

Give to get— and to be grateful

The art of votive offerings takes many forms worldwide and in all ages. By **Christopher Colven**

Agents of Faith, the catalogue of a recent exhibition staged to mark the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the Bard Graduate Center in New York, is truly a sight to behold. Lavishly illustrated with colour plates, it is an absolute joy to turn pages that open up a complex expression of faith – namely, the desire on the part of the devotee to present something to a deity either in petition or gratitude. In an introductory essay, Ittai Weinryb observes: “Votive offerings can be found throughout human history and around the globe, from archaic Greece to modern times, from the slopes of the Himalayas to the forests of Brazil.”

As a Catholic priest who has spent a number of years ministering at a Marian shrine, I am not unacquainted with the notion of ex-votos as an expression of religious belief. While this exhibition gives full rein to that apparently natural inclination, it widens the genre to include secular objects. There is a particularly poignant section dealing with the offerings left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, where, as the authors of the section acknowledge: “The objects evoke camaraderie, on and off the battlefield.”

Among the hundreds of thousands of artefacts left at the memorial wall are stuffed bears wearing jerseys of Chicago’s rival baseball teams – the Cubs



Ittai Weinryb
*Agents of Faith: Votive Objects
in Time and Place*
Yale University Press, 372pp, £55, \$75 (hb)

Robert Maniura
Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany
Cambridge University Press, 276pp, £75, \$99.99 (hb)

and the White Sox – a bottle of Olde Bourbon and a customised 1994 Harley Davidson motorbike.

An Asian insight portrays dishes set out as food offerings at a temple in the Indian city of Ahmedabad to mark Diwali, and a chapter on votive giving in Islamic societies, while underlining the Koran’s strictures against imagery, has some useful words about the Shia acceptance of the intercession of the prophets and the righteous. The examples of ceramics given here are mainly Iranian, and the depiction of the

cenotaph of Imam Reza in Mashhad will come as something of a surprise to those used to thinking of Islamic art in more austere terms. Latin America has its own section, which addresses the participation of the indigenous peoples in Christian practices from the 16th century to the present day. Devotion to the Mexican shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe is widespread among those colonised from the Iberian Peninsula and is represented here in a particularly moving painting dating from 1879 showing the Virgin saving shipwrecked sailors.

For me, the most engaging part of the catalogue is that devoted to German pilgrimage culture, with an emphasis on the Bavarian village of Altötting (much loved by the former pope, Benedict XVI, whose own Marian devotion takes its emotional heart from this tiny chapel). Mitchell B. Merback notes: “On the eve of the Reformation, the southern end of the Holy Roman Empire – Bavaria, Austria, Swabia and Franconia – formed a sacred landscape dense with holy places.” It is a tradition exemplified in the 17th century

The universal need to give to God: food offerings in a temple in Ahmedabad, India, for the festival of Annakut during Diwali

by a votive painting reproduced here of one Caspar Helmiller asking the Madonna of Hogling for the safe return of his cattle. Each contribution to the catalogue underlines the simple truth that men and women of differing cultures, religions and ages have felt a need to relate to forces beyond themselves by making offerings that can be placatory, intercessory or appreciative.

Robert Maniura’s *Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany* offers a cameo supporting the broader point being made in the Bard catalogue. This is a well-researched work with extensive notes and bibliography, though nothing can assuage the disappointment at finding the note, “readers will find the colour plates at the following website...” It would surely have been possible for Cambridge University Press to have reproduced at least some of the illustrations in colour.

The major figure considered here is Giuliano Guizzelmi, born in 1446 to a long-established Prato family. A lawyer by training, his mind turned in later life to his burial place, and the Guizzelmi chapel, in what is now Prato’s cathedral of Saint Stephen, became the focus for his devotional beneficence. In the same building a cult had grown up around a relic said to be the Girdle of the Virgin and the discussion widens into a consideration of the place miracle had in the religious mindset of Renaissance Tuscany. In this context, perhaps the most fascinating details are contained in a list of household expenses drawn up in 1488, in which secular and religious considerations seem to exist in a happy symbiosis. One item includes a votive offering of ten pounds of wax in “the image of Lactantio, my nephew”. Filippo Lippi’s *The Funeral of Saint Stephen* (which would have been glorious if shown as a colour plate), created between 1452 and 1465 for Prato’s cathedral, is reputed to depict the young Guizzelmi among the mourners – a worthy memorial to a devout and generous benefactor.

