

Genuineness Carolyn Korsmeyer

Not long ago I stood before Durham Cathedral reading a plaque by the door. For centuries, it stated, people needing sanctuary had only to seize the heavy iron knocker above my head and strike loudly to seek admittance. Feeling a kind of archaic sympathy with that gesture, I raised my hand to add my own knock to the tally. But reading further, I learned that the original object had been removed to the cathedral museum and the iron knocker now in place was a replica. My hand fell away.

Why did the desire to knock disappear upon discovery that I would not touch the same thing that others long ago had grasped? To my eyes they were the same, but not to my hand, although had the plaque not disclosed the difference I would have experienced a bogus thrill of connection and been none the wiser. But why would an encounter with the real thing invite an experience that differs from an encounter with a replica so exact that one cannot tell the difference?

The importance of genuineness for historical and scientific purposes is uncontested because artifacts serve as evidence, and one can draw supported conclusions only from the actual material remnants of a culture. But genuineness also possesses ethical, religious, and aesthetic aspects that may seem harder to justify. A cherished lock of hair must have come from the right head. Battlefield memorials stand on the very blood-soaked ground of war. Only the true bones of a saint are relics to revere. Indeed, one might marvel at simply being in the presence of an object that is in some way special and that has survived the vagaries of the past, in which case genuineness prompts its own thrill, an enthralled moment that we might think of as a sort of aesthetic attention. I suspect that the aesthetic quality of such encounters is present in all of them, providing as it does the immediacy and intimacy of acquaintance.

This latter claim may seem particularly strange, for how can a property that is perceptually indiscernible—for genuineness usually cannot be directly detected—become the object of aesthetic awareness? By tradition, the senses identified as conduits for aesthetic attention are vision and hearing, and if one cannot perceive a difference between an original object and a good reproduction, one might conclude that the experience of both would be identical. It is striking, however, that those who cherish encounters with things from the past often invoke the sense of touch. In his famous appreciation of ruins, Georg Simmel remarks, "... with this piece which we are holding in our hand, we command in spirit the entire span of time since its inception; the past with its destinies and transformations has been gathered into this instant of an aesthetically perceptible present" (Simmel 1959: 265-66). Such encounters possess a singular affective intensity, directness, and immediacy, during which attention focus upon the thing itself and the past it embodies. Touch, or even mere proximity, imparts a feeling of continuity and intimacy as though one were adding a link to a chain of touches that stretches into the past. This chain is interrupted with replicas; it requires the real thing.

This declaration may sound fanciful. Indeed, investing touch with the power to connect one with the past and with others is sometimes derided as a species of “magical thinking,” a symptom of primitive and unscientific thought that endows touch with a lingering presence, a sort of contagion. Yet at the same time, some current psychology validates it as a widespread phenomenon of human mentality (Hutson 2012; Bloom 2012, esp. Ch. 4). Moreover, I believe that it indicates something interesting about the sense of touch itself, for I doubt that the impression of continuity and presence is merely an effect of overactive imagination. In its perfectly ordinary functions, touch plays a role in our confirmation that what we see is actually there. As such, it conveys a sense of reality that is especially convincing, for touch is comparatively immune to illusion. (Not completely immune, of course.) You might mistake the identity of the thing that you have run into in the dark, but that something is there is indisputable. One is palpably aware that one is bodily near something else (Fulkerson 2014: 77). The feeling of continuity when touching an object long revered from the past may be an extension of the fundamental nature of this sense and its role in confirming external reality. (“Seeing’s believing, but touching’s the truth,” as the saying goes.) The sense provides a kind of assurance of one’s own physical position in time and place. Touching an object that one takes to be genuine situates one bodily in the history of that thing with all its past and meaning.

Of course, there are formidable difficulties with establishing criteria for genuineness, because objects of great age are unlikely to have survived intact. Fragments, repairs, even histories of substitutions make ascription of genuineness very complicated, though no less important for all that. My claims about the indispensability of genuineness need to accommodate such inevitable change (though pursuit of this subject would overrun my space). It is also the case that one can be deceived about the identity of the object before one, cherishing forever an encounter with a fake. Nonetheless, the very fact that, when discovered, deception causes disappointment, indicates the difference between encounters with genuine things and with substitutes. And for at least some encounters, only the real thing will do.

References

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Figure 1: Durham Cathedral Door Knocker.

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