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Silver Covers, Iron Grids and Sensory Experience Simultaneousness of Iconoclastic and Iconophilic Nature of Veneration in the Early Modern Bay of Kotor

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During the 17th and 18th centuries in the Bay of Kotor a vast number of artefacts was altered in order to correspond more conveniently to the orthodox norms of the post-Tridentine Catholic church. In this paper, we want to suggest the subtlety of this transformation by using the examples of various 'additions' to the most precious holy objects. During these two centuries, the two most important icons and reliquaries in the Bay were altered by using silver covers, iron grids or silver plates as instruments of their representation. These adjustments can rather eloquently suggest the problematic nature of labeling each of these practices as either iconoclastic or iconophilic in nature. It is more fruitful, instead, to examine whether this blockage of the believers' gaze could act as a trigger for a kind of perception that exceeds only repressive impulses imposed by institutional authorities. Regulation of images and discipline of believers' bodies, hence, could be used as heuristic tools, open to the analysis that implies a different vocabulary used for communication between subject and object in the post-Reformation era.

Keywords: early modern body, reliquaries, Virgin Mary, icon casings, early modern senses, vision mechanisms, Baroque, Bay of Kotor

Introduction

After the Council of Trent church authorities became eager to impose control and discipline the conduct of their congregations across the Catholic world. Those efforts initiated processes of education, bureaucratization and civilization in early modern Europe, which, slowly but surely, have become trademarks of the modern world. Even though they may be legitimate and almost natural, both of these statements are, actually, anachronistic and at least partly incorrect. The idea of top-down pressure in the strict, but illuminating process of the Reformation carries within it two narratives that continue to shape our thinking about the (early) modern world – narratives of repression and progress.[1] On the other end of the spectrum there lie another set of notions, equally influential for the ways in which historical narratives have been shaped for a long time – nostalgic notions of simplicity and uniformity of the past, which led to sometimes useful generalizations, known as 'grand narratives'.[2] Triggered by postmodern interests in particularities, complex fashioning of subjects and objects, or a micro-historical way of thinking, a great number of black and golden legends were, with more or less success, attacked. What was challenged most fiercely was the habit of dualistic thinking, i.e. historical explanations conducted through oppositions,[3] such as progress-nostalgia or repression-liberation. During the last few decades historians proposed

a concept of negotiation that can portray the dynamics of change which occurred after both Catholic and Protestant reformations in a better way.[4] Moreover, some of them embraced paradox as a viable methodological approach when dealing with the past.[5]

The aim of this paper is to examine the ways in which the two methodological tools of 'negotiation' and 'paradox' could be usefully applied in the examination of iconoclasm and iconophilia in the post-Tridentine Catholic world. More specifically, the focus of this analysis will be placed on objects created to influence or, more precisely, frustrate sight (and other senses) in the early modern Bay of Kotor – the iron grid in front of Saint Tryphon's relic chapel (fig. 1) and silver casing for the icon of Our Lady of the Reef (figs. 2, 3). Both of them were created not as independent objects of art, but as parts of a larger, spatial composition. The red iron grid encloses the whole chapel, visible only through its curved openings.[6] Similarly, the silver plate carefully covers the famous icon, simultaneously allowing for the faces of Mother and Son to be seen.[7] The two surfaces function as borders between two important bodies – the sacred body of Saint Tryphon and Our Lady of the Reef on one side, and the body of the believer on the other. Their complex role of opening and closing, of simultaneously restricting and allowing the gaze, will be inspected within the context in which they were used – the post-Tridentine, Catholic world. Iconoclasm and iconophilia will be examined not as clear-cut separate oppositions, but as composite and fluid concepts - as they were more likely to have been perceived in southern parts of Europe during this period. Finally, the concepts of negotiation and paradox will be employed as methodological tools, crucial for understanding these complex visual mechanisms.

Blocking the gaze

It has long been recognized that one of the favourite tools of post-Tridentine efforts of visual control was the blockage of the believers' gaze. One only has to think of Michelangelo's Last Judgment or pictures of Venus, which were reshaped by cutting out or painting over intimate parts, Cupids, and any other undesirable details.[8] On top of that, reshaping the sacred space for the sake of a more orthodox corporal and mental approach to the holiness was also common. Writers such as Borromeo or Paleotti left elaborate instructions detailing the proper encounter between early modern sacred objects and subjects. In many of them Borromeo mentions that, whenever financially possible, the top step of relic chapel entrances should be fitted with iron railings and "be adorned either at the bottom, or in the middle, or at the top with small pillars and embellishments properly rendered to produce a graceful effect".[9] Reliquary chapels should thus be gracefully decorated with 'precious marble' and small pillars, yet remain enclosed with iron grids that separate believers from the holy bodies treasured inside.

