When the MacGuffin is an object, it is an agentive object, something that moves the action, causes things to happen. The Maltese falcon of the eponymous Humphrey Bogart film is the quintessential MacGuffin. The MacGuffin of *Mediums and Magical Things* sits in the storage vault of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) in Hanoi—three goddesses with blissful smiles on their faces, carved of wood and covered with gilt and lacquer (plate 1). In anthropology, as well as in fiction, the MacGuffin takes us unawares, but the anthropologist is obliged to provide something in the way of a narrative explanation, which I will, by and by. The goddess statues in question are not “unimportant to the overall plot,” although the plot will eventually overtake them. They are MacGuffin-ish, however, insofar as they administered the motivating nudge for this project. A research path opened imperceptibly, and a scholarly obsession took hold. It happened in 2002, on the morning when Madame Trần Thị Duyên (Bà Đặng Duyên) from the Tiên Hương Palace at Phú Đày, a primary seat of Mother Goddess worship in northern Vietnam, visited the VME. A few years would pass before I recognized that at mid-career, I had been MacGuffined, and was spinning in a new and unforeseen direction, a trajectory involving encounters with empowered images—statues, paintings, masks—that abide under the broad umbrellas of Buddhist and Hindu practice across the map of Asia (figure 1).
THE DAY THE SPIRIT MEDIUM VISITED THE MUSEUM

Early in the new millennium, I worked with Dr. Nguyễn Văn Huy, director of the VME, in co-curating an exhibition, *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit*, jointly produced by the American Museum of Natural History. It was a thrilling and exhausting endeavor involving three intense years of close collaboration between Vietnamese and American colleagues. For labels and exhibition book essays, we evolved a conscientious process of translation, editing, back-translation, and more editing, until the final joint signoff, all of which I experienced as an absorbing seminar in Vietnamese culture. This way of working would become a model for me as the projects that became this book took shape. At the same time, following one of the threads in our exhibition story and my own anthropological interests, I was swept into the exuberant revivification of popular religion that was taking place in Vietnam at the turn of the millennium. The spirit medium’s visit occurred in the middle of our work.

Tiến Hương Palace, primary seat of Mother Goddess worship in northern Vietnam, had donated statues and other material to the new ethnology museum in Hanoi when it opened in 1997. For *Vietnam: Journeys*, members of the VME staff had explained our project to Madame Duyên’s husband, Ông Đồ Đúc, the keeper of the Tiến Hương Palace. We intended to exhibit statues of the three Mothers—the Goddesses of Heaven, of Mountains and Forests, and of Water. Hoping to gain respect for their religion overseas, the temple-keepers generously agreed to provide the statues, my MacGuffins, and politely turned down the VME’s offer to pay for them. Ông Đồ Đúc would later explain that he saw this donation as an act of devotion, of giving to the Mothers’ children. He told us that accepting money from VME would be like “selling the Goddesses.” Instead, he mobilized followers from all over the country to contribute to making the statues. The Palace organized a ceremony asking the Mother Goddesses to witness the offering of the carefully carved and gilded images. For their journey to the museum, the three Mothers were ceremoniously covered with red cloths as if they were on their way to be installed in a temple. Once at the VME, ritual protocol gave way to museum protocol as the staff catalogued the statues and housed them in the storeroom, removing their red cloths and silk turbans and storing these things with other textiles rather than keeping them in association with the images.

The statues arrived at the VME at an unfortunate moment in the history of our exhibition project. The financial crisis that hit New York City
in the wake of 9/11 forced us to drastically trim our objects list to a third of our original intention. Innocent of the Tiên Hương Palace’s emotional investment in having the statues exhibited in New York, indeed innocent of the high quality of the statues that had arrived at the museum, I suggested that the pinched exhibition budget could not accommodate shipping large, fragile, and heavy objects and that the statues were obvious candidates for omission. In truth, I had been mistakenly shown other statues and had not been impressed with their quality; I would not see the actual statues from the Tiên Hương Palace until the day of the encounter. In December of 2002, during the final months of preparation for our exhibit, the curatorial team realized that we could not represent the world of spirit mediums and their rituals without some representation of the Mother Goddesses for a simulated altar. When I saw the actual gilded statues, I realized my mistake. They would have been a spectacular addition to the exhibit, but it was still impossible to cover the cost of shipping and it was by then impossible to accommodate objects of this size in the all-but-final exhibition design for the spirit mediums’ altar.

