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Portals: *Cabinets of Curiosity, Reliquaries and Colonialism*

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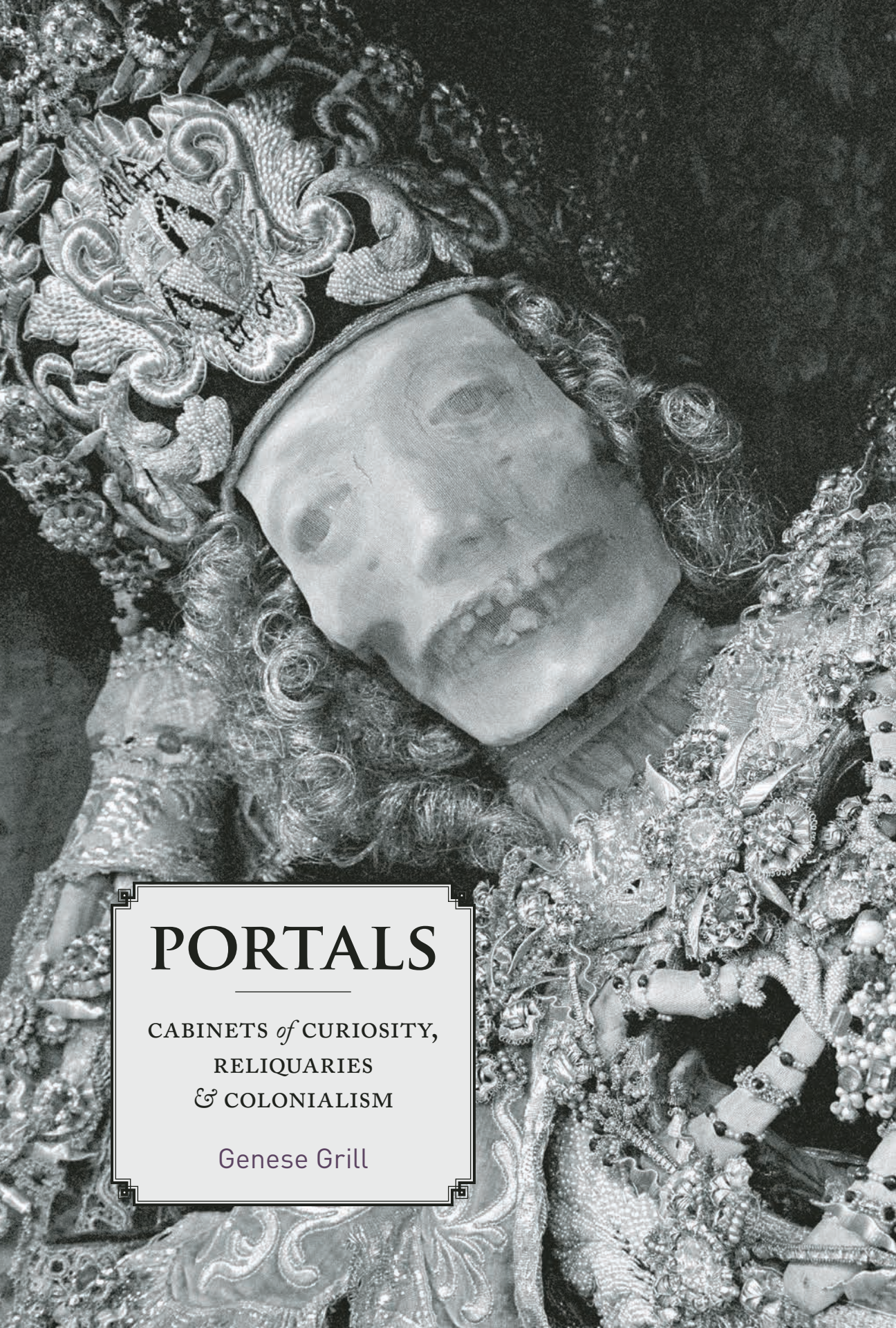
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# PORTALS

CABINETS *of* CURIOSITY,  
RELIQUARIES  
& COLONIALISM

Genese Grill

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( essay )

At the Maison Gai Saber, where  
I am trying to collect my thoughts

*Photo by Paul Koudounaris*

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about *Schatzkammer*, reliquaries, ornament, crime and civilization and its discontents, all the matter has history: all of the earth, all the rocks, going back to the Paleolithic age, and the land, worked and harvested for centuries, the grape vines, the fig trees, the old stone houses with cellars and attics. Yesterday I worked in the garden with Francine, my hostess at this artists' residency in the Loire valley of France, removing ten years of ground cover and vines from an area outside the *pressoire*, a house built by Francine's father, a master carpenter, which is so called because of a beautiful gigantic old wooden cask-press for grapes sitting on its porch. While we worked we uncovered wild garlic and snails and small new prodding flowers. Every material thing here is bound or connected to the past via bloodlines, via deep ruts in the fields, etchings on the surface of earth's memory that reach deep down under the soil to places we cannot see but surely feel. Francine herself was born here, in this house, and her family goes back for generations. The earth we were working was worked by her forefathers and foremothers, over and over again, hands like her hands in the same moist, rich dirt. In the Maison library, where other vines go back to other roots, bifurcating out over vast geographic areas and times to ancient Greece, medieval France, twentieth-century German history and philosophy, Japanese courtly poetry, Arabian-Andalusian melodies, I picked up *Civilization and Its Discontents*, wherein Freud writes about the way our childhood selves are carried within our grown bodies, just as the ancient foundations of old cities may still exist beneath the new structures. I also rediscovered Marcel Mauss's wonderful book *The Gift*, about ancient and primitive gift exchange, called the "potlatch" in some traditions, and about the "mana" of objects and a world where objects are not reduced to commodities bought and sold without any emotional, social or spiritual bonds. The mana that lives in an object once owned by someone is passed on to the recipient. As it is farther passed on, its power and value increase. This reminded me of the sense we have of powers inherent in old things and old places, and in the late offspring of old families, with their mingled lines of influence and geography, ethnicities and languages. The tragedy is that these braids of meaning can be cut off, diminished, when the objects, persons and places in question are used and abused in merely mercenary ways. Cut off from the circulating energy of community, history, nature and the lifeblood of heritage and exchange, they become sterile and lose their mana. Severed from the forces that made it, the

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craftsperson who formed it, the animal and natural materials of which it was constructed, a relic becomes a mere thing, with no meaning.