This kind of 'obstacle of the gaze' encloses the relic chapel in Saint Tryphon's cathedral in Kotor. At the beginning of the 18th century, Venetian sculptor Francesco Penso Cabianca redecorated this small semi-circular space with red and white marble pillars, figures and reliefs, creating four niches for numerous reliquaries, covered with silver plates (fig. 4).[10] After this meticulously executed work, the whole chapel was separated from the remaining space with a large red iron grid. Even before the renovation, archival sources hold records about the existence of a similar grid in the 17th century. Bishop Marin Drago mentioned it in his visitation note dating from 1688. After the reconstruction in 1745 Bishop Castelli noted: "The sanctuary is made of marble, wonderfully decorated with marble columns, and locked with three keys".[11] This way, the beholder was denied direct contact with the shrine and was restricted to communicating merely by gazing through the grid, which had only a small part of it be opened on rare occasions. Three guards, *theasurarii*, were responsible for securing the keys and maintaining those rare openings.[12] This mechanism of restraining the ocular and tactile access to relics could, therefore, be analysed as a very elaborate post-Tridentine tool for blocking the believers' gaze and controlling their conduct in the presence of holiness, prescribed by such an important authority as Borromeo was in the decades following the Council. However, before doing that, it is worth asking: how often were early modern believers denied access (visual or corporal) to various kinds of sacred spaces across southern Europe?

Apart from previously mentioned relic chapels, iron grids and similar interventions were in fact more present in the early modern world than is usually believed. The early tableaux in Sacro Monte of Varallo in Italy were particularly interesting, as visitors had the opportunity to physically interact with figures by touching and moving among them. This was gradually changed over the years.[13] A new design included ornate glass screens, *vetriate*, which isolated figures from the space of believers. In addition to that, some chapels were refashioned by introducing iron or wooden grids with holes through which visitors could observe the space.[14] Confessional boxes, one of the most popular post-Tridentine inventions, typically involved a framed wooden space partitioned using, once again, a similar grid -"the enforcer of sensorial discipline".[15] Blessed Ozana from Kotor spent most of her lifetime as *virgines murata*, separated, at least partially, from the rest of the world with high walls and small window.[16] Wrought iron grids, thick curtains, blind windows, forbidding walls, silver additions – all of these are elaborate elements that were used to separate not only the saint's body, but also the bodies of early modern priests or nuns were separated from the common laymen.

All of these persistent changes were commonly interpreted in negative terms such as *protection from*, *blockage of*, *frustration*, *negation* and, most loudly, *control*.[17] A small dose of iconoclasm was a necessary part of the orthodox iconophilia. Church authorities employed various kinds of visual obstacles in order to fashion desirable interaction between common laymen and sacred objects and subjects.

During 17th and especially 18th century, a vast majority of Madonna icons in the Bay of Kotor gained silver casings. Usually, but not always, they were late medieval images of Virgin, protectors and patrons of dozens of churches in the Bay. The most prominent example is the icon of Our Lady of the Reef from Perast. The decorated silver plates usually had holes through which faces (and sometimes arms or legs) could have been observed. Once more, the creative play of opening and closing, guided the believers' approach to their most cherished figure.[18] Simultaneously, during 17th century, silver body-part reliquaries in Kotor began to subtly change in appearance. Instead of the previously mentioned covering of the sacred surfaces of spaces, the central parts of anthropomorphic reliquaries remained open, displaying their essence under crystal or glass.[19] In contrast with medieval containers, which enclosed the bones of saints under tiny silver doors, their later companions displayed the remains to observers' immediate gaze.[20] It seems that this reverse visual mechanism worked in an opposite way – bones became visible and present instead of being enclosed under silver skin of the reliquaries. Nevertheless, if we compare icons covered with silver plates and reliquaries with crystal openings, as final effects of a gradual historical change, the result is strikingly similar. In both cases we are presented with a sacred object, covered with silver, whose surface is visually interrupted with oval openings, emphasizing the most important elements of their 'bodies' – faces and bones. Once again, frustration and stimulation of the gaze through the subtle play of opened and closed, is successfully employed by means of a similar pictorial vocabulary.

