Figure 1. St. Anthony, south Germany, mid-fifteenth century. Hand-colored woodcut, 38.1 x 26.4 cm. Photo: Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich, Inv. Nr. 118224 D.
Three sufferers, bodies convulsed, inflamed limbs brandished, beg for the attention of the enthroned healer (fig. 1). The men at lower left and right, with crutches, have traveled some distance: The purses at their waists and the hat with upturned visor adorned with metal badges, souvenirs of shrines visited, suggest as much. The healer is remote, imperturbable.

Flanking his throne, thrusting gifts into his field of vision, are four healthy visitors, two wearing fur-lined hats that imply affluence, another with the armor and sword of a well-born soldier. These four are completing a cycle of entreaty and thanks. They or someone close to them was delivered or spared from the fearsome affliction, the burning limbs, by virtue of prayer and a promise of future sacrifice, an expenditure of wealth, time, and mental energy. Once spared or healed, the votary must fulfill his or her promise. Here the votaries crowd the throne of the thaumaturge, competing for his attention; they want their gifts acknowledged. But there is no real urgency, for their limbs are intact and the votive cycle is complete. Life can resume at a normal pace.

For the supplicants at the foot of the throne, by contrast, time has accelerated. The regular rhythms of calendar, labor, and family have been disrupted. This is an “emergent occasion,” to borrow from the title of John Donne’s collection of prose reflections on his own imminent death by disease.1 These devotees display none of Donne’s stoicism, but rather try to strike a deal with the saint who controls the disease. They are presumably making vows, hoping to return in due course to take their places at the sides of the throne, displaying gratitude. They are fearful of emergence itself, a reshaping of time that obscures origins. Emergent phenomena evade cause-and-effect relationships, and so sweep away the partitions that minds erect to make sense of the flow of experience.

This picture, a hand-colored woodcut printed probably in Swabia in southern Germany around 1450, models a web of relations between people and things.2 The votaries and supplicants bear or proffer objects: the badges pinned to the hat, small crosses, a fowl, a mannikin, wax models of bodies or extremities. The objects attest to states of mind and to successful exchanges with entities outside ordinary experience—divinity itself, or a holy man who manages destructive fire. At the pilgrimage site—so the picture suggests—the pilgrims perform for one another. The pilgrim is an object in the eyes of other pilgrims, no less so than are the displayed wax body parts. But above all the pilgrims perform for the powerful saint, the third- and fourth-century Egyptian hermit St. Anthony Abbot or St. Anthony the Great. In the eleventh century St. Anthony’s relics surfaced in southeastern France, in the Dauphiné, generating a shrine cult with wide fame. St. Anthony was credited with the power to heal an array of diseases.

The aim of this paper is to understand better how people’s experiences in the late middle ages were “paced” by objects. The wax body parts tendered by pilgrims testified to ruptures in the body’s experience of itself. They transferred personal experience into the spaces of representation, first the shrine itself, then images such as this woodcut. The print is a portrait of a saint, but its borders are permeated by the rhythms of individual even if unnamed lives. These rhythms are imported by the wax offerings, which were in their own way portraits.

The precise role such a woodcut might have played inside the votive cycle it depicts is unclear. The image printed on paper was a novelty of the fifteenth century. To make sense of the woodcut we might compare it to the objects pictured inside it. The badge worn by the pilgrim at the lower left, for example, is testimony to a pilgrimage accomplished, a souvenir, or a trophy. Such a badge might also possess protective power by virtue of its provenance, its former proximity to or even contiguity

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1. J. Donne, Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions (1624). Donne’s text was modelled on the meditations composed by King Hezekiah after his recovery from illness (Isaiah 38:9–20).

with the tomb of a saint. Lead badges representing St. Anthony were attached to the necks of livestock to protect them from disease. The woodcut may have had a lot in common with such a badge, for there is evidence that prints, too, could transmit the powers stored in a tomb. The print could function as a contact-relic channeling healing or protective power from a saint’s relics to an individual devout. Woodcuts not so different from this were carried home from pilgrimage sites as trophies and talismans. The gift or offering, such as the wax mannikin held by the man at left or the hands and feet suspended from the rail above, had no such powers. There was nothing mysterious about their workings. Mysterious was St. Anthony’s ability to cure illnesses. The offering was a straightforward sign, a token of gratitude. For visitors to the shrine, including other votaries, the displayed offering symbolized another person’s good faith in keeping the bargain struck with the saint by making the trip to the shrine. The offering testified to the saint’s successful intervention and so glorified that saint; the offerings ornamented the shrine and ratified the authenticity of the relics. The mannikin represented the person’s self or soul, dedicated to the saint in the hour of need. The wax hand or foot represented the afflicted limb, thus reporting on the disease’s symptomatology. The votive offerings also had real material value. A fowl or a quantity of molded wax was useful to the clerics who managed such a shrine, for the hen could lay eggs or be consumed, and the wax could be melted down to make candles. But above all the votive offering fulfilled a promise of expenditure, of wealth, time, and attention, made by the votary to the thaumaturgic saint. The proof of expenditure was the aspect of the offering addressed to St Anthony himself. It was important that he take notice of the fulfillment of the vow.


5. Robert Maniura published a document recording the use in 1485 of a figura di charta, a “paper figure,” to heal a sick woman. The image, presumably a woodcut similar if not identical to a surviving fifteenth-century print reproducing the fourteenth-century fresco known as the Madonna delle Carceri in Prato, was put in contact with the fresco and then with the mouth and body of the woman. In 1490 Giuliano Guizzelmi spent sixteen soldi in Florence on paper reproductions of the Madonna delle Carceri, Vergini Marie di charta. “The Images and Miracles of Santa Maria delle Carceri,” in The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. G. Wolf and E. Thuno (Rome: “l’Erma” di Bretschneider, 2004), pp. 86–87.

6. This is potentially a large class of objects, but it is hard to prove that any particular woodcut was used as a talisman. In the Bodleian Library there is a woodcut image of Henry VI, a thaumaturgic king, surrounded by votaries and offerings, adduced by Spencer, Pilgrim Souvenirs (note 3), p. 7 and fig. 4, as a talismanic souvenir from the shrine; but it is not clear how he knows it was used this way. Wallfahrt kennt keine Grenzen (note 3), pp. 39–40, asserts that prints were used in this way but offers no examples earlier than the seventeenth century.


8. Note that van der Velden (note 7, p. 248), says only that it is “possible” that wax votive gifts were melted down later for re-use. There is little evidence, but then it stands to reason that this practice was not well documented. At any rate, wax was expensive. Maniura notes that the ten pounds of wax used to make a votive effigy of a healed child were four times more expensive than the silver used to coat the effigy (note 7, p. 418). The really expensive alternative was the effigy or model fashioned entirely in silver.
The function of the wax body parts within the cycle of entreaty and thanks is clear. Yet in the woodcut image, and in the few other depictions we have of the practice, the suspended hands and feet compel our attention. They seem to exceed the role they play within the cycle. They are super-representations, powerfully linked to their referents. Wax in its texture, translucence, and dull tone can uncannily resemble flesh. The medium of wax symbolizes both the flow of experience—the disease, all the passions accompanying it—and the stilling of that flow. With its responsiveness to pressure, wax carried a strong connotation of fidelity to an original, a one-to-one matching. Wax models of body parts, as far as we can tell, were life-sized or near life-sized. In the woodcut, however, they loom large, like great pelts or trophies. They are the key to the image.

