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## RELICS, COLLECTIONS, AND MEMORY\*

### Abstract

The article begins with an analysis of a modern relic and of relics in general. This leads to a twofold conclusion: we do not know of a society without relics; and the cult of relics is a cult of individuals, groups, or events these relics are believed to be related to. Relics therefore preserve the memories of those of whom they are relics. As such, they are tools of memorising, but not the only ones. Images, written texts, and recordings are also tools of memorising. Images and written texts belong to the class of objects called semiophors which contains all objects included in collections, the meaning of which depends upon the collection they are part of. It is therefore important to distinguish different types of collections: treasuries, private collections, museums (as well as libraries and archives), protected historical monuments, etc. The history of collections seen from this perspective appears to be tantamount to the history of the tools of memorisation, i.e. to the history of external memory preserved and contained in the objects. Recordings are not semiophors. They form a different class of objects because their meanings cannot be disclosed without special apparatuses which transform the physical traces left on them into images or sounds. Hence one may say they form a second belt of external memory, the first being formed by semiophors. The last and most recent belt is composed of all computers with their servers interconnected into the World Wide Web. This is a completely new type of tool of memorising, which duplicates all the previous ones and enables the user to retrieve an incomparably greater quantity of data, to do it much quicker, and to give virtual access to it to almost everybody.

**Keywords:** collection, image, memory, relic, semiophor

### I INTRODUCTION

An attentive visitor to the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan cannot miss a showcase in room V with, among other things, an object 30 cm high composed of a malachite pedestal bearing a bronze column, on

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\* Originally published in Sabine Coelsch-Foisner *et al.* (eds.), *Memorialisation* (Heidelberg, 2015), 27–42.

the top of which are two sheets of transparent glass in a gilded frame. Between them one sees a curl of a long, blond, manifestly feminine hair. Suspended from the frame is a necklace of pearls with medallions on both ends decorated with the heraldic sign of a Borgia family: a bull. As we learn from the caption appended to our object (or from the catalogue), it is a “Teca con i capelli di Lucrezia Borgia” realised in 1928 by the sculptor and jeweller Alfredo Ravasco (1873–1958).<sup>1</sup> Even for somebody who is only superficially familiar with the worship of saints, in their Catholic or Orthodox versions, it is obvious that what we see here is a reliquary, and that the curl of hair exposed in it is a relic. It is, however, a strange relic.

## II RELICS

Lucrezia Borgia (1480–1519) was beautiful, and her blonde hair was celebrated. She was famous as a daughter of the pope and as a sister of Cesare Borgia, with both of whom she had allegedly incestuous relations. She later became a patroness of the arts and letters, but she certainly was not a saint. The provenance of the curl and the date of its entrance into the collection of Ambrosiana are unknown, but it figures already on the manuscript inventory from 1685. At that time, it was preserved in a glass casket together with letters Lucrezia exchanged with Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), a famous writer and later a cardinal, who was most probably her lover and to whom, as a legend has it, she offered a curl of her hair. In the nineteenth century, Lucrezia’s hair aroused the intense admiration of Lord Byron, who visited the Ambrosiana in 1816. Later it was glorified by Gustave Flaubert and by the brothers Goncourt.<sup>2</sup> We have here, therefore, a relic of a person whose fame travelled down through the ages, a relic that is a completely profane object, and a manifestation of hero worship like many similar objects exhibited in our museums or sold for huge prices at auctions. The curl of red hair allegedly of Admiral Nelson was sold on 27 May

<sup>1</sup> Antonia Falchetti (ed.), *La Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Catalogo*, Fontes Ambrosiani in lucem editi cura et studio Bibliothecae Ambrosianae, xlii (Vicenza, 1969), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Francesca Bonazzoli, ‘La ciocca di capelli di Lucrezia Borgia’, *Corriere della sera* (12 Aug. 2004), 51. [http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2004/agosto/12/ciocca\\_capelli\\_Lucrezia\\_Borgia\\_co\\_7\\_040812037.shtml](http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2004/agosto/12/ciocca_capelli_Lucrezia_Borgia_co_7_040812037.shtml) (Accessed: 26 Jan. 2014).

