

## Narratives, Images and Objects of Piety and Loss in Brittany

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Résumé de l'article

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MAURA COUGHLIN

## Narratives, Images and Objects of Piety and Loss in Brittany

### Résumé

*Comment les études en culture matérielle peuvent-elles offrir de nouvelles perspectives sur l'étude de l'art de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle en France ? Comment le travail d'artistes contemporains peut-il animer une collection d'objets historiques et particuliers à un lieu donné ? Cet article s'attaque à ces questions au moyen d'une lecture attentive d'une installation à Saint-Brieuc, de pair avec les collections de deux écomusées en Bretagne et de plusieurs autres sites historiques, sous l'angle des politiques de la présentation et de la commémoration. Il fait entrer plus intensément ces collections dans un dialogue au sujet des sites historiques, des photographies et des peintures des rituels religieux de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle en Bretagne, qui se concentrent sur les rituels quotidiens de la mémoire et du deuil.*

### Abstract

*How can material culture studies offer new perspectives on the study of late-19th-century art in France? How can the work of contemporary artists animate a collection of historical and locally specific objects? This paper takes up these questions by a close reading of an installation in Saint-Brieuc, along with the collections of two ecomuseums in Brittany and several other historical sites in terms of a politics of display and commemoration. It further engages the collections in a dialogue about historical sites, photographs and paintings of religious ritual in late-19th-century Brittany that focus upon everyday rituals of memory and mourning.*

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[M]emory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable. Fragments of it come out in legends. Objects and words have hollow places in which a past sleeps, as in the everyday acts of walking, eating, going to bed, in which ancient revolutions slumber. (de Certeau 1984)

This essay addresses the interplay and intermingling of objects, art and visual culture in several museums and historical sites dedicated to local social history in Brittany in the northwest region of France. Specifically considered is the ways in which cultural institutions present material and visual culture so as to represent bodily experiences of loss, longing and the performance of mourning and in so doing how they construct and reiterate regional, local and provincial identities for Brittany's past. Apart from

museological distinctions and the cultural politics of decentralization, my interest is in the narration of place that occurs in these spaces—in the presentation of a particular and narrow range of objects and images relevant to collective cultural heritage. Rather than draw hard (and somewhat arbitrary) lines between folk or ethnographic museums and fine arts museums, I want to examine the relevance of materiality to the discourse of realism in late-19th-century art and the ways in which museums of cultural heritage encourage mutually reinforcing narratives of images and things. This is to say that my interest is in using material culture studies to inform a study of visual culture, particularly that of a rural nature.

With this approach, the display of a material object alongside a visual representation has critical weight. It is not merely a social trace that confirms or denies the constructed nature of a representation. Conversely, I query the ways in which visual culture is introduced in ethnographic displays as either backdrop to, or authentication of, objects and their past uses. Two ecomuseums in Brittany—the Écomusée des vieux métiers de Lizio (Museum of Old Trades of Lizio) and the Écomusée de l'Île de Ouessant (Techniques and Traditions of Ouessant)—are at the heart of this meditation on images and things. The choice of these two small museums does not suggest they represent all options or even opposite ends of the ecomuseum<sup>1</sup>—however they offer very different approaches to a subject of my research: the material culture of women's piety, memory and mourning at the turn of the 20th century.

In May, 2008, I arrived at Saint-Brieuc near the north coast of Brittany after travelling around the region by train and car to visit many of the small archives, departmental museums, urban museums, ecomuseums and sites that had inspired artists and writers during the later 19th and early 20th centuries. As an art historian I am fascinated by the ways that local museums in France display painting, photography and other forms of visual culture side-by-side with artifacts of material culture relevant to the region. Established in 1886, the Saint-Brieuc Musée d'art et d'histoire des Côtes d'Armor (Museum of Art and History) is a case in point. The shared focus of art and history, declared by the title of the Saint-Brieuc museum is expressed in its layout: its two exhibition spaces are devoted to life in the Côtes d'Armor region and to temporary exhibitions of art and visual culture. The strength of regionally-focused institutions such as this is their attention to the articulation of place, as opposed to an emphasis on selling the notion of artistic singularity and avant-garde genius like the blockbuster-dependant national museums in major urban centers do. Although 19th- and early-20th-century artists in Brittany have a strong presence in national art collections such as the Post-Impressionist galleries of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, smaller venues and regional museums marshal prominent as well as lesser known artists and other forms of visual culture to address the issue of "place."<sup>2</sup>

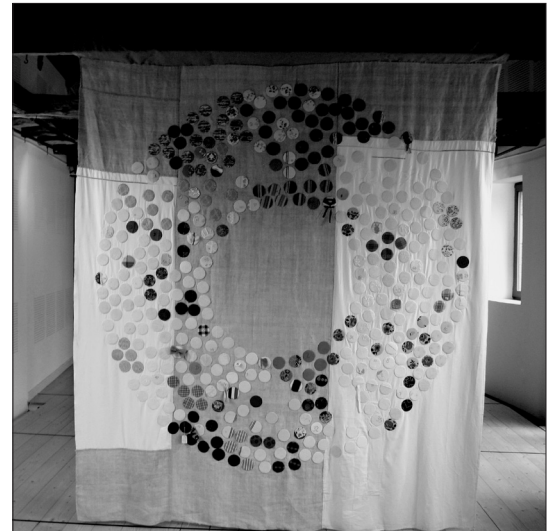
The Saint-Brieuc Musée d'art et d'histoire des Côtes d'Armor is a municipal museum that, at the time of my visit, was hosting an exhibition

entitled *France-Estonie/Je ne me souviens de rien* (Figs. 1-3). The exhibit was an installation and intervention by Keret Altpere, a contemporary textile artist from Estonia who was serving a residency in Côtes d'Armor. Her residency had a very specific purpose<sup>3</sup> formulated by the Office Départemental de Développement Culturel des Côtes d'Armor in collaboration with numerous local partners.<sup>4</sup> As Altpere explained to me in correspondence