A printed or painted picture lacks the direct force of a wax model, but it is more articulate, more voluble. Some pilgrims offered painted pictures, wall paintings or panels portraying a saint, as votive gifts. For many centuries such offerings were rare and impressive, beyond the means of most of the faithful. In the late fifteenth century ordinary worshippers began to deposit small painted panels as offerings, completing the votive cycle and at the same time reporting on the nature of the injury or the cure. The painted panel was in some ways less valuable to the clerics who managed the shrine than the wax body part, for they could do little with it other than put it on display as testimony to the efficacy of the system. It did have great value as a generator of confidence in the systems, however. There is no record of anyone leaving a print or a drawing as an ex voto.

The printed image comments on its own similarity to and difference from other objects simply by portraying objects and the ways people attend to them. The woodcut creates a gradient of values between itself and the objects it pictures. In this way it theorizes itself. Many Christian subjects involve people looking at scenes, other people, things, and images: the Lamentation over the Dead Christ, for instance, or the Crucifixion. Such images deliver the historical event and at the same time show how people responded to the event as spectacle. At such a scene, Christ’s body is already functioning as an image: static, cynosural, densely significant for those who know how to look. A depiction of this scene is recursive in the sense that it encodes inside itself a set of guidelines for its own beholders. Once you have arrived at that embedded “instruction manual,” you have to exit the picture and start all over again. Equipped with the principles retrieved from within the picture, you may now read the picture quite differently and discover new guiding principles that you had misread the first time, before you had access to the instruction manual. And so on.

To go further with this print, and to displace it from its customary art historical niche, let us compare it to a later and very different kind of picture, but also a picture that theorizes itself: an oil painting on canvas by the Ferrarese court painter Dosso Dossi, a representation of an enchantress, probably the good sorceress Melissa, a character from Lodovico Ariosto’s modern epic Orlando Furioso (fig. 2). The work shows Melissa seated inside a magic circle and lighting a wax torch. She has consulted a tablet bearing cryptic writing and diagrams and is about to perform a spell that will reconstitute some metamorphized soldiers, their beings miserably split between animal bodies and effigy-like souls suspended in the tree; thus undoing the evil spell of another enchantress. The painting dates from the late 1510s and is a paradigm of a category of object relatively new at that moment: a nearly self-sufficient image, prepared to go on generating meanings even if displaced from its original setting, the court of the duke Alfonso d’Este. The painting comments poetically on the powers of the witch, a nearly forgotten art, according to Ariosto, a


11. Although the older and local literature on the votive phenomenon addresses these panels, interpretation of this material has really only just begun. For overviews see Kriss-Rettenberg (note 7), pp. 135–271, and Bacci (note 7), pp. 220–223.


wisdom preserved only in the eastern homelands of the enemies of the Frankish knights celebrated in his poem. Dosso’s painting, a fictional image, compares itself to the more efficacious technologies it pictures: The cryptogram on the tablet, the torch that will write with smoke in the sky, and finally the Christian cult image, which is present only as a disguised intertext. For this painting is the “anagram” of a Madonna and Child, or a Rest of the Holy Family on the Flight to Egypt, a sacred narrative transfigured and transvalued. In its physical closure and boundedness, and in its confidence in its own semantic fecundity, the painting is asking for nothing more than the privileges enjoyed by Ariosto’s poem. This was new for the art of painting. Painting here was asking to be upgraded to the status of a poem.

The woodcut representing St. Anthony and the oil painting representing the magnificent sorceress are unlikely pendants. The woodcut together with all its perished siblings—the hundreds of sheets that once made up the print run, identical except for their hand-applied coloring—were so much busier than Dosso’s canvas, for they circulated in the world, from hand to hand, in and out of shops and homes. The painting, unique, was buried deep inside a ducal residence.

And yet how similar the two works are, for both Dosso’s painting and the woodcut with St. Anthony are basically depictions of wizards able to deflect natural and possibly unnatural, but anyway invisible, forces. Both represent seated figures surrounded by individuals in distress. In the painting, the animals are men whose bodies have been transformed not by disease but by magic. They press close to the benevolent sorceress in hopes of deliverance. Melissa, as she manipulates spell and fire, casts a glance upward toward the souls of the men stored in the tree. Melissa and Anthony are not gods, but technicians. They heal or repair by controlling the elements. Anthony’s technology is extra-ecclesiastical and theologically questionable, almost as much so as Melissa’s. Both pictures are recursive: the beholder of each picture is offered a target of attention, and at the same time sees attention modeled. Each picture theorizes itself through embedded analogons of itself.
The painting by Dosso Dossi reveals that the apparently disenchanted image of the early sixteenth century, cut off from the ground of mimetic magic that had guaranteed the cult image, developed a countermagic involving displacement of intertexts. The occluded cult image reappeared inside the new image as the books, the diagrams, the torch and brazier, and finally the combinatorially scrambled Christian subject. The real theme of Dosso's work was its own distance from its imagined predecessors, images that were "not yet" artworks—for example, a simple woodcut representing St. Anthony and his votaries. Such an image, unlike the canvas by Dosso, seems troubled by competition from poems or from important contemporary artists. Yet the woodcut, too, depicts its own imagined predecessor, a superior kind of image, in the form of the wax body parts, which convey their meaning so unforgettably, and possibly in the figure of St. Anthony, which may represent a painted or sculpted image of the sort that one might find at a shrine. (Alternatively, this figure may stand in for the tomb shrine, reminding us that nothing signifies an absent holy person more effectively than a sample of his body—namely, relics—or it may not represent an image or place at all, but simply the saint himself.)

If art is a flow of attentiveness through minds and things, then the work of art is a thing specially designed to retard that flow, and then display it, making the flow visible all at once. At the same time the work is a thing that might at any moment be hurled back into the real-time flow. Both works, the painting and the print, meet these criteria.

The two pictures also differ in an important way. They manage time differently. The relation between the time represented in the picture and the time of the picture is in each case different. The painting by Dosso is to a high degree temporally unified. The painting points, via the poem it illustrates, to a historical period remembered in legend, the struggles of the Frankish heroes in the eighth and ninth centuries against the Muslims in Spain and southern France. The Roland legend resonates against the long-term project of the Crusades, initiated in the eleventh century. The enchantress's arts resonate against ancient and medieval reports of magical practice, as well as the contemporary phenomenon of witchcraft, the target of Dominican inquisitors. The painting depicts a technical intervention designed to undo metamorphosis and so reverse time. But all these temporal gestures are tightly managed by the picture's author. That author, a technician superior even to Melissa the enchantress, manipulates all the temporal vectors. The painting's homogeneous facture and the internal articulation of forms and colors—all the elements that together count as the picture's style and that anchor the picture to its author—create an effect of closure and self-sufficiency. The institution of the fictional artwork stabilizes the time of the image. The painted fiction achieves this stability by severing as much as possible its referential ties. Christian narratives and icons, profane portraits, symbolic and didactic images were all linked to their authenticating sources in remotest times by chains of images. Such images point to stable realities well beyond their own bounds. Dosso Dossi's canvas, only loosely attached to the past, and aligned with but not dependent for all its impact on a poem, was prepared to venture into the world more or less on its own account (even if the picture, in fact, has been moved only very few times in five centuries).

