

Mary in a Clam Shell: Italian-American Lawn Shrines and Sacredness in the Museum

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Figure 1

Introduction

Growing up in the town of Mamaroneck, NY, I remember passing lawn shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The shrine that sticks out in my mind and is probably the basis for this project is the life size sculpture of the Blessed Mother that stood outside of the Knights of Columbus meeting house on the corner of Halstead Avenue and West Streets in neighboring Harrison, NY (figure 1). We drove by it on the way to and from the grocery store. I passed her on my way to elementary, middle and high school. This statue has been in my life for as long as I can remember. I can look back to the times as a kid that my mom would stop at the stop light, and I

would stare at Mary from the car window.

West Street is busier than other residential streets in town. The intersecting street, Halstead Avenue, is a main thoroughfare between Mamaroneck and Harrison. Across the street is a used car lot, a pharmacy, and a supermarket. There is an apartment complex diagonally across the intersection and a more traditionally residential area farther down the street.

Although the shrine is placed off the street, it is still completely visible to passersby. Placing the shrine against the building impedes its ability to be viewed in the full 360 degrees. The shrine is composed of two main elements: the slightly smaller than life-sized statue of Mary and a small four-post canopy structure that covers it. The statue is raised from the ground so that

although the statue is smaller than human height, when approached Mary reaches slightly over the viewer's head. In addition to the brick pedestal where she is placed, Mary stands barefoot on a sphere of the earth. Mary is depicted in her bright blue and white robes, white veil and pale skin. Gold is used in the details of her robes. She stands with her arms stretched downwards. Her features are delicate. The years of wear are beginning to peel the painted plaster on her face, but her robe maintains the vibrant blue of a fresh coat of paint. The shrine has some protection from the weather in the form of a small four-post structure with a curved pediment roof. The style seems almost influenced by East Asian temple architecture. This structure is just large enough to cover the statue. At her feet are two flood lights that illuminate her from below and a single light placed overhead, casting shadows in the folds of her robes. There are often flowers left at her feet as offerings.

The "Mary in a clam shell," as she has become known, is an Italian-American cultural form, where a statue of the Virgin Mary is placed in the front yard as a public declaration of the family's Catholic faith. She is usually surrounded by a half- oval structure, which can best be described as a bathtub cut in half. And sometimes that is precisely what is used, giving the work another nickname, the "Bathtub Mary." This practice of the lawn shrine ties closely to the domestic nature of Italian-Catholic religious practice, where the home becomes an important place in one's religious practice. It also problematizes the ideas of public versus private spaces and secular versus religious statuses. There is another, similar version of the lawn shrine amongst Catholic Italian- Americans, where statues of saints are placed in the front yard of a household in celebration of certain feasts and holidays. Again, the shrine becomes a temporary but publicly explicit announcement of the family's faith. The community is welcomed into the private home

of the presenting family where they are offered food, once again blurring the line between public and private, religious and secular.

Women play a larger role in the preparation of the lawn shrine than they do in the traditionally male dominated religious celebrations. One typical example of a male practice is the dancing of the Giglio, where men lift a four-ton statue on their backs. Temporary feast shrines involve the women of the household. They are often tasked with designing the shrine and to embroider cloth to lay across the table upon which the statue will be placed and prepare the meals for visitors. These embroidered cloths are often passed down across generations of mothers and daughters.¹

The practice of the lawn shrine raises larger questions in regard to the anthropologist Victor Turner's principles of liminality in ritual practices. It is his theory of the statuslessness of objects within liminal phases that I will use to look at how lawn shrines exist within the world, and more broadly, how religious objects once placed within the museum, inhabit their own sense of liminality. I frame lawn shrines within the context of these theories, considering how they inhabit a space of ambiguity between the separate spheres of the public and private and the sacred and the profane. I also relate this to objects in the museum and how they exist in a place between their original function and context versus pure aesthetic value. Turner also speaks about how the passage through a liminal stage brings a person to a state of higher status than before. It is worth exploring how objects of folk art ascend from a state of lower status to a higher one through being placed in a museum, due to our socially constructed ideas of museum as the threshold for collective cultural heritage and artistic prestige.

¹Joseph Sciorra, "Yard Shrines and Sidewalk Altars of New York's Italian Americans," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* vol.3 (1989):193.

Turner and liminality raise larger questions regarding religious art in the museum, and how curators address these issues. How do museums provide context for these objects? How can museums maintain an aura of religiousness in an innately profane space? Many religious items, such as shrines, are specifically created to be engaged with. What happens to them when they are placed in the museum and they can no longer maintain their original purpose? How can museums work with communities to create a more holistic approach to the curation of religious and folkloric objects?

Italian-American Religious Culture

“Concrete Madonna,” “bathtub Madonna,” “Mary in a half shell”; she is known by many names. But they all invoke the same image. A concrete sculpture of Mary, clad in blue and white robes, enveloped in her *conchiglia*, or “shell.” The word “shell” here is meant less to invoke the symbol of rebirth, as in the famous work by Botticelli, but more so in reference to the hemispheric enclave in which Mary is placed.² The traditional practice of lawn shrines is characteristic of Italian-American material culture. “Lawn shrine” can reference the multiple forms of religious devotional artworks often placed just outside of the home, including the shrine, altar, and grotto; although “lawn shrine” as I speak about it here refers to the practice of displaying concrete sculptures of Mary outside of the home. Lawn shrines and grottos are permanent structures often made out of stone, while sidewalk altars are built for certain, specific feast days. These feast days are usually in honor of the patron saint of one’s ancestral hometown. However, others may choose to build an altar for personal devotional purposes, such as curing an

² Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, tempera on canvas, 1485 (Uffizi, Florence), <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/birth-of-venus>. 13 May 2019.

illness. To understand the nature of Italian-American religious practices, it is helpful to first understand the nature of the private versus public dichotomy that these rituals challenge.

Understanding Italian Communities:

The scholarship of Jerome Krase, *Polish and Italian Vernacular Landscapes in Brooklyn*³ and *Italian-American Urban Landscapes: Images of Social and Cultural Capital*,⁴ and Joseph Sciorra's *Yard Shrines and Sidewalk Altars of New York's Italian-Americans*,⁵ will provide the ethnographic basis through which I will look at Italian-American immigrant communities. Sciorra's work with Italian-American immigrants in Brooklyn provides a broad understanding of the role shrines play within the community. The vernacular landscape is independent of the political landscape, instead focusing on the traditional and generally governed by customs. Krase emphasizes the idea of "territorial Italians;" the idea that Italian-Americans are more likely to create physical boundaries in the space surrounding the home.⁶ These boundaries are often in the form of thick stone walls or gated fences. Additionally, it is common practice among Italian-American communities to regard to public space in front of one's home as an extension of their private space. Like other immigrant communities, Italian-Americans settle amongst other Italian immigrant families, creating ethnic enclaves that serve to support and assist one another. Krase also notes that beyond building ethnic enclaves based solely on shared Italian descent, immigrants tended to settle with members from the same town or region, creating what he called "congeries of families."⁷ In everyday life there is the distinct separation between public and

³Jerome Krase, "Polish and Italian Vernacular Landscapes in Brooklyn," *Polish American Studies* 54, no.1 (Spring 1997): 9-31.

