Introduction

The True Cross is, without question, the preeminent relic of Christianity. It is the first among a group called the Passion relics—that is, the objects venerated as part of the story of Christ’s torment and crucifixion. Alert a group of believers that a fragment of the Cross may be seen, and heads will pivot eagerly, seeking its presence—eyes will be lifted, prayers begun. However, it must be admitted that in the complex environment of worship, devotees can rarely see such a relic with any clarity, and rather than through vision, the impact of the relic is experienced via “presence” and community. Given that many relics of the True Cross are only the tiniest of splinters, by necessity it is the reliquary, the container for those relics, that “makes” the relic present and allows it “visibility.” Thus it might be said that, contrary to common sense, devout eyes are focused on the reliquary rather than the relic itself.

The Venetian Renaissance painter Titian captures the effect admirably (fig. 1). His portrait of the male members of the Vendramin family in the presence of the Cross relic of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista (1543–47) shows a variety of responses, from unaware to pious to rapt. The Cross reliquary, gleaming dimly via the rock crystal and gold that frame its precious contents, is elevated on the holy altar and honored by burning candles, but it remains a diminutive object in the upper right corner of the painting. Notably, through the participants’ gestures and outward-directed
gazes, we, the viewers of the painting, are graciously invited to enter into a social identity that is constituted through devotion to the sacred relic.

This brief description of Titian's painting succinctly introduces us to the issues that complicate our understanding of relics and their presentation via reliquaries. We must begin by attending to materiality, sight, devotion,
audience, and community. In the two essays that follow, rather than scrutinize the Passion relics themselves, we focus on the social and cultural phenomena surrounding them. Our concern centers on the presentation and reception of the relics; that is, we examine their reliquaries and display environment, as well as the history of devotions to them. Before launching such an inquiry, however, a few basic questions must be asked—and the answers may seem disconcerting and paradoxical to the reader.

The first question, of course, is, What are relics? Simply put, they are sacred remains, but one must admit that is not a very satisfactory answer. It presupposes that two key questions are already resolved: one concerns the means of selection of the remains, and the other, even more fundamental, a definition of the sacred.

Relics, it must be said, are part of a ubiquitous but misunderstood historical and religious category. All the while that they assert their status as material objects, at the same time they serve a purpose that is distinctly opposite to their physical nature. That is, the primary effect and definition of a relic is a thing that evokes memories and recalls absent persons, places, and events. Relics draw the eye toward what may be abject materiality—dust, bone, splinters, and base matter—engaging the body and the senses, but simultaneously relics deny mundane reality and redirect attention heavenward, toward the divine (as with Titian’s subjects). As we will see, reliquaries, art, and architecture are an essential aspect of this most fundamental redirection, this heavenward turn. Art helps us to know where to look, how to look, what to see, and how to react. Thus, the task of definition is already mired in the problematic question of how the material can evoke the immaterial.

The second issue is perhaps more basic. It is commonly assumed today that a relic is some sort of bodily remnant of a saint, perhaps a bone, and thus usually a thing that is revolting to modern viewers. None of the Passion relics, however, are bones. As we pursue our topic, we will find that relics of
the Passion appear in an astounding variety of forms and materials but are never bodily relics. So, the second question is, What are Passion relics and how are they selected? The only satisfactory answer is that they are associated with the events of Christ’s torment and death rather than having any physical likeness to one another.

Other equally misleading assumptions and questions misdirect our understanding about these relics. A third issue zeroes in on questions of “truth.” Viewers persuaded by the rhetoric of staging established by the sacred aura of reliquary and environment assume that what they see is authentic. That is, they accept the relics as real, unique, and powerful because the displays seem to promise that relics are delivered directly to the viewer, without mediation, from a moment of origin in martyrdom or miracle. As such, relics are presented as persistent, even eternal in their testimony as material objects, miraculously so. Further consideration, however, reveals that relics are neither entirely “true” nor entirely “false,” and they are often, undeniably, subject to the opposite of timelessness—that is, they are contingent and, as we will see, historically constrained. Sometimes they rot or disappear.

Finally, we might ask, as a subset of the already problematic category of relics, How do Passion relics measure up to expectations? To be sure, they present a very special case and yet another paradox. They are the primary “dominical” relics, those that represent Christ. And, although Christ’s body is central to the events fundamental to Christian faith—his Incarnation, his Crucifixion, and his Resurrection—that body is entirely unavailable. With the possible exception of blood shed during the Passion, Christ’s body with all of its parts, according to Christian doctrine, ascended in its entirety to Heaven.

Given this stunning absence, yet at the same time the need to satisfy the material preoccupations and devotions of Christianity, alternative objects appear. What might in other circumstances be classified as lesser, or “contact,” relics—that is, instruments of torture that touched Christ’s body
during his Passion—become the principal focus of Christian prayer. However, questions of identification and of course provenance, leave us at something of a loss. Unlike the bodily relics of the saints, very few legends detailing the origin and preservation of Passion relic-objects survive. Instead, as we will see, most strikingly in the case of the Crown of Thorns, various objects mysteriously and spontaneously surface and are celebrated.

Indeed, it can be argued that rather than being persistent or eternal, Passion relics seem to emerge, in their sudden appearances, in response to specific Christian devotional needs. That is, as questions about the nature of Christ and his worship arose or developed during the Middle Ages and later, relics as manifestations of material Christianity “made themselves known” in order to reassure and support the congregations of the faithful, to aid in their prayers, or perhaps in some cases, more venally, to serve political purposes. Ultimately, it is not our concern to question the authenticity of these objects (surely some were manufactured—whether for unprincipled or devotional motives we cannot say), but such manifestations allow us to consider Passion relics not only as holy material but also as social phenomena—as barometers of Christian devotion and its processes.

So, in contrast to the commonsense perception of relics discussed above—that each is eternal, singular, and intrinsically sacred—in this study we will consider a different scenario: that relics are objects that have histories and multiplicities, that they are objects that appear and even disappear. In sum, the primary concern of these essays is to briefly tell the story, or stories, of the Passion relics. I hope thus to depict the relics more clearly, to pierce the veil of the fixed religious presentation of such objects of veneration, and to reopen a discussion of their preeminent place as actors in medieval history and art history.

Notably, relics were employed in remarkably varied uses and served a wide range of audiences. Among an infinite number of possible themes and histories, those discussed in these essays include: the early imperial use of
Passion relics as trophies of victory; the development of relics, especially the True Cross as a dual “thing,” both sign and potent material object; the persistent medieval engagement with the relics in the context of pilgrimage; the acquisition, multiplication, and spread of the relics during the Crusades; the use of the Passion and Holy Land relics to effect an importation of the sacred from the Jerusalem to other places; and the devotional use of Passion relics (and their images in such depictions as the *Arma Christi*) in imaginative exercises of prayer. Although this list follows a roughly chronological development, the material that follows is not organized in strictly chronological fashion but ventures to offer a brief thematic overview of some of the major relics—cross, nails, lance, crown of thorns, and a few others—as well as specific examples of their presentation and their collection, in the great European treasuries of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period.