

all that remains

Honor your artifacts
in a soldered reliquary

by Cheryl Barton-Petrie

The word *relic* conjures up images of cobwebs and old, dead things. That concept comes from the word's common usage today to indicate an outdated thing, but also relates to its origins. Relic means "remains," coming from the Latin *reliquiae*.

The act of venerating remains is probably instinctual, as it has been around throughout history and is associated with many religions. However, the concept was popularized in the Middle Ages in Europe when relics—mostly body parts or pieces of clothing reputed to have belonged to holy people—were sought out by pilgrims in order to ask forgiveness, give thanks, and request cures and other miracles.

And people claimed that relics *did* perform miracles—so much so that they were sometimes stolen, even church from church, since a good relic was sure to draw a crowd and its alms. Relics were often damaged from finger oils, kissing, and other worshipping acts. This is where reliquaries come in.

A reliquary is a housing for a relic—a container for remains to protect the treasure. In Medieval Europe, these housings were spectacularly decorated, and you can still see many bones and sacred garments in elaborate reliquaries today.

However, you don't have to own one of St. Thomas's finger bones or ashes of Aesculapius to have a great excuse to build a reliquary. They can be built to celebrate a birth, memorialize a death, honor a favorite artist, preserve an ephemeral memory, or just as an excuse to make something cool. I've built them as a meditation to end war, venerate Mother Earth, commemorate my cat, and just for fun.

You ask, just what remains can go in these reliquaries? Well, anything—a leaf, a piece of hair, a button, a love letter, a photograph...then add your style to it.

To build your own reliquary, first make a box, then place the relic in it, collage the interior (or whatever you want to do in there), line the outer edges with copper foil and solder it. (I learned to make these from Ulla Benulla in Berkeley.)

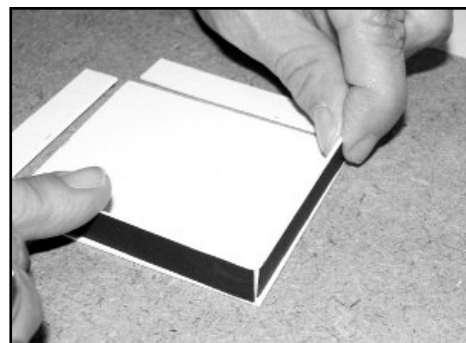
What you need

- ✦ Matboard
- ✦ X-Acto knife and blade
- ✦ Ruler
- ✦ White glue
- ✦ Relics
- ✦ Collage items (papers, fabric, found objects, transparencies)
- ✦ Glass (no thicker than 1/8")
- ✦ Glass cutter (choose one with an oil reservoir)
- ✦ Cutting board
- ✦ 1/2" wide copper foil tape

- ✦ Bone folder or burnisher
- ✦ Rubbing alcohol and rags
- ✦ Flux
- ✦ Solder (lead-free; about 115 diameter)
- ✦ Soldering iron (80-100 watt; thick tip)
- ✦ Jump rings
- ✦ 24 gauge jewelry wire

What to do

1. Decide what size to make your reliquary and cut a piece of mat board that size with an X-Acto knife. I suggest starting small, say 3"x4". This piece will form the back of the box.
2. Cut the sides for the box, which will be four strips of mat board equal in width (about 1/2" is good). The length of the strips should correspond to each side of the box minus one thickness of the mat board.
3. With white glue, attach the sides to the back piece of mat board; be sure to place the side pieces *on top of* the back piece, not abutting the sides. Lay it out before gluing to make sure you have a good fit. After gluing, let it dry. You can speed up the process with heat.



The sides of the box sit on top of the back piece.

4. Now place the relic into the open faced box and collage the interior. Because of the depth of the box, you can achieve a 3-D effect with the collage. Transparencies create an illusionary effect and mystical quality.



This finished reliquary houses a delicate fragment of a decomposed leaf. I trimmed the copper tape with fancy scissors to create the scalloped edge.

(I print photographs onto transparency film using my printer.)

5. Glue all parts in place, as the reliquary will be displayed upright. If you glue the transparencies, however, a glue glob will show. I suggest cutting the transparency to be a little larger than the box from top to bottom and wedging it in place by allowing the transparency to bow out, which holds it in place with tension.

6. Cut glass to fit the box opening. See the “Charmed I’m sure” article in *ARTitude Zine* #6 (Autumn 2002) for guidance on cutting glass, taping edges with copper foil and soldering. I’ll explain briefly here: Use a glass cutter to cut the glass for the front of the reliquary to the same size as the mat board back. Remember, one score does the trick, and you don’t have to press hard! (If you don’t want to cut glass, design your box to fit an already-cut piece of glass.) Since the glass is the same size as the back piece, it will sit on top of the box sides rather than fit inside the opening.



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7. Clean the glass with an ammonia-based cleaner or rubbing alcohol to get rid of dust and fingerprints.

8. Run 1/2” wide copper foil tape around the exterior twice, using two strips of tape. The first strip should wrap around the front edges and over the upper sides securing the glass to the box. The second strip will overlap the back and lower edges to cover where the mat board is glued. To start, measure the length for each strip by

loosely wrapping it (with the backing still on) around the sides you will cover. Tape the front first by laying down the tape so that there is an even width of it overlapping all four sides of the front glass piece (overlap at least 1/8” on the glass). I start each wrap in the middle



In this photo, the first piece of copper tape has already been applied to secure the glass to the box. Now I’m adding the second piece of tape along the bottom edge. You also can see how the box sides sit on top of the back piece.

of the bottom of the box, pinching the tape with my thumb and forefinger to make it stick. Do the corners last, pinching up to about 1/4” away; then, from the corner moving in, smash the tape over the corner with your thumb. Add the second strip the same way. If there’s a gap where the box sides are visible between the tape strips, cover the gap with another piece of tape.

9. Burnish taped areas with a bone folder or burnisher. Rub it well; make everything stick.

10. Use an old paintbrush to cover taped areas with flux, then apply solder to cover all the tape. Holding



Cover the copper tape with a generous layer of solder.

the soldering iron like a paintbrush, I apply a glob of solder to the tip of the iron and then spread/wipe/paint the solder over the tape. Cover all the foil with solder. If the seams of the tape buckle or gap, use more solder. (The inside of the box may cloud with condensation while you are soldering, but this will clear up within a couple hours.)

11. On the back of the reliquary, solder two large jumprings, one on each side about 1” down from the top, lined up vertically. Place them in a way that they don’t stick out—that is, they can’t be seen from the front.



Solder jumprings onto the back if you want to hang the reliquary to display it.

12. String wire through the jumprings, looping and twisting the ends to secure them like you would on the back of a picture frame. Now you can hang your reliquary on the wall or place it in a small stand to display it.

Add finishing touches by rubber stamping with StazOn ink on the glass, gluing found objects like seashells to the exterior, soldering on metal charms, applying patina to the solder, painting on the metal...possibilities are endless!

Many thanks to my guru and sista in art crime, Shelley Kenny, for her modeling hands and ideas.

Cheryl Barton-Petrie teaches art history and aesthetics at a university in San Francisco and has a small biz giving art workshops. See more of her artwork at www.cherylsartworkshops.com. Cheryl's reliquaries are on display at the San Luis Obispo Art Center during March 2007.