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## Defining the sacred in fine art and devotional imagery

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### ABSTRACT

Beginning with a definition of the sacred as a two-fold process of making things special, which consists of accentuation and affiliation, this essay proceeds to argue that things are made sacred in devotional piety and in fine art in parallel ways that configure images within webs of agents. The two kinds of imagery perform in practices of sacralization that move toward different ends. The production of aura is at work in each case, but operates with distinct aims. The essay then presents a historical account of fine art as a modern development tied to the rise of the nation-state, in which secularization extended to making art independent of religious institutions and patrons, allowing it to develop in a way that should be distinguished from devotional imagery. This does not mean that religion withers in the modern era, but that art developed its own mode of sacralization.

### KEYWORDS

Sacred; sacralization; visual piety; fine art; devotional image; aura

*Sacra* have long been regarded by religious practitioners as artifacts consecrated to gods, ancestors, or saints, or to the rites that engage them in relations with human beings (Colpe 2005). Understood in this way, sacred things are specially charged artifacts tasked to affect the world in a way that benefits human beings. By virtue of consecration, origin, or circumstance, certain objects are selected to become technologies of enchantment. Their power to work relies on the difference that particular conditions make. The object may have miraculously appeared, come from the person of a special figure, accompanied a fortuitous event, or been subjected to incantation or another kind of ritual action with the result that the object brings its users into contact with powers beyond their own. Thus, holy water, a bone, a lucky charm, or a saint's image in different ways each become tools for achieving ends. This special instrumentalizing of material things is the work of sacralization, various processes of making things efficacious, or sacred. Two actions are discernible in the production of sacred things, which I will call *accentuation* and *affiliation*. Various conditions highlight them among other things, demanding that they be recognized and treated in a particular way, while their use and veneration bring devotees into relationship with ideal versions of themselves, with gods, or with a people or a community.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Taves (2009, 28–46) provides a very useful account of the production of special things as the basis for understanding *sacra*. The most important and influential work on sacralization as setting apart is, of course, Durkheim (1995), which has been expertly explored by Smith (2004, 101–116).

For my purpose as a scholar of religious art and material culture, the sacred is best understood not as a category of classification, nor as a particular kind of experience, but as a form of cultural work. My approach focuses on things and what they do and how they do it as participants in webs of human and non-human actors. Simply put, the sacred is anything that is reframed by ritual consecration or narrative or discursive transposition such that it produces social consequences for having done so. To touch or see or wear or eat the object is to enter into an embodied relation to something beyond it. Thus, the image of a saint, displayed at a shrine, ritually installed and blessed, apprehended through the medium of a special story such as hagiography or the account of the object's origin and miraculous action, is made sacred; and the effect of the image is sacred by linking devotees to the saint, to the deity who empowers the saint, and to the community identified by devotion to the saint. The first aspect of sacrality is the accentuation of the cult image; the second is the confederative result of engaging the saint by means of the image. The two actions unfold together: highlighting the object in the world of ordinary life moves in tandem with the object's ability to join people together into a social formation. The material and social aspects combine to produce the cultural work of object veneration.

For the sake of clarity, throughout this essay I will intend by the term *sacrality* the state or condition of being sacred; by the sacred I mean both the things and the actions that accent and bring together; and by *sacralization* I mean any process or ritual act (consecration) that highlights anything in order to bring devotees into relation with a desired reality or state of being. In every case, it is the place of images in the operation of sacralization that interests me. So I will trace the history of the sacralization of fine art in the modern era and compare that to the visual culture of devotional imagery in order to show two ways of thinking about how images are made sacred and exert power.

### Nation, art, religion, culture

I begin with the claim that art is a product of the modern era, in which art objects were highlighted or set out by a process of secularization. The development of the nation-state in 17th-century Western Europe, most importantly perhaps in the France of Louis XIV, began to encourage the development of the state and the private citizen as primary patrons of the arts. The production of art certainly began earlier, during the Renaissance, for example, in the setting of the city-state republic, but the church maintained a powerful role. And the specialness of beautiful objects was understood to be a means of glorifying and pleasing God or the saints in order to garner blessings from them. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the state and the secular marketplace increasingly replaced the institutional church as principal employers of artists. But it is important to recognize that this secularization of art patronage did not mean the disappearance of religion (the French state continued to place paintings in Catholic churches throughout the 19th century), but supported a broad shift in which the arts came to be considered somehow religious in their own right. I want to argue that the sacralization of art qua art began with its secularization. In a series of lectures first published in 1818, the French philosopher Victor Cousin developed the view that the sentiment of beauty cultivated by artists was to be 'pure and disinterested.' But he did not wish to suggest that the feeling of beauty was non-religious or anti-religious. For Cousin (1893, 16) the sentiment

of beauty was ‘a noble ally of the moral and religious sentiments.’ This meant that art was not subservient to religion or morality, but had subsumed the spirit of religion and morality into itself.

Let us be thoroughly penetrated with the thought that art is also to itself a kind of religion. God manifests himself to us by the idea of the true, by the idea of the good, by the idea of the beautiful. Each one of them leads to God, because it comes from him. True beauty is ideal beauty, and ideal beauty is a reflection of the infinite. So independently of all official alliance with religion and morals, art is by itself essentially religious and moral; for, far from wanting its own law, its own genius, it everywhere expresses in its works eternal beauty.<sup>2</sup>

The independence of art from religion paralleled the gradual independence or autonomy of the nation-state. A fundamental feature of Romantic thought was to frame artistic achievement in national terms and to regard national character as consisting of religion, language, song, architecture, folklore, and poetry. In a letter of 1796 on the character of nations and ages, Johann Gottfried Herder expressed the logic of nationhood as the basis for artistic character as follows:

Just as entire nations have one language in common, so they also share favorite paths of the imagination, certain turns and objects of thought: in short, one *genius* that expresses itself, irrespective of any particular difference, in the best-loved works of each nation’s spirit and heart.<sup>3</sup>

As culture, specifically religion, language, and the arts, came to assume a strong role in characterizing national identity, culture was elevated to a status of national spirit. Preserving and celebrating culture for its capacity to house and nurture this spirit gave the arts a special role. As a result, the arts were praised for their ability to honor the spirit of the nation as the unitive force of its people.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the Louvre Palace, former residence of kings of France from the 13th to the 17th centuries, became the Louvre Museum in 1793. The last royal resident of the palace, Louis XIV, had famously asserted that ‘l’etat, c’est moi.’ As a result of the Revolution’s toppling of the monarchy, the Louvre became a public museum of art, and was dedicated to preserving the culture of the people, who comprised the new basis of the nation’s sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> The arts acquired a new power and urgency as the indices of national spirit. In a series of lectures on aesthetics during the 1820s, Hegel developed the view that history was a progressive evolution of mind or universal spirit taking shape in a series of art forms from architecture to sculpture, painting, music, and poetry. The place of the arts in the understanding of culture came to the fore during the Romantic era as European nations hammered out their identities in relation

<sup>2</sup>Cousin (1878, 187–188, 1893, 164). For consideration of the Romantic notion of the ‘sovereignty of art,’ see Beiser (2003, 73–87).

