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Fragmented sacrality in heavenly caskets: The display of relics and reliquaries in museum spaces

Fragmentovaná posvátnost v nebeských schránkách: vystavování relikvií a relikviářů v muzejních prostorách

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem práci vypracoval samostatně. Všechny použité prameny a literatura byly řádně citovány. Práce nebyla předložena jako splnění studijní povinnosti v rámci jiného studia nebo předložena k obhajobě v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

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Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá otázkou vystavování relikvií a relikviářů v obvykle sekulárních muzejních prostorech. Práce je rozdělena do dvou částí. První, teoretická část, přibližuje zkoumanou materiálovou stránku. Sekce obsahuje také podkapitolu věnovanou aktuálním tématům a diskusím o tom, jak by se mělo zacházet s náboženskými a posvátnými předměty v muzeích. Empirická část se zaměřuje na tři případové studie vystavených relikvií a relikviářů. Výstavní projekty nebyly analyzovány pouze z vizuálního hlediska; byly zohledněny také textové materiály a celkový kontext výstavy. Práce také obsahuje možná doporučení pro muzea, jak řešit některé z diskutovaných otázek. Tato doporučení jsou prezentována ve virtuální výstavě.

Klíčová slova: relikviáře, relikvie, muzeum a posvátno, vystavování posvátna, muzejní prostor, náboženství a muzeum

Abstract

This thesis deals with the issue of display of relics and reliquaries in usually secular museum spaces. The work is divided into two parts. The first, theoretical, introduces the material under examination. It also includes a subchapter dealing with current topics and discussions regarding the way religious and sacred objects should be handled in institutionalised museums. The empirical part focuses on three case studies of displayed relics and reliquaries. The exhibition projects were not analyzed solely from a visual perspective; textual materials and the overall context of the exhibition were also taken into account. The work also includes possible recommendations for museums on how to address some of the issues discussed. These recommendations are presented in a virtual exhibition.

Keywords: reliquaries, relics, museum and the sacred, display of the sacred, museum space, religion in museums

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1. Introduction

Reliquaries; objects of undeniable aesthetic qualities. Often made of precious materials, adorned with gemstones. However, behind these splendid facades of gold lie sacred relics that give these objects a divine character. Especially in earlier times, these were undoubtedly one of the central aspects of the spiritual life of a Catholic believer. Countless pilgrimages, ceremonies, prayers, processions, but also thefts, inter-monastic feuds, and disputes demonstrate how significant relics and reliquaries once were in the existence of the Catholic Church. Although they can still be found in the contemporary Church, their overall significance is undoubtedly lower than in times past. In a sense, they can also be understood as prototypical museum objects, as they were, to put it simply, created to be seen. There is also a connection to the current institution of the museum as such. Relics and reliquaries were displayed in their natural environments and stored in church treasuries, where they were also catalogued. Over time, these once-venerated objects have been removed from their original contexts and have found their way into museum collections around the world. However, this raises a number of questions for museums as to how they should handle such objects. These objects are religious in nature and, despite being stored in often secular places and contexts, they remain objects of many meanings.

This thesis deals precisely with the way in which reliquaries and relics are exhibited in museum spaces. Not only displayed, but also described in descriptions, juxtaposed to other objects, and generally how they can be understood and interpreted in museum environments. The work is divided into two parts. The first part, theoretical, focuses on general aspects of the investigated material, i.e., relics and reliquaries. This descriptive section does not attempt to be exhaustive, but rather seeks to illustrate to the reader the multiple meanings and layers of these objects through a number of examples. This includes aspects of historical development, possible classifications, post-conciliar understanding, and art-historical aspects of reliquaries - their changes and perceptions over time. Drawing from prior museological research, this section also includes a subchapter dealing with sacred and religion as museological matters. The emphasis here is naturally placed on topics relevant to the overall theme of the thesis, although a large number of general discussions are also included. There is also a section dedicated to diocesan museums, a type of museum institution that can be linked in some way to the communities from which the relics and reliquaries originally came.

The empirical part is dedicated to the author's own research. This section consists of three case studies of exhibition projects in which relics and reliquaries could also be found. A

large portion is dedicated to a temporary exhibition that was on display in Dresden during 2024. *Fragments of Memory*, as the exhibition was named, included a large number of objects from the treasury of Saint Vitus Cathedral in Prague. These objects were placed in a dialogue with the works of Edmund de Waal, Josef Koudelka and Julian Rosefeldt. The other two case studies, which are shorter in scope, are devoted to cases of reliquaries (and relics) displayed as parts of permanent exhibitions. The first is dedicated to two reliquaries exhibited in the former Saint Agnes Convent in Prague. The building currently belongs to the National Gallery Prague, and the exhibition focuses on Medieval Art in Bohemia and Central Europe. The last case study is focused on the Diocesan Museum in Litoměřice. Here, visitors can encounter a display case containing paxes and Baroque reliquary statuettes. Thus, the empirical part of the thesis seeks to understand ways, contexts, and curatorial practices in regards to displaying relics and reliquaries in museum spaces, and answer the research questions defined at the beginning of the section.

Overall, the empirical part of the thesis, in its essence, connects to the New Museology movement. Not only are these projects analyzed and subjected to critique, the aim is also to find possible solutions to the issues raised. However, the position here is not authoritative, rather suggestive. These possible solutions are further analyzed and presented in the discussion section of the thesis using the INDIHU online tool. It is clear that the online space cannot replace the physical presence of objects in a museum exhibition, let alone demonstrate the sacred nature of the objects under investigation. This is more of an attempt to create a "tangible" practical aspect of the overall project.

There is also a connection to the ongoing discussions in the museum field regarding postcolonial questions and decolonisation. I do not think that the topic of this thesis lies within the same area, however, there are several noticeable connections. The problem therefore moves in parallel with these postcolonial matters of considerable interest. Nonetheless, both museological issues deal with similar problems: the origin of collections, the problematic nature of exhibiting human remains, or the issue of preserving the original context.

2. Theoretical part

2.1. Sacrality fragmented: Relics

In order to get to the shrine of Saint James in Santiago de Compostela, several distinct routes were defined for the medieval pilgrim. One such route started in Le Puy in eastern France. From there, the pilgrims headed west through the mountainous region to the high-lying village of Conques. Here, in the mountains of southern France a monastery resides, which was built in 819 CE, originally serving as a place of isolation for prayer. Later on, a necessary stop for the exhausted and footsore pilgrims on the way to Santiago. To accommodate the heavy influx of people, a shrine church was built in the eleventh century. Conques wasn't just a somewhat mandatory stop for weakened pilgrims, it served as a pilgrimage site itself. In the centre of it all lay a powerful relic, the bodily remains of Saint Foy (also known as Saint Faith), a virgin martyr from the time of Romans.[1] Although the legend of Saint Foy lacks a proper historical foundation, veneration of the said saint was prevalent in medieval times, especially in France and England. According to the legend, Foy was a noble young woman, who refused to renounce her Christian creed, and was therefore tortured and ultimately beheaded.[2]

In the Catholic tradition, relics are objects lasting as a remembrance of a deceased saint, in particular body parts or clothes. The word itself comes from Latin *reliquiae,* which was used in a similar sense before its utilization by Christianity. The Catholic church is without the doubt the greatest religious space of relic veneration, to some extent. However, reverence for relics can be associated with numerous different religious systems besides Christianity.[3]

Notably, the textual tradition of Buddhism was strongly engaged with the concept of relics. After Buddha's demise, his body was ritually cremated. As even his body was uncommon, the cremation left no residue, but jewels like relics. These remains were enshrined within caskets made of a variety of materials, often adorned with precious stones, pearls, scrolls and other objects of value. The importance of relics in Buddhist traditions can be seen in the example of relic veneration in Sri Lanka, where a number of relics were sent

[1] Brockman, Norbert C. 1997. Encyclopedia of sacred places. 51. N.p.: ABC-CLIO
[2] Attwater, Donald. 1993. Slovník svatých. Translated by Jitka Matějů. 142. N.p.: Nakladatelství Papyrus, Nakladatelství JEVA.
[3] Thurston, Herbert. 1913. "Relics." In The Catholic Encyclopedia, 734. Vol. 12. New York: The Encyclopedia Press.

to. Here, these significant religious objects were regarded as the living Buddha himself.[4] Although it may seem that the phenomenon of relic veneration in the context of Christianity and Buddhism are quite similar on a cursory level, in actual fact, these are two different traditions. The context of this thesis calls for and deals with the relics of Christianity, those of the Roman Catholic church to be more precise.

2.1.1. Classifications of relics

The traditionally used Roman Catholic system of classifying relics is as follows: *primary relics* are simply bodily remains of a holy person; *secondary relics* refer to objects and things used or touched by holy persons during their lifetime; and lastly, *tertiary relics* represent objects that touched one of the aforementioned types of relics after the saint's demise. This demonstrates a certain contagious quality of relics, as the tertiary relics gain the holiness of a saint via contact.[5] Although this system of classification is still being utilised by the academic and, in some cases, catechetical discourses the official church stance on classification of relics slightly changed in the past decade. In 2017, the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints announced the *Instruction on Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation*. In the text, only two classes of relics are mentioned. The primary ones are the *significant relics*, referring to the whole bodies, body parts, or the ashes obtained by the cremation of the blesseds or the saints. Objects that were touched or came into direct contact with the holy person, as well as miniscule particles of bodily remains, are considered *non-significant relics.*[6]

Another possible system of division lies in the relic's origin and association with a certain holy person. The hierarchy here is rather obvious. On top of the system, relics associated with Christ himself can be found; followed by The Virgin Mary; the Evangelists and other Apostles; other contemporaries of Christ's time - for instance: Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist, Saint Paul, or the first martyr Saint Stephen; medieval and other saints at last. In spite of the fact that based on the teaching of the Church, Christ's physical body

[4] Pal, Joeeta. 2018. "PROFESSOR S.R DAS MEMORIAL PRIZE PAPER: HOW CENTRAL WERE RELICS TO BUDDHISM? EXPLORING ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FROM KANHERI." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 79:791-792. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26906317.
[5] Carroll, Timothy. 2016. "Im/material objects: Relics, gestured signs and the substance of the immaterial." In Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred, edited by Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, 119-120. N.p.: Taylor & Francis.
[6] Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. 2017. "Instruction "Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation."" https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_20171208_istruzione-reliquie_en.html.

ascended to heaven, several relics associated with his physique exist. Remnants of His blood, tears and even breath could be found on pilgrim sites across Europe, especially in the medieval times. There were several relics connected to Christ's infancy as well - His umbilical cord; the cradle in which He was carried into Egypt; or The Holy Prepuce to name a few. Probably the most important ones are the relics linked to the Passion of Christ and the events that preceded and followed. The Crown of Thorns; the Holy Shroud; the four nails used during crucifixion that multiplied throughout the ages; the table at which the Last Supper happened; even the Roman dice was considered to be a relic. The ultimate relics connected with the Passion of Christ are the ones of True Cross. Based on the legend, it was Saint Helena who found the fragments in Jerusalem in 298 CE.[7] Like many relics, especially those connected to Christ himself, the fragments of the True Cross could be found everywhere dispersed across Europe. This was also noted by John Calvin in his theological book *"A Treatise on Relics"*. Here Calvin captured following:

"Now let us consider how many relics of the true cross there are in the world. An account of those merely with which I am acquainted would fill a whole volume, for there is not a church, from a cathedral to the most miserable abbey or parish church, that does not contain a piece. Large splinters of it are preserved in various places, as for instance in the Holy Chapel at Paris, whilst at Rome they show a crucifix of considerable size made entirely, they say, from this wood. In short, if we were to collect all these pieces of the true cross exhibited in various parts, they would form a whole ship's cargo."[8]

The relation between relics, Catholic Church and the reformation will be further discussed later in this chapter.

The physical body of The Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, according to the teaching, assumed into heaven after her body was put into a grave. When the Apostles visited the site, no remains were found, but bloomed lilies and roses. Majority of relics connected to the Virgin were/are those of secondary nature - dropped girdle for Saint Thomas who did not believe in the assumption; or other articles of clothing. One deeply personal relic would be the milk of the Virgin. A notable relic associated with the Virgin Mary is the *Casa Santa of Loreto* in which Mary was born, and the place became an essential location of several New

[7] Bonser, Wilfrid. 1962. "The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages." *Folklore* 73 (4): 238-243. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1258503.
[8] Calvin, John. 1870. A Treatise on Relics. 173. Edinburgh: Johnstone, Hunter & Co. - Translation from the French original

Testament events. The Holy House also was the place of the Annunciation, of the Incarnation, and the place where the Holy Family returned to after they initially escaped to Egypt. It is therefore the place of Christ's nursing as well.[9] Based on the Loreto legend, on the 10th of May 1291 the Holy House miraculously appeared on a hill at Tersatto (modern-day Trsat, a suburb of Rijeka in Croatia). In a dream it was revealed to the Bishop of Tersatto that it was indeed the very Holy House from the Holy Land. Messengers who journeyed to Palestine subsequently confirmed the disappearance of the house from its original location. The *Casa Santa* changed its location a few more times, always carried by angels. The event of translation of the house was observed by a group of shepherds, which became a favourable depiction in the later Loreto chapels. The final resting place of the *Casa Santa* became Loreto in central Italy, where the Loreto chapels received their name from. This last transmission occurred on the 7th of September 1295, and here the Holy House dwells to this day. Although many of the documents relied upon by the advocates of the Loreto legend proved to be forgeries and possible misunderstandings, the pilgrimage site itself and the legendary Black Madonna became the inspiration for the creation of similar pilgrimage sites throughout Europe, especially later in the 17th and 18th centuries.[10]

Various churches across Europe claim to have bodily relics of the Evangelist - Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke, Saint John, both in fragments and *in toto*. The remains changed their location a lot, almost always entangled with disputes and controversies. For example, the body of Saint Luke was one of the treasures of Constantinople. Later when the body was brought to Venice, a dispute arose, as the Paduan Benedictines of Santa Giustina claimed to have such relic in their possession already; even the Pope himself had to get involved in judgement of this dispute. It is said that Saint Luke was also an artist and a physician. He gained his artistic prominence due to a painting of the Holy Virgin, which was found in the catacombs with an inscription by "Luca". Four copies of said painting exist in Rome: in Santa Francesca Romana, in Santa Maria in Aracoeli, in Saint John Lateran and in Santa Maria Maggiore, which had received a papal bull declaring this painting relic to be the original.[11]

