Renaissance Art Reconsidered*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, p. 11.
- 17 Encompassing post-Byzantine Crete here is an important step in deconstructing the orientalist narratives of Enlightenment thought that construe the Classical Greeks as Western and the Byzantine Greeks as Eastern, and which so profoundly shape modern historiographies.
- 18 Buettner, p. 466.
- 19 Woods, 'Introduction', in Woods et al., p. 19.
- 20 Belozerskaya, p. 13; Woods et al., p. 19; Buettner, p. 466.
- 21 Duits, 'Art, class and wealth', in Woods et al., pp. 21–56.
- 22 See Belozerskaya, p. 252.
- 23 For example, the superlative collection of medieval artefacts held by the Victoria & Albert Museum has been published as 'The Medieval Treasury'. Similarly, the outstanding Flagg Collection of medieval and Renaissance art in the Milwaukee Art Museum has been published as 'A Renaissance Treasury' (see Paul Williamson, *The Medieval Treasury: The Art of the Middle Ages in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 1985; Laurie Winters, *A Renaissance Treasury: The Flagg Collection of European Decorative Arts and Sculptures*, Hudson Hills Press, New York, 1999).
- 24 On the treasure-hoard logic, see David Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity: Toward an 'Archaeology' of the Heterogeneous*, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2006, pp. 40–3.
- 25 See Ursula Hoff, *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Gallery of Victoria*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1952, p. 5; W. Frederick Stohman, 'Quantity production of Limoges champlevé enamels', *Art Bulletin* 17, 1935, p. 390.
- 26 See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1981, pp. 78–9, 88.
- 27 For a history of the impact of reformation polemic on early modern historiography, see especially Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.
- 28 See Andrew Fyfe, 'Basal-flange bowl with jaguar-effigy lid', in Amanda Dunsmore, Andrew Fyfe, Colin A. Hope et al., *Ancient Civilizations in the International Collections of the National Gallery of Victoria*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2004, pp. 118–19.
- 29 The display of the Oceanic art collections in galleries contiguous with the Antiquities galleries remains problematic.
- 30 Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993, p. 6.
- 31 On Riegl's thought, see Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1992; Michael Gubser, 'Time and history in Alois Riegl's theory of perception', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2005, pp. 451–74; Henri Zerner, 'Alois Riegl: Art, value, historicism', *Daedalus*, vol. 105, 1976, pp. 177–88; Christopher S. Wood (ed.) *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, Zone Books, New York, 2003; Iversen.
- 32 See Zerner, p. 181.
- 33 Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, Rolf Winkes (trans.), Rome, 1985.
- 34 See Buettner, p. 481.
- 35 See Sally Binford & Lewis Binford, *New Perspectives in Archaeology*, Aldine Press, Chicago, 1968.
- 36 See Michael Shanks & Ian Hodder, 'Processual, postprocessual and interpretive archaeologies', in Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, Alexandra Alexandri, Victor Buchli, John Carman, Jonathan Last & Gavin Lucas (eds), *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 3.
- 37 Caroline Bynum & Paula Gerson, 'Body-part reliquaries and body parts in the Middle ages', *Gesta*, vol. 36, 1997, pp. 6–7.
- 38 Ellen Shortell, 'Dismembering Saint Quentin: Gothic architecture and the display of relics', *ibid.*, pp. 32–47; Scott Montgomery, *Mittite capud meum ... ad matrem meam ut osculetur eum*: The form and meaning of the reliquary bust of Saint Just', *ibid.*, pp. 48–64.
- 39 See Thomas Head, 'Art and artifice in Ottonian Trier', *ibid.*, pp. 65–82.
- 40 Barbara Boehm, 'Body-part reliquaries: The state of research', *ibid.*, p. 15.
- 41 *ibid.*
- 42 See Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum: An installation*, New Press, Baltimore, 1994; Ann B. Stoddard, 'Redecorating the White House', *New Art Examiner*, vol. 20, no. 5, January 1993, p. 19.
- 43 *Chinoiserie: Asia in Europe, 1620–1840*, National Gallery of Victoria, 9 October 2009 – 14 March 2010.