CHAPTER 13


Claire Fanago

The shared premise of this volume is that material things come to be endowed with transcendent significance and efficacy across a wide range of cultures. How that takes place and the actual meanings attributed to the material world vary widely. The majority of case studies here deal with relics as a particular type of sacred object. Within Christianity, broadly and institutionally conceived, the relic not only manifests divine immanence, but also testifies to a specifically Christian belief in spiritual life after bodily death, that is, in the doctrine of salvation first adopted at the Council of Nicea as the Nicene Creed in 325 CE. However, the word “relic” can and has been used more loosely by contemporary scholars, including several contributors to this volume, to refer to objects, even virtual objects, with other, non-Christian connotations. Nonetheless, as this essay and those by Catherine McKenna, Jeannette Peterson, Mary Elizabeth Perry, and Andrés Prieto in particular emphasize, the sacred is a contested category, particularly when Christian beliefs come into close contact with other, non-Christian ways of attributing “sacredness” to that which exists phenomenally. No one needs reminders in today’s world of contentious religious fundamentals that one person’s sacred is another’s taboo. To lose sight of the simple fact that the meanings assigned to the material world not only differ across cultures but collide, often violently, when different cultures come into contact would deprive the “relic” and “sacred” things more generally of any historical significance whatsoever. If anything can serve as a “relic” and any meaning
whichever can be attached to a given “relic,” what would be the point of studying the critical functioning of their significance?

On the other hand and by the same token, how material things come to have “spiritual” significance, and how the same object or concrete manifestation can have multiple meanings for its users is a timely and appropriate subject for historical investigation. As historians, we have (it should go without saying, but let me emphasize it nonetheless) no way of granting material objects “spiritual” significance directly. We can only study the significance that has been attached to the material world by others, and even here, challenging difficulties arise, as this essay articulates. What is at stake regarding the contested interpretation of sacred objects? Through a case study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Mexican Christian religious images, I suggest that because images are irreducibly multivalent—that is, all images, all material things for that matter, by their nature refuse absolute meaning—they enable individuals with different beliefs to coexist in the same heterogeneous society. Sacred images with multiple cultural resonances are not necessarily synthetic products of cultural interaction, however. In fact, they are often just the opposite—meaning one thing to one person or group and something quite different to other users, as Andrés Prieto demonstrates beautifully in his chapter regarding the Jesuit appropriation of Guadalupe medicinal knowledge of certain plants. Perhaps a similar contestation regarding indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge is embedded in the Christian religious imagery of New Mexico. Unfortunately, insufficient evidence survives to make the case, although the visual imagery is suggestive. Nonetheless, as Catherine McKenna suggests in her study in this volume of the significance of medieval Irish wells, “certain habits of mind infected the materialization and localization of the sacred” and can be provisionally reconstructed from the surviving historical record in the New Mexican portraits of Christian saints and other holy figures under discussion here.

The methodological challenges regarding attempts to reconstruct “mental habit” from material evidence in the absence of textual documentation is the subject of several essays in this volume, and always a factor in my own argument. Because the artists used artistic models developed two centuries earlier (the images are based primarily on Catholic Reformation print sources), because they lacked academic artistic training, and because they used the humble materials locally available in a subsistence economy, conventional histories of art classify these artistic productions as “belated” or “provincial” and relegant to the periphery of disciplinary concerns. Simply stated, my initial methodological challenge in studying this body of material was to dispute the interpretations imposed by scholars by devising other, less ethnocentric ways to think about cultural production.