**Fig. 1 (Top)**  
Sample of textile work by Keret Altpere. Photo by the author.

**Fig. 2 (Middle)**  
Detail of Altpere work. Photo by the author.

**Fig. 3 (Bottom)**  
Leftover materials. Photo by the author.



of August 2009, every other year a textile artist is given a residency in order to work on artistic projects related to the history of Brittany's former linen industry (*Toiles de Bretagne*), an industry that flourished from the 17th to 19th centuries. This was a global operation that imported linen seeds from Baltic States and grew, spun and wove linen in Brittany that was exported as finished fabric to Latin America. Little material evidence of the industry remains, apart from the intangible memories of the local people and the tangible manor houses of the textile merchants. The residency project was charged with putting contemporary art at the heart of rural life by encouraging contact between a foreign born artist and the local population, to explore local history and to allow the artist to work in another cultural environment and to find sources of renewal for her art.

From the museum collection, Altpere selected a group of jacquard looms in the upper levels of the historical displays and inserted her own work into the town's past. In the darkened rooms on the lower level, she assembled quilts and other mixed-media pieces from fragments of evocative fabrics that connected the place of her birth and her residency in the Côtes d'Armor. Her textile and mixed medium works were accompanied by sound installations: recordings of memories from inhabitants of the Breton village of Saint Thélo and from her great-grandfather's village of Mõisaküla on the island of Saaremaa, Estonia. Altpere's use of everyday textiles not only referenced her travels and understanding of distance, but also encouraged visitors to experience the collection and her contributions through their own geographic displacements. As a viewer I was inspired to spin my own travels within Brittany—from metropolitan centers to villages to countryside to historical sites to archives to museums—into a subjective, performative web of unending associations of place, travel and cultural tourism as Crouch and Desforges would say (2003: 6-7).

On visiting Saint-Brieuc I thought about American author Marilyn Robinson and how, in her novel *Housekeeping*, she frequently muses on the evocative life of things past. In one eloquent passage, her narrator imagines an assemblage recuperating all that had been lost in the lake that dominates the novel's fictional town of Fingerbone.

Such a net, such a harvesting, would put an end to all anomaly. If it swept the whole floor of heaven, it must finally, sweep the black floor of Fingerbone, too. From there, we must imagine, would arise a

great army of Paleolithic and neolithic frequenters of the lake—berry gatherers and hunters and strayed children from those and all subsequent eons, down to the earliest present, to the faith-healing lady in the long, white robe ... to the farmer ... Add to them the swimmers, the boaters and canoers ... There would be a general reclaiming of fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles, of neighbors and kin, till time and error and accident were undone, and the world became comprehensible and whole. (Robinson 1980: 91–92)

Regional museums, and ecomuseums in particular, are positioned to present a range of objects from a place's past that evoke narratives from their curators and spectators alike. A museum cannot, of course, reclaim every lost bit of materiality, nor could it hope to make the past utterly whole and comprehensible. Yet, the appeal of so many historical collections—and their accumulated and enshrined objects of the everyday—does indeed depend, to some degree, on this unspoken promise. Philosopher of the everyday, Michel de Certeau (1984) and cultural anthropologist Tim Dant (1999) suggests that we form lived and embodied relationships with material objects. However, can we discuss the relationships without necessarily dismissing them as framed by nostalgia, imposed from outside authority, or generalized by international or global culture?<sup>5</sup>

Unlike obsessive hoarding or the inability to throw anything away, ethnographic collecting generally privileges objects that have been categorized as "Other" from present, everyday time and from the cultural place of the museum. Things are chosen for their representative or exemplary qualities, for their abilities to stand for another era, place or attitude toward material culture. Museums often make efforts to reconstruct the past lives of objects through textual description, sound environments or the reproduction of contextual "background" images such as vintage photographs, postcards, prints, posters or paintings. For example, in Saint-Brieuc, a glass case containing a *colporteur's* box whose drawers are brimming with late-19th and early-20th-century religious souvenirs, displays an enlarged version of a photographic postcard image of a souvenir vendor (Figs. 4, 5) at a large-scale, outdoor religious event held in the summer that Cariou and Le Stum (1997) refer to as a *pardon*.<sup>6</sup> Nearby are tiny religious tableaux inside bottles (made by sailors from match sticks), and a Breton hooded black mourning cloak, hanging ghost-like within the case, hinting of its past use and wearing. The display generates more questions than it

**Fig. 4**  
Display case in Saint-Brieuc, May 2008.



**Fig. 5**  
Display case in Saint-Brieuc, May 2008.



answers. What can such objects narrate? What is the point of looking at religious material culture that has so clearly gone out of use? Why have these particular objects been saved and presented? From whose collection did they come? Are we to believe that sailors made only pious objects over the course of long sea journeys? Whose hierarchy of “stuff” has designated the objects that make it into display spaces as “authentic” links to the past?