⁴Jerome Krase, "Italian American Urban Landscapes: Images of Social and Cultural Capital," *Italian Americana* 22, no.1 (2004):17-44.

⁵ Sciorra, "Yard Shrines," 185-198.

⁶ Krase, "Italian Vernacular Landscapes," 20.

⁷ Krase, "Italian Vernacular Landscapes,"20.

private spaces (familial and non-familial spheres) with a perceived preference towards the nuclear family. Here I offer Edward Banfield's idea of "amoral familism," wherein the goal is to "maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do the same."⁸ This social attitude was first observed in mainland Italy, but is found today amongst Italian-American immigrant communities.

These practices call into question the dichotomous separation between what is considered public and private in the American lifestyle. This dichotomy exists within a larger doctrine of moral spheres which Susan Gal describes as "community versus individual, male versus female, work versus home, rationality versus sentiment, money versus love, disinterested group welfare versus self-interest."⁹ I will position the practice of lawn shrines within Gal's principles of public versus private and female versus male, while offering my own idea of the sacred versus profane dichotomy, in the paragraphs that follow.

Sacred and Profane:

The shrines exist within the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. What is unique about lawn shrines is their ability to bring the religious sphere into the domestic. They are personal displays of religious devotion that are removed from the church and placed in the home. Where the church is the traditional place of congregation and worship within the Catholic faith, the home now becomes another place of worship. These objects of religious devotion are often juxtaposed with other secular lawn decorations without diminishing their perceived sacredness. It is noted by Sciorra that there is a common practice to dress the statues up for certain non-

⁸ Alessandro Cavalli and Luca Cavazza Fabio, "Reflections on Political Culture and the 'Italian National Character,'" *Daedalus* 130, no.3 (Summer 2001):119.

⁹ Susan Gal, "Language and Ideologies Compared," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no.1 (2008): 25.

religious holidays (i.e., flags for Memorial Day) or to accompany other profane lawn decorations.¹⁰

Public and Private:

Much of this understanding by anthropologists and sociologists about the private nature of Italian immigrant communities goes against the very public nature of Italian-American religious practice. This outward facing proclamation of devotion marks to the community the pride and protection homeowners feel from the saints being venerated.¹¹ Lawn shrines, sidewalk altars, and grottos make public the very private act of religious devotion. The interpenetration of the public and the private is present when members of the community outside of the family are welcomed to the altar for their own devotional purpose, whether to lay flowers or money in honor of the saint. The often literal border is crossed between the public and private spheres. The stone wall understood by Kruse to be a sign of seclusion or sectioning off is transversed in this act. One Brooklyn man is known to keep his gate unlocked at all hours so that people may enter into his yard easily.¹² During processions altars become areas of rest for the men who carry the statue. At these rests the men are offered food and drinks by the woman of the house. This ritual brings the community into the private space, while marching the private through the streets of the community.

Female vs. Male:

As is the case within religious and cultural organizations, there is a strong divide between masculine and feminine within Italian-American communities. The practice of attending church is often carried out largely by the female members of the congregation. There are

¹⁰ Sciorra, "Yard Shrines," 193.

¹¹ Sciorra, "Yard Shrines," 187.

¹² Sciorra, "Yard Shrines," 194.

disproportionately more Italian-American women who attend mass than their male counterparts; however, there is a larger male presence in the practice of religious festivals, including processions. The way that women participate in religious rituals is through the design and assembly of lawn shrines. Women often embroider or crochet beautiful clothes to cover the altars. These objects are often handed down through generations forming the maternal legacy that Kay Turner addresses in her work with women's home altars.¹³ She described the women's relationship with their altars as "a personally owned place." The altar not only represents its maker's desire for relationship with the divine, but also serves as an instrument for that desire, a place of momentary performances, where prayers and petitions are spoken and responded to by divine intercessors."¹⁴

Statues of Mary can be purchased from many different sources, including the garden shops or directly from Italy, as mentioned by Sciorra.¹⁵ Today, a quick Google search for "garden statue of Mary" yields 34,400,000 results in 0.64 seconds. Sites selling these statues include those dedicated to Catholic religious objects, such as Catholicfaithstore.com. However they are not simply contained to the explicitly catholic web, as sites such as Walmart.com and Wayfair.com also advertise statues for purchase. This once again raises the question of the secular versus profane context through which these items are purchased.

¹³ Kay Turner and James Merrill, "September 11: The Burden of the Ephemeral," *Western Folklore* 60, no.2/3 (Spring/Summer 2009):157.

¹⁴Turner and Merrill, "Burden of the Ephemeral," 157.

¹⁵ Sciorra, "Yard Shrines," 185.

The History of the Representation of Mary

Here I set out to explore the history of the representation of Mary through art. Although this is a task that far exceeds the limits of this paper, it is essential to understand the history of her representation in order to better interpret her image today.

The roots of the cult of the Virgin Mary began first with the cult of Aphrodite and other female goddesses in Greco-Roman mythology. However, during the Christian era temples dedicated to Mary began to replace those of Aphrodite. During the Middle Ages, offerings of lit votives, notes, or small gifts began to be offered at shrines to the Virgin. Mary was venerated for her role as mother, but more importantly, as a perpetual virgin. She was to be the model of faith and charity. However, there is never a single manifestation of the Virgin. According to Westerfelhaus and Singhal:

While the Church's view may be that the term Mary refers to the single individual who was the Virgin- Mother of Jesus Christ, Italian Catholics clearly worship a range of madonnas. While these different madonnas may indeed be associated vaguely with the official Mary, each madonna nevertheless has a separate identity, and each is the object of distinct cultic devotion.¹⁶

Her image is dependent on certain masterful representations of the Virgin or one's personal devotion. Historically, many instances of shrines have been based on personal apparitions, where the image of Mary has come to a person and tells them to build a shrine.¹⁷

Images of Mary through History

The visual history of the representation of Mary can be divided into two main themes: paintings of her and Christ, and narrative scenes of moments throughout her life. Images of her and Christ are either narrative scenes depicting moments of Christ's life, including the popular

¹⁶ Arvind Singhal and Robert Westerfelhaus, "Difficulties in Co-Opting a Complex Sign: Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Site of Semiotic Struggle and Entanglement," *Communication Quarterly* 49, no. 2(2001): 99.

