NEW YORK CITY — What if makers were not the most important figures in an arts exhibition? Challenging conventional subject matter and standard curatorial method is “Agents of Faith: Votive Objects Across Time and Place,” on view at New York’s Bard Graduate Center (BGC) Gallery through January 6. In this affecting exploration of the universal, yet highly personal activity of making ritual offerings, attention has shifted to givers and to receivers, the latter including deities, saints and the departed. As Bard Graduate Center associate professor Ittai Weinryb stated, “This is a conceptual exhibition, across religions, cultures, societies and periods. It shows the ways in which people charge objects with meanings.”

A medievalist-by-training, Dr Weinryb conceived of the presentation and has curated it with Bard Graduate Center Gallery chief curator Marianne Lamonaca and associate curator Caroline Hannah. They have gathered more than 250 objects spanning three and one-half millennia for this inaugural exhibition on the topic, part of a celebratory series of exhibitions and lectures marking the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Bard Graduate Center which will run through the year 2020. As such, it is a fitting tribute to the research institute’s trailblazing, iconoclastic approach and commitment to documenting the unfairly overlooked and explaining the difficult within the decorative arts, design and material culture sphere.

In ‘Agents of Faith,’ Weinryb, Lamonaca and Hannah examine humans’ collective desire to connect with the spiritual world through ceremonial donation of art, artifacts, money and other goods. This global survey covers traditions that transcend culture:


This offering was placed at an Austrian church dedicated to Saint Leonhard of Noblac, a patron saint of prisoners and so honored with objects of iron. Two oxen in double yoke votive, 1601-1799. Iron. Museum Kloster Asbach.

**Votive heart offered to Saint Francis, in the sanctuary of Sao Francisco do Caninde, in Ceara, Brazil, 1995. Wood, paint and photograph. Collection of Beate Echols. —Bruce White photo**

**Sailors have long looked to the heavens for protection. Such models can be found in European churches. Sailing ship votive, Italy, Nineteenth Century. Wood and metal bracket. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. —Walter Haberland photo**

**Such figures were buried underground to safeguard soil fertility in agricultural areas. Standing female deity, North India, Mauryan period, Third to Second Century BCE. Terracotta. Musée du Louvre. ©Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Thierry Ollier / Art Resource, NY.**

AT THE BARD GRADUATE CENTER (continued on page 12C)
Votives are frequently personalized so that the identities of those involved are made clear. Its inscription in Italian can be translated as “Miracle granted to Cavallaro Guiseppe da Pedara on December 17, 1944 (Catania).” Votive painting of Cav. Giuseppe of Pedara for protection during an aerial bombing. Offered to Saints Alfio, Filadelfo and Cirino, Sicily, 1944. Oil on metal. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

This expression of thanks was given to the Church of Our Lady of Rimedio in Orisanto, Sardinia. Leg of a donkey votive, Italy, 1951. Wood, carved and stained; photograph and silk ribbon. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Wax items could be melted down and turned into church candles. Lungs votive, Germany, Eighteenth To Nineteenth Century. Wax, poured and drawn. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Agent of Faith

(Votives are frequently personalized so that the identities of those involved are made clear. Its inscription in Italian can be translated as “Miracle granted to Cavallaro Guiseppe da Pedara on December 17, 1944 (Catania).” Votive painting of Cav. Giuseppe of Pedara for protection during an aerial bombing. Offered to Saints Alfio, Filadelfo and Cirino, Sicily, 1944. Oil on metal. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.)

This expression of thanks was given to the Church of Our Lady of Rimedio in Orisanto, Sardinia. Leg of a donkey votive, Italy, 1951. Wood, carved and stained; photograph and silk ribbon. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Wax items could be melted down and turned into church candles. Lungs votive, Germany, Eighteenth To Nineteenth Century. Wax, poured and drawn. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Agent of Faith

(Votives are frequently personalized so that the identities of those involved are made clear. Its inscription in Italian can be translated as “Miracle granted to Cavallaro Guiseppe da Pedara on December 17, 1944 (Catania).” Votive painting of Cav. Giuseppe of Pedara for protection during an aerial bombing. Offered to Saints Alfio, Filadelfo and Cirino, Sicily, 1944. Oil on metal. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.)

This expression of thanks was given to the Church of Our Lady of Rimedio in Orisanto, Sardinia. Leg of a donkey votive, Italy, 1951. Wood, carved and stained; photograph and silk ribbon. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Wax items could be melted down and turned into church candles. Lungs votive, Germany, Eighteenth To Nineteenth Century. Wax, poured and drawn. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Agent of Faith

(Votives are frequently personalized so that the identities of those involved are made clear. Its inscription in Italian can be translated as “Miracle granted to Cavallaro Guiseppe da Pedara on December 17, 1944 (Catania).” Votive painting of Cav. Giuseppe of Pedara for protection during an aerial bombing. Offered to Saints Alfio, Filadelfo and Cirino, Sicily, 1944. Oil on metal. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.)

This expression of thanks was given to the Church of Our Lady of Rimedio in Orisanto, Sardinia. Leg of a donkey votive, Italy, 1951. Wood, carved and stained; photograph and silk ribbon. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Wax items could be melted down and turned into church candles. Lungs votive, Germany, Eighteenth To Nineteenth Century. Wax, poured and drawn. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Agent of Faith

(Votives are frequently personalized so that the identities of those involved are made clear. Its inscription in Italian can be translated as “Miracle granted to Cavallaro Guiseppe da Pedara on December 17, 1944 (Catania).” Votive painting of Cav. Giuseppe of Pedara for protection during an aerial bombing. Offered to Saints Alfio, Filadelfo and Cirino, Sicily, 1944. Oil on metal. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.)

