THE ART OF RELIGION: AESTHETICIZING CHRISTIAN, JEWISH, AND MUSLIM RELIGIOUS ARTIFACTS

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religious Studies.

Chapel Hill
2017

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ABSTRACT

(Under the direction of Randall Styers)

This dissertation examines the ways in which new meanings and new categories of knowledge about religious artifacts are produced and disseminated by public fine arts museums and academic art history. Through three case studies of artifacts originally produced for religious use, (1) a thirteenth-century medieval Spanish Crucifix in the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester, New York, (2) an early twentieth-century Iraqi Tik at the North Carolina Museum of Art, and (3) a fourteenth-century Iranian Mihrab at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I trace the ways through which religious artifacts are reframed as objects of fine art that are collected and exhibited in fine arts museums. As religious artifacts are incorporated into the museum industry, they are encoded with new secularized meanings through the disciplinary lens of academic art history, altering their original religious value and replacing it with aesthetic value. Further, the narratives that fine arts museums tell about their own histories, which immortalize founders, donors, buildings, and collections, eclipse the religious significance of the particular religious artifacts contained within fine arts museums. As the fine arts museum itself comes to be memorialized and valued in religious ways, religious artifacts, in turn, are secularized through the twin processes of aestheticization and musealization.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In an endeavor such as this, there are so many people who have mentored, guided, and supported me. The patience, and commitment on the part of my dissertation advisor and committee chair, Randall Styers, has allowed me to flourish as a student and scholar. Randall is an incomparable mentor and teacher. I am also grateful to Jonathan Boyarin, John Coffey, David Morgan, and Todd Ochoa who graciously served on my doctoral dissertation committee and offered their time as well as their critical insights and advice as this project progressed. I’d like to thank Richard Viladesau for his insights on Christian art and culture and Carl Ernst for his insights on Islamic art and culture. I’m grateful as well to Gabriel Goldstein for his assistance and guidance related to Judaica in general and the Judaic Art collection at the North Carolina Museum of Art in particular. I’d also like to thank Myra Quick and Tracey Cave in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I’m grateful for the kindness and assistance that I have received during my research from Kathleen NiCastro, Kerry Schauber, Lucy Harper, Nancy Norwood, and Grant Holcomb at the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester; Natalia Lochnya, Michael Klauke, and Connie Shertz at the North Carolina Museum of Art; and Maryam D. Ekhtiar and Ria Breed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I’d like to thank Carolyn Allmendinger and Caroline Wood of the Ackland Museum of Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for their helpful insights at the start of this project. Many thanks also to Peter Rosenbaum for his editorial assistance at this project’s close. Many hours of editing were graciously offered by Randall Styers, John Coffey, Jonathan Boyarin
and Peter Rosenbaum. Despite their best efforts, the mistakes that no doubt remain are entirely my own.

I would not have completed this program or this project without the unwavering support of family and friends, who have so graciously and generously been there for me in countless ways. My deepest thanks to Mary Melie, Kathy Scholl, Sam French, Matthew McAvoy, Candy Doolittle Lucas, Maureen McEvers, Thomas Minicucci, and John Kingsley for always being there to cheer me on. Much love to Tim Hogan, Svetlana Kuksguazen, Oleg Kuksguazen, Patrick Hogan, and Elena Hogan, and especially to my partner Michael Timofejew. Their endless amounts of patience and support during my program and the last stages of this project have encouraged and sustained me. And though there are no words to adequately convey my profound and absolute gratitude for her monumental generosity and compassion – Rose Hogan has said that she only wants to hear the words, “thank you.” So I say thank you, Mom, for everything.
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Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction.
— Walter Benjamin

This project finds its inspiration in Walter Benjamin’s significant and complex 1936 essay on aesthetic and political criticism, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Though Benjamin’s observations in this brief essay are complex and wide-ranging with regards to the dangers of the politicization of art and the potential for harnessing art


2 One of Benjamin’s concerns in this particular essay is how our sense perceptions of art have changed due to the ability to technically reproduce objects. In other writings Benjamin explored the epistemological foundations supporting that support the designation of a “work of art.” See Peter Fenves, “On the Aestheticizing of the Political,” in Walter Benjamin and Art, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), 60-72.
for progressive change, I find Benjamin’s concepts of “cult value” and “exhibition value” particularly helpful for understanding the ways in which specific religious artifacts become classified and characterized as fine art. While Benjamin’s concerns are grounded in Marxist critiques of art production and his essay composed in service of a materialist theory of art, his concepts of cult value and exhibition value help us consider how the original sets of social and cultural meanings embedded in religious artifacts can take on new social and cultural functions when these same objects are reclassified as fine art. In the public fine arts museum, a religious artifact’s former “cult value” (religious or ritual function) shifts to “exhibition value” (art historical and aesthetic significance), while the museum itself takes on cult value in terms of a teleological ideology of achievement and progress that is reflected through the display of historicized artifacts throughout the public fine arts museum’s galleries. Though not specifically addressing the public fine arts museum, Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk (Arcades project) is concerned with deconstructing presentations of history that support ideologies of progress. According to Susan Buck-Morss, Benjamin’s criticism of modernity in 1930s Paris includes the observation that capitalism has succeeded in commodifying “everything desirable,” which can then be “transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display.” Fine arts museums create and reify an art historical narrative through the cultic objects that they exhibit. For Benjamin, as Jan

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Mieszowski notes, the art historical narrative was as troubling as other narratives of humanity’s progress.⁵

For Benjamin, cult value first emerges as “artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult.”⁶ Many forms of art began as aspects of religion and were not intended to be viewed by onlookers as “art” (in the modern sense of the term). Instead, these cultic objects had ritual purposes. Embedded in an original cult setting, the object is encoded with ritual qualities or traits that create a sense of authenticity. The original work of art exists in time and space. It has physical, three-dimensional properties and a unique history that confers authenticity or what Benjamin calls “aura.”⁷ Transportability and reproducibility free works of art from their cult origins and give rise to a new sense of aesthetic (or exhibition) value. As Benjamin explains, once one has the initial aesthetic experience of the original work of art, that moment can never be re-experienced or duplicated.⁸ The inability to re-create the original encounter with the work of art imposes a distance between the authentic original object and the viewer. This distance reinforces the cult value of the original work of art’s aura.

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⁶ Benjamin, “Art in the Age,” 224.

⁷ Ibid., 221. For Benjamin, aura is linked to its authenticity. As he states at ibid., “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”

⁸ Ibid., 224. Benjamin presents his understanding of “aura” by comparing an audience’s experience of a live actor playing Macbeth on stage to a film adaptation of Macbeth. Cinematic versions create distance between the actor and the audience, because in film audiences cannot have the same authentic, immediate sense experience and interaction with a live actor on stage.
As works of art are reproduced through various technologies (for Benjamin, film and photography, but by extension today the Internet and other digital formats), they lose their aura and gain “exhibition value.” Benjamin sees this process as both inevitable and liberating. Reproductions “lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition,” since the original work of art has been removed from its original cultic setting. In addition, reproductions “meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation.” While access to the arts was previously reserved for the elite classes, the advent of mechanical reproduction allows members of the working classes to enjoy art as well. For Benjamin, the loss of the original work of art’s aura is not cause for concern but for celebration. Benjamin sees new possibilities in deploying art for social and political change, and much of his essay is concerned with exploring this potential and with raising awareness of the perils of this praxis. Though fine arts museums offer access to works of art to the public at large, one wonders if Benjamin would be in favor of the teleological narratives that fine arts museums offer about their own origins.

Extracting ritual or ceremonial artifacts from their religious settings and transforming their cultic value into exhibition value in a public fine arts museum involves complex processes that crisscross cultural locations and academic disciplines and professions. As we will see, this phenomenon is not as simple as exhibiting cultic objects apart from their original religious

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9 Ibid., 234-36.

10 Ibid., 221.

11 Ibid.

12 Benjamin’s essay is shaped by his experience of the rise of Nazi fascism in Germany in the early 1930s, which led to his exile in Paris in 1932 and his subsequent death in Spain while fleeing Gestapo agents in 1940. His essay is not only an exploration of philosophical aesthetics, but a record and commentary on the use of film and photography by the fascist regimes in early twentieth-century Germany, France, and Italy.
settings and allowing for their inevitable reproducibility. Instead, the phenomenon involves a transformation in epistemologies over time as new models for understanding the nature of “things” arise. The “history” that confers authenticity and value on the work of art as an existing “thing” in a specific time and place becomes subject to reconceptualization and rewriting. The cult value of an object originally produced for a religious purpose in a particular religious setting that is then exhibited as an object of art in a fine arts museum has its meaning shifted by this change in context. The same object becomes religious or cultic in new ways, its aura celebrated in reproductions available through photographic and digital reproductions. The lines between cult value and exhibition value may become blurred in the fine arts museum.

Although there is not a direct parallel between Benjamin’s concerns and my own, I draw on his theoretical frame of differentiating between a cultic or religious artifact and a “work of art” and on his focus on the cultural processes through which the social and cultural meaning of an object can be transformed as it is reclassified and exhibited as fine art. Benjamin’s understanding of cult value and exhibition value frames how I will investigate three case studies of particular religious artifacts: (a) a thirteenth-century Roman Catholic Crucifix; (b) an early twentieth-century Jewish Tik; and (c) a fourteenth-century Islamic Mihrab as I examine the shifting dynamics between religious value and aesthetic value that occur when religious objects are reconceptualized as fine art objects. I will examine the epistemological processes and channels through which religious (or cultic) artifacts have come to be understood as _objets d’art_ to be collected, exhibited, and interpreted by fine arts museums in order to highlight how fine arts museums have achieved cultic or religious value through their missionary efforts to use art as an ideological tool for civic advancement and public education.
Further, Benjamin’s concept of cult value informs my understanding of the religious artifact. In this dissertation, I apply the term “religious” in its most minimal usage to describe a “thing” that relates to “religion.” Attempting to define “religion” is a complex and fraught endeavor, and one I will not attempt here. Instead, I use the term religion as a constructed intellectual category that applies to the authoritative canons, creeds and doctrines, liturgical rites and rituals, devotional practices and performances, and material expressions of traditional, institutional faith communities and their customs. In this study I focus on the religious artifacts of three particular religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. This is not to say that I understand that the terms “religious” or “religion” to apply only to such traditions and to incorporate only the components I have outlined above. Indeed, I understand that this is a very particular and limited use of the term. My objective here is to not to attempt any sort of global definition of “religious” or “religion,” but instead to draw attention to the key role of particular cultic artifacts as central material expressions relating to and reflecting their original tradition’s ritual, liturgical, and devotional meanings and practices.13

As I examine the transitioning value (from cultic to aesthetic) of the particular objects at the heart of each of my case studies, I argue that twin processes of aestheticization and musealization serve as concrete art historical and museal mechanisms through which aesthetic

13 My narrow use of the terms “religious” and “religion” derives from my desire to focus on the material aspects of particular cultural traditions rather than moral, philosophical, or theological modes of religious thought and practice. Further my use of “religion” and “religious” in this study was forged from the intention to avoid imprecise language such as “sacred,” “holy,” or “spiritual.” Though I do not attempt a definition, I find inspiration in Jonathan Z. Smith’s observation that “religion is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as ‘language’ plays in linguistics or ‘culture’ plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.” Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” in Critical Terms for Religious Studies, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 282-83.
value comes to supersede and replace its original cultic value as the religious artifact is incorporated into a new network of art historical and museological meanings. In exploring these dynamics, I will also examine how public fine arts museums often frame their histories as teleological origin stories, transmuting the aesthetic value of the fine arts museum itself into a new form of religious value. The intertwining of the intellectual attitudes “secular” and “religious” in fine arts museums demonstrates their inherent complexity and speaks to the ways that these categories shift into new modes of expression.

Reproductions: The Religious and the Secular

Nestled along the rolling drumlins of western New York is the small village of Palmyra in Wayne County just off NYS Route 90. Every summer, thousands of people flock to this little hamlet to visit the birthplace of the Church of the Latter-day Saints (LDS) founder and prophet Joseph Smith (1805-44). Today the home to a cluster of ten historic sites associated with Joseph Smith’s life and the translation of the Book of Mormon: Another Testament to Jesus Christ, Palmyra boasts upwards of 35,000 visitors every July for the annual Hill Cumorah Pageant. The Hill Cumorah Pageant is a live spectacle re-enactment of scenes from the Book of Mormon that includes a cast of hundreds of costumed actors and dramatic musical accompaniment in a Broadway style performance. The pageant takes place on a permanently constructed set at the foot of the Hill Cumorah, purported site of Joseph Smith’s receipt of the Golden Plates from which he translated the Book of Mormon.

Of the ten sites associated with the Church of Latter-day Saints in Palmyra, the Hill Cumorah Visitors’ Center is the most prominent. Home to dioramas, videos, and artistic renditions of stories taken from the Book of Mormon, what is most striking is the larger-than-life carrara marble statue of Jesus Christ that graces the colossal bay atrium windows of the Hill Cumorah Visitors’ Center. The sculpture is a reproduction of Danish Sculptor Bertel Thorvaldson’s *Christus Consolator* (1838) from the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen, Denmark. As the website of the Visitor’s Center affirms, this particular artistic vision of Jesus was chosen for the specific ideological purpose of invoking the Christian commitment of the Church of Latter-day Saints.\(^{15}\) First Counselor Stephen L. Richards donated a replica of Thorvalson’s sculpture to LDS President David O. McKay in 1966. The LDS adopted the design, and soon the LDS ordered additional replicas and placed them in LDS visitor centers across the United States to demonstrate the Christian focus of the Latter-day Saints.\(^{16}\)

LDS visitor centers, of which Palmyra is only one of many across the United States, are not museums, although they share many similar features.\(^{17}\) There is no “museum” in Palmyra because museums house the things of the past, and the Church of Latter-day Saints is very much a part of the present. Its visitor centers weave stories from the Book of Mormon into contemporary American contexts—literally inscribed into the very landscape of Palmyra (as demonstrated by the permanent theater installation at the bottom of the Hill Cumorah). Images of


\(^{17}\) The Church of Latter Day Saints operates the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City with on-going exhibits, a permanent collection, and educational programming.
the Hill Cumorah are reproduced widely on the Internet, in print materials, in digital materials, and in photographs taken by countless visitors to the religious site.

Thus the Hill Cumorah is not a museum. It is living religious history, and it is presented in this way to visiting members of the Church of Latter-day Saints. In addition, the Hill Cumorah site self-consciously serves as a testament to the faith for those outside of the LDS church who might visit the area or attend the annual pageant. The annual Hill Cumorah Pageant is marketed as “a beautiful story on an enormous 10 level stage, twelve-tower lighting, state-of-the-art sound system, Hollywood special effects, and a costumed cast of over 650 who provide a truly spectacular show.”18 Advanced entertainment technologies have been pressed into religious service.

Conceptually, the Hill Cumorah stage and visitors’ center, with its diorama installations, videos, and artistic renderings, mimics standard infotainment practices used by contemporary museums to serve visiting audiences. The transient and voluntary nature of museum visitation implies that museums do not require any particular commitment beyond interest or curiosity. For example, fine arts museums offer membership programs for visitors, who can join the museum’s membership program by making a financial donation, but the museums’ intentions are not evangelical or to obtain a particular religious commitment. Museum membership programs are simply one element of an institution’s overall fund-raising and marketing strategy.

Though secular in origin, the Hill Cumorah’s museological practices perform the religious functions of proselytizing, evangelizing, and witnessing to those both inside and outside the LDS community. Sharing the story of the Church of the Latter-day Saints with the goal of

increasing membership in the church is an important objective of the Hill Cumorah site and annual pageant. The dioramas, videos, and artistic renderings may draw from the past, but the ideas, stories, and tenets of the LDS faith are inserted in contemporary visitors’ experience of modern museum and theatrical practices. The physical construction of the LDS Visitors’ Center in Palmyra is inherently theological and missionary, yet the LDS Church draws on state of the art museological theories and practices to deploy them for the religious purpose of evangelizing. The farmhouse (and its reconstructed contents that tell the story of Joseph Smith’s birth and upbringing) is an intentionally designed religious space created to do religious work.

The Joseph Smith farmhouse serves as a testament to the LDS faith. There are no wall labels, professional security guards, gift shops, or cafés. Visitors are free to wander at will and to experience the area as Joseph Smith himself might have. Members of the LDS church are on hand to offer further information on the church, on the area’s sites, and on Joseph Smith. Many guides (sisters or elders) are often briefly stationed in Palmyra during the summers as part of their missionary obligations. Other guides come from local LDS communities. These guides—committed members of the LDS community—reiterate the religious message of the LDS church to visitors of Hill Cumorah.

In striking contrast to the Hill Cumorah religious site, the Cloisters branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the “Met”) in New York City is a public museum that was assembled in bricolage fashion from a twentieth-century collection of religious objects. The Met Cloisters is one of three institutions that form the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A product

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20 The Metropolitan Museum of Art institutions include the Met Fifth Ave, the Met Cloisters, and the Met Breuer.
of European medieval Catholicism, cloisters were commonly situated in medieval Catholic monasteries, convents, or universities as a site for religious contemplation.\textsuperscript{21} The Cloisters museum, however, was originally the brainchild of sculptor and medievalist George Gray Barnard (1863-1938) and was purposely conceived of as a museum. An avid collector and connoisseur of medieval art, Barnard created and curated the original Cloisters site because he wanted to offer Americans access to medieval architecture, art, and artifacts. Barnard saw his Cloisters reconstruction as a means toward that end.

Barnard amassed a collection of medieval artifacts (primarily Romanesque and Gothic) from across France. In 1914, he combined the fragments and artifacts to reconstruct a medieval cloister at the north end of Manhattan in an area known as Fort Tryon. One of the important visitors to Barnard’s cloister was John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Rockefeller decided to purchase the Barnard Collection on behalf of the Metropolitan Museum of Art with the intention of relocating it to property he had previously purchased. Formerly known as the Billings Estate, this property was also on the north end of Manhattan and overlooked the Hudson River. Rockefeller offered this land to New York City to be used as a public park and to permanently house the Cloisters Museum. In addition, Rockefeller donated his personal collection of medieval objects (including the famous Unicorn Tapestries) to be incorporated into the Cloister’s permanent collection.\textsuperscript{22}

The Cloisters opened to the public in 1938 as the foremost collection of medieval art in America, and despite having been reconstructed from an assemblage of various European


\textsuperscript{22} Barnet. The Cloisters.
Catholic artifacts, was purposely recreated to appear as a single, intact medieval cloister.\(^{23}\) This “new” medieval Cloisters became part of America’s most important fine arts institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Since its opening, millions of visitors have toured the Met’s Cloisters.\(^{24}\) Most visitors to the Cloisters have not come seeking a private, quiet space to contemplate God as they would in a medieval cloister. Though that experience is possible, it is less likely, given the number of visitors in and around the Cloisters. Further, with its gallery labels, ropes and stanchions, security personnel, public restrooms, gift shop, and café, all with the Met’s official branding, visitors cannot easily escape the fact that the Cloisters is a branch of a major museum.\(^{25}\) Here we have a public space that was purposely constructed using medieval Catholic liturgical, ecclesiastical, and devotional artifacts. The intentions of Barnard, Rockefeller, and the leadership of the Metropolitan Museum of Art were to create a space in which visitors could gain an aesthetic experience of “art.” Yet the aesthetic experience promoted by the Met Cloisters is offered through objects that were originally created for religious purposes, which is a reversal of the intentions of the LDS church which, in creating the Hill Cumorah complex as a religious site, uses a secular farmhouse and visitor’s center.

Today a large portion of the world’s religious artifacts have been re-conceptualized as “fine art” and housed in what have come to be known as “fine arts museums.” Since the late eighteenth-century, the term “fine arts” has been applied to objects that were created primarily

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 9-16.


\(^{25}\) Like the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue, the Cloister’s building, grounds, and collection have grown and expanded over time as more objects have been acquired and an increased number of educational programs have been funded.
for aesthetic appreciation (painting, sculpture, prints, drawings), in contrast to “applied arts,” which served some functional purpose (such as furniture, textiles, and glassware, where function is valued together with form). Though the systemization of the category of “fine arts” occurred over a number of decades, it was given formal authority with Charles Batteux’s 1746 *Les beaux arts réduit à un meme principe*, which outlined the *beaux-arts* in terms of a distinction between function and utility (applied arts) and pleasure and beauty (fine arts).26 As new museum collections were formed in the late eighteenth century, both fine art and applied art were incorporated into art museum collections with the differences all but invisible except to specialists. As a result, liturgical, ecclesiastical, and devotional artifacts from religious traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam were also collected and incorporated into the collections of fine arts museums.27 Today religious artifacts continue to be collected, exhibited, and interpreted as fine arts objects.

Despite coming from widely-practiced religious traditions, many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cultic artifacts have been incorporated into art museum collections often with little fanfare or attention. In many cases, the types of religious artifacts collected by fine arts museums can still be used in churches, synagogues, and mosques. Artifacts that were once used for specific ritual purposes in living religions have been recast and repositioned as something quite different. When placed in fine arts museum settings and removed from their religious or cultic functions, religious artifacts have become naturalized as objects of fine art.


27 This study is concerned with artifacts that were made in service of religious needs (devotional, contemplative, ritual, liturgical, funerary). The term “Islamic” has also been applied to art and artifacts that originate in Muslim-majority lands but were not created or used for specific religious purposes. These objects include textiles and domestic decorative arts.
This project explores the mechanisms through which religious artifacts (with cult value) have come to be understood and accepted as fine art (with exhibition value). It seeks to investigate the dynamics through which one type of “thing” becomes another type of “thing” through repositioning, reframing, and declarations of expertise.²⁸

**Thing/Object/Artifact**

David Morgan defines a “thing” as “an on-going colloquy between material characteristics and a patchwork of epistemological cataloguing.”²⁹ As Morgan notes, “things” and their meanings are continually changing. Though a thing may be categorized and classified, its meaning and value can change depending upon viewer, context, and era, in addition to a range of possible social, moral, economic, and cultural circumstances. The category of “thing” can include items made by human agents for specific purposes as well as natural materials (tree branches, stones) that were not formed for human purposes, but the notion of “thing” is not particularly helpful in clarifying our understanding of how one thing becomes another thing, or how the cult value of a religious artifact transforms into the exhibition value of fine art.

Things are defined through various taxonomies of meaning (including cultural, ideological, social, economic, and historical). Yet a thing’s meaning will always escape any narrow confines, since individuals will interact with objects in disparate ways depending on changing meaning systems and interpretive schema. Viewers, users, and scholars may all react to an object differently.


In museums, curators, educators, and docents often use the general term “object” for individual works of art contained in their collection. Fine arts museum conventions use “object” as a neutral term connoting a flatwork, a sculpture, an installation, or an antiquity. The term “object” does not necessarily specify particular spatial requirements. Object, then, is a generic term for some “thing” in a museum’s collection.

In art history classes and textbooks, we speak of paintings and know that they are typically flat. We speak of sculptures and installations and know that they are typically not flat, despite the frequent use of two-dimensional digital, or photographic reproductions through various forms of media. We can discuss artworks and artifacts and imagine what they look like from the flat images offered by digital or photographic reproductions in museum catalogues. Curators and other scholars do not, in general, apply the term “object” to refer to the original work. We are generally more specific. It is a Vermeer oil painting; it is a medieval liturgical chalice; it is a Jewish marriage belt; it is an Islamic mosaic. Other than at the most theoretical level, art history as an academic discipline does not concern itself with the placement of objects in physical space, which is a more practical concern for the fine arts museum.

Museum curators, designers, art preparators, security staff, and educators must always attend to the spatial requirements of individual works of art. In the museum, “things” become “objects” when they are specifically understood as three-dimensional artifacts that will take up physical space in a museum gallery. The Vermeer painting and its frame have dimensions that are often listed on its accompanying wall label. The medieval chalice has height, width, and depth. The Jewish marriage belt has length and width, and it must somehow be exhibited to demonstrate its shape and form. The Islamic mosaic has length, width, depth, and height. Museum objects are three dimensional, necessitating material and spatial considerations when
place on view in galleries. They are also artifacts.

What then is the difference between “object” and “artifact”? The word “artifact” derives from two Latin terms. The first, *arte*, is the ablative case of *ars*, from which our term “art” evolved. The second, *factum*, is the past participle of the Latin verb *facere* (“to make”). Together, these terms refer to something that is made by human hands for a special purpose. Like “things,” artifacts have been the object of study by a philosophical lineage from Aristotle through Martin Heidegger to contemporary material culture studies.

Clearly marking the difference between “thing” and “artifact” and “object” is an impossible task, since meanings are always shifting. In this study, I will use the term “artifact” to identify materials made by human agents for particular purposes. Further, I will enlist the term “object” for its museal rather than its epistemological connotations. Once a thing becomes an object in a museum, it is categorized, classified, or encoded with aesthetic and historical value.

Artifacts are original works of art that are subsumed within the epistemological category of “fine art” when they are given that status by fine arts professionals (art collectors and dealers, or fine arts museum curators) and the attending academic field of art history. Art history is the academic discipline that credentializes scholars as interpreters and keepers of humanity’s collective artistic heritage. The cult value of an artifact originally produced for a religious purpose is transformed into exhibition value when the artifact is collected, exhibited, and

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interpreted as a work of fine art, with new attention to its aesthetic qualities and spatial dimensions in a specific place and time. When the artifact is considered a special object, it can be appropriately installed and protected in a gallery for exhibition to the visiting public.\(^{33}\) The primary purpose of fine arts museums is to collect, exhibit, preserve, and interpret artifacts as works of art, drawing on the disciplinary foundations of aesthetics and art history. Through these processes, artifacts undergo a process of aestheticization, which, I argue, is one important channel through which cult value transforms into exhibition value.

I use the term “aestheticization” to signal the creation of exhibition value, replacing the functional and cult value of artifacts with an emphasis on their formal aesthetic elements (line, shape, form, color, space, texture). Aestheticization is the formalist and “art-for-art’s-sake” position that privileges the visual properties of an artifact.\(^{34}\) Aestheticization as a process has evolved through the long philosophical lineage of “aesthetics” as epistemological inquiry. Aesthetics in its various approaches serves as a framing discourse for the category of fine arts as it has emerged in Europe since the Renaissance. Aesthetic inquiry, though, traces its genealogy back to Plato and Aristotle. As it developed in medieval Europe, aesthetics was heavily influenced by Christian theology, and various theorists and critics have grappled with the relationship between aesthetics and other modes of knowledge.\(^{35}\) As a field of inquiry, the history of aesthetics is far too broad to explore adequately here, but a brief overview of key developments in the eighteenth century will provide an historical frame for our study.

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\(^{33}\) Fine arts museums do not exhibit all of their holdings, and significant portions of many fine arts museum collections are housed in art storage and are consequently off-view to the public.

\(^{34}\) Walter Benjamin criticized \textit{l’art pour l’art} as a new theologizing of art, which denied art’s possibilities for social change. Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 224.

\(^{35}\) Umberto Eco, \textit{Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
During the mid-to-late eighteenth century, aesthetics was of great interest to thinkers attempting to understand the philosophical implications of physical sensation in response to the high arts of painting, sculpture, poetry, and music. The optical and psychological experiences of natural vistas and the visual arts were categorized into a hierarchy from pleasant to beautiful to sublime. William Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) was followed by Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), then by Francesco Algarotti’s *A Essay on Painting* (1763), Archibald Alison’s *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790), and Richard Payne Knight’s *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805). These texts offered a foundation for the cultivation of taste and distinction among the elite classes who supported fine arts academies as patrons and connoisseurs.

Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and G.W.F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1817) and *Lectures on Fine Arts* (1817) had a profound impact on aesthetic theory among subsequent philosophers, as did the works of John Ruskin (1819-1900). Romantic artists and thinkers of the nineteenth century and their heirs in the twentieth century also expanded aesthetic contemplation into new directions. Most influential aesthetic texts shared a concern with the high arts of painting, sculpture, poetry, and music. Liturgical implements came to be included within museum collections and incorporated into narratives of art history, but scant attention has been paid to the dynamics shaping this inclusion. The aestheticization of religious artifacts has been naturalized to the degree that it is rarely, if ever, recognized or questioned.

The religious genealogy of aesthetic theory is particularly notable, though, since the traditional discourse of the “aesthetic” draws on much of the same language used to describe religious experience and ritual. Terms and concepts such as “sublime,” “contemplative,” and “meditative” have long been part of the rhetoric deployed by proponents of the museum
movement in Europe and America as they created vast, temple-like institutions to house the
influx of materials gathered both from various sources within their own cultures and from
cultures under colonial control through archaeological excavations, private purchase, and
outright appropriation.\textsuperscript{36} Today, fine arts museums regularly invoke aesthetics as the truth of
human potential and they often frame their histories in missionary terms. Fine arts museums
present Western narratives of humanity’s \textit{artistic} production rather than humanity’s \textit{religious}
activity. Aesthetic (exhibition) value has replaced religious (cult) value, since aesthetic value is
the domain of an elite curatoriate and generally unquestioned by large portions of the museum-
going public.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, to say that religious artifacts have been “aestheticized” is to highlight the
change in value of religious artifacts. Though recognized as “religious” historical objects, in the
fine arts museum the visuality of the object is heightened in a new and distinct way. The original
religious meanings and functions of these artifacts have been supplanted, and the artifacts are
now presented as fine art. As objects of fine art, they are inscribed with new meanings and
functions that revere the artifacts in different ways through different lenses. One “thing” has
been transformed into another “thing.” Through the process of aestheticization, the cult value of
the artifact has been superseded by exhibition value, as visual and aesthetic properties are valued
over any original religious function or utility.

Intertwined with the process of aestheticization is the process of “musealization.” I use
the term “musealization” to indicate the movement of religious artifacts from their practical or

\textsuperscript{36} I will say more about the “museum movement” in chapter one and will consider the histories
of three individual museums in the case studies that follow.

\textsuperscript{37} I borrow Arthur Danto’s term “curatoriate,” which refers to “art experts,” those individuals
who are trained in curatorial practices, art history, visuality, connoisseurship, and art criticism.
Arthur C. Danto, \textit{After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History} (Princeton,
functional contexts into new exhibition contexts. Musealization is the process through which religious artifacts are incorporated into physical spaces dominated by art historical and museological taxonomies. No longer used in ritual or ceremony, these artifacts are removed from liturgical usage and placed in a secular museum setting. When placed in a museum gallery, the artifact can only be accessed almost exclusively through the visual sense. To musealize an object is effectively to set it apart from usage or function, to place it into a narrowed category of visual, aesthetic, and public. Religious and secular modes of knowledge become differentiated in important respects by the physical context of the fine arts museum. But at the same time, as we will see, religious and secular categories become blurred in other respects in the narration of the history of museums as social institutions. The twin concepts of aestheticization and musealization offer us tools to investigate the specific ways that cult value is transformed into exhibition value for a large number of artifacts.

Chapter Outline

In order to pursue my investigation of the dynamics that shape the aestheticization and musealization of artifacts originally produced for religious purposes, I have chosen three case studies involving objects from different major religious traditions housed in quite different museums. Each of the three museums I explore is a public institution with an encyclopedic collecting strategy. The encyclopedic collecting strategy seeks to fill the museum’s collection

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38 In this study, I use “religious” and “liturgical” to describe the artifacts incorporated into fine arts museums that were created or fashioned specifically in service to religious devotion, liturgy, ritual, or ceremony.

39 There is anecdotal evidence from museum staff that some visitors may still perform ritual or devotional gestures in front of religious objects such as the sign of the cross in front of a crucifix, but this is often discouraged by museum etiquette.
with art and artifacts across a broad range of cultures and time periods. In other words, the three museums examined in this dissertation collect, exhibit, preserve, and interpret art and artifacts from prehistory through contemporary art from a range of regions and cultures across the globe. In identifying these fine arts museums as public spaces I seek to underscore their role as civic institutions designed to serve broad public audiences locally, regionally, and nationally. These fine arts museums were designed not to serve a particular religious community or have a particular religious affiliation, but to meet the needs of the public at large.

To open this investigation, in chapter one I explore the rise of the public encyclopedic fine arts museums during what has come to be referred to as the “museum moment.” To provide the historical frame for my project and explore the role of the fine arts museum in the American cultural landscape, I trace the ways that fine arts museums inserted themselves into the educational systems of America, and were supported not only by scholarly expertise but also by civic funding and private donations. Next, in order to understand how religious artifacts were aestheticized and musealized, I consider the professional museological practices that evolved to frame the artifacts’ transition from religious objects to art objects. Finally, I explore the ways that scholars from various disciplines have critically examined the ideology of the fine arts and the role of museum within that ideology.

Chapter two presents the first of my three case studies. Here I analyze a thirteenth-century Spanish Crucifix in the collection of the Memorial Art Gallery (MAG) of the University of Rochester. I examine the processes of aestheticization and musealization at work in transforming the cult value of an important Roman Catholic devotional artifact into the exhibition value of a “medieval sculpture.” The MAG is a university fine arts museum serving a mostly local audience in central New York. Though it is small and regional, the museum’s
collection is encyclopedic in scope with expertly curated and exhibited works of art. After a review of the MAG’s history and mission as a fine arts museum, I explore the Crucifix’s provenance from its entry into the historical record in 1932 to its acquisition by the MAG in 1952. I next situate this artifact in its medieval Christian cultural context, speculate on how it might have been used in its original setting, and demonstrate that its place in the art historical narrative as a “Romanesque/proto-Gothic” object of art transforms our fundamental understanding of the artifact. The Catholic Crucifix is transformed from an object of religious devotion to an object of aesthetic contemplation among other objects within a collection that has been classified as “medieval art.” As a case study, the Crucifix at the MAG allows us to see the dynamics of how religious artifacts from the dominant Western religious narrative were folded into a universalizing art historical narrative that shaped how religious objects would then be understood as “fine art” when placed in “fine arts museums.”

In chapter three, I consider the social and cultural dynamics at work as American Jewish communities re-conceptualized traditional Jewish ritual and liturgical artifacts as objets d’art. Seeking the inclusion of their communities in the narrative of Western art history, important Jewish collectors and donors actively sought to transform the cult value of their religious artifacts into exhibition value. The category of “Judaica” emerged as a distinct area of art historical inquiry influenced by early collectors and connoisseurs, academic art historians (Jewish and non-Jewish), and modern and contemporary Jewish artists.40 This chapter traces these transformations by focusing on the journey of an early twentieth-century Tik (a case for

40 For example, see Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver, “A Prequel to Modernity,” in Jewish Art: A Modern History (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 15-39. The authors incorporate ritual objects such as ketubot and megillot (Esther scrolls) in their first chapter, but move away from ritual objects to focus on paintings from the seventeenth century forward in subsequent chapters.
storing the Torah scroll) from its original home in an Iraqi Jewish community to its present-day display in the Judaic Art Gallery of the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA). A public fine arts museum, the NCMA has a renowned encyclopedic collection of art. The NCMA is a large state-founded art museum supported by various donor groups, one of which is the Friends of the Judaic Art Gallery. This group underwrites acquisitions and educational programs supporting the Judaic art collection at the NCMA. As a case study, the Tik allows us to explore the aestheticization and musealization of Jewish religious artifacts in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art (and similar public museums), and consider how Jewish art is collected, donated, and preserved in a self-conscious fashion by a religious minority seeking to have their artistic and cultural heritage acknowledged and included in the art historical canon.

The fourth chapter considers the formation of the category of “Islamic art” as it too becomes a distinct category of fine arts over the twentieth century and an important vehicle for introducing Muslim culture to Western audiences. Particularly since September 11, 2001, the display of items of Islamic cultural heritage by fine arts museums has been used to provide a more complex and humanizing view of Islam for American audiences. This chapter focuses on a fourteenth-century Iranian Mihrab on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, one of the most famous and reproduced images of Islamic art in the world. I examine the ways that the Met, a fine arts museum industry leader, has utilized the presentation and exhibition of Islamic art as a corrective for negative stereotypes of Muslims in the period since 9/11. In addition, I explore other ideological effects produced by the display of Islamic art at the Met, particularly after the museum’s Islamic art gallery was reopened in the fall of 2011 as the “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.” The Met serves as a model for other museums, and I consider the ways in which the aestheticization and
musealization of Muslim artifacts both parallels and diverges from the aestheticization and musealization of Christian and Jewish religious artifacts.