1998 for 48,000 francs; and on 13 March of the same year a tuft of hair attributed to Napoleon was sold for 52,000 francs.<sup>3</sup>

Napoleon is the historical hero who probably left the greatest number of relics in all of modern history. His snuffboxes, hats, frock coats, handkerchiefs, gloves, boots, decorations, chairs, etc., etc. were piously preserved by his close relations, as were leaves from the trees under which he used to sit during his exile at the island of Sainte Hélène, water from the spring he used to drink there, pieces of wood from his coffin, pebbles from his grave, etc., etc. These objects were included in reliquaries made by his companions in exile, who provided them with manuscript certificates of authenticity; some such reliquaries are now in museums.<sup>4</sup> It follows that we can distinguish between those relics which are directly related to the person to whom they refer, and those which have only a distant relationship. The first case is illustrated here by a tuft of hair, and the second by the pebbles from a grave. We'll see later the importance of this distinction from the point of view of memorising. Nevertheless, collectors are interested in both types of relics. Those of Napoleon are a case in point. Even after the disappearance of the almost religious cult centred on him – a cult which was very popular in nineteenth-century France as well as in Poland and elsewhere – memorabilia of his did not lose their value, as attested by their prices at auctions propelled by the rivalry of buyers. Ten years ago the Paris weekly *L'Express* published an article on 'Napoleon's business'.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, even the craziest Bonapartist did not believe that Napoleon's snuffbox or his hat had the power of healing the sick or performing other miracles. But for the rest, there is no difference between the medieval and the modern concern for relics.<sup>6</sup>

Now let us cross the Atlantic. In the Old South Meeting House in Boston, one sees, among other exhibits, a sealed bottle with some-

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymous note in *Le Monde* (28 May 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Jérémie Benoît, 'Les Reliquaires de Napoléon' [http://www.histoire-image.org/site/etude\\_comp/etude\\_comp\\_detail.php?i=448](http://www.histoire-image.org/site/etude_comp/etude_comp_detail.php?i=448) (Accessed: 26 Jan. 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Jérôme Dupuis, 'Le business Napoléon', *L'Express* (6 Dec. 2004) [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/le-business-napoleon\\_487743.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/le-business-napoleon_487743.html) (Accessed: 26 Jan. 2014).

<sup>6</sup> "A very rare and precious reliquary with bones of Louis XVI and of Queen Marie-Antoinette was sold for 70,000 francs to a private person", *Libération* (1–2 April 1989).

thing inside that looks like black tea. And indeed it is a tea, and a very exceptional tea at that. The label on the bottle is difficult to read on the screen. The result of my decipherment is: “The tea that was gathered upon the shore of the Docketter arch in the morning after the tea was [thrown?] from three cargo ships on December 17, 1773”. Happily, forty years ago during my first visit to the Old South Meeting House, I transcribed a caption appended to this bottle, as follows:

Boston Tea-Party Tea, 1773. Tea leaves picked up on the shore of Boston harbor the morning after the tea was dumped overboard, December 16, 1773. The gift of Rev. Edward Griffin Porter, 1893. The vial and the leaves were given Mr. Porter by Mrs. Martha Weld of Dedham, Massachusetts. Mrs. Weld received them from Mrs. James Hute of Jamaica Plain.

Mrs. Hute acquired them from Mrs. Jaber Dow of Dover, New Hampshire. Mrs. Dow was Hannah Waite of Malden, Massachusetts and she inherited them from her mother, Rebecca, daughter of Thaddeus Mason of Charlestown, Massachusetts.

Rebecca Mason had married

William Haur of Boston, 1767

Samuel Waite of Malden, 1780.

This caption was made in order to remove all doubts about the real provenance of the tea leaves one is looking at. It explains how they arrived at the museum from the shores of the Boston harbour, giving the names of the successive owners, and dates and the places where they lived. It establishes not only a connection between the object we see and what we ought to know about it, i.e. its identity and its origins, but moreover it provides its pedigree in detail. Such an authentication is rather unusual. And yet there are a lot of relics about which we would like to know how and through the agency of whom they arrived at their present location. Instead, we have to accept the authority of the institution and believe that this curl of blond hair belonged to Lucrezia Borgia, or that piece of stone is the one “on which William III first set foot on English soil, 15 November 1688”, as we learn at the *Stichting Historische Verzamelingen* of the House of Orange Nassau at The Hague.

The number of such examples can be increased *ad infinitum*. Our museums and private collections contain plenty of relics. It follows that there is no reason to believe that interest in relics was confined

to Antiquity and the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> There is moreover no reason to believe that such an interest is confined to our society and its direct predecessors. We do not know of any society without relics. Their presence is, therefore, an anthropological, trans-historical phenomenon. This is the first point I wish to stress. The second is that what we use to call “the cult of relics” is actually not a cult of the relics themselves, but of individuals, or groups, or of the events they allegedly relate to. In Greek and Roman Antiquity it was a cult of divinities, of semi-divine heroes and of humans deified because of their exceptional achievements in war, arts, sport, or love. In the Middle Ages, it was a cult of saints. In our times, it is again a celebration of exceptional achievements and of their authors, similar in some respects to what it was in Antiquity, but almost completely secularized. I use the word ‘almost’ because an aura of sacredness still surrounds death, particularly the death of heroes in any area of human endeavour.