To a large extent, contemporary debates over the ownership and significance of objects duplicate the terrain long established by relics. In both cases, the significance attached to certain objects causes them to behave like synecdoches of entire belief systems for their interpretive communities and, from the conflicting significance associated with these objects by different subgroups within a heterogeneous community, arise disputes over who controls the past. So perhaps it is not too far-fetched to understand the fundamental issue that the sacred raises as one of ownership: who owns the past? An additional condition arises in this case: the historian’s interpretation lies in the same historical continuum as his or her subject matter and is, therefore, subject to the same critical reflection as the subject of study. Hence, it is the historian’s intellectual and ethical responsibility, in other words, to investigate from all sides the meanings that could be attributed to sacred things by a heterogeneous interpretive community, not just the politically dominant cultural faction. In the case of the New Mexican religious images, past interpreters treated the images as if the European saints pictured in them constituted an audience with exclusively European cultural knowledge. As I argue below, this could hardly have been the case in New Mexico. Like the titular image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in colonial Mexico that is the subject of Jeanette Peterson’s essay, a “bicultural dimension informs our understanding” because the population that used these images had cultural roots in indigenous as well as imported systems of belief and pictorial representation. The transformation of European iconography into autochthonous sacred objects is the subject of the following essay as well.

Studying the New Mexican material—mostly anonymously executed sacred images from the late eighteenth century until the present day—led me to consider cultural identity from a very basic perspective: how people manipulate whatever material culture is available in their environment to negotiate their relationship with the world. The maker of the object, the person if there is one, the distributor if there is one, its user, its later owner, and so on, all have agency of some kind in the “aesthetic field.” The prospect of disentangling these agencies is daunting. The distinctiveness of New Mexican santos, as these religious images are known today, consists not in their overt subjects (which conformed to Catholic Reformation taxes), but in elements that may appear to have been “merely decorative” graphically striking and frequently elaborate abstract design motifs and landscape references (figure 13.1). Despite their anonymity, these images are, as a group, readily distinguished from local products elsewhere in the Spanish colonial world. Everything we know about the society that generated these devotional objects—roughly 10,000 examples survive today in museums and public collections—strongly suggests that they did not have a single, homogeneous identity. The distinctiveness of New Mexican Christian art, then, raises questions central to the social construction of meaning. The process of trying to account for cultural identity in a heterogeneous colonial society also raises issues of power and interpretative privilege.

Who owns the past? From the mid-eighteenth century, in addition to importing religious art from Mexico, New Mexico produced its own altarpieces and individual devotional panels depicting Christ, the Virgin, and saints, made for both the colonists and the Pueblo missions, sometimes by the same artists, sometimes employing the same motifs in sacred objects associated respectively with Christian and Pueblo rituals (figures 13.2 and 13.3). Like their neighbors in the Christianized pueblos, the settlers of European origin were served by relatively few priests. In these conditions, brotherhoods and sisterhoods, or cofradías, took care of community religious needs, just as they had on the Iberian Peninsula, where the majority ultimately originated. Although segregated by lifestyle, the inhabitants interacted intensively (in asymmetrical relationships of power, of course) on several levels: economically, through warfare, and via intermarriage. Spanish colonial religious art always involved negotiations between natives and
colonizers, because it was used as one of the principal instruments of conversion, in a society where conversion was the church’s paramount task.

The questions raised by the visual and demographic evidence are as simple to articulate as they are difficult to answer: how did the sacred images distinctive of the region signify for their original audiences? And how can we understand the mediated relationship between ethnicity and cultural production? One new ethnic subgroup that emerged in the mid-eighteenth century is particularly relevant to consider in trying to address these questions. Throughout the eighteenth century, military campaigns were waged against nomadic Indians—Apaches, Navajos, Utes, and Comanches who raided both Pueblo and Spanish-style villages. In the 1720s, when the nomadic Comanches replaced Apaches as raiders from the east, they also exchanged goods and captives annually (with the same settled communities they raided) at trade fairs held at Taos Pueblo. Captured

Figure 13.2 Quill Pen Santero, Saint Peter Nolasco, courtesy Taylor Museum, Colorado Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Comanches sold and traded captured Plains Indians of various backgrounds, many as children, to settler households. The term *genesis* initially applied to these detribalized, Christianized Plains Indians, but it also came to be used for other exiled Indians, including Pueblo outcasts who left their traditional lifestyles as adults and brought extensive cultural knowledge with them. Beginning
in the 1750s, land grants were made on the perimeter of Hispanic settlements to *genizaros* from the *barrios* of Albuquerque and elsewhere who had fulfilled their terms of indenature.

