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Evoking the Altar in the Eclectic Museum

Evocaciones del altar medieval en un museo ecléctico

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Abstract
The impulse to display the arts of the medieval altar in context has guided curators of European medieval art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art since its medieval collection first took form in the early 1900s. Developing side by side with displays governed by classificatory principles of art history, The Met's contextual displays mine its eclectic medieval collection to recreate the settings of furnished and decorated church sanctuaries from both western and eastern Europe. Such evocations seek, among other things, to recuperate the losses of meaning incurred by ritual objects taken out of active use. This paper explores the history of altar evocation in Met galleries (both Fifth Avenue and The Cloisters) and argues that these displays chronicle curators' changing pedagogical interests over time with respect to the presentation of medieval art to a visitorship unfamiliar with the Middle Ages.

Keywords: altar, museums, display, evocation, contextualization

Resumen
El impulso de mostrar las artes del altar medieval en contexto ha guiado a los conservadores de arte medieval europeo en el Museo Metropolitano de Arte desde que su colección medieval se formó por primera vez a principios del siglo xx. Al desarrollarse junto con exposiciones regidas por los principios clasificatorios de la historia del arte, las exposiciones contextuales del Met extraen de su ecléctica colección medieval para recrear los escenarios de santuarios de iglesias amueblados y decorados de Europa occidental y oriental. Tales evocaciones buscan, entre otras cosas, recuperar las pérdidas de significado en que incurren los objetos rituales retirados del uso activo. Este artículo explora la historia de la evocación del altar en las galerías Met (tanto en The Met Fifth Avenue como en The Cloisters) y propone que estas exposiciones narran los cambiantes intereses pedagógicos de los conservadores a lo largo del

tiempo con respecto a la presentación del arte medieval a un público que no está familiarizado con la Edad Media.

Palabras claves: altar, museos, exposición, evocación, contextualización.

Résumé
Le but de présenter les arts de l'autel médiéval dans leur contexte a guidé les conservateurs de l'art médiéval au Metropolitan Museum of Art depuis que sa collection médiévale a pris forme au début des années 1900. Se développant côte à côte avec des expositions régies par les principes classificatoires de l'histoire de l'art, les expositions contextuelles du Met exploitent sa collection médiévale éclectique pour recréer les décors de sanctuaires d'églises meublés et décorés d'Europe occidentale et orientale. De telles évocations cherchent, entre autres, à récupérer les pertes de sens subies par les objets rituels retirés de l'usage actif. Cet article explore l'histoire de l'évocation d'autel dans les galeries du Met (à la fois de The Met Fifth Avenue et The Cloisters) et soutient que ces expositions témoignent de l'évolution des intérêts pédagogiques des conservateurs au fil du temps en ce qui concerne la présentation de l'art médiéval à un public peu familier avec le Moyen Âge.

Mots clés: autel, musées, exposition, évocation, contextualisation .

From chalices and patens to an entire church apse, the arts of the European medieval altar abound in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Throughout the museum's history, its curators have sustained an intense interest in the ever-challenging question of how to display these formerly ritual objects with sensitivity to their past use and significance. This question is predicated on the profound ontological shift that ritual objects undergo on the journey from church to museum, which leads to their transformation from functional items into "works of art".[1] In their periodic reassessments of The Met's medieval displays, curators have been neither oblivious to, nor uninterested in, the changes that museums work upon religious objects. The question of how best to display medieval religious material is under frequent review at The Met in large part because the museum historically has placed so much emphasis on contextual display, particularly where the arts of the altar—so central to medieval Christian visual culture—are concerned. While The Met is much like many other museums in its tendency to organize and display medieval objects following the classificatory principles of traditional western art history (style, medium, technique of manufacture), its galleries have always offered a parallel mode of display that seeks to replicate some aspect of objects' original settings.[2] Taxonomic and contextual approaches have long gone hand in hand at both of the

[1] For this shift, see, for example, E.P. Mclachlan, "Liturgical Vessels and Implements", in T.J. Heffernan and E.A. Matter, *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, Kalamazoo, M.I., 2001, pp. 374-375. See also writings by C. Paine, especially *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties,* London, 2013, pp. 13-24.

[2] For comparison, a recent discussion of display options for medieval art is found in D. Mondini and I. Haupt, "Purismus oder Evokation? Beiträge von Franco Albini und BBPR zur Inszenierung mittelalterlicher Exponate in

museum's locations, The Met Fifth Avenue and The Met Cloisters. The latter site, a satellite location known for its historicizing architecture as well as for its incorporation of actual fragments of medieval buildings, is an obvious point of departure for the discussion of contextualizing display, though The Met Fifth Avenue, with its rich history of period rooms, is equally essential to this topic.[3]

In this essay, I examine a series of contextualizing displays of altar arts at The Met's two locations, proceeding from the early twentieth century to the present day. I argue that these displays chronicle curators' changing pedagogical interests over time with respect to the presentation of medieval art to a visitorship unfamiliar with the Middle Ages. The Met's earliest contextualizing displays of medieval art, dating to the first decades of the twentieth century, were chock full of objects aimed to educate but also to dazzle the American public, enticing them to explore first hand, and often for the first time, the material remains of the medieval past. These maximalist attempts at contextualization, presented with theatrical flair, gave way at mid-century to an impulse to educate visitors more systematically in rigorous art-historical principles through more selective contextualizing displays. These tended to focus more tightly on specific chronologies and geographies, reflecting adjacent galleries' displays of objects organized taxonomically in cases and on pedestals. At the same time, mid-century contextualizing displays provided new opportunities for visitors to contemplate individual objects as works of art in their own right. Finally, in line with the so-called "new museology" attuned more than ever to museums' social and political roles, recent decades have seen a tendency toward looser, more diffuse displays that suggest complex networks of use and signification among objects and above all situate visitors as makers of meaning vis-à-vis these networks.[4] Examining changes over time, I draw particular attention to the strategic use of space within contextualizing displays and specifically the space allowed between objects, which emerges as a key variable with significant evocative potential. While the earliest examples of contextualized altars tend to be densely packed set pieces best appreciated from a certain remove, the latest offer dispersed layouts through which visitors may circulate and, from shifting vantage points, potentially make multiple connections among objects on display.

Contextualization—the orchestration of a setting resembling that of an object's original intended use or presentation—is a display strategy by no means unique to The Met. Museum professionals around the world undertake the contextualized display of historical objects by studying the spatial, material, and social circumstances of their past use and presentation and then approximating those circumstances within their galleries. The simple, but powerful act of arranging objects in relation to each other in space, a central challenge of curatorial work, is in this instance closely bound to the desire to achieve some degree of historical accuracy and, perhaps to go a step further, authenticity. Leaving aside the fraught notion of authenticity,

italienischen Museen der Nachkriegszeit", in W. Brückle, P.A. Mariaux, and D. Mondini (coords.), *Musealisierung mittelalterlicher Kunst Anlässe, Ansätze, Ansprüche*, Berlin, 2015, pp. 211-234.

[3] For an overview of The Met's period room displays, see A. Peck (coord.), *Period Rooms in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, 1996.

[4] The literature concerning the new museology in the United States is vast, though a useful staring point is S.E. Weil, "From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum", *Daedalus,* 128-3 (1999), pp. 229-258.

accuracy should be understood as a fluid concept that often depends largely on which ideas a curator principally wishes to highlight.[5] In light of this, contextualization in museum display is a flexible approach. It can take a number of forms and has no ideal mode. For example, it can be accomplished on a large scale through the creation of a period room: a specific, immersive, and highly controlled architectural environment in which to display furnishings and objects. A prime (non-medieval) example of a period room is the reconstruction at the Brooklyn Museum of the ca. 1850s parlor from the home of Colonel Robert J. Milligan of Saratoga Springs, New York. The display seeks to present the parlor's wall décor, furniture, books, and knick-knacks as a more or less faithful representation of the room's original appearance. Intentionally or not, through its scale, scope, and coordination of multiple elements, a period room such as this one makes a claim to painstaking historical accuracy. Alternatively, contextualization can be accomplished in a looser fashion through the charismatic choreographing of objects related functionally, but not necessarily historically, into theatrical *tableaux vivants.* The Victoria and Albert Museum's current arrangement of vestments, croziers, and banners into a processional formation behind its 1480s *Palmesel* from Ulm comes to mind.[6] In this instance, not only is the concept of procession conveyed, but also something of its performative aspect. On a smaller scale, contextualization can involve the thoughtful placement of objects in relation to each other in a single glass case—the arrangement of finds from a single treasure hoard, for example. The impulse to contextualize in museums has waxed and waned over time. While at the present moment many curators do opt for contextualizing displays, their motives and methods may not resemble those of their predecessors.