Although not an evangelist, it was St James to whom the remarkably significant shrine in the aforementioned Santiago de Compostela is dedicated alongside his supposed remains, as the region became an important cult centre in the Middle Ages. Presumably up to

[9] Bonser 1962, 243-244
[10] Bukovský, Jan. 2000. Loretánské kaple v Čechách a na Moravě. 9-10. N.p.: Libri.
[11] Bonser 1962, 245-247

half a million pilgrims per year traveled to the proclaimed last resting place of the Apostle, simultaneously ranking Santiago next to Rome and the Holy Land among the greatest pilgrimages of the medieval Christian world. According to tradition, the Apostle James was the first Christian missionary of Spain. After his return to the Holy Land, he became a martyr, however, his deceased body was miraculously brought back to Galicia. Hundreds of years had to pass before the relic was finally discovered in the late eighth century. By the 12th century, a whole network of routes led to Santiago and the significance of the pilgrimage itself continued to grow until fifteenth and even sixteenth centuries before a period of decline.[12] Although there is no reliable proof that the remains excavated in Galicia truly were those of St. James, nor does the legend itself, dating to the seventh century, has any historical evidence,[13] the pilgrimage has undergone a renaissance of sorts in the present. The site, shrine of the Apostle and the city of Santiago alone regained touristic and spiritual interest. It was also the Council of Europe that marked *Camino de Santiago* to be a significant European route and symbol of shared European identity.[14]

The story of the New Testament is filled with diverse characters that interact with Christ. Even though their involvement in the story is often secondary, it was nevertheless possible to establish a place for them in the cult of relics, especially the medieval one. According to the story, the remains of John the Baptist were cremated and the ashes were subsequently scattered, but a portion was saved and preserved. Simultaneously, though, there are multiple decapitated heads of the saint. It is said that one of such skulls can be found in the Baptistery of Basilica of Saint Mark in Venice, alongside the red stained stone on which he was executed. Probably the most important contemporary of Jesus Christ was Saul of Tarsus, otherwise known as the Apostle Paul, or simply Saint Paul. In addition to his bodily remains, a particular relic associated with Saint Paul exists in Rome. The church of *San Paolo alle Tre Fontane*, literally translated as Saint Paul at the Three Fountains, is the legendary place of Paul's execution. It hosts the three fountains, which sprung from the ground wherever the severed head touched the ground after the decapitation of the saint.[15]

To create a complete list of relics and their cults would be merely impossible, as even an authoritative register of saints who have ever been worshiped in churches does not exist. The Roman Martyrology contains approximately 4 500 names, however, it is far from being

[12] Graham, Brian, and Michael Murray. 1997. "The spiritual and the profane: the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela." Ecumene 4, no. 4 (October): 390-391.
[13] Attwater 1993, 190
[14] Graham and Murray 1997, 391
[15] Bonser 1962, 249-250

exhaustive. On top of that, for many saints, not much is known beyond their name, their status (whether they were bishops, martyrs, etc.), the period of their life, or the day dedicated to their celebration.[16]

It is safe to say that Saints, martyrs and Blesseds with their distinctive relics and cults were omnipresent in the times of the medieval Catholic Church. This statement can be also supported by altar stones, an important part of church/altar equipment, which contain the pieces of two martyrs in a hollowed-out cavity in the stone. This stone, which was consecrated by a bishop, is subsequently placed in the centre of an altar at which the Mass is celebrated. The altar is just then constituted proper. Thanks to its central location in the table the Host and the chalice are placed on the altar stone during the Sacrifice.[17]

It may appear that the cult of relics and making-of Saints is a question of the past, the opposite is rather true. Basilica *San Bartolomeo all'Isola* in Rome became at the beginning of the new millennium a memorial place for the new martyrs of the 20th and 21st centuries. During preparation for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, a "Commission of New Martyrs" was established by John Paul II, under the premise to investigate modern-day Christian martyrdom. *The Sanctuary of the New Martyrs* in the basilica is made of six altars: the altar dedicated to Christian Martyrs persecuted under Communism; Martyrs persecuted under Nazism; followed by altars anointed to remember modern Martyrs from Europe; Africa and Madagascar; America; and Asia, Oceania and the Middle East.[18] Part of the altars are also relics associated with these new martyrs. For example, one of the relics on the altar dedicated to Martyrs persecuted under Nazism is a letter that was written by Stanisław Kostka Starowieyski from the extermination camp in Dachau. Elsewhere, a stone that was used by the murderers of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko for the submersion of his body in the Wisła river can be found on the altar of Martyrs persecuted under Communism.[19]

This subchapter clearly demonstrates the immensity and the vivid nature of the cult of relics in the medieval Catholic world, however, it also indicates that the veneration and presence of saints and blesseds is still an important matter in the present-day Catholic Church.

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[16] Attwater 1993, 11

[17] Hardon, John A. 1980. Modern Catholic dictionary. 20. N.p.: Doubleday.

[18] Basilica di S. Bartolomeo all'Isola. 2025. "Sanctuary of the New Martyrs." Basilica di S. Bartolomeo all'Isola. https://sanbartolomeo.org/sanctuary-of-the-new-martyrs/?lang=en.

[19] Lehnert, Marek. 2012. "Rzym: polskie relikwie w miejscu pamięci męczenników." Polskie Radio 24. https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/708048,rzym-polskie-relikwie-w-miejscu-pamieci-meczennikow.

2.1.2. Early histories

The presence of relic devotion in Christianity may be connected to two sources: cult of heroes in Antiquity, and the resurrection of the flesh in Christian beliefs.[20] It is clear that the act of veneration of a relic associated with a Holy person can be traced already to the preliminary ages of Christianity. The earliest instance is to be found in *"The Martyrdom of Polycarp"*, an early Christian text written by the inhabitants of Smyrna, about 156 CE, depicting the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp. The said Saint lost his life at the stake, and his disciples wished to acquire his burned remains.[21] After initial difficulties with access to the remains, the Smyrnaeans say:

"Thus we, at last, took up his bones, more precious than precious stones, and finer than gold, and put them where it was meet. There the Lord will permit us to come together according to our power in gladness and joy, and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already contested, and for the practice and training of those whose fate it shall be."[22]

The initial struggle with reclaiming the remains was rooted in a concerned Jewish population with the Smyrnaeans, who were thought to abolish the belief in "the crucified one" and would *"begin worship this man"*.[23]

The problem of potential worship and extravagance or abuse in the cult of relics can be traced in texts by several great writers - Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose, Saint Jerome, Saint Chrysostom to name a few, once commented on this issue. Regarding the problem of worship and adoration, Saint Jerome says that relics are venerated - not worshipped or adored, as through the veneration of martyrs one can better adore God whose martyrs they are. The importance of relic veneration in the first centuries of the Church, can be strikingly illustrated by the example of eulogy by Saint Gregory of Nyssa on the martyr Saint Theodore. In his treatise, the author describes the lavishly decorated building of the martyr's final resting place, which was built over the tomb. The worshipper was led to approach the tomb, believing that just by touching a blessing is granted. Furthermore, a kind of lust is described

[20] Geary, Patrick J. 1978. Furta sacra : thefts of relics in the central Middle Ages. 29. N.p.: Princeton University Press.
[21] Thurston 1913, 735
[22] Lake, Kirsopp, trans. 1913. "The Martyrdom of Polycarp." In The Apostolic Fathers Vol. 2, 337. London: William Heinemann.
[23] Lake 1913, 335

there, as the worshippers wanted to take something with them. Therefore the dust deposited on the saint's grave became a great gift and the mould a treasure. It is rather hard to establish the exact time when the veneration of relics became common. Definitely by the 4th century, it became a widespread issue. This is supported by found stone blocks that were once altar slabs, listing relics that were probably once cemented into round cavities hollowed out in these blocks.[24]

Attitudes towards the remains of holy persons differed from West to East. The Eastern traditions had no problem with the division and fragmentation of the bodily remains of saints, while the West, especially Rome, showed great respect for these relics. Touching alone was seen as a peril, and only those among the holiest of ecclesiastics could do such a thing, which, however, had to be preceded by fasting and prayer. This approach lasted until the late Middle ages. The cultus of relics was rather amplified during the Merovingian and Carlovingian period.[25] In the above-mentioned monastery in Conques, apart from the relic of Saint Foy the pilgrims encountered other relics too. Two known reliquaries containing holy release were put out for veneration - Reliquary of Pippin, containing relics of several saints, the Holy Virgin and some generic ones from the flesh of Christ; second object is known as the *A of Charlemagne*, in the centre of which, according to the inscription on the reliquary, a piece of the True Cross could be seen.[26] The secondly mentioned object was, according to the preface of the monastery's chronicle, a gift by Charlemagne himself, as Conques declared to be founded by him. However, the *A of Charlemagne* is one of the many objects of a similar nature connected with inconsistencies and problematic nature of its origin.[27]

2.1.3. *Furta sacra* and chicaneries in regards to relics

Conques was not the original resting place of the remains of Saint Foy, but Agen. In order for the pilgrims heading to Santiago having to stop in Conques instead of Agen, the monastery had to become a hotspot. Thus, in 866 CE, a brother from the monastery in Conques was secretly sent off to Agen, posing as a devoted monk for a decade. Only after that was he able to steal the relic of Saint Foy, and transferred it to his original station.[28] This

[24] Thurston 1913, 735-736
[25] Thurston 1913, 736
[26] Remensnyder, Amy. 1996. "Legendary Treasure at Conques: Reliquaries and Imaginative Memory." Speculum 71, no. 4 (October): 886-888. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2865723.
[27] Cahn, Walter. 2006. "Observations on the "A of Charlemagne" in the Treasure of the Abbey of Conques." Gesta 45 (2): 95. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25067134.
[28] Brockman 1997, 51

story is amongst many examples of *furta sacra*, holy thefts. It was not only priests and monks who took part in these actions, a whole section of the trade was dedicated to selling relics. From the position of a merchant, it was difficult to get to the relics legally, thus they had to be thieves themselves, or they were embezzlers of relics that their trusted religious communities put in their care. As shady as the business might seem from today's perspective, everyone involved could benefit from this trade. For the merchant relics symbolized small, easily transferable items that were, at the same time, highly desirable. In the end, they also brought superb prices for very little initial investment. Another great advantage for the seller of those times was the communicational difficulty between communities involved in the trade. Thus the merchant could sell the body of a popular saint more than one time. Either just parts of the bodily remains could be offered for sale, or the merchant could appear with yet another relic of a saint that was sold *in toto* years earlier to a different religious community. Multiplicity or sameness of relics were therefore common occurrences that only occasionally caused major conflicts. The issue of authenticity was already a concern noted by some buyers at that time. An agent could be sent to supervise the acquisition of a relic, or to fact-check the story of a merchant, however, these representatives had to face many problems caused by this clandestine trade. The most effective way of determining the authenticity was rather a pragmatic one: if the relic "performed" miracles, inspired the devotees, and enhanced the overall prestige of a place where it was placed, authenticity was guaranteed.[29]

The story of Saint Foy's *furta* is a case of a monastic theft. From monastic competition, to securing a source of funding, or change of religious sentiment, the reasons why monks would participate in thefts of relics can vary.[30] The circumstances that led to the theft of Saint Foy's bodily remains were rooted in the efforts to strengthen the popularity of Conques against the rising fame of another, the abbey in Figeac. In the two versions of the *Translatio Sanctae Fidei* from the eleventh century, the "translation" of Saint Foy was for the well-being of the area and redemption of its inhabitants.[31]

In the minds of the monks and lay patrons, the body was not stolen, but simply translated. Another aspect of the Saint Foy story is the connection to the material world. In the *"Book of the Miracles of Saint Faith"*, Bernard of Angers - the author, recalls a story of a man named Gerbert. The Saint appeared in Gerbert's dream, demanding gold for a miracle that she performed for him. Reluctant at first, Foy had to come into his dreams, and she even

[29] Geary 1978, 52-54
[30] Geary 1978, 82
[31] Geary 1978, 58-59

threatened him. It was only through a promise of gold or precious stones, said Saint heard the pleas of pilgrims and devotees. The miracle was only guaranteed after receiving such a gift, or in the case of Gerbert, gold was claimed as a payment by the Saint. In case of non-compliance with the condition, Saint Foy would threaten the person. The final stage of this "sacrilegious" dispute would be retrieving the miracle, or the Saint would not mind crippling the person too. It is clear, it was the Conques community's aim to gather gold and precious stones for representative objects displayed in the monastery for the public eye.[32]

The most cited book in this subchapter by Geary contains a list of these holy thefts. It records over 50 *furtas* that occurred between circa 800 - 1100 CE, and it is far from being exhaustive.[33] Presumably, a religious system that has *"thou shalt not steal"* as one of ten fundamental rules, would not support theft in any shape or form, however, it was possible to find justification for such acts. The basic concept behind several excuses for a theft of relics was the idea of the saints' control over their remains even after their initial demise.[34] The relic was believed to be the living saint him/herself, and would therefore willingly allow it to be carried away, translated, to a different location.[35] Other mundane justifications existed as well. Like in the aforementioned case of Saint Foy, where the translation of the relic was reasoned with improvement of Conques. In some cases, the apologists justified the theft of a relic with regards to its safety. Additionally, the nature of the man taking a role in such an act mattered a lot; action by a good man was seen as good, even though the very same action performed by an evil man would be considered bad.[36] However, criticism of the sale and theft of relics existed from the beginning. As early as the fourth century, Saint Augustine denounced certain monks as fraudsters who used the monastic habit to make a profit by selling relics.[37]

2.1.4. Council of Trent on relics

An important milestone in the development of the cult of relics and their veneration was the Council of Trent. The main objective behind the nineteenth ecumenical council was to determine definitive teaching of the church and thus react to many doubts raised by the

[32] Černocká, Jana, Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, and Katarína Šimová. 2023. Smrtí smrt překonat: relikvie a jejich moc ve středověku. Edited by Jana Černocká. 83-84. N.p.: Masarykova univerzita.
[33] Geary 1978, 149-156
[34] Geary 1978, 114
[35] Geary 1978, 133
[36] Geary 1978, 114-115
[37] Thurston 1913, 737

Protestants. Further aim was to reform the inner life of the Church, and remove numerous abuses within it.[38] The matter of relics was one of the issues discussed, as many Protestants disapproved of the Catholic devotion to icons and relics. The council seemed to admit that there were abuses relating to these matters, and with their response they focused on these abuses, rather than rejecting the Catholic beliefs altogether. The decree from December 3 1593, on *Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of the Saints and on Sacred Images* was a clear response to the questions raised by the Protestants in regards to this matter. The Council was able to find justification of these catholic practices by explaining the difference between veneration of images of Christ, the Holy Virgin, and Saints, and "worship" of images the way Gentiles did in the Psalm 135.[39]