In zones of intensive ethnic mixing like the *genizaro* villages, especially in the period from ca. 1750 to 1860, people with limited knowledge of any given cultural tradition—but with a demonstrated capacity for negotiating between cultures—united against common danger. Penitential societies, the most widely practiced form of community-based devotion outside the pueblos, multiplied rapidly in the 1830s and 1840s, indicating that a culturally fragmented population was creating new, cohesive forms of social organization at the village level. As these lay religious organizations simultaneously sought spiritual aid and gained mutual social protection, they created an increased demand for sacred images. *Santos* appear to be the self-expression of an upwardly mobile, ethnically complex class of settlers from highly diverse cultural backgrounds, living in the three urban centers of Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Santa Cruz; in outlying villages; and on the frontier.

New Mexican cultural studies today are conducted in a highly politicized arena. An important aspect of the long-standing debates over cultural property involves cultural differences over the right of individuals to obtain esoteric knowledge. Contemporary Western assumptions that knowledge should be accessible to everyone do not take into consideration certain Native American attitudes toward sacred forms of knowledge. According to Joseph Suina, Professor Emeritus at the University of New Mexico, a former governor and a resident member of Cochiti

*Figure 13.3* Pseudo(?)-ceremonial bowl, Tesuque Pueblo, ca. 1890, black on white ware, courtesy Museum of Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Pueblo, native esoteric traditions account for the unwillingness of contemporary Pueblo people to discuss their sacred beliefs with outsiders:

Misinterpretation of Pueblo secrecy is partly due to differing views of knowledge held by different cultures. In the Anglo world, knowledge is highly regarded and its acquisition is rewarded in a variety of ways, including admiration of knowledge for its own sake… But that is not the case in the Pueblo world. Like the Anglos, Pueblo Indians consider knowledge to be of high value. Some types of knowledge, however, are accessible only to the mature and responsible. This is particularly the case with esoteric information that requires a religious commitment.

The circumstances that Suina describes provide a pertinent example of the ways in which unexamined cultural differences lead to miscommunication and resentment. New Mexico presents the difficult situation that some of its potentially key participants in what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls an "intersitial space" refuse the label of hybridity and reject the model of cultural pluralism. How are we to assess and possibly recuperate Native American contributions to a complex cultural practice that developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Mexican towns? How should we respect the general unwillingness of the pan-Pueblo community—not withstanding individual dissenters—to share knowledge and simultaneously refrain from reinscribing their resistance in some sort of romanticized discourse of idealized primitivism? Dealing with incommensurable attitudes toward the sacred raised an ethical dilemma for me as a historian: what constitutes good scholarship in such an arena of conflict?

Anthropologist Richard White is highly critical of any postcolonial cultural identity grounded in the assumption that there exists a unified collective self. It is difficult to imagine Suina or most other Native Americans whose cultural heritage resides in the Southwest sympathizing with White's position. Yet his criticism that "Indian people have themselves embraced a romantic vision of a sacred past" merits a response. Identity, White emphasizes, is a contestable and unstable notion. The museological enterprise, as White says, teaches "explicitly and implicitly, intentionally and unintentionally" that all life in America is hybrid and contingent. As realistic as White's portrayal of postcontact Native American material culture may be on some levels, it leaves out of the equation the right of any cultural group to a dynamic, self-described identity. Even the brief introduction to contemporary Native American materials provides enough to suggest concrete ramifications for academic investigation. It is not possible to move beyond the oppositional claims made in current debates over cultural property without considering the politics of knowledge production in mainstream scholarship. The categories and concepts used in arguments over ownership of intellectual property, including perceptions of the past, are inadequate to the task of revisiting ethnocentric accounts of history if they conceive of cultural artifacts within a Western, patriarchal framework.

