

Humanized Objects: Between Person and Thing

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Humanized Objects: Between Person and Thing is about objects that are given certain human characteristics. These aspects range from the contours of a vaguely human shape to the telltale facial features of a famous individual. These human qualities elevate the objects beyond the status of inert *things* but not to the point of independent *people*. Instead, these humanized objects occupy an intermediary place between the two.

Cultures across time and around the world portray the human figure in their art and made objects. Some of these instances found here in *Humanized Objects* are portraits, in which particular individuals are visually represented and identifiable. Others are more abstract, but the human figure is still recognizable.

Because they are objects, their personhood is inherently simplified and extracted. The creators of these objects select particular human attributes based on the message they intend the object to convey. They consider what the traits can communicate to a larger audience and how characteristic they are of the group, individual, or ideal the figure is based on.

This installation explores what connections can be drawn from the symbolic figures visible in the objects, paintings, prints, drawings, and photographs on view. What human features are abstracted onto the objects to communicate particular meanings? What characteristics do people project back onto these human forms? To what varying degrees might these rendered figures be considered human as opposed to inanimate objects?

Humanized Objects challenges us to probe the boundary between things and humans. We take for granted that the works in the case and on the wall here are objects and not people – but how do we know that? What qualities do the objects share with real people, and what sets them apart? Might the objects in this installation occupy a tenuous space somewhere

between *person* and *thing*? Is *human* compared with *object* a dichotomy or a spectrum? This installation brings these delineations to the forefront for consideration.

Humanized Objects contains three overlapping thematic groupings: functional objects, sacred objects, and effigies. The functional objects, like jars and pins, can serve their intended purpose without human imagery. That the objects on view here display human characteristics is noteworthy. By depicting human qualities these objects may be seen as gaining those characteristics themselves, whether the authority of the ruler depicted on a medal or the status of an elegant woman used in an advertisement. In this way, the objects are integral to social power dynamics. The second group, sacred objects, depicts figures that are spiritual connectors. These works remind believers of their religious stories and lessons. They also act as intermediaries between beholders and a higher power. The people depicted in these objects give a more tangible sense of presence to the immaterial. The third group, effigies, are human vessels. They take on particular characteristics and qualities the person creating or interacting with the objects projects onto them. These figures are imbued with certain abstracted human characteristics that they then embody, like the idealized adult features of *ere ibeji*, which memorialize deceased twin children in Yoruba culture.

Meanings change over time and can always be interpreted in various ways by different people. I do not know the originally intended significance of all the works in this installation. Still, they communicate some meanings to us today. The objects in *Humanized Objects* are ones that connect to my interest in figures occupying the ambiguous space between *person* and *thing*. I deliberately selected these pieces from a wide range of times and cultures to highlight the common use of the human figure under each theme.

SACRED FIGURES

Sacred figures channel spiritual activities. They can work in two general directions: from a person to the spiritual realm and from the spiritual realm to a person.

The head (number 36) is from an Anyi funerary sculpture, called a *Mma*. A *Mma* is associated with a particular royal ancestor or member of the court. Hairstyle and scarification identifies the individual, but the *Mma* is otherwise idealized. The Anyi people, who live in what is now Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, created a *Mma* for a person's funeral ceremony. Afterwards they placed the sculpture in the cemetery to become part of a court with other *Mma*. There, people could visit the sculptures and leave offerings or say prayers for the dead. *Mma* are an extension of the people who came before them. They are a spiritual interface through which the deceased ancestor can interact with the physical world and the living can commune with the dead. The Anyi largely stopped the practices surrounding *Mma* in the early twentieth century due to colonial pressures.