By ‘relic’ I mean an object deprived, in most cases, of any feature that could link it directly to the person or to event it is supposed to come from. A curl of hair is just a curl of hair; a stone is just a stone, and tea leaves are just tea leaves. As in the Middle Ages, when the bones of Saint Martin could not be ascribed to him without a band of parchment telling that *Hic sunt ossa sancti Martini*,<sup>8</sup> the relics we exhibit cannot be recognized as what they are supposed to be without captions that distinguish them from objects they are physically and visually similar to in all respects. These captions operate therefore somewhat akin to a transubstantiation: they change trite, ordinary, common objects into exceptional ones, invest meaningless objects with meaning, and in doing so, they elevate valueless objects to the rank and dignity of precious ones, worthy of being preserved, protected, and exhibited. They operate in this way because they connect objects to the memory we have of persons or events. Once this connection is established, the objects themselves become evocations of the persons or events they are allegedly connected to. In other words, they become

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<sup>7</sup> As regards the modern interest in relics, see Philippe Boutry, Pierre Antoine Fabre and Dominique Julia (eds.), *Reliques modernes. Cultes et usages chrétiens des corps saints des Réformes aux révolutions* (Paris, 2009), 2 vols.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Cordez, ‘Gestion et médiation des reliques au Moyen Âge. Le témoignage des authentiques et des inventaires’, in Jean-Luc Deuffic (ed.), *PECIA. Ressources en médiévistique, vol. 8–11, 2005: Reliques et sainteté dans l’espace médiéval* (Saint-Denis, 2006), 33–63.

remembrances materialized and endowed with the power of provoking an actualization of images which are buried in the minds of the visitors who are looking at them.

Actually, what we see in a museum when we look at a caption of a relic is the last stage of a long and complex process. The caption of tea leaves quoted above gives some idea of how this works. At the beginning, there was a person or an event which people who met the former or assisted in the latter considered as worthy of being remembered by themselves and by their heirs. Objects related to such a person or event, including their personal belongings and even parts of their body, are therefore carefully preserved in order to provide an external, material support to help keep the memory alive. Initially, there is a strong nexus between the object and the memory of the person or the event the object is related to and hence the object is usually given an initial oral message which expresses in words the memory of this person or event. It is this nexus between memory, message and the object that gives the latter the status of a relic. And that gives it an active role, so that a look at it or a contact with it arouses mental images of the person or event concerned. Later the oral message is often put in written form and accompanies the object on its passage from generation to generation. The mental images it arouses at this point are based not on personal perception, but on belief – on confidence in the truthfulness of predecessors. The circulation of a relic or a procession of viewers in front of it makes it possible for them to have in common the viewing of the object, the message appended to it, and the remembrance of the person or of an event conveyed by both the viewing and the message. This integrates local and individual memories, inasmuch as henceforth they have remembrances in common. In other words, the relic contributes to the creation – out of a plurality of individual memories – of a shared collective memory.

### III

#### TOOLS OF MEMORISING COLLECTIONS

Relics are important tools of any memorising, but they are not the only ones. To give a clear idea of their specificity it is useful to confront them with another class of essential tools of memorising, i.e. with images. As well as relics, images usually go together with captions which indicate their themes and their authors. But in contradistinction

to relics, images are not presumed to have been genetically connected to the past persons or past events they represent, i.e. to have been a 'here and now' part of the person or event. An image is a projection of a perceived, remembered, or imagined object onto a surface or volume; the object so projected is usually called the 'model'. The relation of an image to its model is that of similarity. In terms of the remembrances it evokes, this entails an important difference between the memories evoked by images and those evoked by a relic. The latter, provided it is authentic and directly related to a person or event, confirms the reality of such person or event, sometimes including their appearance, albeit always a fragmentary one. As to the rest, it leaves a free place to the imagination. In contrast, an image does not guarantee the reality of its model; it may be a fiction produced by its author. To some extent even photography presents a subjective point of view. But an image shows how the person or the event it represents is believed by its author to have looked like, and in doing so, it constrains to some extent the imagination of the viewer. This constraint is sometimes very weak, but quite often it is so powerful that the remembrance of a person or event is indelibly shaped by the image which represents them. Because of this power of images, they standardise individual memories much stronger than relics. They are, in other words, much more efficient as producers of a collective memory.

