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[Book Review] Things: In Touch with the Past by Carolyn Korsmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press)

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The great Nineteenth Century architect and renovator of ancient buildings, Viollet-le-Duc, maintained that the adoption of absolute principles, when thinking about the past and restoring those things handed down to us from the past, 'could quickly lead to the absurd' {Viollet-le-Duc, 1854 #1033: loc. 6796}. From the simple fact that some things that are important to us are so, at least in part, because they are old, many questions spring. Why should the fact that something has been around a long time confer value on it? Should old things be preserved or should they be left to decay? Preservation, by suspending the aging process, undermines that very value it is designed to preserve. Decay, on the other hand, results in the objects vanishing altogether. Why do we queue to see original objects but are generally indifferent to perceptually identical facsimiles? How can we explain the cult of relics (or reliques)? Why do we are we indifferent to some old things (stones) but not to others (axe-heads)? Is the reconstruction of damaged or destroyed heritage a matter of fakery ('Disney-fication', as some put it)? What do we even mean by terms such as 'genuine' or 'authentic'? Even if we can throw light on the value conferred by age, how valuable is that value? Is it worth the vast amount of money absorbed by the heritage industry – especially in the face of other pressing needs such as food and shelter?

In this excellent book, Carolyn Korsmeyer skilfully threads a course through these murky waters. She sensibly finds an issue to anchor her discussion: explaining why it is that people favour original objects over replica or replacement objects. However, this is only an anchor – her discussion then ranges far and wide, considering most if not all of the questions posed above. Korsmeyer is aware, of course, that (to use some crude classification for a moment) those in the Western tradition did not always have this preference and that, even now, there are traditions that do not have this preference (some Japanese shrines, for example, are burned and rebuilt every twenty-five years). What she is doing is to rationalise this preference for those who have it; to show that there is something sensible to be said for it.

Her answer, in brief, is that the experience to be had from genuine historical objects is different from the experience to be had from replicas – even indiscernible replicas. We can deal with a likely immediate objection. How can two experiences, each with of an object that is indiscernible from the other, be different experiences? The objection, as Korsmeyer says, relies on a naïve notion of experience: 'the nonperceptual cognitive state of believing an object to be genuine has a particular phenomenological character, and that character penetrates the perceptual experience of that object, occasioning the aesthetic encounter and giving rise to a thrilling experience' (55). Our experiences of 'real old things' is, for the reason that they are real old things, different from our experience of things that are not 'real old' (the joke is Korsmeyer's).

Being told the experience is distinctive tells us neither the nature of the experience nor why it is valuable. Korsmeyer's account of these issues takes us to the heart of the book. She begins with the plausible claim that, generally, our experiences of the world is multi-modal. The claim that underpins the book, and provides it with its sub-title, is that burden of explanation of the peculiarity of our experience of the genuine is borne by the sense of touch. Touch, as Korsmeyer says, is, along with smell and taste 'traditionally excluded from aesthetic operation'. However, it is the sense that is closely tied to our immediate experience of material reality. The replica may look identical to the genuine object, but only the latter puts us 'in touch' with the past. When we are in its proximity; 'it is the sense of touch that sustains us being in the presence of the real thing' (41).

Having argued that it is our sense of touch that ground the 'aura' that historical objects have, Korsmeyer then capitalises by drawing on the transitivity of touch.

The experience of being in contact with the real thing conveys an impression that the act of touching possesses a sort of transitivity: that by touching, one becomes a link in a chain that unites one with some original object, with a creative hand, with a remembered or historical event, or with other who have touched the same thing, rather in the way that a magnet transmits its attraction through a chain of paperclips or nails. (48)

Korsmeyer is able to show how widely held this sentiment is with a huge number of delightful examples, drawn from the actual world and from fiction. She recounts how, when walking in Ostia Antica, the ancient port of Rome, she tripped on a groove in the stone

Tripping over a chariot rut is rather thrilling and quite different from tripping over a pothole. Just for a moment you have stumbled over – almost into – the past. The sheer physicality of the experience and the movement of one's own body are elements of the aesthetic operation of touch. (45)

Korsmeyer tackles two obvious objections to her view head-on. The first is that her account is supposed to be general. However, we encounter many historical objects in circumstances in which touch is impossible – at least not without attracting the attention of the museum guardians.