¹⁷ Pat Munday, "Mining Cultures and Mary Cults: Where Sacred and Profane Meet," *Technology and Culture* 57 (2016): 9.

imagery of the Annunciation, Conception, Nativity and Crucifixion. The fresco cycle painted by Giotto in 1305 for the Scrovegni Chapel depicts many of these scenes amongst others in the life of Christ and Mary. Other scenes of Mary and Christ are of the genre of the Madonna and Child. Beginning in the first millennium CE, Mary is represented as a heavenly queen, enthroned with her son in a heavenly sphere. By the 15th century, the image of the Madonna and Child is



brought into our reality.

Although less numerous, paintings depicting scenes of the life of Mary can be found throughout the history of her representation. The Guido Reni frescoes for the Chapel of Annunciation in Rome contains a cycle of scenes from the life of Mary and chooses to omit images from Christ's infancy.¹⁸ The images include the *Annunciation to Joachim*, *The Nativity of the Virgin*, *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, *The Annunciation to Mary*, and *The Virgin*

Figure 2

Sewing in the Temple (the only known representation of this scene).

History

References to Mary are scarce during the first century CE. The first direct reference to her by name comes from the first two gospels according to Luke. Luke chapters 1 and 2 tell the story of Jesus' birth and infancy. The gospel of Mark 6:3 reads as follows: "is not the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and of Juda, and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us?" This is one of the first written accounts to refer to Mary as the mother of Christ. In both of these cases, Mary is only regarded through her relation to Jesus Christ. She is only

¹⁸ 1610; Judith W. Mann, "The Annunciation Chapel in the Quirinal Palace, Rome: Paul V, Guido Reni, and the Virgin Mary," *The Art Bulletin* 71, no.1 (1993): 115.

mentioned in the gospels to mark herself as the mother of Christ. Much of her life exists within the apocrypha. Luke 1:17-18 recount the annunciation stories of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, both women who experience miraculous pregnancies at the hand of God. Although this story pertains to Mary's life before the birth of Jesus, her identity is still very much in reference to her as a mother.

The first known visual representation of the Virgin is a third century fresco found on the wall of the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome (figure 2). This wall painting, although worn, is understood by some to be an image of the Madonna and Child.¹⁹ The image includes a veiled figure sitting with a child on her lap. The mother embraces her child, hugging him close to her breast, suggesting that she may in fact be nursing her child. A third figure, assumed to be either Balaam or Isaiah, points beyond the seated figures towards a star. Both of these men are Old Testament prophets who foretold the coming Savior.

During the 11th century images of Mary were created by nuns and monks as a form of devotion. There was a particular interest in images of the Nativity, Crucifixion and Assumption. Mary began to occupy larger and more prominent spaces within painting. During the era she is often presented enthroned and surrounded by a heavenly scene. Images of Mary continue to be in response to her position as the mother of Christ, with artists showing interest in representing her alongside Christ's suffering.

Church adornment also began to reflect the changing views towards Mary around the turn of the first millennium. A mosaic decoration of the Madonna and Child from Hagia Sofia also adheres to the then contemporary practice of representing the Virgin. Mary and Christ are seated upon a richly adorned throne. Mary is clothed in blue; her body is tall and slender. Heavy

¹⁹Judith Dupre, *Full of Grace: Encountering Mary in Faith, Art and Life* (New York: Random House, 2010), 37.

shadowing along the folds of her robe create a perceived heaviness in the cloth. Her body becomes the backdrop to the infant Christ who is clothed in gold. She tenderly rests her hand upon her son's shoulder. The entire scene is set against another precious gold background, suggesting a heavenly setting, which reaffirms their holy status. The reflectivity of the glass tesserae is a preliminary attempt to use light as a symbol of Christ's holiness and the light of God.

During the 15th century, a regal image of Mary was created. Her majesty was adopted by members of monarchies as her status as a mother is the embodiment of a healthy lineage, which was essential for ruling families.²⁰ She was shown to have the power to protect and inspire, also characteristics of a successful ruler.

The 15th and 16th centuries saw the greatest production of artworks honoring Mary. Along with her greater visibility, there was a greater accessibility to artwork with the production of prints. Now, religious images were not simply for Church adornment or wealthy families, but prints



Figure 3

(engravings and woodcuts) made it so a modest family could bring religious images into their home. Thus, it is not surprising that in the 16th century there was a trend in the representation of Mary that placed her in the home. *The Holy Family* (figure 3), painted by Netherlandish artist

²⁰Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 286.

Joos van Cleve in 1512, is a scene of the Madonna and Child that is set within the home. The image has the addition of Joseph, which further suggests the domestic and familial nature of this image. This image does maintain some of the traditional elements of a Madonna and Child painting. The infant Christ is seated on Mary's lap. She is clothed in a beautiful blue robe with a red mantle. It rejects the earlier tradition of setting images of Mary and Christ in a heavenly sphere and instead places them on earth. The gilded background of earlier images is replaced with a bright blue atmospheric sky that can be seen through the window behind Joseph's head. The figures have lost their halos, instead choosing symbols to indicate their holiness and virtue. The white lily becomes synonymous with Mary's purity and virginity, while the fruit and wine placed on the shelf foreshadows Christ's sacrifice.

Just like many other aspects of the Catholic dogma, Mary's liturgy came under fire during the 16th century and the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther called for a redistribution of holiness in a more equal way with a return to sacred texts and away from sacred images. Luther's hesitation about Mary came from the fact that much of her story exists within the apocrypha. Her story is not based in the scripture but in the writings of hagiographers, such as the *Protogospel of James*, a 150 CE account of Mary's life. Feasts of the Annunciation, Visitation and Purification were maintained by Luther based on their scriptural merit, but all other feasts were seen in his eyes as distracting from the "unsullied word of God."²¹ John Calvin, commenting on the sexualization of Mary during the time of the 16th century, stated: "brothels show harlots clad more virtuously and modestly than the churches show those objects which they wish to be seen as images of virgins."²² Catholics fought back in the face of the Reformation by affirming the Immaculate Conception, and used her image in monasteries to lead their men in the

²¹ Rubin, *Mother of God*, 368.

²² Dupre, *Full of Grace*, 37.

quest to spread their version of Christianity. It is during the 16th century that Catholicism affirms its global reach, bringing along with it the image of Mary.