In the case of New Mexico, recovery of religious significance is problematic because of the unequal relationships of power operating in a colonial society, I return to these circumstances in more detail at the end of this essay. First, I sketch a trajectory of interpretation that respects the rights of Pueblo communities to maintain control over their esoteric knowledge. The methodological
challenge that santos present is the possibility (or impossibility) of reconstructing
their signifying power in terms that were meaningful to their original audiences.
What happens when the pictorial systems of unrelated cultural traditions are
confused? The visual sign does not necessarily "reveal" its meaning—the visual
hides as much as it shows. A New Mexican santo, like any other icon, is valued
by individual worshipers for its efficaciousness. The significance that an icon has
for its owner is personal, beyond the reach of historical recovery in most cases.
Perhaps it is as such private transactions accumulate that we begin to transcend
the unknowingly personal and move into the more accessible realm of historical
reception.

The doubleness of the images produced in New Mexico emerges from con-
sidering both Native American and European sources. Pictorial mechanisms
of substitution are interesting for their own sake, but in the present case they
are also evidence of the destruction of existing symbolic orders and the emer-
gence of a different, coercive colonial social system. If the pictorial motifs
and conventions of New Mexican art of the colonial era were catalogued, a
prominent place would be reserved for landscape elements that appear fre-
quently on santos (Figures 13.4 and 13.5). Consider the "rain cloud" motifs
introduced into several representations of Saint Joseph/Bonaventure, which
might be associated with the gifts of the ancestral katsina for some viewers but
be merely decorative elements for others. Or consider the pose of a standing
saint with the Christ child on his arm, which recalls the iconography of the
Virgin and Child, a meaning in keeping with Franciscan representations of
regular clergy who, in imitation of Christ, presented themselves as nurturing
mothers—but perhaps also in keeping with the sacred status traditionally
accorded to self-elected Pueblo males who took on the persona and tasks of
women.13

Such visual affinities with precedents on both sides of the cultural divide
suggest conceptual affinities beyond formal correspondences. But is it possible
to sort these meanings out in historical hindsight? A more complex example of
the visual evidence that survives is the snake and fish-like creatures pursue-
ing (?) a soul being caught up by the Guardian Angel in a late nineteenth-century
santo (Figures 13.6 and 13.7). Such figures are reminiscent of Pueblo water
snakes, such as Hopi depictions of the horned water snake (Paliwakon), origin of
all springs, who causes earthquakes. Throughout the Pueblo world, snakes are
associated with the cloud katsina or Cloud People, humans who lived good lives
and serve the living after death by bringing rain and life.14 Yet the visual nar-
rative suggests that their significance might be different here, in keeping with
Christian identifications of serpents with sin, transgression, and damnation.15
Even within a Pueblo context, snakes are considered dangerous to human
welfare. Ritual conflict involving them is indicated in a painted cloth curtain from
a Hopi meeting of the Antelope Society, ca. 1920. The drama once performed
in front of this screen consisted of snake puppets fighting with human impres-
sonations of katsinas over corn plants that the snakes try to destroy.16 The katsi-
nas, who always win, reside in the Hopi village from late December to late July
and have the power to bring the rain, fertility, and good fortune that the snakes
signify even in opposing them. The Pueblo ritual drama symbolizes the forces
of nature in a universe that, unlike the Christian belief system, is not divided
morally into good and evil.