The contrast with Dosso's painting allows us to home in on the nature of the woodcut. The printed image of St. Anthony is fundamentally a referential image, the portrait of a thaumaturgic saint, a historical personage with a real effectiveness in the world that exceeded his own lifespan. The authenticity of the portrait is secured by substitutional chains linking it to other images of St. Anthony. More interestingly, the woodcut connects real and modern people to the virtual reality of the picture through the attributes of the thaumaturgic saint. Votive offerings were among the conventional attributes that served to identify Anthony, but so too were the devotees. Emergent time floods into the picture through the attributes. The depicted votaries signify in two directions. First, they function as conventional labels, copied from other pictures, securing the picture's reference to Anthony. This reference was the basis of the picture's value. Second, the votaries begin to refer through their animation to real trials and uncertainties experienced by modern people. They are portals onto the life-world of shared experience, the bed of real sensations and emotions that preexists any interpretation or depiction. The woodcut depicts the recipe for a stabilization of time—namely, submission to the votive cycle—but in doing so it also vividly depicts the very emergent phenomena (disease, fear, hope, resolve) that drive the cycle. By comparison, the painting by Dosso is closed on itself, and tranquil.

Anthony is multiply identified: by his name, written on a scroll affixed to the railing, by the tau-shaped staff, the tau on the robe, the cap, and the belled pig at his feet. The clerics of the Antonite order enjoyed the privilege of keeping pigs. Their pigs wore bells—even papal bulls and poems mentioned this—and in images
the bells were transferred to Anthony’s staff.\(^{14}\) The tau or Greek T was a sign associated with magical powers; according to the bull of 1297 the Antonites “call it potentia.”\(^{15}\) Healing played a major role in Anthony’s life story. But his fourth-century biographer Athanasius, guided by Anthony’s own words, insisted at every turn that the Lord was performing the miracles ascribed to the saint, and not the saint himself.\(^{16}\) Anthony was essentially a hermit, not a healer. The saint was transformed into a thaumaturge only in the twelfth century, after the clerics attendant on his shrine at St.-Antoine-l’Abbaye or St.-Antoine-en-Viennois in the Dauphiné, in southeastern France, gained a reputation for effective treatment of a brutal disease, widespread in Europe for centuries, involving inflammation of the extremities and ultimately gangrene.\(^{17}\) The disease was in fact caused by a fungal contamination of grain used in breadmaking, thus cutting a wide swath through society. But until the seventeenth century no one connected the disease to the bread. Instead, the society personified the disease by attributing its onset and abatement to St. Anthony, the one who controls the fire, as the crude red flames at the base of his throne indicate. Fire appears to add to the universe, but it ends up subtracting. Fire is a principle of energy and transformation, life giving if handled properly, otherwise destructive. The flames were added in the late Middle Ages to the roster of symbols that one could expect to find in an image of St. Anthony.

The earliest surviving example of an image of St. Anthony accompanied by votaries is a panel in Fabriano dated 1353 and attributed to the Master of the Fabriano Altarpiece, now identified as Puccio di Simone, or to Allegretto Nuzi (fig. 3).\(^{18}\) This painting represents the saint standing in a landscape, holding book and staff, with two pigs at his feet, and flanked by kneeling figures from various social stations, seven men on the left and seven women plus a baby on the right. None of the kneeling figures in the Fabriano panel is visibly ill or holding an offering. Nevertheless these figures, like the seven small figures in the woodcut, are attributes identifying the giant saint and reminding beholders why one might direct prayer toward him.

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\(^{14}\) L. Fenelli, Il tau, il fuoco, il maiale: i canonici regolari di sant’Antonio Abate tra assistenza e devozione (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo, 2006), p. 161; L. Fenelli, “Sant’ Antonio Abate: Parole, reliquie, immagini” (Ph.D. diss., University of Bologna, 2007), p. 309. The two studies by Fenelli are the most thorough treatments of the iconography of St. Anthony the healer and its origins in real practices and institutions.

\(^{15}\) “. . . habitu cum signo T quod potentia vocant . . .” (Fenelli, Il tau, p. 65); Fenelli, “Sant’ Antonio Abate,” pp. 93, 302; see also p. 38.

\(^{16}\) Athanasius, Life of St. Anthony, §§ 14, 38, 48, 56, 57, 84.


Wax body parts and other offerings were left at the tombs of many different saints. Our knowledge of this practice is based mostly on the reports and biographies drawn up for canonization hearings, so there is a bias in the evidence toward modern saints, personages of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Not all of these saints were known in their own lifetimes principally as healers. Votive offerings and votaries do not appear as attributes in images of most of these saints. Only those identified as thaumaturges are iconographically labeled in this way: St. Anthony the Great, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Nicholas of Tolentino. Shrine devotions, including the display of wax models of limbs, are described in some hagiographical pictorial narratives, either in mural cycles or in so-called Vita panels, that is, altarpieces involving full-length portraits accompanied by scenes from the life. Examples are the images of devotions at the tomb of St. Margaret of Antioch in her Vita panel in the church of San Antonio Abate, in Pistoia. Here we also see wax hearts symbolizing devotion or mannikins symbolizing the soul or possibly representing a baby, as well as offerings of crosses and other devotional tokens; also crutches and manacles speaking eloquently of ordeals overcome.

A rare representation of devotions at the tomb of St. Anthony is the scene of the Liberation of the Unjustly Condemned Youths at the church of San Antonio Abate, or the church of the Tau, in Pistoia. This image and others representing scenes from the Old Testament and from the life and miracles of St. Anthony were painted on the walls of the church in the early 1370s by a Florentine artist, probably Niccolò di Tommaso. At the right is an altar inside a small shrine-like chapel, adorned by an apparently painted image of a standing St. Anthony. In front of the shrine is a box whose lid is held open by several onlookers. In the box is a jumble of what appear to be wax hands and feet: a different way of storing the offerings than that depicted in most scenes of tomb worship.

Two images of the early sixteenth century give us rare glimpses of collections of votive offerings, more extensive and informative than the conventional hagiographical scenes: the Vision of Prior Ottobon by Vittorio Carpaccio (ca. 1515) and the woodcut reporting on the pilgrimage to the Schöne Maria of Regensburg by Michael Ostendorfer (ca. 1520). In the Carpaccio, we see models of ships, vessels spared from shipwreck by prayer. In the Ostendorfer, we see tools and farm implements, perhaps actual objects involved in accidents, perhaps symbols of the abandonment of worldly concerns. In each scene, we see models of body parts, but also many long slender objects, candle-like lengths of wax in the true measures of healed children. People gave bundles of wax spun out in thread-like lengths, known as trindles, long enough to encircle the tomb or even the church. People gave money, food, and livestock. They gave entire buildings. They vowed to restore or take care of existing images.

