

# Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place

September 14, 2018–January 6, 2019



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*Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*—on view at Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 18 West 86th Street, New York City, from September 14, 2018 through January 6, 2019—is the first large-scale exhibition to provide a broad perspective on the practice and history of votive giving. Featuring works dating from ca. 1500 BCE to the twenty-first century, the exhibition looks at those objects that humans have chosen to create and offer in their most intimate moments. Through the act of votive giving, people have always revealed how our dreams and hopes, as well as our fears and anxieties, find tangible form. Ittai Weinryb, associate professor, Bard Graduate Center, is the curator, together with Marianne Lamonaca, chief curator, and Caroline Hannah, associate curator, Bard Graduate Center Gallery.

Linking the human and spiritual realms, the practice of votive giving is common across human societies. Almost anything can be transformed into a votive once it is charged with sentiment and meaning through a spiritual act such as prayer or meditation. Through this process, the votive becomes activated as the material representative, or agent, of the individual's most private wish or vow. While votives are often made of modest materials such as clay, wood, wax, or metal and can be mass-market goods, they can also take the form of exquisite works of art.



Retablo of F. P. from El Coesillo for their son's safe return from the United States to Mexico. Undated Oil on metal Durand-Arias Collection.



Standard. Iran, early 18th century. Silver with black inlay. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1984.504.2.

More than 250 works, dating from antiquity to the present, will be on view, including a rare ancient anatomical votive from the Louvre; an exquisite mid-fourteenth-century Italian sculpture of the Virgin and Child from the Metropolitan Museum of Art along with Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic objects from the Met's collections; and more than one hundred votives from the folk art collection of the Bavarian National Museum in Munich, which have never been exhibited in the United States. Contemporary religious and secular objects will include rare votive paintings made by Mexican migrants from the Durand-Arias Collection, Yoko Ono's *Wish Tree*, and objects left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, ranging from personal items such as woolen gloves to a custom-built Harley Davidson motorcycle.

## The Exhibition

*Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place* is organized into themes that illuminate the ways votive objects have been used while presenting opportunities to consider the commonalities among objects from different cultures and time periods. From the moment of intention to the site of deposition, the exhibition offers various pathways through the wide array of votive objects and practices that are on view. The exhibition is laid out on three floors of the Bard



Graduate Center Gallery. While visitors may begin and conclude their visit in the first-floor gallery devoted to objects left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, all are welcome to pursue their own path through the exhibition.

## What Is a Votive Object?

Archaeologists have found evidence of votive giving dating back almost four thousand years. Caches of votive offerings are commonly found at geological sites situated between the natural and supernatural realms. On the second floor, one of the earliest votives on view is a Minoan double ax-head from 1450–1700 BCE, thought to have come from a votive deposit in the Diktaian Cave on the island of Crete. The cave was believed to be the site of the mythical birth of Zeus and was the most famous of the god's devotional sites.

How an object becomes invested with emotion or intention is a fundamental aspect of its transformation from a material object into a votive. Nails representing individual vows can be seen driven into the wooden, nineteenth-century African power figure from the Kongo kingdom. With the *Enthroned Virgin and Child* (ca. 1340–1350), a sculpture from Umbria, Italy, made of painted canvas and gesso on a hollow wooden core, votive offerings such as lace and a rosary were deposited under her unusual painted canvas robe with the hope of communicating directly with God. On loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the sculpture will be exhibited along with the never-before-seen x-rays that reveal the votives hidden within her drapery.

## Narrative and Memory

Just as humans have always solicited help from the divine, they also give thanks when they receive it, often with a very specific votive object that directly references or illustrates the subject or topic of their plea. Objects on view in the second-floor north gallery include legs and arms carved of wood, eyes cast in silver or carved in relief and painted in polychrome, as well as various other models of afflicted body parts and even figurines of treasured livestock. While the circumstances leading to a votive object's creation are not always apparent, votive paintings generally bear texts that explain the story behind the picture. One of the many narrative paintings on view vividly depicts the ravages of war and was offered to three saints for their protection during an aerial bombing in Sicily. Another, the *Ex-voto of Josefa Peres Maldonado*, an elaborate 1777 Mexican oil painting, gives thanks, in gruesome detail, for an initially successful breast cancer operation.

## Participation

This portion of the exhibition addresses the way in which the votive offering, and the people who use and make them, participate, so to speak, within the larger practice of votive giving. In the second-floor south gallery, visitors will examine artifacts from around the world, including Kongolese, Islamic, and Southeast Asian votives. On view is also a striking lifelike nineteenth-century German wax figure of a boy with real hair, glass eyes, and formal clothing that was part of a large collection of votives left at the pilgrimage church in Gößweinstein in Bavaria.



Enthroned Virgin and Child. Italy, mid-14th century. Wooden core, painted canvas, and gesso. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 16.154.10a,b.



