

ORNAMENT AND ARTIFACT: POSSIBILITIES IN CULTURAL
INTERPRETATION

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I have to confess that my own relevance to this session, if it is not quite incidental, is at best interstitial. My interest focuses somewhere between the two polarities referred to in the first part of the title, "Ornament and Artifact." These alternative concepts are also implicit in the institutional affiliations of the objects discussed—one group comes from an historical museum, the others from art collections—and ultimately in the treatment the objects have received from the speakers. Professor St. George, following the method of cultural anthropology, takes those incredibly hard, diorite millstones, recut, incised and reused as doorstones, as the point of departure for wide-ranging explorations in the domains of folklore, superstition, magic and metaphor, from colonial New England to the heart of Africa. Some of his arguments might seem overdrawn and far-fetched to some historians, but I find them perfectly valid and very helpful evocations of a certain kind of cultural situation that links human beings across great stretches of space and time. His peregrinations lead him to the provocative notion of "affective presence" as a definition of the ultimate purpose or efficacy of objects like Richard Dummer's doorstones. It is striking, on the other hand, that Professor St. George devotes little attention to the objects themselves. In particular, he tells us nothing that would help answer two very crucial questions concerning them: is there anything about the way they are designed that would enable us to date them and place them in 17th century New

England: and secondly, how does the way in which they were designed serve to achieve the quality of affective presence? I suspect that the underlying problem is belied by his remark that the lady-stone is of greater visual interest than those with dates—a sophisticated epigrapher would howl with pain, and proceed to tell us vast amounts from the sizes, shapes and distribution of the numerals.

The dates have evidently been executed with great care, using compasses to trace the sixes, zeros and nines—like repeated magic circles that transform the year itself into an affective presence on the house. The lady-stone may refer to Mr. Dummer's second marriage; indeed, the radiant sun above and the hearts, flowers, and perfectly rounded breasts arranged symmetrically about the ovoid head, itself haloed by equally symmetrical curls and a gigantic bonnet that also becomes the shoulders—all these formal devices imbue the carving with the quality of a powerful, iconic invocation of some awesome goddess of fertility.

Moreover, the formal devices—geometricity, symmetry, repetition, ambivalence—may also have connotations of their own. In other words, Professor St. George treats the doorstones very effectively as meaningful and highly-charged artifacts, but hardly at all as works of art.

With the other papers almost the converse seems true. In the best art historical mode, the speakers took pains to analyze visually the works they dealt with, relating them to others of comparable form and purpose in order to determine when, where and in what context they were made. In fact, the objects were treated primarily as works of art, and tended to lose their peculiar quality as artifacts. By this last I refer not to their utilitarian function but to what can only be called their spiritual function as affective presences in

the world of the people who made them. In this health-food age we know full well the wondrous effects people attribute to alimentation. Jesus said to his disciples, "Ye are the salt of the earth." But what is the exotic magic of a crystalline boat riding high on the waves of a transparent sea that floods the dining table? And what mythic powers do we absorb by feasting on fruit from a dish that contains portraits of antique heroes and heroines? We might suppose that precious jewels would be hidden and protected by a plain-looking safe. What are the mysterious worth and significance of royal treasures kept in delicate, flower-bedecked chambers carried aloft by pure white figures of Atlantean beauty and grace? Ornament and Artifact are like mirror reflections of one and the same luminous but elusive Thing—spelled with a capital T—which our discipline must seek to grasp from both sides at once.