

Sacred Ritual or Profane 'Event' Culture?

How can ritual objects and Performances in Museums be Shown with Integrity?¹

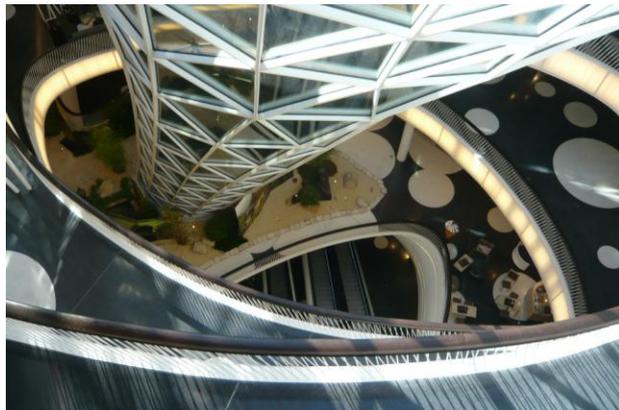
Dr. Anette Rein, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Figure 1: The Fascade of MyZeil²



Since February 2009, we have a new shopping mall in Frankfurt am Main. It is called MyZeil. Because of its special architecture (constructed by the Roman architect Massimiliano Fuksas) it is already famous and a well accepted shopping mall in the city.

Figures 2, 3: Inside of the Shopping Mall³



¹ This is the revised form of my paper presented at the ICME Conference in Shanghai on the 9th of November 2010. ar_welten@yahoo.de

² <http://www.myzeil.de/> Zugriff 14.10.2010.

³ Photographs by Rein Oktober 2010.

On six floors one finds shops with a range of goods from smart phones, cosmetics, fashion and on the top there is a fitness center.

From the myzeil-magazin⁴ we learn, that the management of the center presents a seasonal changing decoration in the first floor. Under the title: “Es grünt so grün”, a shortened quote from the musical by “My fair lady”⁵ – the management announces the creation of an interesting contrast to the spectacular construction of the glass roof.⁶

Figure 3: The main Entrance of the Mall with the *Torii*⁷



The topic of the seasonal decoration from the 1st of October until the 13th of November 2010, was called “Im Zeichen des Buddha” (“In the sign of Buddha”). While approaching from the pedestrian MyZeil the entrance, you found the motto on the upper cross beam of

⁴ Myzeil-magazin 1/2010, p. 10.

⁵ Full quote „Es grünt so grün wenn Spaniens Blüten blühen“ Wolfgang J. Reus, (1959–2006).

http://www.aphorismen.de/display_aphorismen.php?xanariolD=a23c4092f78097160645156044374c26 quoted 14.10.2010.

⁶ „Die saisonale Dekoration im Erdgeschoss von MyZeil bildet einen spannenden Kontrast zur spektakulären Dachkonstruktion des Star-Architekten Massimiliano Fuksas. Bänke und andere Sitzgelegenheiten laden zu einer oder mehreren Pausen ein.“ myzeil-magazin 2010:10.

⁷⁷ Photograph by Rein October 2010.

the *torii*⁸, which was made of red tapes, imitating the Japanese Entrance of a Shinto Shrine⁹. A *torii* usually marks the border between the sacred world of the shrine and the secular world outside.

There were two posters with the announcement of the Buddha exhibition on the right and on the left side of the *torii*. Walking through the *torii*, the visitor was confronted with the first Buddha on the left side, positioned under an escalator.

Figure 4¹⁰



It was one out of 39 different items, being arranged on both sides of the escalators and in the middle space of the first floor – following the mandates of the architecture of the shopping center – and on the second floor one found the biggest Buddha in front of a picture of a Japanese tea house.

⁸ "Torii" literally meaning "where the birds reside" <http://www.wa-pedia.com/glossary/torii.shtml> (consulted 14.10.2010). See also: <http://www.nihonbunka.com/shinto/blog/archives/000051.html> (consulted 15.10.2010).

⁹ <http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2056.html> (quoted 14.10.2010) Shinto ("the way of the gods") is the indigenous faith of the Japanese people. It remains Japan's major religion alongside Buddhism. "Shinto gods" are called *kami*. They are sacred spirits which take the form of things and concepts important to life, such as wind, rain, mountains, trees, rivers and fertility. After World War II, Shinto and the state were separated.