Contextualized displays of medieval art at The Met and other museums are often described as "evocations".[7] What does it mean to evoke in a museum? To "evoke" is to conjure a setting, a feeling, a memory. The original definition of this term, to summon spirits through the use of magic, goes some way toward explaining the residual numinosity of its current use, but it also suggests that "evocation" might be a dangerously empty word for contemporary discourse. On the other hand, perhaps it is the word's capacious quality that makes it so appealing. "Evocation" seems useful in describing contextualizing museum displays dealing with the material of the past (and not just the medieval past) because it leaves room for doubt, implying a degree of approximation that, given the spotty survival rate of medieval objects, lends itself particularly well to their display. An evocation acknowledges that all the details might not be in place, that there might even be significant lacunae. It accepts the losses, and the resultant distances—spatial, geographic, temporal, or conceptual—between objects. In turn, it harnesses the power of these spaces. Leaving room for feeling and memory, both of which are more difficult to quantify and represent, evocation seems to grant historical accuracy a bit of a

[5] The concept of "authenticity" in museums has recently been analyzed with respect to the display of medieval art in America in S. Fozi, "American Medieval: Authenticity and the Indifference of Architecture", *Journal of the History of Collections,* 27-3 (2015), pp. 469-80; and in J. Borland and M. Easton, "Integrated Pasts: Glencairn Museum and Hammond Castle", *Gesta,* 57-1 (2018), pp. 95-118.

[6] This display forms part of the Medieval and Renaissance galleries that opened to the public in 2009.

[7] See, for example, Fozi, "American Medieval," and Borland and Easton, "Integrated Pasts." In addition, speaking anecdotally, this is a term that my colleagues and I frequently use when interpreting The Cloisters for visitors, whether giving tours or explaining the museum's concept and origins in more formal presentations.

reprieve. Though the term calls for far deeper interrogation in some future discussion, "evocation" might be preferable for describing contextualized displays in museums, even including the meticulously plotted period rooms so celebrated in institutions such as The Met.[8]

The eclecticism of the museum's collection arguably contributes to the evocative power of its altar displays. While The Met has often described its own collection as "encyclopedic," a word that suggests comprehensive global coverage (whatever that means) of the history of art, "eclectic" might be a better term for the current discussion, as it acknowledges first that the collection's great breadth does not necessarily amount to comprehensive "coverage" of all art-historical areas, and second that the collection itself has arisen from the wide-ranging and idiosyncratic tastes and curiosities of the many private individuals and staff members who have helped to build it.[9] Eclecticism can work to a curator's advantage. While it might be desirable, for classificatory purposes, to confect displays that bring together objects of similar date and origin, a more heterogeneous ensemble of works from different times and places is not necessarily a bad thing. For one, it can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the medieval altar. A diverse array of objects can signal to viewers that there was no singular or archetypal medieval altar. Scholars increasingly take into account the multiplicity of functions and significances that even a single altar could hold, as well as those of the different kinds of altars in a single church.[10] They also acknowledge the short- and long-term temporalities of altars: over the course of a single year, a church altar's appearance would change depending on the needs of the liturgical calendar, while, as generations passed, an altar could both shed and accumulate objects, furnishings, and decorations.[11] In her work on altarpieces, Beth Williamson has acknowledged the challenges posed by such "instability of context" and encouraged art historians to work *with* the variability and complexity of medieval altar settings.[12] Intentionally or not, many of The Met's altar evocations have done just that since the very beginning, prefiguring more recent studies seeking to articulate the medieval altar's multifaceted nature,

[8] At least some of The Cloisters' spaces, notably the cloister from Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa and the Merode room (sometimes called the Campin room), have been described as period rooms, given their historical architectural framework. See M.B. Shepherd, "The Cuxa Cloister" and "The Campin Room", in A. PECK (coord.), *Period Rooms in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, 1996, pp. 25-32 and 33-40. The recommended phrasing of Dianne Pilgrim, "period setting", might also be considered. D.H. Pilgrim, "The Period Room: An Illusion of the Past", in D.C. Peirce and H. Alswang (coords.), *American Interiors, New England and the South: Period Rooms at the Brooklyn Museum,* New York, 1983, p. 13. See also C. Nielsen, "'To Step into Another World': Building a Medieval Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago", in C. Nielson (coord.), *To Inspire and Instruct: A History of Medieval Art in Midwestern Museums*, Newcastle, 2008, p. 26.

[9] For a meditation on eclecticism in American collecting practices prior to World War II, see R. Brimo, *The Evolution of Taste in American Collecting*, K. Haltman (trans. and ed.), University Park, P.A., 2016, pp. 171-94.

[10] For example, V. Fuchß, *Das Altarensemble. Eine Analyse des Kompositcharakters früh- und hochmittelalterlicher Altarausstattung*, Weimar, 1999.

[11] For evidence of the crowdedness of the altar, see (for example) an inventory from Salamanca Cathedral in Á. Riesco Terrero, "Un inventario de la catedral de Salamanca del siglo xiii", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Serie III, Historia Medieval*, 9 (1996), pp. 277-302. As an extension of an altar, a medieval church treasury's holdings often only grew over time, including many an object brought from afar, and new acquisitions certainly made appearances at the altar. See, for example, M. Rosser-Owen, "Islamic Objects in Christian Contexts: Relic Translation and Modes of Transfer in Medieval Iberia", *Art in Translation*, 7-1 (2015), pp. 39-64.

[12] B. Williamson, "Altarpieces, Liturgy, and Devotion", *Speculum*, 79-2 (2004), pp. 341-406.

by incorporating diverse combinations of architectural elements, furnishings, implements, and decorations. (The desire to take into account altars' spatial and material complexity prompts my use of the term "altar environment" to describe many of the examples below).[13]

At the same time, however, it is also important to recognize that more heterogeneous displays can risk sacrificing nuance, namely by glossing over regional or temporal particularities. In presenting ritual objects as representative of types ubiquitous all over medieval Europe and in constant use throughout the Middle Ages, such displays might instead suggest a false notion of universality that, while supportive of the medieval Church's own aspirations to liturgical orthodoxy, do not necessarily reflect reality.[14] As museum displays become more sophisticated, nuanced collection interpretation becomes more and more desirable, but achieving it remains a work in progress.

Early Altars, 1900s-1920s

From The Met's establishment in 1870, its founders sought to accumulate a wide range of art objects to educate and inspire the American public in conscious emulation of such European art museums as London's National Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, then the South Kensington Museum. In the early days, plaster casts and models, valued for their educational utility, stood in for actual medieval monuments at The Met; the collection of original medieval artworks only began in earnest during the early twentieth century.[15] At a time when many private individuals donated entire collections en masse to build the museum's holdings, the banker J. Pierpont Morgan gave his, in stages, between 1908 and 1917; the scale of his contribution, however, was unprecedented. Morgan was a voracious, yet discerning collector, and among the thousands of artworks he donated to The Met, he offered a bounty of medieval objects including furniture, stone and wood sculptures, ivories, and metalwork. Through these significant gifts, which prompted the creation of the first Department of Decorative Arts at The Met, Morgan almost single-handedly created the museum's collection of medieval art.[16] It is thus to the display of the Morgan material that I turn first in exploring the museum's earliest displays of altar arts.

In 1906, Morgan acquired a substantial group of medieval objects from Georges Hoentschel, largely sculpture and furniture, which he lent long-term to The Met before eventually donating it.[17] These works constituted the first significant public display of medieval art

[13] I follow the example of J. Kroesen and V.M. Schmidt (coords.), *The Altar and its Environment 1150-1400*, Turnhout, 2009.

[14] It remains a challenge to convey to visitors some awareness of those aspects of the liturgy that were, in the words of J.S. Ackley, "remarkably unstable, flexible… constantly emended, locally inflected, and richly embellished". "Re-approaching the Western Medieval Church Treasury Inventory, c. 800-1250", *Journal of Art Historiography,* 11 (2014), p. 3.

[15] K. Baetjer and J.R. Mertens, "The Founding Decades", in A. Bayer with L. Corey (coords.), *Making the Met: 1870-2020*, New York, 2020, pp. 34-47. See also A. Peck and F. Spira, "Art for All", pp. 50-69, in the same volume.

[16] R. A. Rottner, J.P. Morgan and the Middle Ages", in E. Bradford Smith (coord.), *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting, 1800-1940*, University Park, P.A., 1996, pp. 119-20; and A. Bayer, B.D. Boehm, D.O. Kisluk-Grosheide, "Princely Aspirations", in A. Bayer with L. Corey (coords.), *Making the Met: 1870-2020*, New York, 2020, pp. 72-86.