<sup>3</sup>Herder (2004, 119, emphasis in the original); for the German original, see Herder (1985, 495, vol. 7). Kant included a chapter entitled ‘Of National Characteristics, so far as they Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,’ in his 1764 work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (Kant 1991, 97–116).

<sup>4</sup>On the Louvre, see McClellan (1994) and Oliver (2007). Several other private collections of painting and sculpture in Europe had become art museums during the course of the 18th century such as the National Archeological Museum of Naples, established in the 1750s, though the museum was not designated ‘national’ until 1860, when Guisepppe Garibaldi occupied Naples and demanded that the collection be opened to the public; the Uffizi in Florence opened to the public in 1765; the Pio-Clementine Museum in Rome was established in 1773; and in 1781 the art collection of the Habsburgs was opened to the public in the Belvedere Palace in Vienna. For further discussion, see Alexander and Alexander (2008, 27–33).

to one another and their own, often invented pasts, which the arts helped them imagine and construct (Geary 2002).

For their part, sociologists and anthropologists have looked to religions as primary ways of sorting out peoples and civilizations, regarding religions as foundational and elementary bearers of collective identity. A clear articulation of this way of thinking emerged in Britain during the second half of the 19th century. Edward Tylor opened his major work, *Primitive Culture* with the enduring definition of culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (Tylor 1920, 1). A contemporary approach most famously associated with Matthew Arnold infused culture with redemptive power. In the preface to his *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold summarized the purpose of his book:

to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we know follow staunchly but mechanically. (1993, 190)

In 1882, John Robert Seeley, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, published *Natural Religion*, a set of essays that argued for regarding art and science as definitive aspects of ‘natural religion,’ which he understood as rooted in the inclination to admiration and contemplation. Rejecting supernaturalism as the essence of religion, Seeley (1882, 132) insisted that natural religion was common to Christian and skeptic alike because art and science were modern humanity’s way of embracing the natural world. Where Tylor (1920, 427–428) had refused out of Victorian reticence to address the relationship of Christianity to the natural religion of primitive culture, Seeley was not constrained to do so. But like Arnold, Seeley considered them the constituents of what he called ‘the higher life.’ Art and science were modern instantiations of what drove religion in pre-modern worlds.

What is this new thing ‘culture,’ and what relation does it bear to the old familiar thing ‘religion?’ If we might judge by the utterances of its adherents, it is not dissimilar nor unfriendly to religion, but somehow more enlightened and modern, so that it speaks another dialect even when it would express the same truths. (Seeley 1882, 136)

Indeed, culture was religion by another name: ‘The name culture will seem to be merely the *alias* which the Natural Religion of the modern world has adopted, being forbidden by orthodoxy to use the name that properly belongs to it’ (Seeley 1882, 136).

Like Arnold, Seeley resented the ‘mechanical’ character of institutional Christianity, and looked to culture as the modern alternative. The substance of religion, he claimed, was culture, ‘and the fruit of it the higher life’ (138). Seeley looked to artists since the early 19th century as exemplars of the culture that would revive true religion:

If we look at the history of the modern theory of culture we shall perceive that its characteristic feature is precisely the assertion of the religious dignity of Art and Science. That German Gospel which the Puritan Carlyle preached to us with a solemnity which seemed scarcely appropriate to it, was an assertion of Beauty and Truth as deserving to be worshipped along with Duty. Goethe and Schiller habitually apply the language of religion to Art. (139)

Modern poets, he claimed, effected

a remarkable revolution in art. For the first time artists began to perceive the unity of what they contemplated; and for the first time, in consequence, they began to feel that their pursuit was no desultory amusement, but an elevating worship. (91)

This led Seeley to attribute to artists a preminent religious significance: ‘The function of the prophet was then revived, and poets for the first time aspired to teach the art of life, and founded schools’ (92). Preeminent among them, he listed Goethe, Schiller, Chateaubriand, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron.

The inclination to invest the artist with prophetic stature became a commonplace among aesthetes, critics, poets, and painters into the 20th century. Art became a spiritual source of inspiration and cultural renewal by virtue of being produced by artist-prophets. Rather than drawing its power from institutional religion or the state, the work of art was highlighted as special as a trace of the artistic vision that crafted it. The sacredness of art, in other words, rested for many in the modern era on the stature of the artist as an agent and progenitor of spiritual value. The special status of art derived from the office of the one who produced it. The two-fold character of art as sacred is evident in how certain artists and their work were set out and how the work served to elevate those who recognized its sacrality. For example, the painter and theorist Wassily Kandinsky, in his manifesto, *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912), compared ‘the whole picture of the spiritual life’ to an acute triangle that expands upward by the press of geniuses and artists.<sup>5</sup>

In every division of the triangle, one can find artists. Every one of them who is able to see beyond the frontiers of his own segment is the prophet of his environment, and helps the forward movement of the obstinate cartload of humanity. (Kandinsky 1994, 134)

For Kandinsky, modern souls,

which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbor seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose. The whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game, is not yet over. (1994, 128)