Many categories of ex voto were rarely or never represented in paintings or prints. We know from...
documents, for example, that wealthy votaries deposited life-sized effigies, made of wax or even silver.\textsuperscript{29} Others left painted panels or murals representing themselves in prayer.\textsuperscript{30} Beginning in the late fifteenth century and perhaps earlier, votaries offered small panel paintings depicting their moment of need or the cure. The effigies and small panels, however, seldom appeared inside other pictures.\textsuperscript{31}

A historian of religion would therefore be unwise to accept the woodcut portrait of St. Anthony, or any of the scenes of shrine-centered cults depicted in Vita panels, as straightforward evidence of real practices. Most are highly conventional images, copied from picture to picture. They are also idealized images, offering a normative account of the votive exchange. Such paintings, for example, rarely depict the clerics who managed the shrine.\textsuperscript{32} Nor do they ever show worshippers making offerings to painted or sculpted images. In principle, pilgrims came to shrines to be near relics, not an image. In some cases, the documents speak of votive offerings made to painted or sculpted images not associated with tombs or relics.\textsuperscript{33} But the depictions of tomb cults rarely represented such practices. Of course, many offerings were made to the Virgin Mary, and she left no relics. Votive cults arose at sites where she was known to have performed a miracle. At such sites an altar and a fabricated image, sculpted or painted, provided a focal point. The Virgin through her miracles tended to take on local forms; she existed across a range of “avatars.” The local sculpted or painted image of her was a way of naming that avatar. But the theology was unambiguous: The fabricated image itself had no powers, nor could it listen to appeals.\textsuperscript{34} No prop or portal or medium is necessary to communicate with the Virgin or any saint. The prayer goes straight to the saint, wherever it is enunciated. This principle is made clear by a woodcut representing the pilgrimage site of Altötting in Bavaria, where pilgrims crowd an altar topped not by an image but by a figuration of the Madonna, half-length and surrounded by clouds (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{35} The figure of the Virgin in the woodcut does not represent an apparition. Rather, it says that the Madonna herself is present and the target of devotional attention, but that she is not available to the senses.

Now we are in a better position to say something about the figure of St. Anthony in our woodcut (fig. 1).

Kris-Rettenbeck (note 7), pp. 19–53; Sigal (note 7); Bacci (note 7), pp. 147–226; and the systematic taxonomy in van der Velden (note 7), pp. 213–222.


30. On paintings and sculptures as gifts, see van der Velden (note 7), pp. 278–285.

31. See also the Greek votive reliquary discussed by M. Gaitzib, “Visualized Rituals and Dedicator Inscriptions on Votive Offerings to the Nymphs,” Opuscula 1 (2008): 91; the deposit of pinakes or small painted panels at the shrine is not itself depicted in pinakes that depict votive practices.

32. The shrine scenes at the church of the Tau in Pistoia do involve clerics. So does the scene of the sick tended by clerics before the open tomb of St. Anthony in a fourteenth-century Catalan panel, in Fenelli, “Sant’ Antonio Abate” (note 14), pp. 244, 251.

33. An example adduced by Bisogni (note 7), p. 76, is the yimagines cere deposited before an ymagine of Nicholas of Tolentina at Norcia; see also pp. 82–83 on the capacity of images of Margaret of Antioch to substitute for the tomb. The documents nearly always speak of vows made to the saint or the Virgin herself, not to images. But Giuliano Guizzetti in 1487 vowed his nephew “to the Most Glorious Large Crucifix of the pieve of Prato”; Maniura (note 7), p. 415. See Vauchez (note 20), pp. 524–529, on the displacement of the cults of the saints from tombs to images.

34. Maniura stresses this point in “The Images and Miracles of Santa Maria delle Carceri” (note 5). Faranda (note 7), p. 122, notes that the votive panels at Cesena never represent cult images; instead they represent the Madonna herself. Some images seem to leave the question open—for example, the prints by the German engraver known as E. S. associated with the pilgrimage to Einsiedeln. Are the pilgrims in these engravings addressing the Virgin or a handmade image of her? One representation of a pilgrimage that does show pilgrims focusing on an image, two images in fact, can be and was read as a critique of the institution of pilgrimage: Ostendorf’s woodcut reporting on the cult of the Schöne Maria of Regensburg; see Wood (note 24).

exceptionally inscribed with a name, a place, and a date, “Ludwig Maler ze Ulm [14]68,” representing a pair of saints, Christopher and Anthony, side by side (fig. 5). St. Christopher, a giant, ferries an unknown child across a river. His burden becomes ever heavier but with his great pole he bests the current. Christ reveals himself, and explains that Christopher had been carrying the weight of the whole world—the orb in his hands. As proof he makes the pole bear leaves and fruit. St. Anthony is identified by book, bell, Tau staff, pig, and flames. Both figures are upright and tightly wedged into their frames, resisting horizontal narrative extension. An earlier

At the shrine of St. Anthony in France, or in the many Antonite churches throughout Europe, pilgrims were likely to have seen a painting or a sculpture portraying the saint in just this way, enthroned and remote. The woodcut is not a representation of the image one might find at a shrine or church, however. It does not depict a scene of worship in which people approach a fabricated portrait of the saint, painted or sculpted. Rather, it is a paper version of such an image. The woodcut is a portrait in its own right. The depicted figure is simply an image of St. Anthony. The votaries address him, fulfill their vows by giving him the promised gifts. Images of saints that are fundamentally portraits, like the painted and sculpted images of Anthony or like our woodcut, tend to give the attributes in condensed form, with little suggestion of a scene or story. An example is a hand-colored woodcut,
37. Schreiber (note 2), no. 1218. Die Frühzeit des Holzschnitts (note 2), no. 12. See also the miniature painting in a French Book of Hours of the third quarter of the century, Morgan Library, M. 282, fol. 127v: Here Anthony is enthroned and attacked by demons on both flanks; there are no votaries, however.

woodcut, datable to the second quarter of the fifteenth century, represents St. Anthony seated on a triangular throne topped by a fanciful three-bay canopy. This is the only other woodcut besides ours to picture him enthroned (fig. 6). Here he holds bell and staff and is attended by a pig. He is beset by two kneeling sufferers, their hands pictured as flames, and a pair of hoofed and clawed demons, one of them wielding a club. Anthony was frequently depicted in the late middle ages suffering temptation at the hands of demons, as described in the Golden Legend. This is a rare, possibly unique, conflation of two iconographies, placing the suffering devotees in parallel with the harrassing demons, thus rendering Anthony as victim and savior at once.

A later woodcut, dating from around 1500, possibly French, represents a standing Anthony holding an

Figure 6. St. Anthony, Germany, second quarter of the fifteenth century. Hand-colored woodcut, 27 x 19.1 cm. Photo: Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich, Inv. Nr. 118241 D.
ordinary Gothic crozier instead of the Tau-staff (fig. 7). Three of the kneeling figures are well dressed and healthy; they press their hands together in prayer; one has a rosary at her waist. The fourth supplicant is a ragged victim already missing at least one extremity. He holds an unidentifiable object in his right hand (a bell?). He has come directly to the shrine in hopes of relief. The long bent pole above is decked with models of limbs, swaddled babies, and pigs. Scrolls with Latin inscriptions prompt the prayers of the print’s beholders: “Pray for us, blessed father Anthony; may we deserve to avoid the morbid fire.”

There are many such surviving images of St. Anthony standing and surrounded by a collection of attributes that includes votaries and offerings. A painted example is a panel at the castle of Issogne in Savoy, a descendant of the Fabriano image. Among the depicted ex votos are three long candles, two feet, one hand, one forearm, and one bone. A later descendant is the sixteenth-century woodcut attributed to Sebald Beham representing a relatively avuncular Anthony flanked by kneeling votaries, one with a flaming hand. A collection of body parts, mannikins, and candles is mounted on the exterior of an Antonite chapel or shrine (fig. 8).

Some works, like ours, show the saint enthroned, creating an aura of remote authority and suggesting that he is not merely an intercessor capable of making a case to the Virgin or Christ on behalf of human sufferers, but also a redoubtable source of power in his own right. The image suggests that he is the only mediator capable of managing the ravaging fire, symbol of a sacred chaos that precedes even the gods. Anthony was considered vengeful and ill-tempered. In the popular imagination the disease was understood as a punishment for insults or neglect, for example reckless damage to an image of the saint. The historical Anthony, by contrast, according to Athanasius, was a humble ascetic who wanted his tomb site hidden.