[17] E. Robinson, "The Hoentschel Collection", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 2-6 (1907), pp. 93-99. See also Rottner, "J.P. Morgan", p. 119.

in the United States when they went on view in 1908 under the tenure of The Met's first Curator of Decorative Arts, William R. Valentiner.[18] Many of these large-scale works were given pride of place in the museum's Great Hall entryway, where they were arranged within a strictly symmetrical layout that echoed the strong lines of the grand Beaux-Arts-style edifice itself (Fig. 1). The central aisle of this display, lined with choir stalls to suggest the east end of a Gothic church, led to a truly stunning focal point, a sixteenth-century Entombment sculpture from the Chateau de Biron in the Dordogne. The aisle did not lead to an altar, such as one might expect in a church-like space, though the placement of the Biron group here does make sense within this ecclesiastic evocation, as sculptures like it did form part of altar environments, and its presentation of Christ's body in the context of the Passion directly relates to the ritual of the Mass. Similarly, the partitioned spaces flanking the central axis suggest side chapels. Conveying something of the sheer abundance of Morgan's loan, these were more densely filled with furniture and sculpture. Some tentative altar evocations punctuate these lateral spaces, such as in Fig. 1, right, where a carved limestone retable fragment sits atop a cloth-draped block. While at first glance such a display might seem to amount to not much more than placing an object on a pedestal, the deliberate placement of the textile between object and support, evocative of a frontal, suggests an intentional allusion to an altar.[19]

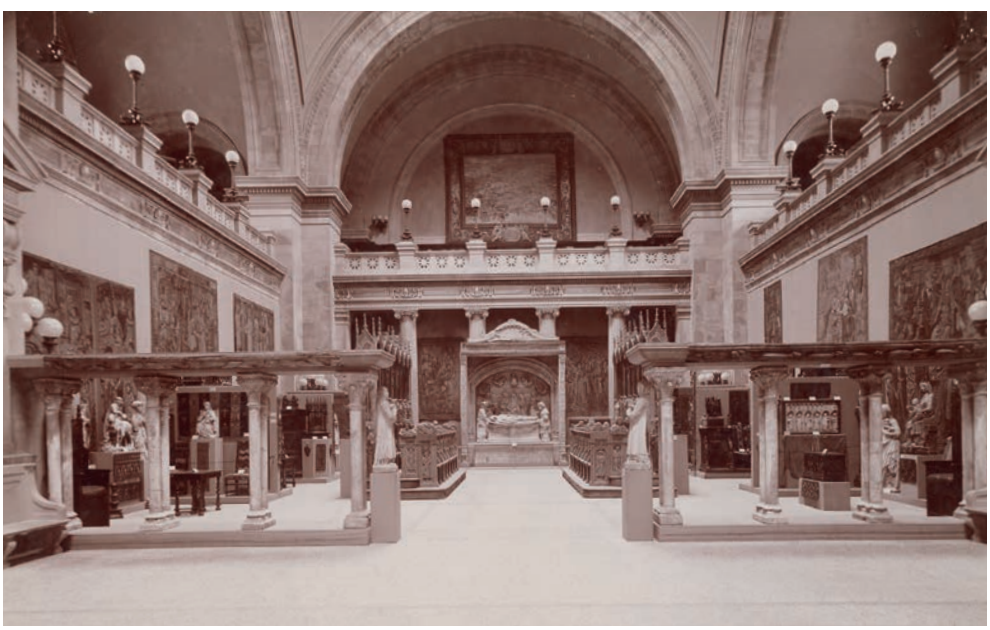

Fig. 1. Exhibition of the first Morgan loan of medieval art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Great Hall, 1908

[18] L. Kargère and M.D. Marincola, "Conservation in Context: The Examination and Treatment of Medieval Polychrome Wood Sculpture in the United States", *Metropolitan Museum Studies in Art, Science, and Technology*, 2 (2014), p. 15.

[19] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for underscoring the importance of the textile here.

Overall, the Great Hall's church-like setup, amplified by subsidiary altar evocations, reveals that interest in contextualizing the rich cache of medieval material existed at The Met from the start. While there survive no records describing the curators' rationale in designing this display, they evidently desired to demonstrate that space mattered in the medieval church: that a close relationship existed between many works of medieval art and their architectural settings, and that these relationships helped to give objects significance. This understanding is evident in a critic's response to the display. William Rankin, writing in the *Burlington Magazine* in the fall of 1908, noted that "Mr. Morgan's loan will be especially useful to students because the picture of an epoch is presented. Gothic art cannot be thought of as an isolated stylization; it always is part of a whole, so that the *ensemble* is needed to reinforce the unit motives".[20] At the same time, the deployment of these objects in this manner, housed within the museum's elegant and immense main entryway, made a dramatic visual impression.

In the series of galleries just beyond the Great Hall, in contrast, objects were arranged chronologically from Romanesque to Renaissance, providing a different view of medieval art based on style and date.[21] Yet, as a 1910 photograph reveals, these rooms also included a few altar-like evocations. Here, a vitrine at far right showcases a fourteenth-century polychrome sculpture of the Visitation from the Lake Constance region (Fig. 2). The centrally-placed sculpture was flanked by what appear to be Limoges incense boats and candlesticks, while an iconographic textile and two other objects, perhaps ivory or wooden plaques, were pinned to the

Fig. 2. Exhibition of the first Morgan loan of medieval art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Wing F, Room 3, 1911

[20] W. Rankin, "Current Notes", *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 14-67 (1908), p. 61.

[21] Rottner, "J.P. Morgan", p. 120.

backboard. It is unclear whether this arrangement was specifically meant to evoke an altar, though it certainly does suggest one. At the very least, the symmetrical arrangement of the objects, including ritual implements, asked visitors to understand the sculpture as venerable, a focal point within a larger apparatus of worship.

In 1912, Morgan acquired a second collection of medieval art from Hoentschel that largely consisted of ivories and metalwork. Before officially entering The Met's collection, this second group of objects was lent to the museum for a temporary exhibition held between 1914 and 1916. Photographs of this exhibition provide an opportunity to better understand The Met's early non-contextualizing displays. The galleries were organized chronologically. Within this framework, individual cases often were dedicated to works of the same medium or geographical origin, as can be seen in a 1914 photograph of one of the galleries that shows, at right, a vitrine of ivory panels across from another full of Limoges enamels (Fig. 3).[22] In some instances, groupings by chronology, geography, and media could achieve the opposite effect of the contextualizing displays, de-emphasizing their objects' original functions and circumstances of use in favor of a better understanding of, for example, the materials and techniques used at a given historical moment. For example, at left in the same photograph, a case of fourteenth-century French objects combines ivory caskets carved with courtly subjects, usually intended for storing small personal items in the home, alongside a reliquary statue of Saint Christopher, meant to contain sacred matter in an ecclesiastic setting.

Fig. 3. Exhibition of the second Morgan loan of medieval art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Wing H, 2nd Floor, Gallery 12 ("Gothic Room"), 1914

[22] Kargère and Marincola, "Conservation in Context", p. 15. According to Barnet, Valentiner had more opportunity to put this perspective into practice in Detroit. See P. Barnet, "'The Greatest Epoch': Medieval Art in Detroit from Valentiner to the 'Big Idea'", in C. Nielson (coord.), *To Inspire and Instruct: A History of Medieval Art in Midwestern Museums*, Newcastle, 2008, p. 40.

In part due to the sheer quantity of objects on view, this exhibition made a significant impact on the museum-going public and sparked many a response from contemporary writers.[23] While it drew praise, some critics found the display of objects in the 1914-1916 exhibition wholly dissatisfying. In one review published in the *New Republic* in 1914, the anonymous author dreamed of a different approach, writing: "Imagine… an apse built into a wall, an altar beneath a stained glass window, the reliquaries, the lamps and the bishop's crook in their destined places, tapestries hiding the walls. Would there be need of a catalogue to remind us that craftsmanship is the precious bond that unites art to life, and that beauty achieves perfection by serving *some other purpose than to display itself?"* (emphasis mine).[24] It is fascinating to see the altar at the center of this particular commentary, though perhaps not surprising given the multitude of liturgical objects on view. In the presentation of such accumulated riches, some clearly yearned for displays that recreated medieval settings. Notably, this sentiment was expressed just as American enthusiasm for the period room was beginning to take off. This mode of display would reach a height of popularity between the 1920s and 1940s and subsequently see revival at varying points in time, especially at The Met. Hunger for a more contextualized approach may reflect a growing expectation of museum display fed by other experiences of contemporary life, from shopping to entertainment.[25]

Those eager for overtly contextualized displays got their wish in 1914, when Barnard's Cloisters, which eventually would become The Met Cloisters, opened to the public.[26] This museum housed the personal collection of a charismatic American sculptor and art dealer, George Grey Barnard, who mostly collected medieval sculptures and architectural fragments but also acquired some paintings and textiles. Unlike the perfectly proper Beaux-Arts museum on Fifth Avenue, Barnard's Cloisters (located one hundred city blocks to the north) constituted a medieval fantasy entirely of the collector's imagination that incorporated, often into the very fabric of the building itself, original medieval architectural fragments (Fig. 4). The space was eclectic and romantic, and it presented its own "atmospheric" brand of historical authenticity.[27] Its idiosyncrasies won it high praise in its day, and many saw and felt in its presentation a great evocative power. As Thomas E.A. Dale recently observed, the museum's "very lack of a systematic display was appreciated by collectors and public alike as evoking a higher purpose".[28] This was the ideal space for the kinds of historical object assemblages that many Americans, perhaps especially those who could not travel to Europe, apparently craved to see. Barnard's Cloisters, a monument to modern medievalism, arguably served to create a "feeling" for the past based as much on intuition as on art history.[29] Given the great

[23] Rottner, "J.P. Morgan", pp. 123-125.

