Real objects, fake contexts

The "real religious thing" in the museum

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Real Objects, Fake Contexts: “The Real Religious Thing” in the Museum

How do visitors experience “the real thing” (TRT) and authenticity during their interactions with religious objects in the museum?

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Abstract

This thesis examines what it means for visitors to experience authenticity when interacting with religious objects in the museum. Authenticity and the display of religious objects are both important themes for contemporary museums, yet previous research on experienced authenticity in the museum did not include religious objects into their analysis.

Through in-depth interviews and questionnaires, this thesis contributes to the existing academic debate by adding visitors' experiences of authenticity with religious objects into the discussion. It shows how these experiences fit into the existing frameworks, not because they are identical to experiences with non-religious objects, but because the existing frameworks on authenticity do not accommodate a comparative study of experiences. Building on Latham's TRT-framework, this study proposes a new, reimagined framework. This reimagined framework, which uses the axes "cognitive-sensory" and "inward-outward oriented" in order to map visitors' experiences, could be used for future comparative research into authentic experiences.

Contents

1. Introduction

When visiting the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in 2018, I was awestruck by all the gorgeously crafted Haida woodwork, the amazing and historically significant carvings by Bill Reid, and the enormous grand hall filled with tens of totem poles and massive wooden canoes. The exhibitions told me stories of First Nation potlatches, traditional ways of building houses, dances, and all manners of rites and customs important to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada. Further along in my visit, the museum showed me objects from all over the world: opera costumes from China, thorn carvings from Yoruba, masks from Sri Lanka, and ceramics from Slovakia.

There was one object, however, that has deeply engraved itself into my memory: a Kwakwaka'wakw mask of the Raven. Or, rather, the box that it was stored in. Because there, amidst all the objects in the depot-style permanent-exhibition, stood one wooden box. Placed on the wall above it hung a sign, explaining that this is how the masks–with which I was surrounded at this place in the exhibition–should all be stored when they were not being used in ritual. However, due to the colonial history within Canada, and how close Kwakwaka'wakw culture had come to being eradicated by the colonial system, the masks now stood displayed within the museum in order to share the culture, and to prevent it from being forgotten.

In an ideal world however, I should not have been able to see the masks. As a Dutch person with no First Nation heritage I probably would never have been present at any First Nation ritual, and the mask would have been stored within the box, inaccessible for me to see. Instead, I stood surrounded by them: tens of masks, all outside of their boxes, all displayed, as is the case in many other anthropology museums around the world. Without the displayed box, I never would have questioned whether I was meant to see these things, or whether it was “real” to see them displayed like this.

Suddenly, I was confronted with a doubt about the rest of the exhibition. If this is how the object really should be stored, then what did that make the rest of the exhibition? Fake? Disingenuous? How much of what I was seeing was “real”?

My questions do not imply criticism of the display, which was created through consultation with many First Nation people, who all had their own reasons for showing the objects despite their prescribed ways of storage. What the display did, however, was make explicit a fundamental dilemma at the core of the museum: how can a museum show “the real thing”?

The museum is stuck in a paradox of authenticity. As an environment, the museum is created to tell a certain story, yet it aims to show “the real thing”. The exhibitions, often carefully and thoughtfully crafted, are intended to show the way “things truly are”. However, most–if not all–objects within an exhibition were never intended to be placed in a museum. Instead, they have been transferred from their original environment into a museum’s collection, where they now stand displayed in a new context: a museal context. Here, they are surrounded by other objects, displays, informational signs, soundscapes and visitors. For some objects, the informational signs surrounding them are contested: curators might describe the objects differently than the objects’ source communities would.

Still, despite all of its *artificiality*, and despite debates within the museum community on what the real story behind an object might be, visitors still do feel like they are experiencing "the real thing" when visiting a museum. Furthermore, studies have shown that it is important for visitors to feel that they are seeing something authentic: without it, they value their museum visit less (Hampp and Schwann 2014). How is that possible? What does it mean for a visitor to experience authenticity during their visit? What causes it, and what kind of feeling results from such an "authentic" encounter? What does it mean for something to be "authentic" or "real" in the first place? And how does the context of the museum influence this?

Research into the ways visitors experience authenticity and feel as if they are seeing something "real" and meaningful is not only relevant for scholarly discussions on authenticity and museum anthropology. Results of this study could be used by museums and heritage organizations in order to create further engaging exhibitions for their audiences: if the museum knows which parts of their exhibitions visitors particularly connect with, they can incorporate this knowledge into their exhibition design process.

It is important that museums are able to create engaging, meaningful exhibitions because, as informal learning environments, they take on a crucial education role within society. As Bennett –albeit rather critically–showed in his re-examination of the origins of the museum, museums have been used by groups in power to attempt to transform a people from a "population" to a "civilized society" (Bennet 1999a). Museums are furthermore "important identity-generating institutions that both preserve and perpetuate ideology and culture" (Shaindlin 2019). After the pandemic, visitors in the Netherlands have not returned to the museum, and many museums see their visitor rates significantly lower than they were in the years before.[1] While there are a plethora of reasons for this, knowing how to create–even more–engaging, meaningful and "real" exhibitions might help raise the attendance numbers back up.

This study aims to gain insight into the workings of authenticity in the museum, and find how visitors can experience authenticity and something "real" during their visits. In particular, this research will focus on these 'real' experiences with religious objects. While some research has been done on visitor's experiences of authenticity regarding secular objects, religious objects have been overlooked in these discussions: a fact that will be elaborated upon in chapter two. This is particularly remarkable considering the important role religion has played in history and continues to play for many people today.

In order to reach this aim, this study centers on the following question:

How do visitors experience "the real thing" (TRT) and authenticity during their interactions with religious objects in the museum?

Before delving deeper into this particular research, first let us consider what other studies have been done before. Chapter two will examine what has been written on the topics of museum visitors, religious objects, and authenticity, and point out the particular gaps in research that this study aims to fill. In particular, it will show how the visitors' experiences of musealized religious

[1] https://nos.nl/artikel/2429680-waar-blijft-het-publiek-cultuursector-worstelt-sinds-corona, accessed on 24-05-2022.

objects is a topic little explored, and why it matters to include religious objects in the discussion of authenticity.

Following this, chapter three will expand on the frameworks I have chosen for this study, and explain their relevance for the final research. It will turn to a theoretical discussion on what it means for something to be "authentic", how visitor-object-interactions can be understood, and why the TRT-framework created by Latham seems the best fit for understanding authenticity in this study. It will furthermore introduce the philosophical school of phenomenology, and explain how it influences this research's approach.

Chapter four discusses both the methodology and method of this research, and expands on the way the interviews and questionnaires were executed. Following this, chapter five will present the results of the research. It will first introduce the four interview participants using their own words, and will then discuss the major themes found within their interviews. Then, it compares the results of the questionnaires with those of the interviews, to see whether the themes discussed in the four interviews are representative for a larger group, or if there were themes that arose from the questionnaires that were not discussed in the interviews.

Once the results have been discussed, chapter six will compare them with previous work and frameworks about authenticity in the museum; the object-knowledge-framework and the TRT-framework in particular, showing that the TRT-framework does not allow experiences with different kinds of museum objects and experiences by people from different backgrounds to be compared. Here, I will propose a new framework, a reimagined TRT-framework, and argue that these adjustments are necessary to enable future research to analyze and compare different visitor experiences of authenticity.

Lastly, chapter seven offers a conclusion that both reflects on the findings of the present study, and sketches possible directions for future research: how did this research improve our understanding of the way visitors experience authenticity in the museum, and what new questions does this raise?

2. Mapping the field of study

The research subject of this thesis can be divided into roughly three main themes: visitor experiences, religious objects in the museum, and authenticity. Much has been written on these topics; it would therefore be useful to begin by reflecting on what has already been done. The chapter will begin laying out what research has been done on museum visitors, which is a developing yet small field, continuing into an exploration of the institute of the museum and the place of religion within it. Then, it will trace various thoughts on authenticity, including the authenticity of art and objects, to show that there is no clear consensus on what it truly means for something to be "authentic". Lastly, the chapter will discuss how the themes have been previously combined within research, in order to show how this project can shine a new light on these themes.

Researching the museum visitor

The study of museums was revolutionized in 1989 by the publication of *The New Museology*, edited by Peter Vergo (1989). This work initiated a more reflexive turn within museology, following the one that took place within anthropology several years earlier (Michael 2015). Whereas previously museums had mostly been considered as solely places of research and preservation, this volume looked at the way museums were placed within society, and what socio-political role they should fulfill. This new perspective on the role of museums within society was influential in many publications on museums afterwards (Jones 1993, Lum 2020, Silverman 2009, Robertson 2019).

In his chapter entitled "The Exhibitionary Complex", Tony Bennett continued this renewed focus on the role of museums for society, including the effect museums have on their visitors. Drawing on Foucault, he located the gaze of the visitor as essential for the museum visit. Bennett argued that the visitors not only observe the displayed object but also their fellow visitors, ensuring that all visitors behave well and become upstanding citizens. The museum thus becomes a means for control that initially begins top-down but then becomes self-regulating (Bennett 1995a).

This top-down vision of the museum within academic debate might be influenced by the way researchers have examined the museum and its effects on visitors. While the field of museology has grown significantly since *The New Museology* was published, visitors have been understudied within the discussions. Instead, a lot of research has focused on the design of exhibits, their content, curatorial experiences, and even solely on the work that goes on behind-the-scenes during object-registration (Buggeln, Paine, and Plate 2017, Paine 2013, Arya 2011).

Why has this top-down approach been so prevalent within the study of museums? Harris Shettel, in his review on visitors' experiences, suggests varying practical reasons for this lack of research: human resources, funding, time. Yet Shettel also proposes that this might be because researching visitors would take the power away from the curator (Shettel 2008). In recent years the role of the curator in the museum has become contested: are they truly the keepers of knowledge, or are they in some way defending their monopoly on the production and mediation of knowledge, which leaves them in a position of power: the people who are in the position to decide on what the truth is, hold a position of power in society (Foucault and Gordon 1980). Particularly when it comes to

indigenous objects, the expertise of the curator is being questioned, and with the rise of co-curation it appears that the curator is more-and-more becoming a facilitator for the source communities (which have often historically been marginalized) to let their voices be heard (De Jong and Grit 2016, Clifford 1999, Lonetree 2012, Sauvage 2010).

That is not to say no research on visitors has been done at all. Some very early work was already done in the first half of the 20th century (Stephens 1928, Dewey 1937). When looking at more recent scholarship some scholars, like Bitgood, Pine and Gilmore and Shettel have taken an approach based in economics. They assume that visitors make rational choices during their visits, based on various factors, and create systems through which to analyze the cost-value ratio of visits. What exactly these factors are, remains up for debate (Bitgood 2013, Gilmore, Pine, and Pine 1999). Others, like Falk and Dierking, have looked at the way pre-visit expectations line up with the actual visitor experiences, and consider the main purpose of the museum to be educational (Falk and Dierking 1993, Falk and Dierking 2000, Falk and Dierking 2013, Falk 2004). Still others look at visitor satisfaction (Pekarik, Doering, and Karns 1999, De Rojas and Camarero 2006) or the way a museum visit can improve the visitor's wellbeing (Packer and Bond 2010).

Some scholars, such as Cameron and Gatewood, argue that sometimes museum visitors are looking for a deeper and meaningful experience during their visit: a numinous experience. They have coined the term "numen-seekers" for these people (Cameron and Gatewood 2003). This fits with a more recent approach to visitor studies, taken by Falk. In his research, Falk takes a new approach to understanding museum's visitors. Rather than organizing them by demographics (age, gender, nationality, etc.) he groups the visitors based on their main motivation to come to the museum. One of his types of visitors is, thus, the "recharger", viz., a person looking for a deeper connection with the exhibition they are visiting (Falk 2016). Other visitor archetypes include the "explorers", who are hoping to learn something new during their visit, and the "facilitators", whose visit is primarily motivated to accompany their social group (e.g. parents who accompany their children). In general, the focus on "the visitor" as a homogenous and rational person is disappearing. Instead, the focus has shifted towards the nuanced and varied motivations and perspectives that visitors have.

Whereas visitors themselves are not the focus of studies very often, the "theoretical visitor" and their possibility for holding various perspectives have been considered on a more theoretical level by a.o. De Jong and Grit, in their adaptation of Guattari and Deleuze's discussion of de- and recontextualization to the museum: it is in the interactions between the visitors and the objects that knowledge is created (Guattari and Deleuze 1987, De Jong and Grit 2015).

(Religious) objects and the museum

Following De Jong and Grit, the objects are equally important as the visitor when it comes to studying experiences in the museum. What happens to objects when they enter the museum has been a topic of many debates. Current-day consensus seems to be that objects are de-contextualized and re-contextualized within the new museum setting (Parr 2005, MacGregor Wise 2005, Preziosi and Farago 2004). Influenced by new ideas on object agency and object-subject-interactions, various frameworks have been created to explain the way objects interact with their surroundings and with people (e.g. Latour 2005, Gell 1998, Hodder 2012). The objects'

context matters for its meaning; let us therefore take a small detour to reflect on what it means for an object to be in the museum. What kind of environment is the museum?

Whereas historically museums were considered a place for research and preservation, once they opened up to the public in the late 18th and 19th century they were also in charge of educating their visitors (Bennett 1995b). Therein lies power in the museum: they take on an epistemic function and thus have power to decide whose stories are being told, and which objects are used to represent these stories. Sigfúsdóttir notes that exhibitions are sites for the *generation* of knowledge rather than only the *reproduction* of it (Sigfúsdóttir 2020). A useful term to understand such an epistemic reading of museums is what Conn describes as the "object-based epistemology" around which museums are usually organized: the objects themselves on the one hand, and the context (described by Conn as the systematics') into which they are placed on the other (Conn 1998, 22). Moreover, as Hooper-Greenhill writes, "learning in museums is never just about learning about the collections, it is also about the shaping of views about the self" (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 375).

Whereas historically many museums aimed to tell a sort of universal truth, the universal museum is giving way to the integral museum (Brown and Mairesse 2018, 527-529). Considering the growing realization that museums are not apolitical but rather stand within an evolving society, many museums are aiming to tell the stories that have not been told in the museum previously. González and Cury describe this as a movement of curating as caring: caring not only for the objects but also the people they represent (Cury 2019, González 2019). Some scholars, such as Bounia, also emphasize the entertaining nature of the contemporary museum: she describes this as a "prioritization of people rather than objects" (Bounia 2014). This can even be found reflected the very influential International Council Of Museums' most recent definition of the museum:

> A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution *in the service of society* and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and *enjoyment*" ("Museum Definition - International Council of Museums" 2007).[2]

In short, the museum has changed from a place of education and preservation to a social institution: it has become increasingly aware of its social and political place in society, and many museums now work on social programs as well as educational ones through, for example, object-repatriation and cultural initiatives (e.g. Robertson 2019, Lonetree 2012). As part of this, in recent years faith groups have begun demanding control over "their" objects. Simultaneously, curators are realizing that many objects can only be understood within the religious context they originate from (Paine 2013).

With the rise of museal interest in religion, and the increasing opportunities for voices that have been underrepresented to be heard in the museum, the study of religious objects in museums has grown (Promey 2003). In 2019 the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM), a subcommittee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), published a study series

[2] emphasis added by author

entitled *Museology and the Sacred* (ICOFOM 2019). This publication, which was based on a symposium, signals that the role of religion in the museum has become a central topic within current museology. The ICOM is a renowned international network of museums, and one of the most influential organizations in the museal world; having one of their committees dedicate a symposium and publication to the topic of religion in the museum places the topic to the foreground of contemporary museological discussion.

ICOFOM was not the only to show interest on this particular theme: recent publications by Buggeln, Paine and Plate, among others, are shedding more light on the role of religion within the museum (Buggeln, Paine, and Plate 2017, Paine 2013, Orzech 2020). These are not the first to connect the two themes, as the expression of museums being the new temples and museum-visits functioning like rituals go further back in time (Cameron 1971).

Authenticity and experiencing "the real"

Authenticity is another topic relevant for museums, as shown by another ICOM-committee publication. In 2010, the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Archeology and History (ICMAH) published a study called *Original, Copy, Fake, on the Significance of the Object in History and Archeology Museums* (ICMAH 2010). The articles in this publication discuss a multitude of case studies related to the use of copies and replicas in museum exhibitions. The term "authentic" in this publication is used to denote the *original object*, opposed to any copies of the object that might exist. Theories from both Benjamin and Baudrillard are referenced in nearly every article; it seems their approaches have inspired most discussion on authenticity in the museum.

