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Representing Spectacular Miracles

'It is outrageous. I thought that the Ashmolean Museum was about the promotion of art, not the promotion of superstition and bigotry.'

'It is wonderful. It brings ordinary life into the Museum. The images sit on people's hearts.'

These two comments were made in response to the exhibition which we recently curated at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, under the title, 'Spectacular Miracles'. The small exhibition — the first of its kind to be held in Britain — consisted of a group of photographs, taken by us, of paintings or statues believed to be capable of supernatural powers, from shrines in north-west Italy. The comments are indicative of what was to us a striking range of reactions, which highlighted the challenges of putting on an exhibition on this theme both in a secular museum and in a country whose culture still bears strong traces of a Protestant suspicion of images.

We had previously exhibited most of these photographs in Italy — in the medieval church of

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the Dominican convent of Santa Maria di Castello in Genoa, as part of the celebrations of the city's year as European Capital of Culture in 1994. The setting there — the very prominent space either side of the elaborate baroque high altar (which is no longer used) — had presented its own challenges, but the cultural context was still a Catholic one, even if many of the visitors were not necessarily practising believers.

When we were invited to devise a display for the Ashmolean, in a small narrow gallery space with no natural light, we thought hard about the visual demands, but also about the very different cultural expectations of the majority of visitors. Convinced (as we had been in Genoa) of the need to theatricalise the display of photographs, for the Ashmolean we designed a long enclosed rectangular box (10 m. long × 1 m. wide × 3 m. tall). Into this we cut openings of different shapes — mostly rectangular of different dimensions, but two oval — which were set at different heights. The photographs were then set back from the openings (recessed about 50 cm), and attached to hidden battens, so that they seemed to be floating in space. They were lit by bright internal lights, and the lighting in the room was dimmed, so that the impression was of a series of focused images, each one of which needed to be looked at individually. At the end of the display case where most visitors arrived, we placed a large back-lit transparency of one of our biggest and most spectacular images — originally a ship's prow; and at the other end the whole space was filled with photographs of *ex voto* painted miracle narratives which had been given to the shrines of the images represented in gratitude for prayers answered.

The idea of the display was in some sense to evoke the experience of visiting a shrine of a cult image.¹ Such images are characteristically the illuminated focal point in a dark church, surrounded by candles and other lights, and the devotee is encouraged to concentrate her or his attention on the image by this means. Prayer and hope combine with a dramatic setting to create the possibility that the carved or painted image will be perceived as a living presence. In front of such shrines there are always prayer cards, with a reproduction of the image on one side, and a prayer on the other. These are intended both to focus attention at the time, and also to be a souvenir to take home. Such reproductions carry the miraculous potency of the image into homes and workshops, offices and cars or ships. In order to echo this aspect of the cult shrine, we decided, rather than having a conventional printed catalogue, to print little cards reproducing all the images, which would be set out in little perspex boxes underneath each image, for people to pick

¹ On which see further [Garnett, Rosser 2003; [Garnett, Rosser 2004a]; [Garnett, Rosser 2004b]; [Garnett, Rosser 2007].

up at the time and also to take away with them. Instead of a prayer, on the reverse of each card was a miracle story and some account of the origin of the cult. We wanted people to regard each image as being part of a narrative devotional tradition, and hence to encourage visitors to the exhibition to read a story about the image as they looked at it.

We introduced the exhibition by drawing attention to the fact that the belief that a statue or painting can fly through the air, speak, weep, or produce miraculous cures is both an ancient phenomenon and a very contemporary one. This is by no means something limited to one religious culture, to backward or rural communities, or to an 'unenlightened' past. Our reason for focusing our research, of which the photographs represent one product, on the area in and around Genoa in Liguria, is to reinforce this fundamental point. From the Middle Ages to the present day, Genoa has been in the vanguard of modernity: the place where banking was invented in the medieval period; a sophisticated maritime republic which rivalled and outlasted Venice; one of the first parts of Italy to industrialise and to develop socialism; throughout its long history up to the present the hub of a global network extending at various times from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, from the Americas to Britain to Australia. From sanctuaries along the mountainous coast of Liguria, miraculous images look out over this dangerous part of the Mediterranean sea. Ligurian cult images have helped to shape the identity of migrant communities, just as they have done for the Italian cities, towns and neighbourhoods from which the migrants have travelled. Nineteenth-century sailors from Camogli, then an important port, took copies of the painting of the Madonna of the Little Wood, their miraculous image, when they travelled abroad. At Berdyansk in the Ukraine in 1858 there was a niche containing such an image, and also a painting of her, covered in the manner of a Russian icon, above a ship-chandlers' shop belonging to a family from Camogli.