[24] Quoted in Rottner, "J.P. Morgan", p. 123.

[25] N. Harris, "Period Rooms and the American Art Museum", *Winterthur Portfolio,* 46-2/3 (2012), pp. 117-138.

[26] Rottner, "J.P. Morgan", p. 125 connects the *New Republic* review with this contemporary event.

[27] S. Fozi, "American Medieval", p. 470.

[28] T.E.A. Dale, "Meyric Rogers, Oswald Goetz, and the Rehabilitation of the Lucy Maud Buckingham Memorial Gothic Room at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1940s", in C. Nielson (coord.), *To Inspire and Instruct: A History of Medieval Art in Midwestern Museums*, Newcastle, 2008, p. 121.

[29] A 1916 review of Barnard's Cloisters by Jerauld Dahler in *Architecture* magazine praises "the individual feeling of the author" of the museum (Barnard), which in this instance was valued above the academic rigor of the professional architect. Quoted in Smith, "George Grey Barnard", p. 136.

Fig. 4. George Grey Barnard's Cloisters, view of the "nave", 1926

inspiration that medieval art gave Barnard himself as an artist, he may have hoped his visitors similarly would be moved.[30]

Barnard's Cloisters took on the overall shape of a church, with a central "nave" connecting to a separate "chancel" complete with altar evocation (Fig. 5).[31] Displaying an eclectic selection of items, this example suggested the heterogeneous quality of many medieval altars noted above. The mock altar table was draped with an embroidered frontal of ca. 1500 from France or Italy. Atop the table was the predella of an Aragonese retable. Barnard did own the rest of the retable's panels but chose not to include them in this display. Instead, the predella was surmounted by a French Virgin and Child sculpture under a tracery canopy with

[30] Fozi has argued for the importance of Barnard's role as artist in interpreting his Cloisters. See "American Medieval", p. 476.

[31] The building's layout is outlined in J. Breck, *The Cloisters: A Brief Guide*, New York, 1926. Incidentally, recreated altars were not unique to Barnard's Cloisters or to The Met. The Detroit Institute of Art, for example, had "several altars" in its "Mediaeval Hall" in order to, in the words of then-director William Valentiner "characterize in a general way the impression of an early church interior". Quoted in Barnet, "'The Greatest Epoch'", p. 41. Detroit's 1920s installation of medieval art also included a chapel from the Chateau de Lannoy with altar table, see p. 46.

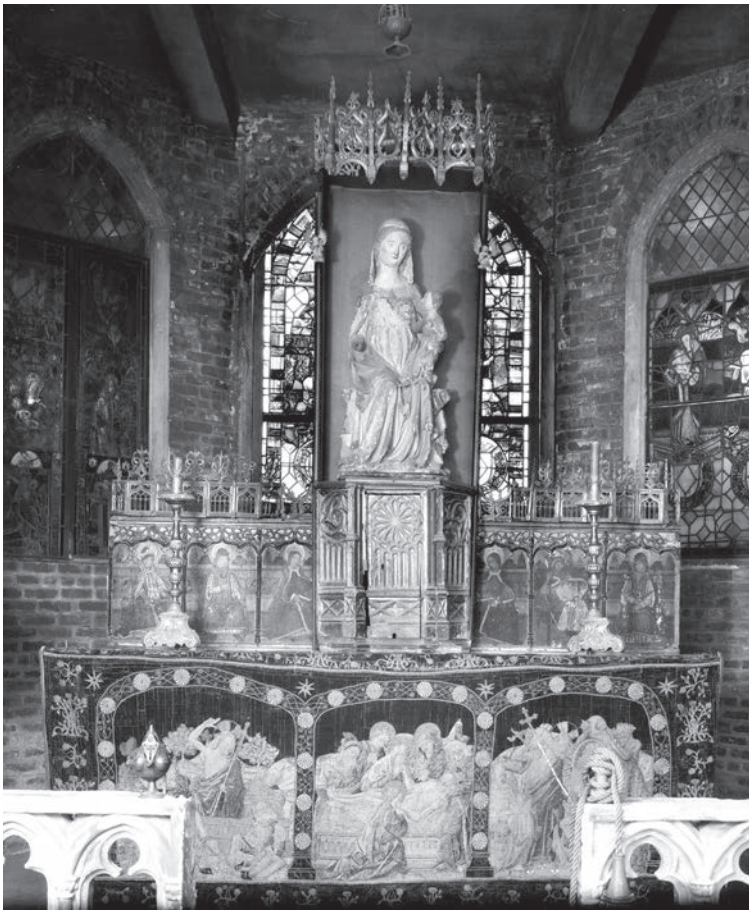

Fig. 5. George Grey Barnard's Cloisters, view of the "chapel", 1927

modern backing. His deliberate fragmentation of the retable does not sit well nowadays, as it misrepresents the complete work. This decision was, nonetheless, consistent with Barnard's overall approach to his Cloisters; he had divided and dispersed other groups of related objects elsewhere in the museum, such as the cloister elements from Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, which could be found in both the "nave" and "north transept". Barnard likely bought the retable with its individual panels already disassembled. In addition to presenting a formidable carpentry task, a reassembled altarpiece would have filled the space and limited visibility of the stained glass beyond. While a tall retable obscuring an architectural feature was perfectly acceptable in many late medieval Spanish churches, it was a liability in a museum known for displaying fixed architectural features as well as movable objects. The visibility of objects is generally a requirement of art museums, while in medieval churches, and especially those with long material histories, it was a relative value.[32] Overall, Barnard's chancel offered a rich, immersive

[32] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for highlighting the visibility issue.

experience of a later medieval altar environment replete with relevant objects and representing different mediums. Here, evocation seems to have entailed communicating the variety of visual stimuli surrounding many late medieval altars, from the rich colors and metallics of an embroidered panel to the brilliance of light filtering through colored glass.

At the same time, the theatricality of Barnard's Cloisters, evident in the photographs taken of them, is even greater than that of The Met's early displays of the Morgan collection. The dramatic implications of Barnard's displays were obviously a big part of their appeal. To that end, in 1928 The Met produced a short film set at Barnard's Cloisters called *The Hidden Talisman: A Ghostly Romance of the Cloisters*; in it, the chancel served to frame the devotions of a medieval lady pining for her lost lover.[33] Yet it is clear that Barnard aimed to create a unique, quasi-theatrical experience for visitors not just for special projects such as this, but every day—after all, the museum's guards famously dressed as monks.[34] Within such a setting, the historical dimensions of contextualization, though not unimportant, became subordinate to a romanticizing impulse. Barnard's evocations made room for sensory experience and spiritual connection in a way that The Met's earliest displays did not. Moreover, Barnard's Cloisters were exclusively devoted to large-scale spatial evocation. Unlike the displays at Fifth Avenue, there was no suite of rooms with cases beyond the pseudo-church, and no impulse to offer a complementary narrative based on the academic art historical principles of the day.

Modernist Altars, 1930s-1960s

In 1925, the oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller, Jr. purchased Barnard's Cloisters on behalf of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Though initially housed in Barnard's building, in 1938 The Met's Cloisters reopened in a new location just to the north in newly-created Fort Tryon Park. The new museum's design emerged from over a decade of careful art historical research and architectural planning, the fruits of a collaboration initially led by the architect Charles Collens and The Cloisters' first curator and director, Joseph Breck. Later, following Breck's untimely death in 1933, James J. Rorimer became the project's lead curator.[35] The new Cloisters museum was to continue the conceit of evocative medieval spaces that had originated at Barnard's Cloisters and had been so loved by visitors. At this time, the American public's enthusiasm for period rooms had reached a new height, and, to a certain extent, the decision to remake The Cloisters on the model of its previous iteration speaks to public demand.[36] As

[33] The *Hidden Talisman* was one of a series of "cinema films", as they were then called, produced by The Met for educational purposes and rented out to local schools and other cultural organizations. The entire film is available on The Met's website: https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/med/hidden-talisman.

[34] For Barnard and his Cloisters, see J.L. Schrader, "George Grey Barnard: The Cloisters and The Abbaye", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin,* 37-1 (1979), pp. 3-34; and E. Bradford Smith, "George Grey Barnard: Artist/Collector/Dealer/Curator", in E. Bradford Smith (coord.), *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting, 1800-1940*, University Park, P.A., 1996, pp. 133-142.

[35] For the design of the buildings and galleries, see T.B. Husband, "Creating the Cloisters", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 70-4 (2013), especially pp. 30-47.