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The everyday reading that shaped the thinking of the landowner class: the library at Dunham Massey, Cheshire

Never ‘bought by the yard’

The actual use and contents of the English country house library have been brought to light. By **Jeremy Musson**

In Mark Purcell’s all-encompassing study, *The Country House Library*, every aspect of this topic is researched and addressed on an epic, Girouardian scale. Whereas architectural and art historians are often uninterested in the actual books found in historic architect-designed libraries, Purcell argues it is impossible to separate them from a consideration of situation, appearance and design. Demolishing the commonplace belief that volumes were

“bought by the yard”, he offers an opportunity for historians to think afresh about the way collections were read and valued within the elusive confines of the country house library.

Libraries were often admired and coveted by visitors. Around 1540, John Leland “likid exceedingly” a library in one of the towers of Wressle Castle in Yorkshire, “a study caullid Paradise, wher was a closet in the middle of 8 Squares latished aboute: and at the toppe of every

Mark Purcell

The Country House Library
Yale University Press, in association with the
National Trust, 352pp, £45, \$55 (hb)

square was a desk ledgid to set books on cofers withyn them”. Two centuries later, a visitor to Blickling Hall in Norfolk, wrote approvingly of the new library fitted into the Long Gallery: “very beautifull... a charming Chimneypiece designed by Lord Burlington. Sr Rich’d Ellis who left the Book’s his Busto is plac’d between the broken parts of a pediment.”

Purcell begins his grand sweep with evidence for libraries in the Romano-British world, before moving on to the types of medieval manuscript books stored in movable chests: psalters and books of hours, alongside histories and romances, law books and treatises on subjects such as courtesy, warfare and equestrian medicine. In the 15th century, works on classical subjects were collected by humanist-inclined magnates—among them John Tiptoft, the first Earl of Worcester, who was said to have “despoiled the libraries of Italy so that he might adorn England with handsome monuments of books”.

Purcell, now the deputy director of research collections at Cambridge University Library, has a breadth of knowledge of the country house library that comes partly from his former work as the National Trust’s principal adviser on libraries – the custodian of some 300,000 books. This enables him to cut through areas of confusion, such as interpreting surviving evidence. Take Hardwick Hall, where a 1601 inventory mentions only six books, yet other sources suggest a substantial library; the solution is that the inventory lists only those books, some with rich textile covers, that were kept in Bess of Hardwick’s bedchamber.

Self-consciously architectural library interiors make their appearance around 1720 when the finest Palladian houses also had libraries placed alongside private rooms. Robert Adam designed

elegant Neo-Classical libraries in the later part of the century, although some were inadequate for the number of books and were quickly converted, with one at Saltram becoming the dining room.

The social quality of the late Georgian library in England was celebrated by Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, who noted in the 1820s what an agreeable impact it had on social intimacy: “Many a marriage, or seduction of the already married, is woven between the *corpus juris* on one side and Bouffler’s works on the other, while the novel of the moment lies between as a means of communication.”

A gripping chapter covers the early 19th-century bibliomania that culminated in the great sale of the Third Duke of Roxburghe’s library in June 1812, described as a chivalric tournament between Earl Spencer, the Marquess of Blandford and the Sixth Duke of Devonshire. Purcell gives an excellent account of the arc of sales reflecting the decline in the fortunes of the landowning classes after the late 1880s. In 1966, Shane Leslie wrote in his memoirs, *Long Shadows*: “The empty shelves at Blenheim, Sledmere and Althorp gave me the ghastly gasp as coffins and vaults ravaged by body-snatchers.”

However, the book ends on a positive note as the improved economic climate, reduced taxation and sophisticated arrangements such as “conditional exemption” have slowed the dispersal of historic libraries. The evolving professionalisation of the National Trust’s approach is also explored. The new challenge for country house libraries in private or institutional ownership is not just to preserve and document these collections “but to make fragile historic libraries, which were intended for the few, visible and accessible and meaningful for the many”. Meanwhile, the country house library has become a favourite wedding venue, “grandiose but free of possibly unwelcome religious associations”.

Packed with information and fizzing with ideas, this book will ensure you never look at a country house library in quite the same way again.

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