¹⁰ Photograph by Rein October 2010.

Figures 5, 6¹¹



While walking alongside the installation one recognized the arrangement of a Japanese garden with all its typical accessories: stones, gravels, plants of different sizes, a picture of a teahouse, a small lake and a bridge.

Figures 7, 8¹²



Within this garden one could find the following sculptures :

- 25 Buddha sculptures (16 Mandalay Buddha from Burma / Myanmar [19. century], 6 from Thailand Ayuthaya [1350-1767; 13th-15th century], 2 Buddha from Japan [14th century], 1 Amitabha Buddha from China [1]),
- 3 low reliefs from Thailand Ayuthaya (1350-1767),
- 6 masks Mandalay Burma / Myanmar (19th century)¹³,
- 3 Dewis from Thailand,
- 1 metal-gong.

Three labels in front of the sculptures gave different information to the visitor.

¹¹ Photographs by Rein October 2010.

¹² Photographs by Rein October 2010.

¹³ As the scientific curator from the Buddha Museum in Traben-Trarbach told me, these objects are not older than about 30 years. In his museum they do not collect or show antique objects, but they show different types of Buddhist representations from all over the world. And according to him the different motives of the schools remained over the centuries the same ones. For him these figures are authentic ones. Interview with Dr. Rettig October 2010.

Figures 9, 10: Different labels¹⁴



The biggest one gave some data about each sculpture. A smaller one, which advised the visitors not to step on the ground, was completely ignored by the visitors. I have seen many of them stepping into the garden to get very close to Buddhas for a picture.

Figure 11: Taking pictures¹⁵



¹⁴ Photographs by Rein October 2010.

¹⁵ Photograph by Rein October 2010.

The third label made obvious that the exhibition was a cooperation between the MyZeil with the German Buddha Museum in Traben-Trarbach¹⁶, a little town close to the river Mosel. As a privately financed museum, they need to have more visitors and the exhibition in the shopping center seemed to be an opportunity for a public relation campaign for them. As I was told by the scientific curator of the museum¹⁷ and the manager of the MyZeil¹⁸, the background of the installation had not a scientific base. The cooperation was arranged between the director of the museum and the marketing manager of the center.

It was an architect who used the “cultural material” to construct this ensemble having a fragmented, hybrid character. He created a mixture of Shintoism, Buddhism and sculptures of different countries and traditions, which one would never find together neither in a Zen garden nor in a Japanese Buddhist temple garden¹⁹.

This construction with a religious look-and-feel was possible, because – as the manager told me – the shopping center feels neither an obligation nor a responsibility to participate in any cultural education program. They just want to entertain the people with an eye-catching decoration. “The people can do what they want with the exhibition.” The content would be user-defined, as the manager told me. And when discussions would rise up about ethical aspects or about presenting items in such a religious contradictory way – “so much the better”!

While observing the people walking in the center, I found different reactions. Visitors who told me about being shocked of the way of presentation of sculptures with a clear religious impetus situated under escalators, and those reactions of people just enjoying the beauty of the sculptures. When I tried to inform the latter about the missing scientific background and about the hybrid mishmash character of the installation – they just did not want to know about it.²⁰ As the manager told me – perhaps just 10% of the people would be interested in the religious background together with a traditional authenticity of the presentation – for the rest this way would be just the best.

But, in this presentation was an institution with its own artifacts involved and which calls itself a museum. At this point I would like to ask some questions:

- What is a religious object?
- Are there prescribed places where religious items can be publicly shown?
- Do religious objects need a special treatment when they are presented publicly compared to other items?

¹⁶ www.buddha-museum.de

¹⁷ Interview with Dr. Rettig (Japanologist and Sinologist), October 2010.

¹⁸ Interview with Mr. Kirbach (Management of MyZeil), October 2010.

¹⁹ Interview with Prof. Annette Schad-Seifert (Japanologist), 15.10.2010.

²⁰ I did not make a systematic interview research, I just asked people whom I know personally and who had visited this show.

What is a religious object?