I chose these particular artifacts, the Crucifix, Tik, and Mihrab, as case studies because each of them once had very specific liturgical functions.\textsuperscript{41} Though pleasing to the eye, the Crucifix, Tik, and Mihrab were not created simply for purposes of aesthetic contemplation as fine art. To recall Benjamin’s frame once again, the Crucifix, Tik, and Mihrab were produced to function as ceremonial or cult objects, though this does not discount the aesthetic considerations that went into their original production as cult objects. Yet the processes of aestheticization and musealization have transformed these artifacts into objects of art, presented to the public primarily in terms of their exhibition value. In what follows, I investigate the concrete cultural dynamics through which this transformation of a religious object into an art object occurs.

As I consider these three religious artifacts, I will also explore how the histories of each of these three museums are presented through the origin stories each narrates about itself. These narratives appear to create a new form of cult value for the individual fine arts museum itself.\textsuperscript{42} The transformation of religious artifacts into works of art contrasts sharply with the ways in which fine arts museums often seek to instill a type of cult value on their architecture and institutional identity through the narration of their institutional founding and mission. Since fine

\textsuperscript{41} In English capitalization rules, it is not necessary to capitalize “Crucifix,” “Tik,” or “Mihrab.” My capitalization of these terms indicates the Memorial Art Gallery’s Crucifix, the North Carolina Museum of Art’s Tik, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Mihrab. General references to crucifixes, tiks, and mihrrabs will be in lowercase.

\textsuperscript{42} The recent rise of museums of religion is a phenomenon worthy of study in its own right. For examples, see the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art (Glasgow, Scotland), www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums/st-mungo/Pages/default.aspx; and The State Museum of the History of Religion (Saint Petersburg, Russia), www.gmir.ru/eng/; Museum of World Religions (Taiwan), www.mwr.org.tw/index-en.aspx. In November of 2017, a new Museum of the Bible will open in Washington, D.C.
arts museums own original works of art and the copyrights to reproductions of those works of art, fine arts museums serve as a fertile field for investigating and extending Benjamin’s inquiries into the social function and revolutionary possibilities for works of art.

Through this dissertation, I seek to expose the contours and processes of aestheticization and musealization across a range of cultural levels. I will consider the macro political, social, and economic contexts that led to the removal of the specific ritual artifacts from their original religious settings and the subsequent classification of these artifacts as “fine art.” At the same time, I will also consider the micro decisions made by collectors, dealers, and museum staff who brought the objects to their current homes in the collections of three very different art museums. In so doing, I seek to examine the ways that museums have arisen to fulfill a new religious role focusing on the majesty of human artistic achievement, which, as interpreted by fine arts museums, serves an enlightening and missionizing function.43

CHAPTER ONE: THE RISE OF THE MUSEUM

MUSEUMS ARE TRUSTWORTHY
Americans view museums as one of the most important resources for educating our children and as one of the most trustworthy sources of information.
—American Alliance of Museums

The Rise of the Museum

The American Alliance of Museums touts museums as both “trustworthy” and “important resources for educating our children.” This was not always the case. Art museums for the benefit of civic education are a relatively recent cultural development, emerging only since the late eighteenth century. Though collecting interesting and beautiful objects is as old as human culture, and the notion that “good” art can help shape proper citizens is traceable to Plato, the current implementation of civic or national museum programs that invoke the so-called “high” or “fine arts” as a moralizing and civilizing force is a product of Enlightenment thought, and through this ideological framing museums of “fine art” evolved to stand as beacons of human achievement, cultivation, and refinement.

The Museum Movement

The “museum movement” was born in Revolutionary France, when the Republic claimed

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the royal collections of the Palais du Louvre as a national treasure.² With the power shift from
Louis XVI’s monarchy to the National Assembly in 1792, the National Assembly quickly
formed a commission to create a national museum that would demonstrate the republican spirit
of the Revolution. The Louvre opened to the public in 1793. Napoleon later established
additional museums across France and Italy to hold the treasures he and his agents confiscated
during his various campaigns. When Napoleon appointed Baron Dominique Vivant Denon as its
director in 1804, the Louvre became the first modern art museum to house liturgical objects in
addition to Renaissance paintings and Classical sculptures in a public landmark that proclaimed
its secular mission.

The paintings, sculptures, and antiquities pouring in from Napoleon’s campaigns and
from archaeological digs in the Middle East that landed in Denon’s care needed to be organized
systematically.³ Though some terminology has changed, the basic manner of classifying and
organizing works that began with Denon continues today. The American Alliance of Museums
has yet to establish standardized terminological guidelines for presenting objects of religious
material culture, leaving such terminology up to individual curators and museums. The authority
art museums hold over the religious objects in their collections highlights the importance of
examining of the ideological foundations that underlie modern sensibilities of the “fine arts.”

The opening of the Louvre had far-reaching implications. Not only was its opening
bathed in the rhetoric of the Revolution, but the new museum was also steeped in a new agenda

² George Bazin, The Museum Age (New York: Universe Books, 1967), 169. Here I follow Bazin,
who refers to the foundation of various museums across Europe beginning with the Louvre as a
“movement.” See also Andrew McClellan, Inventing the Louvre (Berkeley, CA: University of
California Press, 1994), 91-93; and Ellinoor Bergvelt, Napoleon’s Legacy: The Rise of National
Museums in Europe 1794–1830 (Berlin: G H Verlag, 2009).

of using the arts as a pedagogical tool for shaping citizens who would come to view recently confiscated church art from the vantage point of an enlightened, modern present rather than from a superstitious, religious past. As Napoleon’s agents closed churches and monasteries, devotional paintings and liturgical objects were crated up and carted away. The traditional sanctity of the altar was shattered in this new age of secularism, opening the way for new modes of understanding church imagery and ecclesiastical implements. Religious objects confiscated from churches across Europe were recast as objets d’art and placed in newly defined spaces purposefully designed to draw attention to the aesthetic and educational qualities of the objects.4

The opening of the Louvre pushed other European nations to consider the role of art as political capital. Across Europe and America, affluent donors and eager politicians were galvanized to promote the arts as a civilizing force in the urban landscape, invoking rhetorics of democracy, empire, human achievement, and artistic genius to establish museums that would celebrate aesthetic ideology in public spaces specifically designed to foster appreciation for an essentialized aesthetic category of “fine art.” Though the British Museum had been founded in 1753 (and opened in 1759), following the establishment of the Louvre art museum in France voices in the British Parliament began to raise the possibility of a national gallery of art.5

4 Andrew McClellan explores the Revolutionary program in spectacular detail in Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth Century Paris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); though his attention is focused on masterpieces of church or Christian-themed painting and antiquities, as were the original organizers of the Louvre, and not on liturgical or ecclesiastical objects that were later subsumed into art historical generalities such as “medieval.” The term “medieval” cleaved into more specific classifications such as “Romanesque” or “Gothic” as the field of art history developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5 When the British Museum opened as the first public, secular museum in 1759, it was not considered an art museum, since it also included a library and a natural history collection. Marjorie Caygill, The Story of the British Museum (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 4.
England’s National Gallery was founded 1824, and additional art museums soon opened to the public across Europe. The Berlin Alte Museum opened in 1830, and the Hermitage (established in 1764) was opened to the public in 1852. Soon museums also sprang up across the United States with the Metropolitan Museum of Art opening in 1866, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Boston Museum of Fine Arts both opening in 1876, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., opening in 1937.  

Paralleling the rise of these large, encyclopedic art museums, at the end of the nineteenth century Jewish communities in Europe began organizing gallery exhibitions of ceremonial objects borrowed from private collectors and synagogues. One of the earliest exhibitions occurred in Budapest as part of Hungary’s centennial celebration in 1896. Another took place in 1906 at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, though London had already seen an earlier public exhibition of Jewish art and antiquities. Exhibiting Jewish ritual objects as “art” in public spaces eventually led to their inclusion in public art museums.  

6 Numerous smaller museums and galleries also opened to the public. In America, “the museum movement” was tied to the donations, efforts, and direction of powerful late nineteenth-century industrialists, such as Andrew Mellon at the National Gallery of Art and John Taylor Johnston and George Palmer Putnam at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.  

7 Iona Benoschofsky and Alexander Scheiber, eds., The Jewish Museum of Budapest (Budapest: Corvina, 1987), 12.  

8 In 1887, the Anglo-Jewish Exhibition was held at Albert Hall, and the organizers of the Whitechapel Gallery hoped to expand their exhibition by including artwork by Jewish artists both domestic and foreign. See Exhibition of Jewish Art and Antiquities, Nov. 7 to Dec. 16, (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1906), 1.  

9 Neither the Louvre nor the British Museum holds collections of Jewish ceremonial art, but Jewish museums were founded in many European cities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In America, three important public museums have large (and growing) collections of Jewish ceremonial/ritual art: the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the North Carolina Museum of Art.
collected and included in various aristocratic kunstkammers (collecting cabinets) throughout Europe for centuries, the inclusion of Muslim material culture in public art museums takes us back to the Louvre. During the Napoleonic era, French activities in Egypt and other parts of North Africa brought into France a rich variety of Muslim decorative objects that were added to the Louvre’s collection in tandem with Roman Catholic religious materials. Thus, the founding of the Louvre launched not only the “museum moment,” but also the era of musealization.

The Era of Musealization

Theodore Adorno opens his short essay, “Valéry Proust Museum,” by noting the negative connotations of the German term “museal.” Adorno tells us that the term “describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying.” In the essay, Adorno then turns to compare two “diametrically opposed” approaches to art and the museums represented by symbolist poet and essayist Paul Valéry (1875-1945) and novelist Marcel Proust (1871-1922).

In Adorno’s account, Valéry represents the position of the elitist cultural conservative who sees art as losing its impact when exhibited haphazardly in museum galleries that intermingle styles from different time periods and cultures and that are filled beyond capacity. For Valéry, such exhibition is a gauche and barbarous attempt to recapture an artistic moment that has long since passed, and this endeavor results in the commoditization of art. Proust, on the other hand, approaches museums from the position of the amateur, playing the delighted


consumer who idealizes both the artistic process and its products, despite the inevitability of a work of art’s eventual material demise as a transient object. For Proust, this inevitability serves as a metaphor for human mortality, and allows one to pause and reflect both on the collective experience of death that humans all must share and on one’s individual transience.

In his analysis of Valéry and Proust’s differing positions, Adorno specifically addresses the fine arts (painting and sculpture), rather than decorative or applied arts (where most liturgical and devotional artifacts have been categorized). Yet the notion of “musealization” can easily be applied to implements of devotion, ritual, and liturgy that have been included in museum collections alongside the standard fine arts of painting and sculpture. While Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” does not directly discuss the role of museums, Adorno’s reflections in “Valéry Proust Museum” inform this study. Drawing on Adorno, I explore here the ways that religious artifacts have also been musealized (in ways similar to the paintings and sculptures that Valéry and Proust consider). Throughout his essay, Adorno likens museums to mausoleums and sepulchers, and he is not the first to consider museums as tombs.  

While the Hill Cumorah religious site discussed in the introduction positions the religious past in the context of the present, fine arts museum galleries regularly contextualize the religious present within the past. Museums reframe Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious artifacts in

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aesthetic and historical terms. Catholic Christians can view medieval crucifixes, but they are not invited to kneel before them. Jewish visitors to Jewish ceremonial art galleries do not pray before the Torah, and Muslim visitors do not perform salat in front of the mihrabs contained in Islamic art galleries. While there is life and movement all around the ritual artifacts in the museum, the objects themselves remain static, commonly entombed in glass cases or affixed to walls. When museum guards turn the gallery lights off after hours, ritual artifacts are cloaked in darkness. They remain separated from their religious communities, hidden away until the museum opens its doors again. Museum ritual has overwritten religious liturgy. Religion has become art with new sets of meanings and rituals.\(^\text{14}\)

Musealizing religious artifacts removes them from their original spaces of religious meaning and transforms religious value into aesthetic value with new audiences and functions to attend them. Religious artifacts—no longer understood primarily in ritual, devotional, or liturgical terms—are placed within a new hierarchal scale of formalistic qualities, classified pursuant to an art historical timelines and categories. In being aestheticized, an object’s visuality becomes its most critical feature; it is put on view in a museum gallery to be seen, experienced primarily through the sense of sight. In this process, it is removed from its original religious context and reframed through concrete and standardized museological practices. It is (a) assigned an accession number and tagged with the name of the donor or fund through which it was purchased; (b) labeled with a formal title or designation; (c) classified according to a


\(^{14}\) For a discussion of the specifics related to how museums have become modern “temples” with their own prescribed “rituals,” see Carol Duncan, \textit{Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums} (London: Routledge, 1995).
specific historical time period, culture, or geographic region; (d) placed under the care of a particular museum curator; and (e) either put on view in a gallery where it will represent its classification to the viewing public or placed in museum storage.\textsuperscript{15} The object’s original religious function or value has been subsumed by its new function as part of a fine arts museum collection.

As I noted in the introduction, when religious artifacts are aestheticized and musealized, they are re-presented to the public as objects of fine art. Museological exhibition practices encode these religious artifacts with a new visual importance. In many instances, particularly in the case studies examined in this dissertation, the religious artifact’s specific religious (or contemplative or ritual) functions is subordinated to its visual attributes. Viewers are informed by the accompanying wall label about the materials and techniques used in the production of the object, its geographical or national origin, and the names of its donors or the name of the fund through which it was acquired.\textsuperscript{16} These details overwrite the earlier religious significance by ascribing to the object new importance in aesthetic and historical categories, as part of an idealized celebration of humanity’s collective artistic heritage. The conventions of the art museum foster new sensibilities of art \textit{appreciation} of the religious artifact. Art appreciation becomes the dominant response to these religious artifacts once they are incorporated into public art museum spaces. Aesthetic value supersedes religious value. The proper approach to these artifacts in these spaces is through visual appreciation rather than through devotional practice.

\textsuperscript{15} There are occasions where the object is not put on view but placed in museum storage away from public view for a variety of reasons, which may include the need for conservation treatment, the need for further research, or plans for later rotation into galleries. Often textiles must “rest” between viewings to preserve their material integrity, which degrades over time and is adversely affected by light and changes in temperature.

\textsuperscript{16} Some wall labels include the artifact’s dimensions as well.
The ideologies of the fine arts invoked by the founders of modern museums generally follow a clear rhetorical strategy: the fine arts are a civilizing force and instill universal values in the populace. This theme originated in Plato’s dialogues and it flourished in the hands of Enlightenment philosophers, championed particularly by Jean Jacques Rousseau’s argument that the arts serve as a moralizing force and as a counterbalance to the baser aspects of humanity. Art museums often embody the aesthetic precept “Beauty is Truth,” though individual museums will often test how far this maxim can be pressed. As institutions of civic advancement and education, art museums have charged themselves with an evangelizing mission to carry this Truth forward in an attempt to reach as many audiences as possible. The assumption underlying this mission is that that artistic truth is universally accessible to all. One has only to walk voluntarily through the doors of an art museum to find a kind of enlightenment. The notion that art is important for humanity finds its way into museum mission statements and onto museum websites. The positive power and value of art is a fundamental assumption of fine arts museums in America, though the viewing public often has little awareness of the origins of this rhetoric.


18 For example, the *Sensation* exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999 faced a public backlash led by then mayor Rudy Giuliani, who objected to the painting “The Holy Virgin,” by artist Chris Ofili who used elephant dung in his rendition of the Virgin Mary. Giuliani. Failing to understand the ideological complexities inherent in Ofili’s work, Giuliani threatened to revoke public funding to the Brooklyn Museum of Art, voicing conservative resistance to non-traditional imagery, materials, techniques, and alternative or non-Western interpretations of Christian iconography.

19 For example, “The Code of Ethics” of the American Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), (the professional association charged with leading the profession), states, “The Association of Art Museum Directors believes in the power of art and the responsibility of art museums to serve and educate the public through collection, research, preservation, exhibition, and the advancement of knowledge about works of art ….AAMD’s members are dedicated, first and foremost to the fulfillment of their museums’ missions to serve the public through art and art
Each year more than 48 million Americans pour through art museums to view objects that have been given the status of fine art by art historical and curatorial authorities. Although there are sometimes complaints about why this elevated status has been given to certain works of contemporary art, criticism is seldom—if ever—directed against the inclusion of medieval devotional altarpieces, Torah finials, or illuminated Qur’ans in these collections. The museum-going public accepts Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious artifacts as fine art. The common acceptance of religious artifacts as fine art shows how naturalized this perspective has become but it also raises the question as to how this naturalization occurred.

Subsumed into the evolutionary paradigms of art historical narratives, the aesthetic value of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim liturgical artifacts is cordoned away from faith, ritual, ceremony, mystery, and piety. The religious artifact becomes a single “art object” in a collection education .... AAMD members believe that art museums play a constructive role in society and that art conveys the rich complexity of human experience. AAMD’s members champion a breadth of artistic expression and the role that art museums play in exploring diverse artistic perspectives,” from AAMD, Code of Ethics, accessed August 26, 2012, https://aamd.org/about/code-of-ethics).

20 On September 24, 2012, I spoke with Alison Wade, the Chief Administrator for the New York branch of the American Association of Museum Directors (AAMD). Wade informed me that the AAMD had counted 48 million visitors in 150 of their member institutions in 2010. Since not every art museum was included in the 2010 survey, the number of visitors per year to U.S. art museums is likely much higher than 48 million.

21 For example, Jesse Helms led a congressional fight over National Endowment of the Arts funding because of its support of the Robert Mapplethorpe *The Perfect Moment* exhibition (Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1989).

22 This process draws its authority from the many philosophical treatises on aesthetics as a psychological or sensuous category of knowledge, such as those written by Burke, Kant, and Hegel in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, although Andrew McClellan traces this theme to Giorgio Vasari’s treatment of Raphael and Michelangelo in his *Lives of the Artists* (1550-1558). See McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre*, 201.
of many other “art objects.” Historical context is secondary, if provided at all. Given the brevity of explanatory panels and accompanying wall labels (often limited to sixty words or less), detailed explanations of the prior religious significance and functions of religious artifacts cannot be adequately conveyed in these formats. It is difficult to convey religious depth on a museum label despite the best efforts of museum curators and educators. Unless religious artifacts are the topic of special exhibitions or specialized research, often the religious significance of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim liturgical artifacts is either overlooked or absent altogether. When not accompanied by educational materials explaining their function in the religious tradition, religious artifacts become simply another object on view in an art museum gallery.

Without context, the significance of liturgical objects may often be neutralized or secularized. In some cases artifacts are associated with the past in general, or in the case of Islamic art, with a long past period of cultural glory. Jewish liturgical artifacts may or may not be included in medieval or Islamic galleries at all. Presentations of Islamic art in public art museums tend by and large to exclude contemporary art from Muslim-majority lands in their Islamic art galleries. Medieval art galleries, which are regularly filled with Christian liturgical and devotional materials, however, are rarely labeled “Christian art.” Rarely, if ever, are

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23 Though the material objects of specific religions are often photographed and reproduced in museum educational and marketing materials, this project does not analyze the objects as images or as visual culture of religion. For this approach, see David Morgan, The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

contemporary self-identified “Christian” works of art included in a public museum’s contemporary art galleries.

Art historian Liz James offers an elegant summary of “art” as “a conscious creation, something set apart and different, noted for certain formal qualities, and located within an historical and cultural context.” This perspective allows us to consider the dynamics that shape the transformation of religious artifacts into fine art. In speaking about the Virgin and Child mosaics in the Hagia Sophia, James notes that identifying an artifact as art in primarily visual terms overlooks how the object functioned before it was something called “art.” Consequently, though “art” can take many forms (literary, visual, cinematic, etc.), objects claimed by fine arts museums are valued for formal attributes (style, iconography, line, shape, form, color, texture, and technique), attributes that focus on their visuality, only later adding regional and historical context in order to fold the objects into a larger art historical meta-narrative.

As James points out with her examples from the Hagia Sophia, when only the visual characteristics are highlighted, much is lost in terms of understanding the artifacts and the cultures from which they originate. The specificity of its religious contexts, how artifacts functioned as sacred, liturgical, or devotional objects, and how artifacts originally acted upon viewers by engaging all the senses can rarely be adequately conveyed in public art museums. Even if museums attempt to contextualize the objects in their galleries, religious experience cannot be duplicated in the public space of fine arts museums.

A visit to a public art museum will include most of the following features: mediated and subtly regulated light (to prevent harm to the art), fellow visitors vying to read the explanatory wall panels, the din of voices speaking either about the art itself or of a host of other innocuous

topics, students taking notes or sketching, parents teaching children, teachers and docents leading school groups, security guards circumambulating, loose teenagers wandering looking for their peers, bored spouses seeking an escape, and eager art lovers engaging with the objects. A host of distractions can impede appreciation of the art by even the most devoted museum aficionado. Even if a visitor is fortunate enough to enjoy a few moments of solitude in the gallery, the interaction between the individual and a religious object on view is altered by the secularized space of the gallery design itself. Though a bench may be present for convenience or to contemplate the art objects, the formal practice of kneeling before a crucifix in order to pray, or the performance of salat in front of a mihrab (should it, in fact, actually mark the direction toward Mecca) would be halted by museum staff as inappropriate behavior since a museum is a public, not a religious institution.

Along with the wall labels we find in museum galleries, we also find vitrines—those glass or plexiglass cases that fully enclose artifacts and separate them from viewers both physically and psychologically. These cues direct us to access the object through the sense of sight. When “art,” is separate and cordoned off audiences can only experience art visually as part of an array of other art objects in fine arts museums. The docent announces, “Here we have medieval art. That, over there, is Jewish ritual art, while over further is the Islamic art gallery.” In many fine arts museums, visitors can walk through galleries that may be divided up as neatly as an art history textbook’s chapters.26

Carol Duncan notes that the museum is itself a new form of temple that purposefully

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26 The practice of designing and labeling galleries is a fluid and on-going practice that reflects intellectual and cultural trends. Many contemporary fine arts museums curators are rethinking how galleries are labeled and designed, presenting more nuanced understandings of cultural and historical influences across regions and time periods.
draws on the architectural features of ancient Greek and Roman temples. But fine arts museums have structural and design priorities very different from religious architecture. Where orientation toward a religious site (such as Jerusalem or Mecca) is critical in many religious buildings, other priorities take precedence in museums. Where can we fit this item? What is the best installation and presentation? In what ways can the object be in conversation with other objects in the gallery? How will school children see it if the vitrine is too high? None of these museological concerns reflect the religious priorities of Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, or Muslim mosques. The religious setting cannot be replicated in public art museum galleries. In the art museum, the focus is on the visuality of each object; everything else is secondary.

Further, the modern art museum’s primary mission—to collect, preserve, and interpret—is a product of the industry’s professionalization over the last half of the twentieth century. In nearly every American art museum, curators must be professionally trained in art historical theories and methods, rather than the theories and methods of religious studies. Though today both disciplines are generally informed by social theory and cultural theory, art history and religious studies are very different academic disciplines. Few scholars of religious studies are hired to staff the curatorial departments of art museums. The curatoriate, that body of trained experts who oversee all aspects of art including criticism, curatorship, and scholarship, is generally comprised of specialists trained primarily in the discipline of art history. Though additional specialization in area studies (such as “Jewish,” or “Middle Eastern,” “Islamic” or “South Asian”) are becoming more prevalent disciplinary theories and methods remain predominantly art historical. Thus liturgical objects, placed under the umbrella of fine art, are the purview of the art historical inquiry. While scholars of other fields might have access to these

objects for scholarly or research purposes, the objects are now primarily categorized as “fine art” and generally studied through the disciplinary approach of art history. Though museum attendance is voluntary for the public (though some publically-funded school programs offer annual museum visits for certain grades), the scholarship produced by the curatoriate, (such as museum catalogues, scholarly articles, lecture programs, wall labels, museum marketing, and other materials) is viewed as authoritative both by insiders (museum staff, art historians, art students, and other arts specialists) and outsiders (the interested public).

Given the nature of my line of questioning here, I do not intend my study as a criticism of the curatoriate, art history as an academic field, or public art museums. Professionally and academically trained art museum curators, scholars, and educators execute and deploy the necessary skills and expertise both to care for and to interpret the objects under their care, and the public is the direct beneficiary of their efforts. Museum industry giants such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum (i.e., the largest of the encyclopedic museums) employ numerous specialists—Egyptologists, Assyriologists, classicists, medievalists, Asianists, Islamicists—who are extensively trained in their chosen period and culture and who provide extensive contextual background through museum catalogues, scholarly monographs, internet articles, blogs, and website information designed to disseminate knowledge of the objects in their collections to non-specialists.

In smaller museums curatorial departments are often staffed by art history-trained professionals who must stretch their expertise and become generalists taking on broad curatorial responsibilities. For example, a curator hired as a medievalist may also have responsibility for ancient galleries, Islamic galleries, and Asian galleries. Often, research on particular objects will be contracted out to specialists who are called in to supplement existing curatorial knowledge.
over the objects. Research on particular objects may also be carried out by students or museum volunteers.

Except for very rare exceptions such as the Cloisters branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the religious contexts of religious traditions are generally not reconstructed in fine arts museum galleries (and of course the Met Cloisters is an artificial assemblage of elements from different cloisters rather than a reproduction of a specific cloister). The Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester did not reconstruct a rural thirteenth-century Catalan chapel to house its Crucifix. The North Carolina Museum of Art did not reconstruct the ark from an early twentieth-century Iraqi synagogue to house its Tik, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art did not reconstruct a fourteenth-century Iranian Ilkanid madrasa to house its Mihrab. Instead, these religious artifacts have been folded into larger agendas and narratives of the museums that house them.

In common museum practices, the original religious functions of particular artifacts (devotional, liturgical, ritual, funerary, contemplative) are secondary to their place in an art historical continuum if the religious functions are acknowledged in wall text or wall labels at all. Visitors to the fine arts museum can leave with little understanding of an artifact’s original liturgical function. Though it is impossible to gauge the variety of ways visitors might interact with and interpret religious artifacts in fine arts museums, it is also possible that visitors may mistakenly believe instead that religious artifacts once served as mere decoration. The religious significance of an artifact can be overshadowed by its aesthetic or formalist presentation. Religious artifacts from living religious traditions are placed on the same footing as the religious artifacts of past cultures. Despite having been neutralized in the space of fine arts museum galleries, objects such as crucifixes, tiks, and mihrabs are still vital to Christian, Jewish, and
Muslim religious communities today. In fine arts museums these artifacts may only serve as a brief introduction to the original religious tradition. In many cases, museum visitors are unaware of the religious traditions represented by these artifacts. Religious meanings and liturgical functions can disappear within the museum setting and the aesthetic, art historical frame that shapes it. The liturgical artifact comes to reinforce the very art historical narrative within which it is caught; its cultural work shifts from religious to aesthetic.

Fine arts museum professionals frame religious artifacts by placing them in particular galleries, labeling both the artifacts and the galleries with a degree of convention and uniformity. Galleries are generally labeled by their geographical or cultural designation and then organized according to Western historical periodization. This is the case for galleries labeled Ancient Near Eastern, Ancient Egyptian, Classical art of Greece and Rome, and of course, European art (medieval through Counter-Reformation), which is then organized by location, period, and style. Pre-Reformation European art is almost never labeled as “Christian” in public art museums though its iconography is overwhelmingly Christian and it was produced in areas that were predominantly Christian. But other galleries are often identified through specifically religious terminology such as “Islamic” or “Jewish Ceremonial/Judaica.”

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29 For example, during my time as a museum educator and more recently as a college instructor, it has become clear to me that younger museum audiences including schoolchildren and traditional-aged college students have difficulty identifying the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Jewish tradition, while in Christian narrative art, students are not able to recognize Jesus and his disciples, Mary his mother, Mary Magdalene, or other central figures from the Gospels in paintings. Students who do not have strong ties to faith communities, then, tend to be at a loss in terms of approaching liturgical and ritual artifacts from various religious traditions as anything other than decorative.

30 The 2011 re-installation of the Metropolitan’s Islamic Art Galleries and its name change to “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia” may be more confusing for the inexperienced visitor than the previously ambiguous “Islamic Art” nomenclature.
Despite the care taken in exhibiting these objects in specially designated galleries, little scholarly attention has been devoted to the cultural shifts that fostered the aestheticization and musealization of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious objects into \textit{objets d’art}. Instead, recent scholarship has focused primarily on anthropological and cultural studies approaches to the museum using lenses of postmodern critical theory through which to examine museums that display nationalistic, colonial, and industrializing agendas. It is only in the past decade or so that scholars of religious studies have become interested in museums as sites for studying the materiality of religion. In the next section, I consider the recent scholarship regarding museum ideologies and practices.

\textbf{The Disciplinary Fields at Play}

There has been a flurry of museum criticism by scholars from various disciplines since the late 1980s. Scholars of art history, museum studies, anthropology, cultural studies, and related fields have contributed to critical reflection on the ideologies shaping modern museums. The rise of museum studies programs, at both graduate and undergraduate levels, speaks to the aspiration to promote the professionalization of museums. Using various tools from critical social theory, scholars have explored the role that museums play in modern societies and have continued to study the museum’s impact on modern sensibilities.\footnote{Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, \textit{Museums}, 191.} Since the scholarly literature of museum criticism grows daily, in what follows, I focus on the conversations that are most relevant to my study of the aestheticization and musealization of religious objects in fine arts museums, and the ideological framework that supports these processes.
Philosopher Hilde Hein eloquently remarks concerning modern museums:

They bake no bread—except from time to time as part of a special exhibition. They are centers of study and research, but assign no homework, and nobody flunks an exam there. They gratify certain spiritual interests, but impose neither duties nor penance. Sometimes they inspire awe, but no one prays in them. They promote social and civic values, but have no powers of enforcement.\textsuperscript{33}

Visitors to art museums are, for the most part, engaging in a voluntary educational exercise as a chosen form of entertainment. Americans are not required to visit art museums, and visitors can choose to see or ignore whatever they wish among the objects on view in museum galleries. Some museums provide brochures that offer a “highlights” tour, and there are often other self-guided materials available; but unless a visitor has signed up for a guided tour of an art museum, they are free to meander the galleries as long as the galleries remain open and the visitor abides by the museum’s code of conduct. As noted previously, millions of visitors pour through art museums every year. The appeal of art museums remains strong, demonstrated by the number of museums and the number of visitors.

Several important cultural and museum critics have detailed the deliberate rhetorical strategies used to promote museums as sites for social advancement and the development of cultural capital.\textsuperscript{34} In an influential 1967 article, César Graña detailed the rhetoric of early


museum industry advocates, who viewed public American art museums as an apt means for a democratic nation to educate, edify, and enlighten the masses. In his 1988 monograph *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine demonstrates how cultural leaders used the arts as a mechanism of social control, seeking to instill appropriate norms of behavior among non-elite audiences attending museums and other cultural institutions. American museum audiences continue to rely on the specialized interpretations and social authority of highly trained arts professionals, and they demonstrate the wide acceptance of the belief that art museums are critical cultural and educational institutions that dispense important benefits.

Many social theorists continue to uphold this view. Philosopher Lambert Zuidervaart maintains that the arts are a vital means for expression and communication in democratic society, offering a sociocultural counterbalance to corporate cultural market economies. Zuidervaart focuses on the political role of the arts. Although he is concerned primarily with artists and art projects that are publically funded, his position can easily be extended to publically maintained arts institutions. Zuidervaart views art as a central component of civil society. At stake in his analysis is the precarious role of contemporary art production. He does not adequately address

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the artist as producer of a commodity, nor the audience as consumers. Zuidervaart’s view of museums is to champion them as a force of change, but without a clear sense of how art differs from other forms of corporate capitalism. Museums participate in corporate capitalism in many ways (corporate-sponsored programs and exhibitions, food service and retail sales, etc.), so it is unclear how museums can serve to offset corporate capitalism as a force for change as Zuidervaart seems to suggest.

In another recent examination of the ideology of the fine arts deployed by contemporary museums, Joli Jensen identifies four different perspectives concerning the “redemptive ideology” of the arts: renewal, revolution, conservation, and subversion. All four perspectives see the purpose of the arts as instrumental. Art redeems and advances society, and exposure to the arts improves individuals while simultaneously exposing them to universally held values. According to Jensen, instrumental views of the arts were first promoted by artists and critics and later by academics and intellectuals to advance their authority and social standing. This rhetoric of the redemptive nature of art plays out in public consensus that certain forms of culture can transform society, despite the lack of empirical evidence to support such a view. Jensen argues that this naïve view that art can cure the ills of society reflects anxieties about modernity, which arise from the ambiguous nature of technology, commerce, and democracy. She admonishes those who maintain that the arts are not and will never be the antidote that they have been touted to be. Again, as with Zuidervaart, Jensen assumes that the arts effect change in society she simply

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38 Joli Jensen, *Is Art Good For Us? Beliefs About High Culture in American Life* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Ltd., 2002). Jensen’s four perspectives are augmented by her advocacy of a fifth perspective based upon John Dewey’s philosophy that art is an experiential
cautions us about overemphasizing the extent of that change. As we will see in chapters three and four, art can be invoked to promote particular understandings of individual social groups (sometimes as a counterbalance to negative stereotypes), but as Joli shows, such deployment of art for social change can be of limited value.

Art historian David Freedberg directly engages with religious artifacts in his criticism, and he notes two discourses that dominate the discussion of art: (a) high critical analysis of formal or aesthetic value, and (b) the conscription of context, the attempt to reclaim a context for the work of art. In Freedberg’s view, though, both discourses only serve to evade important questions concerning how objects are received, what effects they have on viewers, and the entire messiness of object-viewer affect. In considering religious objects, we can draw on Freedberg’s conclusion that art historical discourse and ideologies of fine art necessarily occlude anything that has not been tightly fit into traditional scholarly categories. Instead, though, as Freedberg demonstrates, images evoke innumerable responses in viewers, many of which curators, art historians, and scholars of visual culture overlook in favor of formal analysis or provenance. In other words, professionals seek to rely on “objective” criteria for including objects in the collections of art museums, and those criteria are primarily aesthetic and historical.

The artifact must be understood and valued in aesthetic terms first, with consideration of its historical significance second, and with its religious significance coming into consideration peripherally. As Larry Shiner succinctly states, it is “only by deliberate effort that we break the trance induced by our culture and see that the category of fine art is a recent historical

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social process. As a process, art engages individuals and communities not as the instrument of their salvation, but as an end in itself.

construction that could disappear in turn.\textsuperscript{40} This category is unlikely, though, to disappear anytime soon as more and more art museums are forming around the world and the economic value of individual artifacts continues to rise. Aesthetic value seems to increase as religious value decreases.

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from it substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.\textsuperscript{41} Benjamin’s concepts of “cult value” and “exhibition value” derive from the understanding that art originated in a cult or religious settings. What Benjamin notes above, however, relates to objects that have already been classified as works of art. Benjamin was not discussing only religious artifacts; instead, he explores how works of art \textit{qua} works of art lose their “aura” of originality under the onslaught of new technologies of reproduction.

Benjamin’s “aura” as related to art could then be applied to the model of a Tyrannosaurs Rex seen for the first time by an eleven year-old child who then becomes fascinated with dinosaurs. She may never lose that sense of awe and wonder despite seeing the form of the T-Rex reproduced in multiple media, not the least in modeled plastic toy figurines. In this case, the reproductions may serve to remind the child of the original and invoke that same sense of religious sensitivity throughout her entire life leading to a life spent in scientific inquiry.

\textsuperscript{40} Larry Shiner, \textit{The Invention of Art: A Cultural History} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3.

Returning to the art world, would “aura” apply in the same way to the thirteenth-century BCE painted coffin of Khonsu as to Jackson Pollack’s *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* (1950) in the same way? Both are reproduced in various media; however, one was created for a specific ritual purpose—(ideally, at least for Khonsu, as funerary equipment and not for the eyes of twenty-first century “art” audiences). The second was produced self-consciously as “art” for an “art market.” Benjamin’s *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, then, reproduces the same universalism that it seeks to undermine. Benjamin’s conception of “art,” in service to his political and social theory, classifies all works of art under one domain though they may have different forms or expressions. Artifacts now considered “art,” however, were produced for different purposes in different periods of time. Further, different cultures value such artifacts in various ways that may stand apart from the Western art historical taxonomy. Adorno’s understanding of “musealize” applies to objects in museums equally, and perhaps a little mournfully (since he views the process as a form of cultural decay). Instead, however, artifacts that are aestheticized and musealized are renewed and reconceptualized through their transition into works of art.