Postmodern approaches to art and tourism studies have been concerned with the "authentic" for almost a century. In his seminal work "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", Walter Benjamin problematized the concept of authenticity in light of new technical developments such as photographs. He argued that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (Benjamin [1935] 2008, 220). The authenticity of a work of art, according to Benjamin, lies within the "aura" of the object: "a unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be" (Benjamin [1935] 2008, 243), and a phenomenon which is not a given property but instead created in the interaction between the object and the viewer. Benjamin's new theory on this authentic "essence" inspired many other scholars to critically think about what authenticity truly means. For example, MacCannell argued that the inverse is true: only once the option of reproduction became available, did the original become "authentic" (MacCannell 1999).

Philosophy of art was not the only field interested in authenticity. Within the field of tourism studies, Wang analyzed many postmodern approaches to authenticity, and found that they are often not so much concerned with factual authenticity of the objects/places, but rather with an *experiential* authenticity. Drawing on Baudrillard, Cohen, Bolz and others, she found that "a postmodernist deconstruction of the authenticity of the original implicitly paves the way to define existential authenticity as an alternative experience in tourism" (Wang 1999, p . 358). Following this new existential authenticity, she divided it into two aspects that are both essential for tourism: intrapersonal (and thus happening within the self and the body) and interpersonal processes (related to communitas). According to Wang, experiential authenticity is thus also a *social*

phenomenon: after reading deconstructionist perspectives, she argues that authenticity is constructed by people and society.

The concept that authenticity is constructed through social interactions also appears in other publications. However, to say that there is any consensus on what creates authenticity within tourism and the museum would be an overstatement. Some take Benjamin's theory that the authentic aura is created through ritual (whether it be religious or secular), and consider the entirety of tourism to be this ritual. Thus, according to Rickly-Boyd, Gable and Handler, tourism creates authenticity (Gable and Handler 1996, Rickly-Boyd 2012).

Other scholars draw on a different post structuralist philosopher in their search for the authentic: Baudrillard's. Miles Orvell draws on Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation, in which Baudrillard argues that in modern society almost all things are composed of references, while the things they refer to are no longer there. Baudrillard calls this a hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994). Orvell, in his discussion on authenticity in historical American culture, argues that authenticity has become a primary value, in contrast to an earlier period during which "imitation" was a key value within American society. Within this discussion, Orvell coined the term "the real thing" (Orvell [1989) 2014). This term, "the real thing", is pivotal for this study and will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

Authenticity of religious objects in museums

When looking specifically at authenticity in museums, several scholars have engaged with the topic. Notable are Penrose, who studied visitor experiences at the Anne Frank Museum, Hampp and Schwan, who quantitatively compared visitor's responses to objects they were told were either originals or replicas, and Latham, who took a phenomenological approach to stories that participants told her about previous, memorable museum visits. All three examined which factors might contribute to experiential authenticity through visitor research (Hamp and Schwann 2014, Latham 2015, Penrose 2020). Their theories are pertinent to this study, and these too will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, as will become clear during that discussion, all three did not include religious objects within their research.

It appears that authenticity and religion are both central topics for museums, but the combination of the two has not yet been explored. Authenticity is not merely a measurable quality of an object, but it is socially created and it is experienced. In order to study authenticity, then, exploring the experience of the visitors could provide valuable insights. Research on religious objects in museums has often overlooked the perspective of the visitors. Simultaneously, research on authenticity within the museum has overlooked religion, by including only secular objects within their discussions. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the discussion of authenticity in the museum by adding experiences with religious objects onto the already existing literature. In order to do so, the following chapter will expand on the existing frameworks, and move into a theoretical discussion on what it means for visitors to "experience authenticity during their interactions with objects".

3. Understanding authenticity in the museum

The main research question, namely "How do visitors experience 'the real thing' (TRT) and authenticity during their interactions with religious objects in the museum?", contains several terms and concepts that should be carefully defined. This chapter will examine the theories and definitions that will be used when answering this question. We shall begin with a closer look at authenticity, and then explore how a phenomenological approach offers a fruitful avenue for studying experiences of authenticity. The chapter will then proceed to discuss object-visitor interactions and the resulting "consciousness" that arises from these interactions using the object-knowledge framework. This framework's interpretation of consciousness will be compared to theories on numinous experiences, unified experiences, and flow experiences, suggesting that these experiences might not be a result of authentic experiences, but rather be a cause of them. Finally, I will compare the results of several visitor studies of experiential authenticity, and argue that Latham's framework for TRT-experiences is the most suitable for the next part of this research.

A closer look at authenticity

As we noted in the previous chapter, the definition of authenticity is still hotly contested. While there is still a lot of scholarly discussion concerning what authenticity truly means, most would agree that authenticity matters to people: visitors value things more once they know them to be "real", whatever is meant by that term (e.g. Penrose 2020, Rickly-Boyd 2012, Rickly-Boyd 2015). Even when the objects themselves are not historical, it has been found that many visitors value objects in the museum more when they perceive them to be the original, 'authentic' objects. In a visitor study done on natural science objects in the museum, Hamp and Schwann (2014) found that the visitors who considered authenticity of importance (which was around half of all visitors) described an increased experience of the exhibit once they knew that the objects were originals.

Historically, heritage management has tended to approach the concept of authenticity rather materialistically, looking only at objects' objective and measurable material qualities in order to decide on their authenticity: who made the object, what is its place of origins, how old is it, etc. (Hampp and Schwan 2014). More recently however, authenticity has been approached from a constructionist perspective, which examines the ways in which authenticity is socially created. Authenticity here is no longer an inherent quality of an object, but rather a status that is granted to an object. In theory, this would mean that the "objective" authentic status of an object would no longer matter, so long as people agree that it is authentic. In museums, this would mean that so long as reproductions are treated in the same way as originals are, they can appear to hold the same level of authenticity (Hampp and Schwan 2014, 350).

This subjective and constructed authenticity is called experiential authenticity, because it is based on how a visitor *experiences* the object. Selwyn (1996) divided this experiential authenticity into two different categories: cool authenticity, and hot authenticity. The former is based on knowledge, and the latter on feeling. Whereas the cool authenticity of an object can mostly be affirmed or denied through by authoritative actors such as scholars (who may be in a position to determine whether the object is an original or a reproduction) its hot authenticity depends on the visitor's beliefs, and is constantly socially created.

Rickly-Boyd (2012) distinguishes between the authenticity of the object and authenticity of the experience. The former is directly linked to the physical object. The latter is created by the visitor's interaction with the "aura" of the object. Rickly-Boyd draws on Benjamin here, and references Benjamin's famous definition of the aura as "a unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be" (Benjamin [1968] 2008, 235 n.5). Further explaining how the aura works, Benjamin writes: "[e]xperience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man [...] to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (Benjamin 1968, 188). In other words, an object's aura is created through the reciprocal interaction with its observer.

Whereas Benjamin argued that this aura is unique to the original object, Rickly-Boyd argues that his second type of authenticity, the authenticity of the experience, is closely related to this interaction with any object's aura. This opens up the possibility of experiencing authenticity with copies and facsimiles in the same way as would be perceived with an original object. Rickly-Boyd calls the process of constructing authenticity "authentication". Concern for the process raises the question: who is doing this authenticating?

One author who has incorporated this important question in her theories of authenticity is Ning Wang. In his article *Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience* Wang (1999) has further expanded on this dichotomy between object-based, and activity-based authenticity, creating a five-part typology of the varying types of authenticity:

1. Object-related "objective": the measurable material qualities of an object that categorize the object as an original.
2. Object-related "constructive": authenticity validated through the visitor's pre-existing knowledge of the object created by education, beliefs and media-representations.
3. Activity-related "existential": authenticity created through "bodily feelings".
4. Activity-related "existential, intra-personal": authenticity driven by "self-making" visitors' attempts to "realize their authentic selves".
5. Activity-related "existential, interpersonal": "in the dimension of inter-human relationship".

In this model, the object-related types could be considered similar to Rickly-Boyd's authenticity of the object, while the activity-related types can be considered similar to his concept of the authenticity of the experience. Furthermore, the Rickly-Boyd's authentication of heritage is reflected in several of the types. In his notion of the object-related "constructive", for example, pre-existing knowledge validates an authentic status of an object: here, visitors consider the objects authentic because they have been told so by people they perceive to be experts: scholars, religious leaders, documentaries, etc.

Wang's model emphasizes the interconnectedness between the physical, the emotional and the cognitive, and leaves room for both influence from the object, the visitor and the external world. More importantly, most of these types of authenticity are "existential" and are thus located with the visitor. In order to better understand these types, Wang argues, the researcher should not look only at the object, but at the visitor experiencing the object as well. To accomplish this, a phenomenological approach would seem most fitting.

Phenomenology: the study of experiences

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena: the way things appear in our experience (Siewert et al. 2003). It is a discipline within philosophy, and can be used to examine first-hand experiences of people, and the meaning they give to these experiences. Based on theories developed by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Brentano, and Heidegger, among others, it embraces the constructed nature of experiences and acknowledges that a person's first-person point of view the only way is that they can understand their surroundings. While it has a basis in psychology, it is not concerned directly with the way cognition works, but instead with how cognition is possible in the first place (Larsen and Adu 2022, 2). In sum, the phenomenologist searches for "direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations, which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide" (Merleau-Ponty, 1978, p. vii). When studying experiences in particular, a phenomenological approach is therefore particularly appropriate.

Within phenomenology there are different schools, which, according to Larsen and Adu, can roughly be divided into two: the transcendental and the existential phenomenology. The first researches thoughts and experiences, the second researches the experience of Being. The discussion of this divide falls beyond the scope of this thesis; it is important, however, to note that I follow here a transcendental approach, inspired by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.[3] The transcendental school of phenomenology argues that *perception* is the sense through which a person receives the sensory input.

A key-element of this approach is the fact that it acknowledges all knowledge is embodied: our physical senses–and not only our minds–are the mediators through which we can know our surroundings. Seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, etc. are all forms of perception. These perceptions then are processed by the individual's subjective experiences. The way in which they are processed depends on their cultural and individual background, and also their physical state of being. Are they tall, short, deaf, blind, etc.? From what perspective can this person experience the world? It is important here to distinguish phenomenological subjectivity from the more commonly used reference to "personal experience/opinion" as a contrast to "objective" reality. Only after the sensory input has been perceived and moved through the subjective "lens" of the person, does it arrive at "consciousness". This term, *consciousness*, will be explained shortly when we turn to a discussion of the Object Knowledge Framework.

Figure 2.1: Process from sensory input to consciousness (Larsen and Adu 2022, 21)

[3] For more explanation on this divide, see Larsen and Adu 2022.

Before examining what exactly the phenomenological interpretation of consciousness entails, let us first further examine the way these processes of sensory input - perception - subjectivity work using the Object Knowledge Framework, which applies these concepts to the visitor experience in the museum.

The Object Knowledge Framework

In order better to understand what exactly happens when a visitor interacts with an object in the museum, Wood and Latham created what they have called the Object Knowledge Framework. Historically, they write, objects were viewed as "texts", which could then be "read" using traditional semiotic methods. Alternatively, objects in the museum could be considered symbols; physical representations of larger concepts and ideas. However, Wood and Latham argue, this approach neglects the physical, embodied dimension of the objects and the visitor's experience. Instead, they propose a new orientation through the idea of a lived experience of objects, that shapes a visitor's understanding towards more an individual and personal meaning (Wood and Latham 2013, 26).

At the basis of this approach lies the idea that an object's meaning is fundamentally unfixed (Heidegger 1967, Hodder 1986, Hooper-Greenhill 2000, Olsen 2010, Pearce 1990, Pearce 1994). Instead, the meaning is *created* through the interaction between the object and the visitor. The pre-existing knowledge and experiences that the visitors bring with them into the museum can shape the way they understand the object. Because every visitor brings with them a unique set of experiences, the objects become entangled in a large rhizome of meaning. Although this might sound similar to the rather traditional understanding of the objects as "symbols" onto which each visitor can project their own meaning, Wood and Latham argue that the actual object does also matter. Given the phenomenological principle that all knowing happens through our physical bodies interacting with a physical world, from an embodied perspective the physical object is the basis of the visitor experience. Thus, the visitor and the object are of equal importance for the final experience (Wood and Latham 2013).

Wood and Latham conclude thus that the museum is "networked": it exists within an entangled web of connections to other museums, organizations, individuals and objects . Within this networked museum,

> experiences and ideas move back and forth in a system that lives and breathes through staff and visitor relationships that are developed across, around and through objects. In a networked museum model, the objects—all of the things of the museum—anchor the webs of information and people across all aspects of museum work (Wood and Latham 2016, 18).

In order to be able to understand and analyze this network, Wood and Latham propose the *Object Knowledge Framework,* arguing that, "the experience of object knowledge is not about separating the object from the subject [the visitor], but instead is about the potential for shared connection between people and objects" (Wood and Latham 2013, 18). Wood and Latham visualize this as the following:

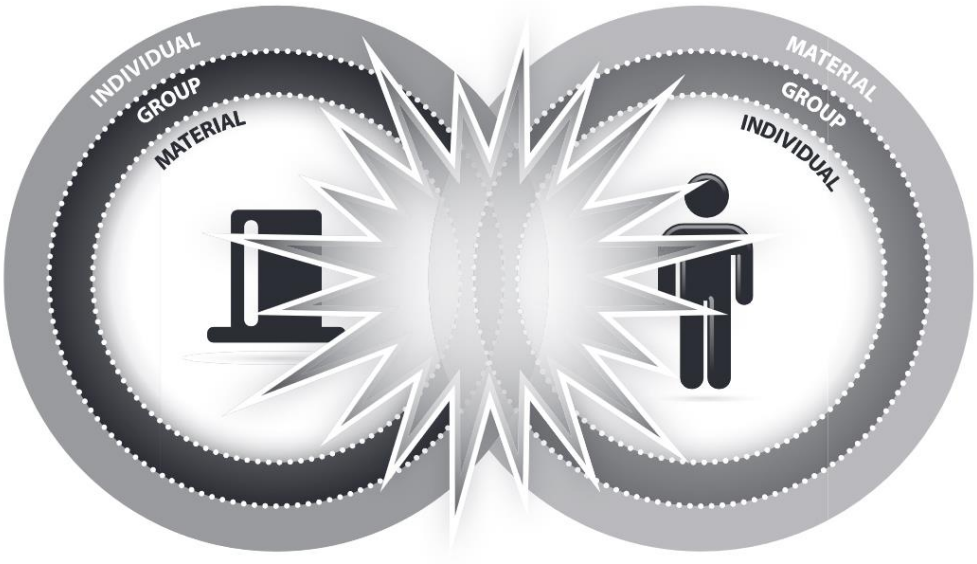

Figure 2.2: Visualization of Wood and Latham's Object Knowledge Framework (Wood and Latham 2013, 41)

The diagram shows that the final experience (visualized by the "explosion" in the center) is the result of a meeting between the objectworld (left) and the visitor's lifeworld (right). Both worlds are informed by three dimensions: individual ways of knowing, group ways of knowing and material ways of knowing. What do these different dimensions mean for the object and the visitor?

First, let us consider the object. How are we to understand the three dimensions of the object? And what exactly does "object" mean in this framework?

Objects in this case can be understood broadly as "all the *things* toward which the visitor will direct their attention and actions' in the museum" (Wood and Latham 2013, 42). For the purposes of this framework "things" are then tangible, and they are physically present within the space. They can be museum-objects, but also signage, decor, and anything else that visitors might look at. This tangible nature of the things is important for the framework, particularly for the "material" dimension. Rather than conceptualize objects as merely physical representations of immaterial ideas and symbols, this framework acknowledges that their material presence itself — regardless of any preceding ideas about the object's meaning — can also influence the experience. In short, the material dimension consists of "the physical composition and construction of the object" (Wood and Latham 2013, 36). This material approach to objects is consistent with other scholars' conceptualizations of the object's relation to the body. For example, Belting's image-body-material triad. Although Belting speaks of images rather than objects, he theorizes that images exist in the interaction between the physical and the mental (Belting and Dunlap 2011).

Both the individual and group dimensions of the object are related to their original owners and origin, and both dimensions include stories directly related to this specific object. This could be the story of how the object has been passed on through generations (group), or a memory of a specific moment that the object was a part of before it entered the museum (individual). It is important here to note that while Wood and Latham do make a distinction between the different

dimensions in their analysis, as Hodder has observed "each object exists in many relevant dimensions at once" (Hodder 1986, 139).[4] All three dimensions together, the individual, group and material, are called the "objectworld" (Wood and Latham 2013, 32). In the museum, the visitor will mostly learn about this objectworld through labels, signs and information folders, (audiovisual) displays and by looking at the object directly.

The visitor's dimensions combined are called "the lifeworld" in Wood and Latham's framework, a term borrowed from phenomenology. This lifeworld is

> the immediate, dynamic, and direct world that every person inhabits, and encompasses each individual's subjectivity. The lifeworld is something that each person has, and is always and already there to encounter and be encountered (Wood and Latham 2016, 28).

