

Brenda McCullers, ARH 6930, Fall 2014

How should sacred objects be presented within a museum setting? How is the object's aura perceived when moved to a museum? What tensions arise during the reconstruction of sacred displays within the museum? In the article, "Sacrality and Aura in the Museum: Mute Objects and Articulate Space," author Joan R. Branham (1994/1995) addresses questions like these and focuses on "theories of the sacred and the problematic notion of oscillating spatial definitions for the museum curator" (p. 33). She references three exhibits to support her position: a fragment believed to be part of the Jerusalem Temple *soreg* displayed at the Rockefeller Museum, the *Holy Image, Holy Space: Icons and Frescoes from Greece* exhibit at Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, Maryland, and the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

In the beginning of the article Branham claims that within the museum setting, ritual objects are displayed out of context, separated from their location, resulting in a loss of original function and significance. She uses the Jerusalem Temple *soreg*, a warning stone believed to be part of the partition wall of the Herodian temple, as one means to represent her point. The object within its original location was acknowledged as sacred with a vital message to the viewer. Branham explains that its location at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem does not provide the viewer anything that presents the ritual aspects of the object or its importance. As a result, museum visitors are unaware of what the object represented and therefore miss the significance of what the object truly denotes.

Branham goes on to explain that museums, recognizing problems like this, have taken steps to “recontextualize” and “resacralize” objects. Unfortunately, Branham explains that these attempts have also been problematic. She states, “Curatorial attempts ‘to work’ an object’s aura have led to the sophisticated manipulation of museum space in an effort to enhance the art work’s numinosity as well as the visitor’s experiential encounter” (Branham, 1994/1995, p. 39). She describes an exhibit, the *Holy Image, Holy Space: Icons and Frescoes from Greece*, where a Byzantine chapel was transported and reconstructed within the Walters Art Gallery. Staged lighting and theatrical techniques were used to create an emotional experience for visitors. While the display brought about emotional reactions from some museum visitors, Branham maintains that you cannot replace the ritual aspect of a sacred space. She claims such a display as the Byzantine chapel only provides the “present day spectator with an imaginary bridge to the past” which enhances “the meaning and understanding of Byzantine space and objects” (Branham, 1994/1995, p. 42). Elements such as exit signs, do not touch signs, roped-off areas, gift shop areas, etc. present a tension that cannot be removed from the museum experience, affecting the sacred aspects of the exhibit.

In the last part of the article, Branham addresses reconstructing “reality” within museums. She uses the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum as an example where “multimedia-sensory techniques” are used to “engage the viewer and to achieve the most sobering effects possible” (Branham, 1994/1994, p. 44). Although the museum creates a “daunting and solemn” experience for the visitor, Branham (1994/1995) states controversy has surfaced over the idea that a twelve year

period of history can be “reduced to a matter of minutes in the visitor’s tour, temporally distancing a real victim’s long term endurance of Nazi persecution from the instantaneous and imaginary sensations perceived by the museum-goer” (p. 45). In addition, Branham believes the location of the museum is strange in that monuments of the United States highlighting their achievements throughout history surround it.

The bottom line is, there are many areas of concern that the museum staff must consider when constructing a space for religious or sacred objects. Consideration must be taken concerning placement, environment, history, and the audience. As Branham points out, there will always be areas of tension that need to be addressed. With that in mind, while it is important for places such as the Rockefeller Museum, the Walters Art Gallery, and the U. S. Holocaust Museum to make note of these tensions, it is also important for them to continue providing visitors with experiences that help contribute to a deeper understanding of sacred and religious objects.

References:

Branham, J. R. (1995). Sacrality and Aura in the Museum: Mute Objects and Articulate Space. *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, 53, 33-47.