Popular religious objects (like those in the heap at Saint-Brieuc) have little monetary value, yet their accumulation and presentation seem to mark them

as significant generators of historical narrative, as material collected rather than rejected as obsolescent waste. Popular culture associated with the religious revival in France has long engendered a masculine modernist recoil from its kitsch popularity and proliferation (Kauffman 2005: 64). Realist literature abounds with instances in which the consumption of religious popular culture is denounced as false, fetishistic or kitsch. Gustave Flaubert’s fictional character Emma Bovary, for example, embodies the female consumer of popular culture, whether it be the bourgeois journal *L’Illustration* or the lachrymose chromolithographs that instruct her childhood as she “looked at the pious vignettes with their azure borders in her book, and she loved the sick lamb, the sacred heart pierced with sharp arrows, or the poor Jesus sinking beneath the cross he carried” (Flaubert 1904: 44). The impulse to categorize women’s relationships with material culture as excessive and fetishistic can be read as a particularly modernist cultural pattern that reinforces binary divisions of class, gender and national identities while opposing “high” and “low” forms of culture. In my work on rural women’s material culture of piety and representations of it (Coughlin 2009), I have moved away from these binary options of categorizing cultural forms, preferring instead to research the use of such images and objects by women in Brittany for the ways in which they enabled performances of local identity and provided forms of resistance to the homogenizing forces of modern consumerism and the institutional packaging of everyday experience.

In an unpublished paper, sociologist Eva Persson (2007) discusses the problematic material nature of religious images and objects in Irish Catholic families.<sup>7</sup> Persson finds that these things, even when no longer given a position of honour in the home, are difficult to dispose of and thus, are often moved into out-of-the-way locations, but may eventually find a home at a religious site such as a wayside shrine or holy well (Fig. 6). At Saint-Brieuc, I wondered, was the municipal museum serving a similar function for religious bric-a-brac? Can its use by the community be understood as a site for the recuperation of devotional waste? Did or does it serve the role of recycling this past? What narratives along these lines does the display promote?<sup>8</sup>

To consider the function of museums in generating narratives of the local from material culture, one must turn to recent museological attitudes and models. The framing of ethnographic

material culture in museums began to receive radical critique by contemporary artists such as Christian Boltanski in the late 1960s. Writing about his work, Rebecca DeRoo (2004) sees Boltanski's ideas as being in dialogue with the notion that "in an ethnographic museum ... unlike in an art museum, utilitarian objects and photographs were understood as evidence and as providing an authentic picture of the past ... as exemplary of the culture" (228). Also espousing the post-1968 cultural turn of "new museology," the ecomuseum was developed in France with the goal of opening up natural, living cultural heritage to a broader spectrum of society (Davis 1999: 54). In 1971, Hugues de Varine coined the term "ecomuseum," (*écomusée*) referencing an environmental concept of "*écologie*" (Davis 2005: 370) As a democratizing approach to cultural heritage, the ecomuseum was proposed as an inclusive alternative to state run, bureaucratic, centralized, professionally curated and often elitist institutions (Blockley 1999: 24-25). In one of its most radical formulations, in 1984, Québécois Museum administrator René Rivard characterized these relationships: "traditional museum (= building + collections + experts + public) to the ecomuseum (= territory + heritage + memory + population)" (Davis 2005: 371). In an influential manuscript often cited in later texts on the ecomuseum, Rivard (1984) makes a radical call for "repersonalizing" the local with a museum of living, collective memory (rather than the "temporal vector" of the valorized past) that in its more extreme assertions has "no need for specialization, historians, folklorists or nostalgic or callous tourists" (1984: 45-46).

As it was theorized, the ecomuseum had a somewhat utopian scope: it was to be broad enough to encompass a natural and cultural landscape, local heritage, dialects and sense of place, along with the objects, archives and images that might be contained in a building (Davis 2005: 368)—the kind of place "where a multiplicity of voices can be heard and ... where dialogue can take place" (Corsane 2005: 9). The ecomuseum was to provide

a mirror in which a population could seek to recognize itself and to explore its relationship to the physical environment as well as to previous generations; also an image offered to visitors to promote a sympathetic understanding of the work, customs and peculiarities of a population. (Poulot 1994: 66)

An ecomuseum's success was to depend upon community agreement, support and involvement; it promised to give back to the community by



**Fig. 6**  
*Accumulated votive "gifts" at St. Brigid's Well, Liscannor, Co. Clare, Ireland, June 2007.*

retaining local character, fostering sustainable businesses, promoting festivals and thereby aiding the economic regeneration of rural areas, in part through cultural tourism. What differentiates the ecomuseum from sites of staged heritage tourism is that the ecomuseum's focus must be determined by its local population as opposed to being imposed from the outside (Davis 1999: 69). The ecomuseum is thus a way of producing, performing and maintaining a sense of place or locality. As geographer Doreen Massey (1991) explains, our contemporary understanding of a certain place or locality is the result of many intersecting social relations that are always in process of reproducing an ever-changing specificity (28). The first official ecomuseums in France were connected to the establishment of the Parc Naturel Régional d'Armorique in Finistère (Western Brittany), and one of these was the Écomusée de l'Île de Ouessant that eventually included two houses, a lighthouse and a windmill.