The lifeworld is always present, and all experiences are mediated through it before they can be known to a person (Ashworth 2016, 23). Concretely put, if somebody is color blind, for example, then all their experiences will be influenced by this: their way of knowing the world cannot be separated from themselves. Whereas in this framework color blindness would be part of the material dimension, previous experiences (individual) or the visitor's cultural background (group) also shape the way in which they interact with their surroundings. Thus, it is not only the visitor's knowledge of the objectworld, but also their own lifeworld that creates the final object-visitor-interaction.

Referring back to Figure 2.2, we may note that the final experience (the "explosion") is the result of the meeting between the objectworld and the lifeworld. However, according to Wood and Latham, this moment is more than just the visitor seeing the object: it is what they call a "unified experience" (Wood and Latham 2013, 32). This unified experience happens when the interaction between the object and the visitor creates a deeply felt and meaningful lived experience, sometimes felt as an ""Aha!" experience, a holy experience, a moment of awe or wonder, or an experience of enchantment or delight". The authors go on to describe this occurrence as a moment of *consciousness* (Wood and Latham 2013, 38). The term consciousness is important within phenomenology and one that warrants a little more consideration for this study.

Consciousness, unified experiences, numinous experiences and flow experiences

Whereas Wood and Latham use "consciousness" as synonymous with "aha-experiences" or holy experiences, the phenomenological conception of consciousness does not suggest that it need always be a grand experience. As we noted above, phenomenologists agree that objects are experienced through perception, which is influenced by the lifeworld of the observer. Following this, they argue that perceiving is not a passive mechanism that just "happens", but is a mental act of consciousness that reflects the perceived things (also called the *phenomenon)* in people's experiences. A defining feature of consciousness then is that it has to be intentional. As Larsen and Adu put it: "there is no thinking unless people are thinking of something, therefore thinking

[4] Hodder here refers to the four aspects of his theory: time, space/location, use/purpose and cultural classification. However, Wood and Latham cite him in a similar context as this thesis, referring to their own framework.

requires some active directedness towards a phenomenon" (Larsen and Adu 2022, 6). These moments of consciousness are what can be studied through phenomenology.

The consciousness arising from a unified experience that Wood and Latham describe is similar to Cameron and Gatewood's description of numinous experiences in the museum. The numinous experience, a term first introduced by Rudolph Otto, is used to describe an experience of feeling connected with something transcendent, holy or spiritual (Otto [1917] 1965). The term was brought into visitor studies when Cameron and Gatewood used it in several of their articles on visitor experiences at the museum (Cameron and Gatewood 2000, 2003). They hypothesized that some visitors might visit the museum with the goal of finding a deeper and meaningful connection during their visit, and called these visitors "numen-seekers".

In their work on visitor experience, Cameron and Gatewood defined the numinous experience as "a transcendental experience that people can have in contact with a historic site or object", and categorized three dimensions of this experience. Firstly, a deep engagement or transcendence, which can be so intense that people lose track of time. Secondly, the visitors feel a sense of empathy with the past, and thirdly they experience a feeling of awe and reverence (Cameron and Gatewood 2003).

Building, to some extent, on Cameron and Gatewood's groundbreaking use of Otto's notion of the numinous to explore visitor experience, a decade later Latham conducted a phenomenological analysis to further investigate numinous experiences with museum objects. From this study, Latham proposed four dimensions of these numinous experiences (Latham 2013):

1. Unity of moment: a feeling that "all things align together".
2. Object link: the tangible object brings the story being told to live.
3. Being transported: an embodied feeling that the space/time is transformed.
4. Feeling connections bigger than the self: feeling connected to yourself, others, historical people or the transcendent, which Latham divided into the "reflective self", "imaginative empathy", and "higher things".

In their theories on numinous experiences, Latham, Cameron and Gatewood all refer to what they call the "flow experience". First described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi ([1990] 2008), the flow experience is a moment of psychological "flow", during which a person is completely absorbed in the moment. Flow was first described by Csikszentmihalyi in relation to play-activities, but it has more recently since been appropriated to the description of museum-experiences as well, and was used to explain why certain activities (like visiting a museum) can be an intrinsically rewarding experience in itself (Latham 2013). Within his description of the varying activities that can cause a flow-experience, Csikszentmihalyi includes religious experiences. (Csikszentmihalyi [1990] 2008, 137).

The core of the flow experience is a merging of action and awareness, during which the person feels that they are completely immersed in the activity they are doing, and are not distracted by any self-reflective thoughts like "should I be here?" or "what should I be doing?". They are able to center their attention solely on the activity in which they are currently involved. As an extension of this experience, the person might feel that they become separate from their self for a moment during this immersion. Csikszentmihalyi calls this the loss of ego. He argues that three other contributing factors to this experience are a person's sense that they are in complete control of

their actions, that there are clear demands placed on the person for their actions, and that they receive clear feedback as well. Lastly, he posits that the 'autotelic' nature of a flow activity is key: the person feels rewarded and satisfied purely by participating in the activity, without the need for any external rewards (Csikszentmihalyi [1990] 2008).

For the unified experiences, the numinous experiences and even the flow experience, a sense of "awe", and of immersion into the moment are essential (for a further comparison of these experiences, see Latham 2016). Recent research has examined possible causes for this sense of awe, and have found it to be closely related to experiential authenticity. The following section will further unpack this connection: it might appear that these unified, numinous or flow experiences are a result of an authentic experience, rather than the cause.

Explaining authentic experiences

One of the important studies that examined the factors contributing to authentic experiences is Hampp and Schwan's visitor survey (2014) conducted in a natural science museum. While the objects on display (a spacesuit and a moonrock) were very clearly presented as secular objects, their findings are surprisingly quite similar to the theories pertaining to experiences of the numinous described above. I will here focus on the results from the participants who indicated that the object's authenticity mattered for them, and that the context of the exhibit was more directed to the way the displayed objects worked, than to their historical/cultural value. This group of participants identified five important values as contributors to the sense of authenticity of the object. The values are as follows, in order from most mentioned to least mentioned by the participants:

1. History: authentic objects establish a connection with history.
2. Charisma: authentic objects emanate a certain *aura* (which can result in the sense of awe described previously).
3. Rarity: authentic objects are rare or even unique.
4. Prestige: authentic objects aggrandize both the museum and its visitors.
5. Completeness: authentic objects do not lack any detail.

The historical significance of the object in particular mattered for nearly all participants who indicated that they cared about authenticity: it was important for people that they perceived the object as an original, rather than a replica. Moreover, a majority described a certain "a certain charisma", or "wow-effect" (p. 360), that Hampp and Schwan compare to the numinous experience by Latham (2013) described above.

A second research project that contributed elements that might help us to understand experiential authenticity examines authentic experiences from visitors to the Anne Frank House (Penrose 2020). In this project, Penrose spoke to students after their visit to the museum, and asked them about their experiences. From this research, he found that the following factors made the students' visit feel particularly authentic and awe-inducing:

1. The display of original objects and texts.
2. The display of objects representing the narratives that were told (and thus with a metonymic as well as a metaphorical function).
3. The creation a personal connection to the stories (empathy and awe).
4. A sense of place: the museum is housed in the real house where Anne Frank wrote her diary.

All these factors resulted in embodied responses and vicarious experiences for the students: they acknowledged that the objects were genuine (cool authenticity), but what really engaged them with the museum was the fact that after their visit they felt like they could truly imagine what living in the house must have been like for Anne Frank (hot authenticity).

The final framework on contributing factors to authenticity that I will discuss here is Latham's framework for the experience of "the real thing", which is central to this thesis. To develop this framework, Latham undertook interviews with twenty-one visitors, and spoke with them about their thoughts about "the real thing" (TRT) in museums. Within these interviews, she intentionally left the definition of TRT open to the participants' own interpretation. These interviews concerned objects from five museums, including history museums, a science center, a natural history museum, a living history museum, and an art museum. From these interviews, she identified the following four ways of understanding TRT:

1. Self: TRT is experienced through aspects of myself.
2. Relation: TRT is experienced by connecting me to other people (beings), events, times, and things.
3. Presence: TRT is an actual physical thing that was there and is right here in front of me now.
4. Surround: TRT is experienced in the way it is presented to me and by what surrounds me (and it). (Latham 2015, 5)

The first way of recognizing TRT, through the "Self", means that the visitor recognizes aspects of themselves, their identity or their prior knowledge in the object on display. As one participant stated: "it seems more real because I know something about it" (p. 6). The second, through "Relation", refers to moments in which the visitor feels connected to people from different cultures, places or times, and feels like a part of "something bigger", or connected to humanity itself. The third way of recognizing TRT, through "presence", refers to the visitors' acknowledgement that the actual physical object they are interacting with has also been present at other historical events, and that it acts in some way like "proof" of history. Lastly, the way "surround" prompts recognition of TRT concerns the way the object is present in the space. This category can further be divided into two groups: visitors who wanted *more* surroundings, in order to learn more, or be immersed into the environment, and people who wanted *less* surroundings and wanted to let the object "speak for itself". Regardless, both the more- and the less-group indicated that the surroundings of an object were significant for their experience of TRT.

Latham's four modalities of encountering TRT are not, of course, mutually exclusive and any single experience of TRT can be influenced by a combination of multiple themes operative simultaneously. This framework, therefore, can be visualized as a series of overlapping sets, as represented, following Latham, in Fig. 2.3

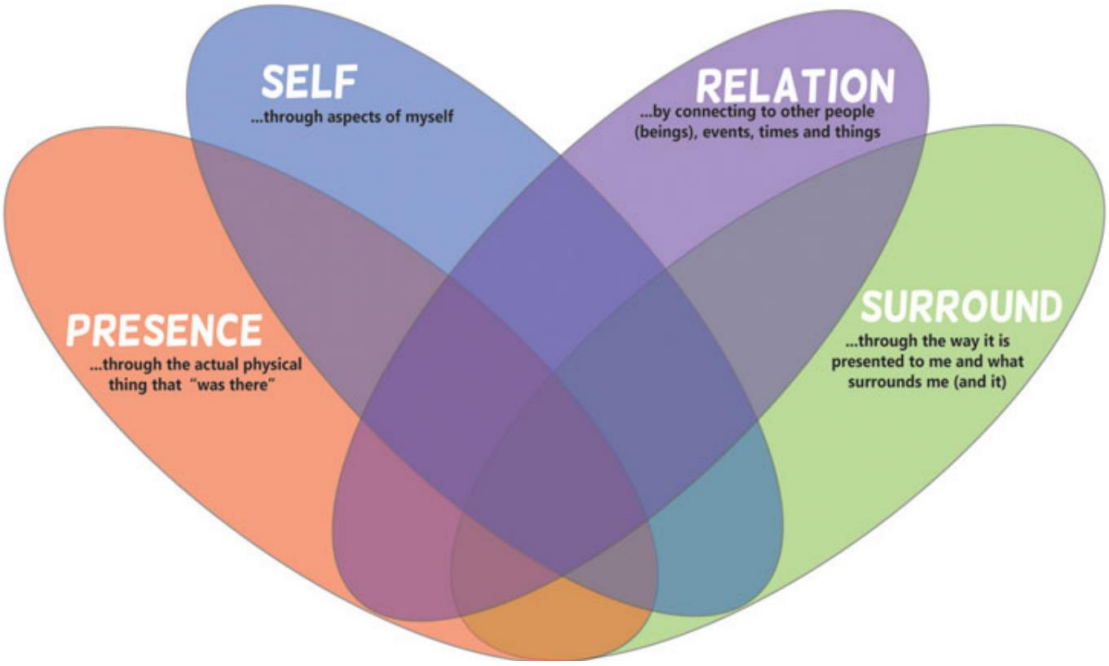

Figure 2.3: The TRT-framework created by Latham (Latham 2015, 6)

While Latham's framework does have some overlap with earlier theories, such as Wang's activity-related "existential, intra-personal" (authenticity driven by 'self-making' attempts to 'realize their authentic selves) and Latham's category of self, the "surround" category is a new addition to the conceptualization of authenticity that is not present in the theories discussed above, but as shown has proven to be of great importance when laid next to the Object Knowledge Framework.

Looking forward

When the three frameworks for authenticity in visitor experience by Latham, Hamp and Schwan and Penrose are placed next to one another, and related to the phenomenological Object-Knowledge framework, they can be compared in the following way:

Latham (2015)	**Hampp and Schwan (2014)**	**Penrose (2020)**	**Object-knowledge framework**
Presence	History, rarity, completeness	Original objects and texts, objects representing the narratives	Object: material, individual, group
Self	Charisma	Creating a personal connection to the stories	Visitor: individual, material
Relation	History, prestige	Creating a personal connection to the stories, objects representing the narratives	Visitor: individual, group Material: group
Surround	n/a	Sense of place	Object: material

The table shows that the framework proposed by Latham encapsulates both other frameworks. For example, Latham's *relation* points to the same qualities identified by Hamp and Schwann's as values of *history* and *prestige*, and can be related to the personal connection between the visitor and object, through the object's use to represent narratives described by Penrose. The same holds for Latham's way of the *self,* Hampp and Schwan's value of *charisma* and Penrose's factor of *creating a personal connection*: in all three cases, the researchers argue that a personal interaction between the visitor and the object causes the experienced authenticity: either through a personal memory or through the "self" interacting with the object's aura.

The only gap in the table is in the equivalent in Hampp and Schwan's frame to Latham's *surround*, or Penrose's *sense of place*. Hampp and Schawn did not include the influence of the object's surroundings in their final five dimensions of authenticity. They did, however, mention the influence of the object's surroundings on the way visitors experienced authenticity during the discussion of their results. For this reason, we can say that Latham's 2015 framework is consistent with and encapsulates both Penrose's and Hampp and Schwan's research, even if Hampp and Schwan did not draw out the importance of surroundings for perception of authenticity in their conclusions.

The definition of the different types of authenticity and the ways it can be constructed or experienced remains contested. This study examines specifically experiential authenticity however, that is, the way visitors *experience* authenticity. In research on this experiential authenticity, it has been found that the four themes described by Latham (presence, self, relation, surround) are remarkably consistent with earlier research conducted on the topic. For this reason, Latham's framework provides a both useful and a scientifically representative framework for our study.

It should be noted that nearly none of the frameworks and studies discussed in this chapter had any mention of objects with a religious, sacred or holy dimension to them. Only Penrose's study, which included an old bible annotated by one of the Frank sisters, involved an object that could

be construed as religious. However, in the analysis of his study, this objects' religious dimension was not addressed. This study will use Latham's TRT-framework as its base, but will also remain critical on whether the framework might have overlooked ways in which an object's religious significance could influence the visitor's experiences.

I have argued that a phenomenological approach is a particularly suitable approach for the following study, because of phenomenology's focus on experiences through an embodied perspective. The Object Knowledge Framework includes this phenomenological approach, taking into account both the object-world and the lifeworld, and applies it to visitor-object-interactions in the museum. Furthermore, as shown in the table above, the object-knowledge framework is capable of including all four themes of TRT, and can thus be fruitfully used to analyze new data regarding TRT-experiences of religious objects. Whether the religious dimension of the object seamlessly fits into the TRT-framework, remains to be seen.

4. Researching “authentic” experiences with religious objects

A phenomenological framework lies at the base of this research. As discussed in the previous chapter, phenomenology is the study of *phenomena*, which are “things the way they appear in our experiences”. In other words, phenomenology looks at the way people experience the world around them (Larsen and Adu 2022). However, phenomenology itself is a school within philosophy, not a method. This means that the ideas of phenomenology need to be adapted and included into an operationalized, concrete research plan. Examples of researchers who have “translated” phenomenological theory into concrete research methods are Moustakas (1994) and Pilarska (2021), and Larsen and Adu (2022). My approach is based on the groundwork they have laid out in operationalizing the theory.

The methodology

Several ideas are important to keep in mind when designing research phenomenologically. First, everybody’s experience of the world is unique to them, as a person can only experience their surroundings through their own lifeworld, which consists of their individual experiences, community and culture, as well as their physical characteristics. Because this research is interested in experiences and meaning, which are the result of complex and multi-layered processes, in-depth interviews are fitting. They provide the researcher space to ask clarifying questions in order to get as close to the participant’s experience as possible; this offers the participant the space to elaborate on their thoughts and experiences where they see fit.

However, the distance between the participant’s experience-as-it-was on one hand, and the researcher’s inability to fully grasp the participant’s experience on the other, needs to be addressed within the research plan as well. Because the researcher has no way to experience the discussed phenomena the same way as the participant did, it is important for the researcher to stay close to the participant’s own words in describing their experiences in the recording and analysis of the data. Of course, because the researcher does not exist in a cultural vacuum, it is impossible to exclude absolutely a prior and influential interpretation on the part of the researcher; purely by the questions the researcher might have asked (or not asked) during the interview, she could influence the data. After all, as Maxwell argues in his handbook on qualitative research design, an interview is an interactive process of co-creation (Maxwell 2013).