Writing on the eve of the First World War, Kandinsky could hardly imagine how much worse things would become. Yet he considered the rare artist of genius to be a prophet who pointed the way out of what he considered the nightmare of modern materialism and unbelief. Art was to rescue modern society from atheism. Modernity was sunk in unbelief. ‘As regards religion, its inhabitants bear various titles. They call themselves Jews, Catholics, Protestants, etc. In fact, they are atheists’ (Kandinsky 1994, 134). In contrast to the ‘purposeless, materialistic art’ of the day, he hailed ‘the other type of art,’ that which ‘has an awakening prophetic power, which can have a widespread and profound effect.’ That art was the work of the man who ‘conceals within himself the secret, inborn power of “vision.”’ Kandinsky (1994, 131) wrote of him in heroic terms: ‘He sees and points. Sometimes he would gladly be rid of this higher gift, which is often a heavy cross for him to bear. But he cannot.’ And this burden accrued to the benefit of the many gathered in the slowly ascending triangle: at the expense of the misunderstood and lonely artist-prophet, the many took the shape of a graduated community following the spiritual insights of a lofty elite. Even if they fail to recognize this leadership, the people

<sup>5</sup>Kandinsky (1994, 134); cf. Kandinsky (1952, 30): ‘das ganze Bild des geistigen Lebens.’

were better for the work they scorn because its spiritual effects eventually trickle down to improve their lives. It is not a relationship with art that promptly completed its sacrality as both segregative and confederative since the works of genius remain contested, relying on time to affirm their power. But the progress is sure and the vision of the artist is eventually ratified in Kandinsky's scheme.

As a prophet, the artist became the purveyor of spiritual consciousness and inspiration, supplying in the body of his or her work the revelation formerly reserved for sacred writ and ancient myth. This substitution accommodated what liberal theological thought described as the sacred in the modern, secular world. German theologian Paul Tillich characterized faith as one's 'ultimate concern,' and this idea was readily adapted to art. Where Kandinsky despised modern, naturalistic, and academic art, Tillich disparaged the conventional religious art of his day as failing to mediate 'ultimate reality,' and praised Expressionist painters before the First World War for prophetically expressing in the style of their art 'the catastrophes of the twentieth century.'<sup>6</sup> Prophecy in art, Tillich claimed, was not a vision of the future, but the revelation of what really mattered. He fondly recalled an occasion after the war when he stood before a Botticelli painting in a Berlin museum and experienced what he described as 'an ecstatic feeling of revelatory character' (Tillich 1987, 12). Artists, he maintained, reveal their ultimate concern in their work's style. 'This means that every artistic expression is religious in the larger sense of religion. No artistic expression can escape the fact that it expresses qualities of ultimate reality in the forms it shows' (Tillich 1987, 33). 'Artists do not merely express a moment of the social situation of their time.' Style allows them to convey something much more profound. 'They express the dynamics of the depths of society which come from the past and run toward the future. Therefore, [artists] have a prophetic character' (Tillich 1987, 29).

In 1959, Tillich delivered a lecture entitled 'Art and Ultimate Reality' at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He brought much of the intellectual history outlined so far to bear on his understanding of art. One easily discerns the influence of German idealist philosophy and Romanticism, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Rudolf Otto. Tillich's procedure was to sketch out formal qualities that corresponded to or produced existential states that may be taken to characterize the sacredness of art that reveals ultimate reality. He outlined 'five stylistic elements [in the visual arts] which can become mediators of ultimate reality,' describing them briefly and then pointing to a number of examples drawn from a broad range of the history of art (Tillich 1984, 233). The examples were not determined by historical argument, but by how their visual features impressed Tillich as corresponding to five types of religious sensibility.

The first is numinous realism, which corresponds to what he called the sacramental type of religion and works by the realistic depiction of ordinary things 'through which ultimate reality mysteriously shines' (223). Examples range from 'primitive art' (he does not say what he has in mind by the term) to Paul Cézanne, Georges Braque, Giorgio de Chirico, Marc Chagall, Jacques Lipchitz, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Yves Tanguely, and Naum Gabo. This is a bewildering range of artists whose works often depict nothing like ordinary, everyday objects. Hardly 'realist' in any sense, the work of most of these artists begins with recognizable subject matter, but is not concerned to imitate

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<sup>6</sup>From a series of lectures in 1952 delivered at the Minneapolis School of Art, Tillich (1987, 29).

appearances. The second correspondence of style and religious sensibility is ‘the mystical type,’ in which ‘the particularity of things is dissolved into a visual continuum’ (226). Tillich drew examples from ancient Asia to modern Europe and America, from Song Dynasty landscape paintings to Wassily Kandinsky’s abstract art to the work of contemporary New York School non-objective painters such as Jackson Pollock. Once again, a widely varying range of work. The third is what Tillich calls ‘the prophetic-protesting type of religion,’ the artistic style he calls ‘critical realism.’ It ‘shows ultimate reality by judging existing reality’ (229), and is evident in another laundry list of artists: Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Brueghel, Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, James Ensor, Georg Grosz, Max Beckmann, and Edward Hopper. Religious humanism is the fourth category and corresponds to artistic idealism, which Tillich defines as art that engages ‘anticipation of the highest possibilities of being’ (230). Finally, the ecstatic-spiritual type of religion is visualized in expressionist art. Such art ‘breaks to pieces the surface of our own being and that of our world’ (232). Instances of it include work by Vincent Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, André Derrain, Franz Marc, and Emil Nolde.

The great majority of the free-ranging examples of Tillich’s thematic approach to defining the sacred in art consists of representational art that tweaks, distorts, and modifies appearances to convey something beyond what the eyes sees in everyday or ordinary experience. Throughout, Tillich relies on his fundamental definition of the sacred as symbols of ultimate reality. As he put it, ‘If the idea of God includes ultimate reality, everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not’ (220). This allowed him to ignore artistic context, history, and intention. Art is a varied means of expressing reality. And art that does so in a way that struck Paul Tillich as pressing beyond the surface or appearances of everyday reality was sacred inasmuch as it sought to reveal ultimate reality.

Tillich regarded his selection of fine art as an effulgence that drew one away from ordinary experience. Art was a symbol of ultimate reality, accentuated within the course of everyday life. But Tillich did not consider the other half of what I have described as the double function of sacralization: the communal dimension. Art was not about drawing viewers together, but rather about isolating them in a personal, essentially private encounter with ultimate reality. Tillich deliberately selected examples of art that were not originally created for religious circumstances because he wanted to make the point that ultimate reality, not religious sect or affiliation, was what made artistic expression sacred. Indeed, he made sure to criticize ‘kitsch’ as the deterioration of religious art in use by churches, and he despised in particular as kitsch ‘the sentimental traits and beautifying dishonesty from the distortions of the idealistic style’ (234). As an example, he pointed to one of the most popular portrayals of Jesus in the United States from the 1890s to the 1920s (Figure 1), comparing it unfavorably with one of his favorite painters: ‘an apple of Cézanne has more presence of ultimate reality than a picture of Jesus by [Heinrich] Hoffman (which can now be found in the Riverside Church of this city).’<sup>7</sup> The expression of ultimate reality as a neo-Romantic definition of religion certainly does not comport with the devotional piety that found Hoffman’s Jesus so appealing. The ‘churches,’ the religious communities to which the many belonged and pinned

<sup>7</sup>Tillich (1987, 225). A comparable denunciation of the banality of popular devotional imagery continued in the work of John Dillenberger, who was influenced by the work of Tillich, see Dillenberger (1986, 204).