**Fig. 7**  
Écomusée Niou,  
Ouessant, June 2006.

Many ecomuseums, likewise, encourage the visitor to make contact with various “antennae” sites in the landscape that inform an intangible sense of place that the museum aims to conserve and promote (Davis 2005: 368).

La Maison du Niou Uhella (Fig. 7) the “premier ecomuseum of France” (Davis 2005: 368) opened in July of 1968, prior to the invention of the category. This building, in the tiny hamlet of Niou Uhella on Ouessant later became the centrepiece of the Écomusée de l’Île d’Ouessant. It is a slate-roofed, stone cottage, in which compartmentalized spaces of two rooms served as kitchen, dining room and bedroom are typical of house styles ca. 1900 (at about this time of relative prosperity, many families replaced thatch roofs with slate (Péron 1994: 32)).

**Fig. 8**  
Box beds face the  
table and hearth in the  
Écomusée Niou.



Connected to the house is a small museum, displaying in glass cases objects and costumes from the history of the island. The trim, walls and furniture are painted white and bright blue—a colour with Marianic overtones, favoured at about this time. As historian Françoise Péron (1997: 200) notes, the interior is arranged like a boat, but ornamented like a chapel: small passages of living space weave through the box-beds, armoires and enclosed hearth (Fig. 8). Overhead are suspended colourful reflective glass balls. The hearth is surrounded by pious images such as statuettes and popular Epinal and chromolithographic prints (Simon 1997: 265). These devotional prints were cheaply printed by the thousands in large publishing houses in Rennes and Quimperlé and were sold at *pardons* and by travelling merchants. A standard format for these prints has an iconic image of a saint surrounded by smaller narrative images of miracles, devotional texts and blessings (Pocius 1979: 132-34). Locally significant saints who were the focus of major Breton *pardons* include Saint Yves (of Tréguier), patron saint of widows and orphans, and Saint Anne, patron saint of sailors (local legends tell of her birth in the port town of Douarnenez (Anson 1965: 69)). At home, these prints blessed the hearth and protected the family, gaining meaning by the ways in which they were displayed and consumed (Dant 1999). For a population with a very low rate of literacy (Ford 1990) images like this were important mnemonic markers that could return the viewer to a significant event (for instance the *pardon* where the print was purchased) and serve as a continual reminder of his or her spatial and performative experience of a festive event (Edensor 2000; Crouch and Desforges 2003: 6). The *pardon* souvenir might interact with everyday life and thus bridge spatial and temporal distances for the former participant (and other viewers).

As suggested by the Niou reconstruction, elaborate domestic altars in coastal homes were the meeting place of private loss and global travel (Simon 1997). Here, on the open dish racks on the walls, marriage globes and devotional statues are sandwiched between dinner plates and exotic colonial souvenirs brought back from men’s travels at sea. The minimal “male” intervention in the interior of the home is telling of the general absence of men from everyday life on the island: men and boys shipped out frequently for voyages of six or seven years. The reconstructed decor and layout of the domestic space is a bit simpler, cleaner and more prosperous looking than a widely read travel

account written in 1895 would have us believe. The narrator, Victor Eugène Ardouin-Dumazet, describes a typical Ouessantine cottage as having granite mortarless walls, a straw roof, a beaten earth floor, only a few kitchen utensils, a meager fire made of gorse twigs and dried cow droppings, very little light and close, humid smells that came from a family sharing one enclosed bed (1895: 287).

By contrast, L' Écomusée des vieux métiers de Lizio (Morbihan, Brittany) (Figs. 9, 10) contains within a 2000 square metre building a collection of more than 70,000 objects relating to the materials and techniques of everyday life. If one compares the reconstructed interior of Niou to one in Lizio, Niou appears almost modernist in its relatively uncluttered sparseness. Both interiors are ornamented with religious popular images, but a great deal more *horror vacui* is at work in Lizio. The resulting historical reconstruction of domestic space is not at all similarly aestheticized. Lizio's ecomuseum was founded (in 1985) and is maintained by a ceramicist, Alain Guillard (the current large structure opened in 2000). Guillard's website promises visitors "a lesson on the past" of "artisans and other trades" that offers not only obsolete gadgets, garments and gear, but an evocation of skills and gestures lost to the present.<sup>9</sup> The displays are wide ranging: more than 60 *mise en scènes* staged in the rambling building include an automotive garage from the 1950s, part of a cinema interior, a classroom, a grocery store, tobacconist, pharmacy, a toy shop, several home interiors and the workshops of various rural artisans. The result more resembles dealers' stalls at the Porte de Clignancourt flea market on the northern edge of Paris than an official French museum. Its overstuffed accumulation, while offering unintentionally marvellous, creepy and macabre tableaux animated by wigged mannequins and plastic dolls in period costume, seems to suggest that all materiality of the past merits saving, and that all can be made comprehensible and whole.