The Renaissance saw an increase in humanist ideals and the interest in creating beautiful things. Symbols began to arise that connected with Mary's virginity. During this time lilies are often placed in a scene accompanying Mary. Her blue and white robes become symbols again of her piety, but also her regality. Blue pigments were the most expensive and was used by artists to honor the Virgin. After the Renaissance, the importance of religious imagery in fine art gradually begins to fall off. Religious art of the 20th century witnessed a revival with the help of the French Dominican priest Father Marie-Alain Couturier, who had a radical belief that religious art did not have to be created by believers, only skilled artists. The list of modern masters he worked with include Braque, Matisse, Leger, Chagall, and Rouault.²³

According to Judith Dupre, the museum fulfills the role of the church, as these images are removed from their original setting and placed in the galleries of museums to be venerated.²⁴ I will again borrow the words of Dupre to sum up my study of the historical interest in the Virgin Mary:

Mary's identity in word, art and devotion...would change again and yet again. As Theotokos, Mary would be made more nurturing, emotional and familiar during the middle ages; given a pomegranate and placed in a meadow during the Renaissance; and relegated to the role of genial housewife by the Reformers, before she reemerged, officially recognized by Catholics as the Queen of Heaven, with the assertion of the dogma of the Assumption.²⁵

The Virgin Beyond the Bible

The Virgin of Guadalupe, an Aztec transformation of the Virgin arose after the Spanish colonization of Latin America. The adoption and subsequent transformation of the Virgin was

²³ Dupre, *Full of Grace*, 41.

²⁴ Dupre, *Full of Grace*, 38.

²⁵ Dupre, *Full of Grace*, 72.

typical among people colonized by Catholic countries. Today the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe stands strong within Latin American and Chicana communities of the United States. The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe differs from traditional imagery of the Virgin Mary in her dark complexion, black hair, brown eyes.²⁶ She is often represented on a cloud or in a crescent moon, with her hands in prayer, head tilted.²⁷ The symbolism of her blessed virginity is in the flowers of her tunic, which are placed over her womb to signify the birth of Jesus Christ.

Imagery of the Virgin of Guadalupe, typically two-dimensional, painted renditions, still continue to push the boundary between the sacred and profane. The Virgin of Guadalupe is often painted on the sides of buildings or stores in the hopes of protection for those who own the businesses, often from gang violence, or to aid family members who are sick or struggling. These paintings also adopt certain profane images within the composition, and include pictures of cowboys, native women, or armed gang members.²⁸

Vernacular Images of Mary, Mary in ephemera:

Vernacular images of Mary exist beyond the examples of lawn shrines that are explored in this essay. One of the more interesting instances is Our Lady of the Rockies, a 90-foot-tall shrine to the Virgin Mary in the town of Butte, Montana. The original plan for the statue was a five to six foot monument to the Virgin Mary built by a miner after his wife successfully recovered from a seemingly deadly illness. However, the community, made up of mostly out-of-work copper miners, came together to build first a 60, but eventually 90 foot statue for the city of Butte, as well as “a monument in honor of mothers everywhere.” This again references the Virgin and her model of motherhood.²⁹ The creation of this monument cost the community

²⁶ Singhal and Westerfelhaus, “Semiotic Struggle,”

²⁷ Camilo Jose Vergara, “Queen of L.A.,” *Print* 53, no.3 (1999): 86.

²⁸ Vergara, “Queen of L.A.,” 88.

²⁹ Munday, “Mining Cultures,” 13-14.

upwards of \$1 million of donated labor, services and materials.³⁰ This project included the creation of paved roads and power lines leading to and surrounding the statue. Today the statue serves as a pilgrimage site, where many individuals bring offerings and have in return claimed to experience miracles. The miracles include cured illnesses and help during economic hardship, as well as income from tourism to the area caused by the shrine.

Other vernacular images of Mary appear in the form of traditional *immagnette* or holy cards, which are mass produced, wallet sized cards with religious images. Although traditionally *immagnette* exist with many different religious images, according to Diana George and Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori,³¹ there are enough images of Mary on these cards to be worthy of an academic study. Holy Cards are not considered sacred, but rather serve as aids to worship as well as a educational purpose. Holy Cards started out as hand painted devotional images, but with the creation of printing, became easier and cheaper to produce, thus opening their availability to the poor. Again, these images were meant for women as indicated by the presence of the Madonna and Child. Mary at her most maternal, with the Christ child held on her lap or at her bosom, became a model of a mother's love and strength.

Fieldwork

I have chosen to focus many of my field examples from locations in Harrison, NY and the surrounding towns of Mamaroneck and Hartsdale. Harrison is a village within Westchester County, New York. Harrison encompasses an area of 16.76 sq. miles.³² The 2017 population

³⁰ Munday, "Mining Cultures," 14.

³¹ Diana George and Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori, "Holy Cards/Immagnette: The Extraordinary Literacy of Vernacular Religion," *College Composition and Communication* 60, no.2 (2008): 252.

³² "Harrison, NY Profile: Facts and Data." NY Home TownLocator, 5 May 2019, <https://newyork.hometownlocator.com/ny/westchester/harrison.cfm>

estimate is 28,319 residents with a median household income of \$117,453.³³ 6,538 residents are foreign born,³⁴ with Italian being the second most common spoken non-English language.

Estimates place the population of Italian speakers in Harrison at 1,635.³⁵

The shrine at the Knights of Columbus (KoC) meeting house, which was referenced in the introduction to this paper, is a unique example among the shrines studied as it exists in proximity to an outwardly Catholic organization. The next two examples are shrines that are found outside of residential homes. The first is outside of a house on 64 Crystal Street, again in Harrison (figure 4). This street consists entirely of residential homes, ending in a dead end, with a large town park. This house is around the corner from an elementary and a middle school. The house that this statue is placed in front of is typical of the neighborhood. It is a clean, yellow split level, with a nicely groomed yard and hedges.



Figure 4

The shrine is once again placed back off the curb, but is completely visible from the street. This shrine is comprised of two elements: a statue of the Virgin Mary and a stone grotto. The grotto is a semi-circular alcove in which the statue of Mary is placed. Although typically sold as an accessory element to the statue, grottos can also be built from found objects. Such objects include old tires and bathtubs, thus dubbing them “bathtub Madonnas.”³⁶ The statue of

³³ “Harrison Village, New York,” United States Census Bureau, 5 May 2019, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

³⁴ “Harrison Village, New York,” United States Census Bureau, 5 May 2019, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

³⁵ “Harrison, NY,” Data USA, 5 May 2019, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/harrison-ny/#demographics>

³⁶ Sciorra, “Yard Shrines,” 190.