A person, too, can become an object when alienated from her history and her roots, although occasional spiritual and physical journeys away from home are instructive and refreshing; and there seem to be some people—travelers and expatriates—who find their homes or perhaps their anti-selves in constant transition or in far-off lands. But even these wanderers are tracing lines of contact, walking paths and touching artifacts that seem somehow to be calling to them. Even they are treasuring places and the objects and people who have either originated there or arrived via surprising routes—routes that are stories and heritages in themselves. These considerations compel us to reconsider modern-day prejudices against materiality and to work to understand why many of us continue to love objects, no matter how implicated they may be in things we ostensibly don't love.

It is so difficult to imagine a time when humans were not driven by merely economic ends. The roots of such a time are still traceable, however, and we may uncover them and cultivate them today if we choose. But in another, more popular book on the gift, Lewis Hyde suggests that, since gift exchange is a complex and fraught relationship, often dangerous and messy, some modern people may actually *prefer* the commodification of objects and life because it gives them a sense of freedom from the group, the commonality, the family, the tribe. Thus, a “free society” may be not so much about political freedoms as about the freedom of individual determination, the sense of anonymity and of not being beholden to anyone. This explains why one may prefer a sterile hotel to the awkwardness of staying in a warm home with strangers who may become friends. While cleaning up after dinner, Francine and I agree that this sort of anonymity does have its charms too, for a poet or artist who escapes for a while from everyone she knows to live in a foreign city. And of course in our modern world, we often stray very far from our homes and our people, abandoning native languages, customs and the obligations of kinship that go along with them. There are often good reasons why a person would want to be cut off from his family or his national heritage and culture, but such a separation can probably only be achieved by a truncating and repression of parts of ourselves that it might be better to bring up to the surface in all their messy material complexity. At best, we adopt new families, learn new languages, invent new customs, putting

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down new roots and creating and collecting new keepsakes; and at worst, we float amid shallow connections without identity, without meaningful possessions or mementos to hold us down, without a place to call home.

Here at the Maison Gai Saber, then, I am thinking of all these things amid the warmth and awkwardness and delight of strangers who have quickly become friends, thinking about our culture's ambivalence toward materiality and trying to parse the differences between some objects and others and understand how much matter is enough and how much is too much. It is not merely a question of the objects themselves but of our social and spiritual relationship to them. Is it possible to imagine and foster a process of transmission, exchange and ritualization of objects different from today's anonymous marketplace? Mauss tells us that in the primitive gift-exchange societies he studied, "the large abalone shells, the shields covered with them, the decorated blankets with faces, eyes, and animal and human figures embroidered and woven into them, are all personalities. . . . A copper talks and grunts, demanding to be given away or destroyed; it is covered with blankets to keep it warm." Of course, good bohemians, even within our commodified context, have always known how to celebrate the life of material objects, giving and receiving treasures from crowded junk shops, reanimating neglected and forgotten relics, dusting off old lanterns to find they contain genies who can grant wishes. And we make our own reliquaries around the remains of meaningful matter—locks of hair, love notes, train tickets, feathers, an acorn, a seed, a butterfly wing, a faded photograph, a fragment of a dress—connected with some experience or person sacred to us, carefully enclosing them in a box, a book, a special little chest and placing them on an altar in our boudoir or study. I immediately discovered that Francine is a good bohemian aesthete, a spiritual lover of material objects, when she took me, on my second day here, to the *brocante*, the flea market in Chinon, where that great lover of material pleasures Rabelais lived, where that great spiritual saint Joan of Arc came to visit a disbelieving king. And when she showed me around the beautiful crumbling remains of Châtelleraut, the city where Descartes, that arch antimaterialist, lived as a boy. Rereading the *Discours de la méthode* the other morning, I found Descartes' assertion that he was "une substance dont toute l'essence ou la nature n'est que de penser, et qui, pour être, n'a besoin d'aucun lieu ni dépend d'aucune chose matérielle; en sorte que ce moi, c'est-à-dire l'âme, par laquelle je suis ce qui je suis, est entièrement distinct du corps"—which was all the more disturbing after having

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visited his childhood home, a pretty house with physical walls, halls, floors and archways. Without succumbing entirely to the worst kind of ahistorical psychologizing, I couldn't help but wonder if perhaps his house was too narrow for him, too crowded, impelling him to escape to Holland to reinvent himself, develop his method and escape his bonds to place, people, material world.

Even though I had to temporarily uproot myself to come here, it strikes me that my visit to the Maison Gai Saber is an object lesson in an opposite tendency to value the visceral threshing and braiding of matter. This journey away from and back seems to be a process of decommodified exchange similar to the ones Mauss points to, since there really is no purpose or product to speak of here except for a sort of ineffable, practically mystical mingling of material and spiritual substances. It could not have been achieved from afar, for the material environment is very present in my musings and experience here, from the churned and tilled fields of fertile soil to the fences woven from thin dark rushes to the winding wooden staircase in this sixteenth-century house to the warm figs to the yellow of a lemon in an earthenware bowl to the fragrant walnut oil (from trees in Francine's mother's garden), which we watched men in their blue work coveralls make one day with an ancient heavy grinding stone and crushing and liquifying machines, to the dry wood crackling in the old fireplace with its smoke-darkened grate, the old pan for roasting chestnuts, the heavy cast-iron foot warmer and the white-gray ashes that must be taken out back in a pail along with the redolent food scraps and the cheese rinds. But what—besides the fact that I visited the Vienna museum of art, the Louvre and the medieval Musée de Cluny on my way here, looking at rooms filled with reliquaries and imperial collections of exotica, scientia and artificia—does all this have to do with the problem of maximalization and minimalization, *Schatzkammer*, ornament and crime, the physicality of reliquaries, the violence of iconoclasm and the pleasures and discomforts of civilization? Let me see if I can make the connections.