To complete our inventory of the tools of memorising, we must add at least two categories. The first is that of written texts, which we have already encountered in connection with relics and images but which must also be considered now independent from the two. Texts do not confirm neither the reality nor the looks of the persons or events they are speaking about, unless they are at the same time their direct relics. This happens when a text is a product of an action, as in the case of documents which, if they are authentic, confirm the reality of the actions they originated from. But as a rule, texts are not relics of the persons or events they describe. Needless to say, they are not their images either. They describe persons and events in words. These descriptions, however, may be as powerful as images. Moreover, they may tell and describe many things which cannot be represented by an image, and even less by a relic. And they can do that so vividly as to strongly influence remembrances and to unify them even more than images do. Because of this, in literate societies collective memories are conveyed principally by written texts.

In present-day societies they are also conveyed to an increasingly greater extent by radio and TV broadcasts, films, audio and video recordings, and by hard disks and portable flash-memory drives which compose together the fourth and most recent category of tools of memorising, i.e. that of recordings. Their content is extremely diverse. Only a fraction of them memorise persons or events from the past. But this fraction has a growing importance for both the creation and constitution of contemporary collective memories, because recordings preserve incomparably more from the past than relics, images, and texts. They indeed register not static but dynamic images of persons or groups, even quite numerous ones, making it possible to see, after the passage of time, speeches, attitudes, gestures, mimics, and movements in their actual settings, and therefore to make inferences about the psychological state and psychics of the people concerned. Moreover, they register and enable the viewing and sighting of events together with their environments, their colours, and their sounds. Our external memory of persons and of events contained in recordings is therefore quantitatively richer and qualitatively different than the memory of periods preceding the coming into use of recordings on a large scale.

Relics, images, texts, and recordings are not the only tools of memorising. There are also public monuments, historic buildings, landscapes, and natural and historic sites. It is easy to see that such a listing corresponds to a historic succession of the tools of memorising. Recordings arrived some five millennia after the invention of writing, which arrived some thirty millennia after the invention of images, which arrived probably long after the invention of relics or perhaps at the same time; we do not know. Earlier, the only tools of memorising were the human body and language. An individual who memorised events important for his community often shared with its members the remembrances of which he or she was the guardian through songs and dances. But this is only a speculative premise; we do not have relevant sources for so remote a past. Concerning a much later period, following the invention of relics and images, we can, however, state with reasonable certainty that new tools of memorising enlarged and diversified the content of memory, as was already noted when we sketchily assessed the effects of images, texts, and recordings upon the creation of collective memories. The history of memory is inextricably connected with that of these tools and



that of the contents of memories, the latter being to a large extent dependent upon the former.

For now let's leave aside recordings; we will come back to them later. Here it is sufficient to note that they differ in one important aspect from relics, images, and texts which, despite their diversity, have in common the important characteristic that any one of them exhibits some features which are visible with the naked eye, i.e. signs. And these signs refer to something which is invisible in principle and not only here and now; they refer to something often located in the past, and sometimes in a very remote one; or in the more or less distant future, or else in places accessible only with great difficulty, if at all; or even to the outer world beyond the reach of humans in the course of their terrestrial existence. In other words, relics, images, and texts are invested with *meanings*. They represent a functional class of objects, which years ago I proposed to call 'semiophors'. This term seems at present to be in common use. Recordings are different. They are constituted as such not by the signs they bear, but by physical changes unattainable by human perception, which require special instruments in order to be transformed into images or meaningful sounds. Because of this specificity, recordings do not belong to the functional class of semiophors, but to that of media.<sup>9</sup>

We seldom deal with isolated objects. Generally, they form systems the elements of which are connected with one another according to a purpose determined in advance. Tools and machines are systematized with a view toward producing goods; arms with a view toward combat; and surgical instruments with a view toward performing operations. So too, semiophors are systematised with a view toward participating in a cult or ceremony. And they form collections, i.e. sets of objects deprived of any utilitarian, liturgical, ceremonial, or decorative function, subject to a special protection and exhibited to be viewed in enclosed places designed for that purpose.<sup>10</sup> But while semiophors form collections, this also works the other way round: collections form semiophors. By virtue of being included into a collection, an object is deprived of its utility and of its liturgical, ceremonial

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<sup>9</sup> With respect to the classification of artefacts, see Krzysztof Pomian, *L'antropologia di fronte agli artefatti* (Modena, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris-Venise : XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1987), 15.

or decorative role (if it previously had one), and at the same time it is endowed with a meaning. This can be seen in exhibitions of old tools which are no longer used, but are preserved as relics of sorts. This sometimes also happens with objects which have been long considered as rubbish, when archaeologists discover that they can bring to light information about past and begin to collect them. It also happens with productions of nature: minerals, fossils, shells, desiccated plants, fruits, stuffed animals, bones, eggs, anatomical specimens, etc. Included into a collection, all these objects become semiophors. There are therefore two different categories of semiophors. Relics, images, and texts had a meaning prior to having been included into a collection, which confers upon them new meanings superimposed upon the earlier ones, which are then only virtually present; all other objects become semiophors when they receive their meanings from the collections into which they have been included. The meaning conferred to an object by the collection it enters into depends in the first instance upon the type of collection itself, as there are many types and they are very different one from another.