Director Nguyễn Văn Huy turned to the Tiên Hương Palace for advice, wondering if some of the smaller statues in the VME collection could be sent instead. Ông Đồ Đức and his community were profoundly disappointed that the Tiên Hương statues would not be traveling to New York. Madame Duyên descended from the palace to assess the situation. Because the three Mother Goddess statues had grown dusty in storage, and in anticipation of Madame Duyên’s arrival, the VME collections management team took the gold-covered images out of the storeroom, placed them on a low-planked platform, and began to clean them, everyone remarking on their fine quality. They were still at work when Madame Duyên arrived and reacted with horror. “On the floor! You put them on the floor! Would you put Ho Chi Minh’s image on the floor?” Profuse apologies ensued.

Ông Đồ Đức and Bà Đồ Duyên had never intended for the statues to be kept in a storeroom, and said that the VME should return them if it did not intend to display them. The statues could be given to a Mother Goddess temple overseas, another means of making the religion known to a global community, the kind of work that the Tiên Hương Palace had hoped to accomplish through our exhibition. My Vietnamese colleagues, for their part, understood that these three statues had not been ritually enlivened with the souls of deities. They saw them as fundamentally different from the statues-become-gods that lead active lives on temple altars, practices with which they, unlike me, were already well acquainted.
So they were not enlivened—but at the same time, these were not ordinary artifacts, as Madame Duyên was causing us to see. What were they?

MADE TO BE EMBODIED

The three Mothers are the sort of objects that are meant to embody a god/soul/energy, the sort of object that in early Western writing about non-Western religion was sometimes called a “fetish” or, in statue form, an “idol.” These are material fabrications intended to foster “a sense of extraordinary, super-sensory presence which arises through a complex assemblage of acting and sensing humans,” priests and other religious specialists, devotees, and the fabricators themselves (Meyer 2015a, 167). In studies of material religion, many productive conversations have taken the fetish and the act of “fetishizing” as an entry point (e.g., Meyer 2014; Latour 2010) such that it becomes necessary to distinguish the “fetish,” strictly speaking, from the “idols” and other images that I will be considering here. Peter Pels (1998, 101) emphasizes the extraordinary materiality of the fetish: “we cannot only think animistically, of anthropomorphized objects, of a spirit in matter, but also fetishistically, of human beings objectified by the spirit of the matters they encounter.”

The material form acts upon the human object, provoking a response. Yes, the empowered images described here can be said to objectify their human subjects, engendering awe, fear, comfort, grateful devotion, or trancing. The particular and remarkable form and substance of their materiality participates in this. The images that I will be discussing are also not innately animistic; they come to be inhabited by spirits or energies through ritual work and processes that could be described as “magic.” Ensoulment is neither an inevitable nor an irrevocable condition. It is something that is enacted upon or inducted into a thing whose basic materiality pre- and postdates this special habitation. The possibility of there being a before, during, and after to the presence of spirit or soul stuff is of no small consequence for those who engage statues, masks, and god pictures. Pels’s notion of “spirit in matter” becomes here a mutable quality that confounds and complicates the nature of solid matter and the ontology of the object. The discussion necessarily concerns materiality, but looks to a different causality. The images that concern us here are about spirit in matter but with respect to the acts and circumstances that cause spirit/god/soul/energy to be there, or not.
Where the fetish is commonly understood as a product of the practitioner’s own fabrication, often homespun or a found thing, statues like the three Mother Goddesses are complex craft productions commissioned by individuals or communities. They are, for the most part, made by skilled artisans according to strict protocols, usually in workshops dedicated to this purpose, such as have existed in societies inflected by Hindu or Buddhist practices for a very long time. Those who do this work are skilled in the ways of working wood or stone or casting metal. Sometimes techniques are simplified, and production rationalized, but not without debate. As Teri Silvio (2008, 203) notes for Taiwanese popular religion, and as could be more broadly stated across time and space, these are places where “idol worship is not a historical heresy but everyday practice—where the divine was never conceived as absolutely separate from the human, never unique or indivisible, and never unrepresentable.”

The scriptural traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism include bodies of liturgical knowledge that accompany and enable the production and ensoulment of images. Gods, spirits, buddhas, and nat are ritually installed inside appropriately prepared sculptural forms as receptors for the transmission of prayer, blessing, and protection. Through appropriate procedures, the statue body becomes the body casing of a socially present god, spirit, buddha, or nat. Usually, an animation packet of ritually-indicated substances is installed in a cavity, analogous to the vital organs that are encased in the mortal flesh and bone of a living human body. A priest, monk, or ritual master awakens the image’s senses and “opens” its eyes. Some images, thus enlivened, gain renown as fantastically efficacious sites of power and veneration, while others are grudgingly conceded to be duds. Most lead ordinary lives as recipients of petitions and bestowers of benevolent fortune.