In addition, what Benjamin does not fully consider are the new ways in which the secular art he was concerned with obtain what we could consider “religious value” in a reverse process from which we understand to be happening to liturgical objects in public art museums. This, however, is an exploration best left for another time. What concerns us here relates to the authenticity of a liturgical artifact and the transition of religious value into aesthetic value. In other words, in terms of change, we ask how does the authenticity of the original religious artifact change when it is no longer seen, used, or understood in its original religious context? In other words, by what specific channels does this process take place?
Steven D. Lavine and Ivan Karp’s important edited volume, *Exhibition Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991), does not include an entry by a scholar of religious studies despite the fact that a disproportionate number of ethnographic artifacts and other objects found in museum collections relate to religious practices or reflect religious beliefs. Lavine and Karp’s volume compiles essays presented at a conference held in September 1988 at the Smithsonian Institution’s International Center, which focused on issues related to the representation of various cultures and communities in museums. In their introduction, the editors note that exhibitions and museum gallery installations reflect the judgments, biases, authority, and directives of curators, designers, and museum administrators and often ignore critical concerns on the part of the cultures or communities being represented and displayed. Lavine and Karp argue that art museums continue to operate under the normative understanding that aesthetic value is universally available to all people regardless of their social location or identity.

The contributors to *Exhibiting Cultures* draw attention to the political subtleties shaping museum exhibitions, particularly concerning the art of marginalized groups. The volume also seeks to investigate the assumptions that support museum exhibitions as a medium of cultural representation and the power differentials that exist between the “represented” and the “representors.” Yet, despite the careful attention in this volume to the representation of cultural difference, the authors rarely consider the dynamics shaping the exhibition of religious objects. For example, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s essay is helpful in setting up a theoretical framework that seeks to displace “seeing” as the privileged mode of engagement in art museums.

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(as opposed to the multisensory experiences provided by festivals). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also notes with poignancy the detached and separated status that religious artifacts can have in museum contexts, shaped by what she terms the “poetics of detachment.” We must recall that one of the primary directives of all art museums is to preserve or conserve the objects in their collections and that detachment occurs through the aestheticization and musealization of religious artifacts which privileges the sense of sight. Use of the senses other than sight is unlikely to occur in museum settings, except for the implementation of audio loop technologies, or programs specifically designed for visitors with special needs.

An opposing position is offered by art historian Svetlana Alpers’ defense of the art object’s primary “visuality,” which, she maintains, is the object’s primary role within the museum. She terms this process “the museum effect” by which museums transform cultural objects into something understood as “art.” Since art is meant to be seen, it follows that objects transformed into art have lost their practical functions. Only the object’s aesthetic value remains. As a way of “knowing,” visuality has become the primary point of access to these objects, with earlier context secondary, if it is acknowledged at all.

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, a well-known scholar of museums, asks just what “knowing” means in the context of museums. Hooper-Greenhill asks the stubborn questions that do not lend

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44 In some art museums, there are special “touch tours” designed to accommodate visitors with visual impairments who must use the sense of touch to “see.” Usually, however, the number of objects available for these types of programs is limited, and often visitors are required to wear gloves, which interferes with their ability to access the object fully.

themselves to easy answers. The concrete reality of museum galleries fade into abstractions in her critiques of how knowledge is produced and disseminated in museums and the ways and means through which objects are placed into a constructed narrative. Hooper-Greenhill also examines how meaning changes over time; objects once artifact, now are art. Yet every art object is still an artifact—even a painting reflects its context and is interpreted in this manner by art historians who place it in its appropriate gallery according to period, culture, or region. In a similar manner, liturgical objects are also positioned according to period, culture, or region, incorporating them into an art historical narrative that continues to flow into contemporary times.

In the introduction to Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations (2006), Corinne A. Kratz and Ivan Karp note the rise during the 1990s in new museums and heritage sites that came to serve as channels for minority religious, ethnic, and/or national communities to assert their identities and cultural importance. In chapter three below, I will consider the ways that nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish communities collected their ritual and liturgical artifacts, forming collections to be exhibited in galleries across Europe. Too often absent from Western art historical scholarship, Jewish communities self-consciously promoted their heritage and culture by forming collections of ritual and liturgical artifacts, creating museums to house and display them. In so doing, Jews asserted their identity and pressed for inclusion into global art history.

*Museum Frictions* valuably explores the implications of Tony Bennett’s 1988 notion of “exhibitionary complexes” for understanding the presentation and musealization of cultures from


across the developing world, but since it focused primarily on the dynamics of globalization it has little to offer our consideration of religious artifacts.\footnote{Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” \textit{New Formations} 1 (Spring 1988): 73-102. Bennett’s later essay, “Exhibition, Discipline and the Logic of Culture” was included in \textit{Museum Frictions}, 46-69.} The editors chose to title the volume \textit{Museum Frictions} to describe the competing claims, mandates, audience interests, community and civic interactions, and globalizing processes that constantly shift in and around museums. The primary focus of this work, though, is on globalizing forces and transnational processes and implications for museums.

To understand museums as “cultural centers,” I turn to Kylie Message’s analysis of the museum building and expansion from the mid-1990s forward. Message focuses on the progressive tendencies shaping institutional “newness” in museums. As she recounts, contemporary museums seek to become “cultural centers” upholding a dedication to multiculturalism, heterogeneity, and an inclusive cultural identity. In this, Message concludes that contemporary museums do not differ substantially from their nineteenth century forebears, which arose out of nationalist agendas. As she observes, “Emerging from a concern with class reform and civilization, these programs developed alongside colonization to define, classify, produce, and control racial ‘otherness.’” Message also notes that the discourse surrounding “new” museums builds on a rhetoric of civic reform, access, and democracy to include a recognition of cultural diversity, but this discourse still operates under modernist assumptions of progress, here equated with “newness.”

Since my study specifically concerns the relationship between art and religion in fine arts museums, I next turn my attention to note the growing body of scholarship in this area. Though as David Morgan observes, there is no academic field of “art and religion.” There are only
individual art historians who specialize in distinct areas, such as the art of certain periods or traditions. \(^{50}\) Since the 1980s, several scholars have pioneered studies and interest is growing among art historians, scholars of religion, and museum professionals.

Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona’s *Art as Religious Studies* (originally published in 1987) compiles essays by a number of authors who explore the role of the arts in teaching religious studies. It seems important to note here that neither “religious studies” nor “works of art” are clearly defined in the volume. The editors seem to assume that “religious studies” is synonymous with Jewish and Christian traditions and that the arts serve the purpose of teaching from confessional perspectives. They further emphasize the visual potency of art that simply seeing a religious icon is the means through which viewers can be transformed. The editors explain,

*Art as Religious Studies* was designed to investigate the integration of the discipline of seeing into religious studies….The only requirements made of each contributor were, first, that art be interpreted as a primary document for religious studies, and second, that the discipline of seeing be central to the investigations. \(^{51}\)

This appears to be a very narrow understanding of what the field of religious studies should be and what types of “works of art” should be used to teach it. Thirty years later, there may be many who would object. That said, Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona offer us a starting point for considering how the religious value of liturgical objects might be acknowledged.

Another pioneering work in the study of religion and art is Gordon Graham’s *The Re-enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion*. Here Graham draws from philosophical


aesthetics to explore Max Weber’s “disenchantment” thesis and the role of the arts as a tool for “re-enchantment.” Graham ultimately concludes that the arts cannot fully enchant in the way that religion (read: Christianity) can, because the arts do not adequately move toward the numinous or holy. Graham’s exploration of the role of art in relation to religion raises important questions, but he does not engage with specifically religious objects. Here, as in other explorations of the categories of art and religion, the focus is on art created as art, rather than religious objects, that have been transformed into art.52

Other recent scholarship tends to focus on ambivalent attitudes toward art by religious authorities or on specific art movements that draw on religious themes and sentiments.53 In addition, there have been some museum exhibitions prompted by scholars interested in the connections between spirituality and art or Christianity and art, but again, these inquiries do not engage with liturgical objects or the channels through which liturgical objects are transformed into fine art.54


54 For example, Christian art scholars Jane Dillenberger and John Dillenberger produced and edited museum catalogues that deal with Christian themes in contemporary American art (1970-1980). See Jane Dillenberger and John Dillenberger, Perceptions of the Spirit in Twentieth Century American Art, (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1977); John Dillenberger,
In 1998, the Ackland Museum of Art at the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill held a seminar to discuss the ways that art museums could engage with community members from various religious traditions. Representatives of various faith communities were invited to participate in sessions with museum staff and faculty from the campus. The results of those conversations were published by the museum as *A Place for Meaning: Art, Faith, and Museum Culture*. This volume addressed questions such as how members of faith communities interact with devotional objects in the museum’s galleries, how curators and educators could be more inclusive of members from faith communities, and how museum authority over the production of knowledge surrounding religious objects could be shared by practitioners of religious faiths. This collection of essays directly addressed community concerns over the display and interpretation of religious objects and it included the voices of religious practitioners. Yet as helpful and innovative as this work may be, it did not address the main question of this dissertation regarding the migration of liturgical objects from their home religious contexts into fine art museum settings. Thus we must proceed with our own inquiries, informed by those who came before, but diverging to look at more practical rather than analytical questions.

**Conclusion**

Liturgical artifacts from around the world have been incorporated into narratives of the

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history of civilization and also into the academic field of art history.” As is demonstrated by a cursory glance into any standard art history survey text, the narrative of the “history of art” commonly begins with prehistoric cave painting, moving then in a progression through a number of historical and cultural periods, and ending with contemporary art. The profession of art history has been shaped by a historicist and stylistic teleology of art production based on eighteenth and nineteenth-century discourses on aesthetics.

In this chapter, I have explored the rise of the public encyclopedic fine arts museum during what has come to be referred to as the “museum moment,” which occurred from Revolutionary France to the nineteenth and early twentieth-century establishment of public fine arts museums on the American cultural landscape. To understand the processes of aestheticization and musealization that artifacts undergo in their transformation from religious object to art object, I have traced the development of distinct museological practices that evolved out of the professionalization of the fine arts museum field and the discipline of art history that supports and frames it. Lastly, I considered the ways that scholars from various disciplines have critically examined the ideology of the fine arts and how fine arts museums are shaped by that ideology. In tracing this historical and theoretical foundations of the discipline of art history and the fine arts museum that is shaped by it, I have highlighted the need for a more practical examination of the processes and channels through which religious objects have been transformed into objects of art.

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56 Early art historical theory informed by Enlightenment philosophy and philosophical aesthetic inquiry mainly focused on form, subject matter, iconography, and style upheld through academically trained artists.

57 Minor, *Art History’s History*, 83-84.
CHAPTER TWO: AESTHETICIZING THE CRUCIFIX

The notion of art as such must first come into being, if the past is to acquire an artistic value; thus, for a Christian to see a classical statue as a statue, and not as a heathen idol or a mere puppet s/he would have had to begin by seeing in a “Virgin” a statue, before seeing it as the Virgin.

— André Malraux, Museums Without Walls¹

Figure 2. Reinstallation of Spanish Crucifix in 2013 at Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester Medieval Art Gallery. Source: 52.34 Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester.

Europe’s medieval cloisters are intriguing sites of mystery. With intricate stone masonry and labyrinthise passages that titillate the imagination, even colonial parish churches seem modern in comparison. As I have noted above, more than one America philanthropist has fallen in love with the medieval cloister. John D. Rockefeller Jr. was not alone in his passion for art; he met his match in William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951), who in 1925 also purchased a medieval cloister and its surrounding buildings, shipped it crate by crate to American shores, only to lose it again by the late 1930s. Built between 1133-1141, the Monastery of Our Lady, Queen of Angels, was later rededicated in 1174 to St. Bernard de Clairvaux. Hearst’s cloister was originally constructed just outside of Sacramenia in the province of Segovia in Northern Spain. Now, the Episcopal Diocese of South Florida owns the monastery, and it sits at 16711 West Dixie Highway in North Miami Beach, Florida.  

Dubbed “the Ancient Spanish Monastery” by its current occupants, the Monastery of St. Bernard de Clairvaux once had everything one could ask for in a Cistercian monastery: gothic arches, stained glass windows, manicured gardens, chapels, carved stone finials and capitals, and a chapter house. Its history is a long one, nearly nine hundred years, during seven hundred of which the monastery was home to Cistercian monks. In the 1830s, due to civil unrest originally launched by the Napoleonic occupation and subsequent internal wars, the Monastery of St. Bernard de Clairvaux was closed, its liturgical implements, books, and ecclesiastical furniture either confiscated or destroyed, its grounds and buildings turned into stables and grain storage. In that state of dormancy the Monastery lay until William Randolph Hearst purchased its cloisters and remaining outbuildings in 1925. Taking apart the stone structures and filling more than nineteen thousand crates, Hearst had the Monastery shipped to New York. Hearst suffered a

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financial crisis, though, and was never able to realize his ambition of having the Monastery reconstructed near his home in California. The boxes languished in a Brooklyn warehouse until after Hearst died in 1951, and his estate was sold to Raymond Moss and William Edgeman. Moss and Edgeman had the Monastery rebuilt (supplemented by a few random additions from other ‘medieval Spanish monasteries and churches) at a new location in North Miami. Robert Pentland, Jr., a benefactor of Episcopal churches, bought the site for the Episcopal Diocese of South Florida, and today the Monastery of St. Bernard de Clairvaux serves as an Episcopal Christian church holding services in both English and Spanish. The venue also hosts various events, concerts, and tours, and it has been featured in Hollywood productions Ace Ventura (Morgan Creek Productions, 1994) and Rock of Ages (New Line Cinema, 2012).

With such a colorful history and near complete provenance information of the structural elements and the cloisters itself, the Monastery of St. Bernard de Clairvaux offers a glimpse into the shifting categories of religious value and aesthetic value. As an active Christian church, the Monastery of St. Bernard de Clairvaux is not a museum. As an active Christian church, its liturgical objects are not “artifacts;” they are active elements in Christian worship.

The Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester also possesses numerous liturgical objects. In the setting of a regional public fine arts university museum, these objects are no longer primarily religious in nature. They are objects of art. In this chapter I will explore the processes and channels through which a liturgical thirteenth century Spanish Crucifix was transformed into an object of medieval art and exhibited in the medieval gallery of the Memorial Art Gallery. First, I will place the Crucifix in the historical context of Catholic craft and industry. Next, I will explore the history and mission of the Memorial Art Gallery, and consider the

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3 Ibid.
narratives it presents about itself as an encyclopedic fine arts museum serving the local population of a mid-size city in western New York. I will then explore the Crucifix as an object of fine art, before I consider the Crucifix’s religious significance. Finally, I will consider how the theological importance of the Crucifix as a symbol of the dominant Western Christian religious tradition dissolves into art historical generalities, with the Crucifix now serving as a synecdoche for the Christian artistic heritage.  

Catholic Art as Industry

American fine arts museums possess countless examples of Christian liturgical and devotional artifacts—from Old Masters biblical paintings to the ritual artifacts of Roman Catholicism, and personal items such as devotional altars once used at home. In the wake of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, a large number of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical implements (altar crosses, chalices, candlesticks, hanging-lamps, etc.) and objects of personal devotion (altars, Psalters, prayer beads, icons, etc.) were often destroyed outright or refashioned for non-religious use. At the opposite end of the decimation of Catholic liturgical, ritual, and devotional objects were countless unknown rescuers who secreted these materials into private hands, consequently preserving these objects. This was done either in the optimistic hope that Roman Catholicism would once again dominate in Europe, or for less sanctimonious motives

4 In this chapter, I will not consider the evolution of the symbol of the cross and crucifix, since there exists already a vast body of specialized literature on Christian iconography (particularly the imperial Hans Belting’s Likeness and Presence), and the subsequent commentaries that continue to proliferate and populate art museum shops. In addition, I will not address discussions surrounding theological interpretations, linguistic analyses, and popular conceptualizations of the Passion narrative in the Gospels and the larger Passion narrative traditions within Church history. Finally, I will not consider detailed discussions of materials or techniques used in creating crucifixes through the centuries, which is, and perhaps should remain, the purview of art history.
such as creating private collections of “curiosities” out of church treasures. Eventually, the Enlightenment and its proponents’ theories of Reason, Taste, Beauty, and Aesthetics led to the establishment of the modern system of art and its material expression in newly founded “art museums” discussed in chapter one.

Though this description oversimplifies drastically, categorizing liturgical objects—chalices, pyxes, ostensories, censers, reliquaries, basins, candlesticks, hanging lamps, processional and altar crosses—as art was a direct result of the Enlightenment’s influence upon the practices and activities of French Revolutionary agents culminating in the establishment of the first public art museum, the Louvre.⁵ As we saw in chapter one, the secularizing force of fine arts museums is a generally accepted fact of modernity. Consequently, collectors, connoisseurs, and critics of art have reshaped the religious value of liturgical objects into aesthetic value. The concurrent rise of the fine arts museum and the academic discipline of art history (which supports, authenticates, and sustains it) is not in question here. As André Malraux wisely notes in his meditations on art and art history, “Museum without Walls,” the idea of art as an epistemological category of knowing was required prior to viewing religious artifacts as something other than sacred materials used in ritual, contemplative, ceremonial, or devotional practices.⁶ What the rise of Renaissance humanism did for Catholic-themed paintings, the French Revolution did for ecclesiastical and liturgical implements: religion dissolved into art, giving

⁵ Oleg Zastrow notes that art historians tend to pay more attention to “high art” (such as painting and monumental sculpture) than to minor art (i.e., decorative arts, ritual objects, and textiles). See his Croci e Crocifissi: Tesori Dall’VIII Al XIX Secolo = Crosses and Crucifixes: Treasures from the 8th to 19th Centuries (Milan: Five Continents, 2009), 8. This has changed, though, with the growth of the subfields of medieval art and medieval studies and the growth of medieval art galleries in actively collecting art museums.

birth to new forms of veneration in the form of connoisseurship. Function was sublimated to form as aesthetic ideology transformed the cultural imaginary of Europe and America in the eighteenth century from contemplation through spiritual exercise to contemplation of the artistic form, better known as formal analysis (line, perspective, color, texture, style, space, shape). This same aesthetic ideology undergirds the educational mission of many contemporary art museums, with their dedication to fostering in audiences an appreciation for art as a civilizing and inspiring celebration of human achievement.7

Grand narratives of art history tend to ignore the ways through which new modes of knowledge are generated and reproduced. Everyone knows that art museums secularize liturgical objects, but the dynamics through which this happens are more obscure. Why contemporary Americans accept Catholic or Eastern Orthodox objects in fine arts museums as art, but view Christian objects within churches as religion bears further examination.

The industry of Catholic Art has many components. In using the term “industry” I draw on Merriam Webster’s definition of “industry” as

(a) systematic labor especially for some useful purpose or the creation of something of value, (b) a department or branch of a craft, art, business, or manufacture; especially one that employs a large personnel and capital especially in manufacturing, and (c) a distinct group of productive or profit-making enterprises.9

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7 One does not need to look beyond the mission statement of many American art museums or the statements of early museum advocates to recognized the pervasive claim that the significance of art lies in its perceived pedagogical value. See, for example, Hugh H. Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei, eds., Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History & Philosophy (Walnut Creek, Calif: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2008).

Industry is not a term normally associated with medieval Catholic churches, but the term describes the control and production of ecclesiastical and liturgical objects. Medieval Roman Catholic authorities provided strict guidelines for artisans and craftsmen in the production of ecclesiastical materials for use in the church. In effect, they controlled the industry of ecclesiastical and liturgical materials. Church art and artifacts were pressed into service of Catholic theology—church materials were not merely the result of individual genius or interpretation. There was a Roman Catholic industry of ecclesiastical materials. During the Reformation and later Age of Revolution in Europe, Roman Catholic liturgical artifacts were pressed into service of a new industry—the public fine arts museum.

During the French Revolution, agents working under Napoleon’s aegis removed Roman Catholic implements and materials from ecclesiastical contexts. A number of these materials were installed in the Musée du Louvre, setting the precedent for appropriating religious materials within a new industry of “fine art.” As discussed above, the industry of the fine arts begun in the eighteenth century evolved into a universalized system or industry of art by the nineteenth century. Today, acknowledging liturgical artifacts as art has become so ingrained that visitors to public art museums rarely stop to consider the channels through which religious, ritual artifacts have been quietly yet purposely transformed into secular objets d’art. Christian liturgical artifacts were among the first objects to be aestheticized and musealized.

The thirteenth century Spanish Crucifix that is the focus of this chapter was absorbed into the modern system of fine art, naturalized as an object of art, and remains an object of art despite the Memorial Art Gallery’s curator’s efforts to improve its contextualization as an artifact.
medieval Catholicism. Despite the MAG’s contextualization, we know nothing of the Crucifix’s origins. There are no records surrounding its commission, the atelier that produced it, or the church that installed and consecrated it. Further, we have no information regarding the people who prayed to it, or the clergy who celebrated the Catholic mass before it. Once the Crucifix left the employ of the Catholic Church and was transformed into an art object, it lost its earlier significance as a sacred object. A different language would now be used to describe and circumscribe it.

The Memorial Art Gallery (MAG)

The Memorial Art Gallery stands 100 years proud, it is an art museum known for both its acclaimed collections of world art and its educational commitment to, in the words of founder Emily Sibley Watson, “the edification and enjoyment of the citizens of Rochester.” For 100 years, millions of individuals have come to look and learn, to create and socialize, and to contemplate and be inspired.

— Grant Holcomb, Director of the Memorial Art Gallery (1985-2014).

In her MAGnum Opus: The Story of the Memorial Art Gallery (1988), Rochester journalist Elizabeth Brayer offers an anecdotal and thematic presentation of the founding of the museum. Filled with photographs of the founders, directors, staff, and volunteers of the Memorial Art Gallery (the “MAG”), Brayer’s book reads much like family history, full of

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10 The Memorial Art Gallery has limited space for the exhibition of art and artifacts and for wall labels, which could provide additional contextual information for the objects.

11 In 2013, the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester celebrated its centennial anniversary. In conjunction with their centennial the MAG published a detailed timeline of its history edited and co-authored by several of the MAG’s staff, Lu Harper, Kerry Schaub, and Marjorie Searle, The Memorial Art Gallery: 100 Years (Rochester, N.Y.: Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 2103). The quotation above comes from the first paragraph of Dr. Grant Holcomb’s remarks in the introduction that amplify the MAG’s commitment to education and the Rochester community.
nostalgia and reminiscence, a labor of love on the part of the author featuring the individual personalities of the MAG’s “Gallery Family” in their own words. A second history was commissioned in conjunction with the celebration of the 2013 centennial anniversary of the founding of the Memorial Art Gallery. The Memorial Art Gallery: 100 Years serves as an historical timeline of events, people, and developments in the MAG’s protean career as a community and university art museum. To duplicate these two works is unnecessary, but a brief outline of the Memorial Art Gallery’s history will offer important insights into the processes through which the public has been trained to understand religious artifacts as objets d’art.

Like other museums that had their origins during the Museum Age, the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery was the brainchild of the wealthy elites of its patron city. With social ties to the Metropolitan Museum of Art President Robert de Forest and University of Rochester President Rush Rhees, the wealthy Sibley family was in the perfect position to have their name forever attached to a growing municipal arts community in the City of Rochester, New York. The story of the Memorial Art Gallery, like so many other public art museums, is bound up with the biographies of the city’s wealthiest patrons.\textsuperscript{12} Despite this and because of this, the citizens of Rochester and visitors to Monroe County in New York State have an art collection representative of many of the world’s cultures under one roof—unfortunately, a roof little known outside of the immediate vicinity of Central New York. Yet unlike the “great man” narratives attached to so many of the American arts institutions formed during the Museum Age, it was a woman, Emily Sibley Watson, who was responsible for the founding of the Memorial Art Gallery, and it was two women, Gertrude Herdle and Isabel Herdle, who steered the Memorial Art Gallery through its formative years and for over four decades. Thus, the MAG has the distinction of having one

\textsuperscript{12} Duncan, \textit{Civilizing Rituals}, 48-49.
of the first of three female art museum directors in the country.

Emily Sibley Watson (1855-1945) was the daughter of wealthy industrialist Hiram Sibley and was a preeminent donor and advocate of the Memorial Art Gallery during its formative years. Gertrude Herdle Moore (1896-1993) was at the helm of the Memorial Art Gallery, serving as its director from 1922-1962. Gertrude’s sister, Isabel C. Herdle (1905-2004) served as the assistant director and chief curator from 1932-1972. Their father, George Herdle (1868-1922), was the MAG’s first director, and Gertrude initially served as his assistant until his death, when she took over as director. The Sibley and the Herdle families can be credited with the foundation of the Memorial Art Gallery, the formation of its permanent collection, and the execution of innovative museum exhibitions and educational programming.

The Sibleys were one of Rochester’s most prominent and wealthy families. The Sibley family patriarch, Hiram Sibley (1807-1888), amassed his fortune during the emergent telegraph industry. Sibley eventually merged his telegraph companies with the Western Union Telegraph Company, serving as its first president. Hiram Sibley acquired a large collection of paintings and considered creating an art museum in the city of Rochester. Despite his efforts, Sibley failed to convince the necessary officials that the time had come to establish an art museum in Rochester. Hiram Sibley eventually sold his prized art collection and it fell to his daughter Emily to rehabilitate his dream of a community art museum in the city.14

The Memorial Art Gallery formally opened to the public on October 9, 1913. The inauguration celebration included speeches by President of the University of Rochester, Rush

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13 Moore was also the first woman to be elected to the prestigious American Association of Museum Directors.

Rhees, and the President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert de Forest. Both men advanced the common notion of their time that the fine arts foster civil and moral values, provide a civilizing force for the masses, and inspire the sense of human achievement and dignity in the populace. In his remarks at the MAG’s opening de Forest narrated the history of royal and aristocratic art collection, noting that

Many of these galleries in their installation and in their use, still bear the impress of this origin and are rather expressions of national, even imperial grandeur, than part of any broad educational scheme. It has remained for the present generation to realize the relation between art galleries and education and to bring art galleries into proper relation to the school and university. It has remained too for the present generation to realize that the fine arts of painting and sculpture, which have been represented almost exclusively in the art galleries of the past, are not only the arts, but only part of a great whole.\(^{15}\)

Affiliated with the University of Rochester, the Memorial Art Gallery’s original mission was to provide educational service to the municipal community at large, a mission that has continued under its former director Grant Holcomb (1985-2014) and its current director Jonathan Binstock (2014-present).\(^{16}\)

When the Memorial Art Gallery opened in 1913, it did not have its own permanent collection. It was initially an empty but newly built architectural gem, reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance, designed by the New York City architectural firm Foster, Gade, and Graham. Though long supported by the Rochester Art Club, which George Herdle served as President, the MAG’s building was commissioned and funded by Emily Sibley Watson (ESW) as a memorial to her son, James George Averell, who had died from cholera at the age of twenty-six. Soon

\(^{15}\) Robert de Forest, “Commencement Remarks,” The Memorial Art Gallery: Exercises of Dedication, October 13, 1913, Rochester, N.Y., 10.

after the building’s dedication, a poignant sculpture entitled *Memory* (1914) by William Ordway Partridge was given to the MAG by Sibley Watson as part of the permanent collection. She had commissioned the statue and Partridge carved a likeness of James George Averell into its base.

Throughout the Herdles’ tenure, Emily Sibley Watson, her second husband James Sibley Watson, and their son James Sibley Watson, Jr., were regularly involved in fundraising for the MAG. The Sibley Watsons were the principal financial donors of unrestricted funds used for the institution’s expansion. Not only were they regular donors of both unrestricted funds and of directly purchased art objects for the museum’s permanent collection, they also served on the MAGs Board of Managers, which steered the initial fledgling and then burgeoning art gallery.

Under the interim directorship of George Herdle, himself an artist, the Memorial Art Gallery launched its permanent collection with the acquisition of “a lappet of Burano lace, four plaster casts of Greek sculpture, and a group of contemporary American paintings,” according to museum chronicler Susan Dodge Peters. After George Herdle retired, his daughter Gertrude, who had been his long-time assistant, was named his successor as director of the Memorial Art Gallery. Under Gertrude, the museum continued to grow, and Gertrude became the first woman art museum director at a time when the profession lacked for statements of professional standards to guide the process of electing a director. In fact, Gertrude and her sister Isabel pioneered exhibitions, educational programming, and community outreach, all with little or no professional training in museum administration, curatorial practices, museum education, or public programming. Some of the Herdle sisters’ most discerning exhibitions included Impressionist artists and the works of the recent Abstract Expressionists long before the larger

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museums were promoting modern and contemporary art in America.\textsuperscript{18} This vision was likely due to a small coterie of interested parties in 1930s Rochester, who sought to define the Memorial Art Gallery’s institutional identity as progressive. The founding of a respected art institution in a remote region of western New York serves as an important case study in the development of fine arts museums in America in the early twentieth century.

Despite their lack of formal graduate training, Gertrude Herdle Moore and Isabel C. Herdle made invaluable contributions during the early years of the MAG’s history cannot be overemphasized. Art history was a new academic discipline in American universities in the early twentieth century and women attending college were rare. Both sisters attended the University of Rochester and specialized in medieval art. Neither Gertrude nor Isabel received what today would be considered minimal professional museum training, yet they managed to make the MAG an innovator in art collecting and educational programming. Gertrude was responsible not just for the administration of the museum, but also for building donor relations, securing long-term acquisition endowments, building the permanent collection, and offering progressive special exhibitions that were not always understood or appreciated by the Rochester community. Isabel’s self-training in gallery and exhibition design earned the attention and respect of museum professionals across the country, and it was largely through their combined efforts that the MAG rose as an institution enjoying regional recognition, if not quite national renown.\textsuperscript{19} Isabel Herdle—as chief curator—was responsible for the purchase of the thirteenth century Spanish Crucifix in 1952.

\textsuperscript{18} Brayer notes the incredible range of exhibitions and programs that the Herdle sisters implemented in \textit{MAGnum Opus} (Rochester, NY: The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 1988), 102-125

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 113.
The Fine Art Crucifix

By its central position in the Memorial Art Gallery’s installation of medieval art objects, the Spanish Crucifix is the focus of that gallery. The medieval gallery is situated at the top of the staircase that brings the visitor to the second floor of the museum. The second floor houses classical antiquities, the galleries for ancient Near Eastern art, Islamic art, Asian art, Renaissance art, and eighteenth-century European art, a central fountain court containing a seventeenth to eighteenth-century organ, and the medieval art gallery.

The MAG’s medieval art collection is small but significant. Most of the artifacts are housed in glass vitrines, but the museum possesses a few medieval paintings. The walls are painted a neutral color that allows the art to stand out. Lighting is low to protect the art, but also to help contextualize the objects, as they might have been situated in a darkened church interior or domestic chapel. The Crucifix dominates the gallery. It is hung at an elevated height to mimic its role as an altar cross. On entering the gallery, the visitor’s eyes are immediately drawn to the Crucifix because of its position. All other objects in the medieval art gallery are at eye-level or housed in glass vitrines. The simple placement of the Crucifix above the other objects in the medieval art gallery gestures to its original function, but we are told very little about it.

Should additional details of the Crucifix’s origins be discovered, however, its classification and status as a medieval art object is unlikely to change. Certainly it is doubtful that any newly revealed contextual detail could cause the Crucifix to be transformed back into a religious artifact of liturgical use or ritual devotion. Consequently, its classification as an object medieval of art is secure. Neither art historians nor scholars of religion have devoted much time to unearthing contextual information related to this particular object. This is unfortunate, particularly as the Spanish Crucifix might offer specialists in thirteenth-century Catalanian
Catholicism a great deal of information about medieval Spanish Catholic religious veneration should such an investigation be undertaken. That said, the limited provenance information provided by the art dealer who sold the object to the Memorial Art Gallery and the information gleaned by careful examination of the Crucifix itself offer a number of important clues as to its function as a liturgical and devotional object.

Large gaps exist in our knowledge of this unique Crucifix. As just noted, it is not known who commissioned it, who carved it, which church or chapel installed it and consecrated it, or when it was eventually de-installed or deconsecrated. We do not know how the Catholic community felt about the Crucifix or if the church where this Crucifix once hung still exists. This is not to say that the Memorial Art Gallery should (even if they could) return the Crucifix to the Pyrenean village, nor do I question the value that the Crucifix adds to our understanding of “medieval” art and Roman Catholic faith in Europe.20

The Herdle sisters were strategic in fleshing out the MAG’s collection. Given the growing field of art history in America and the competition among institutions to acquire appropriate art objects to create a viable encyclopedic collection, the Herdle sisters were concerned less about extensive provenance information and more about the affordability, aesthetic value, and educational potential of their acquisitions.

In general, museums are non-profit, and they usually have limited funds with which to operate, acquire, conserve, and educate. Further, curators are often tasked with being caretakers

20 At the MAG, the Spanish Crucifix has been treated with great respect as an artifact of religious significance. Conversations that I had with the curator of the medieval collection and director of the Memorial Art Gallery suggest that the MAG is dedicated to presenting each object in light of its cultural context and ensuring that the information made available to the public through print materials and docent tours serves to underscore the educational mission of the Memorial Art Gallery.
of several disparate areas of a museum’s permanent collection. By extension, they must be
generalists rather than specialists. The Memorial Art Gallery is no different. Nancy Norwood,
who curates the medieval gallery, is also the curator of all European art (ancient Greek to
modern), as well as ancient Egyptian, Asian, and Islamic art. She is also responsible for special
exhibitions in her areas as well. Like so many other art museum curators, she does not have the
time to spend researching every object under her care. If research is to be undertaken, interns or
specialists are contracted and funded through special grants. In the Memorial Art Gallery (as for
in many other major art museums), little information is available on the history of many objects
in the collection, though much more attention is paid today regarding provenance.

Material that entered museum collections prior to the 1970 UNESCO “Convention on the
Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of
Cultural Property,” often had little provenance information. From the late eighteenth century
forward, antiquities poured into Europe and America from various archaeological excavations
(both private and institutional), through systematic confiscation by colonial powers, and through
the collecting campaigns of wealthy individuals. In addition, political conflicts and large-scale
poverty contributed to looting and a strong black market antiquities trade, all of which served to
obscure critical provenance information.

We know nothing of the historical context of the MAG’s Spanish Crucifix other than that
it entered the historical record as medieval objet d’art in 1933. We do not know, for example,
where the Crucifix was originally displayed, when or why it was removed, or even why it was
preserved. We can only speculate. In some cases, churches voluntarily remove items from their
interiors to replace them or update them. It is also possible that the church which originally
contained the Crucifix was closed or damaged, and someone—perhaps even congregants
themselves—thoughtfully preserved the altar Crucifix either in a private chapel or personal collection. What we do know is that this provenance information is lost to us. We must construct what can be known about this object based on stylistic evidence compiled by specialists in art historical analysis.

![Crucifix](image)

**Figure 3.** Crucifix, unknown Spanish, early 13th century.  
*Source: 52.34 Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester.*

The MAG’s Crucifix tells us many things. Art historical stylistic evidence provides us with some limited indication as to where the Crucifix originated and perhaps even when it was carved.\(^{21}\) The information available to scholars and museum visitors alike is that sometime in the

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\(^{21}\) During a conversation with the MAG’s curator, I asked if there had ever been testing done on the Crucifix to determine anything more about its materials or origin. She reminded me that to take any type of sample from the object itself would, in fact, damage it. Therefore, there would need to be a specific reason or necessity for doing so. Learning the type of wood used would
thirteenth century, an alter crucifix was commissioned, carved, and installed in a rural region of Spain. Experts have placed the origin of the MAG’s Crucifix in the Catalonian region, and this geographic designation appears on the object’s 2013 wall label, about which more will be said below. Other than those scholarly deductions, for a span of about eight hundred years there is no historical information about the object to indicate its history or how it made its way from its ecclesiastical origins into the hands of a Barcelonan collector in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Provenance records indicate that the thirteenth-century Spanish Crucifix was transferred from the possession of Barcelonan Olegario Junyent (1876-1956), a painter, author, and set designer, but there is no further information in the MAG’s Registrar File offering additional insight as to how the Crucifix landed in Olegario Junyent’s possession. From Junyent, the Crucifix entered the collection of M. & R. Stora and Company, a medieval art dealer based in Paris and New York. We know nothing of why Junyent sold the work, or how it transferred to the art dealers, but we do know that it left Spain prior to the Spanish Civil War, since the object enters the historical record through its inclusion in the Exposition d’Art Religieux in Nantes, France at the Psallete in July-September 1933.

A stock sheet found among the R. Stora documents (held in the Special Collections of the Getty Research Institute’s Research Library) places the Crucifix in the New York office of R.

offer little additional knowledge or context and would cause irreparable harm to the object under her care.