When we speak about collections, we most often mean private collections, which are widespread in our society. It is therefore important to keep in mind that private collections are only one of several types of collections and that they are a late and rather uncommon phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> In my opinion, collections are as old as *Homo sapiens*. They therefore have a very long history, of which we know only a small part in detail. We may imagine that it started with objects considered to have a supernatural origin because of their extraordinary shapes, colours, limpidity, brilliance, hardness, rarity, or connection to an impressive – perhaps even deified – animal, as in the case of horns, tusks, teeth, and in some instances owing to the circumstances in which they were discovered. We may imagine, in other words, that it started with objects vested with some kind of sacredness, which preserved the memory of an encounter with the invisible. They seem to have been preserved and collected, albeit in small numbers because of the nomadic way of life. Such small collections of sacred objects, relics and

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Id.*, 'Sammlungen – eine historische Typologie', in Andreas Grote (ed.), *Macrocosmos in Microcosmo. Die Welt in der Stube 1450–1800*. Berliner Schriften zur Museumskunde, x (Opladen, 1994), 107–26. Included in Krzysztof Pomian, *Des saintes reliques à l'art moderne. Venise–Chicago: XIII<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 2003), 333.

images, the latter mostly small sculptures, constituted a possession held in common by a tribe and entrusted to the care of its chieftain or shaman. It also seems to have been exhibited, perhaps even worshipped in particularly solemn moments, to manifest the gratefulness for all blessings received from powerful beings living in a world different from ours. Since the very beginning of their history, collections and collecting are indivisibly connected to collective memory and to collective beliefs, the former being for a long time tantamount to the latter.

#### IV FROM TREASURIES TO MUSEUMS

With the advent of the Neolithic age we enter onto firmer ground. The transition to a settled way of life, agriculture, husbandry, and the introduction first of ceramics and later metals was followed by the stabilization of religious beliefs and of social hierarchies, the appearance of cities, and the birth of divine or sacred monarchies. In this new cultural and social setting, previously small collections of sacred objects were replaced by treasuries of growing sumptuousness and diversity.<sup>12</sup> The godlike status of kings and the almost superhuman status of their companions had to be somehow expressed in their material environment. For obvious reasons, the materials used for this purpose were those that conferred sacredness to persons who carried them or used products made of them, because they were already considered as extraordinary gifts of gods. The same is true of materials used for the statues of gods and for the furniture of temples. Every palace and temple had its workshop where objects were produced which were designed to enhance the greatness of their owner during their life and even to accompany them after death in their journey into the realm of gods. And it had its treasury, where besides precious materials, other products were preserved and made ready to go down to the tombs which awaited the deaths of their owners and those which, because they went out of fashion or were damaged, waited to be dismantled in order to recover the materials they were made of. Every treasury was therefore a collection of products designed for the celebration of

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Krzysztof Pomian, 'Les trésors: sacré, richesse et pouvoir', in Lucas Burkart, Philippe Cordez, Pierre Alain Mariaux, and Yann Potin (eds.), *Le trésor au Moyen Âge. Discours, pratiques et objets* (Firenze, 2010), 131–60.

a cult or for the exercise of power, as well as of materials considered essential for their production.

Treasuries represent a peculiar type of a collection, characterised first of all by their content: they were composed of specimens of materials considered in a given society as endowed with sacredness and, as a result, precious, as well as products made from such materials, to which one must add relics and images. They were moreover characterised by their strong links with the palaces and temples where they were usually located. While treasuries themselves were enclosed and placed under the guard of armed men, the objects they contained were partly exhibited in palaces as furniture and interior decoration, and also during coronations, weddings, funerals, receptions of foreign envoys and other ceremonies; and in temples as *ex votos* and liturgical furniture or during religious feasts and processions. In the absence of war, with its attendant destruction and looting, over the passage of time treasuries accumulated an enormous wealth composed of precious objects: products of artisans of palatial or temple workshops, acquisitions, tributes, booty, and gifts. As such they were collections which did not result from a deliberate, individual collecting plan, but which were born and grew up as by-products of the exercise of power or of a religious cult. They were collections without collectors.