Mary stands about two feet tall, and the whole thing is not more than four feet in height. Again, the shrine is not meant to be viewed in the round. The grotto conceals the back half of the statue of Mary, while the shrine's placement in some bushes and against the house cause it to only be viewed from the front. Mary again stands with her hands at her sides, clothed in her robes and veil. In the example of this particular statue, the concrete is not painted. Instead Mary and her enclave are both cast from the same gray concrete. The grotto is textured with a hemispherical pattern and the edges are decorated with a roped design.

Another example of a residential shrine is found on Union Avenue (figure 5). Although technically in the same neighborhood as the shrine on Crystal Street, this house is on a busier street. However, it faced the elementary school and sits diagonally across from the middle school. For most of the day, while school is in session, one must drive by at 15 miles per hour, obeying the posted school zone speed limit. Again, the house is typical of the middle-class neighborhood: a modest split level, but well taken care of. The lawn and landscaping are maintained. This house sits on a corner lot, but the shrine faces Union Avenue, and unlike the KoC shrine, cannot be seen from the intersecting street. Similar to the other domestic shrines I have analyzed, this one is smaller than human height. It is raised off the ground on a slate and stone pedestal. The masonry is a possible reference to the stone typically used in Italian vernacular architecture.³⁷ Once again, the shrine is placed close to the house, but remains completely visible from the street. Like the other examples, the statue is not meant to be viewed in the full 360 degrees, as it again is enclosed in the semi-circular grotto, this time painted white with gold details, and maintaining the same somewhat decorated aesthetic as the other shrine. In this instance, the addition of the pedestal almost forces the passersby to notice the shrine. The

³⁷ Sciorra, "Yard Shrines,"191.

concrete is painted again, in the traditional pale blue and white, again with the addition of gold detailing on Mary's robes and in the decoration of the grotto. The details like the pedestal and painted concrete make this statue the focus of the yard. There are a few bushes against the house,



Figure 5

but the shrine calls the viewer's attention immediately. This is not so much the case with the other domestic shrine, which is hidden amongst large bushes and lacks the attention-grabbing, brightly painted concrete. The statue of Mary is again in the same position, standing tall with her arms outstretched at her side. Her robes creating a curtain of cloth that falls in deep folds against her body and at her feet.

In my research, I have found that although there are many similarities in how these lawn shrines are

presented, there also exist differences. It is important to highlight these differences as the practice of erecting a lawn shrine is still a very personal expression of religious devotion and not merely a lawn decoration. Sciorra addresses the personal nature of these shrines through his description of how people alter the shrines:

Few people leave the store-bought object unadorned, choosing instead to enhance and personalize the figure in various ways. Minor changes are made through the use of paint, by raising the statue on a pedestal, or by highlighting the figure with a spotlight. In winter, the statue is wrapped in plastic to protect it from the snow and cold. During Christmastime it is decorated, along with the rest of the house, with electric lights and in holiday colors³⁸.

³⁸ Sciorra, "Yard Shrines," 186.

The interest of these objects as anthropological subjects lies in what aesthetics and elements people choose as representations of their faith. The next two examples are some of the most individual I have witnessed. The first is at 75 Harrison Avenue in Harrison. Harrison Ave. is a very busy street, where the speed limit is 35 mph. This shrine is normally viewed at a higher speed than the others I have discussed. In addition, it is much smaller than the others, which is how it caught my attention. The statue of Mary is only a foot and a half to two feet tall. She is again enveloped in a stone grotto. The shrine is placed on a large rock on the lawn which



Figure 6

provides a natural pedestal upon which the statue stands.

Uniquely, this shrine is placed away from the house, and is therefore able to be viewed in full 360 degrees. Despite this, the statue of Mary is still only viewed head on because the grotto obstructs the posterior. It is separated from the main lawn by a driveway. Despite its uniqueness, the shrine maintains some elements I have found to be typical including being painted in white and blue with gold accents.

Although this next example is not in Harrison, but the neighboring town of Hartsdale, it is another instance of the individual nature these shrines can adopt (figure 6). The shrine at 20 Laurel Street in Hartsdale, is on a quiet residential street that is off a busy, four lane thoroughfare which consists almost entirely of large commercial businesses. It is the type of street that you would not travel on unless you had to; which is how I found this shrine. A classmate of mine, knowing the nature of my project, suggested I check it out. This shrine is unlike any I had studied. 20 Laurel St. is built into the side of a rocky hill. The yard is not a flat grassy lawn, like the other examples, but

instead a mixture of natural and paved stone elements. This particular shrine is placed within a grotto carved from a large boulder. On one particular visit, a fresh coat of snow blanketed the yard, but the statue was clear, protected from the snow by the stone structure. A small brick paver walkway leads to the shrine from the front staircase. Despite the walkway, the uneven terrain of the yard makes it difficult to access the shrine.

The statue of Mary is painted in the typical colors of white and blue. However, this statue is different from the examples at the KoC or Union Avenue, because the colors of her clothes are inverted. This Mary is clothed in a blue gown and white veil. Her hands are pressed together at her chest in a prayer. The fake plastic flowers framing the entrance to the grotto are a welcome liveliness against the barren winter during one of our visits. During the warmer months lovely vines of flowers grow around the entrance to the grotto which create a cohesive landscape with the rest of the neatly groomed flowerbeds.

From these three examples, along with the many other instances of Virgin Mary lawn shrines I have witnessed both in Harrison, and in my previous fieldwork with Italian-American immigrants in Brooklyn, there are some commonalities I have noted. The shrine is placed on the front lawn, but typically placed farther back on the property, closer to the house, though it remains completely visible from the street. The statue of Mary within the shrine is rarely meant to be viewed from all angles, and instead most often viewed solely from the front. The back of the statue is covered by the stone grotto it is placed in, or the statue is placed against the wall of the building, thus impeding the viewer's ability to view the work in its entirety. The image of Mary is often very similar across different shrines, almost as if they are cast from the same mold. Many of these statues are mass produced, which may explain why they appear as copies. She stands tall in a heavily folded garment, and her hair is covered by a veil. Her arms are straight

and raised slightly from her sides. If the statue is painted, it is done in a limited palette of white and blue, with the details often painted in gold.

Thematically, it appears common that the shrine almost always depicts the image of Mary alone, without the accompaniment of the Christ Child. Mary is most importantly defined through the birth of Christ, and yet he is not present in the shrines. Historically the image of Mary is used to represent the ideal of motherhood, and yet in typical shrine statues, the key marker of her identity of mother, the infant Jesus, is not present. In one instance in the neighboring town of Mamaroneck (figure 7), I did witness a shrine with two statues, one of Mary and one of Jesus, that were separated in their own grottos, and was not a representation of the Madonna and Child. It was not a single statue with an enthroned Mary with an infant Christ on her lap.