Therefore, it is possible to discern two groups of examples where the observer's perception was modified through addition of 'an obstacle' to the sacred object or space. One would be spatial refashioning in which the most popular mechanism of change was the addition of an iron or wooden grid, while the other is a metamorphosis of individual objects executed through creative interplay of surfaces, i.e. silver covers and various openings. It should be noted that these two mechanisms could have worked together. A very eloquent example is, again, Saint Tryphon's relic chapel, where the skull of the patron saint is kept in a reliquary with a crystal opening on top (fig. 5), treasured behind silver door of the marble casket and locked behind the grid. Iron hooks found along the walls suggest that there was even a curtain that once covered the walls of the chapel.[21] Therefore, the mixed examples of objects that were 'opened' through the use of an oval hole on their skin and placed at the core of the 'box within the box' mechanism, were more than common during this period.

Nonetheless, the play of offered and denied, as well as the imperative of changeability of the body were common denominators in all the mentioned processes. If they are reduced to mere tools of repression and discipline (which are understood as negative triggers of control in contemporary terms) a great part of creativity that

1 Saint Tryphon's relic chapel, 18th century, Cathedral of Saint Tryphon, Kotor, Montenegro (photo: S. Kordić)

2 Silver revetment for the icon of Our Lady of the Reef, 18th century, Perast, Church of Our Lady of the Reef (photo: D. Babović)

3 Icon of the Our Lady of the Reef, Lovro Dobričević, 1452 (photo: D. Babović)

4 Saint Tryphon's relic chapel (photo: S. Kordić)

5 Reliquary of the St Tryphon's Head, 15th -17th century, Kotor, St Tryphon's relic chapel (photo: S. Kordić)

6 The iron grid, Saint Tryphon's relic chapel (photo: M. Ulčar)

7 Arm-shaped reliquaries, 14th -18th century, Kotor, St Tryphon's relic chapel (photo: M. Ulčar)

8 Jacinta Kunić-Mijović, Copy of the icon of Our Lady of the Reef, 1828, Church of Our Lady of the Reef, Perast

early modern piety assumed will remain obscured. Instead, it is more fruitful to suggest a different approach, one that transcends the aforementioned binarisms, respecting at the same time the paradox, or the simultaneous presence of oppositions that history often entails.

Triggering the reaction

Instead of focusing on the frustration of the believer's gaze in Saint Tryphon's chapel and equating the addition of the iron grid with a mere process of *closing*, we should try to understand this complex visual mechanism as an interplay between opened and closed. It is not only what the believer could see *through* the large grid, but also how the whole image changed when observing the space *with* the grid, regarding it not only as an obstacle which should be overcome, but stimulating as a mechanism of the believers' vision (fig. 6).

In front of the grid Cabianca built a small altar from the same colourful red marble used in the space behind the fence (fig. 1). It was in this place that the Mass was celebrated on certain days, and from where the viewer could look at the relics. The most striking impression when observing the space as a whole is the domination of one colour. The intense dark red of the fence does not diminish in the space, but rather emphasizes the red of the marble in a more lively, vivid and even more anthropomorphic way. Serving as a backdrop to the story narrated in front of the viewer, the red marble and its white veins gives an impression of the body – sacrificed body and blood.[22] The centrally positioned, white marble figure of Saint Tryphon is the most prominent part of the chapel. The eye is carefully led through eight relief plates, four on each sides, and up the marble steps to the central point of the space – the figure of the patron saint. Therefore, the red grid that enclosed the chapel instructed observers to experience it as a visual unity in which various materials and textures, together with carefully chosen light sources and iconographical elements, tell the story of martyrdom and glory, efficiently and eloquently, and, above all, simultaneously. The existence of this visual 'obstacle' also interferes with the inclination of art historians to assign the leading role of interpretation to the iconographical content of this spatial image.[23] The grid did not allow the early modern observer to inspect individual elements of the chapel in detail, but rather to experience the space as a sensory unity.