As the anthropologist Karl-Heinz Kohl²¹ points out, everything in this world can be selected by people to become a religious or sacred object. This happens independently of its material (like metals or stones; like human material [bones, skulls], like special places in the landscape or plants [trees] or like exotic things coming from another culture and being centuries old [coins, porcelain, *ikat* textiles]).

Seemingly independent from their material, the sacred things have other aspects in common which qualify them to be adored. These aspects are:

- The intense social awareness concentrated on these items; representing godly spiritual energy. Sacred items are commonly respected.
- Sacred objects are stored in special places.
- Their treatment is combined with special taboos which separate them from the ordinary world. They are used and shown to the public only during special ritual times, in special places and usually to a selected group of people.
- Many times they represent ancestors of individuals or of a community.
- Their value as a commodity cannot be expressed – sacred objects exist outside of an economic circulation. They are not for sale.
- Sometimes they change their owner – then however, usually through a violent robbery (e.g. spoils of war).
- Another characteristic is the special story explaining, when and why an ordinary object became a sacred item. With this story a community or an individual owner remembers extraordinary events which happened to individuals or to groups and which are experienced by them as an epiphany of spiritual beings (gods, resp. holiness).

The resemblance between the treatment of traditional sacred objects with artifacts collected in museums are, according to Kohl²², amazing. After having arrived in a museum the items pass several steps during the professional treatment which can be compared with the rites of passage²³. They are taken out of their original context for being inventoried and at the same moment they are detracted from the economic exchange cycle. Being part of the museum's collection they cannot circulate on the free market again in a legally way – robbery excluded.

²¹ Kohl 2004. „Jedes Ding kann Machtträger sein“ Gerardus van der Leeuw 1970 19-27 in Bräunlein 2004:7.

²² Kohl 2004: 32f.

²³ See Rein 2010.

Figures 12, 13: Suzhou Museum in Suzhou (China), “Please be advised: Walk slowly, speak softly”²⁴



The taboo, which separates traditionally sacred objects from ordinary life, means translated into the museum’s world – do not touch it! Rules of restriction are typical for the public spheres in a museum and the visits depend on special opening hours. According to the scientist for Religious Studies, Peter Bräunlein, the habitus of a family visiting a museum on a Sunday is very similar to a visit in a church: Their way of walking is paced, their voices are low and their atmosphere is devout.²⁵ “Museumgoers [...] bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity”²⁶ as the Art Historian Carol Duncan states it.

The museum’s curators can be compared with the ritual specialists – they are the new masters of the museum’s objects and they decide about content, time and place for the next public presentation.²⁷ And, like the traditional sacred objects, the museums artifacts have their special stories.

It is still popular to give museums – and especially art museums – the etiquette of being the follower of the churches or of religious institutions, which in the succession of the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century lost their dominant position in society. Museums inherited not only most of the sculptural property of the religious institutions²⁸ but also in

²⁴ Left side: “Wood case for the Pearl Piilar of the Buddhist shrine, painted with four Devarajas (Heavenly Guardians) (Reproduction). Northern Song Dynastie (960-1127)”. Quoted from the label in the exhibition. Right side: “Pearl shrine for Buddhist relics, Song”. Quoted from the catalogue Suzhou Museum 2007:76. Photographs by Rein 04.10.2010.

²⁵ Bräunlein 2004:21.

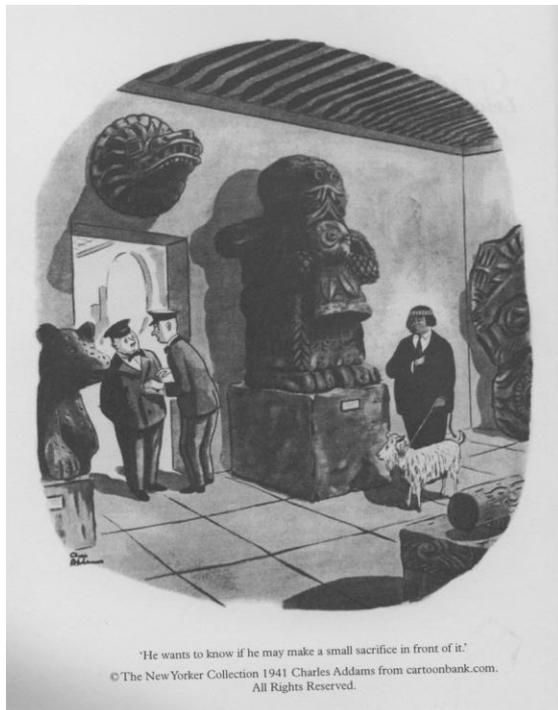
²⁶ Duncan 1994:281.