Figure 7

Liminality

I feel that any analysis of the practice of lawn shrines devoted to the Virgin Mary would be incomplete without framing them within the context of liminality in ritual practices as made popular by Victor Turner. Liminality can be used to frame both the shrines' position in the real world and what it would mean to place them in a museum. I will begin with an overview of Turner's idea of liminality and liminoid spaces, and then offer my own analysis on how this idea can be used to understand the nature of lawn shrines as they exist both in the natural world and within the space of the museum.

The two works by Turner used to frame my understanding of liminality are *Frame, Flow, Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality* (1979) and *Liminality and Communitas* (1969). Liminality as a concept is derived from the middle process of rites of passage as it is described by Arnold van Gennep. In Van Gennep's *Rites de Passage* (1909) he introduces the idea of liminality in his classification of ritual acts. For him, rites of passage can be divided into three sections that the being must pass through, because according to him (and later Turner), the idea of liminality belongs to people during ceremonial practices of rites and rituals. The first category is separation which is characterized by symbolic behaviors that detach an individual or group from social life, that is the normal every day, or the "state."³⁹ Separation is followed by the liminal phase (limen is Latin for threshold), describes the phase of *ambiguity* where the "passenger" is "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial."⁴⁰ The final phase, or return to normalcy, is aggregation, where the person or people are believed to now possess a higher status or altered state of consciousness.

Turner drew upon Van Gennep's theory of liminality. Van Gennep's theory was based on the ritual practices of largely tribal societies. Turner included proto-feudal, feudal, early modern and modern societies and discussed how they have their own practices of public liminality, many based in performance. This is true of the ritual of carnival in feudal societies and of film and theater in electronically advanced modern societies. Additionally, Turner discusses the change in the status of an object as it passes through a phase of liminality. The temporary moments of statuslessness that people achieve during rituals allows them to exit the phase with a higher

³⁹ Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow, Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no.4 (1979): 466.

⁴⁰ Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969): 95.

status. Turner remarks: “liminality implies that the high could not be the high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low”.⁴¹ This implies that the status reversal goes both ways, predominantly in the form of theatrical performance. This will again become relevant when I discuss the liminality of religious objects that are housed in museums.

Liminoid, or “liminal-like” spheres are not rituals that possess true liminal phases, but are intended to be used as an escape from everyday life. According to Turner such liminoid spaces include “the writing of novels and essays, the painting of portraits, landscapes and crowd scenes, *art exhibitions, sculpture, architecture and so on...*”⁴² Turner then explains how the distinction between liminal and liminoid spaces is often fluid and the two co-exist quite often. Liminoid spaces are important here because they remove the idea of liminality from a strictly religious or ritual context and allow exploration of the ways liminality can be expressed in everyday, secular life. Liminoid spaces are not dependent on cycles. Unlike rituals that are time-dependent, for example rituals for different times of the year or different life stages, liminoid spaces are intermittent and often associated with spheres of leisure. This is especially important for this paper, as religious objects in the museum are transferred, in the eyes of Turner, from a space of true liminality to a liminoid structure.

It is after reading Turner that I began to analyze the ambiguous nature of lawn shrines, both as they exist outside of the museum and within it. The objects themselves are viewed by people in their own sort of liminality; as passengers in cars or people walking by are often on the move from one place to another. I speak of liminality here, not as Van Gennep or Turner in the context of a phase that a person or group of people must pass through, but expand on their

⁴¹Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” 97.

⁴²Turner, “Frame, Flow, Reflection,” 491-2.

theories to look at liminality as a status of ambiguity that lawn shrines, and other religious objects, achieve within our socially constructed everyday life, and in such liminoid secular spaces such as the museum. Liminality can be understood to mean “moments where structure and agency are not easily resolved”, and in the case of the museum, curators are not sure how people will react to such objects or how they will interact with other works.⁴³ Religious objects are removed from their original context and placed in a new one, theoretically devoid of any religious affiliation. The objects themselves no longer possess agency and are placed at the mercy of the curators and viewers. I propose viewing these objects not only in the ritual sense of liminality, where one possesses a sense of ambivalence for the period of time they are interacting with it, but also from the perspective that the objects themselves reside “betwixt and between” the spheres of everyday quotidian life and a transcendent religious other, and the outward facing public life and privacy of the domestic sphere.

First, lawn shrines as they exist within the real world, everyday life, straddle the binary between sacred and profane (“secular” or “mundane”) and public and private. Shrines exist within the binary of the sacred and the profane, as they are a way to bring the religious, and one’s religious practice into the home. The church no longer serves as the only place of devotion, as it has traditionally done. Shrines are public demonstrations of a generally private practice of religious devotion. The space of the lawn is seen as both the public and private. Shrines placed in the front lawn of homes are easily viewed from the street; however, they exist on the private property of the homeowner.

⁴³Bjorn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” *International Political Anthropology* 2, no.1 (2009): 5.

Liminality in the Museum

Victor Turner describes liminality and liminal phases as a period of transition either between high and low statuses. It is also coupled with the understanding that a being who passes through a liminal phase will come out afterwards with a higher status. This is typical of such rituals in religion such as sacraments, where one is considered of a higher status afterwards. The idea of high and low status as they refer to Turner's theories are best summed up by this quote: "liminality implies that the high could not be the high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low."⁴⁴ Not only do those in a lower status experience what it means to have a higher status, but the opposite is also true, where the high must understand what it means to be low.

This becomes important when we look at religious, folk objects that are placed in the museum setting. Although there is no single definition of what folk art is, the widely accepted understanding is as follows:

Art forms created by self-trained artists who, working with ordinary and recycled materials and working mostly outside of the art-world establishment, create functional and nonfunctional objects and environments for themselves and for members of their immediate social group.⁴⁵ Although any part of this definition can be (and has been) subject to scholarly critique, it highlights some of the key understandings of folk art. Historically, the name "folk art" implied a certain level of craft, utility or decoration. These objects were created by individuals who are not professionally trained, and therefore have a certain level of freedom from academism. It was not until museums, such as MoMA, began staging exhibitions of folk and "primitive art", that these art forms were exhibited in a traditional museum setting.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," 97.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Manley Delacruz, "Outside in: Deliberations on American Contemporary Folk Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 34, no. 1 (2000): 81.

⁴⁶ Delacruz, "Outside In," 80.