40. The objects are brown and might be meant to be understood as wooden. There is textual evidence that models of body parts offered at shrines in the earlier middle ages were made of wood: see Gregory of Tours, cited by Freedberg (note 7), p. 136. The tomb of St. Wolfgang depicted in an altar at Pipping near Munich, according to Kriss-Rettenbeck (note 7), p. 76, is the only late medieval image showing wooden ex votos. Many of the examples in Andree (note 7) are wooden, but they are hard to date.


42. Fenelli, Il tau (note 14), pp. 126, 142–146. Erasmus in his Colloques mocked this belief: “When [the saints] were alive . . . who was more good natured than Anthony? . . . But what terrible diseases they send now if they are not, as you have heard, venerated properly”; cited by Huizinga (note 20), pp. 199–200. See Luther’s comment in his Table Talk, cited by Fenelli, Il tau (note 14), p. 143, n. 116. See Clementz (note 17), pp. 51–54, on vindictive saints.

43. According to Athanasius (note 16), §§ 90–92, the saint insisted on being buried underground and made sure that only two brethren knew the site. Athanasius reported that in his day no one any more knew the location.
Before the mid-fourteenth century, only a very few holy personages were depicted seated on thrones. This sign of monarchical, judicial, ecclesiastical, or academic authority was reserved for God the Father, Christ, and the Virgin, as well as saints whose iconography involved enthronement: the doctor Thomas Aquinas, for example, or bishop saints such as Peter, Martin, or Nicholas of Myra. Some Florentine altarpieces of the fourteenth century ventured to promote saints to thrones in excess of their traditional iconographies. Examples are the St. Bartholomew by Jacopo del Casentino (1330s) in the Accademia in Florence,

44 the St. Lucy by Giovanni di Bartolomeo Cristiani (ca. 1375) at the Yale University Art Gallery,

45 the Mary Magdalene, a processional banner on canvas by Spinello Aretino (ca. 1375), in the Metropolitan Museum of Art;

46 and the St. John the Evangelist by Giovanni del Biondo (1380s) in the Accademia. It is not clear what provoked or licensed these moves, but they are the art historical context for the promotion of Anthony to a throne. Anthony’s pictorial enthronement reinforced the saint’s reputation as a distant and godlike personage. There are several enthroned Anthonys from the fourteenth century, including a Florentine dossal in a private collection attributed to the Master of 1343;

48 a processional banner by Barnaba da Modena at the Victoria and Albert Museum (ca. 1370);

49 a panel by Niccolò di Tommaso in Naples, dated 1371;

50 a panel by Spinello Aretino at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum (ca. 1385);

51 and a panel by Niccolò di Pietro Gerini at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (ca. 1380) (fig. 9). The black-robed saint in this last work is immense and remote, his gaze fixed and forbidding. His roster of attributes has been stripped down to a red book and a staff; he is framed not by human votaries but by four angels.

These panels are the ancestors of the fifteenth-century enthroned Anthonys, such as the altarpiece by Priamo della Quercia (1445) at the Oratorio di S. Antonio in Volterra, with fire below the robe and small laborers—not victims of disease—hauling goods, apparently salt, as an offering;

52 and our own woodcut.

We also have fragments of a tradition of sculpted enthroned Anthonys. The oldest is a French work in stone dated to the mid-fourteenth century that seems independent of the Italian panels.

53 Possibly derived from the Italian paintings, or from lost German panels.


47 Galleria dell’ Accademia, inv. no. 446. Marucchi, Gallerie Nazionalie di Firenze, no. 79.


49 London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 781.1894.


51 Providence, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, inv. no. 16.243.


53 Brussels, Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, inv. no. 8783. The work was first published by Gross (note 38), p. 136 and fig. 82.

Figure 8. Sebald Beham, St. Anthony, ca. 1522. Woodcut, 29.3 x 22.3 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.
mediating between the two traditions, are several German wood sculptures of the fifteenth century. The best-known is the enthroned St. Anthony by Nicholas of Hagenau for the Antonites at Isenheim in Alsace (ca. 1490), now in Colmar, the central figure of the altarpiece later completed with two sets of painted wings by Matthias Grünewald. The intermediary links between the Tuscan painted altarpieces (fig. 9), the German sculptures, and the two German prints (figs. 1 and 6), all representing St. Anthony enthroned, have vanished. It is impossible to construct a coherent art historical narrative.

Enthronement opened the image of St. Anthony onto the iconography of the Epiphany. His body rhymes with the figure of Madonna supporting her son on her lap, target of the wondering gazes of the shepherds and the gifts of the Magi. In our woodcut, too, the company splits into two classes, low and high, ragged and empty-handed, well-dressed and gift-bearing. If the Dosso Enchantress is an anagram or veiled transfiguration of a Rest on the Flight into Egypt, then the St. Anthony woodcut is an anagram of an Epiphany.

Now we have a sense of the family of images this picture belongs to. The purpose of such images was to deliver a true image of Anthony. When it came to images of saints associated with disease or trouble, the beholding of an image, accompanied by prayer, was sometimes held to bring automatic, immediate protection. This is explicit with many images of St. Christopher. The early woodcut known as the “Buxheim” St. Christopher bears an inscription affirming that anyone who looks at him will not die unexpectedly on that day. Images of St. Sebastian were also associated with protection from harm. An early woodcut of St. Valentine, a saint involved with the treatment of epileptics, bears an inscription asking Valentine to “Pray to God for us.” No image of St. Anthony bears an inscription promising protection by virtue of a mere sighting. Some bear inscriptions asking the saint to

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54. Examples are at St. Justinus at Hoechst (near Frankfurt am Main); the Antonite church in Würzburg; and the Antonite abbey at Zahrensdorf-Tempzin (Mecklenburg). Ibid., pp. 122–125, 135–138. See also the southern Netherlandish or French sculpture in the Liebieghaus in Frankfurt, inv. no. St. P. 382. It is believed but cannot be proven that these works reflect a lost prototype at the main Antonite shrine at St.-Antoine.


56. Some of the works listed by G. Gozzi, Sant’ Antonio Abbate ‘il Grande’ ( Mantua: Sometti, 2005), might be sculptures. Gozzi mentions many images of St Anthony but reproduces few; Fenelli, “Sant’ Antonio Abate” (note 14), is more selective but more informative.


The unfolding of the attributes in the St. Anthony woodcut into a scene reinforces the work's recursive character. The woodcut “mentions” states of the soul—the physiological and mental conditions of the depicted votaries—in order to identify the seated saint. But those mentions are also “uses” of the depictions, in the sense that describes a plausible scene that might map onto someone’s experience of reality.

60. See also a late fourteenth-century Florentine triptych that pairs Anthony and Christopher on the exterior wings; F. Zeri, Italian Paintings in the Walters Art Gallery (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1976), no. 9. The inscription below St. Christopher on that triptych promises protection from illness for anyone who looks at the image that day; St. Anthony, however, is described not as a healer, but as a lamp of true light, a teacher, a master, and a traveler. At Isenheim, Grünewald pairs Anthony and Sebastian on the exterior wings; see Hayum (note 17), pp. 17–20.

61. Kriss-Rettenbeck suggests that the main function of the St. Anthony woodcuts was propaganda for the order, a hint to us to exercise caution when assessing their purpose and use (note 7), pp. 25–27.


64. Neither the two shields with crosses on either side of Anthony’s head nor the bird have ever been explained. For various reasons, plausible but not decisive, our print has been associated with Swabia, perhaps the town of Ulm; the watermark is shared by two other early woodcuts, Schreiber (note 2), nos. 471 and 1000; see Origins of European Printmaking (note 2), p. 297.