²⁷ Interestingly there are two big differences in the relationship between objects in temple areas or churches and objects in museums. Whereas sacred objects were extremely important for the status of a church, a museum gives the object a higher value while being accepted as part of the collection or of an exhibition. Kohl 2004:33.

²⁸ Until today we find many items in museums which were shown in earlier times in churches, temples and monasteries – to vary from sculptures of the Holy Mary to curiositas like special relics, huge eggs and bones

the new museum's buildings many aspects of former temples and holy architectural designs were integrated. And, according to the Professor for Aesthetics Bazon Brock, museums are exquisite places for societal rituals which cannot happen in other places.²⁹

Figure 14: "He wants to know if he may make a small offering in front of it?"³⁰



Whereas in the late 18th century the reception of art was an act of education experience, it seems that with the iconoclasm and the move of the religious sculptures into the secular, civic museums, the romantic spirit of that time was longing for more intensive, emotional adventures. Consequently, the experience of an "aesthetical transference and the celebration of the artist's genius"³¹ became a museological program.³² What the Enlightenment tried to hinder, the Romance in the European 19th century (with Friedrich Schleiermacher 1799 as one of the main protagonists) introduced successfully an own way of body language³³ and special ways of perception in museum areas. People were looking for a sense of immersion, for being emotionally moved and for a general elevation.³⁴

from a former monocheros. Churches were museums "*avant la lettre*" (Offe 2004:120) – a combination of the house of the Christian god showing at the same time the varieties of God's creations.

²⁹ Brock 1990:51.

³⁰ Taken from Crispin Paine 2000: Backside of the cover.

³¹ Klotz 2000:54, quoted in Bräunlein 2004:21.

³² Bräunlein 2004:21.

³³ As mentioned before.

³⁴ "Eine nicht vom Willen bestimmte und zweckfreie Anschauung öffnet den Weg zu einer Selbstvergessenheit, die die Erfahrung ästhetischer Transzendenz überhaupt erst ins Spiel gebracht hat und letztlich die Wahrnehmung der 'reinen Form' als Rezeptionsweise der Moderne Geltung verschafft" (Klotz 2000:54, quoted in Bräunlein 2004:21).

In conclusion: The romantically motivated mysticism of the members of the educated bourgeoisie not only postulated a severe discipline of body and senses, but it offers from that time on the experience of the arts as a way to salvation. The new places where this should happen were and still are the new, enormous museum buildings which symbolize the special programs “but (not) for everybody”.

At this point I would like to keep in mind that a museum is not a religious institution but a civic one!

Figure 15: Sculptures in the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, Frankfurt am Main³⁵



Today, “religion” is shown in different museums: in art museums – where we find artifacts as “religious art”, in cultural historical museums – where the items are presented as being “part of cultures and traditions”, and in Religion Museums (like in Glasgow or in Taiwan³⁶) where they mainly present aspects of the so called monotheism religions.

³⁵ <http://www.liebieghaus.de/lh/index.php?StoryID=212> (consulted 27.10.2010).

³⁶ Only recently there are new religious museums like the “World Religions Museum” in Taipeh and that of St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and art” in Glasgow (Kamel 2008:4).

Figures 16, 17³⁷ Left: Shaman Altar in „Aus mythischen Zeiten. 300 Jahre Schamanismus in Sibirien“, Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt am Main (MDW, 13.10.2003-29.02.2004); Right: Tanzmaske eines Geisterboten mit Lippenschmuck Eskimo in „Anders zur Welt kommen. Das Humboldt-Forum im Schloss. Ein Werkstattblick“, Altes Museum, Museumsinsel Berlin (09.07.2009-17.01.2010)



At this point we have to keep in mind that we find different ways of presentations of religions in museums: we have sacred objects in a museum's collection or in an exhibition and we have the live performances of individual ritual specialists or of groups of people demonstrating / performing their ritual duties in public.