Marveling at the richness and variety of the goods transported by train through Concord, our defender of the wild, our minimalist Thoreau, almost sounds like the more metropolitan and paradoxically spiritual-materialist Walt Whitman as he intones noun after noun in an ecstatic encomium to the ingenuity of workers, voyagers, inventors, artisans and the restless energy and activity of Western civilization. "What recommends commerce to me," he notes in the chapter called

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“Sounds” in *Walden*, “is its enterprise and bravery.” The train carries lumber, fabric scraps to turn into paper, Spanish hides, lime and torn sails, things suggestive of the wide world and of our ability to transform nature into culture and civilization. “I am refreshed and expanded,” writes this lover of nature,

when the freight train rattles past me, and I smell the stores which go dispensing their odors all the way from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain, reminding me of foreign parts, of coral reefs, and Indian oceans, and tropical climes, and the extent of the globe. I feel more like a citizen of the world at the sight of the palm-leaf which will cover so many flaxen New England heads the next summer, the Manilla hemp and cocoanut husks, the old junk, gunny bags, scrap iron, and rusty nails.

And yet he stops three times in this chapter to warn: “If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!” and “If the enterprise were as innocent as it is early!” and “If the enterprise were as heroic and commanding as it is protracted and unwearied!” How can we then calculate the real cost, to the soul, to the environment, to humanity, to other cultures, of the “enterprise”: the production, possession and transport of objects? And how assess the gain to humankind from craftsmanship, ornamentation, design, art, manufacture, collecting and trade? Finally, is it possible to delineate a less damaging, less damning means to celebrate, collect and touch the spirit inhered within the material riches of the wide world?

Why have some people been mad to collect and accumulate, to capture the variety and vastness of the world in their drawing rooms, and *Schatzkammer*, while others have urgently preached against avarice, materialism and clutter? Why has Christianity, a religion with such a complex relationship with the physical, spent so much time, money and energy creating elaborately ornamented objects (reliquaries) to house the physical remains of saints who are often honored for their transcendence of physical needs? Kate Barush answers that this apparent contradiction is explained and figured forth in the dual nature of Christ, in the incarnation itself, as the divine becomes matter.

And of course it is a question of what kind of matter, for some objects are empty and degrading while others are replete with spirit and elevating. Is it possible that the impulse to reject physicality and the impulse to celebrate it are both bound up with the fundamental problem of fleet-



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ingness and of our human inability to be in two places at once? That on the one hand, we attempt to overcome death and space by surrounding ourselves with eternal symbols representing the past and distance, while on the other, we refrain from attaching ourselves to anything that will not last?

Indeed, our relationship to objects is a matter of our relationship to relating itself, since material objects are in effect portals, *connecting* us over time and space. They are symbols, illustrating our messy and dangerous relations to the world, to the past, to each other—relations some might prefer to repress, negate or destroy. How are we to respond to such complexity? Can we find some cleaner, more sustainable way to truck with matter? A way that honors natural resources, the fragile ecosystems created by cultures and civilizations? A way that imagines the long-term cost as well as the immediate pleasure of possession? And even if it proves impossible to completely remove the negative results of materiality, might we, in the end, nevertheless choose to celebrate matter? Indeed, if we are not to be hypocrites, there may be no other choice than to embrace it in all its fraught reality.

We have strong-armed and pillaged, looted and swiped, bargained and bartered; we have carried away treasures from cultures that on some occasions would have melted them down for utilitarian purposes or to forge sculptures of new gods. Thus, we have actually preserved some treasures from oblivion by transporting them to Western museums; and others we have purloined from their true worshippers to consider in our drawing rooms and galleries, often without the proper feelings of sacredness—as conversation pieces or worse; we have transported human beings to enslave them and to put them on display at world's fairs; we have collected and uprooted not only objects and people and their natural resources but also rich and marvelous new words for the spices, animals, fruits, fabrics, colors and customs brought back from the voyages of discovery: *cinnabar, arabesque, damask, cannibal, canoe, hurricane, chocolate, armadillo, crocodile, pelican, bastinado, machete, parakeet*. . . . William James Bouwsma writes in *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550–1640*:

The discoveries may have marked the beginning of European Imperialism, but they also expressed a dynamic apparent in other aspects of European culture. As a result, a wave of new products, new knowledge, and new words swept over Europe, stimulating openness, wonder,

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excitement, and imagination. . . . Curiosity, both cause and consequence of the discoveries and previously considered dangerous to the soul, was increasingly seen as a virtue. [Richard] Hooker [an English priest] noted, “the wonderful delight men have, some to visit forrein countries, to discover nations not heard of in former ages, we all to know affaires and dealings of other people, yea to be in a league of amitie with them.”

Our thirst for knowledge has led us to scour distant civilizations and previously unknown cultures, changing them and ourselves through contact. It has spurred us toward invention and “mastery” of Nature, tearing back the “veil of Isis,” but also toward the invention of musical, astronomical, medical, nautical and culinary instruments, the printing press, the microscope and telescope; toward increasing the life expectancy, decreasing death in childbirth, thus instigating the unintended problem of overpopulation; toward the study of languages and folktales and musical scales around the world; toward the exploration of outer space, of the inner depths of the earth, of our own psyches and genetic coding. The *Beagle* was surely sent out for baser purposes, but Charles Darwin was on board.

Is it possible to separate the hunger for power from the hunger for knowledge, which in part has been motivated by a desire to make life better? To perhaps “be in league and amitie” with strangers? Can we separate these impulses from the concupiscence of shortsighted grasping and destruction? Freud suggests that the instinct to aggression and destruction is paired with our instinct to creation, with the proliferation of eros, the force that binds people together and creates families and communities. Is eros the force that drives exploration and collection? Or is it aggression? Or are both forces working together, or against each other, in fruitful and destructive friction? The devil, Freud notes, is opposed by Goethe not with goodness and holiness but with the power to create and generate. Yet to create is to destroy. To be perfectly harmless, to leave no trace, one had better not even live. Aggression might also be associated with what Robert Musil called the “appetitive” tendency of humankind, that drive or hunger to invent, inquire, build, make love that is also the drive to destroy. Thus, while Freud states that the primary originary instinct of aggression is a *threat* to civilization, it may also be true that aggression is a positive energy that makes civilization possible in the first place. Further, while what one person or culture deems “good” can often create unintended bad consequences, some-

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times seemingly self-interested actions can result in benefits for many. Take egotism out, Emerson noted, and castrate the benefactors.