Figure 13.4  St. Joseph or St. Bonaventure, Arroyo Hondo Carver, active ca. 1830–1850,
gesso and water-based paint on wood, courtesy Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs Fine
Arts Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado.
Depending on the viewer's cultural orientation, visual similarities with very different cultural resonances could combine in a variety of ways: we can sometimes reconstruct the range of meanings an image might have held for a viewer with multiple cultural roots, but it would be impossible—and pointless—to offer a definitive interpretation for an image that embodies such irreducible semiotic equivocations. It is more prudent, perhaps, to ask a more general question—namely, what form of Christianity could the Pueblo Indians of the colonial world have practiced? The vast majority of missionaries assigned to what is now New Mexico failed to learn the native languages. Under these circumstances, the teaching of Christian doctrine must have been exceptionally reductive. The limited communication that the Franciscans initially established with the local population may partially explain why there are such extensive formal parallels between later images of saints and Pueblo katsinas. If representations of katsinas look like icons of saints to us, the similarities may have been equally striking to the missionaries and their coerced converts. After the sobering experience of the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, Franciscans and secular priests apparently encouraged a certain amount of cross-cultural translation. In any case, missionaries in Latin America and elsewhere in Europe's colonies worldwide, even when they acquired linguistic skills, unavoidably transformed Christian concepts into indigenous ideas in the process of translation—because words are inseparable from worldviews. The visual evidence suggests that a similar process of cultural (mis)translation took place through images in New Mexico.

There is, perhaps, one significant difference between the katsinas and the santes that can inform our current understanding of the ways in which artistic images
From a Euro-Christian understanding of the world, the setting gives the worshipper concrete, sensual cues that aid an internal process of remembering, or making the absent present. Saint Augustine's analysis of touch as the moment of vision permits him to maintain the dual possibility of the vision of God in the present and its permanent fulfillment beyond the present life. Augustine's model of the milieu of human life is primarily that of time: it is a question of the sensation of time's flow—retaining the significance of each moment in the individual's journey through time toward God. Perhaps, from an understanding informed by Native American beliefs, on the other hand, the landscape suggests how the supernatural is immanent in the world, coeval with it—that is, how "divine" and "worldly," "human" and "land" are not really separate categories at all. As Catherine McKenna infers regarding local interpretations of medieval Irish wells, the dialectic between presence and absence that is always involved in Christian interpretations of relics is replaced by its opposite: the terrain is fully charged with personal and bodily presence. The landscape from a Pueblo perspective is regarded as a place where the power of a guardian spirit resides in a very real and physical sense. Moreover, as McKenna rightly observes, the sacredness thus embodied in the image is at once unitary and inexhaustible: the icon is a continual source of comfort and strength for those who consider it efficacious, regardless of their knowledge of Christianity.

As a historian, however, my ability to understand a Christian sacred image from a Pueblo perspective is restricted by a lack of trust between Anglo and Native Americans. In New Mexico, the role of the critical historian has been and to a large extent remains inscribed in a long and complex history of institutional repression of Native beliefs and practices. To return to the social significance of the sacred, an outstanding contemporary example of the persistence of a "cultural line" is provided by a series of letters addressed to the Warburg Institute at the University of London in 1999, by the Hopi Cultural Preservation office. The Hopi authorities framed their position regarding the republication of photographs of esoteric ceremonies taken by art historian Aby Warburg and his Mennonite missionary host V.R. Voit a century ago (figure 13.8) in terms of economic exploitation: their letters state categorically that the Hopi religion is not for sale. Implicit in this statement are the effects of neocolonial economic exploitation imposed by the market in ethnic art that dates from the 1880s. The popularity of ethnic art—the term itself is deeply problematic—is due partly to the participation of native peoples who commoditize and commercialize their cultural heritage in order to survive in (or otherwise profit from) a capitalist society. This is the compromised position that the Hopi Tribal Council rejects when it mandates that the Hopi religion is not for sale.

From a Hopi perspective, it matters not at all whether the profit is going directly into the pockets of publishers or scholars. One effect of the knowledge thus produced is financial profit from something that should be valued for its inherent merit, and another effect is loss of control over the distribution of their own cultural values, with its attendant loss of the values themselves within their own culture and falsification of religious beliefs to all concerned. Romanticizing records of cowboys and "noble savages" in the form of illustrated novels, prints, and postcards provide close contemporary parallels to the surviving photographic records of Warburg, the German scholar-turned-tourist, dressed as a cowboy