**Figure 1.** Heinrich Hoffman, *Christ and the Rich Young Ruler*, 1889, oil on canvas, Riverside Church, New York. Photo from Wikipedia. Public domain.

their conception of religion, gravitated toward sentimental kitsch, which is what Tillich regarded Hoffman's paintings to be whereas the discerning individual preferred the likes of Cézanne. In fact, Tillich hailed fine art in a way that widely comported with a privatization of spirituality in the modern era, defining it in non-communal ways as grounded in the subjectivity of the individual viewer as a condition of freedom from institutions like the state or church. This sensibility can be traced back at least to the ideal of art for art's sake in the early 19th century. The valorization of the artist as the basis of the sacrality of fine art contrasts with the operation of visual piety, which is less concerned with the artist than it is with the ability of the image to link viewers to a communal ethos of piety and the presence of the saint or savior pictured in the image. The two sensibilities – art as sacred and visual piety – articulate different conceptions of sacrality. In the end, fine art and devotional imagery are apples and oranges.

### A comparison of fine art and devotional imagery

For the sake of comparing fine art and devotional imagery, I propose to define fine art as *discerning* engagement with the sensuous properties of carefully crafted objects. In fact, the experience of fine art is inextricable from a battery of distinctions or judgments. Discernment distinguishes any form of art, from cooking or flower arrangement to painting or sculpture. Discernment means the determination of value by comparison, which consists of invoking criteria keyed to what goes into making the work, what places it among other works, and among audiences.<sup>8</sup> Chief among other things are craftsmanship or technical skill in the treatment of the medium, skill in the use of subject matter, artistic aims, and relationship to the history of art. All of these bear on the physical characteristics of the work to which viewers respond. But what the work causes them to experience informs a number of additional judgments whose function is to frame the experience in order to determine its value. Art is about more than 'What does this object make me

<sup>8</sup>See Bourdieu (1984, 257–317) for discussion of social distinction in artistic judgment.

feel?' The ability of a work of art to make one feel something is part of what makes it special, illuminating it among other objects in the world. But securing the significance of the feeling remains the task of another set of judgments. The first set of judgments are affective; the second interpretative. Together, they enable the determination of aesthetic value.

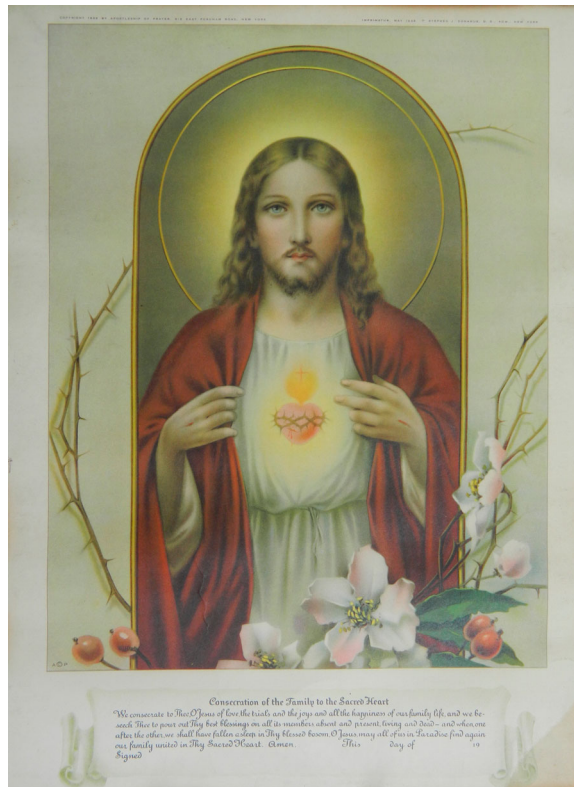
Most noteworthy for present purposes regarding interpretive judgments is their social function of linking the viewer to other viewers. This becomes quite clear when we consider a sample of the sort of judgments I have in mind, such as the discrimination that what I experience is art, not kitsch; whether it is art that appeals to informed taste, not passé judgment; whether it is art that exhibits critical insights, not conventional notions; or art that is collected by the best museums and galleries rather than provincial art gathered in institutions of less prestige; whether it is art by a master and not by a pupil, school, or forger; whether it is art that is admired by people like me, or by those to whose company I aspire, and not the wrong crowd. And whether it is art that makes no sectarian claims, or at least not the wrong sectarian claims. With this in mind, it is clear that fine art is both accentuated and affiliative: aesthetic discrimination distinguishes one from poor taste and joins one to the cadre of good taste, to those who know, who are able to make the discerning distinctions. This may all sound quite snobbish, and it frequently is. But that is not all it is. Art objects exhibit features that shape sensuous response to them in a learned and enjoyable way, and thus exert social consequences. The tools we use to value what art does to us are shaped by the social realities in which we exist.

But do the accentuating and affiliating action of fine art make it *sacred*? The combined actions set out an art work as special, endowing it with an aura or presence that commands attention. But for anything like the vaunted stature of religious aura, that is, the revelation of a divine reality, the history of modern art offers an additional layer of distinction: art that some consider to command universal attention for revealing something more compelling than the material, commercial, and temporary concerns of everyday life. Kandinsky called this the spiritual in art, and Tillich the revelation of ultimate reality. This is not religious art, or a religion of art, or art taking the place of religion. It is better described as the sacralization of art, the endowment of art with a capacity for revelation by virtue of its accentuation as special objects and its effect on the people who admire it. As such, art is more akin to divination, oracles, or rites of transformation.

