

MMD Journal, March 2027: Exhibiting the Sacred

Deadline: Jun 1, 2026

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Exhibiting the Sacred: Objects, Spaces, and Practices between Museums and Territory.

In contemporary society, sacred spaces and objects are increasingly subject to processes of musealization, heritagization, and cultural reinterpretation that redefine their status, meanings, and modes of engagement. Museums and places of worship appear, at least at the institutional level, as distinct domains governed by different aims, languages, and practices: on the one hand, the secular and scientific sphere of the museum; on the other, the religious and devotional sphere of sacred space. Nevertheless, numerous points of contact and overlap invite a critical examination of the ways in which the sacred is selected, preserved, exhibited, and made accessible to diverse and plural audiences.

Places of worship have long functioned as sites for the collection, preservation, and display of objects, images, and architecture, according to logics that show significant affinities with those of the museum institution. At the same time, a substantial portion of museum collections consists of artifacts originally connected to ritual, liturgical, or devotional practices, deriving not only from Christian contexts but also from extra-European cultural spheres or from religions that are no longer practiced. The transfer of a religious object into the museum context entails a profound transformation of meaning: its original cultic function is suspended or neutralized, and the object is embedded within new historical, artistic, anthropological, or aesthetic narratives that reshape audience perception.

The relevance of distributed heritage also emerges, encompassing not only major monumental complexes, abbeys, and Sacred Mountains, but also intangible heritage – rituals, devotional practices, liturgical music – and the various ways in which places of worship are used as venues for concerts, exhibitions, meetings, and other cultural activities. The material dimension, consisting of artifacts, architecture, liturgical furnishings, and decorative systems, and the intangible dimension, related to music, rites, and performative practices, together contribute to the formation of cultural landscapes. These landscapes serve as repositories of collective memory and as testimonies to the social life of the communities that inhabit them in the present, as well as expressions of shared cultural identity that remain meaningful even beyond explicitly religious frameworks.

Over the past decades, museological scholarship has examined these processes, showing that the musealization of the sacred does not merely entail acts of protection or conservation, but rather produces a renegotiation of the values attributed to objects and spaces. At the same time, religious heritage distributed across territories continues to be experienced in heterogeneous

ways, in which liturgical and devotional needs coexist with secular practices linked to cultural interpretation and tourism. The coexistence of multiple uses raises critical issues related to interpretation, mediation, visitor management, and audience definition. From this perspective, the digital turn and the adoption of new technologies represent a significant area of inquiry, not only in terms of innovation, but also with regard to their broader cultural and communicative implications.

In light of these considerations, there is a clear need for a systematic reflection on sacred spaces and objects understood as sites of intersection between religious practices, museological strategies, and processes of heritagization. In particular, the question remains open as to how these spaces and objects continue to generate cultural and social meanings in the present once they are placed in museum contexts, musealized in situ, or integrated into territorial heritage networks, and how museum and religious institutions address the complexity arising from the plurality of perspectives, expectations, and modes of engagement.

The monographic dossier of the MMD issue aims to foster scholarly dialogue on the processes of musealization and heritagization of the sacred, with particular attention to the interpretive, exhibition, and experiential issues they raise. The goal is to collect contributions that critically analyze the role of sacred spaces and objects as cultural heritage, highlighting the tensions between original function and newly assigned meanings, between religious dimensions and secular contexts, and offering theoretical approaches and case studies that contribute to rethinking practices of conservation, interpretation, and access from the perspectives of inclusion, accessibility, and sustainability.

Contributions may address, though not exclusively, the following themes:

- Processes of musealization and heritagization of sacred spaces and objects in museum contexts and in situ settings.
- Transformations in the meanings of religious objects as they move from cultic use to museum conservation and display.
- Sacred spaces as sites of exhibition and cultural mediation: churches, sanctuaries, religious complexes, and places of worship that are still in use or deconsecrated.
- Museums of sacred art, ecclesiastical museums, and collections of religious objects within secular museum contexts.
- Intangible dimensions of heritage related to the sacred: rituals, devotional practices, music, and performance.
- Curatorial and narrative strategies for interpreting the sacred in museum and territorial contexts.
- Display practices and mediation tools in sacred and museum environments.
- The role of digital technologies in the documentation, interpretation, and valorization of religious heritage.
- Engagement with sacred heritage by plural and non-homogeneous audiences, between religious experience and secular approaches.
- Issues of accessibility, inclusion, and sustainability in the management and interpretation of sacred spaces and objects.

Contributions should be submitted as an abstract (maximum 3,000 characters, including spaces) or as a full article in English, French, or Italian, together with a short author biography (maximum

1,000 characters, including spaces), to the editorial team (mmdjournal@unibo.it) and to the guest editor Alessandro Paolo Lena (alessandropaolo.len2@unibo.it) by June 1, 2026.

Timeline

Abstract submission deadline: June 1, 2026

Notification of acceptance: June 30, 2026

Submission of the full article (including images): October 30, 2026

Reviewers' reports returned to authors for revision: December 15, 2026

Submission of the final text: January 15, 2027

Publication of the issue: March 2027

MMD – Museum, Materials and Discussions. Journal of Museum Studies is an open-access academic journal in English, French, and Italian, devoted to museology, museography, cultural heritage as well as research on audiences and fruition with an international outlook, addressing both the life of museum institutions and collections, and the latest challenges they face in their broad cultural and social dimension.

The journal is recognized by ANVUR (Italian National Agency for Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes) for disciplinary Area 8 (Civil engineering and architecture) and 10 (Antiquities, philology, literary studies, art history).

Read more about MMD. Museum Materials Discussions. Journal of Museum Studies: <https://mmdjournal.unibo.it/>

Reference:

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