Similar to the standardized appearance typical of *Mma*, individual Christian figures are represented through consistent features. The two figures in the painting of Saint Roche (left) and Saint Francis (right) (number 34) can be identified by their attributes, or emblems, and poses. Saint Roche, for example, holds a pilgrim's staff and points to a lesion on his leg. These refer to and call to mind the sacred narrative of his life. Saint Roche went on a pilgrimage to Rome in the fourteenth century and during that time cared for people who had contracted the plague. He became sick with the disease, which creates visible wounds, but recovered. After becoming a saint, Roche was invoked by Christians to protect against the plague. In the late fifteenth century, when this panel was painted, the plague was still a concern in Italy. The panel was part of a larger altarpiece, which would have displayed multiple panels with other images of Christian saints or biblical scenes. Altarpieces were a central focal point in the church. They indicated the dedication of a church's altar to particular sacred individuals. Images of saints, like Roche and Francis here, focused worshipers' thoughts on religious topics. They also provided a connection to the saints themselves so they could attend to worshipers' prayers.

Geoff Winningham's photograph (number 35) gives us a glimpse into a different instance of human imagery used by Christians: an Easter tradition in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The annual celebration occurs during Holy Week, when Christians commemorate the

events leading to Jesus's death and resurrection. Judas, one of Jesus's contemporary followers, instigated Jesus's execution by betraying him. Festivities like the one in this photograph often include community reenactments of these events, in addition to the use of effigies. The celebration Winningham captured involves an effigy of Judas, which participants hang in a reenactment of Judas's death or destroy during a celebration of Jesus's resurrection. To a certain degree the doll becomes Judas the person. Killing Judas in effigy offers believers the opportunity to tangibly participate in religious history or take revenge. In Winningham's photograph, Judas holds a bouquet of white chrysanthemums, a traditional funeral flower. This touch further humanizes the effigy. *People* have funerals; *things* have them only inasmuch as they are treated as human.

Are these figures human in their ability to convey believers' messages to a higher power? Are they actually *more than* human since, according to believers, they can access divine worlds that are cut off from mortals? Or are they simply prompting symbols, like words, that induce sacred thoughts or actions?

EFFIGIES

Effigies, defined as human likenesses or habited representations, embody the characteristics their creators or users give them. To truly understand their function one must know their creator or intended user, but something of their role can still be understood by interacting with the effigy itself.

Laurie Simmons's work often deals with the line between dolls and people. Her photograph in this installation (number 49) does just that. We see two figures in a park. One is a ventriloquist's dummy and the other is a human being. Ventriloquist dummies are designed to appear human, but discernible signs make it obvious that they are not. Dummies only take on human animation with the aid of a skilled puppeteer. A ventriloquist can animate a dummy, which superficially resembles a human being, and make it seem to talk by manipulating its controls and speaking with minimal movement. Simmons's photograph pushes this apparent contradiction of an object that simultaneously is and is not human. The

artist leaves the visual cues that this figure is a dummy, such as the grooves separating the disjointed lower jaw and the stiffly posed hands, but gives it new indications of being a person. The dummy in this image suggests human behavior by standing under an umbrella and wearing a trench coat. The artist also treats the dummy as human, photographing him as the subject of a portrait with someone who is visibly recognizable as an actual human being. These unexpected human characteristics can make the dummy seem more like a real person than it would in an act.

While a ventriloquist doll can theoretically be used by anyone, the dolls and drawing included from Lia Perjovschi's *Pain H Files* (numbers 10-11) are intimately connected to the artist herself. The dolls are effigies for her bodily experiences. Perjovschi created these figures to help her remember and articulate her experiences to her homeopathic doctor. They take on her pain and other uncomfortable sensations, recording and communicating. The various colors, lines, shapes, and patterns symbolize the feelings in her body. The marks enliven the blank figures. She did not create the figures to be animate. She means them to be matter-of-fact recordings. The figures are tied to Perjovschi because they record her personal experience and are utilitarian objects that help her communicate. Still, they are independent communication devices. Other viewers can understand something of their meaning without Perjovschi's presence. Such interactions with the figures will be incomplete, but the dolls and corresponding drawings can communicate about bodily experiences on their own.