[36] M.B. Shepard, "In all 'Its Chaste Beauty': Cloistered Spaces in Midwestern Museums", in C. Nielson (coord.), *To Inspire and Instruct: A History of Medieval Art in Midwestern Museums*, Newcastle, 2008, pp. 87-91. See also L. Seidel, "The Buckingham Head: An Incidental Portrait of its Accidental Patron", p. 84, in the same volume.

Collens expressed in a 1931 letter to Rockefeller, he felt the museum's planners should "give each [display] a setting which would minimize the fact that it was an exhibit, but a part of a composition and naturally fitted into the particular spot best adapted to the conditions under which it existed in its original state".[37] Like Barnard's Cloisters, the new building's design emulated medieval architecture, following both Romanesque and Gothic models. Unlike Barnard's Cloisters, the architect and curators studied the appearance of actual medieval buildings and incorporated the features of many such monuments into the museum's design. Once again, historical architectural fragments were built into the modern fabric of the new building, though greater pains were taken to arrange them in ways that suggested or approximated their original configurations.[38] If a complete reconstruction of an architectural setting could not be managed, an abbreviated version could. For example, the museum's holdings of Romanesque cloister elements from the monastery of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa only represented a portion of the original monument, so the museum's display is a half-size version, filled out with matching stones newly quarried from appropriate sites in the Roussillon.

Of course, the new Cloisters museum was not without elements of fantasy, and as Shirin Fozi suggests, in The Met's version of The Cloisters, "Barnard's evocative vision was updated rather than wholly replaced".[39] Much of the museum's appeal still derives from its unique ability to convey an intangible "medieval feeling" to visitors. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the difference of intent and level of scholarly engagement that went into its design vis-à-vis Barnard's Cloisters. Injecting the display with new art-historical rigor, Breck advocated for a chronological progression of galleries at The Cloisters, each focused as closely as possible on a specific period and region and making clear the distinctions between the different styles represented. He aimed to contextualize works with sensitivity to the specific time frames in which they were made, above all taking into account the appropriate arrangement of objects in relationship to each other within each historicizing architectural setting.[40]

In understanding Breck and Rorimer's curatorial approaches to The Cloisters, it is instructive to look to their gallery displays at Fifth Avenue, given that both men started their careers there. A 1933 photograph of one of the medieval galleries shows an ecclesiastic evocation in a space that, as will be seen below, would continue to serve as a church-like environment up to the present day (Fig. 6). Early on, this gallery's Beaux-Arts architecture, including round arches, thick cornices, and elaborate piers, may have suggested to curators the interior of an early medieval or Romanesque church, while its fortuitous apsidal shape specifically recalling a sanctuary is doubtless central to its continued interpretation as such.[41] In the 1933 photograph, dominating the space is a ciborium made about 1150 for the church of Santo Stefano in Fiano Romano, near Rome, which had been part of The Met's collection since 1909. In the

[37] Quoted in J.J. Rorimer, *Medieval Monuments at the Cloisters as They Were and as They Are*, New York, 1972, p. 7.

[38] For insight into this process, see J.J. Rorimer, *The Cloisters: The Building and the Collection of Mediaeval Art in Fort Tryon Park*, New York, 1938, pp. xxix-xxxiii.

[39] Fozi, "American Medieval", 477.

[40] M.R. Leuchak, "'The Old World for the New': Developing the Design for The Cloisters", *Metropolitan Museum Journal,* 23 (1988), p. 259.

[41] The reinterpretation of existing museum architecture for the display of medieval objects is also seen at Detroit. See Barnet, "'The Greatest Epoch'", p. 41.

Fig. 6. Apse gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Wing D, Room 15, 1933

gallery, the marble canopy sheltered a ninth-tenth-century south Italian relief panel depicting two confronted griffins, likely made for a choir screen but here presented as an altar frontal set within an unmistakably table-like modern pedestal. Behind this "altar," a Throne of Wisdom was displayed atop what might be a capital, presumably elevated by a pedestal. At the very back of the room was a shallow niche framed by a carved arch that was later brought to The Cloisters; inside the niche were a small cross and coffret. Arranged along the rest of the room's perimeter are architectural sculptures, while stained glass fragments are set into a window, and a cast lead basin, probably intended here as a baptismal font, stands on a pedestal in the corner. Overall, the room offers highlights of an entire medieval church, the objects more or less placed with respect to where they feasibly might have been situated in their original settings. While the gallery constitutes only an approximation of a church, the architectural reference is clear, and the spatial arrangement of objects in relation to each other is integral to its act of evocation. There are also fewer objects, spaced more widely than in previous Met displays, allowing visitors to enter and move about the space. Finally, though the objects on display in this room date from different periods (among the many twelfth and thirteenth century works there are, for example, elements from the fifth-sixth century chancel screen at Notre-Dame de

la Daurade and some late heraldic stained glass), Romanesque works predominate, suggesting an interest in contextualizing within a more focused chronology.

Comparison of this space with a ca. 1938 photo of a gallery in the newly opened Cloisters (Fig. 7) suggests that the uptown galleries manifested further refinements to the display ethos developed at Fifth Avenue. This space, the Langon Chapel gallery, constitutes a 3/4-scale reproduction of the Romanesque church of Notre-Dame-du-Bourg in Langon, western France. Though largely of modern construction, the gallery incorporates into its fabric original fragments of this church's masonry, including several of its carved capitals. Passing through the doorway opposite the apse, visitors enter this room as a medieval congregation would have entered the nave of the church from its western entrance, enjoying the same axial sightline leading toward the sanctuary. The 1938 photograph of this gallery shows that at this moment, the only objects on display in the room were concentrated in the apse, including a Castilian Romanesque Crucifix hung above a group of four columns with Romanesque capitals arranged in a square, evidently to suggest a ciborium, and an early thirteenth-century Catalan altar frontal mounted on a wooden framework taking the form of a table. The same level of care in the arrangement of objects in space carried over from Fifth Avenue to The Cloisters,

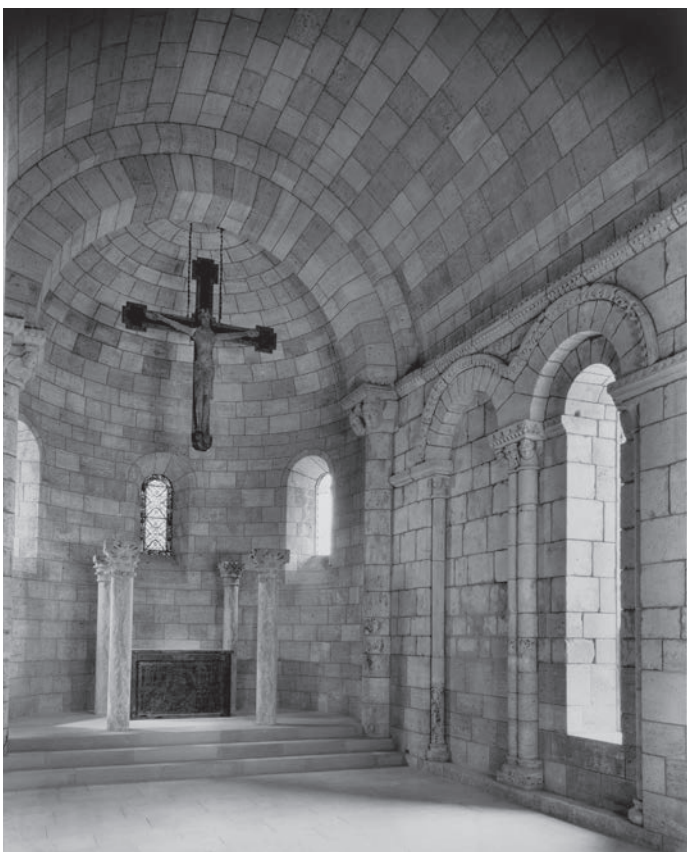

Fig. 7. The Romanesque Chapel (today known as the Langon Chapel gallery), The Met Cloisters, ca. 1938

where the architectural frameworks of each gallery could provide similar, and more stylistically medieval, opportunities to recreate medieval interiors. In addition, a new emphasis on reducing the number of objects on view also emerged in this room, perhaps representing a distillation of previous efforts at selectivity in the Fifth Avenue galleries. With a smaller number of objects on view, even more space and light were dedicated to their display. This shift was characteristic of Rorimer's curatorial work and is broadly observable in other museums' medieval art galleries at the same moment. On the one hand, it reflected contemporary emphasis on medieval objects as works of art worthy of measured, focused study from an art historical perspective. On the other, it responded to modernist principles in architecture and interior design.[42] The revamping of the medieval art galleries at the Art Institute of Chicago during the 1940s took the modernist approach even further, suppressing gothicizing architectural details that had been previously added to galleries to make them seem more medieval.[43] Of course, The Cloisters' historical and historicizing architecture, even if going out of fashion elsewhere, was an integral part of its identity. Moreover, for some it was not at odds with a modernist approach to the display of objects at all. Critic Lewis Mumford praised the display in his 1938 *New Yorker* review of the recently opened museum:

