

Recovering the Ritual Object in Medieval and Early Modern Art

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In the medieval and early modern worlds, ritual served as a legitimising process, a dynamic mechanism for mediating a transference or transformation of status. Objects played an essential part in this performative practice, charged with symbolism and invested with power. Distanced from their original contexts, however, these artefacts have often been studied for their material properties, disconnecting function from form and erasing layers of meaning. The relationships between ritual objects and ritual participants were identity-forming, reflecting and shaping belief structures. Understanding of how these objects were experienced as well as viewed, is key to revealing their significances. This panel will relocate ritual objects at the centre of both religious and secular ceremonies, interrogating how they served as both signifiers and agents of change. Drawn from a range of geographical perspectives, the papers investigate this subject from a cross-cultural perspective, analysing medieval and early modern ritual objects – broadly defined – as social mediators.

Speakers and Abstracts

Transparent Materiality in the Ritual of Stamping Sand Buddha (Images)

Wei-Cheng Lin (University of Chicago)

A less-known ritual in medieval China is called 'Ritual of Stamping Sand Buddha (Images)' (yinsha fohui), in which a hand-held mould was used to quickly make a great number of impressions of the same Buddha image in sand. The ritual took place where sand was readily accessible, such as river banks, shorelines, or the desert. The key feature was the multiple reproduction of sacred images, based on the Buddhist logic of merit and for the elimination of karmic obstacles from past lives. The ritual was first introduced to China through the translation of esoteric Buddhist scriptures during the 8th century, but much of the material, dating to the 10th and 11th centuries, directly related to the ritual practice is preserved in Dunhuang manuscripts.

Despite its popularity, the ritual has not yet received much attention from art historians, as it created no permanent artefacts. The sand image was, by intention, ephemeral – to be washed and blown away at the conclusion of the ritual. Fortunately, several hand-held moulds used in such rituals survived, providing only traces of the immaterial ritual performance. The sustaining material presence of these moulds, however, appears antithetical to the transitory nature of the ritual that focused on notions of multiplicity and innumerability, rather than singular prototypes. Focusing on the concave and inverted image the mould bears, this paper argues that the very materiality of the hand-held mould was negotiated through the ritual performance that rendered it transparent. Yet, it is precisely through the transparent materiality that the nature and significance of the Buddha image and its production, as understood in medieval China, was revealed.

Illuminating the Ritual Objects of Vassalage: The Liber feudorum maior of Barcelona

Shannon L Wearing (UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies)

In his 1976 essay 'The Symbolic Ritual of Vassalage', Jacques Le Goff reconstructed a key secular ceremony of the Middle Ages: the 'feudal' ritual whereby vassals pledged themselves to a lord. Citing first-hand accounts, Le Goff identified three stages of the ceremony, each marked by particular gestures and ritual objects: homage, when the vassal knelt before the lord; the oath of fealty, which was performed in the presence of a reliquary or holy book; and investiture, when the lord bestowed upon the vassal an organic object such as a branch, vine, or tuft of grass, which functioned synecdochically as a fragment of the land being entrusted to them. This courtly paraphernalia validated the performance, much as wax seals confirmed the authenticity of a document while summoning the presence of its signatory. The ephemerality of these rituals and the objects involved has obscured their significance in the establishment of

sociopolitical hierarchies and the formation of identity. A remedy for this lacuna, however, can be found in manuscripts that record such ceremonies in word and image. This paper will focus on an especially rich repository of depictions of vassalic ritual, the cartulary known as the *Liber feudorum maior*, commissioned in Barcelona at the end of the 12th century by King Alfonso II of Aragon. The charters transcribed on its pages are supplemented by visual 're-enactments' of courtly rituals that highlight the objects that 'sealed' fealty and investiture. Consequently, the manuscript not only served as a witness to past events, but itself took on the properties of a ritual object by prompting the virtual re-performance of the depicted ceremonies each time the book was consulted.