This expression of thanks was given to the Church of Our Lady of Rimedio in Orisanto, Sardinia. Leg of a donkey votive, Italy, 1951. Wood, carved and stained; photograph and silk ribbon. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Wax items could be melted down and turned into church candles. Lungs votive, Germany, Eighteenth To Nineteenth Century. Wax, poured and drawn. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Agent of Faith

(Votives are frequently personalized so that the identities of those involved are made clear. Its inscription in Italian can be translated as “Miracle granted to Cavallaro Guiseppe da Pedara on December 17, 1944 (Catania).” Votive painting of Cav. Giuseppe of Pedara for protection during an aerial bombing. Offered to Saints Alfio, Filadelfo and Cirino, Sicily, 1944. Oil on metal. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.)

This expression of thanks was given to the Church of Our Lady of Rimedio in Orisanto, Sardinia. Leg of a donkey votive, Italy, 1951. Wood, carved and stained; photograph and silk ribbon. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Wax items could be melted down and turned into church candles. Lungs votive, Germany, Eighteenth To Nineteenth Century. Wax, poured and drawn. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Agent of Faith

(Votives are frequently personalized so that the identities of those involved are made clear. Its inscription in Italian can be translated as “Miracle granted to Cavallaro Guiseppe da Pedara on December 17, 1944 (Catania).” Votive painting of Cav. Giuseppe of Pedara for protection during an aerial bombing. Offered to Saints Alfio, Filadelfo and Cirino, Sicily, 1944. Oil on metal. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.)

This expression of thanks was given to the Church of Our Lady of Rimedio in Orisanto, Sardinia. Leg of a donkey votive, Italy, 1951. Wood, carved and stained; photograph and silk ribbon. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.

Wax items could be melted down and turned into church candles. Lungs votive, Germany, Eighteenth To Nineteenth Century. Wax, poured and drawn. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. ©Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.


This tribute chopper honors soldiers missing in action from Wisconsin. Their names are painted on the gas tank. An escort made the three-day ride to bring it to The Wall on Memorial Day weekend in 1995. Customized 1994 Harley-Davidson Police Special motorcycle, deposited May 29, 1995. Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

—Bruce White photo


—Bruce White photo

iz their exceptional exhibition. Among these repositories are the Vietnam Veterans Memorial collection and the Rudolf Kriß collection of folk art at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum (Bavarian National Museum), Munich.

Soon after the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC was dedicated on November 13, 1982, visitors spontaneously began to lay symbolic objects at “The Wall.” The National Park Service has saved and archived more than 400,000 items, 44 of which are on view in “Agents of Faith.” These emblems of remembrance and sorrow include a model of a United States Navy river patrol boat, a San Miguel Pale Pilsen beer bottle containing a letter addressed to a deceased comrade and the “Hero Bike,” a customized Police Special motorcycle honoring the 37 missing-in-action servicemen from Harley-Davidson’s home state of Wisconsin.

Asked about the origins of the Kriss collection, Weinryb related how the ethnographer Rudolph Kriss (1903–73) began to acquire devotional objects from the Tirol area of Austria and Germany and elsewhere about 1920. Among the featured objects from this underappreciated resource are a lungs votive, molded in wax and then hand decorated; a forged iron figure of yoked oxen deposited in an Austrian church dedicated to a saint associated with iron; and a painting commissioned in appreciation for divine protection during the aerial bombing of Sicily in World War II. Noting the public’s very limited access to both the Vietnam Veterans Memorial collection and the Kriss collection, Weinryb observed, “This is a unique moment to see these objects on display.”

Other remarkable but rarely exhibited works make an appearance. Weinryb highlighted a late Seventeenth or early Eighteenth Century Armenian Gospel lent by the Morgan Library and Museum. The precious volume is “treasure bound” with Seljuk coins; seal stones with writing in Arabic, Armenian and Greek; and a gilt-metal cross among other significant ornaments. Also noteworthy is a mid-Fourteenth Century Italian Madonna and Child on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. X-ray analysis reveals that a rosary, a piece of lace and other objects rest within the polychrome wooden sculpture. These inserts are likely votives.

Edited by Weinryb, the 372-page accompanying catalog contains 17 essays and abundant illustrations. In it, scholars address such diverse themes as the interconnectedness of African art forms and community belief systems, the roles votives play within German pilgrimage culture and votive giving in Islamic societies. While there is much to rouse the intellect in this project integrating aspects of history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, art history, archaeology and material culture analysis, the emotions are also kindled. By its nature, the subject of votive giving encourages empathy and reflection. Those seeking respite from the hustle and bustle of Manhattan during the holiday season know right where to find manifestations of love and gratitude worthy of contemplation.

The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is at 18 West 86th Street. For information, 212-501-3000 or bgc.bard.edu. Ittai Weinryb served as the editor of the catalog published by Yale University Press in collaboration with Bard Graduate Center.

Kate Eagen Johnson is an expert in American decorative arts and an independent museum consultant, historian, lecturer and author.