Little is known about the Quimbaya people who created the effigy of a female form (number 48). These people lived in modern-day Colombia from around 500 BCE through the 1500s CE and few records survive or have adequate anthropological data today. We do not know for certain what the figure in this installation signified or how it was used, but we can identify particular human characteristics on it. The figure is female, as indicated by her breasts, and is sitting down. The painted geometric designs seem to show a skirt and body decorations. The figure's nose and ears are even pierced. The earrings have been lost but her gold nose ring is still in place. These adornments give the ceramic figure a degree of personality and

identity. Like the figures in Perjovschi's *Pain H Files*, the Quimbaya effigy can communicate, albeit incompletely, human characteristics independent of its creator.

The smiling boy (number 47) is a turquoise sculpture from China during the Qianlong period (1736-1795). This kind of non-religious, privately owned and displayed, figure was common during this time. Figurines of boys, like the one displayed here, were especially popular. Having one was a way to express one's desire for male children, who would continue the family line. In this way, the small sculptures served as a kind of secular charm. They did not have the divine power to act like religious figures, but they could be a vessel to embody someone's hopes for male progeny.

Are effigies somewhat human in their adaptability and ability to communicate? How much do those abilities exist in the effigy itself rather than in the creator's, owner's, or user's interaction with it? Even if an effigy's independence is only given to it by a user, are effigies still more human than simple objects without a human figure?

FUNCTIONAL OBJECTS

Figures on functional objects make abstracted identities visible and embody power dynamics. These identities are often idealized and are always simplified extractions.

Money (numbers 20-23 and 25-26) is perhaps the most ubiquitous functional object with a human figure depicted on it. Coins and bills do not need such an image to serve their purpose as units of payment. However, from ancient times to now, most currency contains an illustration of a person. These figures are often shorthand for indicating the nation producing the currency. Portraits of famous rulers give an air of authority to the money, as their images communicate that the leaders or their descendant governors stand behind the currency's value. Images of figures also define the nation the money comes from by conveying a sense of the nation's history and values. In some cases, the figure is not a famous ruler but an idealized embodiment of the culture. For example, the woman on the Yugoslavian 100 dinar note (number 25) is wearing a traditional dress. She is not identified

by name because she is an ideal type, not a specific person. Whether a banknote or coin is illustrated with the image of a historic leader or an idealized figure, the image communicates the nation's identity.

Other state-produced imagery also makes use of famous rulers to communicate with certain public audiences. The Soviet poster (number 2) from Joseph Stalin's rule (1929-1953) shows an inspiring portrait of him. Stalin is recognizable by his thick mustache and military general's jacket. The text below translates to "Great Stalin – the Best Friend of the Latvian People!" When this poster was produced in 1950, the Latvian government had joined the Soviet Union in the face of an unwinnable war, and many Latvians opposed this latest brutal regime. This poster was part of Stalin and his Soviet government's efforts to win back support. As with the portraits on money, the image of Stalin lends authority, in this case to the message of Stalin's rule as the best thing for Latvia. It also defines the national identity of the Soviet Union that Stalin wanted to realize – a strong, unified, homogenized, Russian-speaking society. Stalin's confident expression helps set the progressive and triumphant tone for this propaganda poster. Below him are two anonymous figures, stand-ins for the Latvian people with their idealized physical features. The man and woman gaze out of the poster frame, following Stalin's pointing finger. Appearing just as resolute and optimistic as the Soviet dictator, they visually echo the textual message of the poster: Stalin is the great leader who can help Latvia into the bright future he has planned, and Latvians should believe in his rule. The anonymous Latvian figures also offer an aspirational position. They are generic enough that viewers can imagine themselves in the position of the man and woman supporting and gaining from Stalin's rule. At the same time these young, blond-haired and blue-eyed figures are idealized enough to enticingly push Latvian viewers to strive for their place in Stalin's Soviet vision. All three figures in this poster convey multifaceted human emotions and identities.