Object failure, as well as remarkable assertions of object agency, are subjects of conversation in different domains of popular religious practice in many places, as will become evident in the following pages. The reasons given for both extraordinary agency and none at all may vary not only with the setting, but in the opinion of different tellers, for, as anthropologists have discovered, the actions abduced to otherwise invisible forces often provoke a multitude of local interpretations (Belo 1960, 72–73; Wolf 1992). Expressed skepticism regarding the veracity or appropriateness of a particular report of image agency is not everywhere to be conflated with a blanket denial of the possibility that an image can enable the presence of a god, spirit, or other non-quotidian
power charge. To explore the circumstances where such possibilities are alive and open to debate is to be concerned with how, as Webb Keane (2013, 4) writes, “material practices make the invisible world a presuppositional ground for what practitioners perceive? How do people produce the immaterial using the material means available to them?”1

Religious images in Catholic communities in and beyond Europe also have long traditions of specialized craft production. When blessed to a sacred purpose, a Catholic statue inspires the worshipper to prayerful piety (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1997, 173–74; Schepers 1967, 791), a basic operation of object agency described in the work of David Freedberg (1989), David Morgan (2005), and especially Alfred Gell (1998). In the medieval European world, many images acquired reputations as miracle-working and became the foci of pilgrimages and other activities (Belting 1994). As has been noted in sensitive writing about contemporary vernacular Catholic practices, some statues acquire or maintain a sense of presence as the foci of community or personal devotion, and many devotees feel a strong sense of relationship when they address their prayers to an image. Statues of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and certain saints are, in some places, kissed, dressed, bejeweled, caressed, and addressed with heartfelt appeals for succor (e.g., Bautista 2010; Christian 1989; De La Paz 2012; Orsi 2005; Whitehead 2013). These are sometimes awkward matters for Catholic theologians. Caroline Walker Bynum has parsed how even in the late medieval period, when statues and other material forms were most exuberantly body-like, these intimations of blood and flesh were matters of significant ambivalence for many religious thinkers (Bynum 2015). Theologically and liturgically, a Catholic statue is not “animated” in the sense that statues and masks are ritually ensouled and enlivened in Buddhist or Hindu practice; they are not intended to house spirits, as objects and images in some shamanic traditions are known to do. Catholic images are not “worshipped,” and Catholics are sensitive to this characterization.

Most Western museum visitors and temple tourists are not aware of the practices that enliven Buddhist, Hindu, and related images. The heavy hand of a Protestant-inflected modernity influenced the academic study of “Eastern Religions,” making it for many years an enterprise of textual study.2 The religious images that had unsettled early missionaries were rehabilitated as “art” in museums and heritage sites. Advocating respect for their chosen fields of scholarship, aficionados and scholars hewed to scripture and artistic formalism, avoiding the specter of
irrationality, superstition, and idolatry that accompanied what Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) has described as the Otherizing of practices outside the so-called “religions of the book.” That battle is over; the Western academy regards “Buddhism” and “Hinduism” as “religions” and scholars of religion now generally accept that religious life—in any tradition—includes abundant popular practices, some of them material. A growing body of scholarship describes the making and ritual ensouling of statues and reliquaries, and the networks of patronage and devotion that enable these projects within specific traditions of practice. Art exhibits sometimes include material evidence of the ensoulement of a buddha made of metal, wood, or stone. Accounts of popular religion, including my own and my colleagues’ work, have described the social lives of sacred images in contemporary local contexts.