> *"The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is their breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."*[40]

The Council also acknowledged the power that the images of Saints have in regards to strengthening one's faith. Great power was given to the bishops, as they were the one to supervise and oversee the erection of a new image. The bishops were also the one in charge of acknowledging new relics or miracles, and simultaneously examining and approving them. Thus, no new cult was set to exist without the authorization of a bishop in command.[41] This attitude towards the management of relics' veneration remained remarkably similar to this day. The competency to perform all kinds of practices with relics is vested in the hands of the Bishop of the diocese or of the eparchy where the relics reside. However, the Bishop must obtain the consent from the aforementioned *Congregation for the Causes of the Saints* beforehand.[42]

[38] Kirsch, Johann. 1913. "Trent." In The Catholic encyclopedia, 30. Vol. 15. New York: The Encyclopedia Press.
[39] Fastiggi, Robert. 2020. "The contribution of the Council of Trent to the Catholic reformation." Perichoresis 18 (6): 10. 10.2478/perc-2020-0032.
[40] American Bible Society. 1984. Holy Bible-NIV. 466. N.p.: American Bible Society.
[41] Fastiggi 2020, 10
[42] Congregation for the Causes of the Saints 2017

2.2. Sacrality enshrined: Reliquaries

The pilgrim traveling to Conques was not met with the crudely exposed remains of Saint Foy, but with a seated statue covered in gold and precious stones that contained the relic. The reliquary of Saint Foy is an unique object from the medieval times as it is the oldest preserved example of a tridimensional reliquary statue since the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Although the statue dates back to the 9th century CE, the face of the saint was taken from a much older artifact. The face clearly does not reflect the likeness of a young girl, and was therefore probably taken from a portrait of one of the emperors of an earlier century. It, however, has a persuasive power that aligns with the story mentioned earlier. Albeit it may seem at first glance, the sculpture-like reliquary was not a worshipped idol, as that would go against the teachings of the Church. The richness of this object can be explained as a representation of the immortal soul of the venerated Saint.[43]

Fig. 1 - The reliquary of Saint Foy in Conques. © Ministère de la Culture (France), Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles d'Occitanie, all rights reserved

Generally speaking, reliquaries in the tradition of the Catholic church are caskets, boxes, or shrines that were designed to contain relics, and have likely existed from the very beginning of Christianity. However, in regards to the material, construction, or term of these early reliquaries, nothing can be said in a comprehensive manner. The objects were also

[43] Černocká et al. 2023, 85-89

known by names having rather an inexact meaning (e.g., *capsella, pyxis, theca, arca, capsa*). It is also suggested that containers of the same name were used for the Eucharist, holy oils, or other religious objects. Thus, it is perplexing to state whether a profusely decorated ancient pyxis depicting scenes or figures from the Gospel, or martyrs, was a reliquary or not.[44]

Fig. 2 - Ivory pyxis from the collection of the British museum depicting the martyrdom of Saint Menas, dating back to the 6th century CE © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

The use, material, and visual image of reliquaries have been greatly studied. The most extensive study on reliquaries is undoubtedly a book by Joseph Braun - a German Jesuit, priest, theologist, and catholic art historian. In his 1940s book: *"Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung"*, Braun describes the reliquaries in a comprehensive way - from their shape, the material used, to the ornamental decoration.[45] On top of the exhaustive typological chronicles and further religious context, this work demonstrates the potential inexhaustible source of research, just on reliquaries alone. For example, Braun wrote a chapter on ostensories (monstrances), which are at present rather associated with the display and veneration of the Eucharist, however, these similar objects originate from the same form.[46] Although Braun's study is more than 80 years old, it is undoubtedly an arguably near-canonical source for any further study of Catholic archaeology.

At present, the study on reliquaries is largely in the hands of Cynthia Hahn, who has been publishing about the topic since the 1990s. Her writing on reliquaries includes

[44] Thurston, Herbert. 1913. "Reliquaries." In *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 762. Vol. 12. New York: The Encyclopedia Press.
[45] Braun, Joseph. 1940. *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung*. Freiburg i.Br.: Herder & Co. GmbH Verlagsbuchhandlung. https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.2050.
[46] Braun 1940, 301

monographies (chronologically): *Strange beauty: issues in the making and meaning of reliquaries*[47], *The Reliquary Effect: Enshrining the Sacred Object*[48], and lastly *Passion Relics and the Medieval Imagination: Art, Architecture, and Society.*[49] Hahns' study of relics and reliquaries goes beyond the pure christian understanding, as the author uses contemporary and non-christian examples of relics and reliquaries. On top of that, Hahn also deals with the idea of an act of enclosure, pointing out a remarkable contrast between display of a precious relic in the middle ages and contemporary "vitrine culture", a highly appropriate topic to museum studies.[50]

Possibly the most relevant source for this chapter is the book by Henk van Os. *The Way to Heaven: Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages* was essentially a complementary publication to an exhibition of the same name. The exhibition ran concurrently in Amsterdam (De Nieuwe Kerk) and Utrecht (Museum Catharijneconvent) in the early 2000s, and it explored the aspects of medieval veneration of relics, also as an essential aid of the spiritual journey of the admirers.[51]

It is clear from the literature search that it is possible to study reliquaries in a variety of ways - the period, the material used, the shape and format, the method of decoration, the location to name a few. Thus the possibilities are numerous and certainly exceed the format of this thesis. The most relevant information for this chapter is a cursory historical overview of the development of reliquaries, as well as the most common types of reliquaries that can be found in museum collections. These are especially reliquaries in the shape of arms or busts, which have an undeniable aesthetic and inquisitiveness-generating quality.

2.2.1. From hidden to unveiled

The medieval-church space was undoubtedly filled with relics that, naturally, required to be stored somewhere. Perhaps nowadays, a general idea of a reliquary may be associated with those that originated in the Baroque era, as they can be seen in almost every Baroque church or a cathedral. For instance, in the papal basilica in Waldsassen the reliquaries

[47] See further: Hahn, Cynthia J. 2012. Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400-circa 1204. Edited by Cynthia J. Hahn. N.p.: Pennsylvania State University Press.
[48] See further: Hahn, Cynthia. 2017. The Reliquary Effect: Enshrining the Sacred Object. N.p.: Reaktion Books.
[49] See further: Hahn, Cynthia. 2020. Passion Relics and the Medieval Imagination: Art, Architecture, and Society. N.p.: University of California Press.
[50] Hahn 2017, 272
[51] van Os, Henk. 2001. The Way to Heaven: Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages. 5-6. Baarn: Uitgeverij de Prom. - Foreword by Ernst Veen

alongside the relics enshrined within them, materialise in an open manner. Highly visible, since the clearest of the glass was used, the remains of the Saints are embellished, bejeweled and formed into theatrical poses. The display of Roman martyrs at Waldsassen entirely utilizes the fondness for the materials of the Baroque era. A sense of accessibility is present, considering whole bodies, not just pieces, are exposed here, ready to have a conversation with a devotee. The bodies themselves were transported to Waldsassen from Rome, from a newly opened cemetery on the Via Salaria Nova, which literally offered up remains of supposed martyrs in hundreds. To testify the authenticity, each body was said to be found with a vial containing blood of the alleged martyr.[52]

Fig. 3 - The reliquary of Saint Gratian in Waldsassen © Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The immediate visibility and accessibility of relics cannot be found within the earliest reliquaries. From the very beginning, churches must have been full of relics, certainly much more than expected. Although hidden from plain human view, altars have been the repository of relics for more than a thousand years. Every altar was supposed to harbour a detached niche, which was there to house a relic. These dents were commonly known as *confessio, sepulcrum* or simply as a *loculus*, the small place. If no relics were present, three

[52] Hahn 2017, 192-196

transubstantiated Hosts were placed in these spaces. It is likely that this practice of placing relics in special niches within altars is linked to an earlier Christian tradition associated with the tombs of martyrs. There are no exact regulations on how the caskets in which the relics are placed should look. Objects of all shapes and sizes, once utilized as reliquaries have been discovered in altars. That includes a whole category of boxes in the shape of a sarcophagus. Another favorite place for hiding and storing relics were statues of Madonna, thus giving the depiction an extra divine aura. However, it was not uncommon that the stored relics were soon forgotten, and nowadays, it is restorers who discover these once hidden holy remains.[53]

Fig. 4 - Reliquary in the Shape of a Sarcophagus, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York - Open Access

Whether the reliquary was in the shape of a statue, a sarcophagus, a cross, or a simple box, there was always a strong connection to the altar. The hidden nature of the relic was there to enhance the holy character of the altar, as it was the place where Christ's presence was celebrated, thus transforming it into a space of redemption.[54]

The most precious works of art in the middle ages were the reliquary shrines. Made from any material imaginable, in various sizes, were to be seen on altar, treasuries, and private homes as well. It was common for these to be transformed caskets, originally, however, created for another purpose. Subsequently, these containers were under Christian culture transformed into objects hosting relics. Thus beautifully-decorated boxes, initially intended to store jewels and other precious things, evolved into reliquaries. While they were

[53] van Os 2001, 104-105
[54] van Os 2001, 112

repurposed chests, these shrines very often resemble buildings. This is especially right with many late-medieval examples.[55]

As it was stated earlier, reliquaries were undoubtedly connected to altars. Therefore these display spaces had been properly adapted for this purpose. Other works of art, despite missing a relic within them, were there to signify the presence of a physical holiness. Painting, for instance, served as advertisement, reminding the devotees of the bodily remains of a depicted saint. Some altar pieces, particularly those in German states, served another purpose other than being promo backgrounds for reliquaries placed on them. They worked as large chests in which relics were kept. It is apparent that it was important to the people to have a visual contact with items evoking reliquaries. Perhaps the most known German example is the *Goldene Kammer* of Saint Ursula and her maidens in Cologne. There are, however, other examples of church treasures to be displayed on the altar. It is clear that some extraordinary reliquaries were taken out, as the structure of these objects suggest possibility to be viewed also from the rear.[56]

The rather significant change in the display and the form of reliquaries can be partially explained by the German word *Schaubedürfnis,* a need to see. Ceremonies, exhibitions of relics, dramatic performances blossomed in the two centuries before the Reformation, as the congregation sought to see everything in front of their eyes, and out in the open.[57] Although at the center of the Christian rite is the Eucharist, Christ in the visual form of the transubstantiated Host, the very moment of seeing a relic was for an ordinary believer often as significant as seeing the Host. The demand for ocular participation was there and often encouraged by the clergy. Monstrances enshrining relics could be found on every altar. In some cities, display of a certain relic was connected with an annual ritual, which was preceded by a lavish campaign.[58]

[55] van Os 2001, 113-116
[56] van Os 2001, 122-124
[57] Wood, Christopher S. 1992. “Ritual and the Virgin on the Column: The Cult of the Schöne Maria in Regensburg.” Journal of Ritual Studies 6 (1): 100-101. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44398528.
[58] Wood, Christopher S. 1988. “In Defense of Images: Two Local Rejoinders to the Zwinglian Iconoclasm.” Sixteenth Century Journal 19 (1): 34-36.

2.2.2. Busts, arms and toes: speaking reliquaries

The aforementioned case of the reliquary of Saint Foy is the oldest case of a repository in the shape of a body part, in this case a whole seated figure. Ever since the 10th century, reliquaries in shapes of arms, heads, or legs became almost omnipresent. Their existence is often recorded only in written sources, the oldest of which date back to the 9th century. The intuitive explanation of these shapes would be an informative idea behind the reliquaries that were reflecting the type of relic enshrined within them; reliquary in the shape of a head contained a martyr's skull, arm reliquaries held relics from saint's upper limbs etc. This rationale was for many years upheld by many historians, the reality, however, is a bit more complicated. After opening the caskets and subsequent testing of the bone samples, it was found that the form of the reliquaries did not seem to correspond to the physical origin of the relics contained inside. Of course, there are instances confirming this assumption.[59]

Before debunking this assumption, art historians named these objects as "speaking reliquaries". Although these artifacts do not really "speak" about the type of relic contained within them, they for sure tell a story of their own. It is the story of representation of saints themselves, who, even after their death, are actively present in the space. Whether an arm reliquary, in fact, contains bones from a holy person's arm is besides the point here, as the main issue is the power of the gesture. Arm reliquaries were often filled with various relics, thus making the act of blessing even more effective.[60] The arm reliquaries are ending with a gesticulating hand. This is mainly the so-called "Hand of Benediction", a frequent symbol featured in religious art over centuries. The sign has been associated with popes, but also Christ himself. The hand is depicted as semi-clunched, the thumb and index finger in an extended position, while the middle finger is partially flexed. The rest, the ring finger and little finger, are in a fully flexed position. Historically, the hand position was also known as the "crucifixion clench". Depicting a hand in such a position can be also found in non-Christian artistic renditions (such as The Hand of Sabazius, displayed at the British Museum). The depiction of the hand position located in various cultures and artistic styles indicates that the symbol was widely observed, inherited and reused.[61]

[59] Černocká et al. 2023, 91-92
[60] van Os 2001, 136
[61] Nzeako, Obi, Ramon Tahmassebi, Jane John-Lewis, and James Baggott. 2024. "The Truth about the Hand of Benediction." Open Access Library Journal 11 (e11424): 2-4. https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111424.

