

## Hearts and crafts:

### An exhibition of global devotional offerings at the Bard Graduate Center



hopes and fears. The show's curator, Ittai Weinryb, who teaches at the Bard Graduate Center, selected more than three hundred votive objects that were made by adherents of most of the world's faiths; they date from 2000 BC to the present. All exemplify that an object's significance is often in the heart of the giver.

Weinryb says that as a young scholar of medieval art he "visited many European churches where crude-looking votive objects and panel paintings decorated the walls and ceilings." Ignored by most visitors, they profoundly impressed him, "because they were not part of any traditional art-historical narrative," he says, "yet they begged for attention."

Arranged over three floors, the exhibition includes objects from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, made of seemingly every conceivable material. Some are miniature sculptures of humans, animals, and anatomical parts; others are pictorial, like the Latin American retablos painted on canvas or metal. A surprising variety of ready-made things is also here—from articles of clothing to a customized Harley-Davidson

**A**t the poignant climax of Jules Massenet's 1902 opera, *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame*, Jean, a juggling beggar boy sheltered at the medieval Abbey of Cluny, scandalizes the monks by offering the Virgin his only precious possession: his juggling act. When they try to interfere, the Virgin's statue comes to life and blesses Jean as he dies of exhaustion. The opera's point is that the sincerity of the devotional offering is more important than the form it takes. This idea is vividly examined in the new exhibition *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*, at the Bard Graduate Center in New York City.

Created by every culture since time immemorial, votives—placed on an altar or other sacred spot or site of communal memory—can symbolize a pledge of faith, the fulfillment of a vow, or represent the giver's



Lungs votive, maker unknown, Germany, 1700s–1800s. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Rudolph Kriss Collection, © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum; photograph by Walter Haberland.

Standing female deity, maker unknown, India, 300–200 BC. Metropolitan Museum of Art, © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

motorcycle—each having been endowed with devotional meaning by its giver.

Precious works of antiquity include a second- to third-century BC North Indian terra-cotta female deity figure and a mid-fourteenth-century painted and gilded sculpture of the *Enthroned Virgin and Child*, with votive objects concealed within its hollow wood core. But many are more modest: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wax votives of lungs offered by victims of respiratory complaints; an eighteenth-century Austrian twig figure of a cow presumably made by a farmer praying for the safekeeping of his livestock.

One of the humblest votives in the show is also one of the most moving: a small painted plastic



figure of a collie, made around 1959 and deposited in 1993 at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Attached to it is a handwritten inscription: “BuiLT + PAiNTeD By A 12 yeAr/ oLD Boy, Who DieD A 21 yeAr/ oLD MAN MARCh 23rd 1968/ IAN J. FRANKS/ Love, Mom DAD RoN ANDY/ + our FAMILies you Never MeT.”

This exhibition, and its admirable catalogue by Weinryb and contributing scholars, challenges conventional notions of sacred objects and invites us to examine not only what each represents, but also why people across time and territory have felt impelled to create and offer them. A special installation is Yoko Ono’s *Wish Tree*, inviting visitors to write down a wish and hang it on one of the tree’s branches.

***Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place* is on view at the Bard Graduate Center in New York City from September 14 to January 6, 2019.**

*Enthroned Virgin and Child*, maker unknown, Italy, c. 1350. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jacob S. Rogers Fund, © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

*Nkisi* male figure with strips of hide, maker unknown, Kongo, 1800s. Brooklyn Museum, Museum Expedition 1922, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund.