



Relics and Reliquaries:

the care of sacred objects in a profane world

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Materiality of relics



Material risks of relics

Dirt ingress

Relative
humidity and
temperature

Pests

Hazards and
mould

Light

Theft

Material
sensitivity and
incompatibility

Dirt Ingress

- By their very design and intention, reliquaries are meant to be opulent and ornate: that is part of highlighting the significance of the contents as special and significant. They tend to be complicated designs, full of curlicues and crannies that are so perfect for dust to settle in and be difficult to remove.
- But accumulated dust is an issue: it is highly hygroscopic – meaning that it attracts water from the air – and also acidic, particularly in environments where current or historical candle burning has taken place. This can cause corrosion but also over time and in high humidities it can undergo a process of segmentation, making it more like a hard deposit. This means it is more difficult and potentially damaging to remove. It is also attractive to pests and moulds, as we will discuss in a moment. Carpets are massive dust traps, and as people walk on the carpet the dust they contain is distributed to approximate hip height. Central heating and doors cause currents to form distributing the air borne dust even further. So good housekeeping is a must.

Relative Humidity & Temperature

- After handling, incorrect relative humidity, or RH, and temperature for extended term storage is the greatest risk to all heritage collections and is also the one that is the most challenging to get right in the context of religious collections. The current standard for mixed archive collections BS4971 advises that a humidity of between 35 and 60% is maintained at all times, with no sudden or substantial deviations. I take this as being over 5% in a 48 hour period or more than 10% in a week for RH. For temperature the goal is between 13 and 23 degrees, again with no sudden fluctuations – I take this as over 5 degrees in a 48 hour period - and an annual average of 18 degrees maximum. It is quite a challenge in historical buildings and retrofitted storage spaces that form part of a building where the primary function is to support human activity.
- But as we saw from our list of materials in relic collections, the component parts are diverse and each needs different conditions to ensure a stable extended term life. Wood and ivory, for example is highly sensitive to environmental fluctuations, as rapid and uncontrolled contraction and expansion may cause cracking and surface or media loss. Silver and gilded metals favour a drier environment around 35 – 45%, whereas parchment is more stable in slightly higher humidities. The wax used to secure many relics will not withstand high temperatures from say direct sunlight or radiant heat and will become brittle over time in unfavourable conditions.

Pests

- Pests are opportunists – and unless you have sealed spaces will always present an issue for heritage collections. This is particularly the case where collections are stored in spaces where human activity takes place: visitor functions such as cafes, the preparation or consuming of food in spaces in the same location as collection stores and simply the presence of human activity in a space will all encourage pests. Woollen and silk textiles, commonly found in vestments, carpets, ceremonial cloths and reliquaries are also a tempting feast for your average moth or carpet beetle. Relics containing hair are particularly irresistible to woolly bears, the larvae of the carpet beetle, who will demolish samples rapidly. Leaky historical buildings with their loose sash windows, damp spots and doors that don't quite fit any more are an open invitation to pests of all sizes. Good housekeeping to discourage pests and vigilance are the key: if you do not check your relics from one year to the next, when you do you may find they have been savaged beyond repair.

Hazards & Mould


Mould proliferates in damp spaces where the moisture can't escape into the surrounding air – in other words a framed relic with organic material against a damp wall is a perfect environment for mould to form. If the relic is also dirty, even better: moulds preferentially grow on dust and dirt.

But there are other toxic hazards connected to relics. Depending on their age, they may contain now-discontinued or banned preservatives and insecticides, given the known mould and pest risk, and particular late Georgian and early Victorian vivid green textiles are known to contain large quantities of arsenic.

Light

The display function and form of relics, and in particular framed examples, means that light exposure is a real risk to the stability and the integrity of the relic and its mount. Textiles will fade, become brittle and fail in long term light exposure, and other materials such as bone, wood, paper, most media types will also degrade. In my experience, most relics on display fall into two categories: the most significant first class relics, which are likely to be on permanent display, and combined framed reliquaries which contain several relics. These are often on walls in the corridors and the back rooms I mentioned, and so are exposed to whatever light is allowed into those spaces.