The social construction of aesthetic value and the cultural work of artistic judgment evident in the foregoing show how art works as a kind of cultural system. Visual piety is much less concerned with discriminating the visual or tactile features of devotional imagery. Other factors come to the fore such as the image's content (subject matter and expression), its narrative, the interests of the viewer, and the engagement of the object as proxy of the saint to whom prayer and devotion are offered by means of the image. Making one feel something is certainly a vital part of the task of devotional imagery, but the procedure differs in important ways from artistic imagery. First of all, the artistic quality of the object may be entirely unimportant in visual piety. Indeed, we do well to pause in even using the word 'art' to designate many religious images. In Christianity, for example, I have in mind devotional imagery of saints, Mary, or Jesus, the holy pictures and statuettes that parents give their children, or that people display in bedrooms, use to instruct children and converts, to proselytize, to advertise one's religion in the cultural marketplace of competing religions. Surely art is not the right word for this visual material.

I do not mean that in the interest of snobbery, but rather with a concern for anthropological care and empirical accuracy. In contrast to Tillich, I am not interested in regarding the imagery of popular devotionism as inauthentic or falling short of ultimate reality.

If by fine art we mean the objects crafted by trained artists, prized by collectors, evaluated by critics, studied by art historians, and exhibited in galleries and museums (all serving as the means for discrimination as a fundamental feature of artistic experience), in most cases the Sacred Heart of Jesus is *not* art. It is an image better described as a devotional technology. The image reproduced here (Figure 2), a color lithograph, was produced in 1939 by the Apostleship of Prayer. Founded by Jesuits in 19th-century France, the Apostleship of Prayer is an organization dedicated to promoting prayer among Catholics and has been especially devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The image was provided to Catholic families who wished to ‘enthroned’ the Sacred Heart in their homes. This meant inviting a priest to the home, gathering family members, and consecrating the image by dedicating the family to the Sacred Heart (Larkin 2009). At the bottom of the image is printed a prayer, ‘Consecration of the Family to the Sacred Heart,’ which is followed by a date and signatures of the head of the family and the officiating priest. This rite demonstrates that the image exists to elicit a particular kind of feeling and to remind family members of the shared devotion to Jesus. The image’s presence in the home inserts domestic viewers into a network of family members ‘absent and present,’ as the prayer



**Figure 2.** Sacred Heart of Jesus enthronement image, Apostleship of Prayer, 1939. Photo by author.

indicates. The image is a kind of domestic pivot that pairs with the authority of parent and priest to create a visual field radiating from the steady gaze of Jesus, who quietly reveals his glowing heart. As a visual technology of devotion, the image facilitates prayer by offering focal points in the eyes and the heart of Jesus, which, when triangulated with the gaze of the viewer, work together to commemorate the prayerful enthronement of the image in the home. Such images connect viewers with extended assemblages that stretch from earth to heaven, with the communities of belief that limn the boundaries of their worlds. They are not meant to be contemplated for their refined aesthetic features, but to be put to work to convey blessing and pious memory.<sup>9</sup>

Distinguishing fine art from religious imagery also brings to the fore the question of shared features.<sup>10</sup> What do they have to do with one another? It is an important question when we consider the interest of contemporary artists in religious imagery. Fine art is produced for a different set of reasons, and serves very different ends, at least in most cases. Even when someone like Bill Viola creates a video of five actors slowly morphing through states of such elementary passions as grief, astonishment, and ecstasy, as he does in *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000; [Figure 3](#)), he does not do so for the purpose of enhancing religious worship or devotion. When his imagery draws on Christian iconography, as it often does, it is intended for museums and galleries, for consumption within the art world, not for churches or formal worship settings. Another example is a major work of 2007 entitled *Ocean Without a Shore*, which consisted of three large video screens mounted on the altars of a deconsecrated Renaissance-era church in Venice. On each screen human figures appeared to be returning from death for a brief visit to the world of the living viewer. Speaking of the installation, Viola echoed a theme common throughout his work: that what we behold in *Ocean Without a Shore* is something like human nature, the shared character of being human that is larger than any particular religion: ‘Religious institutions aside, I think just the nature of our awareness of death is one of the things in any culture that makes human beings have that profound feeling of what we call the human condition’ (Viola 2007, online). As an artist, Viola means to explore the nature of human feeling as images evoke and shape it. One might fairly describe this as a visual technology on its own terms, but one that operates to a different end than devotional devices like the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In the case of Viola’s work, one need have no religious commitments to engage with it because the artist does not address himself to religious communities in the work, but to anyone who might engage the video in an art gallery. And it is not blessing or affirmation of a community of belief that the video intends. The rhetorical construction of the viewer and of the conditions and ends with which the piece is encountered are in key respects very different in a work of art.

Yet fine art operates in a structurally similar way to devotional imagery, and this kinship has not been lost on artists. In *The Quintet of the Astonished* (see [Figure 3](#)), for example, Viola deployed an image to link viewers with something else, to put them in touch with the experience of the passions: intense emotional states that the artist may consider virtually universal. Viola achieves it by slowing the video to such a rate that a static picture appears to come to life. We see still images move, changing very gradually before

<sup>9</sup>For a study of religious images that stresses the role of the network and the image as interface with it, see Morgan (2014).

<sup>10</sup>Portions of the following pages come from Morgan (2016). The author gratefully acknowledges the publisher.



**Figure 3.** Bill Viola, *The Quintet of the Astonished*, 2000. Color video rear projection on screen mounted on wall in dark room. Projected image size: 55 × 95 inches (140 × 240 cm). Room dimensions: 12 × 18 × 24 ft (3.6 × 5.5 × 7.3 m). 15:20 minutes. Performers: John Malpede, Weba Garretson, Tom Fitzpatrick, John Fleck, Dan Gerrity. Photo by Kira Perov.

our eyes. The image is not a timeless icon, but a reality that shares something with human emotion: the constant state of change. Feeling is impermanent and Viola uses the medium of video to capture it for quiet contemplation. Viewers must pause to see the image happen, and in this pause they become aware of the characteristics of the medium and the mechanics of human expression. The slow movement of the video requires viewers to enter the alternate time of the medium and watch the video on its own terms. This occurs within the setting of the museum, which assembles people before the video screen. And it does so by featuring emotional displays that the artist argues are larger than cultural particularities. Once again, Viola speaks to what he considers ‘the human condition.’ This appeal to a universal situation of humankind certainly echoes the anthropology of Christianity, though something comparable is to be found in other religious traditions.