In practice, avoiding or reducing prior interpretation that might skew the data entails two things. Firstly, during the interview, the researcher will attempt to set aside their assumptions and beliefs. This practice is called epoché, and was first included in phenomenological thought by Husserl ([1932] 2012), although the term itself dates back to the Greek Pyrrhonists from the third century BCE (Empiricus 1933). Translating philosophical epoché, or the suspension of assumptions, beliefs, and judgment, to qualitative research means that the researcher remains curious and asks for clarification as much as possible during an interview, while trying to assume as little as possible (Larsen and Adu 2022). Secondly, epoché entails that the researcher should use inductive codes when coding the data, rather than deductive ones; the codes should be based on recurring themes found in the interviews themselves, instead of pre-existing theories and concepts. This should help prevent the imposition of academic interpretations onto the data and making the data fit into preconceived academic categories. Furthermore, this helps the researcher

remain close to the words and experiences that the participant themselves used, which is important because the participant is the best–and only–source about their own experiences. Theories can be used to inform the data analysis, but the researcher should remain aware that they only use them descriptively and–try to–not let them inform the analysis of the data.

This type of research fits in with the school of *transcendental phenomenology* (Larsen and Adu 2022). Kant ([1787] 2007) argued that knowledge is transcendental when that knowledge is not about objects but about how people know these objects. Ideally, the goal of research is to find patterns in peoples’ “thinking acts” or their *consciousness,* that point to some kind of essence of the way people give meaning to their experiences (Husserl [1913] 2017).

The method

This project builds on the 2015 study of visitor experience by Kiersten Latham, on the basis of which the author created the TRT-framework (Latham 2015). In her research, Latham spoke to twenty-one participants in total. They were of varying gender, ages and backgrounds: all were contacted in the United States. Thirteen of these participants spoke about their experiences in history museums; four spoke about natural history and art museums (they spoke about a combined visit to multiple exhibitions); two spoke solely about art museums; and one participant spoke about their experience in a science center (Latham 2015). The participants for the study were self-selected and replied to calls for participants on social media and in various museum’s newsletters. It was not a prerequisite that the participants themselves had had particularly impactful experiences with the objects or the displays in the museum: instead, they were asked to give their general thoughts about what “the real thing” in the museum meant to them.

Latham’s approach inspired the methodology employed in the present study. The main source of data-collection for this project is interviews; the method employed in conducting them is described below. An inherent drawback of an interview is that it is very time-consuming, which means that only a few perspectives can be recorded, analyzed and incorporated in a limited amount of time. To compensate for this problem, in addition to interviews, questionnaires were used once the series of interviews had been completed.

Within qualitative research, it is considered best practice to interview until the research reaches a point of saturation, meaning that no new themes are discovered within the interviews. Statistical research has found that conventionally, most themes are identified within the first six interviews (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006, Francis et al. 2010, Namey et al. 2016), although some claim that it requires slightly more than ten interviews to reach this same point when using inductive coding, which this study does (Coenen 2012).

However, this study only spoke to four participants in in-depth interviews. Therefore, the principal purpose of the questionnaires was to gather a slightly broader range of responses, although they are not intended to be interpreted as representative of all museum visitors. Instead, the questionnaires were used to ascertain whether there were any major topics or opinions raised that had not been discussed in the in-depth interviews, which would have required follow-up interviews. In this way, they functioned as a kind of fail-safe: had the questionnaires raised new and different topics or opinions, they could have brought into question the generalizability of the four opinions from the interviews.

By combining these two methods I seek to have included a broad range of opinions–broader than solely interviews would have allowed me in a limited timeframe–while simultaneously retaining the opportunity for in-depth analysis that interviews offer.

Interviews

For this project, participants self-selected through social media and flyers placed in several museums and cultural spaces with a museal interior. The call for participants was shared by the following museums and cultural organizations, who all have a special emphasis on religion within their collections: the Icon Museum in Kampen; Synagogue Groningen in Groningen; Museumpark Orientalis in Heilig Landstichting; Museum Our Lord in the Attic in Amsterdam, and Museum Sjoel in Elburg. The call for participants was furthermore shared on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Reddit through the researcher’s personal account, as well as the accounts of people throughout her network.

The call, which was shared in both Dutch and English, asked for “stories of particularly memorable museum visits, in which a religious object was involved”. In a further explanation, the call spoke about “experiences of something 'real', something unique, a deep moment of awe, or any other experience that was particularly memorable and meaningful to them during their visit to the museum”.[5] Furthermore, the text explained that “’religious’ in this case is a very broad term”, and that what mattered most is that the participants themselves considered the object to be religious. After receiving a question about whether one could also participate if they were atheist, a clarification was added that a participant’s own (a)religious background did not matter for this research, and that people of all religious backgrounds were welcome to participate.[6]

Searching specifically for people who had had memorable museum visits, rather than searching for people who wanted to discuss their general thoughts on the topic, was an intentional departure from Latham’s study. Due to the time constraints of this research, the choice was made to study experiences that were particularly impactful, to understand which factors had contributed to these experiences.

The special emphasis on memorable, impactful visits was chosen because of the apparent overlap between numinous experiences, flow experiences, unified experiences and experiential authenticity. Furthermore, the concept of “the real thing” (TRT) proved rather difficult to translate to Dutch. Both literal translations as well as more conceptual translations required a level of specification that the English “the real thing” does not. Instead of going for one concrete translation, the description of actual experience was intentionally kept vague, and used various sentences that all shared a similar meaning but at the same time could all be interpreted slightly differently: “a moment of awe”, (*een wow-moment*), something “real”, or a memorable visit. It

[5] Dutch version: verhalen van mensen die tijdens hun bezoek aan een museum de ervaring hadden dat ze iets ‘echts’ of iets heel memorabels mee maakten: een wow-moment, of een moment dat een diepe impact heeft gemaakt.

[6] For the full calls for participants in both Dutch and English, see appendix 9.1.

was not explained in the call that this study had a particular focus on authenticity in the call for participants, although this was mentioned during the actual interviews.

Four people responded to this call, who were then invited for a semi-structured and in-depth interview. A basic structure for the interviews was prepared in advance, including questions such as “could you tell me about your experience?”, “what did you feel during this experience?”, and “what do you think contributed to your experience?”. Furthermore, several questions prompted the participants to reflect on the authenticity and “real thing” of their experience: if they mentioned that something felt “real” or “fake”, further clarifying questions were asked in order to delve deeper into what these concepts meant to them. If the topic did not arise from the conversation organically, participants were asked the following question to consider: “if the visit had been online instead of physical, would that have changed anything? Would that have mattered?”.

Questionnaires

In addition to these in-depth interviews, at two organizations visitors were also asked to fill in a short survey about their experience and feelings, and which factors might have contributed to them. At the first location, the Groninger Synagogue, the choice was made to set up a table with the questionnaires and let visitors engage with them according to their own interest. However, this resulted in zero responses by the end of the day. Thus, at the second location, Museum Our Lord in the Attic in Amsterdam, visitors leaving the museum were actively encouraged to answer the questionnaire by both the front-desk staff and myself. This resulted in nineteen responses, of which twelve were filled in completely. The other seven were filled in partially, with participants skipping over certain questions or leaving the entire backside blank.

The questionnaire asked the visitors about the object that had made the biggest impression, asked them to quantify this impression on a scale from 0 (very little) to 10 (very big), whether the object was religious and what contributed to them feeling this way. On the backside, the visitors were asked to reflect on whether they saw something “real”/authentic during their visit. If the visitor did, they were asked what they experienced as “real”/authentic and whether this “real thing” was religious. Lastly, the questionnaire asked them to elaborate on what contributed to the visitor experiencing something as “real”/authentic. The questionnaires were provided in both Dutch and English, with a majority of the responses being in English.

This project includes the opinions of twenty-three people in total, of which four are interviewed. None of the people who filled in the questionnaire was also interviewed, as the survey was held after the interviews had taken place. The four interviews were based on memorable and impactful museum visits that the participants still recalled years later, whereas the questionnaires were all filled in in one day by various visitors from various backgrounds (both tourist, non-tourist, young and elderly), although their exact backgrounds are unknown as there were no questions dedicated to the collection of demographic data in the questionnaire. Rather, this assessment is based on observations made while handing out the surveys: brief comments the participants provided about either their motivations for visiting, their stay in Amsterdam, and the relation they had to the museum they had visited.

Both the interviews and questionnaires asked people about their experiences, their feelings and the way they made sense of the things they perceived. This approach is particularly suited for a phenomenological analysis, of which the results will be shared in the next chapter, due to its emphasis on the participants’ own subjective experiences. Their open questions furthermore allow participants to raise topics that they deem relevant, which means the information found is “emic”: the participants are free to share their own meaning without a top-down academic interpretation.

Afterwards, the interviews and questionnaires were transcribed and coded inductively, drawing on recurring themes from within the interview themselves in order to stay as close as possible to the words and processes described by the participants. This method is encouraged from a phenomenological standpoint, as described by Larsen and Adu in their handbook for phenomenological research within the humanities (Larsen and Adu 2022).

5. Visitor experiences of authenticity

This chapter will lay out the results of the interviews, by using the participants' own words to explain their experiences. Next, it will discuss the five dominant themes that were found in the participants' stories. Then, the major categories found in the questionnaires will be discussed, which will then be compared to the observations resulting from the interviews to see whether any topics or opinions remain undiscussed that would require additional research.

The participants and their experiences

Four people were interviewed about their experiences with religious objects in museums. Sophie (51) is a teacher who was raised Christian but no longer considers herself a "practicing" Christian; she spoke about the ruins of an old church and its baptistry font, which can still be found in a practicing church. Ben (68) is a pensioner, and practicing Christian; he spoke about a painting with Jewish and Christian significance. Albert (72) is a pensioner, and practicing Christian with Jewish heritage; he spoke about a Jewish prayer mantle (tallit) and Michelangelo's pietà. The fourth person, Jack (29) works in IT and was raised Christian but no longer practices; he spoke about several experiences and objects, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Book of Kells.[7]

The interviews all took place in (semi-)public settings, including a café, a park and an educational room at a museum; all locations were proposed by the participants themselves. The conversations lasted somewhere between 45-90 minutes, during which the participants were speaking the majority of the time. Before the interview began, the participants knew that the research project involved memorable/impactful/awe-inspiring experiences in a museum with religious objects. During the interview itself, it was made more explicit that a second part of this research explores experienced authenticity and the "real thing" in museums.

This chapter will dive deeper into the underlying themes, similarities and differences that the participants described. However, firstly, it will introduce the participants, the objects they spoke of and their experiences using their own words, as they themselves are the best sources to speak about these things.

Sophie

The first participant, and the only woman who replied to the call, is Sophie. Sophie is 51 years old and works as a teacher. She was raised Catholic, but says she no longer practices her faith: she does not go to church and she does not pray. However, she jokingly added:

> When everything goes to shit, I do [pray], like if you are there then do something for me, and if it doesn't help, then at least it didn't hurt to try, I am hypocritical like that. [1][8]

[7] All information is anonymized: these are pseudonyms and the ages are an estimate only used to indicate their general age.

[8] Sophie, Ben and Albert all spoke in Dutch. These quotes have been translated keeping in mind their tone, any local expressions, and keeping as close to their words as possible. However, do

The ruin of an old church Sophie spoke about is not located in a museum directly, but right next to one in its neighboring park. Sophie grew up near the ruins, would often come there as a child, and has always felt a special connection to it:

> Then when I was a little older, twelve, thirteen years old, and I would miss it [the ruin]. [..] So then I would go here on my own on my bike to once again, to once again go to that story, well of course I did not know about the font obviously, but I did know like hey, there is history here. [2]

The ruin has an informational sign placed next to it, which describes its history and discusses some of its architectural features. Recently, human remains had been dug up near it, which have since then been reburied within the walls of the church ruins. Besides the ruins of this old church, she spoke about its baptistry font, which is still in use and located in the town she moved to later in her life. Coincidentally, her children have been baptized using that exact font.

Sophie described her moment of awe primarily as a "feeling of security" (*geborgenheid):*

> You know, when I am there I just, I nearly cry, I just get very sentimental because that, I am an emotion-person, but just that feeling of the past, of security, and that it, that the font returns to my path, that is just beautiful, like it was supposed to be that way. It is as if, like, everywhere there is something for me to hold on to. Maybe that is it, like, okay I might have moved away from this place, which I find terrible, but a piece of it came with me. [3]

While Sophie's object is not located in a museum itself, due to the informational sign located next to the ruin, it could be argued that it does stand in a musealized context. Furthermore, the topic of musealization and the way museums influence her experience with these objects were discussed. This will be addressed further below in this chapter.

Ben

Ben is a 68-year-old pensioner, who volunteers at a museum. He spoke about his experience with a painting that was exhibited within this museum. He described the painting as:

> a painting on which several Jews were walking and there was a man among them about who you would say, well actually he does not really belong, what is that? In her [the artist's] imagination that was Jesus, so she symbolized the people who are now living without that messiah, living without, but he is already involved. [4]

Ben had seen previous works by this artist, a local artist who often depicts religious themes: Christian and Jewish topics in particular. He describes himself as a rational person, who is not very sensitive. However, when seeing this particular painting, he says:

> and then I think, yes, darn, that was one of the first times I really felt touched by it. Look, I've seen a lot of religious objects, and I have been going to church all my life. I am very

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note that these are not their literal words. Some shorter Dutch expressions will be placed within the quotes between block-brackets. The Dutch versions can be found listed in the appendix, indicated by [number].

> enthralled by the gospel, but being touched by an object does not happen quickly. This, that was really like, wow. [5]

When asked what in particular struck Ben about this painting, he emphasized the painting's meaning and the artist's intentions, drawing on his own religious background:

> Yes, because now the Jews still deny Jesus as the Messiah, they say "he still has to arrive", and we say "he has arrived", and yet he is already walking, he is already present among the Jewish people. So, I do not know what, what you know about the gospel, about the faith, but Jesus is the "all-soother" [*alles-goedmaker*], between God and people, and despite the fact that he, that the Jews do not yet acknowledge him, he is already the connection between God and the people in a way. He is already present, and they will acknowledge that at one point, which is what it literally says in the Bible. Yes, so that touched me, that also created more of a connection, to me at least, between Christians and Jews, despite the fact that I had been interested in that for years, yes, it really emphasized that we cannot live without the story, because there are also Christians who disregard the Old Testament, who say, that is of the past, the New Testament is what matters. Jesus who has arrived, who lives, who has said how we should live, that painting symbolizes all that emphatically: it is all connected. [6]

As can be read, Ben's personal religious beliefs take up an important place within his experience: the painting reiterates and strengthens his own convictions. The connection it depicts between Christians and Jews particularly moves him; this theme surfaced multiple times during the conversation.

Albert

Albert is a 71-year-old pensioner as well, who works as an education volunteer at a museum. When asked about his background, he says he was raised a Christian, but got involved with the museum due to the Jewish heritage in his family. Albert explains that his interest in Jewish religion and culture stems from his grandfather, who followed something between Christianity and Judaism:

> He strictly followed the rules for the sabbat celebration, but on the Sunday, do you understand? So he mixed them up a bit. And he was a very strict man, but I do not think he ever really chose between what exactly he wanted. He was married to a Christian, my grandmother, so he became a Christian as well, but that past never really let him go. [7]

This memory of his grandfather, who wrestled with his religious identity until he died, turned out to play a central point in Albert's experience with the museum's tallit, a Jewish prayer mantle. It can be described as a large, striped cloth with fringes (*tzitzit)* attached to its corners. He describes encountering the museum's tallit as follows:

> Because I thought of my grandfather, in that tallit. I suddenly saw my grandpa in that tallit. Nonsense obviously, because that man is long dead, but I saw it in my imagination: yes, that would have made him happy probably, he should have had that tallit. And I thought that was so incredibly interesting. [8]

Albert's experience with the tallit would even go on to have a significant influence on his life. While he was raised knowing that there was Jewish heritage within his family, this moment made him suddenly become much more aware of his own Jewish heritage.

> In the time afterwards, I did, let's say, I did get more aware of it [his Jewish heritage], that is true, yes. Previously I never really thought about it, I knew that it was there and done, but now that has changed. [9]

Albert had replied to the call for participants with only his experience with the tallit in mind, but during the interview it became clear that he had had another impactful experience when visiting Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which he saw while visiting the St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. This moment did not leave as big of an impression as the tallit, but it will be incorporated in the analysis as well.

Jack

Jack is the youngest of the participants, 31 years old, and works in IT. He spoke about multiple different encounters with religious objects in varying museums. The two experiences that the conversation kept moving back to are the exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Jerusalem, and the exhibition about the Book of Kells at the Trinity College in Dublin. Speaking about the exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls, he described:

> So first you get to know that and then you go upstairs and then there's like a central pedestal and that is where one of them, I think one of the main scrolls, is. And then around there are like several cabinets I think just showing fragments and talking about specific passages of the scrolls. And the whole thing is very dark, so, I mean like black or like dark walls and then just spotlight, so it's quite atmospheric.

