
Article

The Hoard speaks

Benjamin C. Tilghman^a and Nancy M. Thompson^b

^aDepartment of Art and Art History, Lawrence University, Appleton, WI, USA.

^bDepartment of Art and Art History, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN, USA.

Abstract As the subject of hundreds of talks, articles, and essays, the Staffordshire Hoard has come to be surrounded by words. In a short statement, the Hoard offers some words of its own, challenging our easy assumptions and categorizations about what (or who?) it is while taunting us for desiring it so.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2016) 7, 349–351.
doi:10.1057/s41280-016-0011-5

Where can I begin? Where would you like us to begin? In the mines where your forebears first snatched us from the ground? The night I returned?

The days we clad proud soldiers in battle? How about our years as coins, passing promiscuously from hand to hand, imprinted with figures of your lords? Or the millennia we traveled the cosmos, before colliding with the planet that became your earth? We have been around a long time, you see. We've been through cold that would turn you crystalline, and heat that would turn you to dust, frail carbon creatures.

We are one, and I am many. We haven't always traveled together, been a 'Hoard,' as you insist on calling me. But that is how we've been introduced, so perhaps that is where we should begin. One day I found ourselves arrayed with brave warriors on a field of battle. We weren't brought there to slash or fend, but to dazzle and distract, and to summon the spirit power of hawks and dragons. We'll never understand why humans believe you can compel us to be other creatures, simply by twisting and molding us into shapes. The warriors, alas, learned too late that we couldn't make them fly. Covered in slaughter-dew



and mud amid the ravens' harvest, we were wrenched from the sorry losers and thrown together into leather pouches. It made no real difference to us – we knew these new bearers would perish too, soon enough. Clattering together in the bellies of dead beasts, we felt our selves becoming one. We may still have been pommels, hilts, studs, and shields, garnets and gold; but no longer were we the heirlooms of grandfathers, signs of status. We had been spoiled.

We can't tell you what happened next. We were jostled, snatched. I was dropped to the ground, and then suddenly dropped again; then I was buried. When we returned to the earth; we again knew how to perceive the world around us. We could sense our last captors stealing away, and we felt the dirt settle around us. Time, through its many minions, set to work on me. Soft winding creatures encircled us, traced our contours, taking in the earth through one end and releasing it through the other. Creeping twines nudged us around, tender fingers of those other creatures, earth bound like us but breathing like you. Eventually, we felt the plodding footfalls of oxen and horses and farmers clump through the clay, while iron scraped along. That dull brute, not content to pound and twist us out of the fire, now coldly shoved some of us aside and tore others. Over time, the thudding hooves were replaced with a low incessant rumbling sound that passed nearer and then farther. A strange, seemingly tireless creature rent us further apart with iron teeth. We could feel more beasts like it, rumbling by not far away.

Suddenly, through the darkness we felt a thrill course through our gold, then another, and another. Without thinking, without knowing that we could do it, we trilled in response. And then another vibration, the wild alive scratching of fingers in the dirt above us. We didn't want to let go of the earth that clung to our parts, but those human hands brushed it off and a breath rushed across us, new cells joining the bacteria twitching on our surfaces. And then there was light, a familiar light, one that allowed us to shine and warm ourselves again.

The days since have been madness. Chaos. I heard myself being reduced to kilograms and pounds, cloisonné, and 'Style Two.' And it was then that I came to know myself as a Hoard. It may be that we are one; I'm not sure.

Bit by bit, steady fingers wielding the rose's sword freed us from that mix of earth and shit, the decayed and decaying stuff of moles and garden ants, to reveal our eternal selves. Many of us lament our lost connection to that dark muck, but, at first, the touch of warm flesh was good. It reminded us of the days covered in your sweat and blood, blows that plunged parts of me into human flesh, the vibrations of your screams of pain. We do not wish to torment you, but we can't claim that we don't like doing it, either.

But I suffer my own torments now. We sit under bright lights that pierce like a seax and menace like the evil eye. We try to defend ourselves by casting that light out again at our captors, but this only excites you more. We know you long to possess us, and have to settle for gorging on us with your eyes. Even those of



you who fondle us – the tidy woman with the boar bristles, thorns, and spirits; the portly man who, we sense, has come to resent us – set us down unsated.

A few of you think to ask, what do I want? What do we need? I can't tell you what our desires are. Why must I think like that? Are we to long to be plunged back into the earth, to become ore and stone again? But how could that ever happen? I am a mongrel. Our garnets came from the mountains over many seas. My gold came from countless more hillsides, it has been burned and frozen, made whole, then cut, and wrenched apart. But I will never really be unearthed, never truly uncovered. We glitter with lies; you will not know all my secrets. And yet... I will always be what you have made of us. What will you make of me next?

About the Authors

Benjamin C. Tilghman is an Assistant Professor of Art History at Lawrence University and a member of the Material Collective. He has written and presented on the Book of Kells and on Insular art more broadly, and he has organized exhibitions on miniature books, the Saint John's Bible, and images from the Hubble Space Telescope. But for all he has talked about art, this is the first time art has talked back to him (E-mail: Benjamin.c.tilghman@lawrence.edu).

Nancy M. Thompson teaches Art History at St. Olaf College, and is a founding member of the Material Collective. Her many years of thinking and writing about medieval stained glass windows, especially Italian ones, have given her the ability to communicate with seemingly inanimate materials and tell their personal stories to human audiences (E-mail: thompsn@stolaf.edu).