Not all arm reliquaries bear the hand of benediction. Some examples include fully open palms, arms holding objects, and there is also a case of a fully clenched fist. It is the shrine of Saint Lachtin's Arm, currently preserved in the National Museum in Dublin. It is argued that unlike other arm reliquaries, the reliquary of saint Lachtin did not stand up raised in blessing; it was held out.[62]

Fig. 5 - South Nederlandish arm reliquary from the 13th century in the collection of the MET, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York - Open Access

Fig.6 - Shrine of Saint Lachtin's Arm, early 20th century (original dated 1106), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York - Open Access

[62] van Os 2001, 141-142

Reliquaries in the shape of arms were heavily used during liturgy, serving as extended limbs of priests; limbs that bless and heal. Hands were already since late Antiquity often used as representations of God, since it was forbidden to depict God's image. There is also a strong connection to Christ, as saints and martyrs are perceived as limbs of Jesus.[63]

When it comes to caskets in the form of a face or a bust, there is a clear connection to the already established ancient traditions. These medieval heads of relics can be generally divided into two groups. The first one clearly derives from the depiction of idealised Roman heads. This is understandable, as when reliquaries in the shape of heads started to appear, there was a plethora of models from Antiquity scattered across the known world. The second is the group of head reliquaries, containing strong individual features.[64]

Fig. 7 - Reliquary Bust of Saint Yrieix, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York - Open Access

The reliquary of Saint Yrieix in the collection of the MET is a great example of medieval people's inspiration by Antiquity. The saint's features seem to be modeled from a Roman original. It is said that Saint Yrieix's remains were carried in processions, thus, in order to make his presence visible, creation of such a reliquary bust was commissioned.[65]

[63] Černocká et al. 2023, 99-100
[64] van Os 2001, 98
[65] van Os 2001, 98

Clearly, the reliquaries in shapes of body parts represented a new spiritual body of a saint. Even though this body was made of gold, silver and precious stones, physically still, yet these anthropomorphic shrines were constantly moving; being held in processions, bestowed on, or dressed up. The shiny and valuable nature of the materials used for making only amplified the holy character of the object, as the reliquaries appear otherworldly. One can say that these religious objects first and foremost functioned as communication devices between the observer and the sacred. Especially the reliquary busts, or heads, depicting a full face of a saint, allowed devotees a face-to-face emotional contact with a holy person.[66]

2.3. Museums and the display of the Sacred

Perhaps surprising to some, the European idea of what museum is connected closely to sacred spaces, relics, and reliquaries. In many theoretical writings on the history of museums, one can encounter at least some mention of church treasuries. The medieval church was filled with objects. Apart from the afore discussed relics and reliquaries, other objects include chalices, ciboria - those that came into direct contact with tangible divine.[67] For the sake of liturgy, other items are necessary too. Books, vestments, textiles, candles, furnishing to name a few, could be found in the treasury too. The name treasury, *thesaurus*, indicates both the physical space depository, as well as the objects themselves.[68] The connection to museums lies beyond the exhibiting and display aspect of these objects stored in the treasuries.[69] These items were systematically inventoried already during the Carolingian rule, subsequently providing a template for the future centuries. Aside from the list of objects contained within the church's treasury, these documents could record other information as well. The way of acquisition, listings of objects that had gone missing, arrival of a new bishop, abbot or other clergy to name a few. However, it has to be noted that most of the medieval treasury inventories did not record all of this information.[70]

An interesting example of a later inventory relevant for the specific subject of this thesis is the inventory made by Jan Ignác Dlohoveský (1638-1701). His work, published in

[66] Černocká et al. 2023, 92-96
[67] the eucharist, remains of saints etc.
[68] Ackley, Joseph S. 2014. "Re-approaching the Western medieval church treasury inventory, c. 800-1250.". 4. The Journal of Art Historiography 11
[69] By that I mean the fact that they were made to be seen by various publics, not just a selected group.
[70] Ackley 2014, 6-8

1673, on the treasures of Saint Vitus cathedral in Prague bears a lengthy baroque name.[71] There are, however, several interesting aspects of this publication. First of all, it is a publication written in the Czech language, and the opening passage is patriotically composed and engagingly appeals to the pilgrims who make their way to Prague. The reader is then introduced to an inventory list of the relics, including a calendar and their brief history of provenance, or alternatively to other information that the author or his teacher Jan Tomáš Pěšina managed to obtain from the archival materials.[72]

There is also a slightly later graphic presentation of the most precious relics of the Saint Vitus Treasure in Prague; naturally, enshrined in their valuable reliquaries. The copper engraving was probably made by one of the lay brothers of a preaching order in Prague, named Dominik. The engraving measures 18.7 x 30.9 cm, and it is the oldest graphic depiction of some of the items in the Saint Vitus Treasury. In the centre of the engraving lies the image of Saint Vitus Cathedral, which is encircled by several reliquaries. Here we can see the Bohemian saints, St. Vojtěch and St. Wenceslas; a depiction of the Virgin Mary attributed to Saint Luke; all is crowned by two reliquary crosses, containing relics of the True Cross. The author also depicted other reliquaries, including those that have not survived to this day. Which are the following reliquaries: Saint Bartholomew's, Saint Philip's, Saint Servatius', Saint Luke's, and the relics of the wife of Saint Sigmund.[73]

Both the engraving and earlier publication on the treasury in Prague could bear the comparison with modern-day museum catalogues, guiding the visitors through exhibitions and further expanding one's knowledge on the matter displayed within a museum. Although the objects stored in the treasury had a sacral and otherworldly connection with the divine, the authors, who were associated with the cathedral and religious life in general, were aware of the rather mundane character emitting from these objects too. It was fascinating for the people to be in a direct presence of such artifacts, made of precious materials, used in ceremonies, simultaneously arousing wonder and curiosity.

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[71] The complete name: PODIVÍN S PŘIBISLAVAU, Kdo se dívá se podiví! Z toho hned přibude slávy. To jest, Všech Kostí Těl, Svatých a Reliquií, vyznamenání a vypsání, nimiž Slávu svou a Podivení daleko všudy, i v cizích krajinách rozhlašuje a rozšiřuje Svatý Hlavní Kostel Pražský, tuto krátce zatím vyložené řeči vlastenskou Svato-Václavskou skrze Jana Ignacia Dlauhoveskýho, kazatele a kanovníka staršího na Hradě Pražském, léta 1673. Vytištěný v Praze, u Jana Arnolda z Dobroslavína.

[72] Šmied, Miroslav. 2020. Ars et Ecclesia: středověké umění pohledem katolického dějepisectví. 54-56. N.p.: Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Katolická teologická fakulta.

[73] Podlaha, Antonín, and Eduard Šittler. 1903. Chrámový poklad u sv. Víta v Praze. 132. Prague: Dědictví sv. Prokopa.

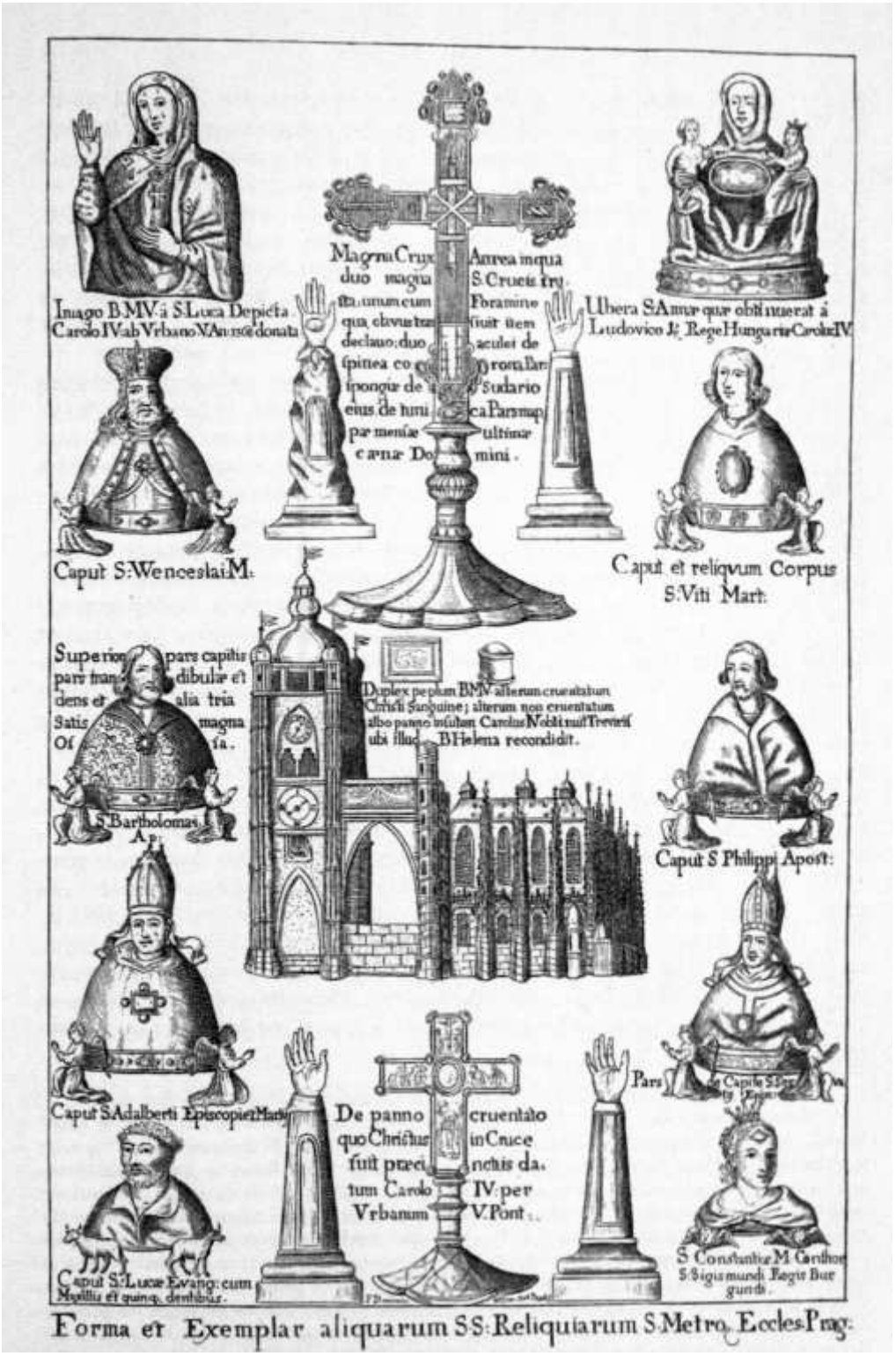

Fig. 8 - The oldest visual publication of the Treasure of Saint Vitus (copper engraving from 1690), taken from: Podlaha, Antonín, and Eduard Šittler. 1903. Chrámový poklad u sv. Víta v Praze. 131. Prague: Dědictví sv. Prokopa

2.3.1. Religion and the Sacred as museological matters

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in his 1936 essay entitled: "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" captures the following:

"'In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art-its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence-and nothing else-that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. This history includes changes to the physical structure of the work over time, together with any changes in ownership."[74]

Benjamin writes here about the limits of art reproduction. Although the overall topic of the essay does not revolve around museums and the sacred, there are relevant takeaways. To put it simply, reproduced art lacks, what Benjamin calls, "*the aura"*.[75] This, however, goes in a museum setting beyond reproductions of works of art. Any object in a museum is stripped from its original meaning and way of use, thus losing the *aura*. Suddenly, contexts are dramatically changing and new issues are arising. Especially with objects that once bore an intangible, otherworldly *aura* in their original contexts. The question therefore remains: how do museums deal with such museum items?

Museum environments are well aware of these issues and problems. Over the past few years, there have been several published books written on this topic. However, already in 1992, Ronald L. Grimes published an article in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* that focused on such problems. The most significant process in regards to sacred and religious objects in museum spaces that affect them lies, according to Grimes, in commoditization. The issue is with Western cultures becoming more secularised, thus enabling misunderstanding some of these objects that may be in their original cultures considered sacred. Commoditization suggests that everything can have a price tag, including those of a sacred nature.[76] Grimes in his text uses predominately examples of Western museums x Non-Western artifacts, however, his insight can be applied to the case of Western relics and reliquaries in museum spaces. After all, these are objects of religious nature displayed in secularised environments. That is what all religious/sacred objects have in common,

[74] Walter, Benjamin. 2008. The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media. 21. N.p.: Harvard University Press.
[75] Walter 2008, 22
[76] Grimes, Ronald L. 1992. "Sacred objects in museum spaces." Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses 21 (4): 420. https://doi.org/10.1177/000842989202100404.

regardless of their culture of origin. Grimes correctly observed that these objects become objects of "curiosity" and "pleasure" in the context of museum exhibitions, and that they "charm" and "fascinate" as well.[77] The author's treatise does not stop at merely listing the problems that the display of sacred objects poses. Several proposed solutions can be found in the text too.

The literature around the theme of religion, the sacred, and museum space is mostly concerned with the display and treatment of non-Western objects. This makes sense, of course, as there are many other problems and issues related to this topic that are still topical in the museum environment. Postcolonial narratives and reparations may be one example, which is also addressed in the aforementioned text by Grimes. It is more common to encounter a specific case study of a particular exhibition or problem in the literature, although theoretical monographs also exist. In this respect, the 2013 publication "*Religion and Museums: Immaterial and Material Heritage*", edited by Valeria Minucciani, is particularly interesting, as it is predominantly focused on Abrahamic religions and contains both theoretical pieces, as well as practical examples and case studies.[78] Minucciani in the text on considerations in relation to the museography for objects of a religious nature well defines the contexts, in which religious heritage and museums may entangle. The first context is secular museums, i.e. those that do not have religion as a theme and can simply preserve and exhibit religious objects. The second context is a secular museum that is dedicated to a religion, however, mostly involving multiple religions.[79] The first public example of this type of museum was the Museum of Religions opened at the Phillip University of Marburg in 1927 by Rudolf Otto (1869-1937). The aim was to comparatively study the diversity of religions through objects, images and reproductions.[80] The last type of context is that of an "ecclesiastical" museum, which in many cases is associated with one particular religious system and a particular community that has decided on the religious context for the display of objects and artworks.[81] In the case of this thesis, these may be diocesan museums, which will be the subject of an entire sub-chapter later on.

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[77] Grimes 1992, 422

[78] Full citation of the book: Minucciani, Valeria, ed. 2013. Religion and Museums: Immaterial and Material Heritage. N.p.: Allemandi & C. - As this is not a monograph, the relevant texts of the book will be cited directly.

[79] Minucciani, Valeria. 2013. "Considerations in Relation to the Museography for Objects of a Religious Nature." In Religion and Museums: Immaterial and Material Heritage, edited by Valeria Minucciani, 14. N.p.: Allemandi & C.

[80] Minucciani 2013, 15

[81] Minucciani 2013, 14

Undoubtedly the most important monographs in the field of the study of the relationship between museums, religion and the sacred are the works of Crispin Paine. In addition to the bibliography dealing with museum work as such, Paine has published a total of two publications dealing with the topic of religion and the museum. Namely: "*Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion"* (2000), and "*Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties"* (2013), and in 2017 he co-edited *"Religion in Museums: Global and Interdisciplinary Perspectives"* alongside Gretchen Buggeln and S. Brent Plate.[82] From the above earlier texts, it may seem that the museum space does not give room for religious intervention, but Paine argues otherwise in the third chapter of *Religious Objects in Museums*. Some museums actually promote the veneration of displayed objects, as these acts promote better explanations of these items.[83] However, most of the examples included in the chapter deal with exhibiting objects of Buddhistic traditions.