A different way of using a recognizable human identity is evident in the brass candlestick (number 16). It takes the form of a *Landsknecht*, a type of German mercenary during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the period in which this candlestick was made. The

Landsknechts were emblematic of the German empire. These soldiers were easily identifiable by their elaborate clothes. Many clothing details are visible on the figure in this installation. The sleeves are “slashed and puffed,” a technique where slits are cut into a top layer of fabric and a lower layer peeks through. Figures in contemporary dress were a new design trend for German candlesticks in this era. Using a *Landsknecht* as the model for this one may have been due to their particularly conspicuous dress. Or, perhaps basing the candlestick off a *Landsknecht* was inspired by their for-hire nature: owning this candlestick would give one a mercenary, albeit only symbolically, of one’s own. The candle this figure holds might also be a visual pun on the fact that many *Landsknechts* used lances.

Another object in the shape of a human figure is the Chorotega doll (number 13), which is also a whistle. Little is known about Chorotegan culture, which flourished in northwest Costa Rica before the arrival of Spanish colonists. The colonists suppressed the Chorotegan language and culture, including their pottery practices. While art historians can trace stylistic influences on objects, the meanings may not be clear. Looking at the doll on view, one can see a mouthpiece on the back of what appears to be a headdress and several holes around the figure that could be covered or left open to play different notes. It is hard to say why this instrument is in the shape of a person. Of course, a whistle does not need to look like a human to play music. Perhaps it is meant to seem as though the ceramic doll is singing when the whistle is played, similar to the way ventriloquist dummies like the one in Simmons’s photograph are made to appear to be talking when animated by a puppeteer. In that way, the doll could embody an abstracted identity of a musician or some other community member or group identified with singing.

What is the significance of embellishing functional objects with the image or shape of a person? Why decorate something that will be used with the image of a real or idealized individual? What characteristics of that person are highlighted, and what do these features communicate to those interacting with the object? What role do such functional objects play in human power dynamics? Are they more human than undecorated objects for being able to take part in that social relationship?

OVERARCHING PROJECT

Humanized Objects is part of my master's project, *Ambiguously Human*, which looks at the ways different disciplines, from visual art and philosophy to biology and computer science, define what is human as opposed to what is a thing. Given a particular context, what aspects of the human or non-human are defined? What *are* the boundaries of humanity? Is there any one consistent definition of what is truly, fully human? *Humanized Objects* is one of several public events I have organized in this exploration. Please visit the project website, sites.duke.edu/AmbiguouslyHuman, for the full schedule. I hope you can make it to another!

I would love to hear what you thought of *Humanized Objects*. What ideas or questions did it inspire? Do you have any feedback? Please email me at AmbiguouslyHumanProject@gmail.com.



BIOGRAPHY

Kati Henderson is a master's student in Duke University's Graduate Liberal Studies department. Her program of study focuses on interdisciplinary public engagement. She is interested in where and how explorations in academic fields intersect, and how those overlaps can be ripe for new ideas, questions, and public education. Since arriving at Duke University she has worked at the Nasher Museum of Art as a Gallery Guide and as an intern with Academic Programs. She loves it here!

On the Wall:

1. **Russian**
Tsarist Servants, 1930
Lithograph on paper, mounted on linen
Gift of Richard Segal
1995.11.11

2. **Russian**
Untitled (Stalin with Soviet Man and Woman), 1950
Lithograph on paper
Collection of Duke University Museum of Art
2001.5.5

3. **Ronald Brooks Kitaj**
Born in Cleveland, Ohio, 1932 – 2007
City of Burbank, California, Annual Budget 1968-1969 from the portfolio *In Our Time: Covers for a Small Library After the Life for the Most Part*, 1969
Screenprint on paper
Gift of Robert Anthoine
1999.7.1.DD

4. **Jules Chéret**
French, 1836 – 1932
La Gomme par Félicien Champsaur (Translation), for the book *La Gomme* by Félicien Champsaur, 1889
Lithograph on paper
Bequest of Sara Lichtenstein, in memory of her parents, Joseph and Esther Lichtenstein
1977.59.99