In the following, I will neither discuss the different aspects of the collecting histories of sacred objects nor the complexity of traditional taboos and the question about "who owns traditional culture?".

I concentrate on the live performances of ritual practices and the individual part of each participant in such an event.

Religious performances within the secular place museum

When I started to write this paper, I was surprised to find out how many initiatives exist, combining religious aspects with the non-religious institution – museum. E. g. in 1983 the theologian and curator Udo Liebelt created (according to him) the first Christian worship in German art museums and in the following years this program became very successful.³⁸ While talking³⁹ about the differences between a Christian devotion with an opening ceremony of an exhibition in a museum it became clear that the religious elements of a common prayer and the common singing in the museum are missing in a secular grand opening⁴⁰.

³⁷ Left: Photograph by Beckers 2004; Right: Photograph by Rein October 2009.

³⁸ Since years we have very close cooperations between representatives from the catholic as well as from the protestant church and different museums in Frankfurt am Main.

³⁹ Interview Udo Liebelt 17.10.2010.

⁴⁰ But several other elements of presenting are very similar: speeches, a group of people listening, music and afterwards a common meal (=snacks).

Figures 18,19: Aus mythischen Zeiten. 300 Jahre Schamanismus in Sibirien (MDW, 13.10.2003-29.02.2004)⁴¹



In art museums as well as in ethnographic museums, ritual specialists are invited to present their religious practice during an opening ceremony or as part of the usual museum's program.⁴² The acting religious specialists – Christians or people from different worldviews / religions – they seem to be very content to present their religious life practices in public. Furthermore, you can see from the above figures (18, 19) of the Shaman from Siberia which depicts her keen awareness about her own important role participation in the opening ceremony. In this way the Shaman was able to greet the sacred objects of her ancestors and to bless them in the museum's exhibition. She was very well prepared for this ceremony and brought her ritual items with her – without the knowledge nor permission of the museum's staff. It was the decision of the Shaman herself to conduct this blessing ritual. It was not part of the officially announced program of the museum to offer a blessing ceremony as an event.⁴³

The museum as a place of communication, has to actively mediate the aesthetical as well as the context related understanding of the visitors on the one hand and on the other hand, the museum has to include the visitors with their own perception of meaning and knowledge.

The curators can show the paths of conceptualization of items exhibited as being either "profane", "sacred" or "authentic". They can mediate that values such as authenticity, are always connected with social and material values and with the imagination that there exists

⁴¹ Photograph by MDW.

⁴² Today it seems that „anything goes“. Churches are used as exhibition halls – but they practice also the Christian liturgy regularly (e.g. Museum Schnüttgen in Cologne). In art museum „museum kunst palast“ in Düsseldorf an exhibition on altars „Altäre – Kunst zum Niederknien“ was presented from the 02.09.2001 - 06.01.2002. They showed 68 contemporary altars from 34 different countries. In the official text by the museum the altars were called „Künstleraltäre“ (altars made by artists); in the exhibition they were publicly consecrated by ritual specialists. The museum explained these religious acts as a way of preserving some of the context. During the time of the exhibition the altars could be used by a community. <http://www.museum-kunstpalast.de/UNI128816335107460/doc306A> (consulted 27.10.2010).

⁴³ This ceremony happened during the opening ceremony on the 13th of October in 2003. At that time I was the director of the Museum der Weltkulturen in Frankfurt am Main. I tried to hinder that this religious ceremony could take place – in vain, the Shaman went her way without asking permission.

a universal truth.⁴⁴ However the curator's influence remains limited. What is seen as "sacred" or as "profane" remains in the hands of the general public. This becomes clearly obvious by the fact that some people ignore the secular character of a museum go there to pray or to practice a devotion in front of art pieces or ethnographic items.⁴⁵

The universal message of a museum as a secular institution should be to offer people education, enlightenment and the freedom to experience their own feelings and assessments without the institutional involvement in religious practices.

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⁴⁴ Kamel 2004:106f.

⁴⁵ This happened also in our Shaman exhibition, where a lady regularly came to visit the exhibition where she mediated in front of the ritual objects. I was told this story from the cashier, who at one point felt empathy with the lady and gave her free entrance thereafter.

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