Freud describes the development of civilization as a process by which humanity strives to protect itself against nature and to master it. Civilization, he contends, also requires that its inhabitants direct “their care too to what has no practical value whatever, to what is useless. . . . We soon observe that this useless thing which we expect civilization to value is beauty.”

Beauty, of course, is counted by many as one of the redeeming elements of life. While beauty also exists in nature, it may be our love of this natural beauty that impels us to make objects and works of art. Can it be that this imitation necessarily leads to a destruction of what it intended to revere? “Man has,” Freud continues, “become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but,” Freud reminds us, “his organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times . . . in the interests of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his God-like character.” Wherefrom this unhappiness? Is it all because of the ambivalence produced by guilt and the repression of instincts, as Freud suggests? At a certain point, too much civilization separates us from the pleasures of being a human animal, makes us too comfortable and numbs our senses. When I was forced to use an outhouse over the course of a cold Vermont winter, I found compensatory joys in hearing the howling of the coyotes late at night and seeing the stars, which I would have missed had I merely padded on carpeted floors down a heated hallway. We want our wild experiences along with our more genteel passions and are lucky if we can maintain both at once. But can we?

A classical musician friend of mine declared one day that Western civilization has done nothing but damage. This statement is not far from the lips of many another liberal denizen of contemporary America. But would he really be willing to give up the piano, the musical scale, Bach or the philosophy and psychology that have put him in a position to make such an extreme statement from the comfort of his well-heated apartment? He had, indeed, already chosen not to give these things up, not even in exchange for a world where no one has ever enslaved or tortured or demeaned anyone else, where nature has not been abused and devastated for shortsighted human interest and greed. For that is the bargain implied by such wholesale negations of Western civilization. Or is it possible to proceed with more subtlety and admit that we want to

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keep some parts of civilization and reject other parts, but that we really cannot possibly calculate which parts of our culture we might be able to have without the allegedly bad ones? Ought we not to ask more carefully how much the appetitive nature of human beings has contributed for the good before declaring that it would be better if we had no desires or curiosities at all? For no matter how much we may criticize civilization, it is unlikely that many of us would be willing to revert to a time before language or agriculture or private property supposedly ruined our simple, happy natures (and, of course, the myth of the golden age has never been proven).

One may, one *must* criticize the damage done by civilization—to nature, and to humans, to cultures and to our sick modern souls. One must question the practices of colonialist occupiers, who destroyed and took egregious advantage of the cultures they “discovered.” But we must also admit that many of these cultures have their own gruesome histories of abuse, slavery and cruelty that allowed them to be the victors over other peoples before we came along and made them our victims. The complex historical truth does not excuse the horrible things we have done and continue to do, but it does demonstrate that civilization and Western rationalism are not the sole purveyors of barbaric atrocities. Thus, barbarous acts committed by non-Western peoples are not solely the result of our own interventions in their cultures and do not under any circumstances justify what amounts to a masochistic relinquishment of what is good about Western culture. Freud, in a passage considering the Marxist idea of abolishing private property as a cure for aggression, notes that “in abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though certainly not the strongest; but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature. Aggressiveness was not created by property. It reigned almost without limit in primitive times, when property was still very scanty, and it already shows itself in the nursery.” While civilization has certainly enabled us to cause harm more efficiently through the use of technology and more coldly and impersonally through the distancing enabled by technology, this does not mean that it is more inherently cruel, destructive or brutal than primitivism. For civilization has also benefited the world, generally made people gentler, kinder and more tolerant and created more “*amitie*.” Furthermore, even the colonialism associated with Western civilization included at

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least a portion of well-intentioned scientific, artistic and anthropological interest in the cultures and artifacts of other people, not to mention humanitarian efforts in the otherwise victimized countries. It has been a very mixed history, and one not easily judged.

Western culture has, in fact, looked outside itself to learn about the lives of others much more than any other culture has, a curiosity that is certainly related to, if not impelled by, a drive to dominate the peoples and places it studied. Our history has landed us here, as we make new history in the present, and many scholars, explorers and collectors have found it meaningful to collect and archive facts, fancy, words, artifacts, stories, exempla of all kinds from the rich past, preserving them for the enrichment of future generations. While there are encyclopedias and libraries and archives that mainly collect intellectual and spiritual content, there are also collections of material objects.

*Kunstkammer*, also called *Wunderkammer*, were according to Philipp Blom in his *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting*, “rooms transformed into images of the riches and strangeness of the world.” These cabinets were seen as microcosms of the world. In one famous chamber of wonders, Blom tells us, “objects in drawers were arranged as an elaborate allegory to represent the animal, plant and mineral world, the four continents, and the range of human activities.” A particular *Kunstschränk* was itself, he says, “an encyclopedia in objects, a programme of the world in microcosm, a *theatrum memoriae* illustrating their place in the great drama of God’s mind.” In Amsterdam, there were purportedly nearly 100 private collections recorded between 1600 and 1740. Objects from all over the world were encased in cabinets that reflected the reach of Dutch trading, from Japan to South America to Egypt to the Middle East. Tulips, Blom tells us, were brought to Europe by Emperor “Maximilian’s ambassador in Turkey, Ghislain de Busbecq, as well as other plants, which were planted in the Emperor’s gardens in Vienna and Prague.” Maximilian was a great collector, a patron of scholarship, and the father of Rudolf of Habsburg (1552–1612), soon to be Holy Roman Emperor. Rudolf gathered artisans and craftspeople and scientists: “The castle on the Hradčany Hill [in Prague] and the streets hugging the slopes around it were transformed into a colony of gold- and silversmiths, stone-cutters, watch- and instrument-makers, painters and engravers, astronomers and alchemists.”

Can we take away some kinds of desire, some kinds of pleasure in beauty and materiality, and not others? Or is the answer to the horrors

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of colonialism a repudiation of exploration, curiosity, materiality and the occasional ritual delight of squandering? Is the answer to hollow materialism a moralistic minimalist prudery, a turning away from the beauties and riches of the world, of the senses, of delight? Criticisms of civilization tend to suggest that less is more and that our great fault as a culture is that we have produced too much and have, in so doing, abused resources and strained capacities; but there ought to be a reckoning and a differentiation between sorts of products: those that feed and inspire us spiritually and physically and those others that may not even feed us physically but rather drain us of vital energies.