5. **Henri Matisse**
French, 1869 – 1954
Study for Saint Dominique, 1951
Lithograph on paper
Edition 28/100
Bequest of Wallace Fowlie
2004.1.13

6. **Romare Bearden**
Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1911 – 1988
Mother and Child, c. 1972
Screenprint on paper
Museum purchase
1998.14.1

- 7. Indian**
Krishna seated on a throne, combing a woman's hair, 19th century
Gouache on paper
Bequest of Maud F. Gatewood
2007.1.3

In the Case:

- 8. Andy Warhol**
Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1928 – 1978
Monument, n.d.
Gelatin silver print
Gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
2008.9.159
- 9. Greek**
Figure of Eros, 4th – 3rd century BCE
Terracotta
The Duke Classical Collection
DCC1964.10
- 10. Lia Perjovschi**
Born in Sibiu, Romania, 1961
Pain H Files, 20th century
Ink marker pen on paper
Purchase, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University Fund for Acquisitions and funds provided by Marilyn M. Arthur
2007.9.1.TT
- 11. Lia Perjovschi**
Born in Sibiu, Romania, 1961
Pain H Files, 20th century
Mixed media
Museum purchase with additional funds provided by Marilyn M. Arthur
2007.9.1.BB; 2007.9.1.I; 2007.9.1.JJ; 2007.9.1.T
- 12. Moche (Peru)**
Male Portrait Stirrup-Spout Vessel, 200 – 500 CE
Ceramic
The Paul A. and Virginia Clifford Collection
1973.1.499

- 13. Chorotega (Costa Rica)**
Doll whistle, 900 – 1400 CE
Ceramic
The Paul A. and Virginia Clifford Collection
1973.1.199
- 14. European**
Medal, n.d.
Bronze
Collection of Walter Kempner, M.D., gift of Barbara Newborg, M.D.
2006.1.226
- 15. British ?**
Medal with Napoleon, after May 1821
Silver alloy and bronze
Collection of Walter Kempner, M.D., gift of Barbara Newborg, M.D.
2006.1.233
- 16. German**
Candlestick figure of a *Landsknecht*, c. 1575
Brass
The Brummer Collection
1966.87.1
- 17. European**
Medal, n.d.
Bronze
Collection of Walter Kempner, M.D., gift of Barbara Newborg, M.D.
2006.1.222
- 18. American**
Pin, n.d.
Silver
Bequest of Sara Lichtenstein, in memory of her parents, Joseph and Esther Lichtenstein
1977.59.44
- 19. American**
Pin with head of a woman, n.d.
Gold
Bequest of Sara Lichtenstein, in memory of her parents, Joseph and Esther Lichtenstein
1977.59.51

- 20. Roman**
Coin, 311 – 336 CE
Bronze
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Willis Clark
1975.37.166
- 21. Roman**
Drachm coin, 18 BCE
Gold
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Willis Clark
1975.37.1
- 22. Roman**
Coin, 311 – 336 CE
Bronze
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Willis Clark
1975.37.141
- 23. Roman**
Denarius coin, 10 – 14 CE
Silver
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Willis Clark
1975.37.2
- 24. European ?**
Pin with the face of a girl and flower blossom design, n.d.
Silver
Bequest of Sara Lichtenstein, in memory of her parents, Joseph and Esther
Lichtenstein
1977.59.16
- 25. Yugoslavian**
Currency note, 1955
Engraving on paper
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Willis Clark
1975.41.373
- 26. Greek**
Currency note, 1953
Engraving on paper
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Willis Clark
1975.41.331