> The studied absence of the superfluous characterizes both the setting and the display; it is this that emphasizes the underlying kinship between modernism and Romanesque art, a feeling quite different from the confident complexities of high Gothic or the boisterous motley of the waning Middle Ages. Each object is shown at full value, because it is not surrounded, for dubious educational purposes, by a dozen other objects. This rigor of selection is responsible for the clean, spacious sense that the building has even on a day of crowds. It is the least cluttered of museums.[44]

The changing tastes in museum display underlying the design of The Cloisters had important implications for the display of altar arts. In addition to providing more space for each object as an artwork worthy of focus in its own right, the Langon Chapel gallery's minimal display enabled visitors to consider each object on its own, as well as its relative placement to other objects. Importantly, in its spareness, the gallery suggests an altar environment without committing too deeply to recreating one. Even the free-standing columns, while hinting at a specific kind of structure, seem to ask the viewer not to get too invested in their identification with a ciborium. To that end, it is notable that when the columns were installed in this configuration, no attempt was made to flesh out a canopy to turn the arrangement into a makeshift ciborium, either with modern or reused medieval materials. Barnard might not have been so restrained. While the 1938 Langon display undeniably is still an assemblage of previously unassociated objects (all roughly contemporary to the Langon architectural fragments, but from disparate origins), it is a far cry from Barnard's altar setup, which in fragmenting and recombining elements conveyed a less coherent idea of what a medieval altar could have looked like.

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[42] Kargère and Marincola, "Conservation in Context", p. 19; Fozi, "American Medieval", p. 478. For an example of a museum pursuing this impulse outside of the United States, see L. Liepe, "Curating Medieval Artefacts in Swedish Museums: Art Objects and Historical Narratives from the 1880s to the 1940s", in W. Brückle, P.A. Mariaux, and D. Mondini (coords.), *Musealisierung mittelalterlicher Kunst Anlässe, Ansätze, Ansprüche*, Berlin, 2015, pp. 204-210.

[43] Dale, "Meyric Rogers", pp. 126-129.

[44] L. Mumford, "Pax in Urbe", in R. Wojtowicz (coord.), *Sidewalk Critic: Lewis Mumford's Writings on New York*, New York, 1998, p. 215.

The 1938 photograph of the Langon Chapel gallery was published in an accompanying guidebook by Rorimer.[45] The 1951 edition of this publication reveals the replacement of the four suggestive columns in the gallery with an actual, complete medieval ciborium: that of Santo Stefano in Fiano Romano, on display at Fifth Avenue as of 1933 (Fig. 8).[46] Perhaps the decision was made to bring the ciborium to The Cloisters to seize upon an opportunity to show the structure within a more "authentic" ecclesiastic setting. The ca. 1951 photo shows that the physical relationship between the apse and the canopy is not so very different from that of either the previous Fifth Avenue display or the original configuration in Fiano Romano, where the ciborium nested within the monumental apse of Santo Stefano, a structure within

Fig. 8. The Romanesque Chapel (today known as the Langon Chapel gallery), The Met Cloisters, ca. 1951

[45] Rorimer, *The Cloisters* (1938), fig. 11.

[46] J.J. Rorimer, *The Cloisters: The Building and the Collection of Mediaeval Art in Fort Tryon Park*, New York, 1951, fig. 10.

a structure. In the ca. 1951 photograph of the chapel, the Crucifix installed in 1938 is absent, likely removed to make room for the tall ciborium. In contrast, the Catalan frontal remained, entering into dialogue with the ciborium that served to shelter it. Additionally, by 1951 the frontal's table-like wooden framework supported a Burgundian Throne of Wisdom sculpture, set between two candles against a cloth backdrop. Compared to the Fifth Avenue arrangement, which had a Throne of Wisdom behind the altar, the display has been condensed spatially. In contrast to the 1938 configuration of objects in the Langon Chapel gallery, the 1951 display appears tightened, creating a stronger sense that canopy, frontal, and image constitute a visual, functional, and semantic unit than the previous configuration did. This is largely achieved by resisting any impulse to include additional objects and by allowing empty space to settle comfortably between and around the selected works.

What happened to the Fifth Avenue gallery following the ciborium's removal and transfer to The Cloisters? Known internally as "the apse," the space continued to evoke a church, though it underwent certain changes. A late-1960s photograph (Fig. 9) shows that by then the room's semicircular terminus had been suppressed, and its new flat back wall accommodated a thirteenth-century stained glass window from Saint-Germain-des-Prés depicting scenes from the legend of Saint Vincent of Zaragoza. Perhaps the window was intended as a kind of replacement for the ciborium, not through its function, but through its height and commanding presence. Below, the south Italian relief panel depicting griffins still stood in its "altar table" frame. Two twelfth-century Thrones of Wisdom, now flanking the altar in vitrines, suggested cult statues on side altars. Against the walls were Romanesque capitals, a Scandinavian Throne

Fig. 9. Apse gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1967-68, Photograph © William Keighley

of Wisdom, and a large stone chest, all serving to flesh out the rest of the ecclesiastic evocation as a somewhat different selection of objects had done in 1933. Perhaps in response to the tightened chronology at The Cloisters, and in contrast to the earlier version of this room, by this point the majority of the works in this display dated to the twelfth century, with the window, chest, and frontal the chronological outliers. At the gallery's threshold, also, were arranged various exterior sculptures to complete the composite picture of a decorated medieval edifice. Although the arrangement of objects in imitation of an actual medieval church or chapel was only approximate (as with earlier examples), the curatorial impulse nonetheless prevailed to arrange objects in a manner that broadly suggested their original configurations within the general paradigm of the medieval church.

It is worth noting that as committed as Met curators may have been to evoking ecclesiastic space on a large scale, this interest did not extend to the arrangement of liturgical objects on an altar table. A notable exception, however, was staged for *The Age of Spirituality*, a special exhibition held at The Met in 1977 that celebrated the art of Late Antiquity. Tracing the journey from paganism to Christianity, the show culminated in a mock altar table setting (Fig. 10). Placed within a vitrine on a broad, four-legged platform was a selection of silver altar implements from the Kaper Karaon and Antioch treasures that included a pair of candlesticks, a cross, chalice, paten, ewer, flabellum, relic containers, and votive panels. On a platform below the case sat a small stone reliquary, signaling the practice of embedding relics within an altar. The display's backdrop was a photograph of the apse mosaic from Sant'Apollinare in Classe in

Figure 10. Altar display of the special exhibition *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century,* held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977-February 12, 1978

Ravenna flanked by the two columns from Notre-Dame de la Daurade in Toulouse mentioned above. These items situated the display within the architectural space of the church sanctuary, a strategy which provided some hint at spatial context, though the main focus was undoubtedly the array of objects.

The Met does not seem to have subsequently picked up this mode of display in its permanent collection galleries, but The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore today features two dressed "altar tables." One, in the Early Byzantine gallery, features most of the same objects from the Kaper Karaon treasure that were included in the *Age of Spirituality* altar table display, hinting at a direct inspiration of the one upon the other conveyed by Walters curator (and later director) Gary Vikan, who previously had been involved in the Met exhibition.[47] Set into a wall niche, the display is framed by an arch and crossbeam to suggest the sanctuary of a Byzantine church. A second altar evocation in the Walters' Romanesque and Gothic galleries similarly relies upon a fabricated architectural setting, this time a partition pierced with pointed arches to suggest the windows of a Gothic church or the outline of a retable, to frame the group of Limoges enamel implements displayed in the case in front of it. Like the *Age of Spirituality* example, both Walters "altars" bring the objects to life by showing them in a sample ritual context.[48] In so doing, they bring the museum visitor right up to the table, dispensing with the congregational "nave" space offered in, for example, the Langon or the Fifth Avenue chapels. While visitors confronted with the Walters' displays can imagine themselves as members of the congregation, observing the rituals of the Mass from a remove, the displays also have the power to place visitors in the shoes of an officiant, extending the imaginative scope of the contextualized display.

Treasury-Altars, 1980s

When it comes to displays of medieval altar implements, art museums often invoke the model of the church treasury, at least as a conceptual framework. The affinities between museum galleries and church treasuries are apparent: both store, preserve, and display objects deemed to be of great communal significance as well as monetary value.[49] Of course, the parallels are limited. While held in church treasuries, separated (if only temporarily) from their settings of use, liturgical objects retain their status as functional items. In contrast, altar implements' entry into museum collections and re-presentation as art objects usually mean that they have been retired from use. Even if they come to form part of a contextualizing display meant

[47] I am grateful to Herbert L. Kessler for both bringing the *Age of Spirituality* altar to my attention and for sharing this observation with me.

[48] The desire to contextualize and elucidate the altar, visible in the gallery displays, is echoed in a Walters publication that explores central themes of medieval art through its collection. See M. Bagnoli and K. Gerry, *The Medieval World: The Walters Art Museum,* Baltimore, 2011, pp. 67-95.

