

"Objects of Devotion" is curated by Kristina Van Dyke, curator for collections and research at the Menil Collection.

This exhibition is generously supported by Michael Zilkha and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Gallery Talk

"Objects of Devotion"

Kristina Van Dyke and Linda Neagley

Tuesday, October 12, 7:30 p.m.

Exhibition curator Kristina Van Dyke will be joined by Linda Neagley, associate professor and director of graduate studies for the Art History Department at Rice University, to discuss the relations between art and religious practice.

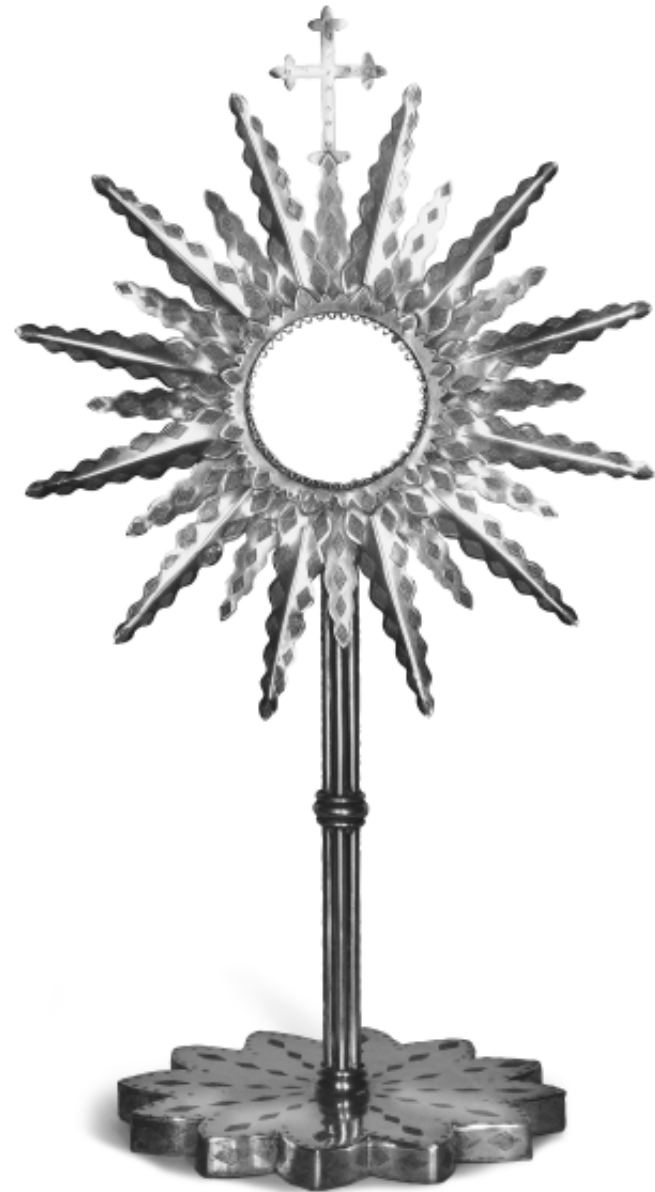
Cover: Monstrance, 1942, designed by Dominique de Menil and executed by a local silver-smith, Trinidad. Silver, 19 x 10³/₈ x 7¹/₂ inches. The Menil Collection, Houston

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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Objects of Devotion

THE MENIL COLLECTION

August 13–October 31, 2010

Drawing on various aspects of the Menil's permanent collection, "Objects of Devotion" explores how art has supported religious practice in different times and places. Items in the exhibition range from small-scale works of a personal nature, such as Byzantine pilgrim ampullae (flasks), to architectural sculpture, including a thirteenth-century figure from a Japanese Shinto shrine. The juxtaposition of multiple traditions allows one to consider the diverse ways objects are used to establish, reinforce, and refine spiritual beliefs. While each article in this exhibition served as an intermediary between believer and divine, the proximity they permitted varies greatly.

In their small scale, objects like the late sixteenth-century European rosary produced an intimate and tactile connection to the unseen, putting the divine within reach of the believer. The Byzantine censer also brought the spiritual domain close to a congregant, enveloping his or her body with incense and invading the senses. Similar ideas are at work in the Mayan vessel, which was most likely used during chocolate drinking rituals. In these last two cases, the artwork became the vehicle for delivering a spiritual presence to the believer's body; and, as with the Eucharist, this body could itself be transformed into a portal for spiritual forces. The sixteenth-century Roman ciborium on display would have contained a cushion on which a consecrated host would rest. Its design is loosely based on the dome of Saint Peter's Basilica and refers to the Chiesa del Gesù, the mother church of the Jesuit order in Rome. Similarly, a Maori chief's feather box from New Zealand held potent conductors of his power, such as *huia* feathers and jade ornaments worn by the owner and his ancestors, and access was limited to him alone. The box is decorated with designs referencing *mananaia*, the tattoos and totems of ancestors with whom the living would seek to communicate. These covered containers concentrate the spiritual energy of their contents, isolating and increasing the objects' potential power. The very fact that the contents are hidden within such ornate and private vessels heightens the sense of mystery about them and speaks to their ability to connect a devotee with other dimensions.

While these objects reduce the gap between believers and divine forces, others function as reminders of the great distance between the two. A pair of late thirteenth-century Flemish or Rhenish figures from a group of ecclesiastical sculptures would have been placed in an architectural setting. Whether elevated in a wall niche or placed on par with the viewer, the sculptures' large scale—particularly as an ensemble—would force the viewer to stand back, reinforcing the idea that the believer must commit to his or her religious practice in order to achieve greater proximity. This concept is modeled by the ensemble itself, which, in its complete form, would portray the crucifixion of Christ with faithful disciples and saints to his left and right—positions only achieved through lives



Vessel
Mayan, 400–900 AD
Painted terracotta
10 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches
The Menil Collection, Houston
Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

of devotion. An artwork's ability to provide examples for believers' behavior is also evidenced in the sixteenth-century Flemish portrait of a female donor, forever frozen in an act of prayerful devotion. Likely part of a larger altarpiece, this work's existence is a tribute to and manifestation of the donor's belief. The same can be said of any item in this exhibition, including a pair of monstrosities designed by Dominique de Menil in Trinidad in 1942 when she and her husband were living in Venezuela.

That works of art in the exhibition from as far back as the thirteenth century BC have survived into the present is evidence of a collective faith in their continuing relevance. John and Dominique de Menil were committed to the idea that objects have lives and are elastic in their ability to answer the demands placed on them over time. While the significance of the Dogon maternity sculpture from Mali, which most likely acted as a stand-in for the petitioner, has changed, the object still holds meaning for the modern viewer. It can be appreciated on a purely aesthetic level, as a source of inspiration, or even as a vehicle of transcendence, albeit in a very different context. As such, this ensemble of artworks is a testament to the power of objects and to the conviction that art can speak to anyone—regardless of time, place, or beliefs.

Kristina Van Dyke, Curator for Collections and Research