66. One could also hope for contact with relics of the thaumaturge in southern Germany because Antonite clerics used to travel from town to town bearing relics and collecting alms. But few viewers of the woodcut were likely to have seen anything like the scene it depicted. No doubt a contemporary would never have posed to himself the question of the historical or topographical siting of the scene. The question would have made no sense. The image represents a state of affairs outside of time: Anthony (or his relics) heals all those who suffer, yesterday and today and tomorrow, from St. Anthony’s fire.

67. Fenelli (ibid.), p. 138, is citing a text condemning the practice. The relic-driven alms campaign covered all of Germany by 1395. See Clementz (note 17), pp. 147–172. Some relics of Anthony were permanently transferred to Arles and to Milan, but the order fought fiercely to limit the fragmentation.

that they represent the ordeals of real people and so enter into possible overlap with the state of mind and body of a person outside the picture, a person looking at the picture and hoping not to fall ill.

The *Enchantress* by Dosso Dossi is also recursive, but it does not invite its beholders to project themselves directly into the fiction. There is no place held in the picture for the beholder. There are no immediate existential stakes for the beholder—no interest, in the classical sense. Most people encountering that painting in its original (or for that matter its current) setting understand how to approach it—namely, with the mind, with no expectation that it help with an urgent practical problem, but rather that it is a wondering, savoring, ruminating delight. The painting represents various modes of cultic or magical interaction between mind and thing, but only to stage a comparison with the different kind of interaction it offered its own beholders. The beholder of the painting by Dosso dominates time. The beholder of the woodcut, by contrast, is afraid that he or she will be dominated by time. Contingency and emergent experience have been inducted into the picture through the referential elements, the attributes which are at the same time starting to resemble portraits.

The convulsed, indecorous temporality of suffering was not alien to the pictorial tradition: Think only of the Crucifixion—the writhing of the thieves—or the myriad Christian martyrdom scenes. Martyrs were placeholders, role models, for ordinary beholders. But how hard it must have been for most Christians in practice to imagine themselves before an imperial tribunal in third-century Rome, persevering in their faith in the face of a gruesome ordeal. The effects of St. Anthony’s fire were vivid and near. The woodcut hints at the power of this disease and others, above all the plague, to upset not only lives but also social hierarchy. Money could buy salvation but not health. The rhyme between the knight on the right and the crippled votary below him, between the sword and the crutch, brings out the image’s biopolitical dimension.

Portraits of donors keep a respectful distance from the targets of their devotion, revealing no state of mind other than steady attentiveness. They hope for salvation. The votaries of St. Anthony are interested in a less abstract goal: not salvation but cure, the redemption not of the soul but of the body. They do not contemplate the saint in tranquility, but press inward, wrapping their arms around the arms of his throne, daring to approach the hem of his robe. Here there are three time-frames. The lowest register of figures invokes the onset of a disease and a panic-stricken journey. The middle register invokes a distant prayer—a performative entry into a contract—a cure, and a journey. Suspended from the rail above the throne, finally, is the spellbinding display of offerings, an archive of past suffering that proves the efficacy of the system. All these time-frames are bodily and experiential, making no claims at all about what happens to the soul after death. The picture, as well as the cult of St. Anthony that it describes, breaks with the salvational function of devotion. One was supposed to turn to the saints for help in securing the immortality of the soul. Votaries of St. Anthony are more interested in the integrity of their bodies.

The picture heightens tension by contrasting the urgency of the sufferers with the saint’s implacability. The enthronement is exploited as way of introducing drama. Now we are well beyond the rhetorical range of mere attributes, for the picture has been transformed from a simple portrait, whose efficacy followed from its authenticity, into a commentary on interaction between humans and the divine in general.

The woodcut of St. Anthony describes neither the behavior of the first witnesses of Christ’s Passion, remote in time and space, nor the behavior of characters from an epic poem based on legendary stories, as Dosso’s painting does, but rather, the behavior of people one might actually know. It is a scene that one might end up joining one day. One prayed to St. Anthony at home, perhaps before a woodcut attached to the wall; one begged to be spared or cured. The woodcut provided the focal point of prayer, and at the same time presented the future as a tree of possibilities. One person fails to seek the saint’s grace and is punished with illness; he must make his way on damaged limbs to the shrine to make amends. One person seeks out the Antonites and submits to an examination—the clerics were known for their diagnostic skill. Another asks for a cure in exchange for proof of respect; he is cured and undertakes a promised pilgrimage. Another seeks relief from a local medicine woman, an adept of herbal cures. Still another dies, unaccountably ignored by the healer. Another tempts fate, does nothing, and survives. The theology of the votive exchange insisted that the offering was a good-faith fulfillment of a promise made after the saint had performed the cure. After all, it was the votary whose integrity was to be tested, not the saint’s. But the documents suggest that plenty of believers made their sacrifices before the cure, as propitiations or bribes.69

There were many choices. Pilgrimage is voluntary, not obligatory.  

The woodcut is a *scenario*: a script outlining what might happen in the future. The scenario is a term of art developed by the Italian comedy, the *commedia dell’arte*. It is a written sketch of the plot that allows for improvisation; it is not a forecast, nor is it a prescription, nor does it ramify infinitely. It is a bounded tree of possible outcomes that helps people deal with contingency by manipulating expectations of likelihood. The scenario contains several different narratives of how things will unfold in the future. The hypothetical narratives influence beliefs about likelihood. The key to the grip of the scenario on its beholders is the compulsion to project the self into the tree of contingencies. The votaries are placeholders for the real beholders. The possibility that you might find yourself suspended in the subjunctive mood of the scenario creates interest.

Hagiographical images show vivid scenes, as if quoted from a Crucifixion or a Lamentation. The tomb scene in the Vatican *Vita* panel of Margaret of Antioch may represent a woman in childbirth. And yet such images are not scenarios, for until the image is set in motion by the medium of print—until it is liberated from the altarpiece—the beholder will not enter into a direct, one-to-one relationship with the scene. The woodcut is mobile, easily penetrating the domestic and bodily spheres. The image of the wax hand is now brought right into people’s hands. The medium of the print makes the connection. The Antonites tried to control the proliferation of altars dedicated to St. Anthony. In 1445 they persecuted a hermit who had set up a shrine to the saint outside the sway of the Order. A compromise was reached: The hermit could keep his altar but had no right to display an image of Anthony. The dissemination of woodcuts or small panel paintings into private spaces was harder to control.

Grünewald’s retable at the Antonite hospital at Isenheim was a complex symbolic machine offering a guide for a “total therapy” of the patient, body and soul, health and salvation. But the allegorical mediation of a retable is considerable. Grünewald’s iconographical inventions create complex parallels among Christ, Anthony, and patient. The experience of the painted panels was supplemented by sermons; by the various participatory theologies of the late middle ages encouraging an Imitatio Christi; and by lore, the subliterary mesh of stories and plays that connected Christian myth to everyday life. Paintings impose a filter of allegory and convention between myth and experience, not to mention their forbidding association with the altar. A woodcut like ours is suballegorical.

There were other printed images that invited projection, for example the image of the bedridden and dying man that often accompanied the text known as the *Ars moriendi*, warning the beholder to settle the state of his soul before death. What was the difference between this and the image of pilgrimage? The *Ars moriendi* confronted the beholder with a simple, even if not easy, binary choice: Learn to die properly, or else. In this way it is analogous to the image of the Temptation of St. Anthony. The message of that scene is obvious: You are supposed to resist temptation. A scenario, by contrast, projects a more ambiguous and branching plurality of plots.