Mediums and Magical Things attempts a broader conversation, an exploration of things material, social, and spiritual that enable and are enabled by ensouled images as they are understood in some different Asian places. This is a discussion in which “the ‘things’ themselves may dictate a plurality of ontologies” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). Statues used by Vietnamese and Burmese spirit mediums, the paintings that hang in Korean shaman shrines, and the masks worn on the heads of entranced dancers in Balinese festivals—the four central cases in my discussion—are all considered by devotees to be inhabited by gods/spirits/energies that become present and agentive though appropriate use in appropriate settings. My examples all come from places where statue ensoulement is a part of local Buddhist or Hindu devotion and where such practices have also infused popular religion in more localized forms. While the social lives of god pictures used by shamans in Korea and temple masks worn by spirit mediums in Bali are not identical in every respect to the social lives of statues, there is sufficient resonance to sustain a conversation among them. Not all images in these places participate in shamanic or mediumistic practice, but my four core cases do. In these examples (and others) the relationship between images, the gods or spirits or energies that enliven them, and the bodies of shamans or spirit mediums, is dynamic rather than purely symbolic or representational; immobile objects become material media that enable gods/spirits/energies to operate through mobile human bodies, spirit mediums and shamans (see chapter 4). As a consequence of these expectations, a great deal is at stake in how these images are made, tended, and used in popular religious practice. Some of the activities of making and the doing could be characterized as “magic,” for want of a better term.
I use the word “magic” cautiously, aware of the essentialist pitfalls, the prejudices of Victorian anthropology, and the ways that this word has come to be associated with stage magic and slight-of-hand, but I use it, nonetheless. I share the concerns of Hildred Geertz (1975) and Elizabeth Graham (2018) that the word came into anthropological use attached to the shadow of its prior and distinctively Eurocentric incarnation—magic as the Satanic or mistaken practices of the Other. In classic works of anthropology, magic has been relegated to the bottom of a science/religion/magic hierarchy, either as a consequence of flawed primitive thinking (Frazer 1980 [1890]; Tylor 1958 [1871]) or limited technology (Malinowski 1954). S. J. Tambiah (1973, 221) made a rehabilitative argument for magic as an illocutionary act, “something very common in human activity: an attempt to get the world to conform to words (and gestures). . . . It assumes that through performance, under appropriate conditions, magic can achieve a state of change.” For the purpose of the following discussion, magic-making gestures would include not only those of the ritual masters who awaken the statues’ senses, but also the work of the artisans whose skilled craftsmanship is saturated with magical intention, to say nothing of the intended agency of shamans, spirit mediums, and the images themselves.

The notion of an illocutionary act, however, is very broad indeed. It elides an already imperfect distinction between routinized, formalized procedures (the pronunciation of man and wife in the wedding ritual) where the outcome is both predictable and generally positive, and the high-stakes and high-risk activities that are often a part of magic’s claim. High-stakes and high-risk actions are very present in Michael Taussig’s (1993) magic of mimesis, an act of capturing the power of the object being portrayed. The Amazonian shaman’s evocation of a jaguar or peccary acts “such that ‘calling them up’ is to conjure with their image, hence their soul, and hence give birth to the real. I am suggesting, in other words, that the chanter is singing a copy of the spirit-form, and by virtue of what I call the magic of mimesis, is bringing the spirit into the physical world” (105). We will encounter this sort of operation, this “calling up” and bringing out into the here and now of ritual space, in the following chapters, where attempts to bring the unseen god/soul/energy into the physical world are difficult, require effort, and carry the ever-present possibility that it might not work at all, or even worse, have a dangerous consequence. Similarly concerned with the process of
capturing power from out there, Alfred Gell’s (2002 [1988]) essay “Technology and Magic” describes the latter as an artful means of trapping the spirits and seducing them to one’s will. Gell specifically emphasizes the beauty or artistry of the magician/maker’s skilled fabrication as the source of the object’s enchantment, its ability to “enchant” a human or a spirit target. As we shall see, the beauty of skilled execution is not inconsequential for the success of an empowered image.

Magic remains a useful word. I share Graham’s (2018) concerns that as deployed in contemporary English, “magic” is overfreighted with different and often trivializing connotations, easily evocative of theatrical conjuring, belief in Tinkerbell, or as an advertising superlative (“Experience the magic!”). I agree that native terminology is best when the local word can do the work intended, as in a case-specific ethnography (Graham 2018; Lederman 2017). But a native term will not always suffice, particularly where the task is dialogic and broadly comparative. When I make presentations about Korean mansin, religious practitioners who are at the center of much of my writing, and who will appear in the following chapters, I can assume that my audience will have been drawn by a common interest in those we have broadly, and not without debate, agreed to call “shamans,” borrowing a Tungus word. Indeed, many anthropologists of religion and religious studies scholars regard the word “religion” itself with justifiable suspicion. Many of us spend ink and screen time explaining how our non-Western subjects cannot be stuffed into procrustean Western/Christian notions of what a religion is, a caution repeated with mantra-like regularity at scholarly fora devoted to the study of “religion.” For the project at hand, I need a word that crosses boundaries, that gives at least the illusion of a possible translation. “Sacred” crops up with fair frequency; the term is broad, neutral, respectful, but far too passive a word for the actions abducted to these particular images and to the intentions of the people who make, use, and enliven them. “Technologies of sacred production” takes me most of the way without the baggage attached to “magic.” It suggests ways of doing things that yield an efficacious consequence and that are not restricted to (but not necessarily exclusive of) procedures comprehensible to an Enlightenment understanding of the operations of cause and effect in the material world. When a skilled artisan applies proper tools to well-seasoned wood, he produces a beautiful statue, to Vietnamese eyes a statue more likely to be efficacious than one that is crudely made and ugly. But “technologies of sacred production” is a wordy turn of phrase and “magic” remains my most accessible shorthand. I will use it where shorthand is expedient, as in the title of this book.
MacGuffins and Magical Things