Figure 13.7 Cleo Junco, cosmological drawing made for Aby Warburg at the Palace Hotel, Santa Fe, on January 10, 1896, as noted on the drawing. Warburg's annotations on the drawing identify Junco as the priest of Chipeo Namitch, the guardian of the kiva at Cochiti Pueblo, and "painter of the wall paintings" there. Warburg identifies the figure as the water-serpent Tzitz-chui depicted "with the weather-fetish." (Warburg, Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians, 9), courtesy Warburg Institute Archives, London.

transform and are transformed by changing cultural configurations. The cultural traditions to which representations of saints and katsinas respectively belong handle the theme of supernatural presence in different ways. Considering the representation of a single, standing saint as a static object already imposes an ethnocentric, culturally specific frame of reference on images that functioned as religious instruments, not as static works of art meant for secular, aesthetic contemplation. Catholicism stresses incarnation, God-made-flesh, as part of a chronological narrative originating in the “moment” of Creation. Many Native American traditions, including those of the Pueblo peoples, stress the immanence of the supernatural, which is conceived as coeval (sharing the same space-time) with human existence. From this perspective, the major difference between Christian and Pueblo conceptions of the supernatural is their radically different conceptions of time. The annual Pueblo ceremonial calendar conceives of time as cyclical—or, to be more accurate, as distinct locations within a temporal extension, for even the term “cyclical” is tinged with the Western assumption that time's dominant trait is succession.

Could the coexistence of such fundamentally different worldviews account for the emphasis on landscape settings in many New Mexican religious images?
striking a pose with a real Indian (figure 13.8). How does this pseudocene of first contact celebrated in this widely distributed image signify? The American Southwest once was Europe’s as well as art history’s “frontier,” but from a contemporary perspective, this can no longer legitimately be the case. We live and work in a global network of social, political, and economic relationships—and uneven though the field of social production is from an economic point of view, there is no universally recognized set of ontological priorities operating within it. On the dust jacket image, however, there is room only for Warburg and his unnamed companion to celebrate the Euro-American Wild West fantasy while referring to Warburg’s actual trip. The current, politically sensitive status of any Pueblo image of an esoteric, private ceremony—much less one that shows a katsina dancer without his mask—is denied any other status than that of “Other.” The intended irony of the dust jacket, conveyed by the superimposed title and caption, is that Warburg’s progressive ideas defined the frontier of a new field of study. An additional, presumably unintended metacritical effect of the words-with-photographic image, however, reiterates (and wordlessly condones) the former neocolonial frame of reference.

From the viewpoint of many Native Americans and others whose cultures are commoditized through the manufacture and sale of “tourist art,” “souvenirs,” “direct-mail art,” and even “scholarly publications,” my institutional affiliation is seen as rendering my critique complicit with the system. The central issue is not merely ownership of intellectual property, but quality control of intellectual property and the ability to conserve the healthy infrastructure of a society. 24 From the dominant culture’s point of view, trafficking in ritual objects is historically significant and quantifiable in museological terms: the monetary value of the objects, their mode of storage, display, distribution, ownership, materials, condition, and so on “preserve” these differences. From the marginalized culture’s viewpoint, on the other hand, what counts is controlling the signifying power of the material residue of events.

The terms of misunderstanding (and miscommunication) often hinge on the meaning of “public,” or rather, degrees of publicness. The behavioral descriptions typical of anthropological field work may signal “objectivity” from the standpoint of empirical science, but in the same breath, they deny the significance that the Hopi themselves attach to their performances. At this intersection of cultural practices, the dominant notion of “public” means the power to inscribe Native belief in an alien system of values and activities.

