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PROBLEMS OF ART IN THE POETRY OF ANNA AKHMATOVA IN THE 1920S AND 1960S

Axmadaliyeva Maxliyo Abdumalik Kizi

Master, Termez State University, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT: - Anna Akhmatova is regarded as one of Russia's greatest poets. In addition to poetry, she wrote prose including memoirs, autobiographical pieces, and literary scholarship on Russian writers such as Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. She also translated Italian, French, Armenian, and Korean poetry. In her lifetime Akhmatova experienced both prerevolutionary and Soviet Russia, yet her verse extended and preserved classical Russian culture during periods of avant-garde radicalism and formal experimentation, as well as the suffocating ideological strictures of socialist realism. Akhmatova shared the fate that befell many of her brilliant contemporaries, including Osip Emil'evich Mandel'shtam, Boris Leonidovich Pasternak, and Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva. Although she lived a long life, it was darkened disproportionately by calamitous moments.

KEYWORDS: Author, novel, times, literature, novel, metaphor.

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah Berlin, who visited Akhmatova in her Leningrad apartment in November 1945 while serving in Russia as first secretary of the British embassy, aptly described her as a "tragic queen," according to György Dalos. Berlin's assessment has echoed through generations of readers who understand Akhmatova—her person, poetry, and, more nebulously, her poetic persona—as the iconic representation of noble beauty and catastrophic predicament.

She was born Anna Andreevna Gorenko on June 11, 1889 in Bol'shoi Fontan, near the Black Sea, the third of six children in an upper-class family. Her mother, Inna Erazmovna Stogova, belonged to a powerful clan of landowners, while her father, Andrei

Antonovich Gorenko, had received his title from his own father, who had been created a hereditary noble for service in the royal navy. Gorenko grew up in Tsarskoe Selo (literally, Tsar's Village), a glamorous suburb of St. Petersburg—site of an opulent royal summer residence and of splendid mansions belonging to Russian aristocrats. Tsarskoe Selo was also where, in 1903, she met her future husband, the poet Nikolai Stepanovich Gumilev, while shopping for Christmas presents in Gostinyi Dvor, a large department store. This first encounter made a much stronger impression on Gumilev than on Gorenko, and he wooed her persistently for years. In Tsarskoe Selo, Gorenko attended the women's Mariinskaia gymnasium yet completed her final year at Fundukleevskaia gymnasium in Kiev, where she graduated in May 1907; she and her mother had moved to Kiev after Inna Erazmovna's separation from Andrei Antonovich. In 1907 Gorenko enrolled in the Department of Law at Kiev College for Women but soon abandoned her legal studies in favor of literary pursuits.

Gorenko began writing verse as a teenager. Although she did not fancy Gumilev at first, they developed a collaborative relationship around poetry. He edited her first published poem, which appeared in 1907 in the second issue of Sirius, the journal that Gumilev founded in Paris. She signed this poem, "Na ruke ego mnogo blestiashchikh kolets" (translated as "On his hand are lots of shining rings," 1990), with her real name, Anna Gorenko. Eventually, however, she took the pseudonym Akhmatova. The pen name came from family lore that one of her maternal ancestors was Khan Akhmat, the last Tatar chieftain to accept tribute from Russian rulers. According to the family mythology, Akhmat—who was assassinated in his tent in 1481—belonged to the royal bloodline of Genghis Khan.

In November 1909 Gumilev visited Akhmatova in Kiev and, after repeatedly rejecting his attentions, she finally agreed to marry him. The wedding ceremony took place in Kiev in the church of Nikol'ska Slobodka on April 25, 1910. The couple spent their honeymoon in Paris, where Akhmatova was introduced to Amedeo Modigliani, at the time an unknown and struggling Italian painter. The encounter was perhaps one of the most extraordinary events of Akhmatova's youth. Modigliani wrote her letters throughout the winter, and they met again when she returned to Paris in 1911. Akhmatova stayed in Paris for several weeks that time, renting an apartment near the church of St. Sulpice and exploring the parks, museums, and cafés of Paris with her enigmatic companion. The addressee of the poem "Mne s toboiu p'ianym veselo" (published in Vecher, 1912; translated as "When you're drunk it's so much fun," 1990) has been identified as Modigliani. In the lyric the autumnal color of the elms is a deliberate shifting of seasons on the part of the poetess, who left Paris long before the end of summer: "When you're drunk it's so much fun—/ Your stories don't make sense. / An early fall has strung / The elms with yellow flags." Modigliani made 16 drawings of Akhmatova in the nude, one of which remained with her until her death; it always hung above her sofa in whatever room she occupied during her frequently unsettled life.