The 41th symposium organised by ICOFOM (International Committee for Museology) was held between 15-18th of October 2018 in Tehran, Iran. The general topic was *"Museology and the Sacred"*. The aim was to discuss links between museology and the sacred, particularly the similarities and differences between museums and temples. Four modes of analysis were introduced: Museum-temple-religion (relationships between religion and museums, questions regarding museums being a new form of religion were asked too); Museality-heritage-sacred (relationships between objects, heritage and the sacred; desacralization in museums); Scientific-political-religious (connections between museum work and the "consecrated life"); Museology-sacred-theology (how do museums define sacred?).[84] As a result of this symposium, ICOFOM published their 47th Study series under *"Museology and the Sacred"*, which contained selected papers presented in Tehran.[85] It can be seen here that the topic of the relationship between the sacred and the museum space is still a subject of relevance.

[82] Whole references: Paine, Crispin, ed. 2000. Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic.; Paine, Crispin. 2013. Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic.; Buggeln, Gretchen, Crispin Paine, and S. B. Plate, eds. 2017. Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic.
[83] Paine 2013, 37
[84] Mairesse, François. 2018. "Museology and the Sacred." In Museology and the Sacred: Materials for a discussion, edited by François Mairesse, 12-13. N.p.: ICOFOM.
[85] This publication will be utilised later in the chapter.

2.3.2. Dealing with sacred objects in museum spaces

Based on the literature review it may seem that no general advice or conclusion can be made regarding the way museums should deal with sacred objects. For fact, one can encounter place-specific case studies requiring individual approach to a display, handling, or storage of an object, where the original cultural background was taken into consideration.

There are, however, texts and studies dealing with the problem on a general level. Helena Wangefelt Ström in her text for ICOFOM's 47th Study series proposes three models in which museums affect sacredness, thus they may take a stance on the matter. The first model is called *"Euthanised sacredness"*. In this model, any sacred nature of an object is completely silenced. Objects are being exhibited in the context of the materiality, date of making, the artist, or monetary value, however, the reasons behind the existence of such items, or the spiritual value for the believers are often missing in the explanation. The meaning of the objects is completely transformed and can be reconceptualised.[86] Although the author argues that the objects are "detached fragments" and any "possible sentiments of a religious beholder" does not pose a problem for the curator, this is not entirely true. Even when a sacred object is musealized, the intangible sacred nature is not entirely "euthanized", only suppressed. After all, the object can be returned to their native cultural settings, where they regain their sacred nature. This can be demonstrated by pretty much any case of a repatriation. *Hybrid identity* is the second possible model. Here, the museum objects can hold two authentic identities developed under the beholder's eye. In this mode, culturally heterogeneous groups of visitors are considered. The museum does not take an official stance on the identity of the object, however, it displays and manages the objects in a non-offensive way to the believer.[87] The third model is the combination of the two previous ones, and looks at the objects from the perspective of shifting uses. Here, the author uses an example of a church treasury, since the treasury has both ecclesiastical and sacred identity, and a princely and profane one. This model plays into the distinction between *cultual* and *cultural* use of an object.[88]

[86] Wangefelt Ström, Helena. 2019. "How do Museums Affect Sacredness? Three Suggested Models." ICOFOM Study Series [Online] 47, no. (1-2) (October): 198. https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.1917.
[87] Wangefelt Ström 2019, 199
[88] Wangefelt Ström 2019, 201-203

2.3.3. Diocesan museums as places of inspiration and authority

As Valeria Minucciani wrote in Religion and Museums: Immaterial and Material Heritage, there are "ecclesiastical" museums managed by the particular religious group to which it belongs. In the case of this thesis one can talk about diocesan museums. In theory, these museums could provide answers to some of the burning questions regarding the display of religious and sacred objects. There are several museums of this type in the Czech Republic, however, compared to other European ones, these are rather smaller museums and often fall under larger museum institutions.[89]

The oldest diocesan museum in the Czech lands is the one belonging to the Diocese of Litoměřice. The museum was founded in 1885, and the original conception was to use the collection to educate the students of theology in older art and subsequently arbitrate tastes in more recent art. Currently, the Diocesan Museum in Litoměřice is part of the North Bohemian Gallery of Fine Arts in Litoměřice. In 1892, another diocesan museum was established - The Diocesan Museum in České Budějovice. Already since the establishment, the museum was intended to foster study and preservation of ecclesiastical artistic and historical monuments of the diocese, and promote correct opinions about pretty much everything regarding ecclesiastical art. The museum struggled over the decades, and in 2008 ceased all operations.[90] The Museum of Religious Art of the Pilsen Diocese resides in the building of the originally Minorite, later Franciscan monastery in Pilsen. The museum continues activities of the previous diocesan museum, which has been operating in the building since 1997.[91] After the Velvet revolution, two more diocesan museums were established. The Diocesan Museum of Brno was founded in 1993. Two years later, the Archdiocesan Museum in Olomouc was opened. The Archdiocesan Museum is part of the Museum of Art Olomouc, and it became the first monument in the Czech Republic to receive the European Heritage mark.[92]

The evidence of interest in the study, preservation, care and presentation of ecclesiastical art can also be seen in the formation of *"Die Arbeitsgemeinschaft der kirchlichen Museen und Sammlungen"* - The Association of Ecclesiastical Museums and

[89] Jílková, Eliška. 2023. "Zprostředkování exponátů sakrálního charakteru a specifika církevních muzeí." Museologica Brunensia 12 (1): 64. https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78635.
[90] Jílková 2023, 68
[91] Západočeské muzeum v Plzni. n.d. "Muzeum církevního umění plzeňské diecéze." Západočeské muzeum v Plzni. Accessed June 21, 2025. https://www.zcm.cz/o-muzeu/objekty/muzeum-cirkevniho-umeni-plzenske-dieceze.
[92] Jílková 2023, 68

Collections. The association operates predominantly in the German-speaking countries, however, concerned church museums from South Tyrol, Hungary, Belgium and the Netherlands are part of the association too. The organisation was already founded in 1958 and is a common platform for church museums regardless of denomination. The working group serves as a voice and a network for professional exchange between church museums and treasuries and the people who work within them. It is important for the group to maintain an active contact with episcopal conferences, regional Protestant churches, workers from other specialised fields, and with museums and other cultural institutions that are not church-owned.[93]

Organisations like The Association of Ecclesiastical Museums and Collections and diocesan museums in general may have the ability to become an authority in regards to handling religious or sacred in museums and other cultural institutions that may get in contact with such items. In the end, these are the places where experts on these topics are gathered. For example the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, which was already mentioned earlier in the connection to *The Way to Heaven* exhibition, offers consulting services to church communities in terms of handling religious art.[94] In 2012, the museum published *"Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects"*. The work group at the museum realised the dramatically changing religious landscape. As the world in general is becoming more secular, an aid was needed for dealing with religious objects. A number of guidelines for dealing with churches and monasteries already exist, however, no guidelines for dealing with religious objects contained within them existed before this publication.[95] The publication offers a roadmap for church communities, congregations, or parishes that may serve as a source of inspiration. It also provides several case studies and examples of real-life situations in regards to the topic.

[93] Arbeitsgemeinschaft Kirchliche Museen und Schatzkammern. n.d. "Das Paderborner Positionspapier." Kirchliche Museen. Accessed June 21, 2025. https://kirchliche-museen.org/paderborner-positionspapier/.
[94] Museum Catharijneconvent. n.d. "Voor kerken en kloosters." Catharijneconvent. Accessed June 21, 2025. https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/advies-voor-kerken/.
[95] de Beyer, Marc, and Jacoline Takke. 2012. Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects. 3-5. Utrecht: Museum Catharijneconvent.

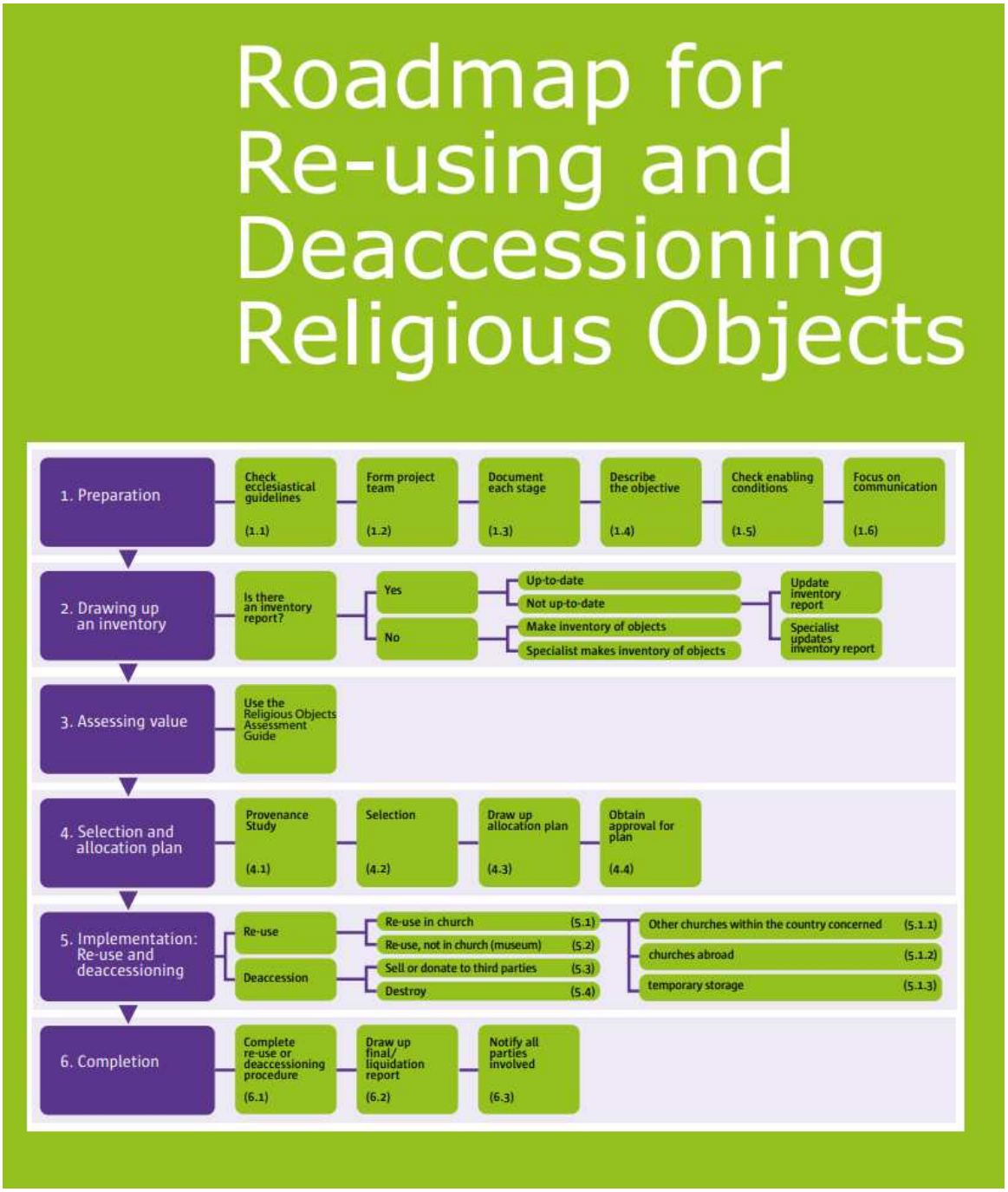

Fig. 9 - The Roadmap for Reusing and Deaccessioning Religious Objects from the Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects taken from: de Beyer, Marc, and Jacoline Takke. 2012. Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects. 16. Utrecht: Museum Catharijneconvent.

3. Empirical part

3.1. Introduction, the research focus and questions

Museums are undoubtedly interdisciplinary places. In museum exhibitions one can encounter human creations, intangible heritage, as well as natural objects, which are often displayed in the same place. Thus, museum work *a priori* requires involvement of various methods from different fields of social, natural sciences, and humanities. The same can be said in the case of scientific examination and research in a museum. The practical research for this thesis was theoretically strongly influenced by a chapter in The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research that focuses on Museum Studies. The author of the chapter is Erica L. Tucker. The purpose of the chapter is to outline the key research methods employed in the study of museums. Various case studies from different museums were used. These case studies were conducted by museum practitioners, historians, anthropologists, and other scholars of museum studies. The author through them explores how these qualitative methods can be adapted to the study of exhibitions, programmes and museums as institutions of knowledge production.[96] This only supports the previously mentioned statement on the museum's interdisciplinarity.

It is evident from the chapter that each investigated case requires specific methods that are shaped by the questions one is trying to answer. The foundation, however, lies in questioning curatorial motivations, selections, interpretation, and intended audience. The core of this thesis lies in the visual analysis of exhibition projects that display reliquaries (and relics). As the author of the chapter in the Handbook points out, it is not only the visual display that conveys the messages about the objects displayed in an exhibition The labels, the use of light, interactive elements, the building of a museum itself, and the juxtaposition - all that may play a part in the transfer. Thus a description of the visual, written and technological elements of an exhibit shall be the starting point of data collection for any museum-related research. Tucker suggests creating maps of the exhibits as well, however, in this thesis, I shall refrain from this, as the material discussed is usually part of larger exhibitions and evaluation of all the data would be beyond the scope of this thesis.[97] Having said that, other displayed

[96] Tucker, Erica L. 2014. "Museum studies." In The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research, edited by Patricia Leavy, 341–356. N.p.: Oxford University Press.
[97] Tucker 2014, 342-343

objects within the exhibitions are naturally considered as well, as they complete a certain setup in which reliquaries are displayed. The descriptions are, however, rather cursory.

The theoretical part of the thesis provides an overview of the type of material one may encounter in regards to the topic. Terms like “sacred”, “aura” are partially discussed. Here, however, is the way these terms are understood and used in the practical part of the thesis. “Sacred” - is primarily used by me as a word which here means the transcendental property of reliquaries and relics. In their natural environments, such as churches, monasteries, cathedrals, these objects are treated with great respect. The sacred is therefore this intangible, abstruse, and often unfathomable nature of relics and reliquaries. Relics and reliquaries are dynamic objects; they are adored, moved, worshipped, kissed, displayed, carried in processions, admired for their aesthetic qualities, but they can also be pilfered, multiplied, and become an apple of discord too. All this illustrates the sacred nature of these religious objects.

