

## Stewardship and the Life of Things

Abstract

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This paper addresses aspects of what Wordsworth termed the “life of things,” both things in nature and human-made things. I take *things* in this context to be in this world and to have a material aspect usually apprehensible through the senses. *Life* is a hugely puzzling term. I take it to be a characteristic not only of organisms that might be either still or once living, but of what might be termed numinous things. The latter includes things that some groups of people might regard as inanimate, but that other groups of people regard as animate. Museums are full of things imbued with life in this range of senses, whether currently or in their pasts. This imposes obligations on museums, notably in respect of things that constituencies—usually communities from which such things originated—wish to see treated in culturally appropriate ways. These include live items as diverse as Native American dance regalia, and Russian and Greek Orthodox icons. The paper discusses cases in which institutions have purposefully accommodated a variety of visitor responses, from secular inspection to devotional attention. The paper concludes that for things to have life implies a variety of cultural worlds in which that quality—life—itself varies. A Niitsitapi world in which an ancestor shirt has life, a Roman Catholic world in which a figure of the dead Christ has life, a Hawaiian world in which a figure of Kūka’ilimoku has life, and a Russian Orthodox world in which an icon of St. George has life, can co-exist with a Western secular world in which—in a biological sense—they do not. Museums are the sites of mediation between and among such worlds.