Around this time Gumilev emerged as the leader of an eclectic and loosely knit literary group, ambitiously dubbed "Acmeism" (from the Greek akme, meaning pinnacle, or the time of flowering). Acmeism rose in opposition to the preceding literary school, Symbolism, which was in decline after dominating the Russian literary scene for almost two decades. The hallmark Symbolist features were the use of metaphorical language, belief in divine inspiration, and emphases on mysticism and religious philosophy. The Symbolists worshiped music as the most spiritual art form and strove to convey the "music of divine spheres," which was a common Symbolist phrase, through the medium of poetry. In contrast Gumilev and his fellow Acmeists turned to the visible world in all its triumphant materiality. They focused on the portrayal of human emotions and aesthetic objects; replaced the poet as prophet with the poet as craftsman; and promoted plastic models for poetry at the expense of music. In October 1911 Gumilev, together with another Acmeist, Sergei Mitrofanovich Gorodetsky, organized a literary workshop known as the "Tsekh poetov," or Guild of Poets, at which readings of new verse were followed by a general critical discussion. Six poets formed the core of the new group: besides Gumilev, Gorodetsky, and Akhmatova—who was an active member of the guild and served as secretary at its meetings—it also included Mandel'shtam, Vladimir Ivanovich Narbut, and Mikhail Aleksandrovich Zenkevich. Several dozen other poets shared the Acmeist program at one time or another; the most active were Georgii Vladimirovich Ivanov, Mikhail Leonidovich Lozinsky, Elizaveta Iur'evna Kuzmina-Karavaeva, and Vasilii Alekseevich Komarovsky.

Gumilev was originally opposed to Akhmatova pursuing a literary career, but he eventually endorsed her verse, which, he found, was in harmony with some Acmeist aesthetic principles. In February and March 1911 several of Akhmatova's poems appeared in the journals Vseobshchii zhurnal (Universal Journal), Gaudeamus, and Apollon. When she published her first collection, Vecher (1912; translated as Evening, 1990), fame followed immediately. Vecher includes introspective lyrics circumscribed by the themes of love and a woman's personal fate in both blissful and, more often than not, unhappy romantic relationships. Akhmatova's style is concise; rather than resorting to a lengthy exposition of feelings, she provides psychologically concrete details to represent internal drama. In "Pesnia poslednei vstrechi" (translated as "The Song of the Last Meeting," 1990) an awkward gesture suffices to convey the pain of parting: "Then helplessly my breast grew cold, / But my steps were light. / I pulled the glove for my left hand / Onto my right." Likewise, abstract notions are revealed through familiar concrete objects or creatures. For example, in "Liubov'" (translated as "Love," 1990), a snake and white dove stand for love: "Now, like a little snake, it curls into a ball, / Bewitching your heart, / Then for days it will coo like a dove / On the little white windowsill."

Readers have been tempted to search for an autobiographical subtext in these poems. In fact, Akhmatova transformed personal experience in her work through a series of masks and mystifications.

Akhmatova and Gumilev did not have a conventional marriage. They lived separately most of the time; one of Gumilev's strongest passions was travel, and he participated in many expeditions to Africa. Moreover, Akhmatova's attitude toward her husband was not based on passionate love, and she had several affairs during their brief marriage (they divorced in 1918). When "On liubil …" was written, she had not yet given birth to her child. Her only son, Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev, was born on September 18, 1912. Akhmatova entrusted her newborn son to the care of her mother-in-law, Anna Ivanovna Gumileva, who lived in the town of Bezhetsk, and the poet returned to her bohemian life in St. Petersburg.