Ex-voto of Josefa Peres Maldonado. Probably Aguascalientes, Mexico 1777. Oil on canvas. Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, 2004.10.

## Site

The activation of a votive offering frequently occurs at a specific, physical location: a place that is thought to be holy—a body of water, an altar, a gravesite, a tree—a site where the human and divine meet. Displayed on the third-floor landing is a small-scale example that may have functioned as a sacred site in its own right. The “treasure bound” Armenian Gospel book (ca. 1675–1725) appears to have talismanic, protective, or magical materials attached to its cover—many of these votive objects are much older than the manuscript itself and some are from cultures that are not themselves Christian. On loan from the Morgan Library & Museum, this remarkable object has never previously been exhibited.

## Votive Bodies and Materials

The intimate relationship between the votive object and the human body is one of the most noticeable features of votives across history. For the task of representing the body, specific materials are frequently chosen, either because of their economic value or for their ability to render lifelike the plasticity of the flesh, such as wax. Objects on view in the third-floor north gallery include an Etruscan anatomical votive in terracotta depicting a boy's torso with an incision that exposes the internal organs. Loaned from the Louvre, it is exhibited in North America for the first time. Other objects include an array of wax votives, including elaborately painted lungs and a number of wooden body parts from Brazil and Central Europe, including heads and a pregnant belly. The latter is exhibited with other votives that show universal concern with fertility and childbirth.

## Votive Giving Today: Enduring Traditions

A major private collection of Mexican *retablos* that were made by migrants along the US border with Mexico will be on view. Dating from across the twentieth century, these remarkable paintings illuminate how this perilous journey has been commemorated by generations of people seeking a better life. A special feature on the third floor will be an installation of Yoko Ono's *Wish Tree*, in which visitors are invited to write their wish on a piece of paper and hang it on a tree branch.

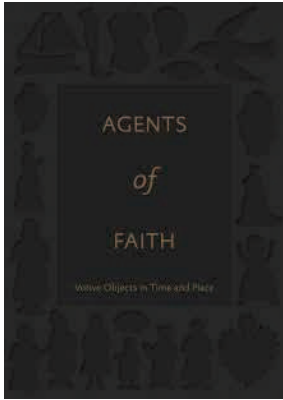
## Votive Giving Today: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Though votives are typically found at sites associated with world religions, the basic impulse inherent in an offering may be secular as well as sacred. On the first floor, the most common votive experience today—votive giving in response to loss, such as an unexpected personal or mass tragedy—will be examined through one of the first occurrences of this phenomenon in modern memory and one that continues to this day. Soon after its dedication in 1982, visitors began leaving letters, photographs, food, and everyday objects as tokens of remembrance and loss at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. On view will be a selection of the intensely personal objects preserved by the US National Park Service, including toys, battlefield artifacts, and a remarkable custom-built full-sized Harley-Davidson motorcycle left in 1995 on behalf of the people of Wisconsin.

Customized 1994 Harley-Davidson Police Special motorcycle, deposited 1995. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, VIVE 15409. Photo: Bruce White.



## Publication



*Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place* will be accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue published by Yale University Press in collaboration with Bard Graduate Center. In addition to Ittai Weinryb, who edited the volume, authors include Fatima Bercht, Sheila Blair, Suzanne Preston Blier, Jaś Elsner, Diana Fane, Nina

Gockerell, John Guy, Fredrika Jacobs, Mitchell Merback, David Morgan, Verity Platt, Mechtild Widrich, and Christopher S. Wood. Several former and current Bard Graduate Center students contributed as well: Alexandra Beauscher, Michael H. Dewberry, Alexander Ekserdian, Anne Hilker, Darienne Turner, and Alyssa Velazquez. The 372-page book will be available in the Gallery and at [store.bgc.bard.edu](http://store.bgc.bard.edu).

## Bard Graduate Center Gallery

Bard Graduate Center Gallery organizes pioneering exhibitions on decorative arts, design history, and material culture, with leading scholars, curators, and institutions worldwide. We provide opportunities for faculty and students to gain experience in exhibition making. Our projects and publications break down traditional barriers between academic and curatorial forms of inquiry.

We offer our visitors a thought-provoking experience in an intimate townhouse setting on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Plan your visit at [bgc.bard.edu](http://bgc.bard.edu).

## Gallery Programs

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212.501.3011 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

## Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212.501.3013 or e-mail [tours@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:tours@bgc.bard.edu).

Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday and Friday through Sunday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Wednesday and Thursday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Suggested admission is \$7 general, \$5 seniors and students.

For information about Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit [bgc.bard.edu/gallery](http://bgc.bard.edu/gallery). For press information and images, please e-mail [hollis.barnhart@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:hollis.barnhart@bgc.bard.edu) or call 212.501.3074.

## Support

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**Above:** Eyes and forehead votive. Austria, 1893. Plaster, cast and painted. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Kr D 27. Photo: Walter Haberland.