Yet it may be that by enshrining this past in such a mad inventory, the death or obsolescence of it is ensured. (Why have one Banania tin when thirty-five will do the job more effectively?) Before his execution in 1944, Annales historian and economist Marc Bloch condemned the Vichy government's peasant populist policies as creating "vast junk museums" (Poulot 1994: 70). This is a sentiment echoed by Rivard, who cautions against a tendency toward *muséomania*: the enshrining of every last thing that goes out of usage (1984: 44). Rather than representing a place or landscape,



**Fig. 9 (Top)**  
A Breton interior at the Lizio Ecomuseum.

**Fig. 10 (Bottom)**  
A Breton schoolroom at the Lizio Ecomuseum.

Lizio's massive excess seems to represent, more than anything, one person's passion for accumulating things. Marketing scholar, Russell Belk has written extensively on the phenomena of collecting in consumer society, which he distinguishes from "mere stockpiling or warehousing, mean acquisition, or sheer accumulation" (1988: 549). Guillard's manic hoarding of the past in Lizio does not so much make it comprehensible, as it seems—almost inadvertently—to parody contemporary rational, professionally curated spaces of museum display, such as the costume and everyday life sections of the Musée de Bretagne in Rennes and the Musée Départemental Breton in Quimper.



Today, in the Musée de Bretagne—housed in the postmodern Champs Libres center in Rennes—traditional Breton festive costume is displayed in brightly lit vitrines, on silver mesh supports, accompanied by bilingual explanations of the date, materials, function and specifically local origin of the garments. A nearby display combines an undated reliquary with a few turn-of-the-century women’s fancy *pardon* pins (*épingles de pardon*) and provides text that again explains the place of manufacture and use of the latter. An early-20th-century travel poster with a stylized rendering of a Breton *pardon* hangs behind these objects, encouraging the viewer to imagine a person’s travel to the *pardon*, the lure of contact with the sacred (the relic) and the act of consumption: the souvenir brought home (these pins were often bought at *pardons* and given as engagement presents). Rennes thus situates its representative objects in the context of the French religious revival ca. 1880-1920 and the local culture of *pardons* in Brittany. In his discussion of the politics of Breton heritage, historian Patrick Young (2009) writes of the attraction of traditional costume for tourists to Brittany in the early 20th century. He suggests that after the turn-of-the-century—a time he refers to as hospitable to folkloric display—the Breton museum was able to “to consolidate its importance as a central repository for Breton patrimony and a key regional attraction” (635). He further observes that during the 1920s and 1930s

Brittany had become one of the more richly endowed regions in terms of its formal and less

formal collections of popular and religious art, folkloric materials and costume; these “artifacts” were often culled from local areas and assembled into collections for public display either in museums or in parts of churches and chateaux. (635-36)

Among the holdings of both Lizio and Niou are collections of objects called marriage globes. These personal collections, essentially miniature museums, are arranged beneath a blown glass dome. The assemblages may include a range of important material traces of a life including fragments of wedding costumes, locks of a dead child’s hair and other loaded, apotropaic and symbolic items. Wreaths of flowers at the heart of the globes came from a bride’s crown, making the globe a meeting place of the body and object, narrating a personal history through a collectively understood language of things. As reliquaries of the commonplace rather than the sacred, the globes’ contents are marked by bodily presence and traces of social interaction. These are not timeless objects of “primitive peasant culture” but objects with histories that changed over time. As literary critic Susan Stewart writes, souvenirs of individual experience tend “to be found in connection with rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage and death) as the material sign of an abstract referent . . . [s]uch souvenirs are rarely kept singly; instead they form a compendium which is an autobiography” (1984: 139). Before the practice ceased in the mid 20th century and globes thereby became collectible (yet unmarked) antiques of a bygone era, the marriage globe had no intrinsic value outside of the family.

The ecomuseum of Lizio presents its collection of marriage globes (Fig. 11)—both in its packed display spaces and on its website—accompanied by explanatory texts that outline the specific iconography of flowers, mirrors, porcelain angels, gilded metal and small birds and the ways the combination of these objects might narrate a biography of the woman who assembled it. In Lizio, amid hat boxes, ancient sewing machines, coffee tins and bicycles, the group of marriage globes no longer seem to speak to individual experience: they demonstrate a range of types marked by continuity of arrangement and variation of detail. Like the material fragments enshrined in a reliquary, the dusty contents today seem to have, to use the words of historian Patrick J. Geary (1995: 174) “no obvious value apart from a very specific set of shared beliefs . . . once removed from their elaborate reliquaries or containers, they [are] not even decorative.” Having been removed from the everyday world of personal experience—

**Fig. 11**  
Marriage Globes, Lizio,  
May 2008.



wherein the contents functioned mnemonically—to the world of the collection, marriage globes have become unmarked curiosities, presented to visitors as enigmatic (and somewhat useless) things from times past.