For several millennia, a treasury was the most widespread type of collection, present wherever there were sacred monarchies or temples with priests in charge of them. Small tribal collections, which also existed during that time, mostly vanished without leaving a trace. Treasuries left a lot of their collections to posterity, in particular in tombs with rich and exquisite funeral furnishings, but also in written texts: in inventories, descriptions, and historic and geographic works. Some of them, among others treasuries of churches, survived until our time, when they were restructured according to present modes and requirements. But already in the second half of the fourteenth century there appeared a new type of collection destined for a brilliant future: a collection formed not by a king, a priest, or an office holder in the discharge of his duties (like in a treasury), but by an ordinary person motivated by a desire to possess the greatest possible number of objects because they were evocative, interesting, curious, revealing or beautiful. Actually, such private collections were neither a recent nor a Western invention. They were born in more or less the same epoch – in the second century before Christ – in China and Rome. In

China, such collections have a continuous history until today. In Rome, they disappeared in the second half of the second century after Christ, not without having left numerous literary traces behind, in particular in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder. Rome also left its imperial treasury, eventually transferred to Constantinople, with its hundreds of engraved gems with motifs from pagan mythology. And it left, besides the *Urbs* itself, buildings and monuments and, in the West, Latin as the language of the Church and of the learned elite, and hence also the vivid memory of ancient Roman greatness preserved in Roman literature, especially in epic poetry.

The revival of private collections in Latin Christendom in the fourteenth century was made possible, first of all, by the emergence – in Italy, in Flanders, and in the Rhineland – of an urban civilization, with its rich and cultivated patricians. This civilization was similar in many respects to that of ancient Rome, considered as its model. Its representative figures tried deliberately to imitate Rome in so far as it did not collide with Christianity. This entailed a renewed interest in visual arts, primarily in painting and in sculpture. Rome was moreover imitated by an empire which pretended to be the Roman Empire, renovated by national monarchies, above all by that of France. In this climate, private collections were rediscovered by Petrarch, who lived at the juncture of Italian cities, of the Empire, and of France. He started to collect ancient coins and modern paintings and legitimised this by Pliny's authority. But private collections were also rediscovered, independently as it seems, by Charles V the Sage, King of France, who formed his personal collection of engraved stones taken from the royal treasury where they arrived in the thirteenth century, most probably bought by Saint Louis from a Latin emperor established in Constantinople after the sack of the city by Catholic crusaders in 1204.

The example of Petrarch was followed by those who were later called humanists and who, if they were not themselves patricians of their native cities, participated as top-ranking civil servants in the exercise of power. In the course of the fifteenth century private humanist collections spread over Italian cities and penetrated into Flanders and the Rhineland. In the same way, the example of Charles V was followed by French princes and by dukes of Burgundy, and later by all the royal courts of the Latin Christendom. Already in the sixteenth century, hundreds of private collections existed in Western and Central Europe. In the meantime, an important event introduced something

unprecedented into the history of collecting: the invention of a museum in Rome in the late fifteenth century. This is an interesting case of the role of serendipity, because Pope Sixtus IV – credited with the creation of the first museum – actually had not the slightest idea that he was doing just that. He wanted only to attenuate the tension he inherited from his predecessor between the papacy and the people of Rome. With this purpose in mind, he offered the municipality of Rome a set of objects reputed to be bearers of Roman identity because of their ancient origins and their later history – they were long exhibited in front of the papal palace at the Lateran and later placed on view in the municipality's palace at the Capitoline Hill. Such a public exhibition of antiquities in a secular setting aroused great interest among the contemporary social and literary elite. In the early sixteenth century, this type of collection received the name *museum* and was quite soon thereafter replicated in Venice, Florence, and several other Italian states. Until the late seventeenth century, a museum was an Italian institution. Thereafter, it spread north of the Alps and later to the rest of the world.<sup>13</sup>

Museums were far from the last innovation introduced into the history of collecting. One must also mention in this connection a public library, as was propagated since the early seventeenth century following the example of Angelica in Rome and of the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Needless to say, a library itself is a very old institution and some ancient libraries – such as that of Pergamon, for instance, and that of Alexandria – acquired a celebrity in their lifetimes that lasted through the ages. But a library open to the public existed, so it seems, only in Rome, until it was revived in the modern era to spread over Europe and the world. Moreover, one must mention in this context public archives: a collection of written records accessible not only to officials and not only to nationals but to any student interested in the past. Such archives were opened in European countries in the wake of the French Revolution in the course of the nineteenth century. During the same century, one country after another, seemingly starting with France, provided for the legal protection of historic monuments and buildings, later extended also to historic and natural sites. Despite the fact that they were comprised of immovable properties, a set of

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed exposition of this history, see Krzysztof Pomian, *Le Musée, une histoire mondiale* (to be published by Gallimard).

protected monuments satisfies all the criteria previously introduced to characterise a collection: it is composed of natural or artificial objects, removed from the field of utilitarian activities, subject to special protection, and exhibited to be viewed and thus looked at in an enclosed area designed for that purpose. Actually banks, corporations, offices or cultural institutions try to locate their seats in historic buildings if possible, in order to reduce the cost of their maintenance. But these buildings are nevertheless specially protected by legal regulations and they are enclosed, physically or symbolically, by plaques which indicate their special status. In any country they therefore form a collection in the strict sense of the term. And some of them form a collection without borders, such as when they are listed by UNESCO as elements of the World Heritage.