One may praise the stay-at-homes who minded their own business, left well enough alone and left no trace, but one could also wonder why they were not interested in their neighbors, in other languages, flora and fauna, religious rites, art and customs. Indeed, it is easiest to do no harm if one becomes a hermit and never dares to do anything, carrying home no souvenirs. But today's trend toward cleansing one's life of extraneous matter includes a rejection of history, memories, culture, art. It ultimately extends to a rejection of personal relationships, too, which may seem too complicated, too much trouble, or too much like "possession." And both rejections may be connected to what looks very much like egoism—the egoism of the "whatever" generation, which sometimes covers up its ignorance of the rich complexity of culture with a self-righteous and hypocritical rejection of its own materialistic accumulation and "empire." We may righteously empty our houses of objects and speak of simplifying our lives, but we tend to keep the hot water and the electricity while moralizing against the other, less useful, more beautiful and meaningful objects. In fact, while fulminating against contemporary Western culture, moralistic critics themselves generally will choose to keep all the worst parts of it—fossil-fuel waste, consumerism, their cell phones and expensive computers—and a hypocritical enjoyment of the fruits of a society they are free to condemn while rejecting its best parts. Autonomous minimalists don't need to learn anything from history, from anyone else; nor do they want to clutter their minds with historical facts, details, images or their bookshelves or houses with old books or artifacts, because they already know everything that matters themselves, much better than their silly misguided ancestors. Or, if not, they can look it up with the flick of a finger.

But collectors and explorers and scholars, however morally inferior they may seem to today's politically correct minimalists, were often

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driven, by curiosity and a love of life, to accumulate, archive and display the many strange and wonderful things made by culture and nature. Some of the first collections were small studiolos: chambers filled with antiquities, gemstones and sculptures, which were popular in Italy among men of both means and learning from the fourteenth century onward.

In the *Kunstammer* in the Vienna museum of art, compiled in great part from the collections of the Habsburg emperors and empresses, I read that such collections were considered “evidences . . . of human craftsmanship . . . a picture of the cosmos,” that they were thought of as a *theatrum mundi* and an archive of wisdom, including exotica, scientia, naturalia, consisting of objects considered both “materially and ideally valuable.” I looked at vitrines filled with measuring instruments like a gunner’s quadrant and a table clock; astronomical instruments such as a ring-dial, an astrolabe; a hanging clock locket in the form of a gilded book; a sundial in the form of a lute, where the strings cast shadows. I found a rhinoceros horn with filigree ornamentation of gold, rubies, pearls; and Indian bezoars from the sixteenth century, ornamented with gold and enamel; seventeenth-century Indian seal stamps of crystal, gold and rubies; a sixteenth-century ivory-and-horn fan in the form of a peacock from Sri Lanka; and the famous golden salt cellar of Cellini, with sculptured Neptune and Tellus for salt and pepper, symbols of sea and earth. There was a Ming Dynasty Chinese rhinoceros-horn drinking vessel of a curiously beautiful amber color; a German powder flask made of a gilded silver shell adorned with rubies, turquoise and glass stones; a hunting horn of gold and enamel with a golden bejeweled woven strap; a writing set with utensils, its lid sculpted with tiny realistic animals, insects and shells. There were automata and clockworks; an enamel smelling-salts bottle in the shape of a fish; a sixteenth-century bronze oil lamp from Padua in the shape of a shell mounted on an eagle’s talon; and a pendant with a monstrous pearl in the shape of a Madonna. This last was grotesque and ridiculous to my modern eye, with tiny grinning or smiling faces around the edges, its pearl Madonna a natural miracle like the face of Christ appearing in some rock face or cloth—but she had been given a necklace, a tiny gold chain, to mark where her neck must be.

There is a sense of fantastical but fulsome excess as the centuries advance toward the baroque, in the elaborate table ornaments that depict, say, a golden elephant upon whose back there rises an air balloon,

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which sports a serpent, which sports a sailing ship whose crow's nest becomes a bouquet of gilded flowers studded with precious gems—a sense that there is perhaps *too much* ornamentation, too many *Schnorkels*, nowhere for the eye to rest. And as I left the Kunsthistorisches Museum and walked around the corner toward the Vienna Secession Building on Friedrichstrasse, I saw the fruitful marriage of old and new in the refreshing combination of its elaborately ornamental dome of gilded leaves crowning a foundation of almost minimalist classical lines. I thought of Vienna's Adolf Loos, that cryptic minimalist decorator and architect who attacked ornament and was the inventor of the eyebrowless window. Loos argues in his book *Ornament and Crime* that only savages and women like ornament; thoroughly modern, sophisticated (masculine) intelligences, he suggests, must prefer utility and industrial design. Although he was a champion of American hygiene and efficiency, his rather utilitarian-tainted positions were only an extreme version of what other artists and designers of the Jahrhundertwende deemed an excessive falsified historicism and falsifying ornamentation of buildings and objects. This aesthetic reaction resulted in the new Jugendstil, with its combination of intensely ornamented areas and bold open spaces, on paper and building surface.

It is important to realize, however, that when the Secessionists, who were ecstatic ornamentalists themselves, criticized ornamentation, they were criticizing what they deemed a stylistically indiscriminate treatment of surfaces that was not connected in any way with the interior, usage or meaning of a building or an object. The Secessionists, in keeping with Ruskin's critique of simulated facades, may have been arguing for a more honest relationship between material and meaning. They may also have been merely gasping for a little bit of breath amid a proliferation of ornamentation that must have felt to them like choking vines, and thus hearkening, as their contemporary minimalist composers had done, for a little silence and margin against which the sounds and arabesques of their designs could be better appreciated. But any extreme reaction requires a compensating swing back in the other direction in time. We have become all too hygienic and prudish about our surfaces. We have cleared away too many weeds we now recognize as medicinal herbs or wildflowers. We must let the life force of organic ornament spread once more over the blank, bleak surfaces of concrete and metal.