22 Eduardo Junyent is the author of several monographs on Catalonian art and architecture that were written between 1960-1980. This connection bears further investigation.

23 Exhibition Program, “‘L’Exposition D’Art Religieux,’ A La Psallete (Monument Historique Prè De La Cathédrale). Ouverte a Nantes en Juin, Juillet, Aout et Septembre, 1933” (August and September 1933), Memorial Art Gallery Registrar File 52.34
Stora by 1940. The document appears to note a transfer of the Crucifix from M. & R. Stora Paris, France to R. Stora, New York. It is dated May 1, 1940 and states “Stock # N.Y. 702, P.N. 7997.” The stock sheet’s description of the artifact reads, “Big Christ on Cross in wood carved and polychromed. France, 14th Century (Pyrenees-Nord Espagne-12-13th Century).” A later handwritten addition notes “Crucifix” above the typed “Cross,” and corrects the dimensions as provided in meters. The provenance information includes the 1933 Nantes exhibition, but beneath that typed line are handwritten notes that read, “Olegario Junyent coll. Barcelona” and [sic] “Exhibited in: Minneapolis Institute of Arts Masterpieces of Sculpture No 18 November 1949.”

We know that the Crucifix was lent to the 1949 “Masterpieces of Sculpture” Exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) since the next page of the same receipt lists the loan price with a date of January 17, 1949. The object is included among the list of objects in the exhibition in *The Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts* (November 5, 1949). At this point, R. Stora firm in New York still retained ownership of the Crucifix since the art dealer is credited as a lender to the exhibition as well as the owner of the Crucifix. Unfortunately, we do not have the museum’s label information for the 1933 Nantes exhibition, but the MIA exhibition catalog lists the Crucifix as “Spanish, 12th century.” A year later in 1950 that same exhibition,

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25 Minneapolis Institute of Art, *The Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Art* (November 5, 1949), Volume XXXVIII, No. 29), 158. A Xeroxed copy of the Bulletin referencing the Crucifix is included in the MAG’s Registrar File 52.34.
“Masterpieces of Sculpture” travelled to Allen Memorial Art Gallery at Oberlin College as a loan exhibition.  

The stock sheet conveniently provided a list of quoted prices offered to potential buyers beginning in 1944, but the Crucifix did not find a permanent home until curator Isabel Herdle approved its purchase on behalf of the Memorial Art Gallery in 1951. The following year, in 1952, the Crucifix arrived at its current home in Rochester, New York.

The Memorial Art Gallery welcomed the Crucifix into its collection by announcing it to the Rochester Community on the cover of its bi-monthly *Gallery Notes*.

In the *Gallery Notes*, the Crucifix is shown already installed on the Fountain Court wall, flanked with the carved wooden figures of the Virgin Mary and St. John. In medieval chapels, the Virgin Mary and St. John were often included close to a Crucifix and became known as a “Crucifixion Group” in the later art historical lexicon.

The Spanish Crucifix was featured in the MAG’s 1961 *Handbook to the Collection*. It was included in the “Treasures of Rochester” exhibition held at the Memorial Art Gallery in 1977. In 1988, the Spanish Crucifix was researched by provisional docent Claire Bagale and her report made its way into the official Registrar’s file for the object. Bagale’s prose is mostly lifted from the *Gallery Notes* and mistakenly assumes that the Crucifix was removed from Spain.

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26 A “loan exhibition” is generally initiated by a museum or gallery then shipped in toto to participating museum venues. Depending on individual institution’s curatorial policies and practices, wall label information along with catalogs and other educational or marketing materials are shared and re-used by each venue. Loan exhibitions allow for a variety of changing exhibitions for individual museums. Further, loan exhibitions allow participating venues to offer their communities (and museum staff) access to works or genres of art that are not part of a museum’s permanent collection. For example, the North Carolina Museum of Art does not have a permanent collection of Islamicate art, yet it served as a venue for the loan exhibition *Empire of the Sultans: Ottoman Art from the Khalili Collection* May 19–July 28, 2002.

during the Spanish Civil War. More recently, an authority on Gothic sculpture has evaluated the Crucifix and plans to include it as an entry in a forthcoming edition of *Gothic Sculpture in American Museums*.\(^{28}\) Still, though, there has been no systematic scholarly research done on the Spanish Crucifix either by trained art historians or by scholars of religious studies.\(^{29}\)

In 2005, the Crucifix was moved from a central location in the second-level Fountain Wall Court to a side room that became the permanent gallery of the medieval art. This shift was due to the acquisition of a Renaissance organ, which was installed where the Crucifix had previously hung. In 2013, the MAG reinstalled the Crucifixion group after fully refurbishing and upgrading the medieval art gallery. The Crucifix currently resides in this space complete with new wall labels. The updated wall labels indicate that the Crucifix’s origins lie in the Catalan region of Spain. That is the entirety of the provenance information related to the Spanish Crucifix.

Much of the material with Christian imagery in American art museums dates to the medieval, Renaissance, and Counter-Reformation periods, when the church was the primary donor for and supporter of the arts. It is not news that during the medieval period the Catholic church held sway in nearly every dimension of public life.\(^{30}\) The church ruled some areas directly and others indirectly, but in urban areas its presence was pervasive. During the

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\(^{28}\) Personal conversation with MAG curator Nancy Norwood, May 2013.

\(^{29}\) Given limited time and resources to conduct extensive research on any one object in a museum’s permanent collection, this observation does not imply any lack interest of MAG’s curators or museum registrars in the Crucifix.

\(^{30}\) I use “medieval” to cover the time period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century and early modern period beginning in the fifteenth century. I use the term for convenience, fully aware that “medieval” is an historical convention deployed for ease and that the term elides the tremendous diversity in artistic, philosophical, religious, political, economic, and cultural expressions across Europe during this period.
Reformations and the social and political conflicts that plagued Europe throughout the sixteenth century, many Catholic churches were closed and their assets seized. Unless members of the Catholic clergy or particular congregations managed to save ecclesiastical implements and devotional images, valuable liturgical implements were confiscated, melted down, and refashioned for secular usage. Other materials were simply destroyed.

During the Reformation and the wars that followed, Spain was a bastion of Catholic solidarity and did not experience the same devastation that plagued other parts of Europe. Even during the Napoleonic era, the rural mountainous regions of eastern Spain did not suffer the fate of seizure and confiscation that befell France and Italy as agents of the French Revolution looted Catholic churches of their treasures. Further, we know that the Crucifix did not fall prey to the secularizing forces of the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) since the Crucifix was already in the possession of M. & R. Stora and Company by 1933. Still, the Catalan region was subject to political and social tensions prior to the start of the war due to conflict between the conservative Roman Catholic camp and the modernizing democratic faction. It is possible that the church from which the Crucifix originated was closed sometime during this period of unrest. The dilapidated condition of the Crucifix itself, however, calls this into question. Likely, the Crucifix was removed much earlier and, unfortunately, not kept under conditions best suited for long-term preservation.

As a result, the Crucifix is not in pristine condition. In fact, at risk of upsetting art historical claims to the contrary, the work is neither a masterpiece nor technically well executed. Its status as “fine art” lies simply in its inclusion into an established system of art and being labeled as such by that system. Thus we come to the question of why this object was deemed
worthy of inclusion in the system of art as an object of fine art, rather than being consigned to a regional history museum.

Figure 4. Crucifix, unknown Spanish, early 13th century, detail. 
*Source:* 52.34 Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester.

To address this question, we can engage in a more formal art historical analysis of the Crucifix. Setting aside its religious significance (although this likely informs why it was collected and preserved), let me begin by considering its medium. On initial cursory inspection (see fig. 2-4), it is clear that the Crucifix has been carved from wood, although the species of wood is unknown. Further, I see that it was once painted, but the extent of the painting is not initially clear. There are numerous extant examples of medieval wood, polychrome Crucifixes that survive in varying states of preservation housed in the world’s art museums.\(^{32}\) With closer

\(^{32}\) For similar Crucifixes to the MAG’s see the Detroit Institute of Art, Corpus of Christ, Spain, Western Europe, 13th Century (28.3); The Art Institute of Chicago, Corpus of Christ, Catalonia, 13th Century (1926.20); and Musée du Louvre, Christ on the Cross, Bavaria, first half of 12th Century (R. F. 3080).
inspection, we can see that the MAG’s Crucifix is quite damaged and most of its polychrome is missing. The wood is worn, flaked, and beset with wormholes. Despite this damage, though, the Spanish Crucifix is an important cultural artifact.

When we turn to consider the formal aspects of the sculpture (relating shape, line, space, color, and texture), we can conclude that the sculptor or sculptors who carved the Crucifix were working within a particular idiom of Catholic imagery, which I consider in greater depth in a later section. Needless to say, medieval sculptors hired by Catholic authorities were not free to re-interpret the figure of Jesus hanging on the cross and were restrained by ecclesiastical injunction. Here we have a three-dimensional carved representation of Jesus’ body hanging tautly upon a cross, clothed only in the perizonium or loincloth, eyes seemingly closed, feet nailed together with one nail.

There are several interesting features of this carving that have not yet been mentioned in the museum’s descriptions of the MAG’s Crucifix. First, the dimensions of the cross itself are insufficient for the Corpus Christi hanging upon it, since it is too narrow for the size of the figure. Second, the arms, hands, and feet are not proportionate with the rest of the body. Third, the eyes, mouth, nose, and bridge of Jesus’ face are roughly carved (as can be seen in the detail in figure 5). The nose was clearly not carved with any realistic precision in scale to the rest of the face.
Without the benefit of being able to see the MAGs Crucifix fully painted, are we to assume that the sculptor or sculptors who carved this piece had severe technical limitations in terms of artistic expertise? Before drawing any conclusions here, let us consider other elements of the Crucifix. For instance, note the competent treatment of the diagonal lines of the torso, which are echoed in the tilt of the head, the parting of hair, and the drape of the cloth. The vertical line of the cross is mirrored in the folds of the cloth and the sternum, while the perfect horizontal line of Jesus’ garment evokes the crossbeam. The carver was not a master sculptor, but from these details we can draw some important conclusions about this work.

It is likely that this Crucifix was hung high above the sacristy or altar. The overly triangular nose, deeply detailed *perizonium*, and disproportionate hands and feet indicate that the
Crucifix would have appeared to scale only when viewed from below and at a distance, while its painted surface would allow details to be seen from afar. This suggests a professional atelier produced the Crucifix rather than a simple rural or folk workshop.

Anecdotal evidence holds that when the Crucifix arrived at the Memorial Art Gallery, there was a small label attached to it that reads “Ripoll” (a city in the Catalan region of Spain). This along with the Spanish provenance connection to Barcelona places the origin of the Crucifix somewhere in the Catalan region of Spain. Though there was no written documentation to support this conclusion, the MAG’s Isabel Herdle characterized the Crucifix as Catalan by its association with the other two figures in the Crucifixion group, the Mourning Virgin and Saint John (52.33.1-2), which were purchased at the same time as the Crucifix. Initially, the Crucifix was dated to the twelfth century and the accompanying figures to the thirteenth century. The dating of the Crucifix was adjusted in the 2013 re-installation. The wall label for the 2013 re-installation reads as follows:

Spanish (probably Catalonia), early 1200s

**Crucifix**
Wood with polychromy
R.T. Miller Fund, 52.34

Spanish, late 1200s

**Mourning Virgin and Saint John**
Wood with polychromy
R.T. Miller Fund, 52.33.1-2

Large-scale sculpted groups of the crucified Christ, the Virgin, and Saint John were frequently found in Spanish medieval churches. They were located either above the choir screen that separated the area for the clergy from the main body of the church or against a side wall.

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The crucifix dates about 50 years earlier than the pair of the Mourning Virgin [52.33.1] and Saint John [52.33.2]. The museum purchased these three sculptures together in 1952 with the intent of representing this important genre of Spanish medieval art.\textsuperscript{34}

Turning from the aesthetic or formal analysis of the object itself, I consider the information the museum’s wall label text provides for the Crucifix and its accompanying objects, the Mourning Virgin and Saint John. These artifacts are “medieval” since they are classified and grouped as “medieval” by the MAG and are installed in their designated Medieval Art Gallery. Though some visitors may not be familiar with what “medieval” indicates, the dating of the objects in the medieval gallery places them all within a specific period, c. 500-1500 CE.

Additionally, the MAG’s wall labels provide the following museological information for each object: the title, the name of the donor who initiated the investment fund through which the works were purchased by the MAG, and the acquisition or registrar’s number assigned to the object.\textsuperscript{35} None of this information speaks to the original liturgical, religious, or contemplative purpose of the objects. Instead, these “medieval” objects have been catalogued and systematized as commodities, their religious value overwritten by museal value: title, material, period, donor, acquisition number. While this information is helpful for the MAG’s various museological purposes as well as for students and scholars interested in studying the work, it offers little in terms of the earlier significance of artifacts. Museum labels can also provide contextual background, although this is often minimal.

\textsuperscript{34} Wall Label Text, Medieval Gallery, Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, June 2013.

\textsuperscript{35} The registrar or acquisition number indicates the year the object was purchased and the order in which the object was purchased that year, e.g., the acquisition number for the Crucifix “52.34” indicates that it was purchased in 1952 and was the thirty-fourth object purchased that year for the museum’s permanent collection.
The Crucifixion group is classified as typical of “large-scale sculpted groups” found in “medieval Spanish churches.” Further, the visitor is told that the Memorial Art Gallery has united these objects to allow visitors to experience the grouping as it would have appeared in many “Spanish” medieval churches. Additionally, the label tells the visitor, “They were located either above the choir screen that separated the area for the clergy from the main body of the church or against a side wall.” This information seems straightforward and simply provides contextualization for the art objects, but it assumes that visitors have prior knowledge of not only art historical terminology (e.g., “polychromy”), but also of Christian, specifically medieval Catholic ecclesiastical practices.

For instance, the information on the Memorial Art Gallery’s wall label for the Spanish Crucifix assumes that visitors are familiar with the physical layout of medieval churches, understand what a “choir screen” is, and know why clergy would be separated from the “main body of the church.” The pedagogical effects of including this contextual information related to the Spanish Crucifix and the sculpted figures of the Virgin Mary and St. John are questionable since the MAG’s curators and educators (and by extension other art museum curators and educators) seem to assume their audiences will have the necessary prior knowledge to understand the original function of these ecclesiastic liturgical artifacts.

In labeling an object “medieval,” fine arts museum curators and educators presume that visitors are familiar with conventional Western art historical classifications for European religious artifacts. This category is reinforced as visitors associate the particular regional, religious, stylistic, and artistic features that have come to be known “medieval” and apply this knowledge to similar objects.” Second, it is assumed that visitors will know Christian, particularly medieval Catholic liturgical procedures, the architectural layout of medieval
churches and chapels as well as the basic norms of medieval ecclesiastical practice. Since all of this is assumed, there is no need to waste valuable text space on the wall label to explain this information. Instead, the important museological information is included: the dimensions, medium, donors, object/accession numbers—none of which indicate the underlying theological purpose of the objects, their original raison d’être.

Consequently, the original theological message of the Crucifix, Mourning Virgin, and Saint John has been quietly subsumed by a new raison d’être. The objects are presented as a given “genre,” i.e., “medieval sculpture,” as though they are little more than examples of one particular style or movement alongside many other styles.

The MAG’s presentation of the Crucifixion Group in the re-installed medieval gallery has reassigned the dating of the Crucifix to the early thirteenth century (“early 1200s”), while the Mourning Virgin and Saint John are dated to the “late 1200s.” In the initial publication announcing the acquisition of the Crucifixion group, the sculpted figures of the Virgin and John were attributed to a Catalonian origin, but the new label changes this designation with the Virgin and John ascribed more generally to “Spain,” while the Crucifix is now described as likely Catalan. As specialists continue to research the objects, attributions may necessarily change. The wall label informs us, however, that the objects were purchased as a group despite their having come from different parts of the Iberian Peninsula and are separated by over fifty years.

When the Crucifixion group was first purchased, Isabel Herdle described the group as “Romanesque.” The 2013 label, however, does not offer a stylistic attribution. It does not inform the viewer whether these works are specifically “Romanesque” or “Gothic.” What the label does say instead is that such objects were “frequently found in medieval churches,” and that the MAG purchased the three artifacts together for “representing this important genre of Spanish medieval
art.” Of course, no such “genre” of “Spanish medieval art” existed as a category in its own context since such a designation is a product of art history.

For medieval Catholics, these figural representations would not have been considered “art,” (in the modern sense of that term), nor would they have been understood as representatives of a “genre.” Instead, they would have been seen as representations of the dying Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christian theology identifies as the divine incarnation of the God the son. The “Mourning Virgin” and “Saint John” would also have been seen as venerated figures, intermediaries between the divine realm of God, the heavenly father, and the profane world of human concerns. The wall label does not offer specific religious or theological information related to these figures, nor can such information be found in the registrar’s file. What is attached to object in the museum context are stylistic qualifiers. Most art historians would classify the Crucifixion group as Romanesque, or even Gothic.36

The term “Romanesque” came into intellectual parlance in the first half of the nineteenth century as the designation of an architectural style contrasted to “Gothic.” It was during this same period that the term “medieval” also gained traction as an adjective separating the Classical world from the “Renaissance.”37 According to noted art historian Meyer Shapiro (1904-1996), Romanesque styles of art and architecture that derived from classical Roman architectural forms (such as the arch and buttress) became the favored style architecture in the early medieval

36 In my conversation with the MAG’s curator, she considered the work “proto-gothic,” since it demonstrates the naturalism found in sculptures of the later Gothic period.

Romanesque came to designate a style of art and architecture that seemed common across Christian Europe during the tenth through the twelfth centuries. The term “Romanesque” is so common now in museological taxonomy that little explanation accompanies it, and, it must be remembered, one of the main points we are considering here is how art historical terms have become so naturalized that they no longer need explanation. While the term Romanesque is no longer used to identify the Crucifixion group at the Memorial Art Gallery, the term remains a common art historical stylistic identifier associated with Christian architecture and architectural elements. The Crucifix demonstrates some traits that have been assigned to Gothic, though, such as emotional expression, more realistic perspective, and more natural human postures. Curator Nancy Norwood has applied the term “Proto-Gothic” to the Crucifix though this is not a common designation.

According to the common Western art historical timeline, Romanesque styles eventually give way to Gothic styles in art and architecture. In the art historical narrative, there is little theological information provided to explain the Catholic Church’s transformation of decorative styles. Scholars of medieval Christianity would know, of course, that the thirteenth century was a time of great theological change. But art history textbooks regularly focus simply on the rise of the cathedral, particularly the development of the barrel vault. Impressive though they were, barrel vaults were not the crucial impetus driving medieval piety. Lip service is of course paid to the theological stirrings that manifested in the magnificent cathedrals during the transition from

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the Romanesque to the Gothic, but it is the focus on architectural developments that take precedence in art historical analysis, not the theological program of the Catholic Church. Further, as I show, art history does not place much emphasis on the different idioms of crucifixes and crosses found in Catholic and Christian worship. They are instead presented merely as decorative elements that reflect a particular region, style, period, or religion—all accepted as standard classifications within a secularized Western art historical worldview.

**The Religious Crucifix**

![Figure 6. Crucifixion Group. Source: 52.34 Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester.](image)

Acquired through the R. T. Miller Fund, the group beautifully summarizes all the poignant and powerful symbolism of the Passion as conceived in Romanesque iconography and adds the special emotional quality and dramatic intensity that Spain—particularly, Catalan Spain—gave to its finest medieval work. Here symbolically in the angular distortion and simplified planes of Christ’s bent body and bowed head, in the brooding serenity of the Virgin and the anguished gesture of St. John, man’s long struggle toward faith is given concrete, though abstracted form.
In writing about the newly acquired Crucifixion group, Isobel Herdle described these objects in the Memorial Art Galleries serial publication *Gallery Notes* in terms that border on the reverent. This language would be toned down for today’s pluralistic museum visitors, but it was typical for a 1953 American audience and demonstrates the tensions involved in trying to circumscribe the religious value the Crucifix with aesthetic value. In Herdle’s original text, sculptures were identified as “Catalonian” as well as indicative of “the special emotional quality and intensity that Spain—particularly, Catalanian Spain—gave to its finest medieval work.” Again, such language would not be acceptable today, since it universalizes and assigns a particular “emotional quality and intensity” to an entire nation. Herdle was careful not to label the Crucifixion group itself as being the “finest” medieval work, since this Crucifixion group is not the highest quality of its kind. As is evident, the sculptures have not been preserved particularly well. The Crucifix itself has lost most of its exterior paint (polychromy). In fact, the Crucifix and its accompanying Mourning Virgin and St. John are rustic and regional. It is the age of these sculptures that bestows their art historical value and status. My objective in this section to rethink the Crucifix not in terms of its art historical value, but as a religious or sacramental object. This involves a brief consideration of its cultural importance.

Thus I will consider the theological message of the Spanish Crucifix. The museum dates its origin to the early thirteenth century. From the 1996 gallery label text, along with the physical dimensions of the object, we are offered: “Unknown, Spanish, Crucifix, early 13th century, Wood, polychromy, R.T. Miller Fund, and this exposition:

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The crucifix was not a popular theme in the early Christian era, but by the twelfth century, the group of Christ (52.34), the Virgin (52.33.1), and St. John (52.33.2) had become a poignant and powerful symbol of the Passion. Spanish cultures, especially of Catalan origin, were particularly expressive and emotional. The Virgin and St. John displayed here were not originally with this particular Crucifix, but their stylized features, ovoid heads, and elongated bodies suggest a Catalan Spanish origin.41

When I first viewed the label for the object in in May 2012 the label included the same museological information (materials, acquisition number, and fund), but nothing further than “Spanish, Crucifix, 1200s.”

In June 2013, the medieval gallery at the MAG was reinstalled. The faded beige damask fabric wall covering was removed, the walls were repainted in a dark neutral beige, the floors were refinished, and the collection was refurbished with thematic case work installations, the repositioning of some items, and additional manuscripts and textiles were placed on view. With such a small collection, the curator envisioned and executed a successful thematic design that incorporated ecclesiastical and liturgical implements, church decoration and sculpture, and objects of personal devotion. Norwood also included new contextual wall labels to fill out details about religious practice and belief in the Middle Ages. With the new contextual information and thematic placement, the reinstallation is visually appealing and informative, and it highlights the MAG’s commitment to educating museum visitors as well as treating all objects respectfully and judiciously.42

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41 Memorial Art Gallery, Catalogue information, April 8, 2013. I must thank MAG historian and head librarian Lu Harper for sharing this digitally stored catalog entry, which she emailed me as a PDF entitled, “Medieval Acquisitions Before 1953.”

42 During my April 17, 2013 conversation with MAG Director Grant Holcomb, Holcomb stated that he sees his job as supporting the curator’s vision to ensure that each object in the MAG’s collection is treated with great respect in terms of how it is interpreted and displayed.
The new wall label for the Crucifix reads, “Spanish (probably Catalonia), early 1200s.” Thus the label provides a more defined regional attribution, but still nothing regarding interpretation with regards to how the artifacts would have been viewed and understood by medieval Catholics. This, of course, is a large undertaking. After all, how can an art museum curator hope to summarize the central symbol for a faith influential and prominent as Christianity on a wall label?

The figure of the cross—or two lines, one vertical and one horizontal, that cross at one point—occurs regularly as a simple geometric shape in nature. The simple cross as a design element or a geometrical pattern occurs across various media, cultures, and epochs. As a geometric figure used by humans, it is at least as old as the Neolithic period and appears regularly in numerous ancient civilizations, including as a component of the pharaonic Ankh and as equilateral crosses found throughout the ancient Indus Valley cultures. In modernity, variations of the cross appear on countless national flags indicating political rather than religious identity. Such variations of the cross as well as “T” and the “X” occur in nearly every human culture. No dictionary of symbols is complete without some speculation as to the cultural meanings of the cross or crossroads.

But when a cross stands alone, or next to other symbols of religious faiths like the Star of David for Judaism, or the Crescent for Islam, the cross commonly indicates Christianity. In this way, the use of the cross without any further figural decoration serves as a simple icon or

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43 There have been numerous scholarly works detailing the origins of the cross symbolism. See, for example, Jean Chevalier, *Penguin Dictionary of Signs and Symbols* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

44 Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (London: Taschen, 2010), 716-717, discuss the form of the “cross” in terms of crossroads. There is a separate entry for the Crucifixion (744-745).
shorthand for the Christian faith. In general, it is an indicator of Christianity, or an “icon” in the modern sense of the term rather than a symbol of religious contemplation or ritual.

The crucifix, though, is a theological construction that belongs to Christianity alone.45 A crucifix includes a figural representation of the body of Jesus hanging upon a cross, the instrument of his execution. For Christian believers, the crucifix represents Jesus’ sacrifice in atonement for humanity’s sin.

I am not concerned here with the historical or theological arguments surrounding the execution of Jesus. Rather, I consider here the crucifix as the crucial and primary image that evokes the soteriological connotation of Jesus’ death for Christians as it developed into a visible theological emblem. In other words, the crucifix’s primary raison d’être is to invoke a theological response, calling forth the main tenet of Christian doctrine for Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Eastern Orthodox churches.46 In short, the crucifix serves as the contemplative reminder of this core doctrine of salvation. But for non-Christians viewing a crucifix in an art museum, art historical or museological largely displaces this religious significance.47

The available literature on crosses and crucifixes (both scholarly and popular) tends to be rather limited to either confessional or art historical approaches.48 Interest in the evolution of the

45 In Crucifixion in Antiquity (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), Gunmar Samuelsson explores the early Christian invention of the “Crucifixion” as a theological rather than an historical event, and he asserts that ancient Romans simply regarded the practice as nothing more than a tool of capital punishment unworthy of a formal title.

46 Due to concerns over idolatry, many Protestant denominations use the cross, but not the crucifix.

47 It is commonly reported that observant Christian visitors sometimes make the sign of the cross in front of crucifixes installed in museum galleries.

48 This lacuna is being filled in part by the work of Richard Viladesau in a three-part examination of the theology of the crucifix: The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and
piety surrounding the crucifix has until only recently become important to scholars of both religious studies and art history. Contemporary scholarship on the development of crucifixes as a vehicle of religious practice and ritual as well as religious material culture have only recently gained traction. This scholarship has yet to influence museological interpretations, since the overarching category of the “medieval” continues to dominate in fine arts museum galleries.

There are numerous guidebooks on Christian imagery in medieval, Renaissance, and Counter-Reformation art, but strangely little is said about comparing individual crucifixes. Given the wide variety of extant crucifixes, a comparative taxonomy would be quite useful for students of art history. In the future, we can hope that such scholarship will become more widely available. In the interim, one must carefully observe individual crucifixes to obtain important art historical details. For example, looking at the MAG’s Crucifix, one can see that the body of Jesus is far too large for the size of the cross itself; this cross would not have supported the weight of a human man. The horizontal beam is too short and too narrow, while the vertical beam stops just above Jesus’ head, and is also too narrow. Apparently, for the sculptor, the original church where this object was located, and its parishioners, realism was of little importance. But nowhere in the art historical discussions of this object does this critique arise. How are viewers—the non-specialists in Christian and/or medieval Christian art—to understand the lack of interest in realism here? The wall labels are silent.

The crucifix was not merely a decoration in medieval churches. Then, as today, it was a critical theological emblem that communicates specifically Christian doctrines of salvation,

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redemption, and sacrifice. As Richard Viladesau notes about an eleventh-century wooden crucifix (similar in some respects to the MAG’s Spanish Crucifix):

The iconography of the cross is complex but at the same time straightforward. The crucified Christ is the incarnate divine Lord [sic], the risen savior, and the eschatological judge. The cross is therefore the tree of life and sign of hope for salvation from the powers of hell, which continue to attack the Christian.⁴⁹

The theologia crucis has evolved over the centuries. By the fifth century CE, the crucis fixus (“one fixed to a cross” indicating the body of Jesus of Nazareth) was a predominant image in churches across both the Latin West and Greek East. In medieval churches that lacked a chancel screen (as did most rural churches and chapels), large crucifixes hung behind and above the altar to remind worshipers of the sacrifice of their savior in atonement for the sins of humankind. Congregants were encouraged to pray before the crucifix, as prayers before it were considered sacramental. At first, only the crucifix itself was installed above the altar, but later entire crucifixion scenes were added to increasingly ornate and elaborate chancel screens.

The two main theological types of the Corpus Christi used in the Christian imagery during the late Romanesque and early Gothic periods have come to be labeled by art historians as the Christus Triumphans and the Christus Patiens. Such art historical stylistic terminology, however, severs the theological links between crucifixes and Christian theology a bit too neatly. The theology of the Christus Triumphans demonstrates Jesus’ triumph over death. In this type—the earliest—the crucified Jesus does not appear to be suffering and is instead looking out at the viewer with a peaceful gaze. Jesus’ body does not droop on the cross, pulled downward by its own weight, but is straight and upright and, often, clothed in a longer or knee-length perizoma. Further, Jesus appears to be standing, supported by some invisible force, while his eyes are

⁴⁹Richard Viladesau, Beauty of the Cross, 59. The crucifix that Viladesau examines is the Ivory Crucifix of Fernand and Sancha in the Museo Arquelógico, Madrid.
bright and calm, and a slight smile graces his countenance. In general, *Christus Triumphans* is nailed to the cross with four nails—one through each hand and each foot in the tradition established by Gregory of Tours (538-594).\(^{50}\)

The second type, the *Christus Patiens*, developed later by the tenth century. This type was contemporary with the *Christus Triumphans* although it tended to replace the triumphant version in the Latin West when thirteenth and fourteenth-century theological trends in Europe began to focus on the suffering of Jesus. In the second type, Jesus’ suffering is portrayed often in excruciating detail. His eyes are closed and his angled body sags painfully under its own weight. He is emaciated, his musculature strained, his skin ashen in either gray or green hues. In early medieval art imagery, Jesus was portrayed with the customary four nails, but in later depictions, the convention of three nails was used, with his feet attached to the cross by a single nail. The *Christus Patiens* type became the dominant form in the Latin churches of the West, particularly after the rise of the Franciscan Order in the thirteenth century. However, according to Oleg Zastrow, it was during the Gothic period that Christian visual narratives more frequently depicted images of Jesus’ crucifixion scene drawing attention to his suffering and torture on the cross.\(^{51}\)

This transition from four to three nails in crucifixion imagery has garnered little attention on fine arts museum gallery wall labels. Thus far neither scholars of Christianity nor theologians

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\(^{50}\) Gregory relates that Jesus was crucified with four nails and then provides additional speculation with regards to what became of those four nails. See *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs*, trans. Raymond Van Dam (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 25.

pay attention to this transition. Since the Church maintained strict guidelines for its ecclesiastical ateliers, it is reasonable to suggest that theological trends precipitated the transition, but this issue remains a topic of investigation for specialists in thirteenth-century theology and cannot concern us further here. What can be known about crucifixes is generally limited to the specifics, and, even here, like many other artifacts, scholars are left to sift through meager contextual information particularly when these objects come from rural areas of Europe (as is the case with the MAG’s thirteenth century Spanish Crucifix).

In its original religious purpose, a crucifix was designed to function as an object of contemplation, to communicate the complex doctrine of sacrifice, salvation, and redemption to the Christian faithful. Churches often housed flatworks (e.g., paintings and frescoes) among their ecclesiastical decoration and with the rise of the Church’s power and prosperity across Europe, new and more lavish visual depictions of both Old and New Testament narratives graced church interiors. The crucifix, however, remained the central theological emblem of the faith.

The MAG’s Crucifix and the Mourning Virgin and St. John were created for a rural church sometime in the 1200s. These are clearly not the most expensive or elaborate sculptures from the Iberian Peninsula. The theological purpose of these sculptures would have been to move

52 In December 2015, I corresponded with Richard Viladesau, professor of systematic and fundamental theology at Fordham University, regarding the transition of four to three nails in crucifixion imagery. Viladesau suggested that the changed occurred for aesthetic reasons rather than theological, though he did note that there was some reference to the three nails by Bishop Lucas of Tuy (d.1249) and fourteenth-century Brigida of Sweden (1303-1373) in her Revelations as well as among the heretical Waldensians and Albigensians. The Catholic Encyclopedia’s entry “Holy Nails” notes only that early medieval imagery of the crucifixion used four nails, but by the thirteenth century, three nails were used in iconography. See H. Thurston (1911) in The Catholic Encyclopedia, “ Holy Nails,” accessed June 13, 2016, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10672a.htm. An Internet search on the term “triclavianism” provides numerous articles and blogs related to the “heresy of “triclavianism” associated with the Albigensians and Waldensians who maintained that Jesus was nailed with three rather than four nails.
congregants into a contemplative, deferent attitude in the ritual observance of the Catholic mass or regularly daily services, and to remind viewers of the soteriological significance of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. The styles of worship in the eastern region of Spain were closely aligned with the Abbey of Cluny (Cluny, France), particularly the two main monastic centers of Santa Maria de Ripoll and Santa Maria de Montserrat. In fact, the most eastern Catalan See of Vich preserved its Benedictine culture despite the Muslim presence in the rest of Spain.54

Given the size of the MAG’s Crucifix, it is likely that it would have been hung above an altar, or affixed to a rood beam or a chancel screen. Since the figure is carved only in the front, it is unlikely to have served in liturgical processions. Further, its verso is not decorated. Specialists have identified the MAG’s Crucifix as having originated from the Catalan region of Spain. This assessment is based on its stylistic features as well as anecdotal evidence. Specialists in Spanish and Catalan art have focused on its formalistic features, noting that the ovoid shape of Jesus’ head reflects a stylistic preference common in Catalonia. But, this does not necessarily indicate a Catalan origin, as other rood crucifixes also have variously shaped heads. Another medieval Iberian crucifix (roughly contemporary with the MAG’s) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has a similar head shape, but its attribution is simply “North Spanish.”55 Consequently, other than to fit the object within an art historical stylistic and geographic taxonomy, one wonders what the importance is of identifying its origins of might be. What additional information does this provide about the object itself, particularly when the theological significance of the object in its period and regional context continues to be


overlooked on museum wall labels? Researchers concentrating on the religious significance of the MAG’s Spanish Crucifix cannot rely on the registration records for assistance.

The original meanings and significance, then, of the Spanish Crucifix reside in its theological, rather than its regional or stylistic implications. Therefore what has been included in the art historical description of the object offers us nothing more than a trace—an absence. Like the archaeologist arriving long after tomb robbers have ransacked a site, religion scholars are left to reconstruct medieval piety from objects removed from their original settings, lacking in both context and documentation. The trace points to the wide gaps in our understandings of the use of crucifixes in the medieval period in rural areas.

For example, when museum visitors are introduced to medieval Christian art, they are rarely, if ever told to compare the typology of crucifixes. Museum visitor’s attention is instead directed to period, geography, and form. What is missing from the wall labels is the theological importance of the object. Museum viewers never think about whether Jesus is portrayed having been nailed to the cross with four nails, one in each hand, and one in each foot, or three nails, one per hand, with one nail piercing both feet, one foot crossed beneath the other. This could simply be a stylistic development, or it could reflect shifting theological currents occurring in the twelfth and thirteenth-centuries.

In addition, when viewing crucifixes, especially medieval crucifixes, art lovers seldom consider the subtle differences that occur in crucifix imagery, and there are indeed many. For instance, in the Christus Triumphans genre, though Christ’s hands are nailed to the cross and are open, his arms are upraised as if he has full control and is simply allowing his hands to remain attached to the cross.
Details related to the religious context of crucifixes are often ignored. Visitors are rarely, if ever, encouraged to consider the theological implications of medieval imagery outside of hagiographical attributes. Yet the variations of crucifix imagery clearly reflect particular theological agendas, (for example, the treatment of Jesus’ arms or whether he is portrayed with his eyes open or closed). Is the head upright and straight? Is it dropped to the side, indicating agony? Is there a crown and, if so, is it a crown of thorns or the royal crown of a king? Is there a halo or aureole? Is Jesus visibly dying or dead, or alive and powerful? Are the traditional five wounds apparent? How is Jesus clothed, fully robed or in little more than a loin cloth? How is Jesus attired, luxuriously or scantily? What about Jesus’ musculature? Are his ribs visible? Are his limbs pulled taunt, with muscles stretched and torn, or is Jesus in full command of his limbs? Is he seated on a verso, the ledge beneath his buttocks, or is the verso missing? Is Jesus bearded or clean-shaven? Is his hair short, long, curly, straight, dark, or light? How has Jesus been crucified, with four nails or three? Is his mouth open or closed? Is there a sign above his head—either the INRI sign or another? Are there additional images carved or painted up on the cross? All these details are important indications of the Christology shaping the communities in which these crucifixes were originally produced. Yet this information is rarely—if ever—conveyed to museum audiences. Such audiences are left with the impression that all medieval Christians shared the same beliefs and represented their savior in the same way, despite overwhelming evidence of difference even within the same geographic region. Each hand-carved crucifix is as individual as the community that produced it.
Conclusion

The transformation of the Crucifix’s religious value into aesthetic value has changed the way the artifact is interpreted and understood. New models of appreciation and veneration have arisen as this object has undergone aestheticization and musealization. Visitors to the public, secular Memorial Art Gallery interact with the artifact visually and aesthetically rather than through Catholic devotional practices. Where in Catholic devotion, every gesture of the Corpus Christi was invested with deep theological implications, within the new fine arts epistemology, the object’s aesthetic qualities have become dominant. Art historical terms and conventions frame the MAG’s Crucifix for the viewer, who can then move on to the next item in the gallery. The object’s aesthetic merits and aesthetic value shape its presentation while its religious or cult value slides into the past.