When comparing it to the exhibitions on the Book of Kells, a medieval manuscript, he says:

> It [the exhibition] was more colorful I think, because the book itself is more colorful, so I think they tried to design the exhibition that way as well

Both of these objects are "just paper fragments", which is why Jack explains that he considers it extra impressive that the exhibitions really touched him. To him, the objects themselves are not particularly interesting looking, but they do both have enormous significance for history. The emphasis on history here, rather than religion, is intentional: Jack describes himself as a non-religious person, and for both objects he expands that it was the objects' significance for people from the past that touches him:

> I could say that God is an invention of mankind, and I think it's a very important part of our history. Especially European history, it has roots in Judeo-Christian culture and also Roman culture but yeah, Judeo-Christian life religious culture. And as such it has a, an enormous impact on people's lives, and when I see these significant representations of religion, any religion honestly, how I see it is that people, like a person, a group of people, were inspired by this very strong sense of belief, that empowered them of inspired them to create such enormous work of human culture.

Jack speaks about culture and history, rather than religion. Coming from parents who are both historians, he has a deep interest in history himself as well, and seeks it out whenever he visits a new place. When asked why the exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls made such an impression on Jack, he answered:

> I'm just getting goosebumps just talking about this because that makes me think you know, that these pieces of paper and the beliefs coded in them, that was so important for people that they risked their lives to hide it, to keep it with them, so, that importance I can really empathize with somehow. So I think it's empathy with like people from the past, in short.

Main themes from the interviews

The stories and opinions of these four people will inform the majority of the analysis. The questionnaires will be discussed in the following section, because they function as a check to see whether there are no major topics raised that did not come up in the interviews. Before the major topics from the questionnaires can be compared to those of the interviews, first it needs to be clear which topics the interviews provided. From the interviews, I identified the following dominant themes.

1. **The experience of TRT/wow-experience/meaningful object encounter was both cognitive and physical.**

Firstly, it appears that the participants' experiences with these objects were both cognitive as well as physical. They were awestruck by the objects, or felt a deep connection with them. This resulted in the participants feeling emotional, feeling "safe" (*geborgen*), becoming very calm, or even, in Albert's case, thinking of his own grandfather:

> But it is true that this really touched me, yes. I thought, I thought about my grandfather, and then you get those additional thoughts like about my mother, about the Sabbat celebrations, and those kinds of things really went through my mind. [10]

These experiences all had to do with the mind; they altered a person's emotions, or they brought up memories that were of significance for the participant.

At the same time, nearly all participants also described a more physical reaction. Ben got goosebumps when thinking about the experience, and Sophie described "tears flowing down her cheeks", as well as a certain gut feeling (*buikgevoel*) and a sense of warmth whenever she was visiting the ruins. Even when speaking about more "cognitive" experiences, participants invoked physical language: the objects "touched" them, they could "feel" the history, or the object would "grab" their interest.

2. **Participants differentiated between experiences with secular and religious objects.**

When reflecting on their experiences, multiple participants found that their experiences with religious objects were different from their experiences with objects they deemed secular. Jack describes:

> 'Cause I mean just listening to myself talk, like these [experiences with religious objects] are profoundly different experiences [from those with historical objects].

Despite not being religious himself, he describes how religious objects in particular have a special impact on him, although for him the biggest factor for this is the object's presentation:

> If like a secular … ehm … something is presented in a way that humanizes it a lot, it can also get me like emotional and … ehm … , just, yeah this kind of emotional is a good way, … ehm …, but that's because it has to do with people but yeah religious objects also have to do with people, maybe even a little bit more.

3. The object's history and the participants' knowledge about the object was of great significance…

All participants indicated that having knowledge about the object increased their sense of awe and the intensity of their experience. For Ben, his knowledge seems to have been a prerequisite for their experiences. Ben describes his personal connection to the meaning of the painting as the core of his experience. Similarly, Jack describes that during his visit to the Book of Kells, the information from the exhibition prior to the book's display had caused his final experience to "not be underwhelmed", which he had feared because the book itself is "just two pages, 'cause that's all you can see". Instead, because he knew about the book's significance, when he finally saw it, he marveled at both the book and its history.

With Sophie and Albert, their personal knowledge played a significant role as well, because both objects are closely related to their personal life stories: the ruin and the tallit both became objects that encapsulated personal memories within their meaning. For Sophie, the ruins of the church had been a part of her youth, and as an object it had "moved" with her when she moved to a new city: through coincidence the font had followed her, which had made the ruins of the church more meaningful to her. In a similar vein, the tallit for Albert found its significance through Albert's memories of his grandfather: without those, the object might have not moved him as much as it did. He describes having seen tallits before even, and not having had such a meaningful experience; it was only with this particular one that the image of his grandfather flashed before his eyes.

These two ways of knowing the objects can be organized into two categories: *empathizing* and *reminiscing*. Jack and Ben's experiences described above both fall into the former. They describe how knowing about the object's meaning and history made them feel connected to the people of the past. Jack describes this as "sensing a connection with people from the past, like, through empathy", and how knowing about the object's history "helps you get closer to the object through the people who inhabited it". Sophie too described feeling empathetic with the people from the past while visiting a historical church-building where she had felt similarly when she visited "her" ruin, saying:

> You can really feel what has been done to build that cathedral, and what that meant for the people. That was a cathedral without pomp and circumstance, while they did try but there was just no money for it, but with how much suffering that has been done, has been built, yet also with how much passion, how much people cared about it that they would move those stones from the sea to the place where the cathedral was being built, yes, that was very special to me. [11]

Both Albert and Ben felt this connection and empathy as well, in particular related to Christian-Jewish relations and history.

The second category is reminiscing. This category covers the moments in which the participants found meaning in the object through personal memories. Albert's memories of his grandfather and Sophie's memories of her youth and the baptism of her children both give a new meaning to the object, one that it historically did not have, through reminiscing. Furthermore, reminiscing was a big part of the interviews. It might appear as if the objects themselves were more of a means through which the participants could connect with their memories. However, these cognitive memories were not the only factor that influenced the participants' experiences.

4. ...but the physicality and temporality of the experiences mattered as well.

When asked whether only knowing of the object, seeing it online but not having it physically present, would change anything about their experience, all participants convincingly answered "yes". The physical presence of the object mattered, and so did its display. All senses except for taste were brought up during the interviews; seeing the object from all sides, hearing anything in particular (or rather; hearing nothing, which contribute to a calm atmosphere), touching the objects if allowed, and Sophie even described smelling a particular smell in the air that she felt contributed to her experience. For Albert, touching the tallit was what induced his experience:

> You have to be able to physically touch it, grab it. An image alone wouldn't mean anything, but this, this was real. [12]

This interest in touching the object was not shared by all. Jack in particular mentioned that he would be interested in touching a replica, but not the real object, because "I wouldn't want to touch the real thing".

From all the senses, the experience of "being there" with the object was the most mentioned, which restates the importance of the object being physically present together with the participants:

> I think physicality is ... ehm ... a big big part of this. You could put it in a virtual reality experience, I don't have a lot of experience with VR so I don't know how good it would be, but ... ehm ... yeah, maybe call me old fashioned but I like the physicality of a museum.

It was not only the objects themselves that influenced their experiences; the display, and the surroundings of the objects played a role in shaping most participants' experiences. For most, gaining knowledge about the objects before seeing them made the experience more intense. However, not all agreed on this. When asked how she felt about the display sign that was located next to the ruins, which indicated it as a heritage-object, she answered:

> A sign? That doesn't really interest me, for me it is really about the feeling. I do read it, but it doesn't say that much for me. [...] I'm not that interested in the sign because, and that is typical for me as a person, I don't necessarily need to go to a museum, right, and I don't really need to read the sign in order to get a feeling or something. It's similar when I see a painting, and then ... ehm ... the painting really needs to grab my interest. [13]

Furthermore, both non-religious participants indicated that the presence of other people was significant for their own experience. Jack described that he felt the presence of religious people contributed to his personal experience when visiting the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition:

> And there's a lot of people around you who really do believe in stuff, and I think that has an experience with it.

Paradoxically, for the two religious participants, it was the absence of people that let them truly connect with the objects. Both Albert and Ben described that they preferred more quiet, solitary moments with the objects. Albert indicated that his experience with the Pietà happened despite the crowd of people surrounding it, rather than because of the crowd. Ben felt that the absence of people was a key-factor in letting him have such an emotional experience with the painting:

> So I had heard the story [about the meaning of the painting] and then afterwards, when I was standing in front of the painting alone, that was when it really got through to me. [14]

Besides the physicality of the object itself, as well as its surroundings, participants also indicated that the location of the exhibition mattered. This includes the exhibition space itself, which arguably is still part of the object's direct surroundings, but also the geographical location of the entire museum. Sophie described that the location of the church-ruins, placed near the village where she grew up, was important for her. She had grown up near the ruins, and so had her parents and grandparents. In a way, she felt like the building was connected to her "roots".

In a similar vein, Jack also brought up the exhibition's location, which in his case was Jerusalem. He spoke about the importance of being in the country where the Scrolls had been found, saying:

> Yeah it's a location where this object, the Dead Sea Scrolls, takes up another significance because you're in the land where it was found. So if this would have been exhibited in a different country it would have been a different experience I think.

Later during the interview, he added that being in a specific location mattered because the objects "induced a sense of the past of the place". In other words, the object, the location and their combined history came together to create something meaningful for Jack.

Not only the physicality of the visits mattered, but their temporality as well. Both Ben and Jack thought it was very important that they were allowed to walk through the exhibition at their own pace and spend some time with the object. Jack explained:

> I mean I think part of these exhibitions is also that you're taking it in at your own pace and you're reading stuff and … ehm … you know, you can pause, you can understand.

These factors can be divided into three layers: Firstly, the experience with the object itself: can you walk around the object, is it physically present, can you touch it, etc.? The second layer is made up of influences from the object's surroundings: is the object lit up in a certain way, are there other people present, are there any informational signs located near the object? The third and last layer are the meta-influences on the display; influences that are not connected directly to the visitor's-object-interaction, but are of importance for the final experience. This layer includes where on earth the object is located, and how much time a visitor is allowed to spend in the exhibition.

5. For all participants, authenticity was important, but also an afterthought.

The word "real" was the only reference participants made to authenticity on their own initiative. The subject of authenticity was discussed more in-depth, but only after they had been asked about their thoughts on the matter; it was not a topic at the front of their minds when speaking about

their experiences. Regardless, when the topic was discussed, all the participants held the following two views.

Firstly, having a "real" object adds value to the experience, and knowing an object is a replica detracts from the experience. As Jack stated:

> But let's say the Dead [Sea] Scroll would have been kept in a safe and they would have put on display a replica, that would have, like, taken away from the experience.

When asked to elaborate on the reason that a replica would have taken away from the experience, he explained:

> It's just the notion that it's an original or a replica, 'cause I guess a replica is not the original, and there could be many of them, so it feels less special to see that, because you know, that, it's not the one singular thing.

Then, what makes an object "real"? Again, the participants agreed; it had to have been an original, and it had to have been used before it came to the museum. Albert explained that this is what made the tallit particularly "real" for him:

> This is a real one, this is a real tallit, not a factory-made thing that you can find in every museum, no, this one was really used by someone, and I think that's good; that has some value to it. [15]

For Sophie, this usage of the object was so fundamental to an objects "realness" that this particular aspect made her dislike museum visits. While describing her awe-inducing experiences, she found that she often had them while visiting active churches. When asked whether she felt she same when seeing similar objects in museums, she answered:

> No, no it has to be real, I don't care much for museums, [...] when it's no longer in use, what it was supposed to be used for. [16]

Taking the objects out of their original contexts and usage makes them un-real for Sophie, which results in her not feeling for the object anymore ("daar heb ik geen gevoel bij"). However, she does not feel like the ruins of the church were less real, because, despite them no longer being used, they are still in their original location, and are made up of the original stones that were used to build them. Commenting on the church's old baptismal font, she adds that for her its value lies in the fact that it is still being used:

> If that font had been placed in a museum I don't think I would have been interested in it, but coincidentally it now stands in the church that my children were baptized in, yes, I might've, I would've found it interesting to see it and to read about it, but I wouldn't, like, feel that connected to it. [17]

Both the object's previous–or its continued–use, as well as the object being an original rather than a replica, matter.

When speaking about the authenticity of the objects, a lot of language that the participants used was related to economics: original things were "worth" more, replicas had less "value", using them could "cheapen" the overall experience, and participants spoke about objects' "richness". While "worth" and "value" are not inherently related to economics, they do stand out when considering

the more direct references to economics as well, further signifying how experiencing authenticity made the experience more significant for participants.

All in all, the interviews show participants' awe-inducing/meaningful/ TRT-experiences with the objects to be both cognitive and embodied. Participants differentiated between experiences with religious and secular objects. For the experience, the object's history and the participants' knowledge of this history mattered: they connected with the object through either empathizing or reminiscing. Furthermore, the physicality and temporality of the participants' museum visits were of importance as well. This could be further divided into the participant's experience with the object itself, their experience with the object's surroundings and their experience with the meta-influences. Participants were not intrinsically concerned with questions of authenticity, but when asked they all agreed that seeing the original object added value to their visit, as well as knowing that the object had previously been used before it came to the museum.

Main themes from the questionnaires

The above findings are based on in-depth interviews with four people. To see whether they are representative for a broader group, I compare these five major themes to the results of the questionnaires.

These questionnaires were filled in on one day and by nineteen people from varying backgrounds, ages, and genders. Ideally, the interviews would have encapsulated all relevant themes. However, if any new themes arise from the results of the questionnaires, this would indicate that the information from the interviews lacks certain perspectives. In that case, more interviews would be required to find all relevant factors for the experienced authenticity of religious objects in museums.

The questionnaire can be divided up into two main parts: the questions regarding the object that made the biggest impression on the visitor, and the questions on whether the visitor believed they had seen something "real" during their visit. Nearly half of the participants indicated that a religious object had made the biggest impression on them, with the museum's altar, the organ entirety of the museal church being mentioned the most often.[9] Among the people who indicated that a non-religious object had made the biggest impression, the altar, the organ, and the church were mentioned as well; apparently, some visitors consider them to be religious, and others do not. This reinforces the importance of asking the participants whether they themselves consider an object to be religious, rather than assuming e.g. an altar is considered to be a religious object by all visitors.[10]

[9] Museum Ons Lieve Heer op Solder has an original hidden-church located in the attic of the building. While it is a church, it is also a piece of their collection.

[10] For the full list of results from the questionnaires, see appendix 9.4

Part one: object impressions

The average grade people gave to their impression, with a zero being a very small impression, and a ten a very big impression, was an 8.3. When counting only the religious objects, this becomes an 8.2. Overall, the objects made quite a big impression on the visitors, as no visitors scored the intensity of their impression below a six. The feelings that people ascribed to their experiences with the religious objects varied greatly: overwhelming, interest, surprise, curiosity, amazement, a strong feeling of community, empowerment, and more.

In general, these descriptions can be grouped into categories of 1) "learning", including *surprise*, *interest* and *curiosity*, 2) "admiration", including *overwhelming*, *beautiful* and *riches*. Two feelings were more difficult to categorize: *music/empowering* and *a strong feeling of community*.

When looking at the feelings invoked by the non-religious objects, both feelings of learning and admiration can be found. Additionally, there seems to be a third category whose feelings paradoxically all seem to fall within "worship": *prayer*, *praise* and *sublimation*. There were also feelings regarding the non-religious objects that were difficult to categorize: *music, peace* and *recognition*.

When asked what contributed to these feelings, for the religious objects several people indicated that the story behind the objects was responsible for the object's big impression on them. One participant wrote: "knowing people worked together in secret to build the church", and someone else attributed their impression to "the story, tradition". Others wrote about the location: "being in church, you feel you can hear the music". One person considered their personal background to be the biggest factor, stating "I'm not a believer (*gelovig),* but I am religious". The last response linked their feelings to the novelty of their visit, stating that they had never seen such a place before.

Looking at the responses for the non-religious objects, multiple people related their experience to their personal (religious) background as well. Furthermore, one person referenced the decor of the exhibition, and two people focused more on the aesthetics of their visit: "it was so beautiful" and "grandeur (*grootsheid)"*. Another person brought up the location of the museum, mentioning that "being able to see the view of the city from the top" was the biggest contributing factor. Lastly, one person mentioned a temporal aspect: it was the age of the object that impressed them.

