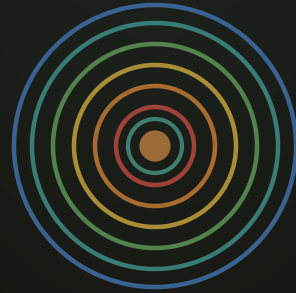


THE ON _ _ _ ING SERIES

On Observing

The Power of Timeless Art and Artifacts

JAMISON JOHNSON • JUNE 2026



There is a bronze Buddha somewhere — choose any of them, in any quiet hall — that has been looked at so many times the looking has become part of the metal. And there is a figure of Christ standing open-armed above a city in Brazil, finished within living memory, already met by more eyes than the temple Buddha gathered in a thousand years. Different faiths. Different centuries. Different stone. The same strange fact underneath: people come away from these things altered, and cannot quite name by what.

Ask them and the accounts scatter. Some say the object felt *alive*. A few will insist it made a sound — a low hum at the threshold of hearing, as though the thing were holding a single sustained note. Set a scientist beside them and she sees none of that. She sees an object, a very fine one, and she can read the workmanship in its seams. She can follow the material backward like a thread: the casting, the foundry, the ore drawn out of the ground, the metal settling into the crust over an unhurried age, the crust itself a late skin on a planet that condensed out of a turning disk of debris, the disk a remnant of stars that had already lived and died. The copper and the tin in the Buddha's skin were forged in the cores of those stars and scattered when they burst. The soapstone wrapped around the Christ is older than the Earth it stands on. To the scientist, the artifact is the most recent knot in a rope thirteen billion years long, and that is wonder enough; she does not need it to hum.

The faithful need none of that rope. They do not arrive at the power of the thing by reasoning back to the Big Bang. They stand before it and the message lands whole — mercy, stillness, an arms-wide welcome over the rooftops — and the lineage of atoms is beside the point. To one observer the object is an object. To another it is a vessel. Neither is misled. They are simply not looking at the same thing.

And here is the quiet scandal at the center of it: in the strictest reading we have of the physical world, *they cannot be*. A current of modern physics — the relational view of quantum mechanics, and its cousin that treats every measurement as an experience belonging to the one who measures — holds that

there is no fact about a thing except in relation to something else observing it. No view from nowhere. No final, observer-free account of what the object simply is in itself. Reality, at its foundation, is not a single fixed portrait hanging in a room everyone files past. It is a set of relations, and each observer stands inside a different one. The scientist's object and the believer's vessel are not two opinions about one underlying thing. They are two true things, because there is no underlying thing standing apart from all observation to overrule them.

I notice, writing this, which of those observers I default to. I reason backward — to the foundry, the ore, the dying stars — long before I let the arms-wide welcome land on me as anything but information. The rope of atoms is the relation I trust. I have had to learn, slowly, that the other one is not a lesser truth I am being polite about.

This is older than the physics. There is a name for what these objects carry — Walter Benjamin called it their *aura*: the weight an original holds by virtue of being here, having occupied this one place across all this time, having been present for everything that passed before it. A copy can reproduce the image and never touch the aura, because the aura is not in the shape. It is in the accumulated fact of having been witnessed. Every pair of eyes that ever rested on the Buddha left something the way a hand leaves oil on bronze. The figure above the city has been wept at, prayed to, photographed, struck by lightning, repaired. None of that is visible in a photograph and all of it is in the statue, held in the relation between the object and the long parade of those who stood before it.

Which is why the hum should not be dismissed. It has a precedent older than either statue. In Egypt there are two colossal seated figures, broken by an earthquake long ago, and for the better part of three centuries one of them sang at dawn — a clear, eerie note the moment the sun first warmed the cracked stone. The Greeks and Romans came from across the world to hear it and understood it perfectly: the statue was a fallen king greeting his mother, the goddess of the dawn, and the morning dew on the stone was her tears. We understand it differently now. Cold stone, fractured, expands as the first light heats it; trapped air and evaporating moisture move through the fissures and the rock releases a

tone. Both explanations are exact. The mechanism is thermal. The meaning is a son calling out to his mother every single morning for three hundred years. The sound was real. What it was depended entirely on who stood there listening for it. The object did not change. The observer did, and so the object did with them.

Most of us only ever stand in one of these relations at a time. We see the object or we feel the vessel; we hear the physics or we hear the king; and some part of us, quietly, is busy assembling the case for why what we see is the version that is really there — ready to defend it, to prove it to whoever stands beside us. That readiness is a kind of glare. It is the self, leaning forward to be right, and it falls across the line of sight like light on glass, letting through only the one reflection it came to find.

I know that glare from the inside; it is usually mine. I have stood in front of one of these things already arguing — already assembling the case for the reading I walked in carrying — so busy being right about the thing that the thing itself never quite reached me.

Imagine, instead, an observer whose jays are aligned. The need to prove the seeing has fallen away — not suppressed, simply absent, the way a window stops calling attention to itself once it is clean. With nothing leaning forward to win the point, there is nothing left to choose between. Such a one would not have to pick the rope of stars over the open arms, or the thermal note over the singing king. They would stand in every relation at once.

I am not that observer — or only rarely, and never quite on purpose. But I have felt the glass go clear for a breath or two, and in that clearing the choosing simply stopped mattering. Long enough, anyway, to believe the chord is real, and to suspect that the only thing ever standing between me and it was me.

The object would not resolve into a single answer; it would hold all of its answers open and true together — the foundry and the prayer, the supernova and the welcome, the fracture and the song. To that observer the thing would do exactly what the accounts have always whispered it does. It would hum, because the dawn is warming the stone and the king is calling his mother and both are happening. It would glisten with an endless turning of color, because every

wavelength of every gaze that ever fell on it is a relation it still holds. And it would resonate, faintly and entirely, with the whole history of its own becoming — back through the hands, the ore, the crust, the dying stars — not recalled but *present*, all of it, at once.

This is what gives these artifacts their timeless feel, and it asks no one to abandon what they see. The scientist is right. The faithful are right. The one who hears the hum is right. There is no privileged seat from which to correct them, because the power was never a property the object kept to itself and dispensed. The power is the relation — the meeting of a particular looker and a thing that has been met countless times before. Every observer completes it truly, in their own key. The aligned observer simply lets them all sound at once, and hears, for a moment, the chord.

Resonances

voices the piece observes alongside — the company it keeps

Carlo Rovelli *Relational Quantum Mechanics*

No fact about a thing except in relation to what observes it — reality as a web of relations.

QBism *Fuchs, Mermin & Schack*

A measurement is an experience belonging to the one who measures, not a readout of the world-in-itself.

Walter Benjamin *The Work of Art...*

The *aura*: the here-and-now of the original, thick with having been witnessed.

Thomas Nagel *The View from Nowhere*

There is no observer-free vantage on what a thing simply is.

The Colossi of Memnon *Thebes, antiquity*

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On Observing

*Set in oxidized bronze and the spectrum of every gaze — the object that holds
all its relations at once, and lets them, for a moment, sound the chord.*

JAMISON JOHNSON

June 2026 · Lee's Summit, Missouri

Set in Fraunces & EB Garamond

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