THE WORK OF A MACGUFFIN

Fast-forward: When *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit* opened successfully in New York in 2003, Richard Fox, then of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, encouraged Dr. Huy and I to apply for a collaborative research grant. The timing was right. Fox wanted to fund a research project in Vietnam, and Dr. Huy and I had proven that we worked well together. Memories of our encounter with Madame Duyên were fresh when we decided to focus on (what we were then calling) sacred objects in the VME collection. The VME was a new museum and these things had been collected within the last ten years, so that there were clear paths back to those who had made, used, and gifted or sold them. The research staff identified six VME objects that had either piqued their curiosity or had made them ill at ease (see chapter 6). We applied to and received funding from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for linked studies of how these things had been made, made sacred, used, and disposed of, and how it had happened that, in each case, the objects had come to reside in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. I worked with two young researchers, Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm and Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương, who wanted to learn fieldwork techniques. We would be the team that focused on the three Mother Goddess images that/who had set this process in motion. We went with due humility to the keepers of the Tiên Hươn Palace and explained our project. Madame Duyên and Ông Đồ Đúc received us warmly. With generosity of spirit, Ông Đồ Đúc explained the careful crafting of the VME statues as on a par with that of statues made to sit in temples, and then sent us to the artisans who had done this work. Through this process, we began to learn what a temple statue was, and about the expectations placed upon it through procedures of careful fabrication, installation, ensoulment, and tending. During this process, our thinking developed in dialogue with the other VME researchers. Nguyễn Văn Huy and Phạm Lan Hương (2008) were researching a statue that had been de-animated and removed from a village temple under acrimonious circumstances. Vũ Hồng Thuật (2008), who was researching an amulet block, shared his deep knowledge of the Vietnamese occult.

This was my introduction to a new world of social practice, partially legible through my familiarity with Korean and Chinese manifestations of gods, ancestors, and ghosts. Basic principles of cosmology were also familiar to me when I encountered them in Vietnamese workshops and rituals. The deployment of lucky hours and days, substances, measures, and directions toward the making and enlivening of a statue drew on
the same basic system of person, time, and space that a Korean diviner, geomancer, or shaman and their Chinese counterparts might use. But the work in Vietnam was also filled with surprises. I had visited countless Buddhist and other temples throughout my adult life. I had made whatever obeisance seemed appropriate, had my inept kowtows corrected by more than one Korean mentor, and had even taken part in a statue’s eye-opening in a meditation center in Seoul, a playful event attended primarily by expatriate meditators. But I had not yet fully grasped that these images were regarded as literal presents. Gods and buddhas had been inducted inside them through processes broadly analogous to the transsubstantiation of bread and wine in the Catholic mass.

**APPROACHING AN IMAGE**

My work with the sacred objects team coincided with my reading of Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency* (1998), which became part of the intellectual ballast of our sacred objects project. Gell offered the once-radical suggestion that people commonly abduct agency to things—my computer becomes moody and uncooperative; acts of iconoclasm cause bad things to happen. In using the philosophical notion of “abduction,” the mental imputation of causation in the absence of immediate proof (I see smoke; I abduct fire as the cause), as a common mental process, Gell removed the idea of object agency from imputations of “primitive thought” and into the domain of sociological process. People enter into relationships with things and these relationships can be studied in the manner that anthropologists examine the rights and obligations that obtain in other human relationships (16–18). This premise was readily evident within the transactional frame of Vietnamese and other East Asian popular religious practices where deities in image form bestow blessings in answer to sincere devotion and send punishment when abused or neglected.

The notion of object-agency is a more radically object-centered position than Appadurai’s (1986b) seminal observation that things have “social lives,” that they move between different domains of social construction and different regimes of value, which are best apprehended through a focus in the peregrinations of the things themselves. In Gell’s scheme, the object is not so much a moving dot as a provocateur, in effect a mover, inspiring devotion, fear, awe, or even vandalism. Gell cites art historian David Freedberg’s *The Power of Images* (1989, xxii), which anticipates the notion of object agency in “the active, outwardly remarkable responses of beholders as well as the beliefs (insofar as they