In a sense, then, “medieval” becomes an historical adjective that obscures the complexity of the society, the various sources of the imagery of Jesus on the cross, the variations within the Christian faith, and the local differences in worship and religious expression. We are left with a remnant of Christian theology, which has been transformed into a new type of object. As an objet d’art, the MAG Crucifix and other medieval crucifixes housed in fine arts museums are now venerated from entirely different perspectives: historical and aesthetic.

In their missions to collect, preserve, and interpret, museums have used elements of Christian piety and ritual to weave a new cloth of aesthetic art appreciation. The medieval worldview reflected in and embodied by the thirteenth-century Crucifix has been reframed. 56

The Crucifix is now understood as an object of the history of art, a remnant of another realm of

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56 Caroline Walker Bynum examines the material and performative aspects of medieval art and material culture in her detailed treatment, Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe (New York: Zone Books, 2011).
knowledge. It has been incorporated into the fine arts industry and serves to illuminate a secular epistemology. At the same time the story of the Memorial Art Gallery provides a new teleological vision of itself—that a new hope has arisen for the collective aesthetic salvation of humankind through the celebration of fine art and the MAG’s role therein.

In this chapter I have considered the processes of aestheticization and musealization at work in the transformation an important Roman Catholic devotional artifact into a “medieval sculpture” that has been incorporated into a universal art historical narrative at the Memorial Art Gallery, a small, public university fine arts museum in central New York. I traced the history and mission of the MAG as a fine arts museum. I examined the Crucifix’s provenance from its entry into the historical record in 1932 to its acquisition by the MAG in 1952, in order to consider the place the Crucifix in its larger place within the MAG’s medieval art collection. This case study of the Crucifix at the MAG allows us to see the concrete ways that a central liturgical artifact from the dominant Western Christian narrative has been included in a universal art historical narrative as one religious symbol among many in the fine arts museum. In the following chapter, we will see how the religious artifacts from a minority religious tradition have been deployed by Jewish donors, collectors, and communities, to ensure that their artistic and cultural heritage is acknowledged and included within the art historical narrative and fine arts museums.
CHAPTER THREE: AESTHETICIZING THE TIK

The Judaic Art Gallery illuminates the spiritual life and ceremonies of the Jewish People through works of art of aesthetic excellence….
—North Carolina Museum of Art¹

Figure 7. Sanctuary, Shearith Israel, New York City, photo from www.shearithisrael.org.

In 1654, the Dutch colonial city of Nieuw Amsterdam was not welcoming to Jews, though many Sephardic Jews had fled to the Netherlands in hopes of escaping the tyranny of the Catholic monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand as they sought to unify Spain and purge it of its non-Catholic populations from 1492-1497. Despite Nieuw Nederland’s Governor Peter Stuyvesant’s objections, a small group of Jews was granted leave to settle in the small colonial city at the southern tip of Manhattan Island where they chartered their synagogue in 1654. They were not, however, allowed to build a house of worship. By 1656, the small Jewish community was

allotted some land to establish a cemetery for its congregants. Only after seventy-five years had elapsed and after the Dutch Nieuw Amsterdam became the English colony of New York did the Sephardic community build its first synagogue on Mill Street. Soon the growing congregation required additional synagogues and cemeteries. By 1897 the Shearith Israel synagogue had grown large enough that by 1897 it was housed in its fifth building, an imposing neo-classical structure located at the corner of 70th Street and Central Park West. Today the Shearith Israel synagogue remains a vibrant participant in the Jewish community of New York, boasting the honor of being the first Jewish congregation in the United States.

Like many Jewish houses of worship in America, Shearith Israel also serves as a community center where holidays are celebrated, educational events are held, tours are conducted, youth programs are provided, and identities are nurtured. Its website identifies it as being both “The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue” and “America’s First Jewish Congregation.” It has an on-line shop, on-site security systems in place, valuable liturgical furnishings, and the neo-classical gravitas of a museum.

When visitors walk into Shearith Israel from Central Park West, they face directly down the vestibule to the *aron kodesh*, or the Holy Ark, which faces in the traditional direction of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Housed and protected within the Ark is the Sefer Torah (the complete Five Books of Moses handwritten in Hebrew by a specially trained scribe) central to the faith of Judaism. In some synagogues, there are curtains over the Torah ark reminiscent of

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the curtain concealing the Holy of Holies in Exodus 26:31-33. The synagogue’s Torah ark connects congregants to God’s commandments both symbolically and physically. Jewish congregants are oriented toward the Torah, and through the Mosaic covenant toward God’s seat on earth in the Temple of Jerusalem. Every aspect of the synagogue serves a specific purpose to orient and guide worshippers in their faith. The Torah and its decorative, protective materials function in the service of the Jewish faith. Neither the Torah nor its accoutrements are extraneous. They are central and critical to Jewish ritual, devotion, and ceremony as part of the hide
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The hide

The hiddur mitzvah is based on rabbinic exposition of Exodus 15:2, “This is my God and I will glorify Him.” Beautification of the mitzvot (commandments) in Jewish tradition involves ways in which ceremonial, devotional, and ritual observances are enhanced through the use of beautiful materials designed to glorify God. The cult value of Jewish religious objects derives from the authority of the Torah and Talmud. Because of this, Jewish ceremonial artifacts are inherently imbued with aesthetic (exhibition) value since their use in ritual requires the objects to be as beautiful as possible. Jewish religious artifacts are designed to be pleasing not just to those who use them, but also to God. The aesthetic value understood in this way differs from the type of exhibition value achieved when Jewish religious artifacts are placed on view in a public fine

4 Ceremonial objects used in synagogue worship and in the Jewish home are generally referred to as Judaica, but scholars and institutions vary in their application of the term “Judaica.” For example, the University of Pennsylvania Libraries use it broadly to include biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts (accessed February 17, 2017, http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/judaica/judaicacollection.html). Sotheby’s and other commercial auction houses tend to use Judaica to refer to Jewish fine art as well as other Jewish collectibles, (accessed February 17, 2017, http://www.sothebys.com/en/departments/judaica.html). In this project, I use “Jewish ceremonial artifacts” or “Jewish religious artifacts” rather than the term “Judaica” since Judaica can also apply to Jewish religious clothing and jewelry, Jewish-themed paintings, or Holocaust memorial books (Yizkor), and other Jewish-themed items which are not used in home or liturgical ceremony. In this dissertation, I limit the use of “Judaica” to its use in specific exhibitions or by particular institutions.
arts museum where the object is no longer used in Jewish ceremony. In this new context, the Jewish religious artifact becomes understood in a new way.

In this chapter, I will explore the social and cultural dynamics at work as American Jewish communities re-conceptualized traditional Jewish ritual and liturgical artifacts as *objets d’art* by considering the ways that Jewish communities sought inclusion of their artistic and cultural heritage in the narrative of Western art history. First, I will examine definitions of Jewish art and consider the rise of Jewish museums that celebrate Jewish identity. Next, I will trace the history and mission of the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) and the efforts of Abram Kanof, a charismatic retired pediatrician, who established a permanent Judaic art gallery at the NCMA in Raleigh, North Carolina. With this historical frame in place, I will explore the transformation of religious value into aesthetic value by focusing on one particular case study, a Torah Tik from an unknown Iraqi Jewish community that has become one of the featured works in the North Carolina Museum of Art’s Judaic Art Gallery. Exploring the transformation of the Tik from a religious object to an art object allows us to consider how the processes of aestheticization and musealization came to be deployed by Jewish communities seeking acknowledgement of their cultural heritage in the art historical narrative.

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5 What this chapter does not cover is how the term “Judaica” is defined or applied. Second, I also do not provide detailed analyses of individual works of Judaica. Such questions of scholarly inquiry are better treated elsewhere by specialists in the field of Judaic Art. Third, I do not consider issues of provenance with regards to Nazi-era theft of Jewish art collections as this does not bear on my study here. Nazi-era provenance research is on-going and museums of repute are in the process of reviewing their permanent collections to ensure that all works in their collections were legitimately acquired. Lastly, other than very generally I do not consider the rise of museums that self-identify as “Jewish museums,” since these institutions are not established as public fine arts museums, which have different missions, collections, programs, and audiences.
Jewish Art as Identity

Recent years have seen the rise of interest in Jewish art history among Jewish and non-Jewish art historians. Indeed, Jewish émigrés from Nazi Germany and World War II brought their expertise to American art history departments, greatly enriching the discipline of art history in the United States. Though there has been much recent discussion over how to understand and categorize Jewish art, there seems to be basic disagreement regarding what exactly constitutes “Jewish art.” In traditional art history survey textbooks, such as Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: A Global History and Janson’s History of Art, the authors do not include chapters on Jewish art, even in the most current editions. Yet the category of something called “Jewish art” has preoccupied many scholars who have yet to agree on a working definition of the term.

With critical attention to all academic categorization and terminology since the 1970s (as a result of the postmodernist theory and “the cultural turn” in humanities disciplines), there has been new scholarly focus on art historical and religious terminology. Contemporary scholarship has benefitted from re-evaluating art historical labels such as “medieval,” a category that has been regularly applied to Christian art but that has ignored Jewish and Muslim influences on European culture.

Critiques of the category “Jewish art” arise primarily from specialists within Jewish cultural and art historical circles. For example, Margaret Olin recounts the history of Jewish art in *The Nation Without Art*, and Kalman Bland explores these issues in *The Artless Jew: Medieval Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*. Both works examine the role of Jewish religious conventions on artistic production and the long-held (though misinformed) view that Jews did not produce art due to Second Commandment and rabbinic proscriptions on idolatry. This view has now been rejected, and new attention can now be directed to the nature and contributions of Jewish art.

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10 It remains the practice of art history survey textbook authors (such as Jansen and Gardner) to identify particular artists as “Jewish” despite the complete lack of Jewish imagery in the artist’s work (for example, Amedeo Modigliani, Mark Rothko, Camille Pissarro, etc.), when other European or American artists are not referred to by religious or cultural identifiers (such as “Christian”). This remains one of the compelling questions in defining Jewish identity in the arts for scholars in Jewish Studies, Medieval Studies, Modernity Studies, Art History, and Museum Studies.
Olin begins her discussion of the lack of art history among Jewish communities by introducing comments from prominent scholars of Jewish art who note the problems inherent in establishing Jewish art as a sub-field or sub-discipline. Olin is, of course, correct that academic categories attempting to demarcate human communities and their artistic production are notoriously imprecise.\(^{11}\) The issue is not a new one, particularly in regard to what constitutes “religion” and what constitutes “art.” As I discussed in chapter one, there has been no shortage of scholars, who have wrestled with the tensions between religion and art and attempted to discern whether one or the other is the servant or the master.

With respect to Jewish art, the concern is not how the category of Jewish art is applied to Jewish religious artifacts, since ceremonial materials tend to be kept for ceremonial use.\(^{12}\) Traditional arts of painting and sculpture are harder to identify as “Jewish.” Academic art history faces major questions in determining whether objects should be classified as “Jewish art” if the works are not overtly religious in nature. Difficulties can arise in museological labeling practices when these categories are not clear. For example, should Camille Pissarro’s work be identified as Jewish, or French, or as art from the Danish West Indies where he was born? Alternatively, should Pissarro’s work to be considered primarily in terms of style, (e.g., Impressionist)? When artists work in the major media of the fine arts (painting and sculpture) and participate in international movements such as realism or expressionism issues of ethnicity do not arise as

\(^{11}\) Olin, *Nation*, 5-17.

\(^{12}\) Jewish families sometimes display collections of Jewish ceremonial art in the home, and Jewish synagogues often have collections of Jewish ceremonial artifacts that they place on display for visitors and congregants. However, a Jewish home or synagogue is not synonymous with a public fine arts museum. In the home or synagogue, religious artifacts are contextualized as ritual, ceremonial, and liturgical in a manner that is very different from their exhibition as part of a collection in a public fine arts museum. Of course, private collectors of Jewish ceremonial art may also display collections of Jewish religious artifacts in their homes, but again this differs from the setting of a public, secular fine arts museum.
often. One example, is the case of Marc Chagall (1887-1985). Chagall is commonly identified as a Russian-born French artist in general encyclopedia entries. Despite using Jewish imagery in his paintings, one must look to more specialized biographical treatments to learn about Chagall’s Jewish heritage. Should Chagall be acknowledged as being a Jewish artist, or a Russian-born French artist? This may appear as an academic dispute over nomenclature, but there are various tensions around Jewish identity in the arts. Some artists and critics wish to set aside Jewish identity, while others seek to highlight it.

In an influential 1966 article, philosopher and art critic Harold Rosenberg asks the question: “Is there a Jewish art?” In asking this question, Rosenberg seems interested primarily in paintings and sculpture. For Rosenberg, labeling Jewish ceremonial objects as “art” is problematic. He dismisses Judaica as “priestly” and questions its inclusion in the category of fine art. Following the art criticism of his time, Rosenberg assigned Jewish ceremonial art to folk tradition, with an anecdote recalling his grandfather’s unique carvings of a dreidel.

Yet looking at just a few examples of Judaica such as finely filigreed silver spice containers from seventeenth-century Europe or twenty first-century artist Aimee Golant’s interpretation of mezzuzot and menorot, it is difficult to side with Rosenberg in his dismissal of ceremonial objects as folk expression or mere ritual. Despite his bias in favor of “high” art, Rosenberg is most helpful in bringing to our attention the question of identity in Jewish culture. He then deflects this focus by suggesting that the issue of identity is a pervasive concern for every individual in the twentieth century, for Jews and non-Jews alike.

Confronted with the grim and tragic realities of the Second World War, Rosenberg suggests that Jews are expressing their individual identities through art, not by creating
something called “Jewish art,” but instead by bridging national and stylistic idioms to foster an “aesthetics of the self.” Rosenberg states:

This work inspired by the will to identity has constituted a new art by Jews, which though not a Jewish art, is a profound Jewish expression, at the same time that it is loaded with meaning for all people. To be engaged with the aesthetics of the self has liberated the Jew as artist by eliminating his need to ask himself whether a Jewish art exists or can exist.¹⁴

Rosenberg’s understanding of Jewish art has influenced many who have followed him. By ignoring or at least setting aside Jewish ceremonial art as “decorative” or “folk art,” scholars continue to debate whether there is something called “Jewish art.”¹⁵ This debate is echoed in broader tensions between fine art and decorative art. Today in many Jewish museums as well as public fine arts museums, decorative arts are often installed among paintings and grouped along historical or national lines.

The concern among art critics regarding whether Jewish ceremonial artifacts should be understood as fine art has tended to dissipate as individual objects and collections of Jewish religious artifacts have become available on the art market, and as art museums and Jewish museums have vied to acquire valuable artifacts. Judaica scholar Ernest Namenyi notes that a

¹⁴ Rosenberg, Ceremony, 60.

¹⁵ Catherine M. Soussloff begins her introduction to Jewish Identity in Modern Art History by recounting a panel focused on the question of “Jewish Identity in Art History” that she chaired at the College Art Association Annual Conference held in Boston, Massachusetts in 1996. The edited volume situates Jewish contributions to the historiography of art history as an academic discipline, but it is interesting to note that none of the contributors discuss the role of Jewish ceremonial objects as a category worthy of art historical inquiry. See Catherine M. Soussloff, ed., Jewish Identity in Modern Art History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). In a more recent treatment of Jewish art history, Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver point out that the label “Jewish art” has been and continues to be used without critical attention. There are several references to ritual art in the text, but they are extremely general. The authors are also at times inattentive to issues of Jewish access to the trades from region to region for Jewish crafting of ceremonial art, particularly in areas under Muslim political control. See Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver, Jewish Art: A Modern History (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).
specifically Jewish art historical record seems to begin with the discovery of Jewish artifacts in the collections of European museums and libraries in the late 1890s and as archaeological excavations in the 1900s unearthed additional examples of Jewish art.\textsuperscript{16} As I noted above, what art historians now identify as Jewish ceremonial art or Judaica includes objects that incorporate specifically Jewish symbolism and iconography and that are used either in the home, in legal, or in cultural practices (such as a marriage contract or \textit{ketubah}). These objects may also be used in synagogue liturgy and are generally made from fine materials (including silver, semi-precious stones, and/or rich textiles).

Pioneer scholars in the field of Jewish ceremonial art in America, including Franz Landsberger, Joseph Gutmann, Abram Kanof, and Vivian Mann, have moved the study of Jewish art and Jewish ceremonial art forward in several important respects. Since the 1960s, these scholars have produced monographs and anthologies that trace the cultural history of Judaica, focusing primarily on the stylistic rather than religious aspects of the objects, though since the objects themselves are used in Jewish ritual and ceremonial observance, religious usage of the objects cannot be ignored in their descriptions.

In his \textit{Jewish Ceremonial Art}, Joseph Gutmann notes that as of 1964, no systematic archive existed for the study of Judaica and that there were few historiographical treatments “on the origin and development of ceremonial objects of the Jews.”\textsuperscript{17} Wealthy Jewish individuals and synagogues had prized and collected Judaica for centuries, but it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that Jewish communities began sharing their rich cultural and religious heritage with the museum-going public.


Many wealthy Jews eventually bequeathed their collections, and these collections in turn formed new Jewish museums. One early donor in Warsaw, Mathias Bersohn (1824-1908), publicly exhibited his collection in 1875, and eventually his collection would serve as the foundation for the Muzeum Starożytności Żydowskich (The Mathias Bersohn Museum of Jewish Antiquities). Bersohn divided his collection into three categories: (1) Judaica, (2) Polish art, and (3) Polish Jewish Handicrafts. According to Richard Cohen, Bersohn can be credited with the differentiation of Jewish aesthetic artifacts into the three classifications. Further, Cohen notes, “Judaica was different from other forms of art: collecting was an act of affirmation of the Jewish past (sometimes also a form of local patriotism), and the objects themselves were exhibited in Jewish sites.”

Consequently, for a long period, collections of Judaica and Jewish folk arts were given only to Jewish institutions, not to the urban museums appearing in Europe after the French opened the Louvre as the first public, secular museum in 1791.

At the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in late December 1901, Jewish art was a core concern for an important group of delegates to the Congress led by Martin Buber and Ephraim Moshe Lilien. Of the eleven artists that were included in a small exhibition in Basel, not one produced traditional ceremonial or religious artifacts. Instead, the artists were well-known and well-respected painters, sculptors, etchers, and architects. As supporters of Buber and Lilien, their hope was to promote a larger appreciation of Jewish culture (including literature, music, poetry, the visual arts, and architecture) while marrying it with a Zionist agenda—the need for a nation-state in Palestine as the venue for launching Jewish art. According to Gilya Gerda Schmidt, by the time of the Fifth Zionist Congress, the issue of the nature and existence of

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distinctly Jewish art was of concern both to advocates of Zionism and to those who denounced it. Schmidt recounts the on-going dispute over the existence of a distinct genre of Jewish art on the part of both Jews and non-Jews alike. With regards to the Fifth Zionist Congress and its innovative Jewish art exhibition, Schmidt notes, “The rise of Zionism was an opportunity to reawaken European Jewry to a creative re-envisioning of community in the light of emancipation.”

Between 1890 and 1910, approximately two million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to America, and Richard Cohen demonstrates that in America (as well as in Palestine) Jewish immigrants relied on the arts both to assimilate and to acculturate. During this period, the Educational Alliance in New York City organized art classes for recent Jewish immigrants as a means for Jews to acculturate into American society. Drawing on the nineteenth-century view that the arts served to instill aesthetic and moral refinement, Jewish immigrants were encouraged to take art classes. In Palestine, as Cohen notes, the Jerusalem-based Bezalel School of Art (known today as the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design) was founded in 1906 by Boris Schatz in hopes of promoting distinctly Jewish art and crafts. Prior to World War I, American Jewish artists tended to seek assimilation into a global historical narrative, while Zionist Jews in Palestine sought to maintain separatist communities.

Catherine Soussloff discusses the role of German Jewish émigrés in America and their impact on the disciplines of art history and museum studies. Soussloff notes that American art

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20 Ibid., 16.

21 Richard I. Cohen, “Overview,” 8. Cohen further maintains that the arts were used ideologically for Zionist and socialist causes.
history has been largely dominated by German Jewish art historical criticism, which serves as the foundation of the disciplines today. Further, she notes that well-known scholars of art history in America (such as Clement Greenberg, Meyer Shapiro, and Bernard Berenson) were not interested in, or least did not work on, creating a specialty in “Jewish art.” Neither did they seek to consider Jewish art from a distinctly Jewish perspective. Instead, these scholars concerned themselves with Western art historical criticism in toto.22

Only in recent decades has scholarly interest in Jewish art arisen in academia. In some ways, scholars are torn on how to understand, approach, and define Jewish art. Yale scholar of Judaic Studies and art historian Margaret Olin describe the category of “Jewish art” as amorphous, one that does little to classify or organize any particular works of art since non-religious work (flatworks and sculptures) by Jewish artists, ritual objects made by Christian silversmiths for Jewish ceremonial use, and Jewish domestic and synagogal religious artifacts can all be referred to as “Jewish.”23 No clearly understood or accepted criteria have emerged to delineate the parameters of “Jewish art.” Despite Buber and Lilien’s agenda to have Jewish art recognized and included within the canon of Western art, the subject matter of the eleven artists whose paintings were on view at the Fifth Zionist Congress was secular, so it is difficult to determine what was “Jewish” about these paintings.24


24 According to Gilya Gerda Schmidt, Jewish art as an intellectual category has its origins in the Cultural Zionist movement, which itself was divided into four subcategories: Jewish history, literature, language and science; Jewish art; Jewish sociology; and Jewish national adult education. Schmidt, The Art and Artists of the Fifth Zionist Congress, 6.
In *Jewish Art: A Modern History*, Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver note that there is an ongoing tension in how Jewish artists understand their work in relation to the larger frame of Western art history and in whether they wish to self-identify as Jewish or have this label applied to them by non-Jewish art historians. But Baskind and Silver conclude that regardless of whether artists wish to be considered Jewish, modern Jewish artists must be categorized with this label. Still the use of “Jewish” to identify a particular body, style, or genre of art remains a complicated gesture when applied to the fine arts of painting, sculpture, or photography. The label is much less controversial when used to describe or identify Jewish religious artifacts.²⁵

With the Jewish Enlightenment (1770-1880) and Jewish emancipations from European political oppression (1791-1917), Jewish communities in Europe began establishing Jewish museums at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to celebrate their heritage and culture, dispel stereotypes, and assert their membership in modernity.²⁶ This movement paralleled the spread of public national museums that began in the eighteenth century. According to Jewish museum historian Emily Bilski, there were several factors behind the founding of Jewish museums, including the widespread cultural changes that occurred within Jewish communities with emancipation and assimilation, the rise of scientific approaches to understanding religious heritage and traditions, the move away from strict observance of *mitzvoth*, the subsequent appreciation of ceremonial objects for their inherent aesthetic value, and

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a desire to share Jewish culture with non-Jews. As Edward Van Voolen suggests with regards to the latter half of the nineteenth century, “Jewish exhibitions and museums presented Jewish religion, history, and material culture to a secularizing Jewish bourgeoisie.” The secularization of religious artifacts by Jewish communities followed the larger trend of secularizing Christian and Muslim religious artifacts by placing them in the collections of fine arts museums in Europe and America.

According to Grace Cohen Grossman, former senior curator at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, the first collection of Judaica to be acquired outside of Jewish circles was the collection of Ralph Bernal (1783-1854), a member of the British Parliament who converted to Christianity though his parents had been Jewish. In 1855, Bernal’s collection of Judaica was transferred to the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1887, the Smithsonian Institution became the first American museum to establish a Judaica collection, though the collection was not originally to be designated as an art collection, but rather as an inclusion in the department of comparative religion.

The first public exhibition of Judaica was held at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1878, with 82 objects displayed. Many other important Judaica exhibitions were to follow, including the London Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition at the Royal Albert Hall in 1887, which included paintings alongside ceremonial objects. In 1905, an exhibition of Judaica was


held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. What differentiated the Whitechapel exhibition from earlier ones was the inclusion of work from noted modern artists such as Pissarro and Max Lieberman, portraitist Emile Lévy, Pre-Raphaelite artist Simeon Solomon, and Dutch painter Jozef Israels. The catalog for the exhibition states that the 1905 exhibition differed from the earlier 1887 Royal Albert Hall exhibition by “including a Collection of Works by Jewish Artists, English and Foreign, and [by inviting] the offer of exhibits from all countries.”

The exhibition was an all-encompassing celebration of Jewish art and antiquities, including ceremonial artifacts, objects of domestic observance, engravings, manuscripts and books, portraits, prints, and the works by the cited painters. It was initiated by the gallery owners, Canon and Henrietta Barnett, and organized by a committee of socially prominent English Jews. The Whitechapel exhibition indicates that it was members of the Jewish communities themselves who formulated the art historical category of Judaica, collecting, interpreting, and preserving these objects by placing them on view for the larger public. In fact, the Whitechapel exhibition drew 150,000 viewers, introducing Jewish art and antiquities to a general audience.

With the formation of new Jewish museums across Europe (Vienna in 1897, Danzig in 1904, Prague in 1906, Warsaw in 1910, and Frankfurt in 1922), Jewish communities in the United States launched initiatives to establish Jewish museums in the larger metropolitan areas. In 1904, Judge Mayer Sulzberger donated twenty-six objects from his collection of ceremonial artifacts.

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32 Ibid., 44.
art to launch a permanent collection for a new Jewish Museum in New York City, which became a reality in 1947 under the stewardship of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. According to consulting curator Emily Bilski, the founding goals of the Jewish Museum were “the collection, preservation, and research of material Jewish culture, coupled with presenting this material to the larger community in a compelling context.”

Jews living in diaspora communities across Christian Europe (Ashkenazim) and Jews living in Muslim-majority regions of the Middle East and North Africa (Sephardim and Mizrahi) contributed to and absorbed elements of the surrounding cultures in which they lived. Several recent studies of Jewish history as well as museum exhibitions have reconsidered the view that Jews were often isolated from other Jewish communities as well as ostracized by their non-Jewish neighbors. In fact, Jewish ceremonial art has never been static and has long integrated stylistic features from surrounding cultures. As Joseph Gutmann notes, Judaism and its material forms demonstrate significant change over time and significant engagement with neighboring cultures, reflected in the variety of styles in Judaica as well as in the forms that ceremonial objects take.

In addition, the styles of European Jewish ritual objects tend to reflect a preference for the Baroque, since the Baroque period (1600-1750) was an important time of transition and pride for Jewish communities. The Baroque period saw the rise of the so-called “Court Jews,” with

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33 Bilski, The Jewish Museum, 9.


Jewish advisors present in European imperial courts and with Jewish merchants able to access overseas markets across the Mediterranean as well as the Americas. After the Enlightenment and particularly during the mid to late nineteenth century, Jews embraced every type of artistic medium, while Jewish ceremonial art began to be collected and exhibited as a means of openly expressing and sharing Jewish identity and artistic forms with European and American societies at large.\(^{36}\) The rise in Jewish influence and wealth is reflected in wealthy Jewish elites commissioning ritual objects to uphold *hiddur mitzvah* through the nineteenth century. This prominence can be seen in the collections of Jewish ceremonial art in Jewish museums as well as public fine arts museums, although Jewish ceremonial objects from outside of Europe tend to reflect a preference for particular regional and local styles (as we will see in the North Carolina Museum of Art’s Iraqi Tik discussed below).

After the State of Israel was founded in 1948, many Jews who had long resided in lands under Muslim control in Iraq emigrated to Israel, bringing *tikim* with them which led to their use in both Sephardic and Ashkenazi synagogues.\(^{37}\) In addition, the modern nation-state of Israel saw the rise of new forms of Jewish and Israeli art. Indeed, there have been significant changes in the styles of Jewish ceremonial art as artisans and artists moved away from traditional Ashkenazi and Sephardic styles and began working in modernist and contemporary styles. Around the world, Jewish artisans and artists began producing Jewish ceremonial art, drawing on modern

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\(^{36}\) Landsberger, *History*, 10-11.

styles and reflecting the desire to create purposefully *objets d’art* rather than just as religious materials for ceremonial use.  

Growing collections within Jewish museums and general museums, which featured the art and artifacts from Jewish communities around the world, led to the creation of subspecialties within the academic disciplines of art history and Jewish studies that focused on Jewish art. Vivian B. Mann, Margaret Olin, Norman Kleeblatt, and Abram Kanof among others served as the founders of the new subspecialty, raising critical attention to the role of Jewish artists in global culture. Mann and Kleeblatt note in the exhibition catalog, *Treasures of the Jewish Museum*,

Jewish art history was largely oblivious to the formal stylistic, iconographic, and ideological analysis that dominated art history for most of the twentieth century and the narrow approach of that which was published led to the neglect of Jewish art within general art history. Just as the study of Jewish art ignored general art historical concerns, so the world of art history ignored Jewish art.  

Fortunately, Mann and Kleeblatt’s lament that the fine arts world ignored Jewish art was answered. Today Sotheby’s holds an annual auction of Judaica (including Jewish religious artifacts and Jewish ceremonial art), and scholarship on Jewish art and Jewish artists is growing.  

As noted above, Jewish museums originally began as a way for Jewish communities to celebrate and share their religious and cultural heritage with Jews and non-Jews. The formation of collections of paintings and sculptures by Jewish artists as well as collections of Judaica opened the way for the inclusion of Jewish art in broader art history. The collection and exhibition of ritual and ceremonial objects begun by Jewish communities in Europe and America

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resulted in the subsequent inclusion of Judaica into the art historical canon, as the founding of the first state museum of art, the North Carolina Museum of Art, demonstrates. The North Carolina Museum of Art and the Minneapolis Institute of Art are two important public art museums that have important collections and galleries devoted specifically to Jewish religious artifacts. The story of the North Carolina Museum of Art’s founding and the formation of its Jewish Art Gallery frame our case study, the early twentieth-century Iraqi Tik.


**The North Carolina Museum of Art**

Like most American museums, the North Carolina Museum of Art’s origins lay with a small coterie of wealthy and socially connected individuals who sought to create a public art museum in the early 1920s. The North Carolina Museum of Art evolved out of several early efforts to promote art programs, jointly sponsored by the North Carolina Historical Commission (founded in 1903) and the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association (founded in 1912).

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40 The North Carolina Museum of Art, “About,” accessed February 12, 2017, http://ncartmuseum.org/about/history/. The North Carolina Museum of Art was not the first public fine arts museum to be founded in the state. The Mint Museum in Charlotte was established in 1936, while the Hickory Art Museum was founded in 1944.
The Fine Arts Society was formed as an arm of the Literary and Historical Association in 1925. It was incorporated and given a new name as the North Carolina State Art Society in 1927, with the mission of garnering support for the creation of a state art museum. One of the museum’s early supporters and donors, Robert F. Phifer, left a bequest of art as well as funds for the acquisition of art for a state art collection in 1928.\textsuperscript{41}

The North Carolina Art Society held a series of art exhibitions in 1929 at the state Agriculture Building in Raleigh. The exhibition featured works bequeathed by Phifer and additional works previously acquired by the Art Society. During that same year, the Art Society approached the NC General Assembly requesting that the Society be taken under state control. The General Assembly authorized a sixteen-member governing board, which included the Governor of North Carolina, the Attorney General, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Chair of the Art Society, and other members appointed by the Governor and by the Art Society.\textsuperscript{42}

The Federal Works Project Administration (WPA), which selected North Carolina as the national center of operations for the Federal Art Project (FAP) in 1935, shaped the museum’s early history.\textsuperscript{43} In 1939 the Art Society was granted a larger gallery space on the second floor of the old North Carolina Supreme Court Building.\textsuperscript{44} In partnership with the Art Society, the Federal Arts Project took over staffing and operations for the new gallery, naming it the “Raleigh Works Project Art Gallery.” In 1943, the collaborative affiliation between the Federal Art Program and Art Society ended when the U.S. Congress terminated the WPA. With the


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 18-19.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 20.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 19.
withdrawal of WPA financial and staffing support, the Art Society was once again placed under the governance of the NC General Assembly, and the gallery’s name changed to the State Art Gallery.

Shortly thereafter, Robert Lee Humber (1898-1970), an international attorney, advocate for the world federation movement, and a state legislator, was appointed by Gov. J. Melville Broughton (1941-1945) to chair the Citizen’s Committee for a State Art Gallery. Broughton had long supported the formation of a North Carolina state art gallery, requesting funds from the General Assembly for that purpose. As chair of the Citizen’s Committee, Humber championed the mandate from the Governor to establish a state art museum. Humber’s connections led him to New York City, where he made the acquaintance of noted art collector and philanthropist Samuel H. Kress. Over the next few years, Humber obtained Kress’s verbal agreement that Kress would donate $1 million toward the establishment of a permanent art museum in Raleigh. Kress, however, imposed two caveats. The first was that the $1 million would be matched by additional funding sources, and the second was that Kress would remain anonymous during these negotiations.  

Humber approached the General Assembly, and in 1947 with the political support of the governor the Assembly allocated $1 million for the purchase of a state art collection. With the museum’s financial foothold assured, Humber resumed the negotiations with the Kress Foundation. Instead of $1 million dollars, the Kress foundation offered $1 million in paintings by old masters. Despite considerable opposition in the Assembly to this new arrangement, the Assembly narrowly voted to allow the Art Society to accept the Kress donation to purchase art

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for a permanent art museum in North Carolina. The bill also stipulated that the State would ensure $1 million to match the value of the works accepted. The result was the founding of the first state-owned and state-operated art museum in the United States.46

Through the efforts of a New York pediatrician, Abram Kanof, the Judaic Art Gallery at the North Carolina Museum of Art was established in 1983. Kanof was the founding president of the Jewish Museum in New York City, and he was instrumental in bringing Jewish art and culture to numerous audiences. In fact, as Emily Bilski remarks,

Dr. Abram Kanof and his wife, the late Dr. Frances Pascher Kanof, enabled the [Jewish] Museum not only to guard the treasures of the past, but assured the continuous creation of Jewish ceremonial art. In 1956 they established the Tobe Pascher Workshop at the Jewish Museum, providing office, classroom, and studio space for resident artists.47

In 1971, Kanof and his wife (also a physician) moved to North Carolina when they retired from active practice. His interest in promoting Jewish art and culture continued in his adopted state. In 1975, Kanof persuaded Moussa Domit, then director of the North Carolina Museum of Art, to allow him to organize an exhibition of Jewish ceremonial art. In the early seventies, the Museum was housed in a renovated state government building in downtown Raleigh, with room for special exhibitions. Kanof’s enthusiasm and willingness to serve as guest curator resulted in the exhibition, entitled “Ceremonial Art in the Judaic Tradition,” which was held April through June 1975. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, which Kanof wrote that was published by the NCMA.48 The exhibition was so well received that the Museum decided to extend its duration for an additional two weeks.

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46 Ibid., 5-6.
47 Bilski, The Jewish Museum, 15.
Because of the success of the exhibition as well as Kanof’s dedication, Domit and the Museum’s trustees agreed to allow Kanof to develop a permanent collection of Judaica. The collection assembled by Kanof was first displayed in 1983 in a small gallery in the new museum on Blue Ridge Road in Raleigh. Until his death in 1999 at the age of 95, Kanof remained the volunteer curator of the Judaic Art Gallery and was a regular presence at the museum, conducting tours of the gallery for visiting schoolchildren, college students, and civil groups. In addition, Kanof delivered public lectures and educated the museum’s volunteers and docents on Jewish tradition, culture, and artistic achievements.