The scenario is completely unlike a script for ritual behavior. Ritual tends to “intercept” all attempts at reflexive communication, such as the recursivity or self-observation that complex works like our print invite.
An individual cannot just barge into a ritual with all his or her cares and fears on display. Individuals involved in rituals are not supposed to communicate with one another as individuals, “out of character.” The ritual is immersive and participatory, whereas the scenario involves shuttling back and forth between distance and self-projection. The woodcut devirtualizes the scene at a shrine, which would still have been governed by ritual and conventions.

At the shrine, one would approach relics encased within an altar or a reliquary. One would see others, suffering or healed, making their pleas or fulfilling their vows. One would see the display of gifts, in effect a portrait gallery, a display of images matched one to one with real individuals. At the shrine, the individual, no matter how humble, portrays himself. The pilgrim’s bodily presence alone is already a kind of self-portrait, for in her devotions the pilgrim is making an image of herself, for other pilgrims. The individuals remain anonymous, but nonetheless they perform for others, and they deposit, in the form of wax body parts, self-portraits. The feet and hands refer to individuals even if the content of the reference is lost. The wax body parts lack any differentiating marks. They were not individually commissioned but were mass produced by artisans, for purchase “off the rack,” probably from a shop located near the shrine. But the context creates them as portraits. The site and the display railing signify that this very object has made its way out of the artisan’s shop and into the hands of a votary. Simply by purchasing the object and transferring it from shop to shrine, the votary makes it his own.

Some images representing appeals for saintly intercession include depictions of kneeling petitioners whose reference is ambiguous. In the St. Anthony panel by the Master of Fabriano, for example, the kneeling donors with their generic facial features might be generic votaries (fig. 3). But it is also possible that the figures in that painting refer to real individuals, perhaps the very family who commissioned the picture. If so, then they are portraits, despite the low degree of resemblance. The wax body parts at a shrine similarly occupy a middle referential state. Their target of reference—the individual whose limb was healed—is quickly forgotten. But the medium of wax creates an effect of a direct connection to a person. Someone was here, the wax foot says.

To behold a display of wax hands and feet and organs is something like coming across a box of unlabelled nineteenth-century photographs. They are portraits even if we don’t know the names of the portrayed. The form of the portrait photograph, even if severed from its content, suffices to create a contact between the living and the dead, or the well and the sick. The rhetoric of the photograph is so potent that a daguerreotype even of an unknown subject is more compelling than almost any painted portrait, or let us say all but the most remarkable painted portraits. The wax ex voto exerts a similar pull and fascination by virtue of its indexicality: or rather, its rhetoric of indexicality, for the wax limb was not in fact cast from a real limb. The medium of wax was the preferred medium for the ex voto, because it symbolized the tight link to individual experience that no painting, no poem, and no ritual could ever have.

The model of the body part, besides being a gift of valuable wax, introduces a further concept of sacrifice, one not covered by the votive system. The wax body part may also suggest that the vengeful saint required from the victim, if he expected the fiery disease to abate, a sacrifice of flesh. In that case, the wax model must be understood as a representation not of a healed extremity, but of a diseased and disfigured or even amputated extremity, a hand or foot surrendered to the thaumaturge as the price of the cure. Only then does the story of suffering end.

The possibility that the wax models represent not healed but irreversibly damaged limbs, thus invoking the most literal possible concept of self-sacrifice, is supported by evidence that at some shrines one might have seen displays of real amputated hands and feet, dried or mummified. Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola reported in 1502 that at an Antonite cloister he saw “scorched limbs and bones” “suspended from the doorposts of the sanctuary.”

The body parts in Beham’s St. Anthony woodcut, which hang not at a tomb but on an exterior wall, have different shapes from the wax models as well as a shriveled or sinewy character (fig. 8). Laura Fenelli wondered whether the shrine scene in the Antonite frescoes at the church of the Tau in Pistoia might depict a box full not of wax models but of real hands and feet, amputated limbs preserved as true relics of diseased but now cured bodies. In the woodcut representing the Altötting pilgrimage, the man with the

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77. Cited in Hayum (note 17), pp. 31–32. She also presents evidence of amputations at the Antonite hospitals.

78. Fenelli, “Sant’ Antonio Abate” (note 14), p. 247. Elsewhere Fenelli has collected examples suggesting that such offerings were later misunderstood as minatory displays of the punished bodies of blasphemers against St. Anthony or other sacrilegous criminals; Dall’eremo alla stalle; S. Antonio Abate tra testi e immagini (Rome and Bari: Laterza, forthcoming). I am grateful to Laura Fenelli for sharing these texts with me. On cults associated with the bodies and body parts of executed criminals, see Kriss-Rettenbeck (note 7), pp. 19–25.
crutch in the foreground, missing one foot, also holds a foot in his hand, as if he were offering a part of his own body to appease the Virgin and stave off further punishment (fig. 4). The predella of an altarpiece by Hans Fries in the Franziskanerkirche of Freiburg im Üechtland (Switzerland) (1506) represents a devotee at the shrine of St. Anthony of Padua carrying his own amputated hand. The amputated limb is the most powerfully signifying self-portrait, a physical sample of the self: a relic of a still-living body, in fact. It is an “auto-icon,” to invoke Jeremy Bentham’s term for his own preserved and fully dressed body, still on display to this day at University College, London.

The wax model displaces the idea of self-sacrifice from the body itself to a mere object. This is the key to the drama of the shrine scene. Depictions of tomb shrines sustain this drama because they do not make it easy to distinguish—or can get away with not bothering to distinguish—between the severed, mumified foot and the wax model that represents a spared foot.

The wax body part is often treated in the scholarly literature together with the life-sized wax or silver effigy. The body part is understood as a less expensive and elaborate version of the effigy. Many a votary must have wished that she could afford to represent herself in true proportions, either as a sculpture in precious material or as a wax effigy outfitted with real clothes and hair and with painted semblant features, rather than as a mere hand or foot. The effigy, like the humble body part, fundamentally represents an expenditure fulfilling a vow. But it does something else that the body part cannot: By representing the votary in an attitude of devotion, it places her in permanent attendance on the shrine. The votary deputizes the effigy to pray for her. The effigy represents, to the saint and to pilgrims, what the votary wishes she could do, namely, train her heart and mind unceasingly on the divine. With an effigy you fulfill your promise, thus closing the deal struck at the moment of crisis, but in addition you recommend yourself to the saint. The body part does not represent attention or attendance. The body part, more purely an offering, closes the cycle once and for all.

The double function of the votive effigy is made clear by a documented example of a silver effigy that was melted down for the silver but replaced by a dummy. In this way, the clerics could make use of the silver, but the votary could go on with his motionless virtual devotions indefinitely.