[49] For example, P. Williamson, *The Medieval Treasury: The Art of the Middle Ages in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 1998, pp. 5-14. Mclachlan, "Liturgical Vessels", p. 374, acknowledges the gulf between museums and treasuries. For further discussion of the treasury as a site of display, see P.A. Mariaux, "Exposer au Moyen Âge?", in W. Brückle, P.A. Mariaux, and D. Mondini (coords.), *Musealisierung mittelalterlicher Kunst Anlässe, Ansätze, Ansprüche*, Berlin, 2015, pp. 30-45.

to evoke the rituals for which they were made, they remain fundamentally separated from those rituals. Moreover, the presence of saintly remains in reliquaries meant that treasuries were, in a sense, sites of veneration.[50]

Both Fifth Avenue and The Cloisters historically have featured galleries described as treasuries for smaller objects made of precious materials, largely but not exclusively comprising liturgical implements.[51] In many museums, including Fifth Avenue, the treasury is a conventional gallery with object-filled cases. In its early days, The Cloisters' Treasury took on a similar appearance (at first glance, at least), a choice which sets it apart from the building's other permanent collection spaces. In true Cloisters style, however, the cases were tall wooden cabinets with Gothicizing carved details, a choice that evoked the storage cupboards of church sacristies. Their contents in turn recalled those of, for example, the different armoires of the Saint-Denis treasury captured in Dom Michel Félibien's 18th-century engravings.

The current Cloisters Treasury design (Fig. 11) dates to the late 1980s. The dark wood paneling, perhaps a nod to the earlier gallery's design, continues to suggest a sacristy lined with

Fig. 11. The Treasury, The Met Cloisters, 1989

[50] P.A. Mariaux, "Collecting (and Display)", in C. Rudolph (coord.), *A Companion to Medieval Art*, Malden, M.A., 2008, pp. 215-217.

[51] It is worth noting here former Met curator Margaret Frazer's publication on the museum's medieval treasury objects, in which she urges readers to consider the treasury objects in the museum collections as working in tandem with other, larger-scale objects in the collection, illustrating the extent of Met curators' contextualizing ethos. M. E. Frazer, "Medieval Church Treasuries", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin,* 43-3 (1985-1986), p. 51.

cabinets, though these have been reinterpreted as sleek, unobtrusive containers. The room's conservation-friendly low light levels recall the pre-electricity dimness of interior spaces. Currently, the objects in the cases are largely (though not exclusively) arranged according to geography and chronology, while some vitrines present church art and others display secular material. This mode of classification, which takes its cue from art history textbooks, also echoes an approach typical of the Fifth Avenue medieval galleries.

Yet while the medieval church treasury is the historical setting that the gallery principally channels, its spatial evocation is more nuanced, presenting an additional layer of understanding through the arrangement of the casework. Vitrines line the perimeter of this room, but additional cases independent of the walls also occupy the inner space. At the room's western end, five of these cases are joined to form a semicircle. Each end of this semicircle aligns with an additional row of free-standing cases that create a deep U-shaped pattern. The preferred mode of circulation is for visitors to enter this gallery from the east, at the open end of the "U." From there, an axial sightline draws visitors inward toward the semicircle. Unmistakably apsidal, this formation of the cases evokes none other than a church sanctuary (and additionally creates a surrounding ambulatory-like space).[52] By integrating the contours of the sanctuary into the treasury, the case arrangement plays with the strict notion of the treasury as a site of storage and display to hint at the rituals that lay just beyond it. In this layered conception of the space, the objects oscillate between their current inactivity and their original intended use in the performance of Christian ritual.

Extended Altars, 1990s-2000s

The Cloisters' Treasury offers just one example of a contextualizing display that plays with the idea of recognizable, unambiguous altar environments. In recent years Met curators including Helen C. Evans, Peter Barnet, Barbara Drake Boehm, Melanie Holcomb, and Charles T. Little took less literal approaches to evoking the altar at Fifth Avenue, finding new ways to communicate object significance and functionality. For example, the current display of the Attarouthi Treasure, a sixth-seventh century Syrian hoard, presents all of The Met's holdings of this trove in one vitrine. While this display allows the objects' status as "buried treasure" to captivate visitors, its presentation of a group of related objects preserved together also provides a window onto the practice of the liturgy, its aesthetics, and the significance of its components in a specific time and place. It shares this quality with the items of the Kaper Karaon Treasure in The Walters' collection, which are also displayed as an ensemble. Yet, with its greater variety of objects, it is arguable that the Walters' display more convincingly evokes an altar table prepared for services (the Attarouthi case has too many chalices for a single service!). Nonetheless, the Attarouthi display does evokes a specific altar context (and church treasury), if not a specific altar table, and the accompanying gallery text is able to further explain the objects' liturgical uses.

The Attarouthi Treasure display was installed as part of the inauguration of the Mary and Michael Jaharis Galleries at Fifth Avenue in the year 2000. Because the new Jaharis Galleries comprised the apsidal space that historically served to evoke a church in the museum,

[52] I would like to thank Justin Kroesen for pointing out the creation of an "ambulatory" in this space.

Fig. 12. Apse gallery incorporated into the Mary and Michael Jaharis Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000

this room received a makeover (Fig. 12). The false walls that previously had been erected to change the room's shape were removed, revealing anew its semicircular terminus. To a certain extent, the year 2000 display continued to embrace the room's church-like layout, though this new version narrowed its focus on the church sanctuary. Like the earlier installation in this space, there are still some large-scale objects placed to approximate their original locations in a sanctuary: for example, the Italian late Romanesque Crucifix that hangs from the ceiling. The relief with two griffins, which had long served as an altar frontal in the center of this room, was pushed to the side, where it better suggested the choir screen that it likely came from. There are also significant differences from the previous configuration of this space, most notably in the introduction of cases full of objects in metalwork and ivory, which might prompt a rereading of the space as a treasury, though, like The Cloisters Treasury, the space itself need not be read as either/or. Only some of these objects were liturgical implements relevant to the "sanctuary space," and once again, these were grouped not according to how they might have been laid out on a historical altar, but rather by other criteria such as materials or style.

In 2008, the apse gallery was transformed again, this time to evoke a middle Byzantine sanctuary (Fig. 13). This choice more fully integrated the space within the rest of the Jaharis Galleries, which feature The Met's Byzantine collection. Across the threshold of the apse stretches a framework suggesting a templon, which supports two actual ninth-eleventh century marble templon panels, as well as a series of Middle Byzantine copper reliefs also originally intended for a templon. In addition, two seventeenth-century Greek icons are hung on either end of the framework, hinting at this pierced form's eventual transformation into the image-dense iconostasis. This structure is explained on a large, adjacent text panel which includes a photograph of the Middle Byzantine templon in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Athens, further clarifying the setting of this ecclesiastic feature and providing a historical reference for

Fig. 13. Apse gallery with Byzantine templon, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009 (photographer: Karin Willis)

the museum's display choices. Passing under the "templon", visitors find a liturgical book, the Jaharis Lectionary, appropriate to a sanctuary setting.

Yet while the templon framework introduces the space, and the lectionary's presence reaffirms the sense of having entered a sanctuary, the gallery does not entirely insist upon its potential as a recreation of such a space. The cases lining the back wall of the "apse" contain a variety of objects, many of which are not explicitly associated with the rituals of the altar. Underscoring this, the 2008 press release that first described this gallery's display was very careful to specify that it was "designed to suggest—*but not recreate*—a Byzantine church of the period" (emphasis mine).[53] The language of this document, which would have been composed with attention to curatorial intent, suggests a hesitance to go "too far" in contextualizing.

Connecting physically and conceptually to the apse is the large space known as the Medieval Europe gallery, also renovated in 2008, which offers a yet another approach to altar evocation. Dedicated to Romanesque art, the cases in this large gallery mostly contain metalwork, ivory, and manuscripts in vitrines interspersed with sculptures on pedestals, and all displays are grouped geographically. At the gallery's eastern end is one of the most striking works in this space, the marble ciborium from the church of Santo Stefano in Fiano Romano, which

[53] "Metropolitan Museum to Reopen Galleries for Byzantine Art and the Art of Medieval Europe", November 10, 2008. https://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2008/metropolitan-museum-to-reopen-galleries-for-byzantine-art-and-the-art-of-medieval-europe

traveled from Fifth Avenue to The Cloisters and back again (Fig. 14).[54] The monumental ciborium holds its own in the grand expanse of the gallery, serving as a foil to the many smaller objects gathered around it. Here, and in contrast to its previous settings, visitors can get close to and move around the canopy, imagining themselves in the space of the clergy rather than that of the congregation—further evidence of a shift in both how museum visitors access art objects and what roles they might imaginatively assume in gaining access to them.

Figure 14. View of ciborium in Medieval Europe gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008 (photographer: Joe Coscia)

[54] P. Barnet, "Medieval Europe: Medieval Art in the Museum Collection, 1977-2008", in J.R. Houghton (coord.) *Philippe de Montebello and The Metropolitan Museum of Art: 1977-2008*, New York, 2009, p. 29.

