The Art of Devotion. The Agency of Sculpture (Leuven, 7-8 Nov 22)

Leuven, M Leuven, Nov 7–08, 2022
Deadline: Jun 30, 2022

Marjan Debaene

9th Annual Ards Conference
The Art of Devotion. The Agency of Sculpture

The 9th ARDS Annual Colloquium, which promotes and celebrates new research in the field of medieval and renaissance sculpture, will focus on the agency of works of sculpture in the medieval and early modern periods. The 2018 ARDS conference 'The function of medieval sculpture' focused on the correlation between the function and the materiality of sculpture from the late gothic and early modern era, and only briefly touched upon the devotional aspect of religious sculpture. The 2020 conference 'The afterlife of medieval sculpture' also featured a few contributions touching upon the topic

As the past decade has seen a considerable amount of research centred on the agency of objects, during the 2022 ARDS Annual Conference, we wish to explore the subject more thoroughly in the context of sculpture, specifically.

Books such as The Saturated Sensorium (Laugerud, Jorgensen, & Skinnebach, 2015) and The Agency of Art Objects in Northern Europe, 1380-1520 (Ziemba, 2021) or Ornamenta Sacra. Late Medieval and Early Modern Liturgical Objects in a European Context (eds. Dekoninck, Claes & Baert, forthcoming 2022), for instance, cover a wide range of topics regarding the ways in which art objects activate the human beholder. Dictating cognitive perspective, modes of visual perception and experiences in space and scale, sometimes multi-sensory, thus stimulating specific behaviours and conditioning people and communities with the active power they contain. To understand the agency of medieval art we mustn't limit ourselves to a strictly art-historical methodology, and rather than look at these sculptures as works of art, consider them as functional objects within the visual and religious culture of their respective era's.

"…Assuming, as they did, that heaven exists and access to it is possible, how did medieval Christian worshippers understand earthly stuff (down to the lowliest rock or worm) to mediate between earth and heaven, representing or communicating each to the other? For to medieval Christians, God is Other…." [ ] "Thus my question is: What does it mean for something (whether crown or garment, icon or sculpture, miraculous occurrence or poetic image) to be "like" something else religiously? In this query, it will be clarifying to explore a little further the concept of "representation." For to "represent" can mean more than simply to "show"; it can mean to re-present or present anew or stand in for." (Carolyne Walker Bynum, Dissimilar Similitudes : Devotional Objects in Late

Medieval Europe, Zone Books, 2020)

Sculptural objects have always been venerated as religious agents of holiness, and in that aspect have been handled, moved, touched, smelled, and even kissed or licked! Objects are known to have been opened, closed, folded, wrapped, veiled, dressed, carried or driven around in processions. Many of these devotional practices are also documented in period written accounts. Altarpieces, for instance, could be closed and opened to reveal a narrative and meditative space for the beholder, tombs were sometimes veiled or covered with curtains. Some artefacts were made as containers for other objects of agency such as reliquaries, tabernacles, … Some were hung high, or placed specifically to mark or close off a space, such as choir screens and triumphal crosses, or even placed in niches, sometimes illuminated only by candlelight. Some objects required the beholder to move around it, others were designed specifically for travel, and some objects were travelled to, as the destination of a pilgrimage or journey. They triggered not only a physical pilgrimage, but rather a spiritual journey. The use of precious materials, triggering the senses, also contributed to the agency and underlying meaning of sculptural objects of devotion. From the smallest precious objects such as prayer nuts to the largest sculptural ensembles, their physical appearance always contributes to the experiences they engender as agents of devotion.

All this was done with the purpose of activating the body and mind of the beholder and creating a spiritual and meaningful experience. Even in non-religious contexts, such as sculptures made for a political or judiciary context, objects had a specific agency and were meant to make an impression on whoever was interacting with them.

Would you like to submit a paper for this conference?

Your proposal can be (art-)historical as well as anthropological, historiographical, technical in nature. Multidisciplinarity is encouraged. Case studies as well as papers providing a broader view and/or of a more reflective nature are welcomed. In the selection of papers, priority will be given to speakers presenting new research and contributions relevant to the specific conference theme. Conference papers will be published in the ARDS acta colloquia postprint series in collaboration with Brepols Publishers.

How to submit your proposal?
- Write an abstract in English in word or pdf; max. 500 words (excl. authors name(s) and contact details). Include a short bio of 150 words max.
- Include a short CV
- E-mail to Marjan Debaene via info(a)ards.be

Practical information
- Call for papers deadline: 30.06.22
- Successful applicants will receive a notification by 31.08.22
- The conference and presentations will be in English.
- The lectures, illustrated by PowerPoint slideshow, should be no longer than 20 minutes.
- Each conference session will be followed by a Q&A with the speakers.
- The organizers cannot contribute towards transport and/or accommodation costs of speakers or attendees.

Programme
The conference will take place at M Leuven* and will combine selected paper presentations with keynote speakers and in situ visits to the current exhibitions ‘Moved’ and ‘Between heaven and earth. Experience Bouts’ at M Leuven and Saint Peters Church.

The conference is followed by a Codart Focus event on November 9th which puts the exhibition Alabaster in the spotlight with two keynote lectures and an exclusive visit to the Alabaster exhibition with the curators. The final program (incl. Codart Focus) will be communicated in September 2022.

Questions or more information? Please contact Marjan Debaene via info@ards.be

*Disclaimer: Should new travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic arise, the 2022 ARDS Annual Conference will be held online via webinar presentations.

Reference:
CFP: The Art of Devotion. The Agency of Sculpture (Leuven, 7-8 Nov 22). In: ArtHist.net, May 6, 2022 (accessed Nov 17, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/36620>.