Thus our assessment of the fitting proportion or kind of ornament may be compared with our judgment about possessions, or with the happiest



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proportion of daily busyness. We need margins and spaces in order to appreciate the teeming excitement of smaller islands of maximalization. Yet we also need to experience the crowdedness of the crammed *Kunst-kammer* and the wildly overcrowded junk shop or library of ideas to feel the impressive effects of multiplicity, variety, sameness and difference evident when many materials, shapes and textures are contrasted together in one space. We may speak of bounty and scarcity, aestheticism and asceticism, we may speak of feasts and of crumbs, overeating and fasting. Economy of expenditure focuses the mind and spirit to appreciation and patience, while profligacy scatters and dulls the senses over time. Yet maximalization must do battle with minimalism, as its teeming proliferations mimic life's own generative energies. Compare a field of spring wildflowers with a cement parking lot; which is more natural? Thus, maximalization signals, enacts, participates in more and richer experience and more life, whereas minimalization often smells of defensiveness, nay-saying, turning away, closing down the senses and the self. We need to allow for cycles and dynamics on a personal and a historical level. We need margins around each rich experience or object or person or taste or sound, to best appreciate its own manifold essences; and then again we need momentary liftings of boundaries, when the names and distinctions among things have been dissolved. A good bohemian will suffer cold to own a beautiful book, walk ten miles to see a sculpture, dream, amid the collections of princes and contemporary museum donors, of being "landlord & waterlord" with Emerson's poet. Thus, a certain kind of sacrifice merges with an aesthetic self-indulgence or a relinquishment of practicality, utility, purpose. And we poor dreamers may wander very freely amid the collections of more implicated emperors.

Leaving Vienna, I proceeded to Paris, where, as Balzac wrote in the nineteenth century, "the great poem of display chants its stanzas of color from the Church of the Madeleine to the Porte Saint-Denis." I had read this quotation in Walter Benjamin's fantastic *Arcades Project*, itself a collection of maximalist proportions, a collection of words about the materiality of Paris. Benjamin was a collector and rhapsodist of collecting, who despite his Marxist fastidiousness declares in his essay "Unpacking My Library" that private collections are more meaningful than public ones, even though public ones "may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically." In the same essay, Benjamin writes, "The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual

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items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them.”

In the unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin struggles with his ambivalence about materiality. He is obsessed and thrilled by the “great poem of display,” as evidenced by the voluminous manuscript cataloging the facts and the sociological significance of material culture within the compromised context of “commodity fetishism.” He writes that the collector’s task is “divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. . . . The collector dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but also into a better one . . . in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.” As an artist, as a writer, as a collector, as a mystic, he loves objects and their auras; as a Marxist, as a moralist, as a victim of the National Socialist tendency to emphasize externals and to create propaganda of aesthetic spectacles and myths, he feels himself compelled to critique the romanticization of material culture as tainted by fascist and capitalist injustice and empire. We may comprehend his confused embrace and rejection of matter, considering the difficult position he was in, poised between brown shirts on one side of the street and communists on the other. Separated in exile from his beloved collection of books and threatened in life and limb, he had hardly any other choice in that historical moment but immateriality—and a truly tragic self-disembodiment: suicide.

Medieval Christianity, an earlier epoch consumed in often dangerous and violent ambiguity regarding materiality, did not have to explain its paradoxes with such critically complex theorizing as did the members of the Modernist Frankfurt school. This is what I thought, anyway, when I walked from the “great poem of display” of the shopping boulevards of Paris to visit the Musée de Cluny to look at reliquaries. Despite the official encouragement to favor internal eyes and divine sensations over external observation and physical pleasure, and amid a long and drawn-out conflict between iconoclasts and those who defended images, medieval artists reveled in colors and shapes and materials. While some theologians, like Abbé Suger, celebrated color as divine light, others, like Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, deemed color to be a species of matter and therefore “vile and abominable.” Other theorists worked hard to justify the spiritual benefits of beauty, often beginning with a key text from Psalms 26:8: “Lord, I have loved the beauty of thy house.” And when it came to reliquaries, there were more specific justifications. In the twelfth century, Thiofred of Echternach wrote, “As the soul itself in the body

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cannot be seen and yet works its wonders therein, so the precious treasures of dust [relics] work unseen. . . . Who with fast faith touches the outside of the container whether in gold, silver, gems, or fabric, bronze, marble, or wood, he will be touched by that which is concealed inside.”

For reliquaries, made of matter considered by some to be vile and abominable no matter how pretty, were still certainly physical objects that were believed to facilitate spiritual contact with nonphysical or no-longer-physical beings. The things they contained *were* often truly vile and abominable: they were often merely a pinch of dust or fragment of cloth. Their tendency to be repulsive needed, writes Cynthia Hahn in *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries*, the “compensatory beauty of the reliquary.” In a strange twist, the external surface of the reliquary, the exterior casing, made of metals and gems, was more lasting than the ephemeral substance within, those almost no-longer-physical traces of a spiritual being disappearing from the physical world.

According to Hans Belting in *Likeness and Presence: A History of Image Veneration before the Era of Art*, the Christian refusal to venerate the image of the emperor was the central cause of the persecution of the early church. Whereas today we may mistakenly associate the prohibition on images with Islam alone, Christianity has a long and complex history of violent iconoclasm. Images in religious practice were often considered an open violation against Mosaic Law, which proclaimed *one invisible* God. The eventual grudging acceptance of images, Belting explains, was “backed by a theory that, in retrospect justified the worship of images within the context of the theological debate over Christ’s nature.” Since newcomers to Christianity wanted to use images to know their new God, and because the people persisted in worshipping images even after they had nominally converted to Christianity, theologians had to find ways of either stopping this worship or justifying it. In 726 there was an edict against images, accompanied by destruction of icons of Christ. Believers in the divine nature of Christ were in conflict with the imagistic stress on his human nature. But the iconoclasm came to a temporary end, under a woman regent, after the ecumenical council in Nicaea in 787. At the council of Nicaea, image veneration was allowed on these grounds: “When the population rushes with candles and incense to meet the garlanded images and icons of the emperor, it does not do so to honor the panels with wax colors, but to honor the emperor himself.” The idea takes precedence over the material, but the material is

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needed to instill the idea. Then fresh iconoclasm broke out in 813. In 842, when another woman was regent, the worship of images was reinstated with the justification that insofar as the invisible God is visible in Christ, Christ then is visible in images of him. The synod of 869 established that “God, as the archetype, was materialized in the Son of Man as an image.” Ultimately, the image and the object could not be repressed; the reliquary represents the uneasy but powerful marriage of the spiritual and the material message of the Church.