At the Niou ecomuseum on Ouessant several globes are displayed. As they might have in a past era, two sit on mantles in the reconstructed cottage (ca. 1900). The shelves, above or near the hearth, served as informal family altars that were meeting places of women's local culture of piety (in images of local saints and local pilgrimage mementoes) and the exotic souvenirs brought home by the family's (male) global travellers. Several other globes are displayed in cases in the historical museum at Niou that adjoins the period-piece cottage. In the glass case, housing one display of globes, is a reproduction of a painting by French painter Charles Cottet, *Wake of a Dead Child on Ouessant* (1897) that appears to bear witness to a social context and ritual function of the object (Fig. 12). The text beside the reproduction of Cottet's painting reads:

#### Death Rituals

Between the moments of a newborn's birth and baptism, it is continually watched over. But after baptism, the young child's salvation is certain. This is why the death of a very young child, so common at this time, was not considered as a tragedy. The tiny corpse was dressed in a colored silken gown topped by a second gown of lace. Colored paper flowers were fastened to this. A branch ornamented with ribbons was placed on his head. The next day he was taken to be buried in a casket that remained open until the last moment of descent into the tomb, and after having already taken a lock of hair and some of the ornamental funerary flowers that would be placed in a reliquary in the home. The painter Cottet, at the turn of the last century preserved a memory of this serene ceremony in several canvases, one of which is in the collection of the Fine Arts Museum of Quimper.<sup>10</sup>

In this painting, Cottet depicts two wedding globes beside the ornamented body of an infant in the material context of a wake for a dead child that we are told Cottet witnessed on Ouessant (Cariou 1988: 124). The social objects arranged around the corpse suggestively align across a range of bodily experiences and serve specific cultural meanings. If we believe that Cottet's painting originates in an observed mourning practice, then we must assume that the globes do more than decorate the display of the dead child that is being waked: they seem to be part of a process of connecting the child's dead body to a material history of the family and thereby

making the process of mourning possible, while marking the body's transition from recently animate to inanimate. Heightening the composition's effect of "stilled-life," the tiny corpse is framed by lit candles and the dead world of the globes. For the body only recently rendered lifeless, death is tragically confirmed and uncannily made present. Attention to the material effects the transformation: white linens cover walls and windows; domestic space is thereby purified and the mundane function of the dining table is transformed to the corpse's space of presentation (Badone 1989: 62).

The text at Niou (quoted above) speaks of the banality of infant mortality in the late 19th and early 20th century, a time when such loss was more acceptable and representable. Historian of the island, Françoise Péron (1997) reiterates the ecomuseum's assessment of Cottet's painting, that the death of an infant was not a sad affair at the time, as he or she was ensured to go straight to heaven. She also tells us that this attitude on the part of the Islanders seemed monstrous to outside observers (222). In its presentation of the material culture of death, mourning and memory, the Niou ecomuseum displays its marriage globes both as objects that bore material witness to crucial moments in the life of the family, and as objects that served to represent Ouessantine customs to the outside world.



**Fig. 12**  
*Charles Cottet, Wake of a Dead Child on Ouessant (1897)*  
*Quimper Museum of Fine Arts. Photo by author, October 1997.*

Cottet's paintings from this series do not seem to be portraits of individuals: when they were exhibited as rural "types" in Paris, they produced a great deal of shock from critics who found them barbaric, crudely coloured and insufficiently sad. Art historian Linda Nochlin (1971: 82) characterizes the prosaic nature of realist representations of death and religious ritual with Courbet's famous declaration: "I cannot paint an angel because I have never seen one." Nochlin writes that the realist approach to the death of an individual treats it with "the banal level of mere commonplace, everyday actuality" (1971: 58). Just as a mummy encountered in a museum is inherently uncanny, here a formerly animate body has become a thing, and its strangely festive ornamentation underscores the material transformation. Cottet's insistence upon the material actuality of the child's body echoes the attitude of his realist forebear Gustave Courbet, who famously declared, "painting is essentially a concrete art and can only consist of the representation of real and existing things. It is an entirely physical language, that uses for words, all visible objects."<sup>11</sup> Breton-born critic Gustave Geffroy comments on the strange materiality of *Wake of a Dead Child on Ouessant*, that an image of childhood cut short ought to generate an emotional response in the viewer, but this child's body inappropriately recalls a shop's display of cured meat or a candied form of Jesus to be sold (and consumed) at Christmas (1900: 99).

Whether or not Cottet, the "outsider" to Ouessant's peasant culture, found the dead child's wake sacrilegious is of little import. Although Cottet's images cannot be uncritically recuperated to transparently attest to ethnographic peasant practices (nor can Ardouin-Dumazet's travel account from 1895, cited above) the Niou museum has used it productively to underscore the way that Breton mourning culture acknowledged the materiality of death.<sup>12</sup> Both the marriage globe and the child's corpse are presented as social objects that bear recent traces of bodily experience. That the child is waked on a kitchen table transformed into a deathbed or altar, rather than in a funeral home or religious institution speaks of everyday familiarity with the end of life. As historian Thomas Kselman (2006) tells us, in most of France, death rituals became increasingly institutionalized over the course of the 19th century. When death and dying were taken away from the domestic sphere to the more antiseptic halls of funeral and nursing homes, these phases of life came to be seen as uncomfortable and best overlooked. At Niou, in

the context of the display of marriage globes, the reproduced painting is employed to bear witness not only to the use of such objects in the home wake, but to also stand for one way in which Island practices were viewed by an outsider and represented to the world at large.