If the image of the Sacred Heart discussed above orchestrated a community of viewing in the Catholic home, so too does Viola’s video, though not among Christians. The audience that his image assembles is far more random; they are not known to one another, and they may share virtually nothing in common. They are not members of a community, but of the art-going public that has at least one thing in common: they are viewing an art whose maker posits a kind of universal and shared understanding of humanity. What they encounter is something they each consume, tailoring it to their own interests and dispositions in the quiet privacy of the public gallery. If the Christian paintings that sometimes inspire Viola’s work also presumed to articulate human nature as the condition for evoking emotion and exercising the procedures of penance, contrition, forgiveness, and redemption, Viola’s art shows viewers intense feeling, encourages reflection on and vicarious experience of it, and suggests that art touches what is common among them, in spite of their many differences and their random assembly before the work of art. Viola is attracted to the grand themes of religion and myth – death, rebirth, pathos, metamorphosis – precisely because he wants his art to command that scope, to speak on that

scale. Fine art is a visual technology, too, but clearly one that operates within different parameters than devotional imagery.

This becomes even clearer in considering a work like Katharina Fritsch's *Display Rack with Madonnas* (Figure 4). The display rack is stocked with dozens of small plaster reproductions of Our Lady of Lourdes. The figurines are painted a uniform yellow, which underscores their mass-produced character and sheer reproducibility. One is reminded of Walter Benjamin's oft-quoted assertion concerning the loss of aura in the domain of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1968, 221). But this is not a claim that proves true in the realm of devotional culture. Aura is not limited to originals, to singular icons or to masterful works of religious art. Even the most inexpensive lithograph such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus reproduced here exhibits aura when encountered within a visual field that finds it there. Such images are charged with power by consecrating rituals and the devotional protocols of prayer in the home or shrine. They bestow blessings and operate robustly to place the petitioner in contact with the saint or deity they image. In the province of religious faith, aura is conferred by an enabling apparatus of piety, practice, and expectation that sets off the image as special and calls together those who find in it a focal point of shared engagement. The images take its place within a chain of



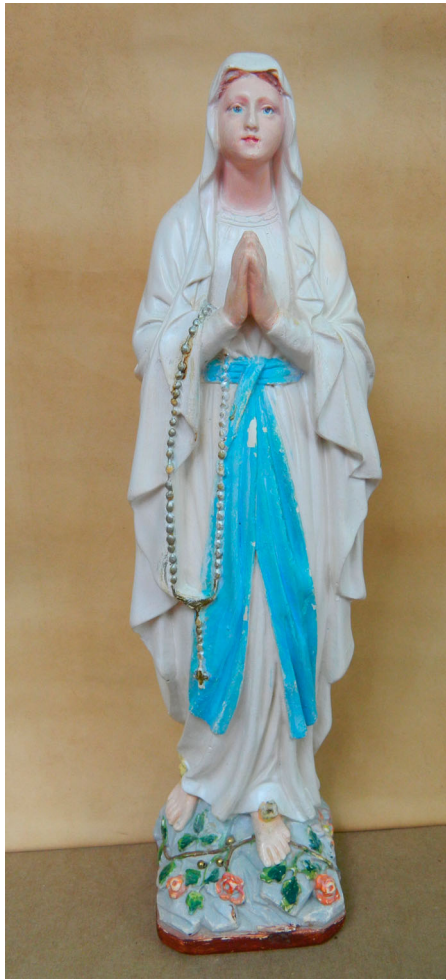
**Figure 4.** Katharina Fritsch, *Warengestell mit Madonnen* (*Display Rack with Madonnas*), 1987–1989. Aluminum, plaster and paint 106 5/16 inches (height), 32 5/16 inches. ©Katharina Fritsch/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Ivo, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

reproductions as a ‘true copy’ that harnesses an authorizing relationship to an original, even if it is now long lost through the iteration of previous true copies. The original is in heaven and is summoned by the image. Visual piety is not about art; it is about the power of images to make desired connections.

Fritsch’s *Display Rack with Madonnas* is not about devotional images. It is about art. It is art. Marcel Duchamp’s iconoclastic *Bottle Rack* stands within it, a famous readymade to be found in the street or work site, but in this case purchased at a department store. Duchamp pilloried the idea of art as ontologically special by nominating ordinary things to stand in its place. Fritsch could be said to quote Duchamp and to add to the bottle rack a set of aestheticized objects taken from a church goods store. More importantly, Fritsch made only one, and the object was acquired by a major museum, the Hirschhorn in Washington, DC. Even if she produced several versions of the piece, each would sell for a considerable sum of money and would be destined for private collections or museums. The work is meant to occupy a distance from ordinary life, from which to encourage a critical look – at commodity culture and at religion ensconced within that culture. Each version of the piece possesses a presence that is unique: that is, set off from the world of ordinary objects, the very objects that compose it, creating a distance that allows for a fresh perception of the objects and the promised that there is something to be found in them that merits the viewer’s scrutiny.

### Visual constructions of the sacred

Religious images are set out as special in the ordinary world, too. That is part of what we mean by calling them ‘sacred,’ what I have called the operation of segregation. They belong to the world of saints and deities and devotional rites. We say that an image such as the figure of Mary used in Fritsch’s work is ‘sacred to’ her because in some sense it belongs to Our Lady. It was the form she is believed to have taken when she appeared at Lourdes to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, an event that is not only commemorated by devotional statuary, but made present by it (Figure 5). By imaging her apparition, the figure calls to Our Lady, addresses her, acts as a passage to her and a conduit for favors flowing from her. Devotional acts use this avenue to direct praise, gratitude, or petitions to Mary. Copies do not negate the real presence of Our Lady to the faithful, but proliferate it. But Fritsch cancels the passageway when she colors the images a gaudy yellow and enumerates the image in rows of manufactured exactness. The rows and rows of identical plaster figures will be familiar to anyone who has ever entered a Catholic Church goods store, where shelves of such figures, and dozens of other saints, confront the consumer as a market of commodities. But once again the difference of art and devotional imagery comes to the fore. Commodification of religious imagery is not a problem for religious consumers because the power of the object is about more than its production. Its legitimacy is not invalidated by the nature of manufacture or by the marketplace. Devotional images like Figure 5 are deliberately inexpensive in order to facilitate their proliferation. Fine art is expensive precisely in order to make it rare to enable the array of distinctions that set the objects and their discriminating viewers out as special. The object of art commands attention (undergoes accentuation) in part by virtue of its commercial inaccessibility for most people. The result is another kind of sacrality, what Benjamin meant by ‘aura,’ which we might also call authenticity



**Figure 5.** Our Lady of Lourdes, plaster statuette, Pieraccini Company, ca. 1955. Photo by the author.

or originality. Devotional images, I want to argue, exert a different sort of aura, produced by different means and for different ends.