Inspired by Benjamin's essay, the term “aura” here therefore means the comprehensive meaning of relics and reliquaries that is shaped not only by the sacred nature of these objects, but also by their natural environment and all processes that affect them. As mentioned in the theoretical part and also in the essay itself, these original meanings are difficult to replicate. Especially in museum spaces that by default strip these meanings away. However, the aim of museums is precisely to introduce these objects in all their complexity to the wider public. Theoretically, the museum should make at least an effort to convey this aura to visitors in some way.

What follows are case studies of three exhibition projects. The first is devoted to a temporary exhibition in Dresden, which was on display in 2024. It is also the most extensive study, as a large amount of the material studied was exhibited there. The second and third are very similar, as they are cases of reliquaries and relics displayed in a permanent exhibition. The main difference is that there is also a diocesan museum represented here. In this regard, this part attempts to cover and present all types of museums mentioned in the theoretical part of the thesis. Although the exhibition in the Agnes convent (one of the buildings of the National Gallery in Prague) is not a secular museum of religion, given the type of collection on display and the space of the former community of nuns, I believe it is possible to make several tangible connections here. As mentioned above, research of exhibition projects is not limited to visual analysis, but it also includes textual analysis of labels and other written material, and other aspects of the exhibitions. I, however, predominately focused on visual and textual analysis, which, in my opinion, were the primary transmitters of information in

the exhibitions. My approach was therefore analytical, and also critical. The criticism here is not in a sense of dismissive rejection, but rather as a perpetual commitment to critique. It is an analytical posture that lies beyond the discussed topic. This approach was heavily influenced by the New Museology movement in the 1980s. The trailblazers of this movement had to subject museums to criticism in order to move forward and propose new solutions and ideas. This automatic suggestion of possible solutions is also part of this work. I am certainly not trying to be the definitive authority here, merely highlighting some of the possible solutions. I definitely do not think museums have an obligation to represent all the meanings of the objects they exhibit precisely and accurately. However, there is a certain responsibility to show the complexity and capture it in the exhibition. This is especially important for religious objects.

As mentioned above, each case examined requires an individual approach, and this also applies here. However, there are several general questions that permeate all case studies and serve as starting points.

- How are relics and reliquaries displayed? What is the overall context and narrative of the exhibition?
- What aspects of these objects are emphasized and valued the most in the exhibition? What other items accompany them in the exhibitions? And why?
- How do these exhibition projects attempt to convey the original contexts and overall aura of these objects? How is the sacred nature of these objects handled?
- How are relics and reliquaries described in labels and other materials? What terminology is used? To what extent is it inclusive for lay visitors?
- How could the exhibition be improved in terms of presenting these complex objects?

3.2. Fragments of memory

Between 16 March 2024 and 8 September 2024, the Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau in Dresden held an exhibition entitled: “Fragments of Memory”, where the treasury of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague was placed in a dialogue with the works of Edmund de Waal, Josef Koudelka and Julian Rosefeldt. The main themes were faith, remembering and holding on to memory. It was the first ever transfer of the treasury's contents outside the Czech borders, and that naturally provoked a backlash in far-right circles, as well as in Czech alternative opinion channels. The apple of discord was the golden Coronation Cross, which contained fragments of the True Cross alongside other relics associated with Jesus Christ. The instigator of the whole initiative was Jiří Folajtár, a Czech politician and activist. In Folajtár’s eyes it was by type the rarest artefact in Europe and probably in the world The overall goal of the initiative was the immediate return of the cross to Prague.[98] As it is mentioned earlier, reliquary crosses, and reliquaries in general, containing fragments of the True Cross were rather omnipresent - even today. The reason why they are not sought after can be perhaps explained by the question regarding their authenticity. It must be added that indeed this particular cross holds a great historical value.

The initiative included a petition and a protest in front of the chapter headquarters and St Vitus Cathedral in Prague. However, many of the questions that Folajtár tried to answer were clearly rooted in his lack of knowledge of the whole exhibition event in Dresden and such international activities in general. Not to mention that some of the answers could be found with a quick Google search. What this Folajtar's initiative definitely represented is the fact that the way in which religious objects are treated in museum environments can be of interest to the wider lay public.

3.2.1. Exhibition visit and overall description

I visited the exhibition on the 10th of May 2024. At the very entrance, before stepping into the exhibition space, the visitor was confronted by a juxtaposition of two sacrament houses and several smaller ceramic works by Edmund de Waal. The film “In the Land of Drought” by Julian Rosefeldt could be seen one floor below in the area in front of the

[98] Paralelně - redakce. 2024. “Paralelně.” Pátrání po vinících vyvezení ostatkového korunovačního kříže pokračuje! Nové informace přináší iniciátor petice Jiří Folajtár. https://paralelne.cz/2024/04/06/patrani-po-vinicich-vyvezeni-ostatkoveho-korunovacniho-krize-pokracuje-nove-informace-prinasi-iniciator-petice-jiri-folajtar/.

cloakroom. Although these contemporary works of art were integral parts of the entire exhibition, in my analysis and observations I focus primarily on the reliquaries from the St. Vitus Treasury. It is, however, clear that the confrontation with modern/contemporary art is one of the possibilities of creating new meanings for these objects. The question remains, though, whether it is possible to create these meanings without losing the original meanings associated with the particular historical and religious contexts of these objects. As I argued in the theoretical part, the museum may choose to "ignore" the sacred nature of an object that, however, does not mean that the museum has the authority nor the power to tear away such intangible aspects of some museum objects.

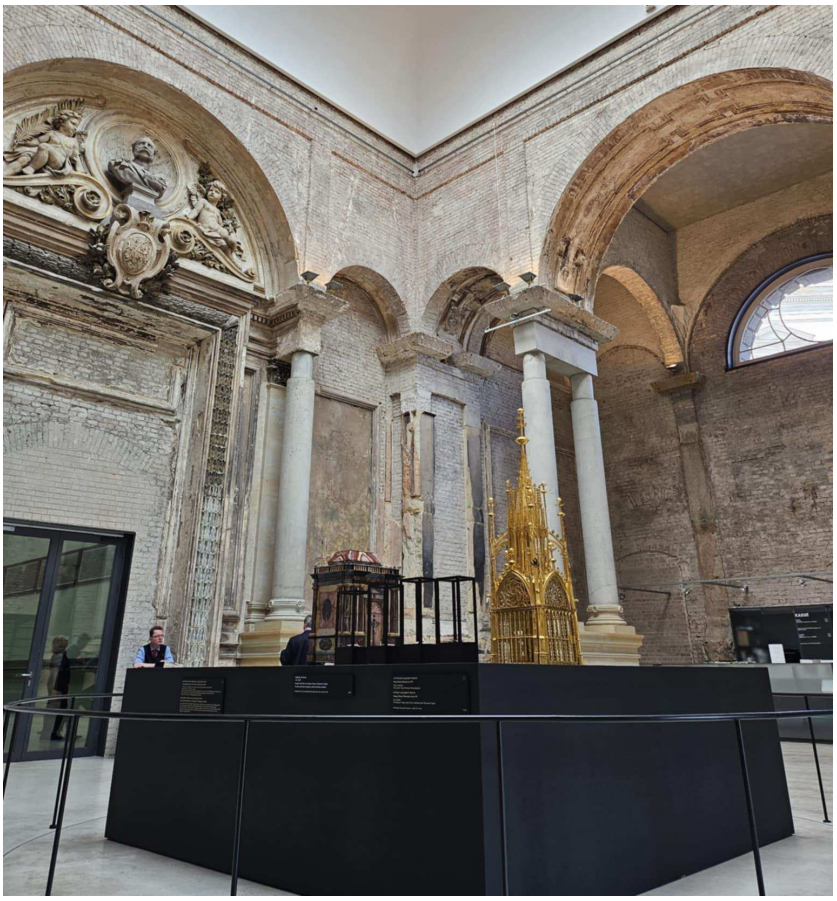

Fig. 10 - Entrance to the exhibition, the visitor is presented with two sacrament houses from the treasury and works by Edmund de Waal © Vojtěch Pulda

The space of the Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau, both as an exhibition space and the institution in general, represents a secular museum. Traditionally, institutions known as *"kuntsthalle"* do not have collections and focus exclusively on organizing short-term exhibition projects. The environment itself is a combination of fragments of the original

building, which was damaged during World War II, and the modern forms of the renovated building. In this respect, it was an excellent choice of location in relation to the overall theme of the exhibition. The overall architectural concept was minimalistic and the exhibition cabinets and the complete design was toned down to black or very dark blue, which served well as a contrast to the golden reliquaries and other objects on display. Most of the objects of the treasury were displayed on the left side (from the entrance) in a kind of labyrinthine structure, which had another accessible floor above the ground where the Saint Vitus Treasury exhibition continued. Exceptions to this design were the Coronation Cross and the table reliquary from the former abbey of Saint Martin in Trier. These two objects had their own little rooms located on the right side. In the middle of the main exhibition hall a large piece by Edmund de Waal was positioned, whose colour followed the overall architectural concept of the exhibition. The photos by Josef Koudelka were displayed on the right side of the main hall; this installation is visible in the later photos from the exhibition.

Fig. 11 - A part of the view of the left side of the main exhibition hall © Vojtěch Pulda

The exhibition did not include a catalogue, however, the visitor had the opportunity to learn more from a printed guide. The guide was essentially a simple publication with several pages, which contained an introduction, information about the exhibited artists. The main point of the publication was to provide additional background information on some of the exhibited objects from the treasury. The visitor had the opportunity to learn that in addition to the reliquaries with various relics, the treasury also contained a large number of other liturgical objects (chalices, monstrances, etc.), as well as artistic objects and direct *secondary relics* - such as the sword or the helmet of Saint Wenceslas, which were on display here too. The texts in the publication mostly discussed the origin of the objects (especially reliquaries as artistic vessels for relics), the way they got into the treasury and in several cases the provenance of the relic itself. The central figure of many texts was Charles IV and his relationship to the object in question. For example, the previously mentioned Coronation Cross. This reliquary contains fragments of the Holy Cross, which were given to Charles IV by the Eastern Roman Emperor John V Palaiologos in 1360. Other relics include parts of the sponge, and a thorn from the Crown of Thorns. The lastly mentioned relic was a gift from John II the Good of France in 1356. The fact that this piece came from the complete relic of the Crown kept in Sainte-Chapelle is confirmed by an authentication document dating back to May 1356. The guide included only a handful of text, thus not all displayed objects were greatly introduced further. As it is a standard of exhibitions, each displayed object had a label with a simple description - what it is, year and place of creation, material, owner.

3.2.2. Issue of sacrality

The main problem with this exhibition is the fact that it is not only about displaying reliquaries as art objects, but also visible relics. Apart from minor fragments of a human bone, the most precious of the Christian relics were present there. Several reliquaries containing relics associated with Christ were there. Not just the Coronation Cross, other reliquaries enshrining fragments of the True Cross, thorns from the Crown, or pieces from Christ's loincloth could be encountered in the display, fully visible to the visitor's eye. Although the exhibition guide explained many of the terms associated with Christian terminology well and clearly to the lay visitor, including basic terms such as relic and reliquary, the spiritual and sacred nature of these objects was not particularly discussed. It was clear that the exhibition was more concerned with the external form of the objects from

the Prague Treasury rather than with their spiritual value. This can be demonstrated by an artistic intervention by Dresden artist Jahna Dahms (1972). In her work entitled “RELICS”, the artist explored gold as a form symbolising power, beauty and the divine. In her eyes, these forms can be found in polystyrene packaging today. The exhibition in Dresden featured gilded polystyrene sculptures. One of such was placed right next to a reliquary cross containing visible fragments of the True Cross. The parallel was merely a visual one. Here is the issue. As it was discussed in the theoretical part, reliquaries can be made of gold, not just because of the monetary value of the material, but mainly for the fact that these objects are enshrining relics of a sacred nature. Thus, visually reflecting the content. To put it simply, not all gold things are automatically sacred because they are gold. Especially by placing a gold polystyrene object next to a reliquary of the True Cross, while drawing parallels on the material used alone is rather unfortunate. In this case, there seemed to be a lack of awareness of what the sacred was here - it was not the gold reliquary. In theory, every reliquary is a *tertiary relic* itself as it came into direct contact with the remains of saints. This, however, is a bit of a stretch and I shall not go into too much philosophizing on this question. It is important to note that I learned about this artistic intervention after my visit, and it seems that the objects were added slightly later. Nevertheless, it is obvious that this event was anticipated, as the photo taken during my visit shows an empty space in the display case that was later filled with the polystyrene sculpture.

Fig. 12 - The part of the showcase where the artistic intervention by Jahna Dahms took place © Rostislav Komitov - taken from the official web of the Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau - all rights reserved

Fig. 13 - Same spot as in the previous photo, taken by me during my visit © Vojtěch Pulda

The sacred nature of the objects displayed is not directly explicitly highlighted in the guide, but some of the objects' descriptions allowed the visitor to learn at least a little more about the way the relics and reliquaries were treated in their day-to-day lives. For example the description for the Golden cross with a relic of Christ's loincloth ends with a piece of information that the object was of a great importance and was placed on display at Prague's Cattle Market every year on the second Friday after Easter. As it is known, movement, display, and performance of relics were natural aspects of the life cycle of relics and reliquaries in their original settings. This is the type of information about sacred objects that a visitor would not normally encounter in a museum. These particular accounts shatter the ideas created by exhibition activities, which tend to turn moving/active objects such as relics and reliquaries into static objects, thus making the overall understanding and interpretation of these objects rather difficult. The items from the treasury were lit from above, giving them a dramatic effect. If we consider the original setting, these objects would tend to be lit from below, elevated, and so the believer would have to look upwards. Which, of course, is not always easy to do in a museum setting, especially if we want the exhibition to be inclusive and accessible. Since *Fragments of Memory* contained a large amount of material, there was a possibility of editing. In my opinion, not everything had to be exhibited, especially considering that the method of exposure was unified. The exhibition style made no distinction

between reliquaries containing relics directly associated with Christ and reliquaries that were pendant-shaped or those containing a relic of a curious nature. This may have given the visitor the idea that all these objects were equal which, of course, was not true.