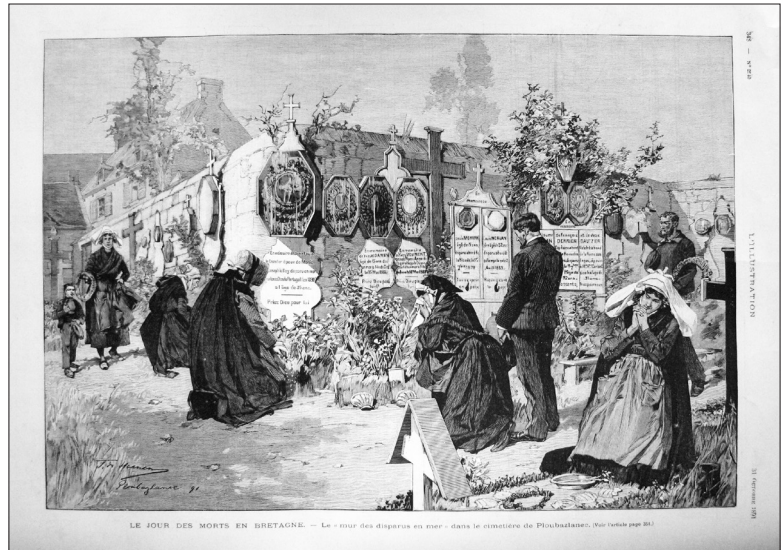
My final example of the Breton visual and material culture of mourning is the historical site, *Le Mur des Disparus en Mer* (Wall of the Disappeared at Sea) near the port of Paimpol on Brittany's North Coast (Côtes d'Armor). In this region, many men fished the long cod season on the banks of Iceland or Newfoundland for the better part of a year. Because so many died abroad or disappeared at sea and their bodies were never returned to their home soil, mourners lacked both the emotional closure of proven death and the physical body around which to focus the grieving and burial ritual.

In the village cemetery of Ploubazlanec, is the famous Wall of the Disappeared at Sea. On the wall are affixed homemade cenotaphs and plaques that memorialize the lost. Images of pious Breton widows attending to graves, throwing wreaths into the sea or grieving at the cemetery wall on *Toussaint*,<sup>13</sup> appear with frequency in illustrated newspapers such as the illustrated daily Parisian papers *L'Illustration* (Fig. 13) and *Le Petit Journal*. The festooned wall appears repeatedly in popular imagery, on postcards and in travel literature of the early 20th century. It made the news in 1939 when the graveyard wall was rebuilt and the homemade memorials to the lost at sea were moved into the nearby 18th-century chapel of Perros-Hamon where they can be found under the sheltered porch—a space somewhat like an open-air chapel. The touching and fragile 19th-century wooden cenotaphs follow no particular, prescribed form (Fig. 14), but many offer a prayer and detail the place and approximate date of death as well as the age of the deceased. Replacing them on the stone wall are durable marble slabs or simple, painted wooden plaques. As one approaches the wall from the cemetery's entrance, a polished granite slab affixed to the wall tells of the lost at sea (Fig. 15). Imbedded in the stone, two reproduced postcards—one with an image of "La Glycine," the last cod boat to depart for Iceland in the 1930s; the other, an early 20th-century postcard, depicts two women, one cloaked in widow's weeds, the other kneeling before a plaque on the wall prior to its rebuilding. The representations frame a visit to the site and they are further echoed in the small, nearby community museum, *Mémoire d'Islande*. It was

founded in 1994 in the former home of a fisherman (François Le Buhan) who had made three long trips to Iceland. Although not officially distinguished as an ecomuseum, it does function like one: it has a collection of objects such as costumes, letters, model boats, navigation gear and photographs donated by the immediate community. Mémoire d'Islande is the focal point of a route that includes the Wall of the Disappeared, the Perros-Hamon chapel, the chapel of the Trinity (with an imposing altar to the Virgin of the Shipwrecked) and the Widow's Cross (named by novelist Pierre Loti); the latter marks a dramatic vantage point for looking to sea (Ploubazlanec 2009). This constellation of sites remains a tourist attraction today in Ploubazlanec, attesting to the lost material culture of mourning.

## Conclusion

Because I was able to move through the sites and the collections of the museums mentioned in this essay I was able to both viscerally and visually begin to understand the range of possibilities for narrating the local to the global traveller. In these spaces I found that material and visual culture strikes a cord in uncanny and often uncomfortable ways when the subject is the concrete and corporeal reality of death. Highlighting the intersection of commemorative rituals of everyday life and visual representation, the presentations in small museums may heighten a viewer's awareness of shifting cultural attitudes to loss, waste and memory. The space of the museum may be read in many ways: as critically engaging the place's past with its current moment; as a melancholic ode to the past; or as a warehouse of the obsolete.



**Fig. 13 (Top)**  
The Day of the Dead at the Wall of the Disappeared at Sea. Ploubazlanec. L'illustration 31 Oct 1891.

**Fig. 14 (Middle)**  
Original Cenotaphs from the Wall of the Disappeared at Sea. Photo by author, in the porch of the church of Perros-Hamon, May 2008.

**Fig. 15 (Left)**  
Marble slab with reproduced postcards on the Wall of the Disappeared at Sea. Photo by author, May 2008.