The art world defines authenticity differently than the way in which devotionism understands the ‘real thing.’ Or it would like to do so. The art world would like to insist that quality, genius, craft, sensitivity to materials, critical reflection, and the gateway of arbiters of taste and cultural institutions distinguish art unambiguously from kitsch. But the specter of Duchamp looms, and sneers. What is art? In the end, it appears to include a certain kind of discourse, a certain set of institutions and practices, a level of expense, a certain kind of audience characterized by a set of expectations rhetorically signaled by the work and its installation, all of which condition the experience of items that artists offer for our consideration. Art is not simply this object or that, but their engagement within a category, a conceptual framework, a domain of social practices. To be sure, this is a sociological approach that fails to satisfy many, but it continues to command attention among others, including many artists, theorists, and social





**Figure 6.** Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1498–1499, marble. St. Peter's Basilica, Rome. Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

analysts.<sup>11</sup> What it allows us to do is to compare fine art and religious imagery in a productive way, so I would like to continue with this line of thought in order to sharpen the different notions of the sacred at work in fine art and visual piety.

Aura is the value that an object comes to exhibit when it is sacralized as fine art or a devotional image through the two-fold process of segregation and affiliation that I have described. Art and religion are both in the business of generating and managing aura, but they do so differently. Each operates within a respective cultural economy in which images and other artifacts are deemed special by means of discrete criteria. Some objects seem to operate equally well in both domains. Think of a grand work by a prized artist such as Donatello or Michelangelo. Is the St. Peter's *Pietà* by Michelangelo (Figure 6) a work of art or a religious artifact? Clearly, it must be both, but perhaps not in the same instant. We can regard the piece for its workmanship, its singular conception and execution, its compelling treatment of its subject, its place within its maker's oeuvre, and its contribution to the narrative of Renaissance art. But we can also watch others encounter the object within the visual field of Christian devotion: that is, as part of the powerful piety of Jesus and his relationship with his mother. In the first case, St. Peter's Basilica becomes a vast museum space holding artistic treasures that tourists and art

<sup>11</sup>For a classic articulation of the sociological constructivism of art, see Becker (1982); also Shiner (2001).

lovers come to admire. They are moved by the artist's remarkable skill at carving stone, rendering drapery, and polishing the marble surface with the greatest virtuosity. In the second case, St. Peter's is a religious site, a temple for pilgrims and worshipers who regard the Pieta as a moving expression of the suffering Mother of God, who presents her unjustly sacrificed son for the onlooker's pious sympathy. For the art public, the object is awe-inspiring for its aesthetic uniqueness; for the pilgrim, the object is moving for its religious sentiments, especially for the affection it engenders in the believer's relationship with Mary. It is quite true that Michelangelo's mastery as a carver of stone may enhance the sense of that relationship, but how many religious devotees fully understand the achievement of this artist when they encounter his sculpture in the Roman basilica? The piety of their engagement with the figure group does not require that they do so. Both audiences are moved; both discern an aura or presence in the work. Both experience devotion and awe. But it is rash to collapse them into one another. The visual fields in which each is encountered as art or as devotional image segregate and affiliate the object, but to different ends. The value or aura of the object varies in each case: in one instance we see a unique work of artistic genius unveiled in a virtuoso performance; in the other, a moving act of maternal grief that evokes pity and compassion toward her suffering.

### Visual cultures of the sacred

The realization of the difference between aesthetic and devotional aura urges us to clarify what is meant by the sacred and what role images play in its experience. It is important not to reduce the definition of 'sacred' to gods or religious cult. As I have illustrated over the course of this essay, the sacred is a two-fold operation: any artifact, creature, place, or practice is set off from the world around it as special – for a moment or much longer – and serves as a way to join human beings to a larger reality. We can speak of the sacred in fine art when we think of the power of presence, the capacity of some works of art to grip us, to stop us dead in our tracks, to command our attention, to shock or surprise us, to take the wind from our chests, to reduce us to silent awe.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis on experience and feeling as the basis of the 'sacred' clearly recalls Otto's description of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, even when we dispense with his scarcely disguised monotheistic theology.<sup>13</sup> And we realize that the organization of museum and gallery interiors and the decoration of their exteriors are complicit in the orchestration of this kind of experience. Space, too, has a kind of agency in affecting how we encounter an object. These spaces privilege the objects within them for special regard. The spaces, the lighting, the arrangement of objects, the hushed interiors, the guards, the cool atmosphere – all of this prompts certain behavior from visitors. This bestows a status on the objects that makes them unique.

The sociology of the sacred that I have outlined informs the spatial construction of the visual field in the museum or gallery. And this calls on the long history of art and artist in the modern era sketched out above to craft the experience of the sacred in art. The result is a kind of non-religious conception of sacrality. The objects do not put viewers in the

<sup>12</sup>For the study of awe in the anthropology of R. R. Marett, see Meyer (2016).

<sup>13</sup>Otto (1958). The idea of presence has been recently applied to the study of religion by Orsi (2016) as the reality of the resistance or push-back of special or suprahuman beings (4).

presence of the divine as Christianity understands it, but works of art do bring gallery visitors into the presence of a wide range of other, often pretentious, realities: artistic genius, national honor, Western civilization, the human spirit, or any number of other cultural constructs such as Asian mysticism, African primordiality, the Eternal Feminine, and so forth. Much of this reeks of mystique, obfuscation, Orientalism, national chauvinism, racism, sexism, and more. But to recognize the reality of this allure is not to endorse it. It is worth bearing in mind that the art world can be as self-indulgent and pompous as any religion.