The wax and silver full-body effigies are often compared to painted representations of kneeling donors, on walls or panels. A celebrated example of the latter is the Madonna of Canon George van der Paele by Jan van Eyck (Bruges, Groeningemuseum, 1436). Here the mortal donor and the holy personages share the same pictorial space and are portrayed in the same scale. Many lesser patrons and artists employed the same sensational device, for example in a small panel by Hans Memling (fig. 10). The unidentifed man at the left kneels in permanent attendance on the Virgin and the saints surrounding her: Catherine on the left, and on the right, with her tower, Barbara. The rhyme with the woodcut representing devotions to St. Anthony is obvious. The enthroned figure is flanked by two figures on each side. The mortal man at the left finds an awkward position neither in nor out of the scene, symbolizing the ambiguity of his relation to the holy figures. The sacred fire or chaos is now translated into drapery folds. Churchgoers who paused before this altarpiece would know that someone with means had dedicated resources whether this counts as magic or not has vexed the literature. Warburg and Schlosser thought so; Kriss-Rettenbeck, Brückner, and van der Velden argue that the effigies were simply representations of a spiritual process or attitude (see note 7 above). See also van der Velden (note 7), pp. 223–245, and “Medici Votive Images and the Scope and Limits of Likeness,” in The Image of the Individual: Portraits in the Renaissance, ed. N. Mann and L. Syson (London: British Museum Publications, 1998), p. 133. Bacci (note 7), p. 194, sees the full-body effigy not as a survival of ancient superstition—Warburg and Schlosser’s argument—but a phenomenon of the late middle ages related to the increasing involvement of the individual in public religion. Bacci’s view is supported by the fact that the custom of leaving models of body parts is historically continuous with pagan antiquity, whereas the effigy is not; see A. Rossi, “Tracce di continuità culturale fra paganesimo e cristianesimo: le offerte votive,” in Ex voto tra storia e antropologia (note 7), pp. 29–34.

81. Van der Velden (note 7), p. 175.

to downplay the origins of the vow in suffering—in emergent time—and instead to strive for an image of composure and stability. The effigy represented a constancy of purpose untouched by time. Some effigies, it seems, did preserve a memory of the unsettled state of body and soul that set the whole process in motion. In 1497 Giuliano Guizzelmi, on behalf of a votary, paid for a wax image of a kneeling man in camicia—that is, in his shirt—which he then placed at the Madonna delle Carceri. It would be unthinkable, however, that a donor represent himself in a state of partial undress in a painting. And indeed most of the wax and silver effigies, as far as we can tell, represented their subjects not only intact but in states of dignity, composure, and worldly splendor, just as did painted portraits. The body part suggests by its incompleteness the anguish of uncertainty to his relationship with the Virgin Mary, in worshipful respect for her person and in hopes that she might intercede with her son on behalf of the mortal soul. That visitor may not know who exactly is represented in the painting. Such portraits were not identified by inscriptions, but at best by a coat of arms. Kneeling figures were recognizable as portraits by virtue of their compliance with conventions of posture and placement and by a rhetoric of physiognomic realism. They read as portraits, indeed as self-portraits, in the sense that the agency of the commissioning votary dominated the agency of the fabricating artisan, unless the painting were done by a famous or autarchic painter. It was no different at the shrine.

The similarities between the painted donor portrait and the wax or silver full-body effigy reveal the difference between the effigy and the mere body part. The votary who hopes to maintain a permanent virtual presence at a shrine through an effigy may be tempted
that is the matrix of devotional resolution. The painted donor portrait or the wax effigy with hands clasped and expressionless features, by contrast, announces the intention to overcome contingency altogether. There is no reference to any specific occasion.57

The effigy in camicia and the body part, as well as chains and manacles and other relics of a crisis, preserved the sense of the “emergent occasion” that set the devotional cycle in motion. Every artifact is “occasioned.” It is the product of unique circumstances and actions. An artifact that strives to transcend its own occasion—most any cult image, for example—will try to efface the traces of its own historical production. The votive offering does just the opposite. Its entire meaning is its preservation of a unique experience of suffering. The moment of origin is not allowed to vanish in the representation. Whereas most representations—portraits of saints, histories, symbolic images—derived their authority by pointing back beyond their own mere fabrication to a prestigious origin in the remotest past, the votive offering pointed a more recent event in the life of an individual: a new origin. The ex voto registers an autobiographical impulse. The individual, encouraged to imitate Christ, performs his or her story in public. All these tendencies were only augmented in the small painted panels that would proliferate from the sixteenth century to the present.88

The votive scenario seems true to life because it describes a passage from health to illness to health that we have all experienced. It is not difficult to imagine the body in a state of steady well-being: we call that good health. The painting or effigy that represents the donor in permanent attendance on the shrine, by contrast, is not interested in health but in the soul. The work helps the donor achieve for his soul what he knows his body is capable of: equilibrium, ease, security. But the soul is never at rest; as long as the soul can foresee the inevitability of the unforeseen, there will always be anxiety. Devotional practice is designed to soothe this anxiety. The composed features and limbs of the kneeling painted devout are attempts to bring into being an equilibrium of the soul. The donor is represented in a state of spiritual “health.”

The wax body parts were never the focal point of anybody’s devotions. No divine power flowed through them. They were just tokens of expenditure, and a simple spelling out of the nature of the disaster. And yet they were the densest points in the whole scene, whether the real scene at the shrine or the depicted scene in the woodcut. The body parts are dense because they are places within the representation (the scene at the shrine, the woodcut) less subject to representational codes. They map onto people’s lives. They are “living images” in the sense developed in a recent book by Fredrika Jacobs.89

It is the same in the fictional painting by Dosso Dossi: the densest and most compelling point in the scene—the enchantress is looking straight at it—is the cluster of mannikins suspended in the tree, weird materializations of the souls of the transformed soldiers.

The woodcut image that not only shows the scene but also puts it in your hands is a flattened pictorial field with unexpected depths. It compares conventionalized ritual behavior to the surging, stalling flow of everyday consciousness, summoned by the wax limbs. The print appears homogeneous but is in fact an unsettled house of many compartments. The print reduces the four-dimensional experience at the shrine to two dimensions. And yet the experience of the woodcut is in important ways like the experience at the shrine. It “belongs” to its beholder in the same way that a pilgrim’s perceptions “belong” to her. For unlike the expensive painting mounted on an altar with an embedded portrait, the woodcut was not commissioned. The woodcut did not in any way testify to any other individual’s experience and will. The scene at the shrine, the collective performance involving self and strangers and objects, was a form of publication. The print amplified that publication in the sense that it delivered the scene into the hands and homes of strangers. It preserved the essential features of the publication, displaying votive offerings that were instantly legible as rudimentary self-portraits and thus as placeholders for the beholder. It was a script indicating different points of entry into the votive system. Within

86. Votive body parts apparently did not represent the limbs in their diseased state. Holmes, however, mentions silver ex votos with marks of the plague (note 7, p. 163). See also Andree (note 7), pp. 114–115. In most cases it would seem that the severed status was enough to represent trauma.

87. Bacci (note 7), pp. 218–219, makes the same point: In the votive panel—the small-scale image that has dominated votive exchanges since the sixteenth century—the accent is on the accident or illness or on the concession of grace, whereas effigies or painted self-portraits are about commendatio and the securing of a privileged relation to the sacred in the future.


the scene at the shrine, in the presence of the saint, the votive offering restored order. But within the *scenario*, the script of the many possible scenes, the offering took on a new meaning. The distance provided by the modern medium of print brought this second meaning to the surface. It opened a window onto a hidden depth of other people’s experiences that was both the basis for the working of the scenario—one superimposes oneself on the ex voto—and the introduction of a wild temporality that most pictures were not equipped to handle. The votive scenario, a story that invited projection, anticipated symbolic forms developed only much later, not pictures at all but texts: the first-person confessional or conversion narrative encouraged by the Protestant Reformation, or even the bourgeois novel of the eighteenth century, especially when it took the form of an astonishing but finally believable first-person narrative.