Moments of individual and social crisis or natural disaster have triggered special appeals to miracle-working images: childbirth, illness or accidents; revolutions; cholera outbreaks; industrial disasters; unemployment; storms at sea. The recourse to miraculous images in times of war has spanned the centuries. But such images have always formed, and still form part of the daily life of believers: men in business suits and carrying briefcases come into the Cathedral of Chiavari to speak to the Madonna dell'Orto on their way to work; every house in a small town displays a copy of the local miraculous image; a prostitute in the old city of Genoa until recently kept flowers before the street shrine which was lit by her red light.

The images represented in this exhibition are Catholic, and predominantly of the Virgin Mary, although there were photographs of two crucifixes, and of one popular print of Jesus the Nazarene. The images are in different media, and date from a range of periods, from the early Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. The cults have been created and re-created at different points, although key periods for the proliferation of cults were the Counter-Reformation of the early seventeenth century, and the nineteenth century, which saw Catholic revival in the wake of the French Revolution and in response to the creation of the secular Italian state. Characteristic of nearly all these cults is their origin in popular lay culture, sometimes encouraged by particular local priests or religious orders. Most of the images represented began life outside a church — as a statue ‘found’ in the fork of a chestnut tree; as a fresco painted on a garden wall; as a printed domestic image of the Virgin and Child, whose lack of colour was said to be due to its origin in a supernatural vision; as the prow of a wrecked ship, salvaged by sailors who turned the statue into a cult object, took it into a church, and themselves conducted exorcisms before it. For the Church authorities, these cults always have the potential to be subversive. Because the believer can establish through his or her relationship to the image a direct and unmediated access to divine power, the authority of the Church is always unstable, and lay agency (most obviously in a case such as that of the sailors and the ship’s prow) can be unorthodox. Whilst the Church as a hierarchy has responded to the upsurge of enthusiasm for particular images by investigations, which have in some cases led to official sanction, even in the case of officially-sanctioned images, brought inside churches, and regulated there, the stories told about images and the relationships established with them remain unpredictable. Devotion is hard to control when a copy is believed to carry the same supernatural potency as the original.

The Church has also, at different periods, expressed concern about the form and material of cult images. Since the Council of Trent there has been a desire to prevent the veneration of holy statues made of friable material, which could too easily be burned or otherwise damaged; and a concurrent desire to ensure the aesthetic quality of such images. When the ship’s prow — venerated as the Madonna della Fortuna — was set up by the sailors in Genoa in 1636, the Church, at first deeply hostile, tried to claim that the image could not be of the Virgin Mary at all (it was suggested that it was in fact an image of the Queen of England). The doll-like statue of the Madonna of Acquisanta (whose cult also took off in the early seventeenth century) was at first attacked as being of coarse material. Many of these images — whether two- or three-dimensional — are not aesthetically fine, according to the canons of high

art (although there are some notable exceptions to this generalisation), but this is irrelevant to their religious power. The focus of our exhibition was not on the artistic qualities but on the vitality and popular power of such images.

The unstraightforward relationship of these images to the categories of what we in the west know as ‘art’ is clearly what alternately intrigued and appalled the visitors to our exhibition. The person who made the first comment cited at the beginning of this article was clearly entirely comfortable with the idea of looking at a painting of the Virgin Mary in the Ashmolean, safely neutralised from its religious context in a gold frame, with a museum label nearby to fix its artistic status. What affronted her was having her attention drawn to the religious power of analogous images. Her related assumption was that the act of putting on such an exhibition was intended to proselytise — to *‘promote superstition and bigotry’*. What her comment revealed was how unsettling the very idea of the religious power of images is, in a country whose culture is in many ways, although secularised, still Protestantised. One of the reviewers of our exhibition pointed out how influential Kantian aesthetics have been in shaping our expectations of the modern art gallery: the notion of disinterested aesthetic appreciation has had the effect of severing the aesthetic from the moral and spiritual. He liked the fact that our exhibition challenged such expectations by showing the images in such a way that viewers had to adjust their gaze, and sometimes crouch down, in order to see them: *‘To be forced to one’s knees in a space so redolent of cultured secularity is wonderfully subversive’* [Fraser 2005]. The other commentator cited at the beginning of this article, herself a Moslem, saw immediately what the point of the exhibition was, and engaged with the distinctiveness of the experiences which the images evoked. Her emphasis on the bringing of ordinary life into a museum was a striking one, which referred both to the ordinariness of the extraordinary in the religious culture to which the images belong, and to the drawing in of a wider range of visitors to the English museum. We had intended — through our theatrical conversation between text and image — to make vivid the mixture of the supernatural and the normal in the daily existence of those who believe(d) themselves to live under the gaze of these miraculous images. The depth of interest shown in the exhibition, at a local and national level, surprised and pleased us, and was itself indicative of a much wider current curiosity about this sort of phenomenon than the hostile critics cared to recognise. This is why they were so revealingly unnerved.

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Madonna della Fortuna, Church of S. Carlo, Genoa



Nineteenth-century ex voto in the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Monte, Genoa