Akhmatova's second book, Chetki (Rosary, 1914), was by far her most popular. By the time the volume was published, she had become a favorite of the St. Petersburg literary beau monde and was reputed for her striking beauty and charismatic personality. During these prewar years, between 1911 and 1915, the epicenter of St. Petersburg bohemian life was the cabaret "Brodiachaia sobaka" (The Stray Dog), housed in the abandoned cellar of a wine shop in the Dashkov mansion on one of the central squares of the city. The artistic elite routinely gathered in the smoky cabaret to enjoy music, poetry readings, or the occasional improvised performance of a star ballet dancer. The walls of the cellar were painted in a bright pattern of flowers and birds by the theatrical designer Sergei Iur'evich Sudeikin. Akhmatova read her poems often at the Stray Dog, her signature shawl draped around her shoulders.

Mandel'shtam immortalized Akhmatova's performance at the cabaret in a short poem, titled "Akhmatova" (1914). In the poem Akhmatova's shawl arrests her movement and turns her into a timeless and tragic female figure. Mandel'shtam pursued Akhmatova, albeit unsuccessfully, for quite some time; she was more inclined, however, to conduct a dialogue with him in verse, and eventually they spent less time together.

The Stray Dog was a place where amorous intrigues began—where the customers were intoxicated with art and beauty. Akhmatova first encountered several lovers there, including the man who became her second husband, Vladimir Kazimirovich Shileiko, another champion of her poetry. She also had an affair with the composer Artur Sergeevich Lur'e (Lourie), apparently the subject of her poem "Vse my brazhniki zdes', bludnitsy" (from Chetki; translated as "We are all carousers and loose women here," 1990), which first appeared in Apollon in 1913: "You are smoking a black pipe, / The puff of smoke has a funny shape. / I've put on my tight skirt / To make myself look still more svelte." This poem, precisely depicting the cabaret atmosphere, also underlines the motifs of sin and guilt, which eventually demand repentance. The two themes, sin and penitence, recur in Akhmatova's early verse. Passionate, earthly love and religious piety shaped the oxymoronic nature of her creative output, prompting the critic Boris Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum, the author of Anna Akhmatova: Opyt analiza (Anna Akhmatova: An Attempt at Analysis, 1923), to call her "half nun, half whore." Later, Eikhenbaum's words gave Communist Party officials in charge of the arts reason to ban Akhmatova's poetry; they criticized it as immoral and ideologically harmful.

In Chetki the heroine is often seen praying to, or evoking, God in search of protection from the haunting image of her beloved, who has rejected her.

Once more she finds the most economical way to sketch her emotional landscape. The simplicity of her vocabulary is complemented by the intonation of everyday speech, conveyed through frequent pauses that are signified by a dash, for instance, as in "Provodila druga do perednei" (translated as "I led my lover out to the hall," 1990), which appeared initially in her fourth volume of verse, Podorozhnik (Plantain, 1921): "A throwaway! invented word—/ Am I really a note or a flower?" Akhmatova's poetry is also known for its pattern of ellipsis, another example of a break or pause in speech, as exemplified in "Ia ne liubvi tvoei proshu" (translated as "I'm not asking for your love," 1990), written in 1914 and first published in the journal Zvezda (The Star) in 1946: "I'm not asking for your love—/ It's in a safe place now …" The meaning of unrequited love in Akhmatova's lyrics is twofold, because the speaker alternately suffers and makes others suffer. But whether falling victim to her beloved's indifference or becoming the cause of someone else's misfortune, the persona conveys a vision of the world that is regularly besieged with dire events—the ideal of happiness remains elusive.

The outbreak of World War I marked the beginning of a new era in Russian history. Many perceived the year 1913 as the last peaceful time—the end of the sophisticated, light-hearted fin de siècle period. Artists could no longer afford to ignore the cruel new reality that was setting in rapidly. For the bohemian elite of St. Petersburg, one of the first manifestations of the new order was the closing of the Stray Dog cabaret, which did not meet wartime censorship standards. Akhmatova's poetic voice was also changing; more and more frequently she abandoned private lamentations for civic or prophetic themes. In the poem "Molitva" (translated as "Prayer," 1990), from the collection Voina v russkoi poezii (War in Russian Poetry, 1915), the lyric heroine pleads with God to restore peace to her country: "This I pray at your liturgy / After so many tormented days, / So that the stormcloud over darkened Russia / Might become a cloud of glorious rays."

