

Originally published in Surface Design Journal, vol. 31, no. 3, Spring 2007, pp. 6-13; reprinted in The Way of St. Francis, vol. 14, no. 1, January-February 2008, pp. 26-30. Copyright © 2007 by Jerry Bleem.

## **Dressing Objects: Addressing Our Longings** **Jerry Bleem**

A recent journey from the Thai city of Chiang Mai to nearby Lamphun took me down a road lined with tall rubber trees whose lower trunks were wrapped with cloth. Though the cloth had begun to fray and fade, this image of trees prized enough to be banded in cloth intrigued me. Later I learned that the government had proposed widening the narrow and busy road. This improvement would have included cutting down these towering trees. Locals wrapped their trunks with cloth to remind loggers that these old trees deserved respect and sheltered spirits. Dressing the trees marked them as holy; harming them would be an infraction against something sacred. The project had to be abandoned. The highway remains inefficiently narrow while the clothed trees stand as quiet reminders of values other than good organization: wisdom that comes only in time, and respect for the spirit world.

In Chiang Mai itself, an ancient gum tree growing in the precincts of Wat Chedi Luang, one of the city's temples, wears a skirt of cloth. Adding to this accumulation acknowledges one's small place in the city's history and the legend linking the life of this tree to the life of Chiang Mai. Similarly, I saw stupas, the architectural structures honoring a relic or an event in the life of the Buddha or one of his revered followers, draped in cloth as a sign of esteem. Wrapping trees and built forms are expressions of the human need to physically interact with objects that represent significance [i.e., function as symbols], to adorn the places where humans remember what we revere.

Clothing things that do not move (which I think of as "inanimate" rather than "not alive") indicates a reality beyond what the eye perceives. The ability to recognize the efficacy of such acts presumes a belief structure in which the tree or the architectural structure leads to or represents the Other, the Holy. No one needs to distribute pamphlets that explain the significance of these acts. The group recognizes their meaning by virtue of a shared culture taught in the doing. Such physical interactions with things might have pre-modern connotations for those who see themselves as descendants of the Enlightenment. Certainly these gestures remind us that constructing life's meaning can take on a variety of forms.

Much closer to my cultural home is Catholicism's tradition of dressing objects, especially statues that represent Christ or specific saints. Most often identified

with southern Europe, my brother Franciscans brought the practice to New Spain and used small, dressed figures (especially of Mary, the Mother of Jesus) to catechize the indigenous people. Though Our Lady of Guadalupe may be familiar to non-Mexicans, almost every city or area has its own Marian image. The older likenesses are small and sculptural, revered, wearing human hair wigs, and dressed in amazing finery. Not a few are made of modeled corn paste, one aspect that connects contemporary devotion to Mary with aboriginal fertility goddess worship.

Yearly each town or region pays tribute to their patron, to a specific title of Mary or another saint that is their connection to God, with fireworks, flowers, processions, pilgrimages, a variety of personal and group prayers, and, of course, food. Setting aside the rhythms of ordinary life and celebrating the supernatural knits bonds that are both spiritual and human. As an individual affirms her/his association with the Holy, the ritual process also solidifies that person's identity with the group, the classic process of making community.

A special treasury holds the personal property of Nuestra Señora de Zapopan, Our Lady of Zapopan, one these small Marian statuettes. Too precious to be taken out of her basilica except for the yearly procession from the cathedral of Guadalajara to her shrine in the suburb of Zapopan, copies of the image reside in the treasury when they are not visiting faith communities in the area. The friar assigned to care for Nuestra Señora de Zapopan lovingly dressed one of the duplicate images for traveling, replacing a golden and bejeweled crown with a hat. He showed me tiny garments of precious fabrics, exquisite jewelry, and gifts (like the solid-gold, toy-sized bus from the bus drivers of Mexico City) that "belong" to this Marian image. She may not be human but she is real; indeed she even wears a tiny sword in keeping with her title of General of the Army of the state of Jalisco.

In churches in the United States, it is not uncommon to find a dressed image of the Infant of Prague, a representation of Jesus as a child. The devotion originated in Spain and traveled with a Spanish princess to Bohemia. Her trip ended in her marriage to a nobleman and the original wax and wood statue depicting a young Jesus that accompanied her gathered a faithful following there. As immigrants from Eastern Europe came to the United States, they brought with them their attachment to the Infant of Prague. Caring for the statue, especially dressing it, reflected fidelity to the Child Jesus. In some churches and homes, elaborate sets of outfits for the image were made in all the liturgical colors used for worship. When the priest celebrated Mass in purple, the Infant of Prague was wearing the same hue.

Though the Catholic Church recognizes numerous saints, popular customs often focus attention upon a single saint for various ethnic, geographic or familial reasons. The need for a physical expression of one's spiritual connectedness (which can appear to some--and even become--a substitution for God) also

provides a market for both cheaply produced likenesses that might be intended for display in a home and quite costly versions for a church. Far from being removed from the marketplace, a material-based piety provides consumers. When such items are produced commercially, they mirror the industrial standards and fashions of their time, e.g., internally illuminated plastic statues.

If a person is not involved in the rituals of belief that revolve around things, one might see them as merely static entities. Their import, however, lies in the actions that surround them. Whether purchasing or sewing clothes for the Infant of Prague, whether clothing a holy tree or gesturing in response to the signs of its sacrality, whether making a pilgrimage to San Juan de los Lagos or enshrining an image of the Virgin venerated there in your home, whether lighting incense or preparing food for a feast day, the doing gives one's belief an authenticity, an actuality. If family history, religious practice or curiosity brings a person to the procession celebrating the feast of San Rocco, one is more fully a part of the action (the ratifying of the belief structure) when singing or carrying a banner or pinning a contribution to the statue than watching like a tourist.

Dressing objects and the meaning implied by this act has been a strategy used by artists as well. When Annette Messenger knit tiny vests for taxidermied birds, she invited our awareness of the natural world. Her futile gesture to keep the birds warm or anthropomorphize them also highlighted the dearth of our comprehension. Janet Morton covered a small house on Wards Island in Toronto, Ontario, with "Cozy" during November 1999. Pieced together from used sweaters with hand-knit elements, "Cozy" was a visual delight, both a physical reflection upon the importance of home and the human yearning for such a place. Assembling, installing and organizing trips to view "Cozy" also summoned a community into existence.\* In the end, dressing birds and a house is not so very different from wrapping cloth around a tree.

I suspect that our inhabiting a body, our corporeality, helps to give credence to expressions that are physical. If that were not the case, flowers and chocolates would have no place on Valentine's Day. Since we gather information about the world with our senses, what we can smell and touch and taste is more undeniable or comforting—more real—than abstract thought. But the complexities of human life and aspirations do not end with the tangible. Each thing clothed, each ritual enacted, represents our desire to preserve meaning or create it, to express our longings or find them.

---

\*For further information on "Cozy," consult the catalog that accompanied the exhibition *Janet Morton: wool work*, curated by Sarah Quinton, Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto, Ontario, 2000.