On top of that, ever since the early Middle Ages, reliquaries amassed their power when placed within a group.[24] They were highly dependent objects, always relying on spatial surroundings, historical background and ritual employment in order to remain alive. After all, their core was most often composed of organic remains of the human corpse. Therefore, various visual mechanisms were necessary to transform the fragility of their essence into an animated and powerful sacred composite. This was established by placing the bone into a silver container. The sociability of reliquaries in Saint Tryphon's chapel was rather a desirable feature, fusing dozens of different objects into a spatial and semantic unity of the Heavenly Court, a holy entourage of sorts, that surrounded the patron saint. This merging was visually achieved in different ways. Firstly, even though they were created over a long period of time, from the 14th to 18th century, body-part reliquaries in the chapel bore a striking resemblance to each other. They were all made of silver, typically emulating life-size dimensions of human limbs (fig. 7). Notably eloquent differences are visible on closer inspection. Secondly, they were spatially separated into four niches, whose surface was once completely silver and gold plated,[25] further serving the purpose of their unification. Finally, it was the presence of the iron grid that stimulated early modern believers to observe the reliquaries as a group. At the same time it restricted the possibility of touch and closer visual approach. This suspension was indeed, at least partially, a controlling tool of the post-Tridentine church, invented to establish an orthodox approach to the holy. However, it was also the screen through which a new vista was opened and offered to the observer.

This effective interplay between iconoclasm and iconophilia may become more coherent only when the aspect of time, in addition to space, is taken into consideration. During most part of the liturgical year the red grid remained locked. Two reliquaries that house the remains of the body and head of Saint Tryphon were kept under

the silver door of the marble casket, held by figures of angels. Dozens of other reliquaries were more available to the viewer, although locked behind the iron grid. Once a year, during the celebration of Saint Tryphon's day, a vast majority of them were carried along the streets of Kotor in a ceremonial procession. The two reliquaries of patron saint were given a special place.[26] After the procession the reliquary of the patron's skull, 'Glorious Head', was washed and ritually kissed by participants of the procession. Not only did reliquaries become visible during the festivity, the most important one was exposed to touch and closer view of the congregation. Therefore, the restriction that the grid imposed should be seen as a creative element of a wider spatial and chronological picture. By having its presence block the gaze during the rest of the year, a desirable intense reaction was triggered on the day when reliquaries were directly available to multiple senses of believers. Therefore, the fashioning of corporal and visual features should not be reduced to the use of repressive impulses by which institutional authorities ensured orthodox veneration of the holy. It was, instead, a complex process of believers' active engagement, where accessibility and enclosure were two sides of the same coin.

Similarly, casing for the icon on the reef was not meant to be an obstacle to the intimate encounter with the Virgin Mary, nor an instrument of hiding and protecting her holy body. The fifteenth century icon of Our Lady of the Reef, as the focal point of official and popular veneration in Perast, received her silver cover as a votive gift from the community in the 18th century.[27] Through these additions, the medieval and early Renaissance icons, as essential objects of baroque religious realities, were able to gain new bodies – silver and different than medieval ones. Silver was, above all, the material of communication during the early modern period. The church on the island that treasures this icon is filled with silver votive plates, which common laymen used to express their gratitude and articulate their prayers through material media.[28] All kinds of votive gifts in the Bay were commonly made using this material. Apart from *ex voto* plates and candelabras, an entire altar made of silver was gifted in the 18th century to the Saint Tryphon's cathedral as a votive offering. Furthermore, a great majority of reliquaries in the Bay were also made of silver. During the later centuries, the anthropomorphic ones contained openings through which bones could have been observed. The icon casings, likewise, allowed for the holiest elements of the body to remain exposed, surrounded by a shiny, silver surface. Therefore, the intention when using this particular material could have been twofold – treasuring the image that acquired a relic status in the early modern period, as well as enabling exchange and communication with the participants in the process. Covering the holy bodies of Christ and the Virgin was, then, the visual mechanism that triggered an active response from the observer who was, once again, relying on creative interplay of opened and closed. Copies of the Our Lady of the Reef, made during the late 18th and 19th centuries almost always present her body covered with a silver casing. In the 19th century, a distinctive role was assigned to the copy of an icon made by Jacinta Kunić-Mijović (fig. 8). She created an exquisite needlepoint using various kinds of silk, golden and silver threads, and, most importantly, her own hair. In order to emulate the bodies of Virgin Mary and Jesus, covered with silver plates, she used the most valuable materials together with part of her own body. Therefore, during the early modern period the icon of Our Lady of the Reef was visually as well as semantically opened to creative transformations, which triggered further participation of the community.

Conclusion

In both of the aforementioned examples, refashioning the previous state of an object or space could be understood as an attack on their past condition. Direct contact with the sacred was not allowed by post-Tridentine reformers who believed that touch was sinful and that communication should be regulated more strictly. Common laymen, prone to heresy, treaded a thin line between iconophilia and idolatry, and needed the proper guidance. From this official attitude arises one simple narrative – wounded by northern destructions (iconoclasm), church authorities were eager to impose an orthodox approach to the sacred objects (iconophilia). Another opposition, North-South, is then reborn.