Akhmatova's third collection, Belaia staia (White Flock, 1917), includes not only love lyrics but also many poems of strong patriotic sentiment. Self-conscious in her new civic role, she announces in a poem—written on the day Germany declared war on Russia—that she must purge her memory of the amorous adventures she used to describe in order to record the terrible events to come. In "Pamiati 19 iiulia 1914" (translated as "In Memoriam, July 19, 1914," 1990), first published in the newspaper Vo imia svobody (In the Name of Freedom) on May 25, 1917, Akhmatova suggests that personal memory must from now on give way to historical memory: "Like a burden henceforth unnecessary, / The shadows of passion and songs vanished from my memory." In a poem addressed to her lover Boris Vasil'evich Anrep, "Net, tsarevich, ia ne ta" (translated as "No, tsarevich, I am not the one," 1990), which initially came out in Severnye zapiski (Northern Notes, 1915), she registers her change from a woman in love to a prophetess: "And no longer do my lips / Kiss—they prophesy." Born on St. John's Eve, a special day in the Slavic folk calendar, when witches and demons were believed to roam freely, Akhmatova believed herself clairvoyant. Many of her contemporaries acknowledged her gift of prophecy, and she occasionally referred to herself as Cassandra in her verse.

Whether or not the "soothsayer" Akhmatova anticipated the afflictions that awaited her in the Soviet state, she never considered emigration a viable option—even after the 1917 Revolution, when so many of her close friends were leaving and admonishing her to follow. She spent most of the revolutionary years in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg) and endured extreme hardship. During the dire years of the Russian Civil War (1918-1920) she resided in Sheremet'ev Palace—also known as Fontannyi Dom (Fountain House), one of the most graceful palaces in the city—which had been "nationalized" by the Bolshevik government; the Bolsheviks routinely converted abandoned mansions of Russian noblemen to provide living space for prominent scholars, artists, and bureaucrats who had been deemed useful for the newly founded state of workers and peasants. Akhmatova was able to live in Sheremet'ev Palace after marrying, in 1918, Shileiko—a poet close to the Acmeist Guild, a brilliant scholar of Assyria, and a professor at the Archeological Institute. Because of his invaluable contribution to scholarship, Shileiko was assigned rooms in Sheremet'ev Palace, where he and Akhmatova stayed between 1918 and 1920.

The palace was built in the 18th century for one of the richest aristocrats and arts patrons in Russia, Count Petr Borisovich Sheremet'ev. For Akhmatova, this palace was associated with prerevolutionary culture; she was quite aware that many 19th-century poets had socialized there, including Aleksander Sergeevich Pushkin and Petr Andreevich Viazemsky.

For a few years after the revolution the Bolshevik government was preoccupied with fighting a war on several fronts and interfered little in artistic life. This short period of seemingly absolute creative freedom gave rise to the Russian avant-garde. Many literary workshops were held around the city, and Akhmatova was a frequent participant in poetry readings. Most of her poems from that time were collected in two books, Podorozhnik and Anno Domini MCMXXI (1922). Among her most prominent themes during this period are the emigration of friends and her personal determination to stay in her country and share its fate. In the poem "Ty—otstupnik: za ostrov zelenyi" (from Podorozhnik; translated as "You are an apostate: for a green island," 1990), first published in Volia naroda (The People's Will) on April 13, 1918, for example, she reproaches her lover Anrep for abandoning Russia for the "green island" of England. In evoking Russia, she creates a stylized, folktale image of a peaceful land of pine-tree forests, lakes, and icons—an image forever maimed by the ravages of war and revolution: "You are an apostate: for a green island / You betrayed, betrayed your native land, / Our songs and our icons / And the pine above the quiet lake." Anrep's betrayal of Russia merges with Akhmatova's old theme of personal abandonment, when in the last stanza she plays on the meaning of her name, Anna, which connotes grace: "Yes, neither battles nor the sea terrify / One who has forfeited grace."