The local problems that I have been discussing also participate in current global debates about the repatriation of cultural patrimony. At the International Congress of the History of Art, held in Melbourne in January 2008, scholars from forty-nine nations presented papers, many of which dealt with repatriation issues, including the case of a Mi’kmaq chief’s cloak brought to Melbourne by a Canadian immigrant in 1852, the return of which is being requested by First Nation Peoples of New Brunswick. 25 Negotiations facilitated by the International Congress of Art in this case have become the focus for rethinking objects as ambassadors to forge human ties and cross-cultural dialogues, although this case is currently far from resolved. 26 I also heard museum directors, including Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, skirt issues of repatriation involving
valuable but contested holdings, most famously, the proper resting place of the Elgin Marbles—in Greece or in the British Museum. A presentation coauthored by Fran Edmunds, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Melbourne, and Vicki Couzens, a Keeray Wurrung/Gunditjmara woman from the western districts of Victoria, Australia, spoke of the bond between indigenous artists, art historians, and curators in recent years to challenge the assumptions of the art market and the museum profession. Couzens reclaimed and redefined in contemporary terms the southeast Australian practice of making possum skin cloaks inscribed with local native histories by initiating multiculti projects where people of all ages shared experiences.

Nor do the issues of who controls the past pertain only to relationships between indigenous peoples and their colonizers. As Kirk Ambrose concludes his case study of the twelfth-century statue of Sainte Foy at Conques, in this volume, a combination of historical evidence suggests that “the sanctity emanating from relics was not constant in its strength, but ebbed and flowed according to the needs of a community.” Dr. Tristan Weddigen, in calling for critical investigation of the uses and abuses of art in international politics, at the CIHA conference in Melbourne, analyzed the looting of 2,000 art works on Stalin’s instructions, aided by the art historians who identified the works of art to be looted. When these works were repatriated to the Dresden Picture Gallery in 1956, the event was accompanied by massive propaganda that created the legend of the Soviet rescue of the Dresden collections from Nazi and Allied barbarism. In another presentation, Professor Kavita Singh, an art historian from the University of New Delhi, documented the reverse flow of objects from museums into shrines, from exhibitions to rituals, in exiled Tibetan communities where objects considered to be sacred reside “eternally poised on the brink of an eternally deferred return” (p. 8):

The flow of objects—the writer] are not repatriations in the conventional sense of the physical return of goods to legal owners. Instead these are acts that deploy the idea of “repatriation”—by inverting it, mimicking it, or deferring it; or finally, by opposing it. In the mimicry, inversion, deferral or opposition lies the political potency of the gesture, as the incompleteness of the act of repatriation draws attention to the loss of the patria, the homeland, and the impossibility of repatriation to it. In the current context of globalization, with its utter lack of regard for authenticity, what is our responsibility to society as intellectuals? This question deserves to be driving our research agendas. Regardless of authors’ claims to the contrary, there simply is no knowledge that exists independently of the institutions that support it and the political circumstances that make work possible (or impossible). Let me emphasize that, in using a case study to postulate general issues, I have not been advancing universalist claims. Questions of whom to whom, through what structures of meaning anything is being transmitted, are always at stake. Art, as cultural geographer Liat Rogoff stated the case recently, is the interlocutor rather than the object of study: an “entity that chases me around and forces me to think things differently.”

The sacredness claimed for any object, whether considered “art” or not, is a similarly productive entity: a legitimate subject for investigation rather than a preexisting category, one that encourages us to dig into the ontological and epistemological issues, necessarily understood from situated subject positions.

So perhaps it is not too far-fetched to understand the fundamental issues that repatriation raises—who owns the past?—whose objects are valuable to whom? whose interpretations count or don’t count?—as the contemporary secular version of the problems that sacred objects in general and relics in particular have historically posed.

Notes
1. This essay is adapted from research published in my book, Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos in-between Worlds, coauthored with Donna Pierce and other contributors (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). On the topic, see now the catalogue based on the exhibition organized by one of the contributors, Robin Farwell Gavin and Will Wroth, eds., Converging Streams: Art of the Hispanic and Native American Southwest (Santa Fe: The Spanish Colonial Arts Society, 2010).
4. See further discussion in Farago et al., Transforming Images. 5. At the very beginning of the local artistic tradition, the anonymous Laguna Sante is an outstanding example of a cultural mediator: he painted the altar at Laguna Mission’s Church of San José Gracia; a diminutive copy of this Three-Person Trinity (attributed to Pedro Fresquis) was painted for an altar screen in a small chapel, probably Chamlia (Denver Art Museum Collection), which is in turn closely related to Fresquis’s signed and dated altar screen at Trampas chapel, similarly.