To this day, the North Carolina Museum of Art is one of only two public art museums with a dedicated gallery of Jewish ritual art. After Dr. Kanof’s death in 1999, a fund was created to host an annual memorial lecture in his honor. Various scholars are invited to speak on a wide range of topics related to religion and art. In 2001 the Friends of the Judaic Art Gallery (FJAG) was founded as a volunteer affiliate group to help raise funds for continued acquisitions, research, and conservation of the objects in the collection and for related educational and outreach programs.

After Kanof’s death, Deputy Director and Curator of American and Modern Art John W. Coffey began overseeing the Judaic Art Gallery and serving as the liaison with the Friends group. Working with the FJAG steering committee, Coffey formed a strategic plan for the Judaic art collection, which included a long-term acquisitions program with a focus on

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49 John W. Coffey joined the NCMA’s staff in 1988 as the curator of American and modern art. For ten years, Coffey collaborated with Kanof with regards to the Judaic Art Gallery, and Coffey became Kanof’s successor after Kanof’s death. In 2002 Coffey became the Deputy Director for Art, overseeing the curatorial, registration, conservation departments, and art reference library. He is currently Deputy Director for Collections and Research and retains curatorial responsibilities for the American, Modern and Judaic collections.
strengthening the historical base of the collection, expanding its range, and continuing to collect modern and contemporary Judaica. There are currently plans to commission artworks from important national and international designers, artists, and artisans whose media reinterpret traditional objects or traditional themes of Judaic ritual objects. Further, in keeping with the museum’s guidelines with regards to aesthetic quality, objects obtained for the Judaic Art Gallery must represent the highest artistic achievement. Guiding parameters for acquisitions to the Judaic Art collection dictate that works represent ceremonial and liturgical practices, represent the variety and diversity of Jewish cultures, and include objects not only from regional and geographic communities but also from important centers of Judaica. The FJAG steering committee and Coffey continue to acquire works from the 1700s forward as part of their acquisition strategy, which seeks to build on the existing strengths of the collection.

In 2010, the North Carolina Museum of Art opened a new building that is architecturally quite different from the adjacent 1983 building. The new West Building, designed by Thomas Phifer and Partners, includes an expanded Judaic Art Gallery located in the European suite of galleries, adjacent to the highly popular Impressionist Gallery. The location of the Judaic Art Gallery toward the back of the West Building is interesting since, to reach it, visitors must walk through the main corridor and through the ancient, medieval, and European galleries, situating the Judaic Gallery within the Western canon of art both visually and spatially. According to Coffey, the new gallery space for the Judaic art collection is 1728 square feet, much larger than the original, and offers a bright and airy ambiance. Though there is little contextualization of any of the NCMA’s collection, Coffey has included embroidered Torah mantles (Torah ark coverings) to enhance and emphasize the ritual and sacred nature of the Torah. The incorporation

of the Torah mantles reflects the hiddur mitzvah and connects the artifacts with their original religious purpose.\(^{51}\)

The objects included in the Judaic Art Gallery represent major Jewish traditions from across the world, with a Torah case from China, a menorah from the Bezazael Workshop of Israel, and numerous works from Europe, Israel, and the United States. The Museum’s “Strategic Plan for the Judaic Gallery” emphasizes that these works are “art” first and only secondarily “Judaica.” Consequently, the objects are presented as *objets d’art* and their religious context is largely absent from wall labels. Individual docent tour guides, who specialize in Jewish ceremonial art, explain in detail how the objects would be used in religious observance and ritual practice. For the casual visitor to the Judaic Art Gallery, however, it is the aesthetic qualities of the individual objects that are stressed. These objects are presented as high art.

The relationship of the Judaic Art Gallery to the rest of the North Carolina Museum of Art, like many collections, follows the idiosyncratic path of its founding donor and original curator. After Abram Kanof’s death in 1999, Coffey and the steering committee refined their presentation of the Judaic art collection and continued scholarly research on it.\(^{52}\) Its preservation, conservation, documentation, and interpretation continue to stress the aesthetic qualities of the works over their religious value. This is particularly notable when one observes that there is a Torah scroll included in the Judaic Art Gallery. Further, since the North Carolina Museum of Art

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\(^{52}\) The NCMA and the Friends of the Judaic Art Gallery have contracted noted scholar of Judaica Gabriel Goldstein to research and evaluate the collection. Goldstein serves as the Associate Director for Exhibitions and Programs at Yeshiva University Museum.
is a museum of fine arts and not a museum of religion, it is understandable that the NCMA would focus museum visitor’s attention on the aesthetic value of the artifacts. The aesthetic value situates art historically which is the preferred discourse in such a setting. Art appreciation can be fostered in a state-run fine arts museum because it highlights the aesthetic features of the artifacts rather than the practices of a specific religious tradition.

Figure 10. Torah Tik, 1908. G.80.5.3, North Carolina Museum of Art, showing the upper right and left interior crown inscriptions.

The Fine Art Tik

Walking through the European galleries of the North Carolina Museum of Art, one finds the Judaic Art Gallery in the next gallery over from the very popular French Impressionist collection in the European wing. The Judaic Art Gallery unfolds in a series of bright white and glass vitrines, each case expertly displaying objects of Jewish cultural heritage and celebrations grouped by ceremonial purpose or domestic use. The gallery walls are also painted white, with wall label text in black. The objects in the cases and on the walls contrast sharply with their pale
surroundings and highlight the silver and bronze details and decorative features. Two sheer silkscreen panels divide the gallery. These panels recall a Torah ark, which would enclose the Torah in a synagogue, but at the NCMA it divides the Judaic art collection of Torah mantles, shields, crowns, finials, and tiks from the other ceremonial objects in the gallery. The design of the Judaic Art Gallery purposely draws attention to the aesthetic properties of the objects it exhibits, yet there are numerous wall labels and educational materials in the gallery informing visitors of each object’s importance and use in Jewish tradition.

The Torah case (or Tik) at the NCMA provides an illustrative case study of how religious artifacts that were traditionally used for Jewish ceremonial purposes become *objets d’art*. The NCMA’s Tik contains an early twentieth-century Moroccan Torah scroll, and it is adorned with two finials (*rimmonim*). In fact, the NCMA’s Tik, Torah scroll, and finials are an assembly of objects chosen and assembled together based on Iraqi stylistic and regional customs.⁵³ Like so many religious artifacts that grace the collections of major fine arts museums, the NCMA’s Tik and its current finials have little provenance information.

The NCMA’s Tik has been cared for and well-maintained, as can be seen from its condition.⁵⁴ The museum wall label provides the following information regarding the Tik: its title, “Torah Case/Tik”; its 1908 dedication date; artist unknown; its physical dimensions (H. 36 7/8 x Diam. 10 1/2 in. (93.7 x 26.7 cm); and details about its medium, “Silver: die-

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⁵⁴ Much of the art in the Judaica Art Gallery is encased due to the value, fragility, and portability of the objects. This is often a necessary reality of museum practice.
stamped, repoussé, cast appliqué, chased, engraved, partly gilded; wood; textile, carnelian beads (restoration).” The NCMA also informs visitors that the museum acquired the object though “Museum Purchase, Judaic Art Fund and Museum Purchase Fund” and provides its accession number (G. 80.3.5).

The NCMA’s Torah scroll dates to the mid-nineteenth century and its text is slightly abraded or weakened in some areas, which renders it pasul or non-kosher (this means that the Torah can no longer be used in liturgical service).\(^5\) Since its provenance is not known, there is no indication as to who commissioned or produced it. The Torah scroll does not come from Iraq, but instead appears to hail from North Africa (possibly Morocco) origin. The gallery label information for the Torah scroll provides the following additional information: “Ink on calf skin vellum, sewn with animal sinew,” and the statement that it is a “Gift of the Friends of the Judaic Art Gallery in honor of Dr. and Mrs. Elmo Scoggin.” The NCMA’s Torah scroll is regularly turned to different passages in order to protect the light-sensitive scroll.\(^6\) Torah scrolls contain the complete Five Books of Moses and are generally hand-written on prepared and sewn animal skin by specially-trained scribes, and rolled around two staves.\(^7\) The NCMA’s Torah scroll is calf skin, which Coffey notes reflects the typical preference of Jews from Muslim majority


\(^6\) I observed during my April 24, 2013 visit to the NCMA that the Torah Scroll was open to Leviticus 11, and during my May 12, 2016 visit the Torah Scroll was open to Exodus 35:30-36:1. Turning the scroll not only helps to preserve it, but allows viewers to see different passages. The turning of the scroll mirrors its liturgical use as well. The NCMA provides gallery cards adjacent to the Scroll for visitors, so they can read an English translation of the Hebrew passage.

\(^7\) Franz Landsberger suggests that the convention of using two staves was influenced by Roman practices, “The Origins of European Torah Decorations,” *Beauty and Holiness: Studies in Jewish Customs and Ceremonial Art* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1970), 87-163.
lands. The staves must be made of wood, in order to reflect the *atsei hayyim* or “Trees of Life,” though there are various interpretations of stave symbolism.

As to the Tik’s provenance, we only know that it likely came from an Iraqi Jewish synagogue, but we do not know the city or town of origin. The style of the Tik is traditional and does not reflect any modernist influences. Information from the inscriptions on the Tik itself provide some context, but we do not know how it migrated from its original home synagogue in Iraq or how it was acquired by Moriah Artcraft, Inc., a prominent New York Judaica dealer, who then sold it to the North Carolina Museum of Art. The Tik includes a dedication date of 1908, which is inscribed on the case. The Tik itself is constructed of wood, covered with a silver repoussé, inscribed in Hebrew, and adorned with carnelian beads (which are restorations of lost originals). The Tik measures nearly thirty-seven inches high and nearly eleven inches wide when closed, and it has gilding on the outside and a fabric-lined interior.

Acquired by the NCMA in 1980, the Tik was displayed prominently in the 1983 Judaic Art Gallery in the original East Building. When it was acquired, the Tik had been assigned a North African origin by Moriah Artcraft. The North African attribution was repeated in Kanof’s

58 Coffey, “Proposal,” 2.


61 Yosef Tobi, “Challenges to Tradition: Jewish Cultures in Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Bukara,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed., David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 933–951. At ibid., 945, Tobi points out that European and Western cultural and educational reforms introduced in Jewish communities in the Middle East generally influenced only the elites.

62 The Tik’s exact height is 36 7/8 inches (93.7 cm) by 10.5 inches in diameter (26.7 cm).
1996 publication, *A Guide to the Judaic Art Gallery of the North Carolina Museum of Art*. In 2003, however, Gabriel Goldstein, a Judaica scholar and curatorial consultant from Yeshiva University Museum, provided the NCMA with a report on the Judaica Art collection, noting that the Tik’s place of origin was incorrect. Goldstein suggested the Tik be correctly attributed to Iraq, leaving the dedication date of 1908 unchanged.

There have been two translations of the Tik’s Hebrew engravings. The first, by Abram Kanof, reads as follows:

This case and Torah scroll within it are dedicated by the great lady Dina, most blessed of women in the tent, wife of Rafael Aharon, sexton, in the year 5668. Permission is given to the synagogue by the donors to move this Torah whenever necessary. This is the Teaching that Moses set before the Israelites. These are the laws, rules, and instructions that the Lord established. Dedicated to the soul of the righteous woman, may glory rest upon her, Dina, the daughter of Hannah, may she be remembered always, who has gone to her eternal home, Sunday the twelfth day of Kislev, in the year of 5692. May her soul be bound up in the bonds of eternal life.  

In a 2011 translation of the inscriptions of the upper left and right interior crown section by Duke University graduate student Benjamin Gordon, the top left translation reads, “This is the Teaching that Moses set before the Israelites. These are the laws, rules, and instructions. I am the Lord.” The top right reads, “This Torah and Torah scroll it contains were dedicated to the Lord by the great lady Dina, most blessed of women in tents, wife of the sexton Raphael Aaron, may the Lord watch over him and revive him. He passed away in 5668.”


64 Transcription/Translation (March 2011) by Benjamin Gordon, Ph.D. Candidate, Duke University. Gordon translated the Hebrew engravings at the request of John Coffey, Deputy Director for Art, Curator of American and Modern Art, and Curator of the Judaic Art Gallery for the NCMA’s internal records. The subsequent quotations are taken directly from Gordon’s translation.
Gordon’s translation clarifies the inscription as it is not the death of Dina that occurred in 5668, but, in fact, that of her husband. Gordon also noted that it is possible that the word for sexton or gabbai may reflect the surname of Raphael Aaron, giving his full name as Raphael Aaron Gabbai rather than that term serving as a title. In addition, Gordon translated the lower lines of the inscription as, “For the soul of the blessed departed Dina the daughter to Hannah, may she rest in peace.” We are told that “she passed away on Sunday, the twelfth of Kislev, 5692. May she be bound in the bond of life.”

Coffey agreed that including this new information on the museum label for the Tik in the new Judaic Art Gallery (2011) was important both to humanize it and to recall its original sacred purpose.

Figure 11. Rimmonim, late nineteenth to twentieth century. North Carolina Museum of Art, 2006.10/a-b.

The Tik and Torah scroll’s finials (rimmonim) date from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. The finials are made of brass and are six and a half inches high. The wall label tells visitors that the finials were a “Gift of the Harold Kadis and Robert Kadis families in ________________

65 The date of Dina’s death in the Gregorian or Western calendar is November 22, 1931.
memory of their parents, Isaac and Mary Kadis.” It also informs that the finials are “Iraqi,” but like the Tik, there is no further provenance information on the wall label. According to Stephen Kayser, rimmonim were the earliest form of Torah decoration and imitate the shape of pomegranates, symbols of fertility throughout the ancient Near East. Pomegranates are a traditional Jewish symbol; the number of pomegranate seeds is held to be 613, the exact number of mitzvot in the Torah. Rimmonim sit atop the staves to which the Torah scroll is affixed. Kayser further suggests that the two staves to which the whole of the Torah are attached symbolize the legendary two pillars called Joachin and Boaz, which stood at the entrance of Solomon’s Temple, which was also decorated with pomegranates. Kayser notes that regional differences exist in preference for the form that rimmonim take. In Europe, rimmonim generally favor the tower shape, while the round pomegranate form was most often used in the Middle East and North Africa. 66

There is not a great deal of scholarship related to tikim in either art history or religious studies. Bracha Yaniv, a scholar of Jewish ceremonial art and tikim has established a typology for tikim. Yaniv contends that there are three general categories of Torah cases: (a) the Babylonian type; (b) the North African type; and (c) the Mediterranean type. Though the geographic regions denoted by Yaniv tend to overlap, each variety of tikim shares certain characteristics and features. 67

All three types of tikim are rigid, made of wood, and are used mostly in Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewish communities, although after the founding of the State of Israel, 66 Kayser, *Jewish Art*, 43.

67 Bracha Yaniv, “Regional Variations of Torah Cases from the Islamic World,” in *For Every Thing A Season: Proceedings on the Symposium on Jewish Ritual Art* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland State University, 2002), 38-75. Yaniv provides the scholarly framework for Tik typologies.
Ashkenazi communities began to use tikim as well. The North African or Yemenite type is often painted and has a flat top from which the staves of the Sefer Torah extend vertically. The Mediterranean type was most popular among Jewish communities residing in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Greece, and Asia Minor. These cases are generally prismatic, with the addition of a carved coronet. Babylonian tikim have cases that are either cylindrical or prismatic and are generally made of wood (the type of wood is not specified), with the wood either bare or painted. Babylonian tikim are also often covered with repoussé metal, leather, or a combination of such materials. Yaniv notes that the tops of these cases, or crowns, are “spherical or onion-shaped,” while the staves that hold the Sefer Torah tend to protrude diagonally and are covered with spherically-shaped rimmonim. Yaniv dates that spherical design to after the seventh century, following the Muslim conquest of Iraq and the influence of Sassanid royal crown styles (as depicted in numismatic evidence). Each new Sassanid king designed his own individual crown, which was then replicated in coins minted. Further, Yaniv also concludes that the royal crowns designed with spikes reflect the sun’s rays and derive from Persian Zoroastrian beliefs in the sun and moon’s influences (again citing numismatic evidence).68

It is also likely that the spherical shape derives from Persian designs including architectural elements. Yaniv describes the tradition behind attaching mitpahot, long rectangles of cloth that once protected the Sefer Torah prior to the use of rigid wooden cases. In Babylonian tikim, the interior plaques on the crown can be read. In general, the inscriptions contain information concerning the dedication donors and date.69

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.
Yaniv notes that there are precedents for tikim from the classical world, where scrolls were most commonly wound around a single stave. Over time, rabbis and Jewish scribes changed their practice of using a single stave to wrap individual books of the Torah to sewing all five books into one scroll and then winding the compilation around two staves both for protection and for ease of reading during synagogue services. Though Jews adopted the codex style for study purposes, scrolls were retained for ceremonial readings, a practice which continues today. Custom reflected in the Jerusalem Talmud as well as the Babylonian Talmud maintains that the Torah should be wrapped in a cloth (*mitpahat*) as a second layer protecting it from profane contact. These mitpahot were commonly woven from linen or wool, but Yaniv is unclear as to whether mitpahot were used prior to the adoption of tikim or in addition to the placement of tikim in either the Torah Ark or niches in synagogues. The Talmud does not prescribe a special shape or dimensions for tikim, but the practice possibly derived from Greek and Roman *theke*, or boxes used to carry and store scrolls. Vivian B. Mann suggests that the use of tikim derived from the Muslim practice of placing the Quran in a wooden box for protection. If this is the case, then it speaks to the cross-fertilization of Jewish and Muslim cultural values and practices in Muslim-majority regions of North Africa and the Middle East.

According to Mann, Jewish communities across North Africa were using tikim as early as the eleventh century and metal-adorned wood cases evolved from earlier textile coverings. Two designs for these protective spaces or niches were employed in synagogues. One arrangement

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included an enclosed Torah ark, while a second arrangement used an open niche design, which was most commonly used in Middle Eastern and west Asian synagogues. After the tenth century, tikim underwent a stylistic change. Prior to the tenth century, tikim opened from the top and the scrolls had to be removed to be read. After the tenth century, the practice developed in which the tik was split vertically in the front and back, with both pieces attached by a hinge. In the new format, the Torah did not need to be removed from the case and the scroll was read upright, with the case sitting on the *bimah* (a table or podium). Yaniv provides a reference for the change in practice dated to the late tenth to early eleventh-century *responsa* of Rav Hai Gaon of the yeshiva in Pumbedita, Iraq.\(^7^3\)

Tikim are used to house the Torah scroll primarily by Jewish communities throughout Middle-eastern regions. According to Mann, tikim were commonly used in Spain and continued to be used by Sephardic communities in the Spanish diaspora that relocated to North Africa and throughout the Near East.\(^7^4\) In fact, Mann notes historical documentation that provides the first reference for the use of copper tikim in the Fostat synagogue in Old Cairo dating from the eleventh century. The reference was found among the repository of Jewish documents found in 1896 with the re-discovery of the Cairo Geniza.\(^7^5\) The Cairo Geniza has provided a trove of historical information for medieval Jewish life across Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East. Evidence exists for the use of tikim across Muslim regions from the eleventh century forward.

\(^7^3\) Yaniv, “Regional Variations,” 42.


\(^7^5\) Mann, *Art and Ceremony*, 2. A *geniza* is an interior storage space or repository attached to a synagogue. It is used to house old or worn out Torah scrolls or religious texts temporarily prior to their proper or ceremonial disposal.
Visual comparison with Islamic art from these regions demonstrates the influence of Islamic architectural forms, motifs, and designs in Jewish material culture and these tikim reflect such Islamic artistic influences.  

In general, tikim are made from metal or wood that has been overlaid with metal sheaths or gilding. The interiors of tikim are often covered with rich fabrics. Yaniv has demonstrated that tikim used in Sephardi and Mizrahi communities in Muslim-majority nations reflect regional variation and acquire local stylistic features. When not in liturgical use, tikim are kept in a niche or cabinet (the Torah ark) or on a table (bimah) in the center of the synagogue sanctuary. Tikim provide highly portable protective cases for the Torah scroll and are often beautifully embellished to uphold hiddur mitzvah.

It may not be possible to draw any causal conclusions regarding the design of Babylonian tikim, as the styles may have been the result of individual preference, funding, or function. Yaniv’s analysis demonstrates that the history and development of these ceremonial objects is a topic worthy of further investigation to tell the story of Babylonian Jewish communities and their community customs and practices.

The NCMA curatorial program has worked to include as much cultural context as possible for the NCMA Tik. But cultural context is often a secondary priority, the first being space limitations and installation requirements. For example, the NCMA Tik does not rest closed within a Torah ark nor does it reside in a niche that faces toward Jerusalem. Instead, the


77 Yaniv, “Regional Variations,” 46.

78 NCMA Deputy Director for Art John Coffey explained that the Tik and Scroll could not be placed on an eastern facing wall due to museological constraints within the available gallery
NCMA Tik case remains open and on view inside a glass vitrine. It is an educational benefit of the curatorial choice to display the Tik open so that visitors may see how the Torah scroll fits inside the case. Though the NCMA Tik does not have a mitpahat flow from it like it would were it ensconced within a synagogue niche, it does have decorative textiles attached to the finials in imitation of the arks of Baghdadi synagogues. But the glass vitrine is remains an ever-present reminder of the aestheticization and musealization of the Tik and Torah scroll and its new meaning as an object of art.


The Religious Tik

“This is my God, I will glorify him.”

John Coffey noted that is was purposely done to contextualize the NCMA Tik’s Iraqi origin.
The Tik in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art is more than a simple wooden case made to house a religious text. It has been incorporated into a network of Jewish historical, art historical, and museological significance. Though Jewish ceremonial objects are necessary for Jewish ritual and liturgical observance, they are not in and of themselves considered sacred. The Torah, however, is considered sacred. This installation of a Torah scroll and Tik offers us a significant case study for how religion and art intersect in meaningful ways. This is particularly relevant for our study, since practices surrounding the Torah are very much a part of Jewish religious life in the present day.

Ceremonial artifacts related to the Sefer Torah and synagogue liturgy, like the artifacts included in the Judaic Art Gallery of the North Carolina Museum of Art, are still used in synagogues across the world. These ceremonial artifacts embody more than just aesthetic values, they reflect deeply held Jewish values, traditions, and religious obligations. Their cult value cannot be separated from their exhibition value, except when placed within the setting of a public fine arts museum, where the processes of aestheticization and musealization have succeeded in separating religious value from aesthetic value within the public space of a museum gallery.

Just as Roman Catholic strictures governed the use of medieval Christian liturgical materials, rabbinic law and community custom determine how Jewish liturgical materials are to be used, maintained, stored, and (when necessary) disposed of or buried. Many of the mitzvot come directly from the Torah, while others were instituted based on rabbinical commentaries, including the Talmud.\(^80\) Jewish ceremonial artifacts and the rituals in which they are used

\(^80\) Moses Maimonides discusses such commandments in his twelfth-century *Mishneh Torah*, and they are also mentioned in the sixteenth-century rabbinic *Shulchan Arukh*, See David J. Goldberg
evolved over time as Jewish communities in the diaspora found new ways to express their identity and piety outside their Middle Eastern homeland. Various types of liturgical and ritual artifacts developed over time to reflect different functions and varying degrees of sacrality.

The two main categories of Jewish liturgical objects are generally known as tashmishei kedusha (“accessories of holiness”) and tashmishei mitzvah (“accessories of religious observance”). The first category, tashmishei kedusha, includes objects that protect and decorate the Sefer Torah (cloth mantle, finials/rimmonim, crown/keter), Torah shield/hoshen, Torah pointers/yadim, Torah curtains/parochet, the podium or table/bimah on which the Torah is placed when not in the Torah Ark/Aron Kodesh, phylacteries/tefillin worn by Orthodox Jewish men during prescribed prayers, the decorative case or holder with handwritten verses taken from Deuteronomy (mezuzah and klaf) that are attached to the doorposts of Jewish homes, and containers or cases that hold Torah scrolls or codices. The second category, tashmishei mitzvah, includes the objects necessary to perform a commandment either in home rituals or in synagogue services, such as the ceremonial ram’s horn (shofar), ceremonial wine goblets (Kiddush), Sabbath candlesticks, Passover Seder plates, Hanukah lamps (menorah/menorot) and prayer shawl with fringe (tallit and tzitzit). Given traditional Jewish strictures regulating the use and

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81 Though Jewish communities lived outside of the Jewish homeland of Israel during both the first and second temple periods, the Jewish Diaspora generally dates to the Bar Kokhba Revolt when the Roman emperor Hadrian expelled the Jews from Jerusalem and parts of Judea, renaming the territory Syria Palestina in 135 CE.


disposal of ceremonial artifacts, it is interesting that many of these objects have found their way into public art museums.

Aestheticized, musealized, and encased, the NCMA Tik—now presented as a work of art—is no longer in religious service, but it is a vivid reminder of an Iraqi Jewish community and its dedication to hiddur mitzvah. The NCMA gallery label cannot, of course, provide all of the available contextual information regarding the origin and first use of the Tik. But the Tik bears witness to the vitality of Iraq’s long history of Jewish life in the region (dating to the 586 BCE Babylonian Exile). Throughout their long residency in Mesopotamia, whether under the Sassanid Persians or Ottoman Muslims, Jewish communities were a fixture of the regional culture, especially in Baghdad.84

For centuries, Jews and Muslims lived and worked together in Iraq with little of the hostility and animosity that tends to characterize Jewish and Muslim relations in the current Middle East.85 Jews who resided in Baghdad viewed Iraq as their home for centuries and traced their lineage to the Judahite exiles after the fall of the First Temple. As reflected in the biblical book of Ezra, not all exiled Judahites returned to the new Persian satrapy Yehud. Instead, some preferred to remain in the cosmopolitan city of Baghdad, which they adopted and to which they adapted during the roughly fifty years of the Babylonian Exile. Given the length of Jewish


presence in Iraq, it is likely that Jews and Arabs shared many cultural habits and customs.\textsuperscript{86} Certainly, the NCMA Tik reflects the realities of Jews and Arabs sharing artistic preferences in the region.

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire established control over Iraq. Iraq was incorporated into the Empire administratively, since it had become an important merchant city for the British India Trading Company. Commercial ties with the Jewish population allowed the Ottomans to increase and prosper. Only some sectors of the Jewish and Muslim populations benefited, though, giving rise to greater social and class stratification within both the Jewish and Muslim communities. Further, the wealthy Jewish elites became politically influential, which enabled them to establish merchant posts in India as well as the Far East. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, many Jews moved to Baghdad from the Kurdish areas in northern Iraq. They found relative peace and security in the city, except during the 1889-1891 cholera outbreak in the region, which saw the loss of between five and ten percent of the Jewish population.\textsuperscript{87}

Shlomo Deshen recounts that Mesopotamian Jewry constituted the major center for Jewish culture until the late medieval period when it “disappeared” until the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The Jewish community recovered and flourished again until the pan-Arabic pogroms (the “Farhud”) under influence of the Axis powers, which unleashed widespread

\textsuperscript{86} Orit Bashkin’s thesis is that Jews in Baghdad were thoroughly “Arabized” and considered themselves Arab-Jews. See Orit Bashkin, \textit{New Babylonians: History of the Jews in Modern Iraq} (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012).

violence against native Jews in Iraq during the interwar and World War II period up until the formation of the State of Israel in 1948.  

In 2003 the American National Archives were called in to rescue and recover several thousand Jewish books and documents from Saddam Hussein’s Intelligence headquarters (Mukhabarat) in Baghdad. Hussein’s motives in collecting and storing so many treasures of Jewish heritage remains a mystery, as does the source of many of them. The expert staff of the National Archives has been able to salvage, restore, conserve, and catalog over 2700 religious books, including Hebrew Bibles, copies of the Talmud, prayer books, Haggadot (Passover Seder text), and printed Jewish calendars. The staff continues to research and catalog tens of thousands of additional documents that are mostly associated with the Jewish communities in Baghdad and that date back to the mid-sixteenth century. As these documents become available digitally, future researchers should learn much more about the Iraqi Jewish communities and how they flourished and contributed to Iraqi cultural, political, social, and religious life up to the point of the political and social tragedies that caused their eventual emigration out of Iraq. After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, many Jews who had resided in lands under Muslim control in Iraq emigrated to Israel, bringing tikim with them, which led to its use in both Sephardic and Ashkenazi synagogues.

Though it has now become aestheticized and musealized as an object of fine art, the NCMA Tik retains its religious value as well as its aesthetic value. There is no fully satisfying or


accepted means for disentangling the Tik’s cult and exhibition values. Like the MAG’s Crucifix, the NCMA’s Tik was originally produced to be seen and used for religious purposes. Despite the absence of information concerning its origin, the Tik’s religious value remains inconvertibly tied with its aesthetic value, and the Tik continues to serve as a marker of Jewish identity and community in the region of Iraq. As an object of fine art, however, it is housed in a museum vitrine, not a Torah ark. It sits in a gallery surrounded by other fine art objects that have been donated or acquired as fine art in a public fine arts museum. Though its importance to Jewish religious history and identity has not changed, the Tik has been imprinted with a new set of meanings.

Conclusion

Religious celebrations and rituals generally tend to invoke the senses in ways that cannot be duplicated in an art museum. Jewish home rituals, for example, invoke all the senses. Visitors to the Judaic Art Gallery at the North Carolina Museum of Art, however, can access Jewish ritual objects only through vision. They cannot listen to the Torah as it is recited or hear the cadence of the congregants’ responses. They cannot inhale the scent of spices in the container during Sabbath’s closing prayer (Havdalah), or taste wine from the Kiddush goblet, or feel the warmth of lighting the candles of the menorah. The objects of Jewish ceremony in the Judaic Art Gallery at the North Carolina of Art do, however, create a valuable rich understanding of Jewish religion and culture, and they serve to support, celebrate, and advocate for Jewish culture in the
southeastern United States. The North Carolina Museum of Art is a leader in terms of incorporating Jewish art into global art history.

Neither academic art history nor critical religious studies can tell the full story of a religious artifact, which has a biography that is written over by history, politics, economics, and social practices. This is particularly apparent in the case of the NCMA Tik, whose story bleeds past all types of confinement. Since we do not know the historical circumstances that shaped the production of the NCMA Tik, we can only attempt to piece together its origin. The Tik is a beautiful, aesthetic object that represents Jewish identity from Iraq and recalls a long history of the presence of Jews and their connection to ancient Babylon. Given the hiddur mitzvah, the commandment to glorify God by creating objects that are both beautiful and ritually functional, Jewish ceremonial and liturgical artifacts are equally imbued with aesthetic value and religious value. On view in a public fine arts museum, the NCMA’s Tik and Torah scroll have been fully integrated into the Western art historical narrative.

In this chapter I have considered the processes of aestheticization and musealization at work in the transformation of an early twentieth-century Iraqi Tik and Torah scroll to explore the deliberate strategy used by Jewish donors and communities to have their artistic and cultural heritage included in the narrative of art history. In this chapter’s case study of the Iraqi Tik’s journey from an unknown Iraqi synagogue to its incorporation into the collection of a regional state art museum at the North Carolina Museum of Art, I traced the social and cultural dynamics at work as Jewish communities reconceptualized their traditional religious objects as “Jewish fine art” that was then exhibited in public fine arts museums. I considered the history and

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91 As of 2014, Jews in North Carolina make up about 0.3% of the State’s total population of 9.5 million. Those residents are concentrated in the Triangle region that includes the Museum as well as in Charlotte, North Carolina’s largest city.
mission of the North Carolina Museum of Art and its Judaic Art gallery to demonstrate how the formation of a Judaic art gallery at a public fine arts museum fosters the inclusion of Jewish artistic heritage within the narrative of Western art history. In the following chapter, we turn to explore how Islamic art has been deployed ideologically in service to a pluralist agenda to counter and defuse the prejudice toward Muslims in America.
CHAPTER FOUR: AESTHETICIZING THE MIHRAB

The mihrāb is the first and perhaps only symbolic form that can be explained almost entirely through religious, indeed pietistic, reasons.
— Oleg Grabar

Figure 13. 9/11 Memorial Plaza and Museum, New York City, Davis Brody Bord (DBB), 2012
Source: https://www.911memorial.org/explore-memorial.

With a population of over 8.5 million residents, New York City is home to numerous landmarks, historic sites, and museums. Besides the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, for decades when people thought of New York City’s architectural highlights, they thought of the iconic World Trade Center’s Twin Towers, finished in 1973 and reaching skyward at 110 stories each for a height of 1,360 feet. For a short time, the Twin Towers were the tallest buildings in the world until they were eclipsed by the Willis [Sears] Tower in Chicago (erected

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later in 1973 to a height of 1,451 feet). Still, the World Trade Center with its seven-building complex was more than an architectural feat; it was a lofty symbol of commerce and progress for some, but a beacon of American economic, military, and cultural hegemony for others. In the present day, however, the Twin Towers mean something else entirely.

September 11, 2001 changed American views of the Muslim world in ways with which we are still engaging and that we are still evaluating. Images of the Twin Towers rupturing and burning came to dominate many Americans’ views of Islam and its 1.6 billion adherents despite calls for toleration, education, and religious freedom on the part of scholars, clerics, and political figures. American television news stations maintained twenty-four hour coverage on the attacks for months afterwards. In late 2001, President George W. Bush launched the American war in Afghanistan with the goal of routing out Al-Qaeda and its sympathizers. With the American media machine in high gear and Americans still suffering from the 2001 attacks, in 2003 Bush successfully garnered support to attack the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, opening the way for the American invasion of Iraq with the purported goals of “freeing” Iraqi citizens from Hussein’s tyranny and thwarting the Iraqi leader’s efforts to use weapons of mass destruction against his own people as well as his enemies.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were accompanied by the Bush administration’s campaign for ideological support. Given the tragedies and loss of life of Americans in the attacks on American soil, sympathy for the administration’s “War on Terror” was high. Although many voices spoke out against the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, those voices often fell on deaf ears. Mainstream news and media outlets showed little interest in educating Americans about the history and cultures of the Islamic World. After September 11, Islamophobia raged higher than ever and still dominates news headlines. Perhaps most noteworthy was the confusion and discord
over how to memorialize the victims of the 9/11 attack and the decade-long debate over the construction and siting of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, which finally opened in 2012. The Memorial and Museum serve both as a shrine to the victims and a portrayal of American strength in the face of its perceived “enemies.” As a result of American political policy and its accompanying ideological rhetoric, fear and prejudice toward American Muslims at home and “alien” Muslims abroad manifested itself in the form of “Islamophobia.”

Despite the efforts of academics, educators, intellectuals, and various social commentators Islamophobia was again on full display in the 2016 presidential election. Donald J. Trump’s election success demonstrates that in the fifteen years since 9/11, Islamophobia does not seem to have waned in the hearts and minds of many Americans.\(^2\) In response to the continued strength of Islamophobia, various cultural institutions, including museums, have come to see public education about Islam and Muslims as an important component of their mission.

The rhetoric of the fine arts so often invoked during the formation of fine arts institutions and university art history departments across Europe and the United States has once again been subtly deployed in our current political environment. Narratives of a peaceful and elegant Muslim artistic heritage are deployed by fine arts museums to counteract the daily media stream focused on the criminal activities of extremist-terrorist fringe groups. One important strategy to

counteract negative stereotypes of Islam has been to highlight the traditions and heritage of what has become understood as the “arts of the Islamic World.”

In this chapter, I will examine the ways that the notion of “Islamic art” has been formed historically and how it is deployed in the contemporary world as a means of counteracting negative stereotypes of Islam. I will focus particularly on the history of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) and the giants of American industry who were behind its formation in the late nineteenth century. The Met has long housed an important Department of Islamic Art and in 2011 the Met opened a reinstallation of its Islamic art galleries under the new title, galleries for the “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, and Later South Asia” (“AAL”). My goal in this chapter is to explore how contemporary American public art museums exhibit Islamic liturgical objects, using my case study of the famous Iranian Mihrab on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In this chapter’s case study of a fourteenth-century Iranian Mihrab, I will explore the formation of the category of “Islamic art” as it too becomes a distinct category of fine arts over the twentieth century and an important vehicle for introducing Muslim culture to Western audiences. Next, I trace the history and mission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City to note its role as a fine arts museum industry leader. To consider the ideological effects produced by the display of Islamic art at the Met, I examine the new iteration of the Met’s

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3 Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81(3) (Summer, 2008): 651-81. Winegar identifies the political agendas that lie behind the use of the fine arts rhetorics governing the deployment of Islamic art in counter-narratives to Islamophobia.