The dichotomy between high and low art forms is apparent in the way that fine art is discussed versus folk art. Folk art is referred to as “primitive”, “simplistic” and “utilitarian.” Folk art is understood to serve a purpose, while fine art is meant to be celebrated for aesthetic values. In many ways the museum is a liminal space, where folk art passes through from a position of lower status to high status. It is only when folk objects are placed in the “white museum walls, complete with precise explanatory labels of provenance, materials, and dimensions” that it seems to hold a status similar to fine art⁴⁷. This is bound to our understanding of the social function of museums as beacons of education, meant to house the finest examples of art and collective culture.

Additionally, religious objects in museums occupy their own liminality in terms of their context. Religious objects in the museum exist within an ambiguous space between their original context and aesthetic values. I will speak later on in regard to how museums deal with recontextualizing religious objects, but now I will speak about how objects in museums exist within this “statusless” phase as described by Turner.⁴⁸ To understand this ambiguity, one must first understand the idea of the “museum effect”: that is, all objects in the museum are viewed as works of art, and this changes the way we view objects. This becomes a problem, as Clifford points out, when the objects are not viewed as “art” within their original context.⁴⁹ Therefore, objects placed in vitrines enter into a space of liminality where they no longer serve their original purpose, but are instead viewed for their aesthetic (or artistic) quality. Putting objects in glass cases does not allow people to engage with the objects as they were intended to be interacted with. Constructed rules and behaviors in the museum restrict the objects from being touched,

⁴⁷ Delacruz, “Outside In,” 80.

⁴⁸ Turner, “Frame, Flow, Reflection,”

⁴⁹ James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 191.

while religious objects, specifically shrines, are meant to be engaged with actively. The lawn shrines I studied have offerings left at the feet of the Virgin at different holidays and feasts. Joseph Sciorra notes that devotees will sometime pin dollar bills to statues.⁵⁰ In cases such as this, people are meant to touch, and in a sense alter the statue. These works are dynamic and therefore require active participation on the part of the viewer.

Museum as Ritual, Museum as Church

The notion of “museums as cathedrals” is borrowed from a text by Carol Duncan, where the overlap between museum and temple were discussed in relation to contemporary art museums.⁵¹ The idea of “museum as cathedral” can be taken to literally mean architecture that mimics that of Greco-Roman temples, as is the case with museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, or museums that literally mimic the architectural forms of churches, as is the case with the Natural History Museum in London, England. Built by Waterhouse, the museum references elements of traditional Romanesque churches. The cathedral-like interior boasts “two long arcades that terminate in pavilions on the street front; both have grand, cathedral-like entrances, and... a large and imposing dome...”.⁵² This example raises the question as to the role museums play in a post-Enlightenment, post-Catholic age where religion is quickly being replaced by the secular. The connection of museums to churches implies that museums are seen as adopting the role of churches in their ability to house and display the hallmarks of culture; the ideals of nationhood and beauty for emulation.

⁵⁰Sciorra, “Yard Shrines,” 194.

⁵¹Carol Duncan, “Art Museum and Ritual Citizenship,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991),

⁵²J.B. Bullen, “Alfred Waterhouse’s Romanesque ‘Temple of Nature’: The Natural History Museum of London,” *Architectural History* 49 (2006): 269.

The popularity of classical forms within museum architecture is used to highlight their power and might by comparing them to imperial Rome.

Not only does the architecture of a museum replicate that of a church, but the way that items are treated within the museum are similar to relics and icons. Such important items are placed on a pedestal for people to witness and venerate at. Museum collections grew from the collections of churches and wealthy princes. This history tying churches with the act of collecting art for public display is discussed in Carol Duncan's article on the "Art Museum and the Ritual of Citizenship", where again the act of viewing objects in a museum is compared to the ritual nature of Catholic practice. This claim comes despite the popular discourse that democratic institutions such as museums, court-houses and capitol buildings should reject authoritative religious doctrines, and adopt a policy of objective truth. They do not represent two opposite beliefs in the process of cultural display. Museums create an atmosphere of devotion, where the seemingly most important aspects of cultural heritage are preserved and displayed. They took over the role of educator and the spaces often reflect that. This highlights the ways in which the religious and secular can be intertwined in this seemingly post-religious world.

These articles do not discuss what it means for religious objects to be placed within the purportedly neutral space of the museum. What does it mean to place religious objects within the new cathedral? How do curators convince museum boards and the public, in highly secularized societies, that such objects are even worth preserving? The reality is that the museum is not a neutral space, as the politics of daily life undeniably find their way into museums and are visible by what objects get exhibited or conserved. There is a long and complex history of the display of objects, one that grew from the need to preserve the community's cultural heritage.

Today it is not only a matter of whose cultural heritage is being preserved or displayed, but whose voice is telling the story.

Curating Religious Objects

Sacredness in the museum is a dilemma for curators and museums who choose to present objects of a religious nature. How can museums create an environment that contextualizes the objects? According to Branham, the removal of such objects from their original context strips them of their original function, and therefore, their significance. The struggle then for museums comes in how they are able to recontextualize objects that are not originally meant for a museum. What compounds the issues with curating religious objects is when these objects are also culturally significant. Often context speaks to the intangible heritage that is difficult to exhibit in a museum. It is relatively easy to conserve the physical object in the museum, but how do curators maintain their religious and cultural significance? Essentially, how can they make the invisible, visible?

The issue of preserve the intangible heritage of these objects is even more important in the case of these statues of Mary, as they are mass produced items, meaning it is difficult to place them within the fine-art, purely aesthetic context of the museum. Walter Benjamin and the idea of the “aura” are at play in this scenario, where the aura is lost through mechanical reproduction. Aura refers to the uniqueness of an object, or according to Benjamin, the “distance, however close the object may be.”⁵³ I propose the question here: how do lawn shrines challenge the idea of the aura? These objects although mass produced are also individually altered for purposes of personal devotion. In this way I liken them to Duchamp’s *Readymades*.

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 52.

Those tasked with presenting religious objects in museum settings are obsessed with the idea of providing context for the objects. The obsession with recontextualization comes from the issues that arise when such objects are removed from their original environment, and therefore function and significance. According to Branham, the objects are essentially silenced.⁵⁴ The museum was not the original environment for religious objects and therefore museums need a method of framing them to provide explanation as to the function and significance that are lost. To borrow another quote from Branham, to “remove a crucifix from the church is to remove the church from the crucifix.”⁵⁵ That is, the second a religious object is removed from its original place of sacrality, it loses its “aura” of religiousness, or its “voice.” Branham uses the example of crucifix, because when one is placed in a museum, the viewer does not engage with it as one normally would. It is the traditional ritual to genuflect at a crucifix when one passes it. Once placed within the museum, viewers do not engage with it as it should be, no one is kneeling at the cross when they pass it. This is how, according to Branham, the sense of religiousness is lost. It is no longer an object to be venerated, but instead an object to be viewed for its art historic and aesthetic value.