Legality of relics

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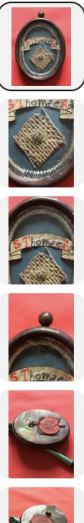
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Antic reliquary relic St. Thomas the Apostle very special from Italy

Size: 2.2 X 2.6 inches (big)

RELIQUARY RELIC SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE. Important relic in solid bronze. Internally the relic presents beautiful workmanship and is preserved in excellent condition. Datable to the mid-1800th. On the back there is a cardinal's seal and threads in good general condition. Rare object belonging to a private collection.

Provenance: Rome, Italy

Period: mid 1800th

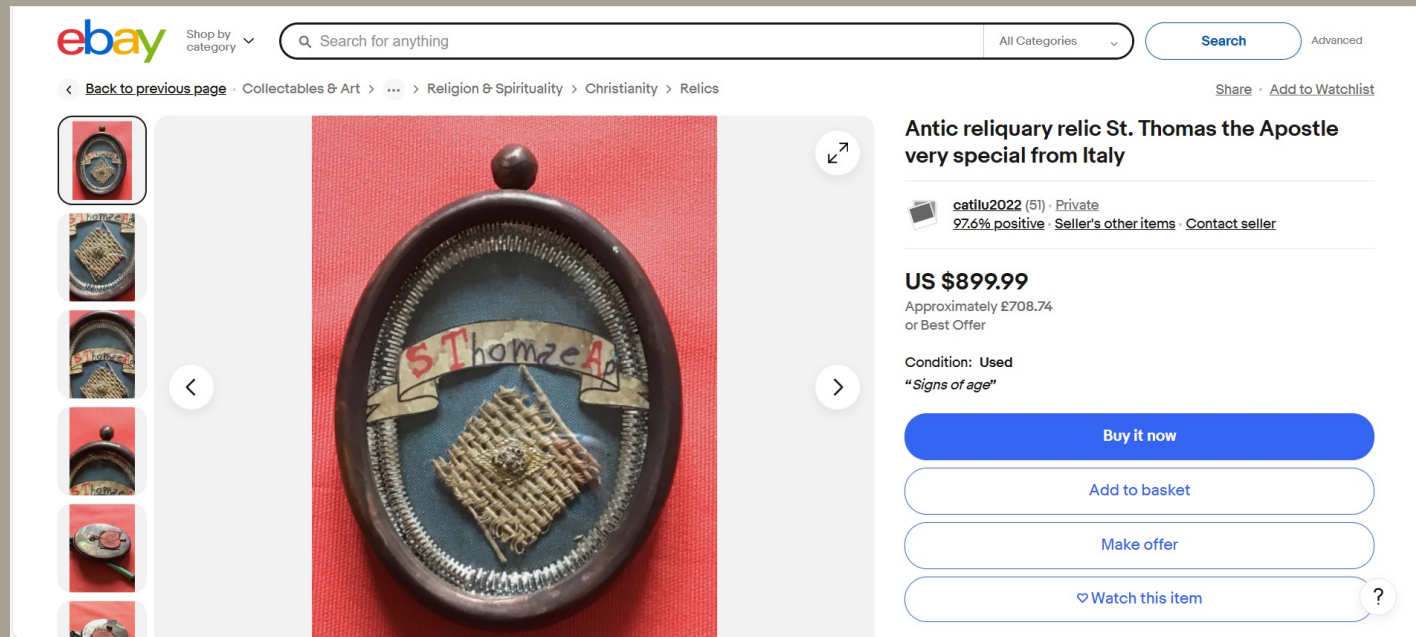
Per eBay rules this item contains no human remains and is a devotional item.

Declaration : eBay policy prohibits the sale of human remains and requires a disclosure of what the relics are: **these relics are clothes or vestibus**, which are allowed by eBay policy. They are sacred and devotional relics of the Church.

The relic is in an exceptional antique condition with some signs of age that adding haunting beauty, dignity and majesty.

Please be concerned that you are buying an old item so, it is ordinary that there will be some imperfections, normal signs of age and wear , which in my opinion only add to its beauty. The pictures are integral part of the description!

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Easy mitigations

- Clean
- Dirt free
- Enclosures – boxes, hoods/pockets
- High quality mounts
- Oxidation inhibitors
- Good quality IPM
- Sealed Tupperware with silica gel
- Good housekeeping



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Thank you for listening. If you have any questions please ask or contact me at

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