CHAPTER 8

Architecture for the Body: Some Reflections on the Mobility of Textiles and the Fate of the So-Called Chasuble of Saint Thomas Becket in the Cathedral of Fermo in Italy

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Much ink has been spilled over the last two decades on art and portability (though not only by art historians)—namely, on the specific field of research that concerns the movements and diffusions of art objects, artists, and artisans, as well as artistic ideas, especially in transcultural contexts. Moreover, numerous conferences and academic books have recently focused on issues relating to the change of artistic behaviors and of the patterns of aesthetic thinking as a result of excessive movements, be it the movement of artifacts through trade; or of people and ideas through the human migration of geopolitical or religious impetus; and, in our own time, of tourism. Terms such as “cultural mobility” and “transculturation” propel scholarly interests today and give input to different academic fields, mainly those related to the social examinations of this phenomenon. The colossal change in our “sense of time” is clearly bound to the 19th-century Industrial Revolution and the mechanical turn, and to the implications of both on our modern era. The invention of mechanical, motorized devices such as cars, trains, and airplanes have been especially significant in this regard, altering our perception of distance and the construction of space, modifying our ideas of “remoteness” and “far,” and reforming the notion of time by re-questioning terms—or rather concepts—such as “ago” and “upcoming.” This change in the human perception of space

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2 I use this term as defined by Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation. London: Routledge, 1992.
and time has accelerated during the so-called digital era of recent years. Now, in addition to the aforementioned tendencies to shorten distances both in space and time, another component has appeared: simultaneity. This new factor clearly modifies the entire system of our thinking of a “global” realm divided into “near” and “far,” breaks the hierarchy between centers and peripheries, and challenges our concepts of linearity and chronology in writing history. In terms of art history, the routes of the transmission of artistic knowledge, either factual or theoretical, were made the very focus of scholarly research, and the investigations that concern the static centers of art productions were shifted aside, at least for a while. In terms of architecture, complexes built at major pilgrimage sites, accommodations designed for hosting traveling merchants “en route,” and tourist hotels and shopping malls have become the subject of the most recent studies in the history of architecture and anthropology. Moreover, airports, train stations, and any building that was planned to serve as a transitional space, a “non-place” (“non-lieu”) as Marc Augé calls it,3 turned out to be objects that perfectly reflect our mobile society, our zeitgeist.

Like the “non-place” architecture, the portable art object also becomes the object of the scholar’s desire because it embodies, in its raison d’être, all the features related to this specific phenomenon of transportability and “transculturality.” Like a world-traveling tourist who carries in his backpack his compressed home, the portable art objects also carry identities and narratives of places, locales, and homes.

Among the luxurious portable objects, textiles were and still are the artifacts that traveled the most. Easy to carry, textiles are also less fragile than most other luxurious objects, which are typically made of delicate and/or breakable materials. Easily folded and packed, they can be reduced in size for easy transportation. And, like any goods that serve as money in economic transactions, in medieval times textiles were frequently traded as legal currency similar to gold and silver and, in that sense, could have been used for cash payments and exchange. In many instances they were even hoarded at home as a form of investment and as monetary security in case of hardship. As Shelomo Goitein and Yedida Stillman have written, the role that textiles played in medieval trade could be compared to the corporate stock shares of our day.4 As carriers of specific patterns and even inscriptions,