Conceiving Ritual Pathways through Ornament: Amedieval Iranian-Islamic rehal as focal object

Maria Shevelkina (Hunter College, CUNY, New York)

Rehal – Qu'aran and manuscript stands – are objects commonly used for furnishing mosques and madrasas. The 14th-century Iranian rahla at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a focalised object due to its highly ornamented schema, bound within a dense network of the body, the sciences, and performance. Taking up recent calls for the study of ornament in Islamic art outside of aniconism and racial prevalence (Flood and Necipoglu, 2017), the Metropolitan ornamented rahla is understood in-situ as both a daily and an extraordinary ritualistic object. Rehal were implicated in religious practices of ritual prayers and Qu'aranic studies by transforming shape in accordance with the needs of the body, the book as body, and their respective positions of authority. The Metropolitan's rahla, a feat of specialised medieval carving and construction in teakwood by the maker Zain (?) Hasan Sulaiman Isfahani, employs the ritualistic utility of the object, particularly its dynamism and widespread ecology, as a direct reflection of the ornamentation. The possibilities of a vast ecology are encountered through the rahla's ornament: the vegetal arabesques; alphabetic inscriptions of the maker, glorified Imams, and God; and the inlaid geometrical, mathematic, esoteric, and sometime magical forms. The ornament, in turn, refocuses such ever-expanding transactions back onto the ritual performance of theological study occurring within the reciprocity between the bodily engagements with the rahla as object. An interpretation of the rahla and its ornamented surface as a dynamic pathway between body-in-performance and daily practice reconfigures ornamented objects as critical and physical reflections of their far-reaching networks enacted in a contracted space.

Ritualistic Spectacle in the Painting of Carlo Crivelli

Sarah Lippert (University of Michigan-Flint)

Carlo Crivelli (1430–95) was a Paduan-trained artist, originally from Venice, who became known for his ornamental but highly realistic paintings featuring three-dimensional detail. The term 'pastiglia' for this technique, however, hardly captures the significance of his incorporation of ritualistic content into his scenes. Exclusively a painter of altarpieces and religious paintings, Crivelli's work inhabits the boundaries between sculpture and painting, calling into question how we define ritualistic objects and whether they can exist dependently on other media. Three-dimensional and precious portrayals of the jewellery and garments of his female saints, the keys of St Peter, or the liturgical garments of his saintly and official leaders, show that Crivelli was a master of integrating the ritualistic into the medium of painting. This paper explores how the inhabitation of both sculpture and painting in Crivelli's work impacted the experience of these objects for viewers, as well as why the ritualistic in his approach was later denigrated or dismissed by art historians, collectors, and critics. In so doing, it will consider how ritual significance spoke to or impacted the status of the art form in historiographic interpretations of Crivelli's work.

From Museum Storage to Display: Identification of a liturgical piece from the French Royal Order of the Holy Spirit, 16th-century

Agnès Bos (University of St Andrews)

Up until recently, the Louvre museum kept in storage a piece of textile of which the function was unknown. Two feet high, with a base 2.8 feet in diameter, this piece is cone-shaped and open at the top and the bottom. The green fabric and the flames embroidered are the same as those on the Chapel ornaments from the Order of the Holy Spirit, founded by Henri III in 1578 and displayed in a Louvre gallery dedicated to this Royal Order. During the 19th century, this piece was unidentified and later seen as a cover for the

Bailiff's mace. Using 16th-century inventories, this paper will question this identification and shed a new light on the original function of this piece: a ciborium cover, used during masses held for the Order at the church of Grands-Augustins in Paris and, from Louis XIV's reign onwards, at the Chapel of Versailles. It will also look into its revelatory shape: it is similar to the canopies suspended from a crook at the back of the altar, above ciboria or pyxes containing the consecrated hosts, which were used in Parisian liturgy from the end of the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 17th century. This gives us a unique insight in the celebrations of the ceremonies for the Order of the Holy Spirit, which would thus not have followed the Tridentine Rite, as one would expect, but the Gallican Tradition.

Smoke, Elephant and the Incense Burner: The Portrait of the Ming Emperor Xizong (r. 1620–1627)
Yao Ning (Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz and Max-Planck Institut)

The usage of incense burners in the ancestor worship in China has a very long tradition. From 16th and 17th centuries onward, however, more incense burners were used in a secular context. This paper will answer the question of how the process of secularisation occurred and why by examining The Portrait of the Ming Emperor Xizong (1605–1627, r. 1620–1627).

The setting of The Portrait of the Ming Emperor Xizong (1605–1627, r. 1620–1627) is decorated with precious gemstones, flowers and a tripodal incense burner of an elephant's head as base and at the same time with visualised smoke of the Chinese character 'shou' for longevity emanating from the censer. This portrait is different from other Ming emperor portraits in ways such as the seeing, touch, sound, and smell sense are involved.

This paper will examine the portrait from the theories of the senses and provide an alternative history of this emperor which the written texts did not tell us on the one hand, and on the other hand, more importantly, it will explore the ornament (the motif of elephant) and connotation of the smoke in the transcultural contexts to shed new light of the new functions of incense burner in 17th-century China.