- 27. Eugene Meatyard**
Born in Normal, Illinois, 1925 – 1972
Untitled, 1958 – 1959 (printed 1992)
Gelatin silver print
Museum purchase
1996.10.2
- 28. The Kleophrades Painter, attributed**
Pelike, c. 480 – 475 BCE
Ceramic
Collection of Walter Kempner, M.D., gift of Barbara Newborg, M.D.
2006.1.1
- 29. Peruvian, North Coast**
Textile fragment depicting a warrior, 1100 – 1300
Cotton and camelid fiber
Gift of Dr. Mercedes Gaffron
1987.9.10 – 11
- 30. Yoruba peoples (Nigeria)**
Male twin figure (*erre ibeji*), 19th – 20th century
Wood and beads
Gift of Mrs. Ruth and Mr. Byron S. Caldwell, Sr.
1974.22.58
- 31. Chinese (Qianlong Period)**
Statuette of Taoist Immortal, 1736 – 1795
Soapstone
Gift of Col. Van R. White
1973.50.67
- 32. European**
Folding skull cap, 17th century
Embroidered silver and gold threads
The Brummer Collection
1966.253.1
- 33. Russian**
Ikon with Two Soldier Saints, 19th century
Oil on panel with silver bas-relief
On loan from the Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans Foundation
DS 1985.4

- 34. Italian (Campania)**
Saints and Francis, c. 1490
Oil on panel
Gift in honor of Marilyn M. Segal by her children
1998.22.13
- 35. Geoff Winningham**
Born in Jackson, Tennessee, 1943
Judas, Easter, San Miguel de Allende from the portfolio *In the Eye of the Sun: Mexican Fiestas*, 1992 (published 1995)
Published by Other American Press of Houston
Color photograph
Edition 4/25
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Travis C. Broesche
1999.13.1.10
- 36. Anyi peoples (Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire)**
Funerary head, 20th century ?
Terracotta
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph and Virginia Neely
1979.43.70
- 37. Roman**
Statuette of Mars, 2nd century
Bronze
The Duke Classical Collection
DCC1964.20
- 38. Bolivian or Peruvian**
Good luck figure (*egego*), n.d.
Textile with fibers, wood, metal, painted ceramic, paper, and matches
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Weston La Barre
1978.53.37
- 39. Egyptian**
Figure of a nude female, 664 – 332 BCE or later
Wood
The Duke Classical Collection, gift of William Bergh
DCC1974.14
- 40. Chancay (Peru)**
Female doll with child, 1000 – 1470
Textile
The Paul A. and Virginia Clifford Collection
1973.1.749

- 41. Masters of the Gold Scrolls**
Last Judgment from a Book of Hours, c. 1440
Tempera, burnished and liquid gold, and ink on vellum
Museum purchase
2010.5.1
- 42. French**
Puppet patterns (Pierrot & Columbine), 19th century
Lithograph on paper
Bequest of Sara Lichtenstein, in memory of her parents, Joseph and Esther
Lichtenstein
1977.59.108.L
- 43. Cycladic**
Marble female folded arm figure (Late Spedos variety), c. 2500 – 2400 BCE
Marble
Collection of Walter Kempner, M.D., gift of Barbara Newborg, M.D.
2006.1.101
- 44. Bahia (Ecuador)**
Figure, 500 BCE – 500 CE
Ceramic
The Paul A. and Virginia Clifford Collection
1973.1.286
- 45. Greek**
Figure of Aphrodite, late 2nd century BCE
Ceramic
The Duke Classical Collection
DCC1969.17
- 46. Guerrero or Olmec (Mexico)**
Figure, 500 BCE – 500 CE
Stone
The Paul A. and Virginia Clifford Collection
1973.1.1
- 47. Chinese (Qianlong Period)**
Miniature reclining boy, 18th century
Turquoise
Bequest of Col. Van R. White
1992.7.15

48. Quimbaya (Colombia)

Effigy figure, 600 – 900 CE
Redware, polychrome, and gold
Gift of Mrs. Barbara N. Wilson
1980.82.2

49. Laurie Simmons

Born in Long Island, New York, 1949
The Music of Regret (Meryl, Act 2, Rain) from the portfolio *America: Now and Here*,
2006 (printed 2009)
Printed and published by America: Now and Here, New York City, New York
Digital C photographic print
Edition 94/100
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ronald Francesco
2013.15.1.13