

Research Title: Museums and Ritual Objects: Examining Curatorial Practices and Reanimating Religious Art

This research will take as its focus the religious art of Premodern Europe, and acknowledge that while this moment in art history has been overvalued, many of the objects that have come to define that value have been misconstrued. We can achieve an advanced understanding of these works by applying comparative approaches developed for works that were once ignored in favor of the European canon. This will open up space for coexisting narratives and human-centered modes of engagement within museums.

At Elon I am the President of the Italian Club in addition to tutoring others in the language. I want to use my enthusiasm for Italian to focus my art history research on artwork created in Premodern Europe, exploring and expanding my personal connection with religious art and questioning how reanimating the past can promote a deeper understanding of artwork across religion and cultures as well as promote inclusivity, accessibility, and provide audiences with an interactive experience similar to what I had in Florence. My exhibition at the Met Cloisters for bringing “the political and personal utility of religious art to the fore, as a living, breathing phenomenon” (Cotter 2022). Museums like this subject to the important role for interpretations of works in their collections. A recent review by Holland Cotter for the New York Times that interactive display practices can deepen the experience of seeing art, making it more engaging and personal.

In the wake of the pandemic and the push for more effective programs and policies supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion, audiences have demanded that museums evaluate their collections and policies with a critical eye. “The museum’s culture of anti-Blackness became more obvious last summer during the global uprisings against the murder of George Floyd. At that time museums became subject to increased public scrutiny” (La Tanya Autry 2021). A variety of cultural perspectives and new voices need to be involved as all of museum holdings are re-examined to imagine how they could be re-animated. Eike Schmidt, the current director of the Uffizi Gallery “says it is now crucial for museums to play a role in highlighting the issues of today and confront the ‘toxic social structures’ of the past” (Giuffrida 2021).

Cross-cultural connections offer another alternative curatorial model that museums are using to redesign and reform their exhibits. This method of exhibiting pieces involves “looking at works of art from a wide variety of cultures but oriented around a common theme” (Nooter Roberts 2012, 5). Understanding cross-cultural connections deepens the meaning behind artifacts, especially works outside the Western canon that are often forgotten or compared negatively against Western objects. “One important feature of western and nonwestern cultures is the importance of ritual display as a component of religious and secular experiences” (Guip 1993, 28). Through the combination of ethnographic information and aestheticism in a cross-cultural display, objects can gain power and be united across cultures.

Interactive exhibits involving Christian art are not commonplace among museums, however. When Christian art is displayed in institutional settings, it is often valued first for its formal elements and aesthetics “with little regard to its subject matter and initial function”. (Clifton 2007, 107). The re-animation of religious artwork is both a historical and a contemporary concern for museum audiences, especially in how and if a holy embodies the divine. I will examine ways we can reanimate these objects and challenge the privilege of certain works of religious art over others in the museum context. This project aligns directly with the Center for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society as it is interdisciplinary research focused on the intersection of curatorial practices in art history, Italian culture, and the privilege of Christian religious artworks during the Premodern era as opposed to other religious artworks.

I am proposing an exhibition and an article-length paper as the end goals of my research project. I will employ the curatorial practices I have researched through the display of religious Premodern art to develop an interactive and cross-cultural exhibit using works from Elon’s International Art Collections. The exhibit will be my major product and will employ the methods and practices I have studied demonstrating how an exhibit can be inclusive, engaging, because it seeks to reanimate religious art in a contemporary context. I will present my research at undergraduate research conferences in my senior year such as the National Conference of Undergraduate Research, SURF, SECAC (Southeastern College Art Conference), the American Academy of Religion, and the College Art Association.

## Works Cited

1. Autry, La Tanya S. "A Black Curator Imagines Otherwise." *Hyperallergic*, April 22, 2021. <http://hyperallergic.com/639570/a-black-curator-imagines-otherwise-latanya-autry/>.
2. Bennett, Tony. "The Exhibitionary Complex." In *The Birth of the Museum*. Routledge, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315002668>.
3. Clifton, James. "Truly a Worship Experience? Christian Art in Secular Museums." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 52 (2007): 107–15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167746>.
4. Cotter, Holland. "What Museums Don't Reveal About Religious Art." *The New York Times*, February 3, 2022, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/arts/design/religion-art-politics-met-devotion-columbia.html>.
5. Giuffrida, Angela. "Uffizi Director Calls on Museums to Confront Society's 'Toxic' Past." *The Guardian*, December 30, 2021, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/30/uffizi-director-museums-confront-society-toxic-past>.
6. Guip, David. "Instructional Resources: Sacred Relics, Ritual Objects: Instructional Resources from the Toledo Museum of Art." *Art Education* 46, no. 6 (1993): 27–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193406>.
7. Roberts, Mary (Polly) Nooter. "Tradition Is Always Now: African Arts and the Curatorial Turn." *African Arts* 45, no. 1 (2012): 1–7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23276714>.