In her highly influential and provocative study Caroline Walker Bynum proposes paradox as an interpretative principle that lies at the heart of Christianity.[29] She defines paradox as "simultaneous (not serial) affirmation of the totally irreconcilable, incompatible, opposed" and rejects the idea that reconciliation or synthesis is possible, neither in the process of writing history nor in life.[30] Crafting mono-causal answers after considering alternatives, the common model of historical analysis is simply wrong when compared to the complexity of our own lives. From that point of view, late medieval responses to the problematic nature of matter should be examined as simultaneous opposites, not as mutually exclusive or eventually compromised polarities. Historians should be able to allow the possibility of paradox, without the need to erase one half of the story or mitigate its complex nature by introducing the order retroactively.

In accordance with that line of thought, it is possible to embrace other sets of oppositions, such as opened-closed or liberation-repression, in order to understand their simultaneous and mutually dependent role in early modern presentation of relics and icons. This interplay of restriction and accessibility provoked further thinking about iconoclasm and iconophilia as coexistent impulses in the 17th and 18th century Catholic world. Their mutual action was not only restrictive or liberating. It assumed active participation of both institutional authorities and common laymen. The red iron grid worked as a barrier that obscured the direct view of the chapel, yet opened novel ways of approaching the holy. Silver casing covered large parts of depicted bodies, yet it was perceived as an open channel for communication throughout the early modern period. In order to understand the complex web of believers' attitudes toward sacred objects, it was necessary to move beyond explicit dualism and to adopt a certain form of negotiation as the dominant model of early modern creativity. These adjustments can rather eloquently illustrate the problematic nature of labeling each of these practices as either iconoclastic or iconophilic in nature. It proved to be more fruitful, instead, to examine the blockage of the believers' gaze as a trigger for the sort of perception that does more than succumb to the repressive impulses from the top, as well as to embrace paradox as both a visual and methodological model for approaching the early modern refashioning of the holy.

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Srebrni pokrovi, željezne rešetke i osjetilno iskustvo: istovremenost ikonoklastičke i ikonofilske prirode u ranonovovjekovnoj pobožnosti u Boki Kotorskoj

Post-tridentsko nastojanje u promjeni vjerskih vrijednost i praksi često se tumači kao kritički odnos i prema ikonoklastičkoj prirodi Protestantizma i prema pretjeranoj i ponekad zlouporabljenoj ikonofiliji kasnog srednjovjekovlja. U skladu s tim, crkvena su nadležna tijela u historiografiji prikazivana kao dominantni zastupnici strogog i hijerarhijskog načina odgoja i obrazovanja običnog puka. Ipak, kako bi razumjeli složenu mrežu vjerničkih stavova prema sakralnim predmetima, potrebno je izaći iz okvira uobičajenog dualističkog odnosa - ikonoklazam-ikonofilija, službeno-popularno - i preuzeti određenu pregovarateljsku formu kao dominantan model ranonovovjekovne kreativnosti. Tijekom 17. i 18. stoljeća u Boki kotorskoj je velik broj umjetnina bio promijenjen u okviru prilagodbe novim normama post-tridentske Katoličke Crkve. U ovome radu želimo pokazati koliko su ove transformacije bile osjetljive, koristeći primjere različitih 'dodataka' nekima od najdragocjenijih svetih predmeta. Ove prilagodbe mogu vrlo jasno predstaviti problem etiketiranja navedenih praksi kao ikonoklastičke ili ikonodulstvene u svojoj biti. Umjesto toga bi plodnije bilo ispitati je li ovo zaklanjanje promatračeva pogleda moglo služiti kao okidač za vrstu percepcije koja nadilazi institucionalno nametnute represivne impulse. Kontroliranje načina prikazivanja i strogost u oblikovanju stavova i gesti vjernika, mogu biti korišteni kao istraživački alat, otvoren raspravi koja implicira korištenje različitog rječnika za komunikaciju između subjekta i objekta u Post-reformacijskom periodu. Ovo istraživanje ima za cilj predstaviti postojanje dijaloga između kategorija i agenata, uglavnom korištenih u strogoj dualnoj podjeli, te istražiti ga koristeći vizualne primjere i arhivski materijal pronađen u crkvama u Kotoru. Koncept pregovaranja i paradoksa bit će upotrijebljen kao metodološki alat, ključan za razumijevanje ovih kompleksnih vizualnih mehanizama.

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