Comparing this to the results from the interviews, it appears that the same principles apply. The feelings induced by the objects vary slightly from those in the interviews. However, this was to be expected because the interviews explicitly required a person to have had an "experience of something "real", something unique, a deep moment of awe, or any other experience that was particularly memorable and meaningful to them during their visit to the museum", while the questionnaires did not. In the questionnaire's responses most feelings seem to be less embodied: all responses related to learning, admiration and worship appear to be primarily cognitive. A case could be made for the feelings of "music" being related to hearing, but that would require a more broad interpretation and it cannot be made sure that that is what the participant meant.

When comparing the factors that contributed to the experiences with the objects, however, parallels can be found more easily. From the interviews, we can say that the participants' experiences were influenced by both their knowledge, as well as the physicality and temporality

of the visit. From the questionnaires, it becomes clear that knowledge of the object's story was also important for the participants in the questionnaires. I would argue further that the two categories of empathizing and reminiscing could be found within the questionnaire's answers as well; the person referencing the hardship that the people building the church went through is empathizing, and the person bringing up their own religious background is reminiscing.

The physicality of the visit is also clearly represented in the questionnaire's results. On the object-level, participants connected with "being" present alongside the object, and one person indicated that the objects themselves (pottery and dishes found during archeological digs) were the source of their feelings. When it comes to the surroundings, people mentioned the decor, as well as the atmosphere within the exhibition and its aesthetics. Lastly, on the meta-level, one person brought up the importance of the museum's location itself, with it being located centrally in Amsterdam.

Part two: object authenticity

From all participants who filled in the questionnaire, only twelve filled in this second part. This may be because this part of the questionnaire was on the backside of the paper. All of the people who answered this question, answered that yes, they had seen something "real"/authentic during their visit. What it was that they experienced as "real"/authentic varied. Multiple participants indicated that "everything" was authentic, including the way the rooms were set up just like they would have been historically. Others referenced specific locations and objects, such as the altar, the prayer room or the pottery-artifacts located in the kitchen. Some people did not refer to specific objects, but rather to activities: "the struggles of the people who came here to worship", or "the religious use of the space".

Most participants indicated that they considered this authentic "thing" to be religious. When asked what contributed to the participant experiencing it as authentic, multiple people indicated that it was the way the exhibition was set-up: "how they were displayed" and "the entire scene". For others, it was knowing the story behind it that made it authentic to them: "I am amazed knowing the history of this place" and "the accompanying story, the elaboration (*toelichting)*". Only one reply hinted at a sense of inauthenticity, stating "I feel like because I knew some things were fake/setup, that made me trust less".

When laid next to the results of the interviews, the observation that authenticity did not seem to be a big concern for the participants is confirmed: all but one participant did not indicate having any issues with authenticity, and the one participant who did, also indicated that they had seen something authentic during the visit. In the interviews, I found that both having the original object, as well as knowing that the object had been used before becoming part of the museum's collection both contributed to experiencing them as authentic. This was reflected in the questionnaire's results as well. Participants indicated that knowing the object's history and that they had previously been used contributed to their experience of authenticity. As one participant phrased it: "to see the real old used things".

The presence of the original object rather than replicas was not mentioned in the responses. This might be explained due to the fact that there were no explicit references to replicas within the exhibition itself. Additionally, this subject was also not brought up by the participants of the

interview until they were asked about it. Keeping that in mind, it seems logical that it also was not brought up by the participants of the questionnaires on their own accord.

The results from the questionnaires seem to mostly align with those from the interviews; they share the same themes. Some small discrepancies were found, such as the broader range of feelings that the objects invoked, which can be explained by reflecting on the way the questionnaire was set up. I observed five main themes regarding the experienced authenticity of religious objects in museums. The experiences are both cognitive and embodied. Participants experience the display of religious objects differently from non-religious objects. The participants cognitively connect with the object through empathy or reminiscing. Simultaneously, the object itself, its close surroundings as well as its meta-surroundings all influence the visitor's experience as well. Lastly, authenticity matters for the visitors, but it is generally not a big concern for them. Things feel authentic when the visitor knows that it is the original object, and when they know that it has been used historically.

6. The “real religious thing”

How do the findings from the interviews and questionnaires relate to the existing theories and frameworks surrounding experiences with secular museum objects? The participants indicated that their interactions with religious objects differed from their interactions with secular ones. Does this mean that these experiences should be interpreted through a different framework, or do the existing ones encapsulate those with religious objects as well? This chapter will compare the results from this research with two frameworks described in chapter three; the object-knowledge-framework and the TRT-framework, and propose a new framework and method for understanding “the real religious thing” in the museum.

The religious-object-knowledge-framework?

First, let us consider the object-knowledge framework. This framework can be used to better understand and dissect the interactions between the visitors and the objects. To what extent does this change when the visitor considers the objects to be religious? Let us take Sophie’s experience with the church ruins as an example, to see whether her experience with a religious object seamlessly fits into this framework. The framework argues that the interactions are created by the interaction between the objectworld and the lifeworld. Both consist out of three layers: the individual, the group, and the material dimensions. When these two worlds combine, they can create a deeply felt, meaningful experience for the visitor, which Wood and Latham (2016) referred to as a “unified experience”, as well as a “conscious” moment. Was this also the case for Sophie?

Looking at the objectworld of these ruins, their material dimension can be described as a group of stones in a particular shape–namely, the foundations of an old church–located in a pit on a small hill in the Dutch countryside. It stands no more than one meter tall at its highest points and covers a surface of approximately forty square meters. The stones on the outer walls are accessible to the public and can be touched, but visitors are not permitted to walk into the ruins. As for the group dimension: before it was a ruin, the church was an active church with a community for three hundred years. Furthermore, it was a Catholic church and was built and used accordingly. The individual dimension of this object becomes more difficult to trace in this study. It is known that the church was built in the fourteenth century, and that the parish stopped using it in 1717, after which it was only used for its cemetery. During these three hundred years, the church was renovated six times. Since then, several of its parts, including the baptismal font, have been taken out and reused in other churches.

Next let us turn to Sophie’s lifeworld. As for her material dimension: Sophie is a middle-aged, able-bodied woman, who needs glasses to read but does not always wear them. This means that when visiting the ruins, she cannot easily read the sign located next to it. When it comes to her individual dimension, Sophie was born and raised in the village near this church, where she lived with her family until they moved to a city nearby. As a child, she would often visit the ruins on her own, as well as during children's parties. Now, as an adult, she does not visit the ruins very often anymore but does enjoy it when she is near them. The city she currently lives in is the same city that the church’s font was moved to. Notable facts from her group-dimension are that she was

raised Catholic, but no longer practices her faith, and that she was raised with the customs and traditions from the same local region as the ruins.

What happens when the ruin’s objectworld and Sophie’s lifeworld interact? Sophie described that whenever she is near the ruins, she feels emotional (“*dat doet iets met me”)*. Those moments carry a deep sentimental value for her and thinking about the ruins, the font, and their story gives her a feeling like her life “was supposed to be this way, as if there is something for her to hold on to everywhere she goes”.

Does Sophie’s experience compare to the moments of consciousness that Wood and Latham described in their object-knowledge-framework? I would argue that it does. It seems that the religious aspects seamlessly fit into the group- and individual dimensions of both the objectworld and the visitor’s lifeworld. The interviews found that both the participant’s knowledge of the object, as well as the physicality of the objects, mattered for the final experience: this is reflected in the object-knowledge-framework. There is one missing factor within this framework, however: the influence of the surroundings on the final experience. This was to be expected, as this gap is inherently present in the object-knowledge-framework and is present when the framework is used on secular objects as well. This gap was filled in Latham’s TRT-framework by the inclusion of the “surround” category.

Experiencing “the real religious thing”

In chapter three I argued that Latham’s TRT-framework proved remarkably consistent with other previous research on the topic of experienced authenticity in museums. Because of this, the results from this research will be compared with Latham’s framework. In her framework, Latham has shown that visitors experience “the real thing”—a term intentionally left vague yet hinting at a sense of authenticity by referring to something ‘real’—through four categories: presence, self, relation and surround (Latham 2015). Latham visualized TRT-framework as follows:

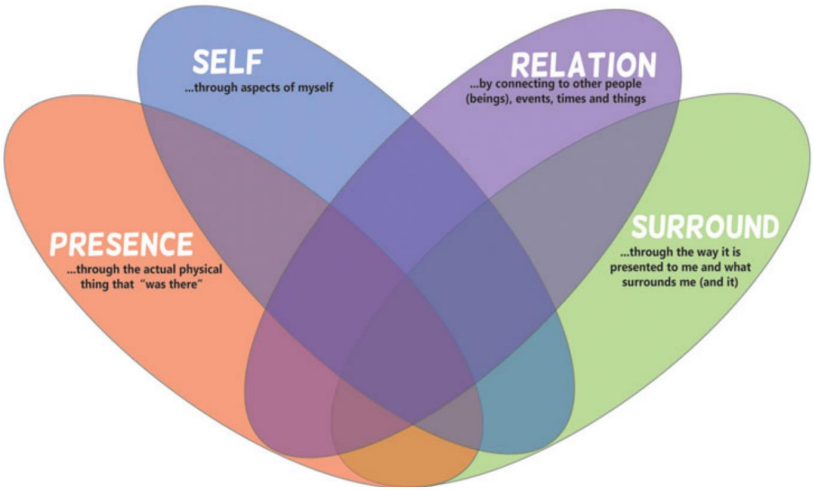

Figure 6.1: The TRT-framework created by Latham (Latham 2015, 6)

The first category, “presence”, refers to experiencing TRT through “an actual physical thing that was there and is right here in front of me now”. This sentiment was reflected in the experiences of this study’s participants: they considered it important that the object was physically present with them. As Albert described: “you could see just an image, that wouldn’t influence me, but this, this was real”.

This category also includes the importance of the object having been used the way it was intended to be used before entering the museum: the visitor knows that the object existed in the past and still exists today. As Latham notes, this category is implicitly based on trust, because the visitors trust that the object truly was there, and that the experts who have created the exhibition are being truthful about the object’s history.

The second, “self”, indicates that the visitor recognizes aspects of themselves, their identity, or their prior knowledge of the object on display. This research too found that the participant’s knowledge was very important for the way they experienced the objects, and that some did indeed connect with the object through their own identity or aspects of themselves; either through their religious heritage or religious background. In the previous chapter, I called this ‘reminiscing’. This was particularly important for Sophie, for example, who recognized a large part of her personal history and identity in the church ruins.

The category of “relation” is the third, and this one closely correlates to the “empathizing” described in the previous chapter. In “relation”, the real thing is experienced through feeling a connection with other people (beings), events, times, and things, or visitors feel connected to humanity itself. Jack, for example, spoke about “sensing a connection with the past through empathy”, and that the objects helped him get closer to the people who inhabited them.

The last category, “surround”, matches with my observation that the physical environment of the object mattered for the final experience of the “real” religious thing. It includes the way the object is displayed: the visual aspects of the display, the audio that surrounds it, the smells related to the exhibition, etc. Furthermore, Latham’s “surround” briefly touched upon the temporality of the exhibition, as well as on its geographical location. The only instance of questioning the authenticity of the experience, which was recorded in the questionnaires, was related to this category:” I feel like because I knew some things were fake/setup, that made me trust less”.

Within the “surround” category, Latham separated two groups: people who want “more” surroundings, and people who want “less”. The former prefer informational signs and support from their surroundings in understanding the experience. Jack, who would fall into this category, explained that:

> They have a whole exhibition about the history and like how the motifs etcetera. And it's like, once you get to actually see it, you know so much about it that you're not underwhelmed.

Sophie, on the other hand, falls into the latter, “less” group:

> Very often in a museum, you get so much additional [information], which I don’t think is as interesting. I have the same with paintings, when I go to an exhibition then I go there for a specific artistic movement or a painting that I really like, but there are so much more things hanging there and then I’m a person who’s, well, done after half an hour. [18]

Does the TRT-framework encapsulate all themes found in my research on the experienced authenticity of religious objects, or are there particularities when it comes to religious objects that Latham’s TRT-framework does not cover? It appears all experiences can fit within the TRT-framework. The framework consists of four different categories, and a visitor can experience TRT in multiple ways at once. If we take, for example, Jack’s case, he experienced TRT simultaneously through “presence”, because it mattered that the Dead Sea Scrolls were physically present with him, and through “relation”, because he felt connected to people from the past through the object. Furthermore, it mattered to him how the Scrolls were displayed: he felt that the theatrical, dramatic lighting made the experience more awe-inducing, and the fact the museum was located in Jerusalem contributed to his feeling of awe as well. Both aspects fit into the category of “surround”. While “self” was not very prevalent in his experience, he did occasionally refer to his christian upbringing and how his personal pre-existing knowledge added to the experience.

Following this, it seems that his experience fits into the framework in the same way as other, non-religious objects would. The same holds for the others’ experiences: they can all be understood through either one or several of the categories from the TRT-framework.

This is further confirmed when comparing the results of this study to the summarizing table from chapter three, in which different studies on experienced authenticity were placed side-by-side:

Latham (2015)	**Penrose (2020)**	**Object-knowledge framework (2016)**	**Van der Velde (2022)**
Presence	Original objects and texts, objects representing the narratives	Object: material, individual, group	“Being” present with an original object that has historically been used
Self	Creating a personal connection to the stories	Visitor: individual, material	Reminiscing
Relation	Creating a personal connection to the stories, objects representing the narratives	Visitor: individual, group Material: group	Empathizing
Surround	Sense of place	Object: material	Importance of the close surroundings as well as the meta-surroundings

However, there is one problem with this conclusion: Jack explicitly distinguishes his experiences with religious objects from those with non-religious ones, and he was not the only participant to do so. How can this be explained?

To explain this difference, we have two options. The first is that while Jack might feel af if his experiences are different, they are not, because they can theoretically be explained in the same way. The second explanation is that the framework is unable to accurately reflect the different

experiences of the visitors. In this case, it is necessary to reflect on the TRT-framework once more, to see how it might be modified to accommodate for these differences in the visitor’s experiences. Because participants did express how their experiences with religious objects differed from experiences with other objects, I would argue for the second option. Drawing on the phenomenological approach to this research, it is important to value the participant’s experiences above any pre-existing theory; they are able to articulate their reality, and if the framework cannot reflect that reality, it is the framework that needs to be revisited.

If we consider the TRT-framework further, it becomes clear that the four categories are not four separate ones, but instead are combinations of two larger themes; the direction of the visitor’s thinking act and the physicality of the experience. I will explain this using the following visualization of the framework:

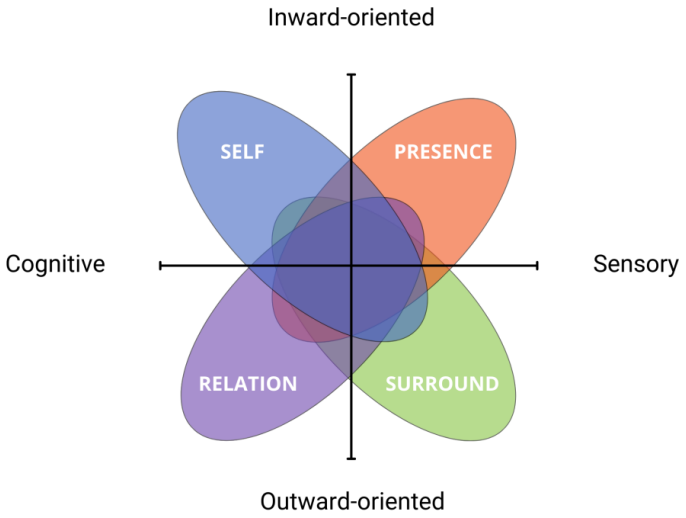

Figure 6.2: Latham’s TRT-framework reimagined.

As can be seen, the four categories through which TRT can be experienced are placed on two new axes: the cognitive–sensory axis and the inward-oriented–outward-oriented axis. The cognitive and sensory axis is straightforward: the experience is either cognitive (and thus something in the mind), or sensory (and thus something tangible). Experiences can be–and often are–a combination of both, as has been shown throughout this thesis, but at least one of them is required for something to be experienced at all.

The same concept applies to inward- and outward-oriented. This axis describes the direction of the thinking act: does it focus on the person/object itself, or on the things that surround them/it? For our purposes, I define the former as inward-oriented, and the latter as outward-oriented. A thought or experience has to be a thought or experience *of something*. If a thought is not inward-oriented, then it has to be outward-oriented. After all, if you are not thinking about the object itself, then you *have* to be thinking about something other than the object. Taking the classic example of the chair: if something is not a chair, then it *has* to be a “not-chair”. This goes the

opposite direction as well: if something *is* a chair, then it cannot also be a not-chair. What exactly this “not-chair” is, remains open for interpretation, so long as it is not a chair. The same goes for outward-oriented: this category is very broad because it covers everything that is not inward-oriented (and thus not directly related to either the visitors or the objects themselves).