There are multiple contexts in which curators must frame religious, and other culturally tied objects; contexts which include the religious, social and political. This becomes difficult when the objects are exhibited in the *neutral* museum.⁵⁶ The process of providing context for objects takes different forms in different museums. For many, the best way to provide a framework of understanding is through a multi-sensory approach, which often includes videos,

⁵⁴ Joan R. Branham, “Sacrality and Aura in the Museum.” *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 52/53 (1994/1995): 35.

⁵⁵ Branham, “Sacrality and Aura,” 35.

⁵⁶ Neutral is emphasized here because museums today are rarely completely neutral, despite many museums adopting a mission of neutrality. They rather represent the ideas (political and religious) and values of those who are privileged enough, that is the boards, large value donors, or curators.

photographs or sound components in addition to the objects and any wall texts or labels. Many academic writings on the subject call for the addition of field recordings of certain rituals or practices. Ethnographic images of the community that the object hails from is another way scholars attempt to provide an understanding of the social and religious function of the objects. For examples like an altar or choir screen, objects that are tied to the environment very closely or are site specific, scholars call for photographs of the objects in-situ. These images provide a visual glimpse into the original placement, and therefore, life, of the objects now presented in the museum. This type of installation is considered by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as “in-situ” and calls for the inclusion of more “of what was left behind” through the mode of replica.⁵⁷ She proposes going so far as to include live persons from the cultures on display. However, this mode must be approached carefully as not to perpetuate the idea of museums as colonialist institutions.

However, other scholars call the attempt to create an “authentic” replica of the original context through the mode of a multi-sensory exhibition a “theatrical tableaux.”⁵⁸ That is a model of the environment that is dependent on dramatics, such as creative lighting to “provoke or heighten the experience of wonder.”⁵⁹ This addresses another issue with sacredness in the museum, and how museums go about re-creating sacred spaces within the museum. It raises the question of authenticity and whether it can be achieved in such a profane space. Authenticity, in line with Benjamin’s idea of the “aura,” is diminished when it is removed from an original site and reassembled elsewhere.

The most effective ways to create context for religious objects is to work directly with the communities that are being represented. The most effective way to provide context for religious

⁵⁷ Duncan, “Art Museum,” 389.

⁵⁸ Branham, “Sacrality and Aura,” 37.

⁵⁹ Branham, “Sacrality and Aura,” 37.

objects is to create a contemporary sacred space within the museum. James Clifford describes museums as “contact zones” where the curators and museum staff work with communities when curating an exhibition of culturally bound objects. The idea is hinged upon “reciprocal communication” that emphasizes a relationship between the museum and community and an awareness of the museum as a space of colonial encounters and the radially “asymmetrical relations of power.”⁶⁰ He also cautions museums on the possibility of exploitation, which is an issue that has historically plagued the fields of anthropology and museum studies.

It is argued by Branham that the most effective method of displaying culturally significant objects is through the practice of creating contemporary sacred spaces within the museum. This means the spaces are built for the museum and not meant to be an actual place of worship. They are originally crafted spaces instead of elaborate reconstructions of preexisting environments. John Clark in his essay “Planning the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery,”⁶¹ where the Buddhist members of the focus group suggested a living shrine be added. It would serve as a place where people could pray. This raises issues with the perceived neutrality of the museum, as it would be an explicit alignment with a specific religion.

Conclusion

The field of museum curation, specifically in regard to religious and culturally significant objects is ever evolving. Although there is no way for me to draw any definitive conclusions, I

⁶⁰ Clifford, “*Contact Zones*,” 192.

⁶¹ John Clark, “Planning the Robert N.H. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture 2009-2014,” in *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* edited by Bruce Sullivan (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015): 67-79.

agree with the view many scholars hold, where the curation of religious and cultural objects should be a process between the museum and the community represented. I agree with Clifford that museums, just like anthropologists, must be aware of the colonialist and exploitative history between institutions in the West and the perceived cultural “other.” I agree with Branham that we should be aware of how we are choosing to recreate sacredness in the museum and to avoid an artificial performance of such sacredness through theatrical effects like dramatic lighting. The “aura” of sacredness cannot be maintained within the museum, and it is better to work with communities to create a new and contemporary representation of sacredness specifically for that environment. I agree curators must be aware of the perception an object evokes in its original context as well as how it is maintained within the museum. Viewers must be made aware of the museum effect and when it is at odds with the cultural significance of certain objects. We must not force an aesthetic or art historical lens upon objects where one is not necessary.

It is worthwhile to discuss what it would mean to keep the shrines in their original environments and display them through a sort of tour. I propose here a tour of a selection of shrines throughout the town of Harrison. This tour may be a program for a larger exhibition of personal religious objects. The idea for this tour will allow the shrines to stay within their original contexts, which as discussed above, is an issue curators face when exhibiting religious objects. To completely sidestep the museum, it will allow for the objects to be viewed in a more “authentic” setting, and renounces the need to replicate sacredness in the museum. This idea works well for lawn shrines, as I would argue that viewing them from a bus or the sidewalk will allow for a more real experience of the objects. These shrines are most often viewed in passing, from the street. I feel that viewing the objects in this way will help people to better understand how these objects represent a convergence between the public and private sectors. The viewers

can witness the close proximity of the objects to the home, the site of the domestic, while remaining completely visible to the public. The viewer maintains their own sense of liminality, a moment of transition from one place to another, as they witness the shrines.

During my internship with the Brooklyn Arts Council this past summer we did a similar program in honor of J'Ouvert. The program was a tour of steelpan orchestras, where a bus took people around Brooklyn to different pan yards to watch the bands practice for the large festival Panorama that happens every summer. Although these objects are not religious, the nature of the performance is so closely tied to the environment that it benefited from remaining *in situ*. The pan yards are essential to the orchestras not only because they are the only open air spaces large enough to accommodate the upwards of 100 musicians, but gentrification has forced the bands to migrate deeper into the borough than where they practiced in the 1980s and 1990s.

I hope this paper has helped the reader to understand the complex questions the surround curating such religious or cultural objects within the museum. I hope this has changed the way people experience lawn shrines in their everyday lives, and are now able to look upon them with a new understanding of the role they play in personal devotion of those who own them.

Liminality, as discussed by Turner, is been a helpful approach to understanding how these objects exist across multiple socio-cultural spheres, and how the same idea of liminality is extended to the objects when placed in the museum. My intention for this paper has been to question the role museums have in curating religious objects such as lawn shrines, and what happens when the remove the museum building entirely, and in effect bring the museum to the objects.

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