In addition to how it structures the viewer's experience, the ciborium also provides a spatial and architectural context in a room that is otherwise filled with objects. Sculpted elements from Italian choir screens are strategically placed nearby because of both their Italian origin, in tune with the gallery's geographical organization, and also because of their original intended use in an altar environment. To a certain extent, the impulse seen in earlier gallery displays to place altar furnishings in precise relationship to each other, suggesting a manner in which they once might have been arranged, endures in this display. At the same time, however, there is a greater physical distance between all of these objects. They have not been placed side-by-side or envisioned as a mock-up of a medieval ciborium and chancel screen, and one would never call this display as it currently looks a "re-creation". Rather, the association between objects is kept loose. Visitors are free to make the connections (which are not explicitly underscored in the gallery text), or not.

Beyond what the ciborium does for the Romanesque gallery, it also interacts in subtle and complex ways with the adjacent gallery that includes the Middle Byzantine church sanctuary. The Italian chancel screen elements are in fact installed at the threshold between the two spaces. Their intended function of delineating or defining space in a medieval church is thus transferred to a new setting, marking the transition between one museum gallery and the next. In so doing, it also creates a relationship between two separate ecclesiastic traditions, east and west, by causing their different altar environments to come face to face. In this context, the screen elements' use makes additional meaning by offering a zone of comparison, allowing visitors to observe that the Italian chancel screen elements and the Byzantine templon revetments resemble each other, both visually and functionally, thus highlighting artistic links between Byzantium and Italy. Finally, the dialogue between these spaces is heightened further through the mirrored display of portable objects: on either side of the gallery threshold, there is a silver and gilt processional cross, one Byzantine and one Spanish. Overall, the display provides a rich opportunity not only to compare across broad geographies, but also to draw associations among a wide range of objects. The diffuse nature of this evocation also offers a certain flexibility in visitors' processes of exploration and discovery that is not as available in more structured evocations of altar environments.

Interfaith Altars, 2021

The Cloisters' Fuentidueña Chapel gallery is named for the monument that dominates the space: the apse of the church of San Martín de Fuentidueña, obtained from Spain as a long-term loan in 1957 and grafted onto an existing gallery. A significant portion of this room constitutes an altar evocation in its own right. In addition to the late-twelfth-century Romanesque apse, its vault supports a ca. 1100 fresco from a different monument, the Catalan Church of the Virgin near Cap d'Aran. The Castilian Romanesque Crucifix that once crowned the Langon Chapel gallery now hangs from the Fuentidueña apse's triumphal arch. Overall, the combination of architecture, painting, and sculpture works together to offer visitors a paradigmatic Iberian Romanesque church sanctuary.

On the one hand, this display works well as an evocation because even in its combination of disparate works from different regions, it offers a relatively high degree of temporal, geographic, and stylistic consistency. On the other hand, given medieval Iberia's cultural, religious, and

artistic diversity, the display only provides a partial view of artistic production in twelfth-century Iberia because, by focusing on the church sanctuary, it does not engage with the arts of Islam and Judaism. In response to this lacuna, in the fall of 2021 I staged the exhibition *Spain, 1000-1200: Art at the Frontiers of Faith*, bringing works of medieval Iberian Islamic and Jewish art into the gallery in order to establish, for a largely North American audience unfamiliar with the history, that the arts of medieval Iberia were the expressions of multiple faiths.[55]

Since this space inevitably reads first and foremost as a church, I endeavored to have the exhibition complicate that reading, first by demonstrating the ways in which Christian ecclesiastic art took inspiration from the arts of Islam, and second by showing how objects made in the Islamic world were incorporated, sometimes through physical transformation, into Christian spaces of worship (Fig. 15). Embracing the existing sanctuary evocation specifically called for the exhibition of objects associated with the altar. Among these were a late antique ivory pyxis with a medieval replacement lid, possibly of Islamic manufacture, that was used as a

Fig. 15. View of the apse display in the special exhibition Spain, 1000-1200: *Art at the Frontiers of Faith*, held August 30, 2021-February 13, 2022 (photographer: Bruce Schwarz)

[55] J. Perratore, "Spain, 1000-1200: Art at the Frontiers of Faith", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 79-2 (2021).

reliquary in San Pedro de la Rúa, Estella; two multimedia panels that Queen Felicia of Aragon and Navarra had made for the convent of Santa Cruz de la Serós, one of which was decorated with a sapphire inscribed in Arabic with four of the 99 "Beautiful Names" of God; and several fragments of fine textiles made in Muslim-ruled Spain that had been used for Christian vestments and reliquary linings.

Over the past 30 or so years, scholars have spoken of objects like these largely within the context of the church treasury, either with respect to the wealth that Christians amassed from conquest, trade, and diplomacy, or in terms of the role church treasuries played in preserving works of Islamic art.[56] While chronicling an important part of the story of object use and reuse, treasury-focused scholarship risks implying, at least to a more general audience unfamiliar with the complex roles played by church treasuries, that such objects were stored away, hoarded and hidden from public view. Taking a different tack, for *Frontiers of Faith* I sought to bring these objects into the arena of communal ritual performance—and what better place to do that than an ecclesiastic evocation? As it was not possible, for reasons of accessibility, to place cases in the apse itself, I positioned them immediately adjacent to it, standing free and taking up space in the center of the room to make them present, visible, and unavoidable for visitors. One goal of this particular display strategy was to normalize the presence in the medieval Christian church of imports from Islamic lands. Another was to underscore the broad concept that what is now called "medieval art" was most often functional, interactive, and significant in its portability or wearability—an idea not central to the message of this exhibition primarily concerned with interfaith interaction, but still essential to the understanding of the objects included within it.

Conclusions

In this brief survey of medieval altar evocations at The Met, a clear shift is observable in curatorial aims over the course of more than a century. The earliest, exuberant attempts were thoughtfully composed with some degree of educational intent, but they also sought to win visitors over with their material abundance and theatrical flair. By mid-century, highly structured and selective displays predominated, in which the relative placement of objects contributed significantly to the making of meaning. While relative placement continued to be a key factor, contextualized displays became increasingly deconstructed over time to suggested loose associations among networks of objects that only increased their significative potential. The difference between these approaches amounts to the difference between imposing a dominant reading upon a group of objects and suggesting a number of possible connections among them. Perhaps one constant among all of the evocations discussed here, however, is the power of imaginative engagement: Barnard's Cloisters provided a setting in which visitors could stage their own fantasies of the Middle Ages, while at the other end of the timeline, the more diffuse, recent approaches to altar evocation encourage visitors to make their own connections among objects and to rely on their own movements through space to do so.

[56] To take just one foundational example, see A. Shalem, *Islam Christianized: Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West*, New York, 1999.

The different approaches to altar evocation may reflect curators' changing perspectives on the history of visitor engagement. After all, contextualizing displays provide visitors with a unique opportunity to experience the past phenomenologically: just by moving through a space and encountering objects, visitors take on certain roles, perhaps without even realizing it. Visitors historically have had the opportunity to experience displays as members of a congregation—this is evident, for example, in the Langon Chapel gallery displays. Now, Met visitors increasingly (and especially in the past 30 or so years) have been invited to enter the more restricted space of the church sanctuary and imaginatively take on a multiplicity of roles, from congregant to celebrant. This is the case in the Byzantine sanctuary, where visitors transgress a boundary by passing through the "templon", moving from the space of the congregation to that of the celebrant. This shift suggests a greater willingness to have visitors see themselves not just as participants in Christian ritual, but potentially as leaders. Whether or not this has occurred by conscious design, a clear parallel may be observed in museums' larger scale efforts, also over the past few decades, to empower museum visitors to engage actively with collections, to create content, and to share what they have learned.

Moving forward, a trend toward thematically conceived displays exploring broad concepts seems to be transforming exhibits of medieval art. For such projects, curators paint with broader strokes and sometimes make connections over wide gulfs of geography and chronology. This trend suggests the contextualized display, which relies to a certain extent on specificity, might wane in importance. However, it seems unlikely that this approach will ever fully go out of fashion, at least not at The Met—and certainly not at The Cloisters, which was made for such kinds of displays. It might be the case that curators find other ways of contextualizing. To that end, it is also reasonable to anticipate future displays incorporating contemporary art in order to stretch the boundaries of what is possible, building on successes such as the 2013 installation in The Cloisters' Fuentidueña Chapel gallery of Janet Cardiff's triumphant sound piece, *The Forty Part Motet*, or the Costume Institute's 2018 exhibition *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, which completely overtook the medieval displays at both Fifth Avenue and The Cloisters and turned altar spaces into the backdrops of sacramental tableaux. Such displays can powerfully evoke in different ways, stimulating sensory and emotional responses that might be difficult to achieve with historical objects alone.[57] Whichever form it takes, the contextualized presentation is likely to remain a cornerstone of medieval art display at The Met for a long time to come.

[57] I thank Francisco Prado-Vilar for raising this important point.