Akhmatova's firm stance against emigration was rooted in her deep belief that a poet can sustain his art only in his native country. Above all defining her identity as a poet, she considered Russian speech her only true "homeland" and determined to live where it was spoken. Later, Soviet literary historians, in an effort to remold Akhmatova's work along acceptable lines of socialist realism, introduced excessive, crude patriotism into their interpretation of her verses about emigration. For instance, the poem "Kogda v toske samoubiistva" (translated as "When in suicidal anguish," 1990), published in Volia naroda on April 12, 1918 and included in Podorozhnik, routinely appeared in Soviet editions without several of its opening lines, in which Akhmatova conveys her understanding of brutality and the loss of the traditional values that held sway in Russia during the time of revolutionary turmoil; this period was "When the capital by the Neva, / Forgetting her greatness, / Like a drunken prostitute / Did not know who would take her next." A biblical source has been offered by Roman Davidovich Timenchik for her comparison between the Russian imperial capital and a drunken prostitute. The prophet Isaiah pictures the Jews as a "sinful nation," their country as "desolate," and their capital Jerusalem as a "harlot": "How is the faithful city become an harlot! it was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers" (Isaiah 1:21). Furthermore, Akhmatova reports of a "voice" that called out to her "comfortingly," suggesting emigration as a way to escape from the living hell of Russian reality. But her heroine rejects the new name and identity that the "voice" has used to entice her: "But calmly and indifferently, / I covered my ears with my hands, / So that my sorrowing spirit / Would not be stained by those shameful words." Rather than staining her conscience, she is determined to preserve the bloodstains on her hands as a sign of common destiny and of her personal responsibility in order to protect the memory of those dramatic days.

Akhmatova and Shileiko grew unhappy shortly after marrying, but they lived together, on and off, for several more years. When, in 1924, he was allocated two rooms in the Marble Palace, she moved in with him and lived there until 1926. This palace on the Neva embankment, in close proximity to the Winter Palace, was originally built for Count Grigorii Orlov, a favorite of Catherine the Great, and then passed into the hands of grand dukes. Yet, despite the "royal" accommodations, food, matches, and almost all other goods were in short supply. Both Akhmatova and her husband were heavy smokers; she would start every day by running out from her unheated palace room into the street to ask a passerby for a light.

In the 1920s Akhmatova's more epic themes reflected an immediate reality from the perspective of someone who had gained nothing from the revolution. She lamented the culture of the past, the departure of her friends, and the personal loss of love and happiness—all of which were at odds with the upbeat Bolshevik ideology. Critics began referring to Akhmatova as a "relic of the past" and an "anachronism." She was criticized on aesthetic grounds by fellow poets who had taken advantage of the radical social changes by experimenting with new styles and subject matters; they spurned Akhmatova's more traditional approach. Eventually, as the iron grip of the state tightened, Akhmatova was denounced as an ideological adversary and an "internal émigré." Finally, in 1925 all of her publications were officially suppressed. The state allowed the publication of Akhmatova's next book after Anno Domini, titled Iz shesti knig (From Six Books), only in 1940.

The 15 years when Akhmatova's books were banned were perhaps the most trying period of her life. Except for her brief employment as a librarian in the Institute of Agronomy in the early 1920s, she had never made a living in any way other than as a writer. Since all literary production in the Soviet Union was now regulated and funded by the state, she was cut off from her most immediate source of income. Despite the virtual disappearance of her name from Soviet publications, however, Akhmatova remained overwhelmingly popular as a poet, and her magnetic personality kept attracting new friends and admirers. The help she received from her "entourage" likely enabled her to survive the tribulations of these years. Occasionally, through the selfless efforts of her many friends, she was commissioned to translate poetry. Besides verse translation, she also engaged in literary scholarship. Her essays on Pushkin and his work were posthumously collected in O Pushkine (On Pushkin, 1977).

In 1926 Akhmatova and Shileiko divorced, and she moved in permanently with Nikolai Nikolaevich Punin and his extended family, who lived in the same Sheremet'ev Palace on the Fontanka River where she had resided some years earlier. Like Gumilev and Shileiko, Akhmatova's first two husbands, Punin was a poet; his verse had been published in the Acmeist journal Apollon. He first met Akhmatova in 1914 and became a frequent guest in the home that she then shared with Gumilev. Before the revolution Punin was a scholar of Byzantine art and had helped create the Department of Icon Painting at the Russian Museum. After 1917 he became a champion of avant-garde art. The Bolshevik government valued his efforts to promote new, revolutionary culture, and he was appointed commissar of the Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia (People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, or the Ministry of Education), also known as Narkompros. For most of his career Punin was affiliated with the Russian Museum, the Academy of Fine Arts, and Leningrad State University, where he built a reputation as a talented and engaging lecturer. By 1922, as an eminent art historian, he was allowed to live in an apartment in a wing of the Sheremet'ev Palace. Akhmatova's romantic involvement with Punin dates approximately to this same year, and for the next several years she often lived in his study for extended periods of time. While the palace was her residence for the brief time that she was with Shileiko, it became her longtime home after she moved there again to be with Punin. Inevitably, it served as the setting for many of her works.