Our history does not end here. But I'll leave aside for a moment its last chapter in order to reflect upon it. For it is more than a history of collecting. It is also a history of the external memory of Europeans. One would like to say 'of mankind' but that would be an exaggeration. Actually this memory is divided between areas separated from one another by languages, scripts, religions, cultures, and political regimes. And even inside the area, it is not accessible to everybody, owing to unfavourable social and economic conditions and different levels of literacy. These reservations having been made, one can say that the memory materialized in semiophors which enters into different types of collections is a collective memory: it is always owned by a group. But insofar as it remains contained in semiophors, it is only a virtual memory. It becomes a living memory and exerts effects on human behaviour only when relics and images are looked at, when written texts are read, and when the meanings of all these semiophors are more or less correctly understood by those viewing or reading them. In other words, when it is actualized in human minds and enters into the memories of individuals.

This has happened consistently after each discovery of a new category of semiophors. Scripts were deciphered, languages learned, meanings of images made explicit, texts translated, images exhibited, and the semiophors entered, to various extents, into the educational curricula, through the agency of which they were integrated into memories of individuals and became part of their culture. This process was repeated in European history several times. It started with the assimilation by pagans, Romans and Barbarians, of Christianity, of

the Bible and of the ways of viewing the world it gave rise to, and it continued with the assimilation of ancient Roman, later also Greek, relics, images and texts into the Christian culture. These were followed by the assimilation into the already European culture of those semio-phors of ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, of the Middle Ages, of China and of Japan, of pre-Columbian America, of pre-colonial Africa and Oceania. In the same way relics, images, and texts were assimilated through the transcribed oral traditions of the European peasantry, later also of the working class. The history of the external memory of Europeans is therefore that of a triple enlargement of its content: in space – from ancient Rome to the whole world; in time – from the Greek and Roman antiquity to the Palaeolithic on one end of the spectrum and to the twenty-first century on the other; and along the social hierarchy – from being productions of the elite to those of common folks. The history of external memory is, in other words, that of its historicization, of its democratization, and of its globalization.

## V

### THE THIRD BELT OF EXTERNAL HUMAN MEMORY

At this point we can open the last chapter of our history of relics; concerning a radically new type of collecting – the collecting of data on hard disks of computers and servers. One may question whether it constitutes a legitimate chapter in the history of collecting, but it is easy to see that it does. The invention and propagation of computers, in particular of PCs, followed by the internet and the World Wide Web brought about a new medium of external memory, be it individual or collective. Our collections – whatever their content – can now be duplicated through digitalization and made accessible as images we can look at on the screens of our PCs. Such an operation is not unprecedented. Humans had already duplicated a significant part of the visible world in the form of images or of collections of specimens. This duplication confronted people with interesting problems. It seems there were times when they did not distinguish an image from its model and believed it had powers it did not and could not have. There was also a time, much later, when images – paintings, drawings, prints – were considered as something immaterial, or at least that their materiality was irrelevant. People slowly learned the essential difference between an image and its model and the importance of



the materiality of images. We are now in a similar situation with respect to the duplication of the visible world, semiophors included, represented by data stored on hard disks of computers and servers.

The storage of digitalized copies of objects is much cheaper than the storage of the objects themselves. The level of fidelity of these copies is very high; they may be realised in three dimensions; and one can turn them in all directions on the screen, zoom in on features one is interested in and discover details invisible to the naked eye, as if one was looking through a magnifying glass. These undisputable advantages of digitalized copies gave rise however to two illusions: the illusion of exhaustiveness, according to which everything may henceforth be preserved for ever, provided it is digitalized and stored on a disk; and the illusion of substitution, according to which digitalized copies may replace the very objects they are copies of without any loss.