If we consider the TRT-framework further, it becomes clear that all four categories occupy one quadrant of this scale each. The category “self”, for example, is inward-oriented and cognitive, because it covers thoughts and memories about the visitors themselves. On the other hand, “surround” is outward-oriented and sensory: it describes all factors that have to do with the physical environment surrounding the object itself. The object itself can be found in “presence”, which is sensory as well, but inward-oriented. The remaining category, “relation”, includes all cognitive thoughts, memories, and feelings that are not concerned with the visitors themselves, but with the “other” instead; be it other people, things, or places.

In considering the framework in this way, it becomes increasingly clear that it is difficult to conceive of any human experience outside this framework. This means that the framework is able to include experiences with all types of objects, both those that are religious and those that are not. When comparing experiences with religious objects to experiences with non-religious objects, it might prove fruitful to compare where exactly within the framework the experiences fall, and which differences we can find within the categories. For example, Latham briefly mentions the presence of other people and bodies as one aspect of “surround”, but for “the real religious thing”-experiences, the presence of *believers* held a particular significance, especially for the non-religious participants. Another difference is that within “self”, Latham describes how participants would recognize aspects of themselves, their identity, or their prior knowledge of the object. For the experiences with religious objects, the participants’ personal religious beliefs took up a particularly prominent position within this category.

In the category “presence”, Latham describes how many participants indicated that an object’s imperfections, scratches, marks, etc. all contributed to a more “real” experience. This was not brought up by the participants of this study. For the participants of this study it did matter that the object was an original, but they stressed it was essential for their experiences that the religious object had previously been *used*. It was not enough that the object had simply “been there” during historical events, as included within Latham’s “presence”, it needed to have “been used” in a religious context. The importance of this distinction should not be understated: as mentioned in the previous chapter, a discontinuation of use is what made religious objects in museums “fake” for some.

Would it be possible to place the experiences discussed in this study on the reimagined TRT-framework? One experience cannot be visualized through one dot on the spectrum, due to the complexity of the experiences. As Latham wrote, “some overlap with each other, some do not. This reflects the complexity of ways individuals could have experienced TRT in their descriptions. Some conceptions were straightforward, falling into a single clear example of one of the themes. Other conceptions blended or overlapped two or more, combining the ways of perceiving TRT” (Latham 2015, 6).

Then, if the TRT experiences can be placed in multiple categories, and each category occupies one quadrant of the spectrum, what would happen if we considered the spectrum to be “scales” that

measure the extent to which each factor influenced the final experience? For example, taking Albert’s experience: to what extent was his experience inward-oriented, and to what extent was it outward-oriented? How much significance did he place on the sensory, and how much of the experience was cognitive? When placing this in the spectrum, it would probably look something like this:

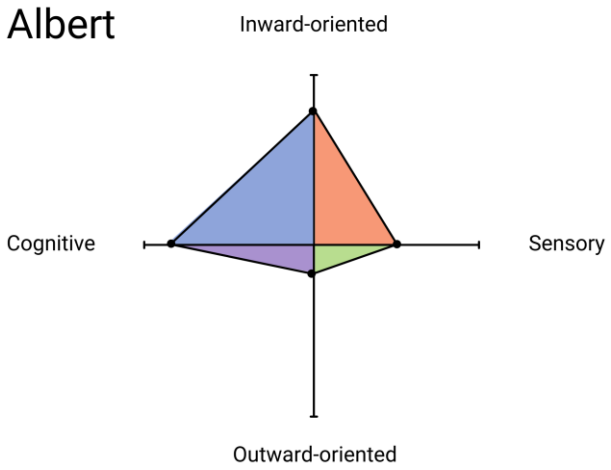

Figure 6.3: Albert’s experience visualized in the reimagined TRT-framework.

Albert’s experience was primarily inward-oriented and cognitive. It was influenced by his memories of his grandfather’s and Albert’s Jewish heritage, which makes it mostly inward-oriented. However, Albert also mentioned how he felt a broader connection between Christians and Jews: to him, this outward-oriented aspect was less important, but it was present as well. When visualized within the framework, it becomes clear that Albert’s experience was mostly informed through the “self”. However, this was not the only category, as he did also mention instances of “presence” (being *there* and touching the tallit), “surround” (due to the absence of other people), and “relation” (through his connections with general Jewish-Christian similarities).

What would the other experiences look like when displayed in such a manner? Based on the interviews, I have made the following charts. It should be noted that this is based on the experiences described in the interviews, and these charts were not filled in by the participants themselves. Furthermore, the exact extent to which one factor was of influence was not expressed quantitatively by the participants during the interviews. These charts are thus based on my interpretation of the information from the interviews. That being said, these are the estimated charts:

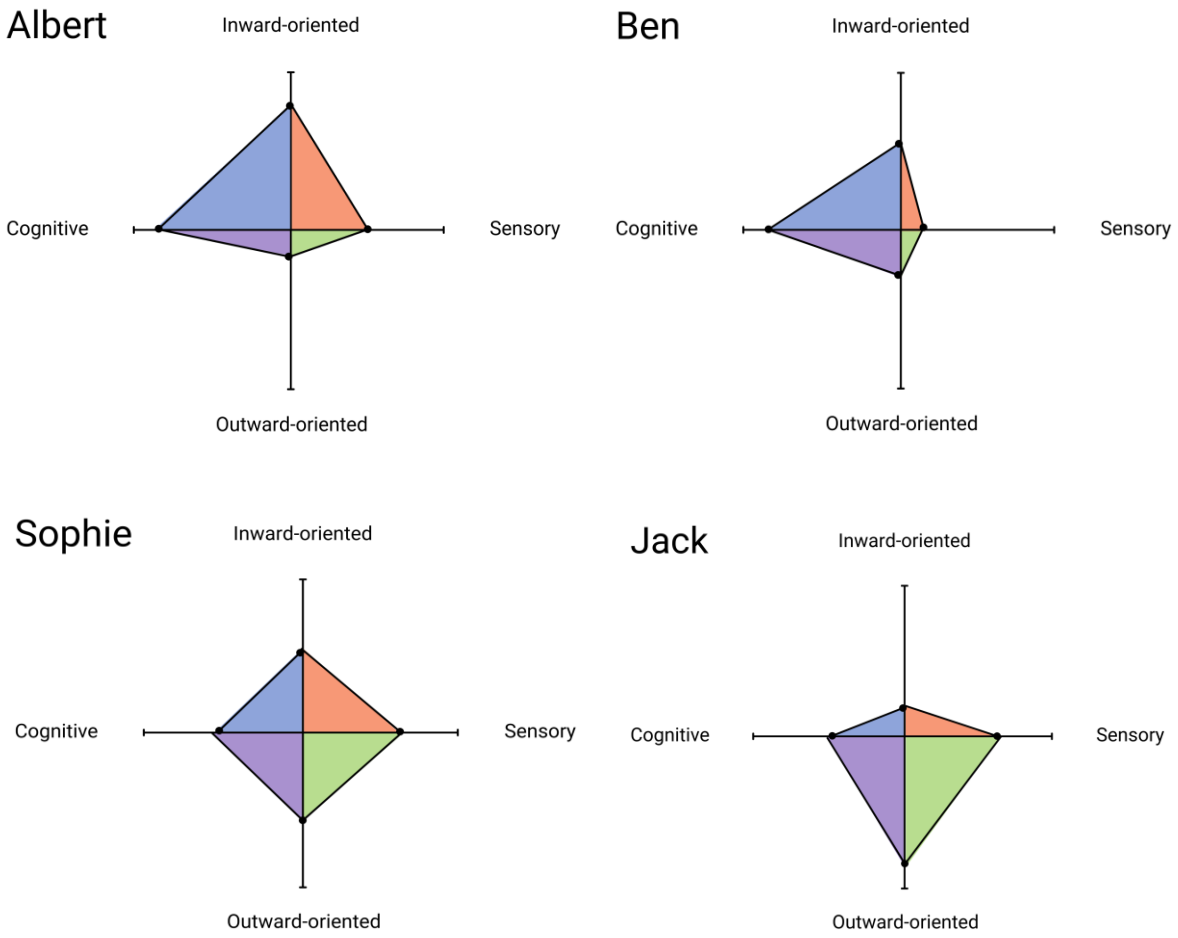

Figure 6.4: All participants’ experiences visualized in the reimagined TRT-framework.

When the experiences are visualized like this, one thing stands out immediately. Both religious participants mostly experience ”the real thing” through “self”. Albert and Ben, who both described themselves as Christians, had experiences that were both primarily cognitive and inward-oriented. Non-religious Sophie and Jack, on the other hand, placed much more emphasis on the sensory and outward-oriented aspects of their experience. This accurately reflects the information from the interviews: Albert and Ben were reminiscing, while Jack was empathizing and Sophie was doing a mix of both.

What does this say about experiencing “the real religious thing”? It appears that for religious visitors, this experience was mostly created through reminiscing, and finding reflections of themselves, their identity of their beliefs mirrored in the object. For non-religious visitors on the other hand, it seems that–while they can also experience the real religious thing through aspects of themselves–the experience is influenced more by outward-oriented factors such as the object’s surroundings of empathizing. Furthermore, for both religious participants the cognitive was most important, while for the non-religious participants it seems that their experience was influenced by its sensory aspect to a greater extent, resulting in more emphasis on both “presence” and “surround”.

This research set out to understand what it meant for visitors to experience “the real religious thing”. I have found that the real religious thing is experienced cognitive and embodied, and is influenced by both cognitive knowledge about the object as well as the object’s physical presence and its surroundings. Furthermore, for the experience of the object’s authenticity, it mattered that the object has been previously used. Is this “real religious thing” different from “the real thing” that Latham described when researching interactions with non-religious objects?

The experiences of the “real religious thing” fit into the TRT-framework, with only differences that could be found within the four categories of the TRT-framework. However, I have shown that Latham’s framework encapsulates all possible experiences with objects. Thus, in order to compare the experiences, it is not enough to solely compare whether an experience fits in the framework or not.

Instead, the experience of the “real religious thing” could be compared with Latham’s account of the “real thing” through, for example, comparing the placements of the experiences in the reimagined framework. Are experiences with non-religious objects more physical than experiences with religious ones? Do religious visitors experience TRT more cognitively with all objects, or only with religious objects? For future research, using a scale like this to visualize where on the chart participants would locate themselves could provide valuable further insight into the experience of authenticity and “the real thing” of all museum objects, not only religious ones. While more investigation would be required in order to draw a definitive conclusion, my preliminary findings suggest that, for example, non-religious visitors more often experience the real thing through outward-oriented knowledge.

A method to measure the impact of museum objects called “emotion networking” is currently being developed by a.o. dr. Hester Dibbits. In this method participants can locate themselves on the scales pleasant–unpleasant and intense–mild.[11] Unfortunately, no such scale exists yet for measuring authenticity and the ways in which this authenticity is felt. I argue that the revised TRT-framework could provide a tool for measuring these experiences.

Information found through this tool could provide museums with more insight into the ways their visitors connect with their objects. For example: if a religious museum’s target audience is mostly non-religious visitors, they might focus more on “outward-oriented” knowledge in their exhibition to ensure that the visitors will be able to empathize with the thing they are seeing. Concretely, this could influence the content of the texts surrounding the object, as well as the way in which the object is displayed. Within the texts, a museum could focus on drawing attention to the larger relevance of an object, rather than an individual object-history, in order to help the visitors empathize with the object’s original owners or creators. While an outward-oriented display is slightly less straightforward to imagine, it could, for example, draw attention to the geographical location of the museum if it’s located in a particularly relevant place, or intentionally include multiple senses into the display, through audio, smells and tactile elements.

[11] There is no peer-reviewed publication on the topic available yet, but further information about emotion networking can be found here: https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/en/research-group-cultural-heritage/emotion-networking/

For now, however, future research using the reimagined TRT-framework could allow us to gain more insight into the different ways people experience “the real thing” when visiting different types of objects. This research needs not be limited to religious versus non-religious objects and visitors only. For example: is there a difference in the way children experience TRT compared to adults or elderly people? And how do experiences with varying types of objects (e.g. natural science objects, historical objects, religious objects, art, etc.) compare to one another?

7. Conclusion

While the bodies of research on museum visitors, religious objects, and authenticity have each grown significantly in recent decades, the combination of the three has been left mostly unexplored. This project aimed to gain more insight into visitors' experience of "the real thing" and authenticity in museums by adding experiences with religious objects into the already existing frameworks based on secular objects. Knowing what makes an experience feel authentic is important for museums so they can further develop exhibitions that connect to the needs and wants of the visitor.

The primary research question, "how do visitors experience 'the real thing' (TRT) and authenticity during their interactions with religious objects in the museum?", contains several concepts and terms that had to be carefully defined before research could begin. In order to do so, several theories and perspectives on authenticity and visitor-object-interactions were discussed. I have argued that "authenticity" is socially constructed: it is not an inherent quality of an object, but rather a status granted to it. This subjective authenticity is also called experienced authenticity: and it is located not with the object, but with the visitor and their *experience*. Thus, in order to find out what this authenticity is, we need to look at the visitor's experience.

This study employed a combination of in-depth interviews and questionnaires, and its method was embedded in phenomenology. From this research, I found that the experience of TRT/wow-experience/meaningful object encounter was both cognitive and physical. The meaningful moments described by the participants included feeling emotional, feeling "moved", but also involved bodily sensations such as crying, goosebumps, and "gut feelings". Furthermore, participants indicated that their experiences with religious objects were different from their experiences with non-religious objects.

When it came to the cause of these experiences, the object's history and the participants' knowledge about the object was of great significance. Participants felt "the real thing" either through *reminiscing*, during which the object functioned as a physical and symbolic representation for the participant's personal memories, or through *empathizing*, during which the participants felt connected with people from different cultures, places or times through the object. For both categories, it is essential that the participant know about the object's story in order to connect with it.

Simultaneously, the physicality and temporality of the experiences mattered as well. All senses except for smell were mentioned by the participants, and the geographical location of the exhibition, temporality of the museum visit, and the physical presence of the object itself were all significant. These, and other contributing physical factors, can be categorized into three dimensions: the object itself, its direct surroundings and its meta-surroundings.

Lastly, the interview found that for all participants, authenticity was important, but also an afterthought. None of the participants had doubted the authenticity of the objects before it was questioned during the interviews, but when they reflected on it, they all agreed: the objects had to be an original rather than a replica, and they had to have been religiously used before they entered the museum. And, while they did not question the authenticity of the objects during their visit, they agreed that their experience would have been less meaningful had the objects been "fake".

When comparing the findings from this study with the object-knowledge-framework and the TRT-framework, I found that, while there were minor particularities within the categories when it came to the participants' experiences with religious objects, they seamlessly fit into both frameworks. At the same time, however, participants indicated that their experiences with religious objects were fundamentally different from those with non-religious objects: this is not reflected within the TRT-framework.

I argue that this is due to the way the TRT-framework is set up. Instead of four different, separate categories, the TRT-framework can be placed on two axes: one indicating the direction of the thinking-act (either inward- or outward-oriented, and one indicating the way in which the information is received (either cognitive or sensory). This can be visualized as follows:

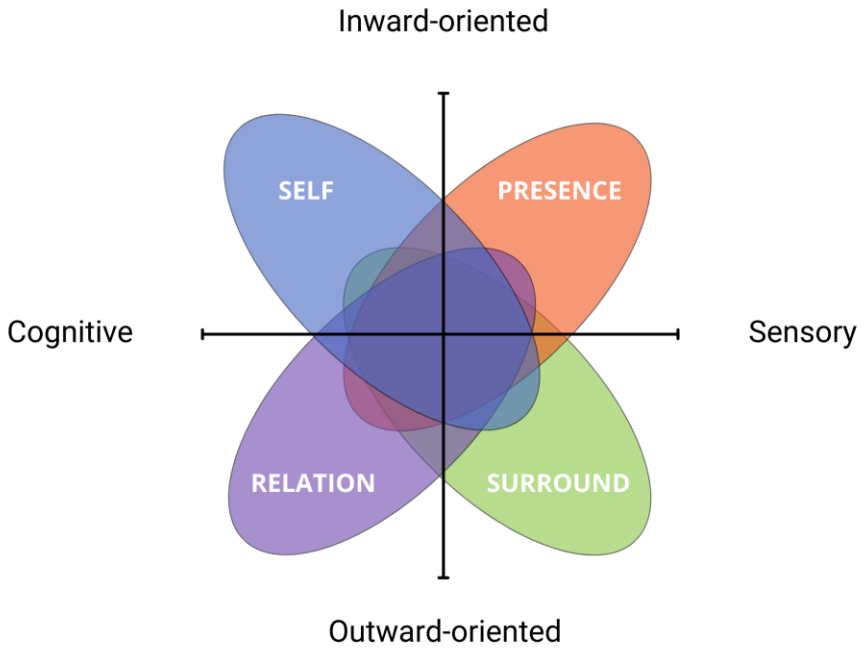

Figure 7.1: The reimagined TRT-framework.