Every feature on a medieval reliquary “represented” something: the hierarchy of the Church, the trinity, the resurrection. Thus, individual elements in an object are fundamentally determined by their relationship to a particularly narrative idea, suggesting that their central purpose was moral: to indoctrinate and elevate. But why then were they made to be beautiful also? Perhaps they were made with precious gems to celebrate the glory of God’s creation, the wealth and power of the Church, or, on the other hand, to paradoxically show the importance of spirit over matter, since these extremely valuable materials represented money spent not to feed or clothe or house people but to enrich objects of spiritual veneration. Cynthia Hahn, in *Strange Beauty*, argues that the physical adornment was a technique for inspiring awe, a strategic use of beauty to seduce. And while this may be true, it seems to ignore the relationship between the beauty of the natural world and that of some divine idea, as if such a relationship had to be artificially constructed. Rather than see the decoration of reliquaries as a social construction used to manipulate worshippers, I would prefer to see it as a spontaneous eruption of joy and pleasure in the divine beauty of the world. Wonder, according to Hahn, is “the key transformative response,” which allows the viewer to experience the “divine presence in mundane objects and allows them to possess a striking power.” Elsewhere she refers to the term *reverentia*, explaining that it was a response that needed to be *taught* to the uneducated viewer of reliquaries. Hahn suggests that beauty is used to create an awe of the spiritual that might not be there otherwise, a sort of trick. But is not the physical world in itself worthy of worship; do not bodies, beauty, textures, sounds, colors inspire *reverentia* themselves without instruction?

We experience ourselves as made of two parts, mental and physical, and we see this two-part structure in everything around us, breaking each thing apart and consciously or not labeling one aspect spiritual and another material. Art marries these separated parts again. Our

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contemporary distrust of beauty tries to see the natural connection as false and insists that external beauty is unconnected to internal or spiritual elements. We are, I submit, at least nowadays, actually educated to *not* reverence the physical. But it powerfully attracts us no matter how well we are trained to respect the spiritual more. And the history of taboos and prohibitions surrounding the worship of relics by common, uneducated people suggests that the natural response to beautiful things is to kiss and touch and kneel down before them.

Use of precious materials for the making of spiritual objects removes the stigma of monetary value from them, almost radically spurning financial and utilitarian cares in the interest of spiritual devotion, squandering precious gems like the chiefs of Mauss's potlatch. As artists have done always. And gazing at such objects may lift one away from worldly concerns. As Suger of St. Denis notes, "The loveliness of the many-colored gems had called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial. . . . Then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe . . . from the inferior to that higher world in an anagogic manner." But the encounter of pilgrim and relic may have been less abstract, and, despite injunctions to favor inner vision, symbolic ingestion and divine embrace, it often included touching, tasting, smelling and kissing. A prohibition against touching at some pilgrimage sites seems to be a taboo necessitated by the pilgrim's desire for sensual contact. There are tales of pilgrims biting off chunks of relics (as if in confusion with the Eucharist). Hahn tells us that the persistence of an "improper approach to relics [shown in legends and stories was thought to] cause serious injury or death." The exception was the "ritual humiliation of relics, in which they were 'exposed'. . . . Such rituals would not have had an impact if they had not been profoundly shocking to sensibilities that had learned a certain *reverentia* toward relics."

In this age of reason, for the nonbeliever, a reliquary is just a box filled with dust, not a revered ritual object carrying the remains of a long-dead but still wonder-working saint. For the believer, conceptual-ity and de-materialization play a great part in the worship of that handful of dust alleged to have once been the bones of Saint Ignatius or the eyelashes of Agnes or the handful of nails from the crucifixion. There are enough splinters from the True Cross to reforest the wasted, paved-over gardens of all modern metropolises. All the Eucharistic wafers ever

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swallowed would embody a Christ large enough to embrace us all—I am imagining him like some impossibly gigantic Bread and Puppet Theater papier-mâché effigy come to life, his arms draped in pale colors, with the green fields of Vermont spreading out forever and ever behind him. This coming-to-life, however, would be only one direction of the oscillating magic that circulates when objects are made part of a ritual exchange from real to imaginary to real to imaginary to real to imaginary and ever back and forth again—objects, by the way, that can only be representations or simulations, symbols or emblems of once-real things or real people whose spiritual qualities were often considered more significant than their material forms. The coming-to-life is followed by a dying, or an eerie emptying out of the object of *anima*, significance, energy.

But to return to the reliquary, with its preposterous claims: that a pinch of dust is really the remains of Saint Agnes's eyelashes or a sliver of wood a piece of the cross. It is not to make fun that I refer to these impossible promises but to try to understand why a religion predicated on a complex relationship between spirit and matter so desperately needed material objects as portals to the allegedly separate and superior Spirit and to trace what this paradox has to do with our contemporary drive toward dematerialization. Embodiment as a basic means to spiritual understanding is, as mentioned, most blatantly illustrated by God's message of Christ: a body inhered with his essence that must have seemed the only way to transmit immaterial understanding to us obtuse humans. Reflecting on reliquaries draws us into the unfathomable, alchemically fluid osmosis of matter and spirit activated by anagogic participation with art objects. The relic does not have to really be what it pretends to be; yet we must at least temporarily believe, despite all evidence, that it is. The art object, made of dreams and imagination from observation, rejection and celebration of the world as it is, enters the world in order to change it forever. We are all, as human beings, made up of both *anima* and *physica*, spirit and body, and if we are honest with ourselves we will admit that despite the fact that we are always breathing, we can still always be more alive, more spirited, more inspired.