The first illusion results from the erroneous idea that the digitalization of an object is tantamount to its dematerialization. But electronic data are not dematerialized. They are as material as all material objects are, but they are material in a different way than those which we perceive with our senses. They are not visible, but observable. This means that special instruments are needed in order for us to perceive not the data themselves, but translations of them in a visible or audible form as images on screens or sounds emitted by loudspeakers. The materiality of these data is manifested not in their shape or their weight, but in the space they occupy on microprocessors. Because this space, however compact, is never infinite – computer's memories have a definite capacity limit: they can store a finite quantity of data, even if it is enormous. The materiality of electronic data is also manifested in the speed with which we can retrieve and transmit them. However great, it too is always finite. Because of these two limits, the digitalization itself, as well as the storage of electronic data and the operations on them have costs; and however small they are never completely negligible. It follows that it is simply impossible to digitalize and to store copies of *everything*. As in the case of written archives, so too in the case of electronic ones we'll be obliged to select that part of them we wish to preserve, the rest being doomed to be destroyed.

And what about the substitution of visible objects by their digitalized copies? The first comment that needs to be made in this connection concerns the difference between the perception of a visible object and the perception of its digitalized copy on a screen. The former always

goes together with bodily sensations related to the texture, the format, and the weight of the object we perceive, with sensations produced by movements of our body, of our hands or only of our head, and by our approaching an object or increasing the distance between it and us, by our turning around it or even touching it. All this is lost in digitalization and replaced by purely visual sensations, in the same way as the changing lights of the natural environment are lost. Generally speaking, in digitalization all olfactory, gustative, and tactile sensations are lost, along with everything which is only accidentally connected to the digitalized object but may exert a significant influence on our perception of it, in particular on its emotional component. In other words, the specific materiality of an object is lost in digitalization. Not its materiality as such; as we have seen it is preserved under a different guise. What is lost is the materiality manifested in its texture, format, and weight, in the place it occupies, in its environment and in its relationship to objects nearby. The perception on a screen of a digitalized copy of an object may be in some respects, as we already noted, much richer than the perception of that object itself, provided it is understood that it is also an observation. However we must add that in other respects the material object is much poorer than its digitalization.

This would be enough to justify the categorical statement that an object can be substituted by its digitalized copy only in some instances, and that such a copy duplicates an object only in some respects, and hence the object itself is therefore irreplaceable. It is also important to keep in mind that the specific materiality of an object is nothing other than its historicity. The trajectory of an object in time and in space leaves traces which are sometimes visible, and other times only observable through an appropriate instrument. That is to say, the past of an object is somehow engraved on it. And the past of an object is that of the people who produced it, handled it, preserved it, or got rid of it. Its history is *their* history. From this perspective, any object coming from the past is a relic, independently of its other characteristics.

## VI CONCLUSION

We started with relics and later took into consideration other tools of memorising: images, written texts, semiophors, i.e. objects endowed with meaning because they are included into collections, and recordings.

Taken together, all semiophors, both movables and immovables, form the external memory of human beings. Until recently it was their unique external memory. Now, we must rather see semiophors as only the first belt of it. The second is formed by recordings which, in some cases, are strictly speaking not semiophors. It is true that they are endowed with meanings but, in the case of disks or films, these meanings require – in order to be perceived – that they pass through the agency of special machines which translate invisible marks into sounds or images. And that is not all. During the last forty years or so, we have assisted in the advent of a new type of external memory, composed of all computers and servers interconnected so as to form the World Wide Web. This third belt of external human memory duplicates the content of first two belts and adds new content, previously doomed to oblivion.

It brings with it, moreover, an essential qualitative change with respect to first two belts. This concerns the quantity of data which can be stored, the velocity of data retrieval, and the possibility of accelerating the very process of integration of data. And it concerns the access to that external memory, which is particularly important from the social and cultural point of view. In the case of the first two belts, it was physically limited, because external memory was composed of discrete and localized units accessible one by one only to people on the spot. The production of copies and replicas which could circulate widely compensated for this limitation only to a small extent. Today, in theory, everybody everywhere has access to everything. But there are reasons not to be overly enthusiastic about this. There is indeed an enormous gap between the theory and the reality, as shown by the data map of the number of internet users per thousand inhabitants on different continents. To have access to the internet, one has to acquire a certain level of literacy and of well-being still beyond the reach of a significant part of the humankind. And in order to fully benefit from the possibilities opened by the third belt of external memory, one has to master intellectual and manual skills which require a considerable learning period; in other words which therefore require a memory. Not only an external and virtual one – but an inner and actual one. What is required is a memory of the body and a linguistic memory, both preserved in and activated by an individual's brain. Such a memory is much more than something that we merely possess. It is the essence of our very existence as conscious beings.

Its disintegration is tantamount to the disintegration of our selves. Without this living memory, all of our external memory – with its contents which register millions of years of the cosmic and human past – would be reduced to a pile of rubbish. Only a living human memory transforms inert material objects and sophisticated machines into something which is meaningful for humans because it conveys information about their world and hence gives them a glimpse into their future.

*proofreading James Hartzell*

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