Miera y Pecheco is credited with a stone, originally polychromed altarscreen for the Military Chapel (La Castrense) in Santa Fe (now in the Church of Cristo Rey, Santa Fe), a wooden altar screen at Zuñi Pueblo, and elsewhere: see Pierce, “Saints in New Mexico,” in Spanish New Mexico: The Spanish Colonial Arts Collection, ed. Donna Pierce and Martha Weigle, 2 vols. (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico


8. Joseph Suña, “Pueblo Secrecy Result of Intrusions,” New Mexico Magazine 70.1 (January 1991): 60. Thanks to Zena Pearlstone for bringing this article to my attention.


10. My thanks to John Reyna and Jaime Quick-to-See Smith for their support and advice throughout my work on New Mexican santos.


15. The Spanish inscription “el angel de la guardi[a]” also identifies the content of the portrait as Christian. Taylor Museum n.895, bark date 1871, purchased from the Spanish and Indian Trading Company, accessioned in 1942 (William Wroth, Images of Penance, Images of Mercy: Southwestern Santos in the Late Nineteenth Century [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991], p. 94, plate 39).}


17. On the short-lived revival of kachina ceremonies in the 1660s and during the period 1680–92 when Spaniards were expelled from the region, see the overview in Curtis P. Schachts, “Pueblo Ceremoniolism from the Perspective of Spanish Documents,” in Kachinas in the Pueblo World, ed. Polly Schachts (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), pp. 121–39; on the revival rooted in the eastern Pueblos following the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, see E. Charles Adams, The Origin and Development of the Pueblo Kachina Cult (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982).


19. Steven Hawking, A Brief History of Time, rev. ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1995) argues that all we know about the universe before the “Big Bang” is that our mathematical models break down. In other words, we do not have a model that explains the Creation of the universe: what our theory explains is that our mathematical model is incapable of explaining Creation.


22. The book to which they objected is Benedetta Castelli Guidi and Nicholas Mann, eds., Photographs at the Frontier Aby Warburg in America, 1892–1986 (London: Merrell Holberton with Warburg Institute, 1998). I thank Nicholas Mann, then Director of the Warburg Institute, for making the correspondence available to me and discussing the issues with me subsequently. I alone am responsible for the views presented on these issues.

AFTERWORD: PERSONS AND THINGS

From a post-Enlightenment perspective that separates the spiritual and mental from the material, a “sacred object” may appear to be a contradiction in terms. What could be more implausible or grotesque than a relic—dead matter in the form of a tooth, a finger, a piece of cloth—that is attributed with greater spiritual power than the people who worship it? How can dead matter possibly transform the lives of the living? Two different problems converge in the history of Christian relics. The first is the relation between God and matter, most powerfully articulated within Catholic theology through the Incarnation and the mass. In William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, the mystery of the incarnation is the mystery of God’s desire to be embodied and to “eat” the earth.

Longland’s “love” is, in a weak sense, transcendental, since it makes everything “lighter,” but it can only do so because it is “hevy of hym-self.” This god actively seeks out the weight of a material form in which he will be born and die. The desire of the believer should consequently be less for the immortality of the soul than for embodiment. “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,” the resurrected body being the precondition for “the life everlasting.” The sacred mystery that the church proclaimed was the preservation, in a transformed state, of matter.

The second problem materialized in Christian relics is the relation between persons and things. As John Strong reminds us in this volume, “‘relic’ stemming ultimately from the Latin verb *reliquiari*, has the root meaning of something left over or remaining behind.” When a person dies, a dead corpse remains, together with the inanimate clothes, combs, washcloths, and other things that the dead...