Punin, whom Akhmatova regarded as her third husband, took full advantage of the relatively spacious apartment and populated it with his successive wives and their families. The arrangements at Fontannyi dom were typical of the Soviet mode of life, which was plagued by a lack of space and privacy. For years Akhmatova shared her quarters with Punin's first wife, daughter, and granddaughter; after her separation from Punin at the end of the 1930s, she then lived with his next wife. Despite the noise and the general uneasiness of the situation, Akhmatova did not seem to mind communal living and managed to retain her regal persona even in a cramped, unkempt, and poorly furnished room. Lidiia Korneevna Chukovskaia, an author and close acquaintance of Akhmatova who kept diaries of their meetings, captured the contradiction between the dignified resident and the shabby environment. In Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi (Notes on Anna Akhmatova, 1976; translated as The Akhmatova Journals, 1994), in an entry dated August 19, 1940, Chukovskaia describes how Akhmatova sat "straight and majestic in one corner of the tattered divan, looking very beautiful."

During the long period of imposed silence, Akhmatova did not write much original verse, but the little that she did compose—in secrecy, under constant threat of search and arrest—is a monument to the victims of Joseph Stalin's terror. Between 1935 and 1940 she composed her long narrative poem Rekviem (1963; translated as Requiem in Selected Poems [1976]), published for the first time in Russia during the years of perestroika in the journal Oktiabr' (October) in 1989. It was whispered line by line to her closest friends, who quickly committed to memory what they had heard. Akhmatova would then burn in an ashtray the scraps of paper on which she had written Rekviem. If found by the secret police, this narrative poem could have unleashed another wave of arrests for subversive activities.

As Akhmatova states in a short prose preface to the work, Rekviem was conceived while she was standing in line before the central prison in Leningrad, popularly known as Kresty, waiting to hear word of her son's fate. A talented historian, Lev spent much of the time between 1935 and 1956 in forced-labor camps—his only crime was being the son of "counterrevolutionary" Gumilev. Before he was eventually dispatched to the camps, Lev was first kept in Kresty along with hundreds of other victims of the regime. The era of purges is characterized in Rekviem as a time when, "like a useless appendage, Leningrad / Swung from its prisons." Akhmatova dedicated the poem to the memory of all who shared her fate—who had seen loved ones dragged away in the middle of the night to be crushed by acts of torture and repression: "They led you away at dawn, / I followed you like a mourner …"

Without a unifying or consistent meter, and broken into stanzas of various lengths and rhyme patterns, Rekviem expresses a disintegration of self and world. Mixing various genres and styles, Akhmatova creates a striking mosaic of folk-song elements, popular mourning rituals, the Gospels, the odic tradition, and lyric poetry. She revives the epic convention of invocations, usually addressed to a muse or a divinity, by summoning Death instead—elsewhere called “blissful.” Death is the only escape from the horror of life: “You will come in any case—so why not now? / I am waiting for you—I can’t stand much more. / I’ve put out the light and opened the door / For you, so simple and miraculous.”

In the epilogue, visualizing a monument that may be erected to her in the future, Akhmatova evokes a theme that harks back to Horace’s ode “Exegi monumentum aere perennius” (I Erected a Monument More Solid than Bronze, 23 BCE). This theme has proven consistently popular in European literature over the past two millennia, and Pushkin’s “Ia pamiatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyi” (My monument I’ve raised, not wrought by human hands, 1836) was its best known adaptation in Russian verse. Horace and those who followed him used the image of the monument as an allegory for their poetic legacy; they believed that verse ensured posthumous fame better than any tangible statue.

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