## Notes

Except for the abstract, all translations from French are mine. Thanks to Jaimey Hamilton for our collaborative work on waste and material culture. Conversations with Patrick Young, Alain and Ronan Taburet and Caroline Boyle-Turner in Brittany in the early summer of 2008 encouraged many of the ideas in this essay. Thanks for research assistance to Marie-Rose Prigent at the Center for Breton and Celtic Research at the Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest and Françoise Leuzy at the Documentation Center at the Musée de Bretagne, Rennes. Many thanks to Keret Altpere for her cooperation and correspondence.

1. A museum where “sensitivity to the environmental setting, and quality of life issues are seminal” (Harrison 2005: 43). A fuller discussion on the ecomuseum model follows later in this article.
2. See for example the emphasis on place rather than personality in the exhibition catalog (Simon-Hamel 2001).
3. In correspondence, Altpere provided the brief of the residency:
  - *placer l'art au cœur de la vie rurale par le biais de rencontres entre la population et un artiste, rencontre élargie ici du fait de l'origine étrangère de l'artiste.*
  - *permettre à la population de remonter le fil de son histoire.*
  - *sensibiliser à l'art contemporain un public varié.*
  - *permettre à un artiste étranger de renouveler son art en se familiarisant avec une autre culture.*
4. This project was partnered with La maison des toiles à Saint-Thélo, la Communauté de communes d'Uzel, le Comité d'Action Culturelle Sud 22, and the Estonian Embassy in Paris. The curator and initiator of the project was Véronique Vauvrecy from ODDC.
5. For current debates on the representation of ethnographic objects see Debary and Turgeon (2007).
6. Held on the feast day of a saint, *pardons* were also held to bless Breton fishermen prior to their departure on long fishing trips to the waters off Iceland and Newfoundland. Pilgrims often travelled on foot to *pardons* as an act of penance. Upon arrival at the location, they would perform a ritual circling of holy sites or buildings, attend masses and say prayers. After the solemnity of the day's religious activities, the event often descended into an evening festive celebration with souvenir vendors hawking their wares, bonfires, dances and wrestling matches.
7. The paper “Moving Statues Around the House: Taking Religious Souvenirs Home” was presented at *Things That Move: The Material Worlds of Tourism and Travel Conference* in Leeds, United Kingdom in July 2007.
8. For an interesting discussion on religious imagery and interpersonal relationships, see Pocius (1979).
9. “*Rémouleurs, limonadiers, fileuses et autres chiffonniers : autant de noms qui ont aujourd'hui disparu de notre quotidien et n'évoquent plus que d'anciennes activités. Cet ouvrage permet d'aller à la découverte d'un temps révolu, celui des métiers oubliés ou devenus rares, car même si certains subsistent, tous ont véritablement évolué. L'auteur réveille nos souvenirs mais, en nous dévoilant également un univers inconnu, il nous offre une leçon sur le passé, lorsque concurrence et rentabilité n'étaient pas encore les maîtres mots. À une époque où la proximité et l'échange humain caractérisaient le monde du travail, les artisans et autres métiers étaient la réponse aux besoins journaliers des habitants du village pour le bien-être de chacun. L'évocation de ces nombreux métiers anciens invite ainsi à renouer le lien avec nos aïeux, nos racines et à s'interroger sur ce qu'ils nous ont apporté et enseigné.... Ce musée est surtout le fruit d'amoureux des vieux objets mais aussi des gestes et traditions d'autrefois. En effet, ces objets ont une âme, une mémoire, et il suffit de tendre l'oreille pour entendre leur histoire.* <http://www.ecomuseelizio.com/livres.php.html> (accessed August 10, 2009).
10. The full text at Niou reads: “*“rituels de la mort’ : Entre la naissance et le baptême, le nouveau-né était veillé en permanence. Baptisé, le jeune enfant était certain de son salut. C’est pourquoi le décès d’un enfant en bas âge, assez commun à cette époque, n’était pas considéré comme tragédie. Le petit corps était revêtu d’une robe de soie de couleur vive couverte d’une seconde de dentelle. On y agrafait des fleurs faites en papier de couleur. Une branche ornée de rubans était placée à sa tête. Le lendemain il était porté en terre dans un cercueil que l’on ne fermait qu’au moment de la descendre dans la tombe, et après avoir prélevé une mèche de cheveux et qqs fleurs de la parure funèbre que l’on placerait dans un reliquaire dans la maison. Le peintre Cottet, à la fin du siècle dernier nous a conservé le souvenir de cette cérémonie sereine dans qqs toiles, dont l’une est conservée au Musée des Beaux Arts à Quimper.”*
11. “*la peinture est un art essentiellement concret et ne peut consister que dans la représentation des choses réelles et existantes. C’est une langue toute physique, qui se compose, pour mots, de tous les objets visibles*” (originally published in the *Courrier du dimanche*, December 25, 1861).
12. I have found it useful in writing about cultural issues of center and periphery in France to use the model derived from postcolonial studies in which texts and images produced by dominant (colonial) subjects that represent otherness (colonial subjects) “so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition” (Bhabha 1994: 162).
13. Observed annually on November 1 and known as All Saints’ Day, *Toussaint* is a day on which the saints of the Christian churches are acknowledged and honoured.

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