Byzantine things do work and act in the world in a way that art never can. The Christian icons, pilgrim tokens, reliquaries, and the like have traditionally been considered art, and rightly so if we restrict our concern to their aesthetic qualities; the exquisite objects easily hold their own next to easel paintings by Titian or Ingres. Contrary to the contemporary conception, however, in which works of art are considered inert and passive, dependent upon the viewer’s gaze, Byzantines saw these objects as dynamic and changeable, fully capable of affecting the world. And in that sense, to call them “art” is to assign the death certificate for Byzantine material culture; it suppresses their living, active aspects. And in that sense, to call them “art” is to sign the death certificate for Byzantine material culture; it suppresses their living, active aspects. So here we call them “things.” Things perform actively in the world and change all other things (people included) in their vicinity. They are not waiting to be seen by a person standing in front of them (though the things here will appear, in some ways, to be waiting—they’re not).

In our attempts to order the past, to define discrete cultures and chronological periods, art falls into a larger system that we devised; and so we parallel Byzantine things with Romanesque and Gothic works from western Europe and those three categories precede the Renaissance—thus medieval, the long “middle age” between Antiquity and its “rediscovery.” But this categorization of the past, however convenient for us, distorts these cultures and often forces them to resemble each other more than they in fact do. This exhibition offers the opportunity to see Byzantine things outside of this environment that we made for them. By placing them in constellation with like-minded things modern and non-western rather than sequestering them in a distinct set of chronologically determined rooms or cases, Byzantine Things in the World allows them to speak in new ways. We do not claim that this environment is natural to these things, that we have recreated the Byzantine experience, but in creating one that resonates with it and is sufficiently different from our habitual ways of seeing and understanding, we can have a fresh (and perhaps truer) encounter with the culture’s strange things.

Conversations that are open in the exhibition should lead to new experiences of this culture’s made things. The intention of showing modernist and Byzantine things together is not to present Byzantium as a new modernism nor is it to tease out intellectual and formal Byzantine roots in modern art (though Henri Matisse closely studied Byzantine coins, Willem de Kooning was keenly sensitive to the Byzantine monuments he saw in and around Venice). Rather, our purpose, at least partially, is to explore the ways that modernism allows us to see new aspects of Byzantine culture. Barnett Newman’s painting in the exhibition, for example, uses the zigzag line running up the painting to call the viewer back to itself. In a similar way, bodies in front of Byzantine icons were always completed by the facing bodies on these painted panels, like Saint Onuphrios here, that forced the petitioner to encounter him or herself. Byzantine notions of unity and oneness may help us to better understand aspects of Newman’s project, and likewise Newman’s position allows Byzantine relations to emerge more clearly and forcefully than is allowed under normal museum conditions.

This conversation between modernism and Byzantine things leads one to understand aspects of the material world that would have seemed natural and self-evident throughout most of history, but are foreign to a modern, western audience (in our conception of the world as a being filled with inert objects we are, in fact, in the minority). For one, Byzantines understood the world to be composed of an ever-present constituent form: the cross. The essential building block of the world, the cross could be found everywhere from the face (see here) and body (outstretched arms and torso) to a ship’s mast, though it was only recognized after the Incarnation of Christ. The swirl of Byzantine
Gold demonstrates its animate nature through its material qualities, and so the deep luminosity it exudes is like dawn’s body, her lambent ankles and fingers. In the absence of the candles, lamps, and shifting sunlight with which they were traditionally lit, things like the gold box no longer flicker or radiate in the same way, but the company it keeps in its glowing fields include the viewer. The box, despite fighting in a lower weight-class, still gives as good as it gets. It is an animate thing in its own right and its resonances operate as a full participant in its culture. Taking form in a thick flow of energy called nyama, or boli, Byzantine relics and reliquaries can’t be replicated here any more than the box’s traditional backdrop can. Yet the intensity of their effects is still there for any viewer who takes the time and attentiveness for that embodied encounter.

The Byzantine world, the world of bodies, of things, was an open field where all things interacted and acted on each other. In this animism by which God’s energies and presence flowed throughout creation, the lines between humans, objects, and world often blurred or even ceased to exist. In Byzantium, each living thing, and every such thing in this exhibition, was capable of transforming and being transformed. And however we choose to classify them, these things still circulate and make new connections among themselves and other things. This exhibition asks that we recognize that power, that life, and, perhaps, enter into a newly entangled relationship with our own world.

—Glenn Pears

Gold

Back cover: Barnett Newman, One-Point Perspective, 1950. Oil on canvas, 48 x 50 x 2½ inches (122 x 132.1 x 6.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2013 The Estate of James Lee Byars

Glenn Pears, African objects also tread a fine line between art and thing, and perhaps their balancing act in European and American museums provides a good model for how like-minded Byzantine things ought to be treated. The box, for example, both is and is not a container/contained, and it operated as a full participant in its culture. Taking form in a thin layer of energy called nyama, or boli, Byzantine relics and reliquaries can’t be replicated here any more than the box’s traditional backdrop can. Yet the intensity of their effects is still there for any viewer who takes the time and attentiveness for that embodied encounter.

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