Islamic art gallery that reopened in the fall of 2011 as the “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia” and focus on the differences between understanding the Mihrab as fine art and understanding the Mihrab as a religious object. Finally, I consider the ways in which the aestheticization and musealization of Muslim artifacts both parallels and diverges from the aestheticization and musealization of Christian and Jewish religious artifacts.

**Islamic Art as Ideology**

Modern scholarship on what has come to be known as “Islamic art” is a relatively recent academic undertaking. Aesthetics has certainly long been an important part of Muslim philosophical traditions, but Islamic art has been a category of the Western academic discipline of art history for merely a century, with critical attention to the specialty coming about only in the past few decades. An important critique of this field, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) provided a valuable corrective to European and American attitudes toward non-Western cultures and the discourses that circumscribed them. Said’s work serves as one of the foundational texts for postcolonial studies. In brief, Said’s thesis is that the West created a monolithic category of the “Orient” as “other,” the West’s negative mirror image of the exotic, mysterious, unknowable. The West invoked the ideological construct of the Orient as epitomizing the irrational, the static, and the passive. In contrast, the West portrayed itself as active, dynamic, and rational, thereby reinforcing its political dominance over the nations and cultures across the Middle East and Asia.\(^5\) In conjunction with Said’s argument, new ways of thinking about the Middle East and the Arab world developed in response to various political developments (including the 1979-1980 Iranian Revolution that directly impacted American and European political and economic

interests). But an ideology of Euro-American superiority continues to resonate within the written art historical narratives describing the Islamic World.

For example, as recently as 1987, renowned scholars of Islamic art Oleg Grabar and Richard Ettinghausen introduced their first edition, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 650-1250* by framing Islamic art in these terms:

The Word “Islamic” as applied to art, refers to those people who have grown and lived under rulers who professed the faith of Islam or in cultures and societies which have been strongly influenced by the modes of life and thought characteristics of Islam. But “Islamic,” unlike “Christian,” refers not only to a faith but also to a whole culture, since—at least in theory—the separation of the realm of Caesar from that of God is not applicable to Islam. Also, unlike Christianity, Islam did not refer first as the faith of a few, increasing the numbers of its adherents under the shadow of a huge state alien to it, slowly developing the intellectual and artistic features, which were going to characterize it, and after several centuries, blossoming into an empire and giving birth to an art as well as a philosophy and social doctrine. Rather, these developments were telescoped into a few decades of the seventh and eighth centuries A.D.

The revised and expanded second edition of *Islamic Art and Architecture 650—1250* was published in 2001 takes into account more recent scholarship from many fields including cultural studies. The new edition does not offer a concrete definition of Islamic art, though an adaptation of the above quotation is included.

In both volumes, there seems to be a generalization and essentialization of Islam as a culture inseparable from its religious frame. Islamic art must then in some way reflect Islamic

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religious values.\(^9\) Oleg Grabar was one of the founding figures of Islamic Art scholarship in the West, and he had a major role in how the category of Islamic art was formed by academic art history. Grabar’s influence on the field of Islamic art cannot be overestimated.\(^10\) Here, in one of the founding art historical treatments of Islamic art, one sees Islamic art being framed as essentially different from Christian art. These types of generalizations about Islam remain current in the minds of non-specialists. Still, one must consider that the academic discipline of art history gave ideological birth to Islamic art, that the discipline has grown into maturity as a specialty, and that it now understands itself as a leading force in counteracting prejudice regarding Islam and Muslims.

Given this history, the basic terminological conventions of the field of Islamic art carry the seeds of misunderstanding and confusion. The term “Islamic” is inherently ambiguous. It can refer to a culture or a religion, and in either case, it works to group together enormously disparate cultural phenomena under a single label that implies some kind of unitary whole. For example, many objects that are classified as “Islamic” were made for secular purposes. In speaking about glassworks in the Met, curator Stefano Carboni notes that the same craftsmanship

\(^9\) The conversation regarding how to define the parameters of Islamic art is a continuing one and one in which I will discuss below with relation to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With regards to modern Muslim art, see Judith Ernst, “The Problem of Islamic Art,” in *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 107-31. A recent treatment by Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), reconsiders the utility of the label “Islamic” as an analytic term in order to underscore the simultaneous unity and multiplicity that “Islam” and “Islamic” means to Muslims. My thanks to Carl Ernst for this reference.

applied to the fashioning of mosque lamps with enamel and gilding was also applied to everyday objects including “sweetmeat bowls and spittoons.”

The term “Islamic art” has its own historiography and critical discourse, which cannot be fully outlined here since scholars have yet to agree on what the term should cover: (a) should the term apply to art and architecture that is specifically related to the religious or ritual expression of Islam, or (b) should the term apply to art that has been formed or created within lands that are culturally Muslim but not specifically for religious purposes, with Islamic art becoming a cultural identifier rather than a religious one, or (c) should the term be discarded altogether and museums reorder current Islamic art galleries according to region and time period following the conventions used in many other galleries. In fact, there seems to be a distinct move in the third direction, particularly with the Met’s 2011 reinstallation of its former “Islamic art galleries”


12 The webpage “About Islamic Art” from Doris Duke’s *Shangrilia Center for Islamic Arts and Cultures* states, “Status of the Field. The field of Islamic art history is currently experiencing a period of self-reflection and revision. Publicly, this is most evident in a number of major museum reinstallations (Metropolitan Museum of Art, Louvre, Brooklyn Museum, David Collection) that have transpired over the last decade and some of which are still in progress. Of central concern is the validity of the phrase “Islamic Art” to describe the visual culture in question. Some curators and scholars have rejected this religious designation in favor of regional specificity (consider the new name of the galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) and have criticized its monolithic, Eurocentric, and religion-based origins. Indeed, although some examples of Islamic art and architecture were made for religious purposes (a Qur’an for recitation in a mosque), others served secular needs (a window to decorate a home). Moreover, there are many examples of non-Muslims creating works of art categorized as “Islamic,” or even “Islamic” works of art created for non-Muslim patrons. These realities acknowledged, some scholars and institutions have opted to stress the Islam component of “Islamic art” (consider the name of the Louvre’s renovated galleries, “Arts of Islam,” that reopened in the fall of 2012),” accessed April 22, 2017, http://www.shangrilahawaii.org/islamic-art-collection/about-islamic-art/.
under a new designation, the galleries for the “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.”

Is it useful to use “Islamic” in identifying art objects that are not religious in nature? Marshall G. S. Hodgson offered a solution to this dilemma of nomenclature. Hodgeson advocated (a) restricting the use of the adjective “Islamic” only to those aspects of Muslim culture that can be identified as distinctly religious, and (b) using the term “Islamicate” for “the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.”

Hodgeson’s proposal never took hold. Instead, the category “Islamic” has remained the standard label for religious art and artifacts as well as secular decorative objects made in Muslim-majority lands. In fact, the Met still maintains its Department of Islamic Art despite renaming the galleries by culture and region. Tensions over nomenclature have persisted from Hodgeson’s day forward. Oleg Grabar, Richard Ettinghausen, and their intellectual heirs continue this debate today.

Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom’s 1994 follow up to Oleg Grabar and Richard Ettinghausen’s 1987 Art and Architecture of Islam: 650-1250 refrains from any discussion of definitions, claiming that their volume “is designed as a survey and manual, not as a vehicle for speculation and broad cultural interpretation.” Following the conventions of most art historical surveys of Islamic art, Blair and Bloom end their overview with the year 1800, as European political and economic imperialism came to dominate North Africa and the Middle East (with the

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13 Marshall G. S. Hodgeson, The Venture of Islam vol. 1: The Classical Age of Islam (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977), 57-60. In this sense, then the NCMA Tik (discussed above in chapter three), which was produced in Iraq and reflects Muslim cultural idioms, would be considered “Islamicate.”

exception Ottoman Turkey and Iran). Blair and Bloom follow the dominant historical narrative that somehow after 1800 Europe directly influenced Islamic art to the extent that it was no longer something authentically “Islamic.” They acknowledge that there were earlier cultural interactions among Europe, North African, and the Middle East, including the Carthaginian general Hannibal’s crossing of the Alps (in 218 BCE during the Second Punic War), Crusader incursions during the Middle Ages, paper manufacturing in Islamic Iberia, and trade in paper and Bursa silks between the Islamic world and Europe. But this narrative does little to establish tangible examples of cross-fertilization in art and culture. As Blair and Bloom’s volume demonstrates, there is great need for a scholarly re-evaluation of the notion that Islamic art fades or disappears after European colonial contact in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Traces of this notion Islamic culture had a “Golden Age” that can be consigned to the past is still part of the art historical discourse.

Fortunately, this is changing, and acknowledgement of the cross-fertilization of art and culture between Europe and Muslim-majority lands is becoming more prevalent. At the same time, though, as Annette Hagedorn and Norbert Wolf suggest in their introduction to *Islamic Art*:

Today Islam is in many cases publicly misrepresented, so the way in which Islamic art and culture are perceived in the Western world, the way in which Islamic art is received and comprehended, is becoming increasingly volatile. Hagedorn and Wolf point out that the troublesome label “Islamic” often does not refer to objects that have anything to do with Muslim beliefs, practices, and traditions, but instead it is attached

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15 Ibid.

16 Annette Hagedorn and Norbert Wolf, eds., *Islamic Art* (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2009), 6.
to decorative and domestic objects (such as rugs, vases, or bowls) that have little to do with Islam as a religious system.\textsuperscript{17}

In 2003, the Met closed its Islamic art galleries to re-evaluate and re-assess its Islamic art collection and gallery installation. As a result of this re-evaluation, the curators decided to change the gallery’s name from “Islamic Art” to galleries for the “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.” The change in the gallery’s name reflects a self-conscious effort on the part of the Met to dispense with older museum conventions that employed religious or ethnic labels (such as “Buddhist” or “Hindu”) and instead to organize and label galleries according to national origin (American art), region (Oceanic art), continent (African or European art), period, (Contemporary), or style (Modern). The change in nomenclature of the Islamic art gallery at the Met also serves other purposes. The art is presented and offered in a new secular ways. With the removal of “Islamic” from the art gallery’s title, there is less emphasis on the religious culture that produced these objects, and rightly so since many of the objects in the gallery were not used for religious or ritual purposes. Another benefit of the change in name is to project more positive cultural associations with Muslim-majority nations, which can be a necessary corrective for many to the negative presentations of Islam in American media, particularly after September 11.

Despite this, the new nomenclature poses its own problems. Many Americans, for example, might not attend to the subtle punctuation used in the galleries’ name, “Art of the Arabic Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.” Here not only a familiarity with these geographical regions is necessary, but visitors must also be able to differentiate between region and era (for example, what does “Later” mean in “Later South Asia”?). Visitors

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
who are not aware of the different cultures, regions, and nations incorporated within this new
title for the gallery may easily walk away with understandable confusion, particularly since
“Arab Lands” is not clearly defined, nor does the museum explain “Arab Lands” relate to the
nations of “Turkey” and “Iran” as well as the other geographical regions “Central Asia and Later
South Asia.” The Met’s attempt to educate through nomenclature is laudable but whether or not
casual visitors to the AAL galleries will understand these nuances has yet to be established. For
example, would casual visitors be able to distinguish between “Arab” and non-Arab” since
“Arab” is an ethnic rather than a national or regional identity? These weaknesses aside, the Met
is making a serious effort to educate and contextualize its Islamic art collections and does so
through a variety of channels, including online resources, materials for educators, and, of course,
the scholarly handbooks to the collection.

The editors of the recently published catalogue Masterpieces from the Department of
Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2011), acknowledge the issue of nomenclature
and provide this explanation for the gallery’s new name in the Preface:

Thanks to over a century of scholarship on Islamic art, the specific character of the art
from different regions with large Muslim populations has come increasingly into focus. As a result, the new galleries of the Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Islamic
Art have been given a geographical name: Arab of the Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia,
and Later South Asia. This name reflects the shift away from the perception of Islamic art
as a unicum to the recognition of the variety of forms and meanings that characterize
each period and locale. In addition, Islam today is practiced by large numbers of people
in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. As the new galleries do not contain art of
either region, the new name more precisely defines what the visitor can expect to find in
them. The nomenclature and organization of galleries along geographical liens in no way
negate the existence of what is commonly called “Islamic art.” Works of Islamic art have
been identified as such because of a unique combination of their properties—such as
Arabic calligraphy, geometric ornament, and the use of the vine scroll—from Spain to
South Asia, from the seventh to the end of the nineteenth-century. While most of the
regions represented in the Department of Islamic Art were once dominated by ancient
empires, a new era accompanied the advent of Islam, and with it came the distinctive approaches to ornament that characterize Islamic art.\textsuperscript{18}

We can see from this explanation that the curatorial and editorial staff have grappled with terminology and attempted to find a solution to what are often very confusing terms for non-specialists. With that rationale in place, though, the geographical term “Arab Lands” does not clearly indicate any particular region since for many non-specialist visitors the term “Arab” and “Islamic” are synonymous. In attempting to label objects through regional differentiation, the Met’s staff may have inadvertently created more confusion than clarity, particularly as the “Department of Islamic Art” and its new catalogue inspired by the reinstallation retain “Islamic art” as the art historical and museological category that governs Muslim material culture. Further, since all museum visitation (on-line or on-site) is generally voluntary, the effectiveness of shifting from “Islamic art” to “Art of the Arabic Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia” has yet to be determined. Yet, because the Met is an industry leader and its influence can be felt globally, other museums and scholars may follow its lead.

**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

No American museum holds greater institutional authority than New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.\textsuperscript{19} The Met has a host of leading, wealthy American industrialists, bankers, philanthropists, and internationally influential power-brokers attached to its founding and early administration. The Met’s governing boards and list donors are a veritable “who’s

\textsuperscript{18} Sheila R. Canby, “Preface,” in *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art*, ed. Sheila R. Canby, Maryam Ekhtiar, Priscilla Soucek, and Navina Najat Haidar (New Haven, Conn.: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), vii.

who” of late nineteenth century wealth and power. The Museum’s supporters and founders includes notables such as John Jay (1817-1894), lawyer and grandson of Supreme Court Justice John Jay; William Tilden Blodgett (1823-1875), entrepreneur, philanthropist, and donor of the Met’s first 174 paintings; William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), actor, poet, journalist, publisher and editor of the New York Post; John Taylor Johnson (1820-1893), railroad mogul, philanthropist, and founding president of the Met; George Blumenthal (1858-1941), banker and head of the United States branch of Lazard Frères; John Pierpont Morgan (1858-1941), industrialist and philanthropist; and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960) and his prominent family. Other influential and famous individuals are also intricately woven into the Met’s history, including Augustus Saint-Gaudens; Richard Morris Hunt, Met trustee and architect for the 1902-1926 façade and additions; President Rutherford B. Hayes (1822-1893), who presided at the opening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Central Park location in 1880; and Elihu Root (1899-1904), Theodore Roosevelt’s Secretary of War. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has an institutional standing unmatched in America.

Given its financial support and international reach, the collection of the Met dwarfs the collections of the other two museums discussed in my earlier case studies. The Met’s collection consists of over two million objects with holdings from nearly every culture and civilization around the globe. With the international prominence of the Met and the social status of its founders and early donors, there have been several institutional histories written, in both

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20 With shifting accession and deaccession schedules, it is difficult to know the exact number of objects in the collection of an institution the size of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; however, “two million” is often given as the estimate number of objects in the Met’s collection, and this was the number given when I spoke with a Met informational volunteer during a June 3, 2016 phone call.
authorized and unauthorized versions. The Museum’s own narrative of its founding speaks volumes about how it positions itself as the premier American arts institution and global museum industry leader.

For the interested and curious, the Met’s website provides several pages of information on the founding of the institution’s three main branches: (1) the Central Park location at 1000 Fifth Avenue; (2) the Met Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park in northern Manhattan; and (3) the Met Breuer at 945 Madison Avenue (the Met’s newest arm that opened March 2016 to house its collection of contemporary art). The narrative offered on the website offers a brief account of the Met’s founding and highlights its mission, its earliest acquisitions, and its architectural history.

The account of the museum’s founding highlights its initial mission statement:

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded on April, 13, 1870, “to be located in the city of New York, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in said city a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and to that end, of furnishing popular instruction.”

Website visitors are informed that this mission has been the “guiding purpose” of the Met since its founding. The next subsection provides the history of the museum, showcasing the American spirit of the museum, which was the brainchild of “a group of Americans” who happened to be in Paris in 1866 when they conceived the idea to create “a national institution and gallery of art.” John Jay is credited with being the one who “proposed the idea” and “swiftly

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21 According to Michael Gross, the Met tightly controls how it is portrayed in media, so much so that “the Met’s tentacles seemed to be everywhere,” suggesting that there might be conspiracies to cover-up unauthorized accounts of the Met’s activities. See Michael Gross, Rogues’ Gallery: The Secret Story of the Lust, Lies, Greed, and Betrayals that Made The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York: Random House, 2009), 494.

moved forward” with its execution on his return home from France. Further we are told that Jay’s role as president of the Union League in New York City served as a catalyst for garnering support for establishing an American museum among “civic leaders, businessmen, artists, art collectors, and philanthropists to the cause.”

The Met’s first acquisition was a Roman sarcophagus. The Met’s earliest collections included “174 European paintings, among which such masters as Anthony van Dyck, Nicolas Poussin, and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo were represented.” Given the “American” entrepreneurial spirit from which the Met sprang, it is surprising that there is no mention of American art or artists in this early history of the Metropolitan. The next section of the narrative highlights the first full collection that entered the Met permanent holdings, the purchase of the Cesnola Collection of Cypriot Art between 1874-1876, which, we are told, “helped to establish the Met’s reputation as a major repository of classical antiquities.”

What is not included on the website are any details of how the Luigi Palma Di Cesnola collection of Cypriot antiquities was formed and the circumstances surrounding the Met’s interest in it. Instead, we are given a brief biography of the “colorful creator” of the collection in both the “About the Met” section and on the webpage, “The Cesnola Collection at the

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24 The Met’s website does not name the donor of the Roman sarcophagus, but Michael Gross notes that it was given by an American consul general to Beirut. See Gross, Rogues’ Gallery, 42.


26 Ibid.
Metropolitan Museum of Art.” Cesnola served as the Met’s first director from 1879 to 1904, having served previously as an appointed United States Consul to Cyprus from 1865 to 1877. It was during this period that Cesnola became an amateur archaeologist and conducted excavations across Cyprus, with methods and conduct that would be considered suspect under current professional archaeological standards.

The architectural stages of the Met warranted its own history, written in 1995 by Morrison H. Heckscher, in the museum’s scholarly series, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*. Drawing on Met archival materials (including sketches, architectural plans, and photographs), Heckscher details the long and often convoluted architectural history of the museum with teleological enthusiasm for the various phases of the Met from its original temporary quarters to its Central Park location and current form. Heckscher has little to say about the costs of building, rebuilding, repairs, renewals, expansions, additions, etc., and he spends little time discussing the fact that like most encyclopedic museums in American, the Metropolitan Museum of Art sits on public lands in Central Park and that its building, grounds, and the associated costs of maintenance to the building and grounds are partially funded by New York City. Like the state-founded North Carolina Museum of Art, the Met is also a charitable


28 Morrison H. Heckscher, “The Metropolitan Museum of Art: An Architecture History,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 53(1) (1995): 1, 4-83. My brief sketch of the Met’s architectural history is drawn from the Met website, Gross’ Rogues’ Gallery, and Heckscher’s article (although none of these sources provides a complete picture of the historical events surrounding the architectural stages, and there is no timeline available for consultation). In Gross’s account, there are dating discrepancies between the official history provided by the Met’s website and Heckscher’s officially sanctioned article.

29 The City of New York owns the land on which the Met Fifth Avenue sits and funds one-third of the grounds, building, and security costs. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Development,”
non-profit organization. The Met’s major expenses are to acquire art and care for its collections. The land and the building campaigns have been funded with public monies. Despite this public support, during the first nine years after its opening in 1870, the Met was not open to the public on Sundays, the only day that working classes would be able to visit the galleries.\textsuperscript{30}

Originally chartered in 1870, the Met opened to the public two years later.\textsuperscript{31} Before coming to its current location at 1000 Fifth Avenue, the Met first opened its doors in 1872 at 681 Fifth Avenue, leasing a large brownstone row house originally built in 1855 that had been used by Allen Dodsworth as the site of a dance academy. The Met’s initial collection of Old Master paintings had been amassed by one of the Met’s founding trustees, William T. Blodgett. Blodgett later sold his collection to the Met when it finally had an adequate location to exhibit them.\textsuperscript{32}

With the Met’s purchase of Cesnola’s 6,000-piece collection of antiquities from Cyprus in 1872, it needed a larger exhibition space. In 1873, a new lease was signed, and the Met moved to 128 West 14th Street, the former home of Mrs. Nicholas Cruger. The Cruger House (or Douglas Mansion) was designed by James Renwick and built between 1853-1854 for Mrs. Cruger with the idea of having it serve as an exhibition space for her personal artwork.\textsuperscript{33}

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\textsuperscript{30} Gross, \textit{Rogues’ Gallery}, 61.


\textsuperscript{32} Heckscher, “History,” 7.

Even before the Met’s incorporation in 1869, New York City leaders and the New York State Assembly deeded the Met the land between East Park Drive and Fifth Avenue in Central Park for the museum’s future site. After long negotiations with New York City Parks authorities and New York State assemblymen, Met trustees under Cesnola’ directorship selected the architects for the new museum site. Over nearly a decade, the architectural team of Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould submitted a series of plans for the future museum building in the high Victorian Gothic style then in fashion. The plans were drafted and the building campaign commenced. Cesnola and the building committee soon decided that Vaux’s designs were too small to house the collection appropriately, and as soon as the building opened in 1880, there were calls for further expansions to the interior and new exterior designs to cover up Vaux’s outdated neo-Gothic façade. Cesnola had the architects execute a series of additions and expansions after the opening of the Museum in 1880. Cesnola also came to the decision that the high Victorian Gothic exterior was démodé for the aspirations of the institution, and he concluded that the building’s interior no longer fashionably suited the display of fine art.

In December 1880 the Met’s executive committee hired Museum trustee (and civil engineer) Theodore Weston to serve as the new architect under the supervision of James Renwick (the architect of the Cruger Mansion and chief architect for the Smithsonian Institution Building and the Corcoran Gallery of Art) and Richard Morris Hunt (architect of the Biltmore


Estate in North Carolina). By 1883, designs for the building’s renovations had already begun, and two years later plans were completed and approved. Between 1883 and 1888 building commenced on what was became the south wing, which opened in 1888. Cesnola and the executive committee revised Weston’s plans for other galleries, and Weston was forced to make changes, including the addition of a grand central staircase that would serve as the main entrance to the museum. Weston’s revisions were also eventually rejected, and by 1890, Weston resigned with Richard Morris Hunt taking over architectural responsibility for designing and implementing plans for the staircase, the north wing, and a new Fifth Avenue façade. Arthur Lyman Tuckerman’s selection as chief architect by New York City Parks Department authorities delayed Hunt’s accession. Tuckerman died before completing any work, and Joseph Wolf, who oversaw the 1894 completion of the north wing, succeeded him.

Richard Morris Hunt, who had been involved with the museum for nearly twenty-five years, eventually became the chief architect and was charged with updating the earlier designs of both Vaux and Weston. Hunt had been on the architectural team of Hector Marin Lefuel that had performed the 1854-1855 extension of the Louvre in Paris. He had also served as president on the board of architects for the World’s Columbian Expositions in Chicago from 1891-1893. By 1894, Hunt had already built up an impressive portfolio of architectural achievements, including commercial residences, civic buildings, and private homes for the wealthy. There can be little surprise, then, that Richard Morris Hunt, one of America’s foremost architects, would have his name attached to America’s principal art museum. In the end, Richard Morris Hunt was responsible for the new 1895 master plan that would eventually fully encompass the entire 1000

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36 Ibid., 21.

37 Ibid., 27-28.
Fifth Avenue building and expand it onto the full thirteen acres that the New York City Parks authorities deeded to the Metropolitan.\textsuperscript{38} Hunt’s designs were grand indeed, emphasizing his intention to establish a neo-classical monument in keeping with his training at the École de Beaux Arts in Paris and to create a dignified assertion of the role of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the American cultural landscape. Hunt died unexpectedly in July 1895, leaving his son, Richard Howland Hunt, to carry out his father’s plans for the Beaux Arts façade and the Great Hall, which was completed in 1902.\textsuperscript{39} A memorial to Richard Morris Hunt was installed on Fifth Avenue near the south end of Central Park in 1898, with the bronze bust of the architect designed by renowned sculptor Daniel Chester French and a monument by Bruce Price.\textsuperscript{40}

The Met’s building campaign continued, with another phase of building and expansions under the firm of Charles Follen McKim and Mckim, Meade, and White from 1904-1926, culminating in a great open courtyard designed to house classical sculptures. After 1926, a series of architectural firms revisited old and new designs to maximize the space for an ever-growing art collection. Among the firms credited with the Met’s internal transitions and external expansions are Grosvenor Atterbury, 1919-1924; John Russell Pope and Otto R. Eggers, 1929-1939; Robert B. O’Connor and Aymar Embury II, 1940-1954; Brown, Lawford, and Forbes, 1954-1965; and Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates, 1967-1991, whose work which included the Robert Lehman Wing (1975).\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{39} Herscher, “History,” 30-33.


\textsuperscript{41} Herscher, “History,” 66-80.
Since 1975, the Met has continued to reinvent itself and retool its interiors as well as open satellite sites devoted to specific periods of art. In 1978, the ancient Egyptian Temple of Dendur was fully installed in the new Sackler Wing. In 1980, a new wing for American Art opened, while galleries for the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas named for Michael C. Rockefeller were opened in 1982. In 1987, a wing for modern and contemporary art in the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing launched, while a new gallery for European sculpture and Renaissance decorative arts opened in the Henry R. Kravis Wing, completing the expansion plan instituted by Dinkeloo and Associates.\textsuperscript{42} Continuing revisions to exhibition spaces include an Arts of Korea Gallery opened in 1998, the Ancient Near Eastern Art Galleries opened in 1999, newly reinstalled Galleries for Oceanic and Native North American Art opened in 2007, and the 2009 reinstallation of the Galleries for Nineteenth-and-Early Twentieth Century Paintings and Sculpture.\textsuperscript{43} The most recent galleries to open are the new galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia, which opened in November 2011, and the New American Wing Galleries for Paintings, Sculptures and Decorative Arts, which opened in 2012.

With its vast fundraising capacity and its location at the center of the global art world and the intersection of high finance, high culture, and high visibility, the actions and decisions of the Met are followed closely by museums worldwide. The constant monumental building campaigns that the Met has engaged in since its inception, its on-going acquisition of art from all over the world, its connections with some of the most powerful and influential domestic and international

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 78.

figures in politics, industry, philanthropy, and the art world all position the Met uniquely to influence and guide smaller institutions. It provides a model and a standard by which other museums can measure their own collection, exhibition, conservation, expansions, and education practices.  

In 2015, the Met amended its mission statement to assert, “The Metropolitan Museum of Art collects, studies, conserves, and presents significant works of art across all times and cultures in order to connect people, creativity, knowledge, and ideas.” The initial 1870 mission statement was reaffirmed in 2005 by the Met’s board of directors. In fiscal year 2014-15 alone, over 6.3 million visitors flowed through its galleries, and it is safe to say that the cultural impact the Met has on the visiting public is considerable and that its educational reach through scholarly publications is also extensive. In this context, I turn to examine the Met’s installation of its famous Mihrab and its account of the object’s art historical significance.

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44 The shadow cast by the Metropolitan Museum of Art is so long that it has earned the honor of being the subject of its own “tell-all,” as we have seen already in Michael Gross’ provocatively entitled book, Rogues’ Gallery: The Secret Story of the Lust, Lies, Greed and Betrayals that Made the Metropolitan Museum of Art.


The Fine Art Mihrab

Finding one’s way to the Met’s galleries for the “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia” takes a good sense of direction and a gallery map. The AAL is located on the second floor, up the central staircase and beyond the galleries for ancient Near Eastern art and Asian art. There are multiple entrances to the various AAL galleries, and one must pay close attention to educational panels and each object’s wall label to follow a chronological and regional timeline. The Mihrab is installed in the gallery designated by a wall panel, “Western Iran under the Timurids and Turkmen,” which provides the historical frame for the objects in the gallery. In the same gallery as the Mihrab, there are several vitrines with illuminated manuscripts as well as textiles and carved wooden panels. By virtue of its size, the Mihrab dominates the other objects in the gallery, but its religious purpose is not highlighted through its installation or on its accompanying wall label.
The Met’s Iranian Mihrab is one of the most reproduced images of Islamic art (cited or not) across all media in the world. Yet photographic and digital reproductions cannot capture or convey the sheer size of the Mihrab (135 1/16 x 113 11/16in. or 343.1 x 288.7cm), nor the intricate detail in its tilework. Its image is ubiquitous in Islamic art and architecture books, websites, and blogs. Any internet search on “Islamic art” or “mihrab” will turn up images of this fourteenth-century Isfahani mihrab. It is included in numerous popular books on Islamic art as well as specialized, scholarly works. For examples, one popular series often sold in art museum gift shops is *Visual Encyclopedia of Art: Islam*, edited by the Scala Group. This general introduction organizes art and architecture from Muslim-majority lands into regions and then modern nation-states. The section of the *Visual Encyclopedia of Art: Islam* that includes the Met’s Mihrab is entitled “Architecture in Iran and Central Asia,” but there is almost no contextual information, just a series of photographs with minimal identifying information. For example, the caption for the Mihrab reads (in four languages), “Mihrab, mosaic of glazed ceramic tiles, Iran, 1354-1355, Metropolitan Museum of Art.” There is no additional information given, and the function of a “mihrab” is never explained. Here and elsewhere, images of the Met’s Mihrab are common, but information about what it is, where it came from, and why it is considered “art” are much more difficult to find.

In the Met’s catalogue and website entries, the Mihrab’s dimensions are included along with its building materials. As previously noted in this study, the museological convention of providing an object’s dimensions has many purposes. Since we do not have any images of the Mihrab in its original location, the dimensions provide viewers of two-dimensional reproductions

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with a sense of its size, but the dimensions are somewhat superfluous on the wall label in the gallery and are no longer included.

Though the Met does not provide much by way of explanation or interpretation of mihrabs, scholar Nuha N. N. Khoury has constructed a typology. He highlights the difference between (a) “image mihrabs,” the two-dimensional pictorial or relief form that depicts or illustrates an arch and often includes images of lamps as well as columns, and (b) “architectural mihrabs,” as used in mosque setting. The Met’s Mihrab is of the latter type. That is, it was designed for use in a mosque on the qibla wall to indicate the direction of Mecca so that Muslims could properly perform salat, the ritual Muslim prayer. (The Met collection also includes a number of image mihrabs that were produced for use at shrines, mausolea, or gravesites. Image mihrabs do not need to indicate the qibla direction.49)

The Mihrab in the Met comes from a madrasa, a theological school attached to a mosque. Though there is very little information regarding the specific site from which the Met’s Mihrab comes, we know that the Mihrab comes from the Madrasa Imami in Isfahan, Iran, built in 1325. The Madrasa Imami is associated with the famous Tomb of Muhammad Baba al-Qasim al-Isfahani, a theologian of Isfahan, for whom architect Abu al-Hasan al Talut al Damghani built a mausoleum in 1340-1341.50 But little else is known about the Madrasa Imami in Isfahan in which one the most famous mihrabs in the world once stood.

Much of the scholarly attention to the Mihrab itself has focused on the techniques of tile-making during the Ilkhanid Period (c.1256-1335) when it was produced and the history and


This focus on the media, craftsmanship, and decoration serves to frame the Mihrab as an art object, rather than a liturgical object as an architectural mihrab. Its aesthetic value is highlighted, while its religious value is largely absent or ignored from these accounts.

The Mihrab was originally situated in a madrasa in Isfahan. Once the capital city of the Sasanian Empire (224-651), and then again later under the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1736), Isfahan served as a crossroads for trade across the Middle East until the last of the Safavid Qajars, Agha Muhammad, moved the capital to Tehran. It was during the reign of Ahmad Shah Qajar’s (1898-1930) in the mid to late 1920s that American or perhaps French archaeologists removed the Mihrab from Isfahan’s Madrasa Imami and transported it in pieces to the University Museum in Philadelphia.\(^\text{52}\)

An undated photograph in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Registrar’s object file for the Mihrab (accession number 39.20) shows the wall and its tilework in pieces, lying on the cement floor of a storage facility (likely the University Museum in Philadelphia).\(^\text{53}\) One has to wonder if the Mihrab was purposefully demolished in order to transport it, or if the conditions of the Mihrab were simply the result of centuries of neglect. There is little detailed provenance


information for the Mihrab itself, so scholars cannot clearly ascertain how it came to be removed from Isfahan, who gave permission for its removal, or other details of its transference from Iran to the United States. There is little detailed information regarding the Madrasa Imami of Isfahan in American scholarly circles, and no detailed information on Isfahan’s Madrasa Imami is provided by the Met.  

Wilfrid Blunt indicates that even by 1966, the Department of Antiquities of Iran had yet to begin conservation on the Madrasa Imami or the Tomb of Baba Qasim. He maintains that these sites had been in disrepair for decades. Later in his monograph, Blunt tells us that it was during the reign of Zil-es-Sultan (c. 1887-1890s), who governed Isfahan under his father Nasir ad-Din and later his half brother Muzaffir-ad Din, that the remains of Safavid architectural sites were allowed to decay, either because Zil-es-Sultan had a profound dislike for Safavid culture or because his father and brother were uninterested in financing repairs and restoration.

Given the lack of information on the history of pre-Safavid Isfahan in American scholarship and the lack of information on how the Madrasa Imami fell into neglect, it is nearly

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54 In 2009, Wilfred Blunt’s original monograph *Isfahan: Pearl of Persia* (London: Elek Book, 1966), was republished with minimal changes; note by the publisher indicates that his work stands the test of time and needed few corrections. See Wilfrid Blunt, *Isfahan: Pearl of Persia* (London: Pallas Athene, 2009). Recent treatments of Isafahan tend to focus on either the Seljuq Period (1038-1194) or the Safavid Period (1502-1736). Therefore, information about the interregnal period between these two governing empires, when the Madrasa Imami was dedicated (A.H. 755/C.E. 1354), is difficult to find in American sources. A recent essay published by Kim S. Sexton, professor of architecture at the University of Arkansas, offers a recommended reading list for Isfahan, but again there is little information on the Madrasa Imami itself among the sources listed, the most recent being published in 2000. See Kim S. Sexton, “Recommended Readings,” accessed March 12, 2017, https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/cities/iran/isfahan/isfbib.html. See also Kim S. Sexton, “Isfahan: Half the World,” accessed March 12, 2017, https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/cities/iran/isfahan/isfahan.html.

impossible to trace the exact channels for the transfer of the Mihrab from Isfahan to America, just as the journeys of the MAG’s Crucifix and the NCMA’s Tik are also cloudy. The date A.H. 755/1354 CE is taken from an inscription on the Mihrab and is the primary contextual information about the object’s origin, but it is unclear who governed Isfahan at the time of the inscription. From 1256-1353, Isfahan was under the control of the Ilkhanid Dynasty. The Ilkhanids were established by Mongol leader and Muslim convert Il Khan Gazan, who ruled from 1295 to 1304. Ilkhanid rule of Isfahan ended in 1335, but civil disputes over the area, including control of Isfahan, continued until the rise of the Timurid Dynasty (1370-1507), a Turko-Mongal clan from Central Asia.\footnote{Stephen F. Dale, \textit{The Muselim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 46. Suzan Yalman and Lisa Komaroff, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History “The Art of the Ilkhanid Period (1256–1353),” accessed March 16, 2017, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ilkh/hd_ilkh.htm.} Founded by Timur [Tamberlane], the Timurids quickly gained control of territories previously held by the Ilkhanid. Timurid forces took control over the area of Isfahan in 1370. That same year Timur established his capital to Samarkand (present day Uzbekistan), leaving Isfahan to younger regents.\footnote{Blunt, \textit{Isfahan}, 36.}

With conflicting political control and civil unrest, it is difficult to pinpoint any one ruler, governor, artist, or architect for the Madrasa Imami in Isfahan, since the Mihrab was dedicated during this interregnal period.\footnote{Suzan Yalman and Lisa Komaroff, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, “The Art of the Timurid Period (ca. 1370–1507),” accessed March 16, 2017, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/timu/hd_timu.htm.} Much more historical information is available after the rise of the Safavid Dynasty in 1501, but this does little to help us gain additional contextual information about the Met’s Mihrab.
As a result, information regarding the specific provenance of the Mihrab is meager. The Mihrab was purchased by the Met in 1939, considerably prior to the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property to which the United States is a signatory. The Met is under no obligation to return the Mihrab to Iran, though Iran has never requested its return.\textsuperscript{59} Despite this thin provenance information, the Met’s registration records do afford slightly more information about the Mihrab than is available for the twelfth-century Crucifix at the MAG and the early twentieth-century Torah Tik at the NCMA. Given the Met’s space and resources, it is not unsurprising that more information can be included on wall labels. The current 2017 wall label reads as follows:

Mihrab (Prayer Niche), 39.20
A.H. 755/A.D. 1354–55
Iran, Isfahan
Mosaic of polychrome-glazed cut tiles on stoneware body; set into mortar

Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1939 (39.20)

Arabic Inscription (on the outer border in \textit{thuluth} script):
Qur’an 9:18-22

Arabic Inscription (framing the niche of the mihrab containing hadith of Prophet Muhammad in \textit{kufic} script): "Said [the Prophet] (on him be blessing and peace): . . . witness that there is no God save Allah and that Muhammad is his Apostle and the Blessed Imam, and in legal almsgiving, and in the pilgrimage, and in the fast of Ramadan, and he said, on him be blessing and peace."

