

Art and prayer

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [August 6, 2014](#) issue



Madonna, by Naddo Ceccarelli, 1347

I'm writing this on an airplane returning from a short trip during which my husband and I visited a Benedictine abbey in northern Scotland and spent time in Oxford with a close friend who is mortally ill. Prayer comes easily in such circumstances; but if St. Paul is right, prayer should be possible in all circumstances.

Just before catching the bus to leave Oxford, we spent a few hours at the Ashmolean Museum, where we saw an exquisite little display of late Italian Gothic art, featuring a *Virgin and Child* by Naddo Ceccarelli and twin roundels of the *Angel and Virgin of the Annunciation* from the studio of Andrea Orcagna. The accompanying label noted that such objects were originally intended for personal use: "Small devotional images were widely used in the home. They were an aid to private prayer. Their precious materials and refined techniques reflected the glory of God." Something about this description gives me pause—though the language is appropriate for a

historical exhibit, I wonder how many museumgoers take away the impression that Christian image veneration is essentially a thing of the past. Would it have been subversive of me to pray discreetly before these holy images?

On another floor, a gallery of Indian sculptures from AD 600–1900 is interpreted by a maxim from the sixth-century *Vishnudharmottara Purana*: “The divinity draws near willingly if images are beautiful.” Here amid seated and standing Buddhas and bodhisattvas, wrathful and benign forms of Shiva, noble Jain ascetics, and a cavorting Ganesh, the accompanying notes do manage to link the present to the past: “Images like these remain in worship today throughout India, as well as in the Himalayan region and Southeast Asia, whose cultures were transformed by the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism.” Would it be out of place in a gallery of late Italian Gothic art to mention the continuing relevance for Christian prayer of images like those by Ceccarelli and Orcagna?

Later in the week we visited a church that had a statue of St. Anthony of Padua which was defaced from top to bottom with graffiti, both votive and romantic. Though one could wish for something approaching museum-level conservation, the statue had a remarkable living quality. It had suffered visibly, and perhaps vicariously, as sacred art must often do when left to its native habitat—but the divinity draws near *most* willingly, I suspect, if beautiful images are placed in active service.

On the flight back I watched the only film on offer—*The Monuments Men*, George Clooney’s tribute to the men and women of the wartime Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program, who found and restored thousands of works of art looted by the Nazis for Hitler’s projected museum or private collections. Having read the reviews, I didn’t have high hopes for the film; nonetheless, it was impressive to see the lead characters venturing into salt mines, in a kind of harrowing of hell, and risking their lives under enemy fire to rescue works like the Ghent altarpiece and Michelangelo’s *Madonna and Child* of Bruges. Was it worth dying for? Yes, the George Clooney character says, because works of art are the bearers of our civilization’s deepest hopes and highest achievements. But there is more to it than a celebration of creativity, as the film itself suggests; the characters are shown in awe, and even in prayer, before works of art that had once lived in churches and homes where they were actively venerated.

While airborne I also listened to an episode of *In Our Time*, the BBC Radio 4 talk show hosted by veteran broadcaster Melvyn Bragg. Bragg is a polymath; his interest in subjects as varied as photosynthesis, Druids, and the Sino-Japanese War, his affability on air, and his ability to elicit scintillating conversation from scientists and scholars make him one of our best curators of general culture. In the episode I listened to, Bragg was discussing with historian of philosophy Anthony Kenny the bitter controversy over John Wyclif's interpretation of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. "Could we just spend one more moment on this?" Bragg asked—"because I think it's absolutely fascinating and key, and quite hard to grasp nowadays." But if it is quite hard to grasp nowadays, that is because it was always hard to grasp. We are neither so stupid nor so technologically advanced as to be unable to share in the religious concerns of our ancestors—pace Rudolf Bultmann, who once said (in a paroxysm of what C. S. Lewis would call chronological snobbery) that "we cannot use electric lights and radios" and at the same time believe in the miracles of the New Testament.

We owe thanks to the Monuments Men and curators of our culture for rescuing and preserving treasures that would otherwise have vanished from view. But what of the civilization that produced these great works? Are we heading for a future in which our sacred objects will survive essentially as museum pieces? We need not only to preserve the past but also to reanimate it, to let it inform our prayer and thought, and thus to reanimate ourselves by recovering what is good and beautiful in our tradition.