3.2.3. The Coronation Cross

Let us stop at the display of the Coronation Cross. As it was mentioned, this object alone was able to generate a controversy regarding the display in Dresden. This valuable reliquary was placed in a separate room, behind a glass, and handrails, which did not allow the visitor to fully approach the object. Which in my opinion was a good thing, as it was a historically valuable item and this distance could also symbolically support the sacred character of the object. Given that the reliquary contained several relics associated with Christ, surely even in its natural environment the object would have been handled with a great deal of respect.

The display followed the established unified look. The walls of the room were painted black, the actual reliquary was displayed more and less in the centre of the room and was lit from above. The cross was put on a block and the description was printed on one of the walls. The text reflected the one that could be found in the guidebook. Here, in my opinion, the curators, however, had the option to explain the sacred character of the exhibited objects by using the cross as a leading example as it was placed in a separate place. I assume that if the cross was displayed at a higher height in a fully darkened room, the sacred character of this object would be more apparent to the visitors. What was definitely missing in the room were benches to sit on, where visitors could stop and contemplate, as is possible in a church setting. Especially with this reliquary, which was clearly made with the intention to support seeing of the encapsulated precious relics, the aura of the object, although slightly suppressed, was still overwhelming.

It is objects such as this cross that are prompting the museological discussion regarding the way in which objects of this type are being displayed. Although the sacred was essentially suppressed throughout the exhibition, as it is demonstrated, the multilayered nature of these objects can never be completely ignored, especially if the reason behind the sacred nature is highly visible.

Fig. 14 - Display of the Coronation Cross in the separate room, view towards the description © Vojtěch Pulda

Fig. 15 - Display of the Coronation Cross, visible view of the relics enshrined within the reliquary © Vojtěch Pulda

3.2.4. Other notes and the conclusion

Another obvious aspect that at least somewhat supported the original nature of the displayed objects from the treasury was the curatorial decision to display some of the bust-shaped reliquaries in a very dynamic way. It was obvious in the exhibition that some of the busts consciously looked in a certain direction; for example to Josef Koudelka's photographs, which depicted the environment where these depicted saints might have walked during their lifetime. A distinct example was the bust reliquary of Saint Peter, which, according to my interpretation, was positioned to gaze at another display case in which a fragment of Peter's staff was stored. These curatorial interventions could hence support the interpretation of reliquaries and relics as dynamic objects that consciously interact with their surroundings. As it is written in the theoretical part, these objects were and are taken in their natural environment as living representations of saints and are able to convey a personal experience with these long-departed personalities. This method also supported the overall theme of the exhibition.

Although the sacred was heavily suppressed throughout *Fragments of Memory*, the question of negotiating the addressing of this aspect of the exhibited objects could not be avoided. Especially here, where it was possible to see not only the artistically crafted reliquaries, but also the relics within them. In such moments, it might be worth considering whether the exhibition concept would work without the relics themselves. It is plausible that some of the relics were indeed removed from the reliquaries, especially those fully enclosing the relics, nevertheless this aspect has not been mentioned anywhere. It is these key moments that develop further questions, especially concerning the way the visitor should observe the objects, particularly taking into account that in most cases these were reliquaries preserving human remains or spiritually valuable relics. However, the attentive visitor was textually warned that they were not in the vicinity of just any religious-type objects, and although this may be a trivial matter, the textual guide at least made important terms somewhat clear to the visitor.

Fig. 16 - The bust reliquaries of Saint Peter and Paul displayed in a rather dynamic manner © Vojtěch Pulda

Fig. 17 - Saint Paul “gazing” over to the display of Josef Koudelka's photographs capturing places “he” once perhaps visited © Vojtěch Pulda

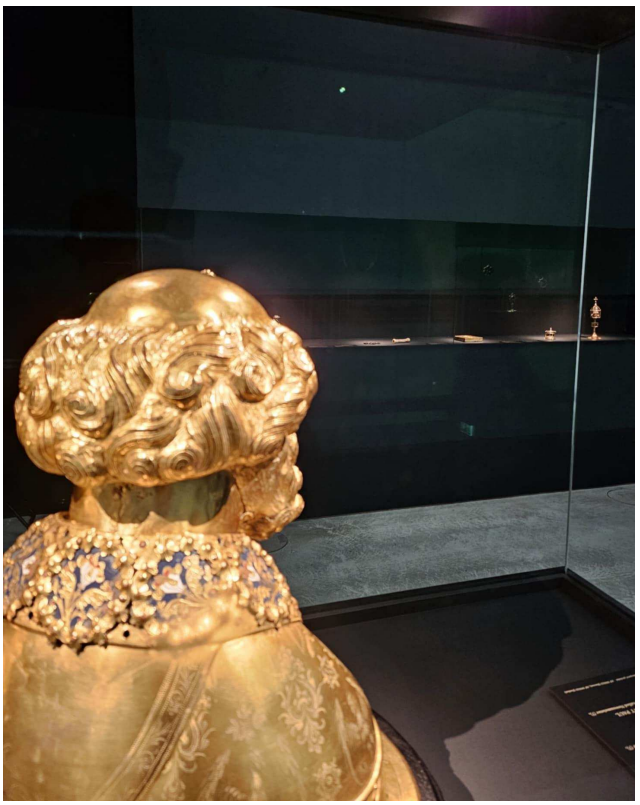

Fig. 18 - Saint Peter “looking” at the exhibition case where a fragment from “his” staff is displayed © Vojtěch Pulda

Fig. 19 - Small reliquary containing a fragment from the staff of Saint Peter © Vojtěch Pulda

3.3. Convent of Saint Agnes - permanent exhibition in the National Gallery Prague

The National Gallery Prague manages several buildings in which the institution presents its extensive collections. One of the buildings is the former monastery of Saint Agnes of Bohemia, named after its founder, which currently houses a permanent exhibition of medieval art. The exhibition is entitled: *"Medieval Art in Bohemia and Central Europe 1200–1550"*. The visitors have the opportunity to see works from important painters and sculptors such as: Master Theodoric, the Master of the Třeboň Altarpiece, the Master of the St George Altarpiece, or the Master of the Litoměřice Altarpiece to name a few. Even a layman would immediately recognize the fact that religious art is on display here and that this art served a higher function, not only a purely decorative one. The exhibition is filled with altarpieces, statues and statuettes of Madonnas and Pietàs, and other important Christian depictions. The word "gallery" in the Czech language implies a museum of art, thus the exhibited artworks are displayed primarily for their aesthetic and visual value. Naturally, the historic value is also appreciated here as the collection contains one of the most valuable examples of medieval Bohemian art. It is important to note here that the art exhibited here is understood as art in today's sense. It is important to acknowledge that these art works had primarily a religious function, just like the reliquaries discussed. The big advantage, however, is the location. Consequently, the former convent gives the visitor at least some understanding of the contexts in which these exhibited works were originally located. Although the Gallery is a type of secular museum, given the space, and the nature of the material on display, we could theoretically speak of at least a partial religious museum. I have visited the exposition many times and there is a clear regard for the religious *genius loci*.

This exhibition is related to the previous case study of *Fragments of Memory*, as some of the exhibited works were also present in Dresden. The sacred nature of the objects on display is suppressed, of course, which makes sense given the type of institution. As mentioned above, there is indeed immense potential to encompass the diverse meanings of the exhibited objects. The works of art are displayed chronologically, always with labels informing the visitor of the year and place of creation and other provenance, and due to the nature of the exhibition, the labels are also enriched with art historical descriptions. In the exhibition it is also possible to come across two reliquary busts, which are the subjects of this case study.

3.3.1. Saint Wenceslas and Saint Adalbert of Prague

The two reliquaries depict Saint Wenceslas and Saint Adalbert of Prague (Saint Vojtěch in Czech), one of the first saints from Bohemia. Both of these objects were made around the year 1500 CE. In contrast to the previous examples, the material used here is wood. The reliquaries are exhibited next to each other, behind glass, in one of the side rooms towards the end of the exhibition. This particular room is predominantly filled with other sculptures in wood of that time, especially statues of saints and Madonnas. On the side, next to the exhibition case, the visitor shall find a description. The English text reads as follows:

"The busts of the Bohemian patron saints St Wenceslas and St Adalbert rank among the most remarkable wood-carvings in Prague under the Jagiellon dynasty. Both are executed with an obvious effort to depict the faces realistically thus revealing the artist's brilliant technique. The busts served as shrines to keep the relics. Originally, the relics were placed in the openings of the head coverings, later in the chest. The reliquary busts were transferred to the Holy Spirit Church in the Prague Staré Město district from the abolished Cyriac Monastery nearby where they are documented in 1634. In type and finishing (a layer of silver and gold combined with washed paints) they are closely connected to the goldsmith's busts from the St Vitus' Treasure."

In the text, there is a clear attempt to explain the original function of these objects as places preserving relics. Although these are two short mentions, the visitor at least may understand that these are not mere sculptures, but objects with a specific function. However, it is not clarified whether the reliquaries contained only the relics of the depicted patrons or also some other sacred remains. It is also not mentioned in the text whether the reliquaries on display contain relics at the very moment. Which, as in the previous case study, raises an immense number of ethical questions. Within the reliquaries it is possible to see relic cloths, which seem to contain relics, but whether these, indeed, are really relics is not explained in the text or the exhibition. These probable relics with labels can be seen in the photos below and are stored in the intended niche in the chest area. The text primarily reflects the needs of the institution as a place that exhibits these objects for their aesthetic qualities and artistic craftsmanship. In terms of type, however, it is important to note that the external design of these objects precisely reflects the sacred character of the relics enshrined within.

Fig. 20 - Display of the two reliquary busts in the exhibition (Saint Wenceslas on the left, Saint Adalbert of Prague on the right) © Vojtěch Pulda

Fig. 21 - Detail of one of the niches where the relics were/are kept © Vojtěch Pulda

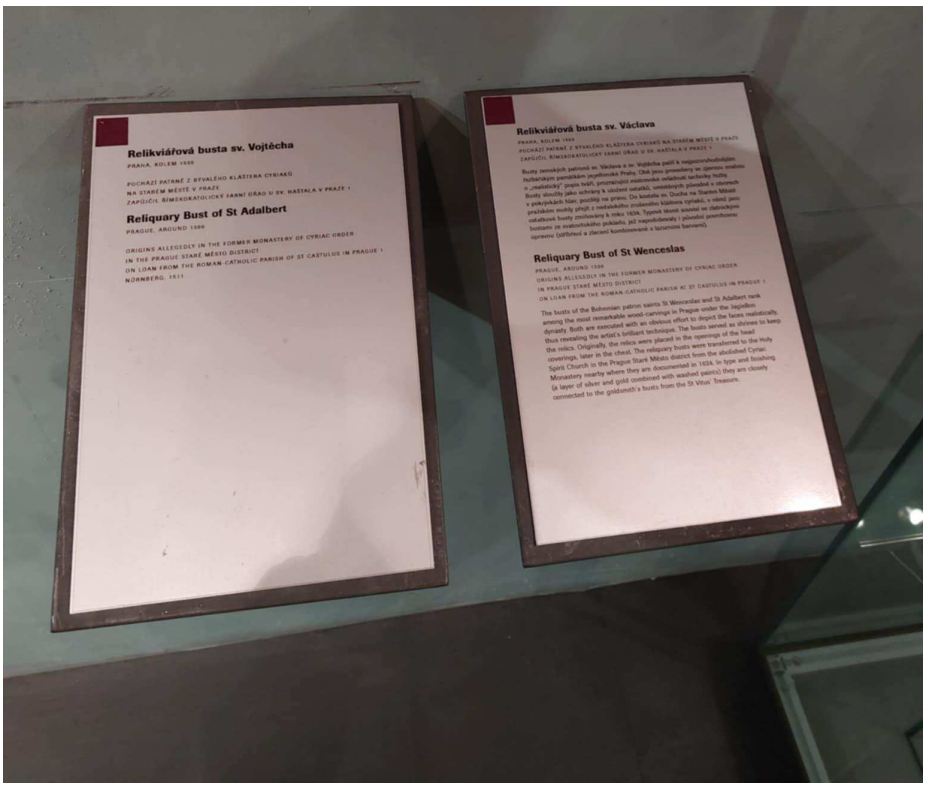

Fig. 22 - Panels with descriptions of the displayed reliquaries © Vojtěch Pulda

3.3.2. The way of displaying and conclusion

By displaying the reliquaries in the space next to other materially identical objects, it slightly encourages the visitor to visually connect them with the other art pieces, by putting them on the same level. By this I mean that these wooden reliquaries, in conjunction with other wooden objects, can be taken as "mere" statues, but not as cases enclosing sacred relics. This makes the busts look rather static, although the faces themselves look active by virtue of the fine artistic production and truly invite the observer to engage in dialogue. The visitor cannot avoid the question why the faces do not look forward but in different directions as if they were looking "inwards". Hence, it is highly probable that these reliquaries were made for a specific place, most likely a particular altar.

Although the sacred is suppressed here, there is indeed great opportunity for development. The exposition has several advantages. Not only are there various types of religious art forms on display from the period as the reliquaries, but it is the place itself. By adjusting the way in which the artworks are presented in the space, the Gallery has the opportunity to quite realistically bring visitors closer to the time and place from which the

artworks originated. As before, this does not need to be a complete rearrangement of the works exhibited, rather through a selection process creating a leading example.

3.4. Diocesan Museum in Litoměřice

As mentioned in the theoretical part, the Diocesan Museum in Litoměřice is the oldest institution of its kind in the Czech Republic. It is a joint project of the North Bohemian Gallery of Fine Art in Litoměřice and the Litoměřice Bishopric. The permanent exhibition entitled: *"Treasures from the Litoměřice Diocese"* is placed in the historic Gothic house on Mírové náměstí in Litoměřice, where the diocesan section of the gallery is located. Notable works include: a panel painting of Saint Anthony the Hermit Overcoming Demonic Visions by Lucas Cranach the Elder, a painting of The Madonna in a Walled Garden by the Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl, as well as works created by Karel Škréta, Anton Kern or Matthias Bernard Braun. It is truly important here to highlight the artistic quality and value of the works on display in this relatively small museum. The entire exhibition is spread over two floors and four rooms in total. Due to its age, the site significantly limits the possibilities and manners in which the works can be exhibited. The exhibition follows the classic chronological ways, which can also be seen in the case of the National Gallery Prague. This again has the advantage that visitors can follow the development of religious art and observe for themselves how certain motifs have changed over time. However, as it was originally a ecclesiastical museum and is now a joint project of the gallery and the Bishopric of Litoměřice, it is important to consider whether there was an initiative to present these objects to visitors in terms of their original function as well.