In the small Romanesque churches around Leigné-sur-Usseau, I find the physical traces of Paleolithic stones, the artifacts of pagan worship and the ornamentation of the simple, graceful piety of early Christianity. There are zodiac signs painted in an archway above the apse and ancient baptismal basins, crude stone crosses with hearts carved in their cruxes, heavy wooden doors with cast-iron handles, small stained-glass

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windows letting faint light into the dark recesses of these chilly, echoing sanctuaries. The gargoyles and paintings on the columns are older and more primitive than any I have ever seen, depicting Rabelaisian pot-bellied peasants, grotesque grimaces, two-headed beasts, a foolish-looking man bent over with his head between his legs. Francine's necklace suddenly breaks, and its heavy beads go rolling along the ancient stone floor, leading her to a nook where she finds two exotically colored dead butterflies at the feet of a statue of Joan of Arc, reminding us of the precarious but persistent threshold of matter and spirit.

On the nearby grounds of the park where Cardinal Richilieu had his immense castle and collection of art in the seventeenth century there are only a few crumbling buildings left. His family fell on hard times and sold the stones, which his architects had once taken from neighboring towns to build his castle. They were sold back, one by one, so they are now scattered about the area, returned more or less to whence they came. But these few ruins of buildings, like the wine cellar with Silenus-faces grinning over the doorway, surrounded by stone grapes, with its dark interior of wooden beams, are magical conduits. Standing under their roofs we can almost hear the grunts of the servants rolling out the wine casks and the nearby laughter of the elegant guests and the beat of the horses' hooves and the rattling of the carriages along the long promenades lined with old trees. Matter itself is a portal—a portal that we hold for a moment to peek through, a portal that we ourselves are—for a short lifetime only, before we let it slip, before it lets us slip into other worlds.

There is so much time in a day here at the Maison Gai Saber, and so little interruption and busyness, that one can—one must—experience the very character of the day, the changes in the weather, the changes in one's psyche. One palpably senses time and space when looking at an old sampler on Francine's bedroom door (the room where she was born), stitched by a foremother, Anne Prevost, in colorful threads that have bled over the years onto the background. And the time and space are suspended when drinking freshly brewed tea in a china cup possibly hundreds of years old, purchased from a flea market in the town where Joan of Arc came to visit the king. One really feels the energies of the people who made, owned, enjoyed, lost and loved these things. We can hear their voices in the halls and in the ancient woods.

Americans like myself can hardly understand this sense of connection to an old house, I suppose, beyond a certain point, even though many

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of us come from families with roots in the old world—some uprooted violently. My mother, a hidden child of the Holocaust, says that she herself has never felt a connection to a place or to materiality, and she wonders if my fascination with objects is in some way a compensation for her own displaced spirit. Perhaps, for even if we try to separate ourselves from our difficult historical pasts, there will always remain traces, unfathomed, unintegrated, as shadows and repressed pathologies. Some of us still feel these old stirrings, hear these old songs and sense these old ancestral longings in our bodies; second and third generations may have the requisite distance to face and to touch the remains of these dark ghosts as well as the more friendly spirits of these traces passed down in genetic memories, in stories, instincts, atavistic echoes. Maybe that is one of the reasons we make the long journey to the old world, and to other places where our ancestors have lived and loved and suffered and enjoyed, even if we didn't know it when we set off.

The sun is shining and the sky is very blue through the casement window in my lovely “resident room,” where I sit at my cluttered desk. Laid across it is a huge piece of tracing paper that I purloined from the “ballroom,” upon which I have handwritten all my notes on *Schatzkammer*, cabinets of curiosities, and reliquaries in many-colored inks in nonlinear waves. The large piece of paper is covered with open books, including the hand-bound one I made here and am filling with drawings; it is covered with leaves and flowers and feathers I have picked up in my walks here; with ink bottles and ribbons, small spools of thread and a large spool of golden cord bought at the flea market, scissors, slips of paper with notes scribbled on them, buttons, a camellia from the garden . . . all physical-spiritual things that are valuable in very personal and symbolic ways, none of them worth money and few of them worth much to any but a few people with a taste for such shreds and shards of a mind's processes. Portals they may be, hems we may cling to on the skirts of ancestors, conduits between earth and more disembodied memories, traces and entryways backward and forward, in and out of time and space.



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# M E E T T H E A U T H O R

Photo by Suzanne Levine



## Genese Grill

“I had so many notes for the writing of ‘Portals,’ compiled over a period of at least a year, that when it came time to write the essay, I was both too familiar with the material and too distant from it. I had been traveling from Vienna to Paris to the small country town Leigné-sur-Usseau, where I would finally write the essay, and absorbing new impressions, seeing real objects that my research had described and feeling a renewed sense of the wonder of the old world and its rich collections, but I was completely at a loss as to how to begin.

“I had a lovely little room in the Maison Gai Saber, with a little desk beneath a window looking out on an old church steeple, which rang every hour. And one day, when my hosts, Francine and Horst, had driven into town, I snuck down into the unheated room where Francine keeps her store of papers, her marvelous handmade books, and found a large crumpled piece of tracing paper and brought it up to my room. I spread it over the desk and began to transcribe my typed notes in different-colored inks, adding some drawings of things I had seen in my travels.

“The transcribing went on for days, and in it I rediscovered the themes of the many different parts of the subject matter and remembered once again why I had ever thought that one essay might be made up of so many different elements. In the evenings I read books I found in the Maison library, particularly Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* and Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which inspired the first pages of the essay. I was also making an artist’s book, and I eventually folded up the giant piece of paper and glued it into the book so it could fold out and give a reasonable approximation of my mental journey. I was also writing letters home, and on one auspicious day, after having taken my morning walk over the damp early-spring fields, I began to write the letter that would become the beginning of the essay, and which I then rewrote, with some modifications, into the hand-bound book that held the map,

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an object lesson in materiality, *reverentia*, and complexity. It was all about connections: to place, to paper, to matter, to people.”

Genese Grill is an artist, writer, translator and independent scholar living in Burlington, Vermont. She is the author of *The World as Metaphor in Robert Musil's The Man without Qualities* (Camden House, 2012) and translator of Robert Musil's *Thought Flights* (Contra Mundum Press, 2015). Her essays and translations have been published in the *Georgia Review*, *Numero Cinq*, *Fiction* and *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*. She is grateful to Rainer J. Hanshe, her friend and editor at Contra Mundum, for introducing her to Francine and Horst of the Maison Gai Saber, without whom this essay would not have been written.