When visualized in this manner, it becomes clear that all experiences with objects must fall somewhere on this graph. For this reason, it is not useful to merely see whether an experience fits into the TRT-framework: after all, it will always fit. Instead, in order to compare experiences and see whether a difference exists between, for example, the experiences of non-religious people and the experiences of religious people, the framework needs to be adjusted.

Following the original TRT-framework, experiences can fall into multiple categories simultaneously. For future research, it might be valuable to use the reimagined framework as a tool by means of which participants can visualize their own experiences, using the axes to measure how much of an experience was, for example, sensory, and how much of it was inward-oriented. This can create visualizations of the participants' experiences, which can then be compared to one another.

When applying this method to the data gathered in the interviews, preliminary results show that, when compared, the religious participants' experiences with religious objects fell mostly in the inward-oriented half of the chart, while the non-religious participants skewed more towards the outward-oriented half. Furthermore, the religious participants' charts were, comparatively, much more placed on the cognitive side, while the non-religious participants' experiences fell more towards the sensory side.

A large question that has been left unaddressed in this study concerns the people who do not feel like they experience "the real thing" in the museum. While the results from this study, and from any future studies using the reimagined TRT-framework, help us to understand how people experience authenticity, the question of why people do *not* experience authenticity has been left unasked. There were no participants who indicated that they did not experience anything authentic; however, people who do not enjoy visiting museums were mostly excluded from my methodology. They would not have replied to the call for interview participants because it asked for people who have had special experiences during their visits, and they would not have filled in the questionnaire because it was only available at a museum.

While this study has improved our understanding of the experienced authenticity of religious objects in the museum, it has raised many new questions as well. For example, both religious participants were also both pensioners, while both non-religious participants were younger. Was it only their religious background that influenced their graphs, or also their age? Or any other part of their backgrounds? How would a religious child compare to the religious elderly people? And would a non-religious pensioner fall on the same place in the chart as a religious one? I argue that further research using the reimagined TRT-framework across different demographics could improve our understanding of the different ways in which people experience the real thing and authenticity during their museum visits.

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9. Appendix

9.1 Calls for participants

9.1.2 English reddit post

Participants wanted for study on museum experiences!

Hello everyone,

I am Mariska, a master student from Groningen researching experiences in museums, and I am looking for participants!

I am hoping to speak with people who have felt like they were experiencing something 'real', something unique, a deep moment of awe, or any other experience that was particularly memorable and meaningful to them during their visit to the museum. I am conducting research specifically on these special experiences in relation to religious objects. 'Religious' in this case is a very broad term: as long as the object had any religious meaning to you, your experience would be relevant for my research!

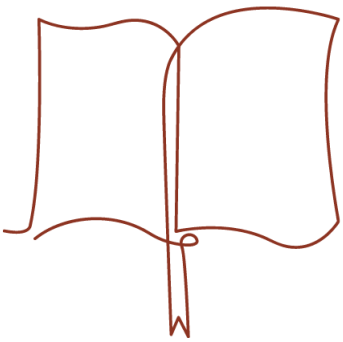
For my research I would like to conduct an interview with you. This means that we will talk through your experience together, and I will occasionally ask you some clarifying questions. In total I estimate this will take ca. 30-60 minutes of your time. This can be done either online or in a public (but quiet) location, whichever you prefer. After the interview, I will use all the stories I have gathered anonymously for my thesis.

If you have ever had a special experience in the museum while looking at/interacting with a religious object, then I would love to hear your story! If you want to participate, have any questions, or doubt whether your experience is relevant for this research, please shoot me a message here on reddit or send an email to onderzoekreligieuzeobjecten@gmail.com.

Thanks!

9.1.2 Dutch poster/social media post

Deelnemers gezocht



Gezocht: mensen die willen praten over een **museumbezoek** dat hun bijzonder is bijgebleven, waarbij een **religieus object** een belangrijke rol speelde.

Het onderzoek

Voor een masterscriptie aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen zoek ik verhalen van mensen die tijdens hun bezoek aan een museum de ervaring hadden dat ze iets 'echts' of iets heel memorabels mee maakten: een wow-moment, of een moment dat een diepe impact heeft gemaakt. In het bijzonder wordt voor dit onderzoek gezocht naar mensen die zo'n ervaring hadden met een religieus object. 'Religieus' in hier is een breed begrip: zolang het object voor jou een religieuze betekenis heeft, dan is jouw ervaring geschikt!
Je eigen (a)religieuze achtergrond maakt hierbij niet uit.

Wat vraag ik?

Voor dit onderzoek zou ik graag een **interview** afnemen over deze ervaring. Al met al zal dit ongeveer 30-60 minuten duren. Vervolgens zal ik jouw verhaal anoniem gebruiken voor mijn onderzoek.

Deelnemen?

Heb jij ooit zo'n moment gehad in het museum, en ben je bereid daar over praten? Dan zou ik jou graag spreken! Twijfel je of je ervaring gepast is, of over andere delen van het onderzoek? Neem ook dan contact op via:

onderzoekreligieuzeobjecten@gmail.com

9.2 On-site questionnaires

9.2.1 Dutch version

Onderzoek bezoekerservaring

Voor masterscriptie Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, ter anoniem gebruik in het onderzoek

Welk object heeft de meeste indruk op u gemaakt tijdens uw bezoek?

_____

Was dit object religieus?

□ Ja □ Nee

Van 0 (heel weinig) tot 10 (heel veel), hoeveel indruk heeft dit object op u gemaakt?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Wat voor gevoel riep dit object bij u op?

_____

Wat zorgde ervoor dat u dit gevoel kreeg?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Had u het gevoel dat u iets ‘echts’ / authentieks heeft gezien tijdens uw bezoek?

□ Ja □ Nee

Zo ja, wat vond u ‘echt’ / authentiek?

_____

Was dit ‘echte’ religieus?

□ Ja □ Nee

Wat zorgde ervoor dat u dit (niet) ervaarde als ‘echt’ / authentiek?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Hartelijk bedankt voor het invullen! Als u verder wil praten over uw ervaring vandaag, of over een eerdere indrukwekkende ervaring met een religieus object (evt. in een ander museum), dan zou ik u ook graag willen interviewen. Contact opnemen kan hier ter plekke, of via: onderzoekreligieuzeobjecten@gmail.com.

9.2.2. English version

Research visitor experiences

To be used anonymously in a masters' thesis for the University of Groningen

Which object made the biggest impression on you during your visit?

_____

Was this object religious?

□ Yes □ No

From 0 (very little) to 10 (very big), how much of an impression did this object make on you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Which feeling did this object invoke?

_____

What contributed to you feeling this way?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Did you feel like you saw something 'real' / authentic during your visit?

o Yes

o No

If so, what did you experience as 'real' / authentic?

_____

Was this 'real thing' religious?

□ Yes □ No

What contributed to you (not) experiencing something as 'real' / authentic?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for participating! If you would like to further discuss your experience, or any previous experience (in a different religion-focused museum) that made an impact, please contact me, as I am looking for participants for in-depth interviews as well: onderzoekreligieuzeobjecten@gmail.com.

9.3 Original Dutch quotes

[1] Terwijl als ik in de shit zit toch wel, maar als je er dan toch bent doe dan wat voor me, he, baat het niet dan schaadt het niet haha, zo hypocriet ben ik dan ook wel weer

[2] Toen was ik wat ouder, twaalf, dertien jaar, dan miste ik het, [...] en dan ging ik dus in mn uppie op mn fietsje hierheen om weer dat, om weer naar dat verhaal, nou ja, toen wist ik nog niet dat het [doopvont] in [*dorp*] stond natuurlijk, maar wel van hey maar hier ligt de geschiedenis van [*dorp*]

[3] Ja weetje als ik hier ben dan moet ik gewoon bijna huilen, ik word gewoon heel sentimenteel want dat, ik ben een emotie-mens, maar gewoon dat dat dat gevoel van vroeger, van geborgenheid, en dat het dan ook mij op mijn pad weer, dat dat doopvont dan weer daar terecht komt dat vind ik gewoon prachtig, dat, ja alsof het zo moet zijn. alsof ik ook van hè, er is overal iets voor mij waar ik me aan vast kan houden. Misschien is dat het ook wel van hey oke ik ben wel uit de [regio] weg, wat ik heel erg vind, maar daar is een stukje van die [regio] gebleven.

[4] Een schilderij daar liepen een aantal joden en daar liep een man tussenin waarvan je zei van ja eigenlijk hoort die er niet helemaal bij, wat is dat nou? In haar [de schilder] verbeelding was dat dus Jezus, dus zij symboliseert het volk wat nu nog zonder die messias leeft, zonder leeft, daar is hij wel bij betrokken.

[5] En dan denk ik ja, verdraaid, dat was één van de eerste keren dat ik er echt door geraakt werd. kijk ik heb veel religieuze voorwerpen gezien. Ik ga al heel mijn leven naar de kerk, ben ook erg geboeid door het evangelie, maar dat ik geraakt wordt door een voorwerp dat komt niet zo snel voor. dit, dat was echt een wow

[6] Ja, nu wijzen, de joden wijzen Jezus als de messias nog af, ze zeggen “hij moet nog komen”, wij zeggen “hij is gekomen”, en toch loopt hij al, is hij al aanwezig onder dat joodse volk. Dus, ik weet niet wat wat, wat je zelf weet van het evangelie, van het geloof, maar Jezus dat is dus de alles-goedmaker, tussen God en mensen, en ondanks het feit dat hij, dat de joden hem nog niet herkennen, is hij ook toch min of meer al wel de verbintenis tussen god en de mensen. Hij is er al bij aanwezig, en ze zullen een keertje tot de erkenning gaan komen, dat staat dus ook letterlijk in de Bijbel. Ja, dus dat raakte mij, dat gaf ook wel weer meer verbinding tussen, voor mij althans, tussen christenen en joden, ondanks het feit dat ik er al jaren lang mee bezig was, ja, benadrukte dat toch nog wel een keer van, we kunnen niet zonder het verhaal, want er zijn ook christenen en die laten het oude testament liggen. Die zeggen, dat is van vroeger, het gaat om het nieuwe testament, Jezus die is gekomen, die leeft, die heeft gezegd hoe we moeten

leven. Dat schilderij dat symboliseert nog eens een keer heel nadrukkelijk: het hoort allemaal bij elkaar.

[7] De regels voor de sabbatsviering die leefde hij strikt na, maar dan wel op zondag, snap je? Dus hij rommelde de boel wat door elkaar. En het was een hele strenge man, maar volgens mij heeft hij nooit goed een keuze gemaakt van, ja, wat moet ik nou precies. Hij was met een christin getrouwd, mijn opoe, dus hij was zelf ook christen geworden, maar dat verleden heeft hem nooit los gelaten.

[8] Want toen dacht ik aan mijn opa, in die tallit. Ik zag ineens mijn opa in die tallit. Flauwekul natuurlijk want die man is al lang dood, maar ik zag in mijn verbeelding, ja daar was hij gelukkig in geweest waarschijnlijk. Hij had die talit eigenlijk moeten hebben. En dat vond ik zo'n machtig interessant.

[9] Ik ben mij, laten we zeggen, meer bewust van geworden, dat is wel waar, ja. Ik was er vroeger nooit mee bezig, ik wist het en het was er en klaar, maar nu is het toch wel wat anders.

[10] Het is wel zo dat ik hierdoor wel er ineens veel meer bij bepaald werd, dat wel. Ik dacht wel, ik dacht aan mijn opa en dan krijg je van die nevenschikkende gedachten er natuurlijk bij, ik dacht aan mijn moeder, ik dacht aan de sabbat. Dat soort dingen, dat ging toen wel door mij heen.

[11] Dat je voelt wat er gedaan is om die kathedraal te bouwen, wat dat betekent heeft he, en dat was een kathedraal zonder pracht en praal waar ze dat wel probeerden maar daar was gewoon geen geld voor. Maar ook met hoeveel leed dat gedaan, gebouwd is, maar ook met hoeveel passie, wat mensen er voor over hadden om die stenen van de zee naar de plek waar de kathedraal gebouwd werd te, ja, daar mee te brengen, Ja, vond ik heel bijzonder.

[12] Daar moet je echt hem fysiek vast kunnen pakken, dan zegt een plaatje, zegt me niks. maar dit, dit was écht.

[13] Zo'n bord? Dat zegt mij niks, het gaat me echt om het gevoel. Ik lees het wel, maar het vertelt mij niet echt heel veel. [...] Ik heb niet zozeer iets met zo'n bord want dat, het typeert mij ook als mens dat ik niet per se naar een museum moet, he, dat ik niet helemaal die tekst hoef te lezen om een gevoel te krijgen ofzo, en dat is wel als ik een schilderij zie, dan ehm, dan moet het schilderij mij pakken.

[14] Dus toen had ik dat verhaal een keer gehoord en toen ik daarna, dus alleen nog een keer weer voor dat schilderij stond, toen kwam het écht binnen.

[15] Want dit is een echte, dit is echt een tallit, dit is geen fabrieksmatig gevalletje wat je in elk museum kunt vinden. Dee, deze is echt door iemand gebruikt, en dat vind ik mooi. Dat heeft wel waarde.

[16] Nee, nee het moet wel echt zijn, ik heb niet zoveel met museums. [...] Als het niet meer in gebruik, dus waar het voor gebruikt moet worden.

[17] Als dat doopvont nou in het museum had gestaan had ik er niks mee gehad. Maar toevallig staat het gewoon in de kerk waar mijn kinderen gedoopt zijn. Ja, ik zou het misschien wel, ik vind het wel interessant dan om het te zien en te lezen maar ik voel daar veel minder bij.

[18] Heel vaak in een museum krijg je er zoveel bij, wat ik dan minder interessant vind. Dat vind ik ook met schilderijen, als je naar een tentoonstelling gaat dan ga ik daarheen voor bepaalde stroming of een schilderij die ik mooi vind, maar er hangt zoveel dingen meer en dan ben ik zo'n type van, ja, na een half uur is het klaar.

9.4 Questionnaire responses

9.4 Questionnaire Responses

Which object made the biggest impression?	Was the object religious?	How big was this impression?	Which feeling did the object invoke?	What contributed to this feeling?	Did you see something real/authentic?	What was 'real'/authentic?	Was this thing religious?	What contributed to this experience?
The whole house, the church	-	8	It was very interesting to lean something about the catholic history	-	yes	The audio guide describes it real	-	To see the real old used things
Statue of Mary	no	9	Peace	My devotion to mary especially in the month of mary	yes	The architecture/everything	yes/no	n/a
Bekers/objecten	no	7	Rijkdom	Grootheid	yes	Altaar	yes	-
Todo, en lugar y el espacio	no	10	Sorpresa	El deseo de congregarse y crear un espacio para la realización del culto muy interesante	yes	Más allá de lo religioso el uso de espacios	no	Todo me parece real y me asombro, conocer la historia de este lugar.
Monstrancé	no	9	Prayer and praise	It was so beautiful	yes	Chapel	yes	Gracias
The attic at the top, the view	no	8	Stiblimation	Being able to see the view of the city from the top	yes	The struggles of the people who came here to worship	yes	None
Het altaar	no	9	Herkenning	De aankleding (textiel, beschildering)	yes	De gebedsruimte	yes	Het bijbehorende verhaal, de toelichting
Orgel	no	8	Muziek	Instrument, oud	yes	Het hele pand	yes	De hele scene
The organ	yes	9	Music - empowering	Being in church - you feel you can hear the music	yes	The artefacts in the kitchen	no	How they were displayed
Beardigskistje	yes	8	Verbazing	Het verhaal, traditie	yes	Uniek een huis met kerk op zolder	yes	Juist wel uniek in amsterdam!
Seeing the church as it would have been set up (with painting behind)	yes	9	A strong feeling of community	Knowing people worked together in secret to build the church	yes	The rooms as they would've been set up	yes	I would not describe anything as a fake or unauthentic
Laundry	yes	7	Curiosity	It was very unusual yet got my mind thinking about how thing were made back in times	yes	The laundry wheel, the dishes, the architecture	no	I feel like because i knew something were fake/setup, that made me trust less
The church	yes	8	Surprise	-	-	-	-	-
The altar! And the privy leading to the cesspit	yes		interest. I cant believe dutch hidden treasures	All the dishes and pottery that was found!. Fascinating!	-	-	-	-
Altar	yes	6	underneath	The zone of peace	-	-	-	-
The whole building and the altar	yes	8	-	We have never seen a hidden church before, it was really amazing!!!	-	-	-	-
De kerk	yes	9	Overwhelming	Ik ben niet gelovig maar wel religieus	-	-	-	-
The beds in the wall + the church	yes	9	Prachtig	-	yes	-	-	-
The organ	yes/no	8	-	-	-	-	-	-
		10	-					