Arabic Inscription (at the center of the niche in \textit{thuluth} script):
"The Prophet (may blessings and peace be upon him) said: ‘The mosque is the abode of every believer.’"

This prayer niche, or \textit{mihrab}, was originally set into the \textit{qibla} wall of a

theological school in Isfahan, now known as the Madrasa Imami, built just after
the collapse of the Ilkhanid dynasty. The *mihrab* was created by joining a myriad
of cut glazed tiles to produce its intricate arabesque and calligraphic designs. The
result is one of the earliest and finest examples of mosaic tilework. A splendid
work of religious architectural decoration, this *mihrab* is one of the most
significant works in the Museum’s collection.\(^{60}\)

Should museum visitors wish to learn more about this object, the Met’s website offers
more detailed information, and it refers to a number of earlier publications. In fact, an image of
the Mihrab graces the cover of the Met’s *Art of the Islamic World: A Resource for Educators*,
edited by Maryam D. Ekhtiar and Claire Moore (2013), and seven units from the text are
available at no charge in downloadable PDF formats for educators.\(^{61}\) On the webpages for the
Mihrab, there are links to additional publications that feature the object, a list of references, and
links to the Met’s comprehensive “Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.” Despite all this
information, though, there is barely any mention of the object’s provenance, which is given
simply as follows: “Madrasa Imami, Isfahan, Iran (1354–late 1920s); [A. Rabenou, Paris, by
1931–39; sold to Arthur U. Pope for Met].”\(^{62}\)

\(^{60}\) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gallery Wall Label (personally viewed on June 22, 2017).

\(^{61}\) Maryam D. Ekhtiar and Claire Moore, eds., *Islamic Art: A Resource for Educators* (New
York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012). As of 2016, the hardcover version is available at
Amazon.com for $79.95, while the PDFs can be downloaded at

\(^{62}\) The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Mihrab (Prayer Niche), “Provenance,” accessed, July 2016,
http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/449537. This is the same information that is
included in the two main Met publications in which the object appears. See Stephan Carboni and
Tomoko Masuya, *Persian Tiles* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 36; and
Stefano Carboni, “Mihrab,” in *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art*, 124-25.
Thus, the provenance notes that in the 1930s the Mihrab was in the hands of Iranian art and antiquities dealer A. Rabenou, who also sold numerous objects to the British Museum.\textsuperscript{63} In the Met’s limited information, we are told that A. Rabenou (who is not identified further) sold the Mihrab to Arthur U. Pope and that it was purchased for the Met in 1939, but no further information is provided about Pope.

Arthur Upham Pope was one of the first Western scholars of Persian art. He produced a six-volume series entitled \textit{Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present} (1938-1939)\textsuperscript{64} and was buried with his wife, scholar Phyllis Ackerman, in a mausoleum in Isfahan.\textsuperscript{65} A pioneer in the study of Persian art, Pope was also responsible for selling Persian art and artifacts to museums. The Met was a client, although there is little additional information regarding Pope’s work for the Met, and even less attention has been drawn to Pope’s archaeological activities in Iran.\textsuperscript{66} As with most museum acquisitions of archaeological material prior to 1973, there is very little detailed provenance information available.

With regards to the Mihrab’s artistic value, the Met provides better detail in a brief catalog entry for an in-house 1993 exhibition entitled “Persian Tiles” held in the Hagop

\textsuperscript{63} The British Museum, “Mrs. Khalil Rabenou,” accessed July 12, 2016, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?bioId=93046. The biography included for Khalil Rabenou mentions a person named Ayub Rabenou, who apparently was identified by Arthur Upham Pope (the same agent used by the Met) as being active in the 1930s, which correlates with the 1939 acquisition date for the Met Mihrab.


Kevorkian Special Exhibitions Gallery. In this entry, Met Islamic art curatorial staff state that the Mihrab is “one of the earliest and finest examples of the complex and time-consuming technique of mosaic tilework” and they date it to the fourteenth century in the Ilkhanid period. The catalog entry also dates the origin of the Mihrab to the period when Injuid Abu Ishaq “took refuge in Isfahan before he was captured by the Muzaffarid Mubāriz al-Dīn Muhammad in A.H. 757/A.D. 1356-57.” 67 This information would only be helpful for a specialist in Iranian history, since nothing is provided to explain who the Injuids or the Muzaffarids were, or what their relationship was either to the city of Isfahan or to the Mihrab. The Injuids were the Shia dynasty who ruled in Isfahan and Shiraz after the fall of the Mongol Ilkhanid Dynasty, and the Injuid Abu Ishaq was not only captured, but executed. Isfahan then came under the control of Mubariz al-Din who expanded Muzaffarid control in Persia province by province (c. 1314-93). 68 This political unrest left a lack of specific information on who was responsible for the Mihrab of the Madrasi Imami.

The Met’s catalogue entry in Persian Tiles discusses in detail the Mihrab’s medium (mosaic tile pieces of monochrome-glaze) and technique (colored glazing of “turquoise, cobalt blue, milky white, ocher yellow often shading into brown, and dark green”). 69 Since the entry does not show a color photograph of the Mihrab, these details are necessary. Additional information in this entry includes a brief discussion of the three inscriptions on the Mihrab, mention of the “vegetal decoration,” and some discussion of the restoration of the Mihrab. We are told that in 1933 the Mihrab had already been restored by “very skillful potters” who replaced the tiles below the central inscription as well as the lower right and left sections of the

67 Carboni and Masuya, Persian Tiles, 36.


69 Carboni and Masuya, Persian Tiles, 36.
main inscription. We do not know when the restoration work was completed, but a date of mid-
1920s is provided for a photograph of the Mihrab that was taken in place at the Madrasa Imami
in Isfahan for the American Institute of Art and Archaeology. There is no mention of who
removed the Mihrab or why, only that it was “removed and shipped to Philadelphia, “where it
was stored in the University Museum” until its 1939 acquisition by the Metropolitan Museum of
Art. 70

We are further told that the Mihrab was included in a 1931 exhibition in London and that
a second photograph from 1931 displays the partially collapsed mihrab. Additional restoration
work was undertaken between 1931 and 1939, but we are not told who did the work. The authors
of the catalogue entry end by stating, “In spite of its troubled history of restoration, this mihrab
nevertheless remains one of the best examples of the mosaic tile technique in fourteenth-century
Persia.” 71

The authors of the catalogue did include references to the inscriptions, which recall
Qur’anic verses 9:18-22, the Prophet’s sayings (Hadith), and a quotation, “The Prophet,
blessings and peace be upon him, said: ‘The mosque is the dwelling of the pious.’” But the
catalogue offers no other discussion of the object’s original purpose. In fact, it is rather striking
that there is no mention of the religious function of the Mihrab other than indicating that it was
designed to point out the direction of Mecca, with no explanation as to why this might be
important. The catalogue’s authors also failed to explain the nature of a “mihrab” or the

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 36.
“Madrasa Imami.” Readers of the catalogue entry are given the Mihrab’s materials and media, techniques, and brief restoration history, but nothing in terms of its liturgical purpose.72

In the most recent catalogue entry for the 2011 Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, published to coincide with the reinstallation and reopening of the Islamic art galleries under the new title of AAL, the entry shows a full-page color photograph of the Mihrab and full translations of two of its three inscriptions. This catalogue entry was written by Stefano Carboni, one of the authors of the 1993 version, when he was the curatorial assistant specializing in Islamic Art at the Met (Carboni is now the Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth). The catalog entry, “81. Mihrab (Prayer Niche)” gives the Mihrab’s museological information just under its title.73 There are, though, some differences from the 1993 catalogue entry. Again, there is no mention of the liturgical purpose of the Mihrab, only that it was “an architectural element in a theological school (madrasa) in the city of Isfahan…The qibla wall, which is now white washed was originally graced with this monumental and impressing mihrab.” The catalogue entry does not include an explanation of the “qibla wall” or an explanation of why the Mihrab would “originally grace it.” Evidently, readers are expected to know this. The 2011 entry rephrases the historical information about Isfahan concerning the period “when rival Injuids and Muzaffarid leaders competed for control of Isfahan,” but there is little new cultural or religious information, and again the catalogue author concludes with praise for the object: “Now displayed as a splendid example of religious

72 Ibid.

73 The museological information states, “Iran, Isfahan, A.H.755/1345/55 A.D. Mosaic of Polychrome-glazed cut tiles on stonepaste body; set in mortar, 11 ft. 3 in. x 9 ft. 5 5/8 inc (3.43 x 2.88 m), Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1939, 39.20.” Carboni, Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art, 124-125.
architectural decoration of Iranian Islamic art, the *mihrab* of the Madrasa Imami is one of the most significant and noteworthy works in the Museum’s collection.”74 Once again, there is the barest hint of the object’s original liturgical purpose; we are not told that the Mihrab was designed to sit on the qibla wall to indicate the direction of Mecca in order to orient Muslim worshippers in the course of their daily performances of ritual prayers. The focus is again on the Mihrab’s materials and media, techniques of craftsmanship, and its significance in the Met’s collection.

The Mihrab contains three bands of Quranic verse in three different traditional calligraphic scripts, *Kufic*, *Thuluth* and *Muhaqqaq*. The Met has not yet not provided contextual information regarding the reasons behind the use of three different calligraphic scripts on the Mihrab,75 but the convention of using bands of different calligraphic scripts can be traced to the Timurid and Safavid periods when this practice became popular.76 The Kufic script is the earliest form of Arabic calligraphy that developed in early Islam during the Abbasid Dynasty (750-1258); the Thuluth style developed in the late tenth to early eleventh century.77 The Muhaqqaq calligraphic script developed out of Thuluth and focuses on readability as well as aesthetically rendering each letter.78 Muhaqqah was rarely used as ornament and tended to be reserved for use

74 Ibid.


77 Ibid., 45-46.

in copying Qur’ans, which makes the Met’s Mihrab an excellent extant example of its use for
decoration in Muslim religious architecture.\textsuperscript{79} The outer Muhaqqaq inscription, which winds
around the outside of the frame from the bottom right across the top and down to the bottom left,
is taken from the Qur’an Sura 9:18-22 (At-Tawbah or The Repentance). It reads:

(18) The mosques of Allah are only to be maintained by those who believe in Allah and
the Last Day and establish prayer and give zakah and do not fear except Allah, for it is
expected that those will be of the [rightly] guided. (19) Have you made the providing
of water for the pilgrim and the maintenance of al-Masjid al-Haram equal to [the deeds of]
one who believes in Allah and the Last Day and strives in the cause of Allah ? They
are not equal in the sight of Allah. And Allah does not guide the wrongdoing people. (20)
The ones who have believed, emigrated and striven in the cause of Allah with their
wealth and their lives are greater in rank in the sight of Allah. And it is those who are the
attainers [of success]. (21) Their Lord gives them good tidings of mercy from Him and
approval and of gardens for them wherein is enduring pleasure. (22) [They will be]
abiding therein forever. Indeed, Allah has with Him a great reward.\textsuperscript{80}

The Kufic inscription is taken from the Hadith (Sayings of Muhammad) and states:

He [the Prophet], blessings and peace be upon him, said: “Islam is built on five
attestations: there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God,
he established prayer and the giving of alms and the pilgrimage and fasting of
[the month of] Ramadan.” And he [the Prophet], blessings and peace be upon him,
said: “Whoever builds a mosque for God, even the size of a sand-grouse nest, based on
piety, [God will build for him a palace in Paradise].”\textsuperscript{81}

In the center of the niche itself, an inscription that incorporates both the Kufic and the Thuluth
scripts, reads “The Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him, said: ‘The mosque is the abode of
the pious.’”\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{80} Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection Records, “Mihrab (Prayer Niche),” accessed June 3,
2016, http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/449537. The MMA does not provide a
translation of the Qur’anic verses on its wall label, but the translation can be found on its website

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
Despite these transcriptions of the hadith and notations regarding the Qur’anic inscriptions on the Mihrab from the Met’s online collection records, there is little overt recognition of the Mihrab as a liturgical implement used in religious service. In fact, the inclusion of Qu’ranic verses on the Mihrab is meant to induce a religious meditative response among the Muslim faithful.\(^8^3\) There is no explanation of the importance of Mecca for Muslims. There is no information regarding the Five Pillars of Islam and the requirement to face Mecca to pray five times a day in the performance of \textit{salat}. There is nothing to indicate that this Mihrab held any deep importance to Muslim religious practice. Instead, the Mihrab’s aesthetic value is clearly privileged and emphasized, while its religious significance—it’s religious value—is barely noted.

The Religious Mihrab

The primary purpose of the mihrab in a mosque is to direct worshipers towards Mecca. The architect of a mosque situates its qibla on an axis orienting the mosque toward Mecca. As Oleg Grabar states, “The mihrab is the first and perhaps only symbolic form that can be explained almost entirely through religious, indeed pietistic, reasons.”\(^8^4\) Its purpose is to focus congregants’ attention toward the holy city of Mecca and the Ka’ba shrine. According to Muslim tradition, Abraham and his son Ishmael dedicated the Ka’ba to Allah, and after Muhammad triumphed over the Meccans, he purged the Ka’ba of idols, cleansing it and rededicating it to

\(^8^3\) Frishman and Khan, \textit{Mosque}, 44.

\(^8^4\) Grabar, \textit{The Formation of Islamic Art}, 115.
Allah. Mecca thus replaced Jerusalem as the holy city of Islam, and the Ka’ba sanctuary became the focal point that all Muslims face during the daily performance of *salat*.

What makes the mihrab religious? In the *Oxford Dictionary of Architecture*, we find the following definition of a “mihrab”:

Semicircular, polygonal, or rectangular niche or recess, chamber, or slab in the qibla wall of a mosque, often elaborately decorated, indicating the direction of Mecca: sometimes the recess is merely suggested on a flat surface. Openings to mihrabs may be flanked by columns from the capitals of which spring arches, and the hoods of niches may be embellished with muqarnas.\(^{85}\)

To someone unfamiliar with the importance of Mecca to Islam and the Five Pillars of the Muslim faith, this definition provides precious little information. However, this definition comes from a general architectural dictionary and not a specialized treatment of Muslim liturgical materials or practices. Thus, I turn to a more specialized understanding of the role of a mihrab in Muslim piety.

Thus far there has been little interest in tracing the history of mihrabs in Western art historical and religious scholarship. The mihrab is generally mentioned in relationship to mosque architecture and almost never is it treated at length as a liturgical object on its own.\(^{86}\) In one of few exceptions, in 1959 R.B. Serjeant published an article entitled “Mihrab” for the *Bulletin for the School of Oriental and African Studies*. Serjeant here traces the linguistic use of the term

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“mihrab” in the hadith and Qur’an, but he indicates that few conclusions can be drawn from the textual evidence regarding the word’s origins. Sergeant asserts that the term seems to have been of pre-Islamic origin and may originally have served to indicate a hypostyle hall (covered colonnade) that later became known as the maqsara, reserved for persons of importance. Later, he suggests, the term became associated with the location where an imam would stand.87

In 1940 Mary E. Crane published an article on the Met Mihrab for *Ars Islamica*. Since the Met had just acquired the object in 1939, Crane expresses thanks to the Curator of Near Eastern Art, Maurice S. Dimand, and to Arthur Upham Pope (possibly one of the agents responsible for getting the Madrasa Imami Mihrab out of Isfahan), since Pope was the Director of the American Institute for Iranian Art. The Mihrab, according to Crane and the Met’s provenance records, had already been exhibited in London at the Royal Academy of Arts in the International Exhibition of Persian Art.88 Crane’s article confirms that the Mihrab came from the Madrasa Imami based on her own examination of the remains of the site. Her analysis, which relies on stylistic comparisons with the brickwork of the Madras Imami, is helpful for determining the Mihrab’s original location, and she explains that the Mihrab came from the empty space in the sanctuary on the qibla wall. Crane concludes by maintaining that because the Mihrab and Madrasa Imami had been dedicated during the interregnal period, the political instability in the area did not affect the building of religious structures.89 If Crane is correct, we


89 Crane, *Mihrab*, 100.
can conclude that the importance of the Mihrab from the Madrasa Imami is not merely as a work of art, but as a religious object.

The Met Mihrab is an architectural mihrab, and its liturgical function was to orient Muslims toward Mecca. Serjeant and Grabar have noted that the mihrab in a congregational mosque would often include the minbar (or pulpit) from which the imam would lead prayer. In large mosques, the qibla wall would often be differentiated not only by a mihrab, but also a dome which serves to distinguish the direction toward Mecca. Though the imam would lead prayer from a raised minbar, mosques were not designed like Christian churches, since there is no official division between a socially elevated clerical class and the lay congregation. Though the Madrasa Imami is not a mosque but a theological school, it shares the same four-iwan floor plan of Iranian (Persian) mosque styles and can be treated as comparable to a mosque. The term “mosque” derives from masjid (“place of prostration”). Since Muslims are free to pray anywhere providing they perform salat with the correct timing, a masjid can be anywhere. The open floor plan of the Madrasa Imami indicates that its southwest iwan was the qibla wall.

In considering the religious significance of the Mihrab itself, Oleg Grabar maintains that the Muslim prayer niche derives from the only Qur’anic rule that affects the design and history of masjids, namely, the requirement to perform salat. In time, the custom developed that the main prayer service would be on Friday, where the imam would offer a sermon and then lead prayer. As noted in the chapter two, the Jewish synagogue is oriented so that the eyes and thoughts of the congregation are drawn to the Torah ark, facing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

90 An “iwan” is an architectural feature of a rectangular structure, walled on three sides, but open on the fourth. Crane includes a floor plan of the Madrasa Imami and its iwans in her article. The floor plan is credited to Donald Wilber, who measured and drafted it. See Crane, Mihrab, Fig. 2.

91 Grabar, Formations of Islamic Art, 100-101.
and containing the Torah, which is the physical rendering of Moses’ covenant with God on behalf of the people of Israel. In the mosque, the eyes and thoughts of the congregation are focused on the qibla wall, which sits aligned to Mecca, home to the Ka’ba sanctuary and signifying Muhammad’s affirmation of Allah’s unity and eternity as well as Abraham and Ishmael’s dedication of the holy shrine to Allah. The mihrab on the qibla wall, then, serves the critical function of properly orienting Muslims toward the holiest sanctuary of Islam. Like the Christian Crucifix and Torah Tik, the Mihrab, though not a scriptural or doctrinal component of Islam, is always in its service.

The Met Mihrab is not installed on a wall facing Mecca, just as the NCMA Tik is not housed in an aron hakodesh that faces the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and the MAG Crucifix is not hung facing east. These liturgically important objects are no longer liturgical in function. They have been secularized, their religious values rewritten and retrofitted into a narrative of art and aesthetics.

Figure 15. Mecca, September 17, 2014. Reuters: Muhammad Hamad.
Conclusion

Shrines and sanctuaries have meaning. They maintain their meanings through the beliefs, rituals, and practices of the living. New shrines and sanctuaries are built and attract pilgrims.\textsuperscript{92} Old shrines remain and draw billions of the faithful over centuries.\textsuperscript{93} As the home to Islam’s most important sanctuary, the Ka’ba, Mecca is Islam’s holiest city. The mosque as community gathering place and place of worship serves as the local sanctuary orienting Muslims toward their holy city five times a day in ritual prayer that unites the \textit{Umma} (community of faithful). The mosque with its qibla and mihrab to direct the prayer ritual fosters one of the Five Pillars of Islam. The mosque is a liturgical space above all. It may be decorated lavishly with non-figural ornamentation, or it may be sparse with very little decoration at all. Given their role in Muslim ritual worship, most mosques are built near or in the center of a town or city. Large cities will have several congregational mosques to accommodate large populations, and the mihrab on the qibla wall orients worshippers toward Mecca.

New York City’s Met has a long and important history as one of the largest public art museums in the world. Its story is told repeatedly as visitors walk throughout its galleries or visit its online resources. Visitors are awed by its collections and impressed by its resources. We know that the Met serves as the most authoritative art museum in America. It houses priceless treasures of human achievement and produces vast tomes of knowledge, which it disseminates across the globe.


In 2001, September 11 drew all eyes to the day’s events, and Americans were thrown into
global currents in ways for which they had no preparation. America has always been a “Christian
nation” according to many political and cultural rhetorical currents and many Americans had a
great deal of ignorance about Islam. Over the decade of the “War on Terror,” Americans still
seem unable to come to terms with Islam and Muslims, whether Muslims are native-born
Americans or live in foreign lands. For many Americans, Muslims represent the “other,” and, in
a frightening way, the Islamophobia that has been prevalent in Europe and America tears at basic
democratic ideals.

In an effort to curtail these disturbing trends, educators and academics have sought ways
to find common ground. As we have seen above, an ideology of the fine arts is often invoked as
a corrective to human conflict and division. When the Met re-installed its galleries in 2011, it did
not re-introduce the collection in its galleries as “Islamic.” Instead, it chose to rename the
galleries according to culture, nation, and region, which is how many other galleries are
organized. Though the new “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later
South Asia” galleries may confuse some visitors, it places the artistic production of these regions
on a level comparable to other galleries in the Museum instead of “othering” them by lumping
them into something called “Islamic Art” that marks religious difference. Students and scholars
can then turn to the historiography of Islamic art, which the Met offers in its educational and
scholarly resources. Indeed, the Met is a leader here. Its strategy seeks to produce social benefit
as other museums reassess their nomenclature and in turn re-evaluate the category of “Islamic
art.”

In keeping with this ideological agenda, the Mihrab in the Met’s collection has been
constructed as an objet d’art rather than an object of Muslim religious devotion. The Met’s
Mihrab no longer serves its original liturgical purpose. Today the Mihrab is understood as an exquisite work of art and is included in art historical narratives of Islamic art and culture.

In this chapter, I have examined the formation of the category of “Islamic art” as it became a distinct category of fine arts during the twentieth century and an important vehicle for introducing Muslim culture to Western audiences since 9/11 in particular. This chapter’s case study of the fourteenth-century Iranian Mihrab in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art allows us to consider how religious artifacts produced in Muslim-majority regions have also been aestheticized and musealized alongside Christian and Jewish religious objects, to be folded into the same universalizing art historical narrative. In considering the history and mission of the Met, I have also considered that its role as a museum industry leader allows the Met to pilot an ideological strategy that deploys Islamic art as a counter-narrative to Islamophobic representations of Muslims in American media.
CONCLUSIONS

We don't need more museums that try to construct the historical narratives of a society, community, team, nation, state, tribe, company, or species. We all know that the ordinary, everyday stories of individuals are richer, more humane, and much more joyful.
– Orhan Pamuk, *The Innocence of Objects*¹


Museums are many things to many people. And they are proliferating. In Washington, D.C. just three blocks from the nation’s Capital Building and three blocks from the National Mall with its nineteen Smithsonian buildings, a new Museum of the Bible will soon open.² The four-hundred million dollar, four thousand and thirty square foot building will begin receiving visitors in November 2017. The brainchild of Steve Green, a Pentecostal Christian and President


and CEO of Hobby Lobby, the Museum of the Bible’s core collection comes from the Green family’s privately collection of artifacts, and this core collection will be supplemented with new acquisitions. According to the Museum of the Bible’s website, the permanent collection already contains over 40,000 artifacts. The museum’s website also boasts that “the collection spans artifacts from the time of Abraham to Dead Sea Scroll fragments, biblical papyri and manuscripts, Torah scrolls, and rare printed Bibles.”³

Though the LDS Hill Cumorah religious complex in Palmyra, New York mimics the museological practices of public fine arts museums in its exhibits, labeling, educational outreach, events, and programming, it is not a secular museum. It is a religious site. Though the Met Cloisters was assembled and constructed from objects that come from religious sites, it is not a religious site. It is a public museum. Like the LDS Hill Cumorah complex, the Museum of the Bible is not designed to be a public fine arts museum. Its mission is overtly Christian, and it will be interesting to see the curatorial and educational decisions in presenting its religious artifacts. But with so many different types of museums on the cultural landscape, the critical educational role of public fine arts museums remains extremely important. The scholarship undertaken by curators, conservators, and museum educators in these institutions is invaluable in helping to maintain the world’s cultural heritage and to expand our knowledge of the past and its relevance to the present.

The three artifacts I have explored in my case studies were once used in formal, commmunal religious settings. Indeed, each of these artifacts could still be used for those purposes.

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³ The Museum of the Bible, “The Museum Collection,” accessed, July 22, 2016, https://www.museumofthebible.org/museum-collection. Since we have no independent historical evidence that can definitively date Abraham’s lifetime, the use of a faith-based historical timeline by a museum can be problematic as some visitors may not be able to distinguish faith claims from scientifically-vetted archaeological and historical information.
today. Contemporary versions of crucifixes in churches, Torah tiks and scrolls in synagogues, and mihhrabs in mosques remain central to religious and liturgical worship. The crucifix visually re-enacts Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross, the primary symbol of Christian soteriological doctrine on which the church was built. Yet, in the fine arts museum setting, a crucifix—such as the MAG’s Crucifix—is framed primarily an example of a medieval sculpture with the stylistic attribution “Romanesque/proto-gothic.” Our understanding of such Catholic devotional objects has been transformed by a disciplinary shift in context and custodianship that has changed our perception and experience of them. The tik protects and contains the Torah, the scripture on which Jewish belief and practice is built. Yet, in the fine arts museum a tik—such the NCMA’s Tik—heralds Jewish identity and artistry within a global art historical narrative. This object is no longer liturgical, but visual, and our appreciation of the religious artifact has been transformed through its public display. The Muslim mihhrab sits on a mosque’s qibla wall, serving as the direct connection to Mecca and the Ka’ba, the central holy shrine that unites Muslims around the world in daily prayer five times a day. Yet in the fine arts museum, a mihhrab—such as the Met’s Mihrab—is deployed to counter anti-Islamic attitudes and sensibilities through a universalizing mode of art appreciation.

Though crucifixes, tiks, and mihhrabs may hail from different points in history and from different faith traditions, these artifacts remain items of primary symbolic importance to their respective traditions and communities. Yet through the channels of art historical narration and the practices of public museums, these religious artifacts have acquired new meanings and significance. Though the artifacts themselves represent particular time periods, religions, regions, or cultures, their original religious value and function has been replaced with new social and cultural values and functions.
The fine arts museum was originally founded in ideological service to modernizing nation-states in Europe and, later, in industrializing American cities. Religious artifacts not previously considered fine art until the museum movement are now often understood as fine art – a transformation that has occurred as the result of numerous cultural, economic, and political forces. In their original contexts religious artifacts have great aesthetic value, but they still retain their ritual and cultic value as vibrant and crucial elements of worship. In the modern fine arts museum, these same artifacts no longer serve ritual purposes. Instead, they take on new sets of educational and aesthetic meanings and are deployed for non-religious purposes of civic and cultural advancement.

Many people see art museums as neutralizing containers for these artifacts that historicize the “religiousness” of the object by placing it either literally or metaphorically “under glass” to be viewed like a specimen from the past. While none of the artifacts we have considered in this study were originally created as works of “fine art,” over recent centuries religious artifacts have been incorporated into an art historical narrative. As works of art, these objects are now presented to inspire viewers and audiences in new ways. Though their original religious utility has fallen away, they serve new purposes as aesthetic and historical objects inspiring new modes of contemplation and veneration. They have been installed in galleries that reify and manifest a particular ideology of the value and significance of “fine art.” The original religious function of these objects has been subsumed into a broader modern narrative. Rather than devotional, or liturgical, or ritual work, these artifacts now perform aesthetic work as part of fine arts museum collections, and they are folded into a global art historical narrative that is accessible worldwide through technologies of reproduction.
My objective in this dissertation has not been to question what museums should do with regards to the religious artifacts in their care. Instead, my purpose has been to underscore the cultural and intellectual channels through which categories of knowledge are produced, particularly in the context of the modern art museum. Through the processes of aestheticization and musealization, museums produce an ideology of “fine art” and a narrative of art history in physical space by incorporating the objects in their collections into specifically labeled galleries. With origin stories that echo creation myths and soteriological narratives of how collections formed and how objects were saved or restored, the institution of the fine arts museum itself has become the site of a new form of religious value. Museums are places of enchantment and they re-enchant the art within, giving the works of art new vitality for diverse audiences and animating new forms of cultural value.4 Through the processes of aestheticization and musealization of religious artifacts fine arts, museums enact the “sacralization of art” by claiming mastery over the artifacts and interpreting them in distinctive ways.5 In addition, museums serve their communities by promoting various forms of social, cultural, and religious tolerance and empathy.6 The processes of aestheticization and musealization, then, have important social implications as museums create and share knowledge about the objects in their care and engage with their communities.


5 David Morgan, “Enchantment, Disenchantment, Re-enchantment,” in Re-Enchantment (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3-22. Morgan explores the spiritualization of art from the late eighteenth century forward and its resultant “sacralization,” the widely understood view that art can impart social and cultural values in ways that organized religion did previously.

In chapter one, I traced the history of the establishment of public encyclopedic fine arts museums, from Revolutionary France to nineteenth and early twentieth century America, a period that has come to be referred to as the “museum moment.” I considered the development of distinct museological practices that evolved out of the professionalization of the fine arts museum field and the discipline of art history that supports and frames it. These practices include what I have termed the “aestheticization” (the focus on the visuality and formal elements of an object) and “musealization” (the movement an object from its original context to a museum setting) of religious artifacts. Lastly, I explored the ways that scholars from various disciplines have critically examined the ideology of the fine arts museum and the art historical framework that supports it. In examining the historical and theoretical foundations of art history and fine arts museums, I called attention to the need for a more practical analysis of the processes and channels through which religious objects have been transformed into objects of art.

In chapter two, I explored the processes of aestheticization and musealization as they apply to the transformation of an important Roman Catholic devotional artifact into a “medieval sculpture.” and its incorporation into the art historical narrative. I traced the history and mission of the Memorial Art Gallery, a small, public university fine arts museum in central New York to consider its position and role as a fine arts institution. This case study of the Crucifix at the MAG allows us to see the concrete dynamics through which a central liturgical artifact from the dominant Western Christian narrative has been transformed from a religious object into an art object and included in a universal art historical narrative.

In chapter three, through an analysis of an early twentieth-century Iraqi Tik, I explored the ways that Jewish communities sought to honor their cultural heritage through collecting and exhibiting devotional, ceremonial, and liturgical artifacts first in Jewish museums and then in
public fine arts museums. I considered definitions of Jewish art in relation to questions of Jewish identity to highlight the role that Jewish donors and communities played in establishing collections of Jewish religious art in Jewish museums and public fine arts museums. I traced the history and mission of the North Carolina Museum of Art and the efforts of Dr. Abram Kanof, the founder and foremost patron of its Judaic Art Gallery. The establishment of a permanent Judaic art gallery in a public fine arts museum affirms the important place of Jewish identity within and contributions to the narrative of Western art history.

In chapter four, I explored the rise of America’s foremost fine arts institution, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art to consider how it ideologically deploys Islamic art to counter negative perceptions of Muslims in America. I considered the social leaders responsible for the Met’s founding and its acquisitions of art works from pioneers in archaeology, connoisseurship, and collecting. I turned my analysis to the educational programming of the Met’s Department of Islamic Art and the re-installation of the Met’s former Islamic Art galleries under their new title “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia” to consider the Met’s leadership role in presenting Islamic art and culture in a specific and deliberate way to highlight Islam’s cultural and artistic heritage for Americans. In focusing on the story of the fourteenth-century Mihrab from the Madrasa Imami in Isfahan, Iran, I considered the differences between its significance as an object of art and its significance as religious object to demonstrate the aestheticization and musealization of Islamic religious objects and their incorporation into a universalizing art historical narrative. As one of the museum industry’s institutional leaders, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is at the forefront of deploying the fine arts as the crucial pedagogical apparatus in service to pluralism and multiculturalism nationally and internationally.
Through these case studies, I have considered the evolving ways that fine arts museum industry professionals and art historians have understood, re-classified, and presented artifacts originally produced for religious purposes as fine art in attempt to highlight the aesthetic value over the religious value. I have focused particularly on the ways that meanings change, how specific Christian, Jewish, and Muslim artifacts have been incorporated into global art historical narratives and used by museums to accomplish a range of different objectives. I have also underscored how the particular value and significance of these artifacts has transformed over time in different social contexts. Finally, I have explored the aesthetic and cultural work these artifacts can perform as “fine art” in the context of fine arts museum collections.

In each of these case studies, the liturgical object has been more than simply a static work of fine art; it has been incorporated into programming and exhibits that produce and sustain certain types of knowledge, both informing museum audiences of a particular story of the object as a work of art and also training museum audiences on appropriate ways in which to perceive the objects and to understand the cultures that produced them. There is presence and absence, distance and proximity at all times among the objects, the cultures that produced them, and the viewer that consumes them. The fact that museum visitors can closely view the art object in museum settings in ways they would never have been able to in situ allows for a new kind of intimacy. The cult value and the exhibition value that Walter Benjamin viewed as binary and the consequent loss of “aura” (that first experience of the original art object that can never be duplicated) merges into and emerges from the processes of aestheticization and musealization to blur the distinction between what is religious and what is not in the space of public fine arts museums. These processes are not distinct and separate, but complementary and instrumental in
imbuing objects and public spaces with new values and meanings, making and re-making
“things” relevant to new audiences and communities.

Different museums offer different ways to learn and engage with the works on view in
their collections. Some museums offer programming to enhance the visitor’s sensuous
experience of the art objects through sound, performance, or touch. Other museums focus on the
formal aesthetic presentation of the artwork in gallery installations. Today many museums
combine these approaches, with new technologies and interpretative methodologies trying to
meet the interests and demands of increasingly diverse audiences. Museums may offer a range of
appealing amenities to attract visitors (cafés or cafeterias, nature trails, cultivated gardens
featuring sculptures, and more), and museum shops include consumer goods and memorabilia
along with educational material. Museums tell the stories of the objects within, and they also tell
stories about themselves and the importance of the museum’s social function.

Each of the museums examined here, the MAG, the NCMA, and the Met are modern
museums that share a similar vision, ideology, and focus in deploying art as a way to bring
diverse communities together (in ways that religion may not). Modern museums are regularly
framed as the site of a particular type of experience, one that can be intellectually or morally
uplifting, perhaps even sublime or transcendent, but this experience is offered in a pluralistic and
multicultural fashion. In fine arts museums, visitors are invited to pause in contemplation and
reverence before works of art and to find the paintings or sculptures or installations that speak to
them. Or visitors can simply admire the human craftsmanship, artistic achievement, and
historical significance of the work. Or visitors can have these experiences and many others
simultaneously.
Benjamin notes that, “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable.” Through aestheticization and musealization, new traditions and practices materialize in fine arts museums that provide audiences with an authentic experience of the work of art in settings that obscure the lines between what is religious and what is not, particularly since fine arts museums offer narratives of their institutional origins that reflect a type of missionary zeal. Through aestheticization and musealization, fine arts museums transform knowledge of themselves as well as how audiences perceive and understand the artifacts in their collections.

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