But critique is less my concern than a compelling description of the sociology of art and religion as visual enterprises focused on the management of aura. The presence generated in the encounter of art need not be a pretentious mystification. Art viewers can engage with the personality of the artist, the spirit of an age, the trace of power, evil, injustice, or the strange otherness of a worldview dramatically different from our own. By contrast, all of these will be of only secondary importance, if important at all, to religious devotees. This is what approaches such as Paul Tillich's fail to comprehend. I would like to argue for a visual construction of the sacred in both fine art and devotional imagery that does not rely on the Romantic quest for authenticity that directed Tillich's treatment of the sacred. Religious practitioners commonly experience images, things, and spaces as sacred, as demanding special attention for their ability to connect devotees to powers, places, or persons that deserve or demand attention. We may refer to these artifacts as the material culture that embodies the sacred, but I do not mean by that to imply that the sacred is a discrete substance or that it is solely identified with a particular object. But neither do I wish to psychologize the sacred, to locate it entirely in the minds of believers. Instead, people encounter it within the gazes or visual fields in which they themselves participate, as we saw in the case of the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (see [Figure 2](#)).<sup>14</sup> Thought of in this way, the sacred is not lodged anywhere singularly, but is distributed across a network of interacting agencies that include people, spaces, objects, rites, words, and events. And this network of actors is distinguished from other versions by audience and purpose. The sacred in art, as we have seen, is not the same as the sacred in religious devotion. But in both cases, sacrality is produced by the act of segregation that pulls the viewer into a particular visual field and by the act of affiliation that joins one to something that matters – Mary or Jesus, in one case, and cultural elites, genius, or national pride, in the other.

If we think of the sacred as generated by an assemblage of human and non-human actors, we need to recognize its fluid, dynamic character. The sacred is a process of configurations, the interaction of various actors, and therefore in need of management, conservation, investment, and curatorial care. In fact, theorists of religion since Émile Durkheim (1995, 325–329) have made the point that the sacred is effervescent, and therefore in need of maintenance. If that is true, how does a thing persist as sacred within the worlds of religion and of art? Producing the sacred is an ongoing cultural work that consists of interweaving different kinds of artifacts into webs of relations that stabilize their sacrality, or at least allow it perform in moments of presence. Fine art relies on the gallery space, the museum, the curator, the conservationist, and the collector to secure the object within an enduring setting that recognizes its uniqueness. Further assistance

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<sup>14</sup>For further discussion of the structure of visual fields in religious practice, see Morgan (2012, 70–83).

is provided by the art historian and the art critic, who embed the work in narratives and careful analyses that turn on description and classification, tracing of provenance, connoisseurship, and canonization as ways of fixing the object's status. The marketplace, especially the auction house and the work of the dealer and collector, and the gallery, act to sort and elevate objects, assigning them value by enhancing their desirability or by deflating it. Objects circulate among dealers and collectors and then come to rest in museums or private collections, where they are studied, and exhibited, until re-sold, gifted, or de-accessioned, whereupon they re-enter the marketplace and their value is once again unstable.<sup>15</sup> But the power of the object to embody or make present an immaterial referent – the artist's vision or feeling, a spiritual value, a grand idea, a people, an ethos, a civilization – depends on transcending its economic nature. That is what the museum and critical evaluation are designed to do: they anchor the work within a matrix of prestige, shaping perception of it and installing it within a narrative that eclipses its exchange value. We may wish to be assured that a masterpiece is 'priceless' or 'invaluable,' but knowing it was acquired for a certain amount of money tends to vulgarize it. To know the provenance of the work of art is to become certain of its authenticity, its claim to being the real thing, the product of Rembrandt or Michelangelo, the Han Dynasty, or an aboriginal people.

By contrast, the provenance of devotional images vouches for a different sort of authenticity: the picture of Jesus on one's wall was a gift from one's parents, a priest, or a relative on the occasion of graduation or marriage. It does not matter how much the object cost and it may not matter what it is made from. What matters is who gave it, why, and where it was acquired. Knowing this secures the meaning of the object for its owner because it directs the message of the object to him or her. But this only begins to characterize the sacred as the experience of something as special in visual piety.

Christian practice historically has stabilized the sacred experienced as presence in several different ways. One method is not to stabilize the sacred at all, but to perform it – if we think of performance as a kind of expenditure that simultaneously enacts and expends the currency of the sacred. Worship often does this: people gather and sing or chant. The sacred consists of their assembly and work together. When the service is done, they go their separate ways and the sacred as a collective experience ends. Another approach is to transform the sacred token or substance created by ritual consecration into another medium such as one's body. An obvious example is the Christian Eucharist: the priest consecrates the host, and then distributes it to parishioners, who consume it. The sacred wafer becomes indistinguishable from their bodies. In Protestant practice, the sacred is most commonly manifested as the spoken word, which enters the listener to take root there and to flower in action. Other kinds of sacred materials must be stored in special sites such as the wine in tabernacles in the sanctuary. Or relics are housed inside reliquaries that protect them from disappearing into the ambient world. What is a bone fragment, after all, once it has slipped away from the receptacle that keeps it apart and therefore special? Quite often inscriptions identifying relics are attached to them, serving to anchor the identity of the sacred artifact. Anonymity menaces if the note or reliquary is separated from the relic. In fact, most relics are visually unremarkable.

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<sup>15</sup>On the circulation of objects, see Kopytoff (1986, 64–91), Geary (1986, 169–191), Weiner (1992), and Davis (1997).

So reliquaries could be said to be the technologies of making them visible, available for encounter with devotees.<sup>16</sup>

Art and religion are different cultural forms that are, however, historically associated and in many (but not all) respects analogous. They differ inasmuch as they address discrete audiences to very different ends. And we cannot lose sight of how differently they regard images. Both are at pains to value visual artifacts, to coax devotion from viewers, to generate aura in the experience of images, and to manage it by investing images within an encompassing apparatus. But one invests aura in the singular, one-of-a-kind whereas the other is intent on the dissemination of the sacred such that the copy does not mean the loss of aura, but rather its abundance. The work of art and the devotional image each belong to different if parallel and sometimes even overlapping visual cultures because they are both devoted to the production and maintenance of sacred objects. But recognizing their difference is helpful for understanding how sacralization operates differently in each case. But in spite of the differences, the idea of the sacred remains relevant to fine art and visual piety. As different as their respective networks are, both are designed to generate aura that bears a historical and sociological kinship in the modern era.

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## Notes on contributor

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<sup>16</sup>In yet another practice, iconoclasm or the destruction of false images or sacred objects or spaces serves a dominant culture such as a colonial force to remove rivals to its own notion of the sacred. Frequently, Christian churches have been erected on the very site of the destroyed temple or shrine or holy place of the subaltern culture in an iconoclastic act of erasure and replacement.

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