In terms of visit, I have seen the permanent exhibition many times. It is obvious here that this particular gallery building has long struggled with visitor attendance, as I have always been there absolutely alone. Which is a real pity, given the value of the collection, as the artists exhibited can be seen in institutions such as the MET or the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In addition to paintings and sculptures, the visitors can encounter several exhibition cases containing objects used at Mass (e.g. chalices), bishop's clothing (mitre or richly decorated gloves) and in one of the cases it is also possible to observe Baroque reliquaries and paxes.

3.4.1. Statuettes and *osculum pacis*

Unlike the previous examples, here in the Diocesan Museum in Litoměřice one comes into contact with Baroque reliquaries. Several examples can be seen in the last exhibition room of the permanent exhibition. This includes a collection of eight small reliquary statuettes and two paxes. Pax is a liturgical object used for the so-called *kiss of peace (osculum pacis)*. It is a symbolic gesture of peace and brotherly love during the Mass, and in the past it was truly a genuine kiss. Later, kissing was replaced by these paxes that were kissed instead. These objects can be made of a variety of materials and have different shapes. In Latin, these objects are called a *Tabula Pacis*, which automatically suggests a flat surface. Among other forms, they can also be in the shape of a cross and contain relics, which multiply the sacred mode of these objects. That is also the example here. Although I have not dealt with paxes in the theoretical part, it is important to note that these objects, like other types of reliquaries, only demonstrate the established fact that they are dynamic religious objects that were and are part of adoration, movement, handling, and display.

The first pax reliquary is a cross containing relics of Saint Thecla from 1757. It is a gilded silver object, also richly adorned with Czech garnets. The second example is a slightly older pax containing relics of Czech patrons. Reliquary statuettes are then a set depicting whole effigies of saints, with the niche containing the relic always visibly located in the chest area of the statuette. They originally came from the Church of Saint Anthony of Padua in Milešov. The material used here is wood and the set dates back to 1730 CE. These objects are displayed in the same case, which also contains other liturgical objects.

The descriptions of the objects are taped to the glass of the exhibition cabinet and only briefly introduce the visitor to the object in terms of the material used, the method of decoration, the year of creation and the original provenance. The description is bilingual; Czech and English. Here we encounter a problem of language used. The Czech description calls the paxes *"pacifikály"*, which is the correct term, however, the English description uses simply *"crosses"*. This completely changes the meaning of these objects and although it is mentioned here that the objects contain relics, the lay visitor may completely by-pass these meanings. On top of that, even the Czech word may be an issue, as it is not a common object used in the ritual practice of the contemporary Catholic Church. Thus, even an informed visitor and a layman may miss the true meaning of these objects. The description of the reliquary statues is also rather brief and provides only the same kind of information as mentioned above. Since these are realistic depictions of saints, their names are, however,

missing in the description. Certainly, a knowledgeable visitor will be able to recognize some of the saints on the basis of their attributes, but a layman will have a great deal of trouble with this task. It is also not specified whether the relics in the niches of the statuettes, even though they are small particles of human remains, belong to the saints depicted.

3.4.2. Problem of the display case and the conclusion

The display case, in which the reliquaries are exhibited to the visitor, has three levels. On the first one, the paxes are put adjacent to a monstrance and two chalices. Interpretatively, this level, given its visual form, suggests to some extent that the objects may move. After all, the main part of these objects is always elevated on a stem. The bishop's mitre (bishop's headdress) together with gloves are displayed in the environment of the exhibition cabinet. The lower part of the cabinet holds a collection of reliquary statuettes. This display is particularly problematic for several reasons. Apart from the problem with further interpretation of these objects, this placement is really low and the visitor can only see these statuettes to a certain extent and even then only with a great deal of difficulty. The sacred is suppressed here, and visually this case resembles a cabinet of curiosities. Especially in the case of the statuettes, it appears as if they have a purely decorative function. Although the relics themselves are really small, there is no doubt that these reliquaries would not have been regarded as mere statues in their original church setting. The visitor is thus left puzzled. Especially for the lay and non-Catholic visitor, finding parallels between these exhibited objects can be difficult. Therefore, there is no other option but to appreciate the objects from an aesthetic point of view.

As mentioned in the theoretical part of the thesis, ecclesiastical museums have the opportunity to become places of inspiration and authority for non-religious museums, and thus, given their nature, set the direction of how religious art should be exhibited and presented to visitors in a museum environment. Not only in the way the objects are displayed, but also in the way they are described on the label or in catalogues. The gallery's website informs that the exhibition is scheduled to be rebuilt and modernized. At the same time, the cultural, historical and artistic value of the objects in the Diocesan collection ought to be respected.

Fig. 23 - The display case containing paxes and the reliquary statuettes © Vojtěch Pulda

In the previous rooms of the exposition there is also another exhibition case that holds other religious objects. These are mainly chalices and ciboria. The museum thus has the opportunity to introduce visitors to the church treasuries in all their variety of objects deposited in them. As with the example of the National Gallery Prague, there is a large number of altarpieces in the collection as well and therefore there is an opportunity to introduce these objects to visitors in the connection to altars. Although this case study focused on the Diocesan Museum in Litoměřice, a temporary exhibition at the Diocesan Museum in Brno is definitely worth mentioning. This exhibition was titled: *"MONSTRANCES & RELIQUARIES cast in bronze…",* and presented visitors with a modern rendition of these religious objects by the metalsmith Pavel Hřebíček. The exhibition was on view from 1 November 2024 until the end of January 2025. This exhibition demonstrates the fact that relics and reliquaries are still a relevant subject in the life of the Church and modern versions of these objects are being created too.

Fig. 24 - Detail of the paxes within the exhibition case © Vojtěch Pulda

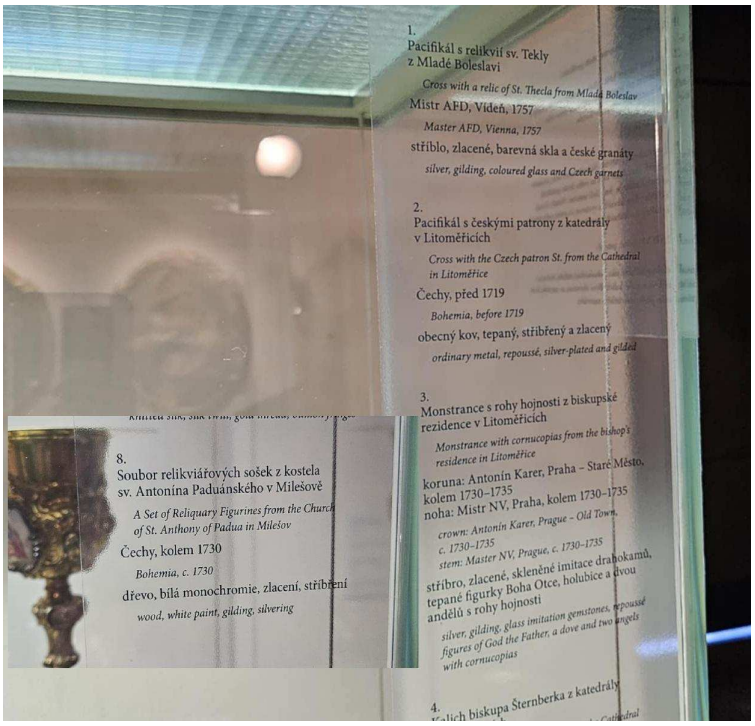

Fig. 25 - Glued labels on the exhibition case © Vojtěch Pulda

4. Conclusion

Several conclusions are evident from the case studies discussed in relation to the topic of the thesis. If one encounters reliquaries with relics in a museum exhibition, their sacred mood is more often suppressed, rather than brought closer to the visitor, which in result creates a problem in further interpretation and genuine understanding of these objects. Reliquaries are therefore valued in museum spaces more for their aesthetic qualities than for their spiritual and religious value. Which is, of course, one of the ways museums can treat the sacred mood of objects in general. Here, however, one encounters the problem that this practice creates. Although reliquaries in museum exhibitions are valued primarily for their material use (gold, silver, precious stones), historical value, and artistic craftmanship, their external form is just a reflection of the sacred relics stored inside. Their value in their original environment is precisely determined by their sacred nature, since for the devout they are not mere statues of gold, but a direct representation of a deceased holy person. In their physical presence and the possibility of seeing the relics, the believers can establish direct communication with the saints. It can be seen from the examples here that museums often probably do not fully realize exactly why these religious objects are valuable.

Museums can, of course, completely suppress the sacred mode of reliquaries, however, there is a somewhat ironic situation occurring here. The context of the objects changes - they now are stored in often very secularized places, but the original term used in descriptions persists. Reliquaries remain to be referred to as reliquaries despite the fact that the way they are displayed now in a museum setting may not be ideal given their original method of presentation. In this case, language becomes the medium of transmission of the original meaning, which simply cannot be detached from these objects. The term will also likely remain the same even if the original relic is removed. The gold reliquary bust, for example, will certainly not be described as a mere “bust”, as it has a certain religious function that shall always remain part of it, despite its possible preservation and presentation in a secular environment. The use of correct terminology is therefore vitally important, however, it must not be forgotten that the lay visitor may often not be fully equipped with terminological knowledge. Further explanation of terms is therefore very much needed, and not always, as the examples have shown, is given. This is, of course, rather a global problem that is often encountered in the museum environment, and is not an exclusive issue to the topic of this thesis. Somehow it is assumed that the visitor knows all the terms or is able to find them efficiently. However, this is rather a naive idea.

When it comes to the actual way reliquaries alongside relics are displayed in museums, they are usually set in a specific context, such as the development of art at the time, or directly presented as part of a particular collection. They are therefore almost always accompanied by other objects in the exhibition. This, naturally, takes away the space for a longer introduction of these objects to the visitor. Having stated that, these are often objects that the reliquaries would have been in contact with in their original environment anyways. Altarpieces or various liturgical objects can be taken as examples. It is therefore almost always possible to create exhibitions in which the exhibited objects complement each other and can thus illustrate the original meanings to the visitor. By visually juxtaposing reliquaries with altarpieces, a connection may be created, and the accompanying material can make such connections even more apparent. It is the static display of objects such as reliquaries that complicates the understanding of these objects. As has been mentioned many times in this thesis, reliquaries are dynamic objects in their natural environment. This is even more true of the relics enshrined within them.

While museums do have the opportunity to assign new meanings to objects, in the case of religious objects there should be a certain respect based on the ethical work with these objects. The display should not be done in an arbitrary manner, especially if the original community still exists and would hold these objects in high regard. This is particularly valid in the case of reliquaries containing relics associated with Christ. As an example I would mention a non-Christian example here: the museum at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, India. The museum houses a rare collection of Himalayan Buddhist art. Although this is a real museum space, the museum objects are stored in a consecrated space. There are also established rules that are not found in a regular museum - it is prohibited to enter the museum in shoes, or take photos and videos. Cases like this one demonstrate that there are indeed ways in which museums can become fusion spaces that may lead to a better understanding of religious art, which is subsequently turned into museum objects.

This may raise the question of why changes in the museum environment should occur at all. After all, museums as institutions have been around for several centuries and their activities are linked to preceding similar establishments. There is therefore an evolutionary line in place and an established role in society. However, if museums are to move forward, there must be a critical evaluation of practices. Hence, the main question is: what is the purpose of today's museums? In 2022, the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM (International Council of Museums) decided on a new definition of museums. This new definition reads as follows:

"A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."

It is therefore one of the functions of a museum to strive to educate and correctly interpret the objects on display. In museum collections one can find various types of objects, including those that are considered sacred in their original environments or have a specific function. By definition, then, museums ought to focus on ethically preserving, exhibiting, and interpreting these objects in a meaningful way. Therefore, it is always important to understand the collections themselves first and to be aware of the initial meanings of these now museum objects.

5. Discussion and recommendations

The study shows that museum exhibitions tend to ignore the sacred nature of reliquaries and relics rather than explaining it to visitors in an accessible way. The main interest lies in the aesthetic qualities of these objects. The conclusions are based on three different case studies, hence there is room for further research. This research could focus not only on other religious museums within Roman Catholicism, but also on other religions. As mentioned in the conclusion, the topic of sacrality and the exhibition of religious objects has been and continues to be a problem that other religious museums also face. It would therefore be interesting to compare the approaches used by certain religious communities when presenting their religious heritage in museum settings.

Further development of this work may lie in the question of removing relics from reliquaries. Generally, this information is missing from exhibitions, and often, if the relic itself is not visible, visitors do not know whether the reliquary in front of them is empty or not. This fact subsequently raises further questions regarding the presentation of human remains in museums. This information seems to be obtainable only through conversations with curators. Additional qualitative research could lead to a community-based one. In theory, there are museums that are somehow related to religious communities. There is an opportunity here for these communities, through facilitation, to address some of the ethical issues discussed above regarding the presentation of sacred objects in the secular environment of museums.

At the very beginning of the thesis, reference is made to the broader discussion in the museum environment regarding decolonization and postcolonialism. Given the transfers of ownership of these objects as a result of secularization and repression of churches during the 20th century, there is also a hypothesis here regarding the possibility of the topic being a space for applying postcolonial theory in the Central European context.

This thesis also includes recommendations on how museums could exhibit relics and reliquaries and generally present them to visitors. This is not an authoritative list, but rather serves as a source of inspiration, given that this subject matter has been discussed in the theoretical section. To present those, I utilised the INDIHU exhibition tool that allows users to create virtual exhibitions. The online space has several limitations, especially when it comes to the topic of this thesis. The sacred nature of objects that can be experienced, can hardly be reproduced in the online setting. Serving as a starting point, I hope that the recommendation presented in the exhibition alongside further material will potentially

facilitate further research and dialogue regarding how contemporary museums should deal with religious and sacred objects - regardless of the religion. There are five recommendations in total. The topics of the recommendations are as follows: **Inclusive vocabulary** (issue of the language used in labels and descriptions), **Connection to other objects** (understanding how in this case relics and reliquaries relate to other displayed objects), **Considering original environments** (considering how relics and reliquaries are displayed in their original settings), **Additional material to further contextualise these objects** (materials that can aid the visitor with understanding these objects), **Sacred matter on sacred grounds and working with the communities** (finding ways how the original communities may help and perhaps solve some of the issues in regards to handling relics and reliquaries). The exhibition can be accessed through this link[99]:

https://exhibition.indihu.cz/view/Fragmentedsacralityinheavenlycaskets2025-07-28T092904591Z

[99] Short URL: https://shorturl.at/d2XiP

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