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The Significance and Validity of Domestic Altar Spaces

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Senior Honors Project

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements
of the Westover Honors College

Westover Honors College

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Introduction

Sacred spaces across different cultures and religions are important to establishing and maintaining a connection with the divine. Institutionally recognized sacred spaces offer a sense of unity and purpose. Local public spaces offer a sense of connection and community. Domestic home spaces offer a sense of intimacy and belonging. Having a sacred space within the home can be integral to maintaining a spiritual or meditative practice, as well as offer a momentary escape from the outside world. Home altars are an important type of sacred space where everyday objects and spaces are transformed into sacred objects and spaces. It is within even the humblest of home altar or domestic sacred space that spiritual practices are performed that are just as valid, impactful, and important as the altars within grand cathedrals occur.

Ideally sacred spaces are places that hold religious or spiritual importance; these places may be physical as well as mental and are often used to meditate or commune with the divine. I will be focusing on physical sacred space within the home namely the home altar. Home altars refer to a physical place within the home that is dedicated to a religious or spiritual practice. A home altar is a place within the home used for spiritual and religious work, communication, meditation, and prayer. A home altar is a designated space useful for creating a spiritual center to the home and can vary greatly from one home to another. This space may be adorned with spiritual or religious objects, images of passed loved ones, as well as various other items. For the purpose of analysis, objects refer to physical items used to facilitate connection with the divine. These items are spirited or imbued with supernatural powers. These are items which are seen as signifying important religious figures or deities. In many cases objects may have a job or function such as healing the sick or protecting the home.

The sacred and the profane

Sacred and profane denote two different spaces, the first being a place of spiritual work of meditation and of connection with the divine. The second space is that of the profane or secular world. While there are key differences in the way that individuals function in the sacred and profane spaces the line between these two spaces intersect and overlap. Sacred space is anywhere that an individual connects with spirituality, or divinity and where an individual makes the physical and or the mental space for meditation or prayer. Profane space is where secular or mundane tasks are performed. In "Angels, Rituals, and Sacred Space in Islam," Burge outlines four major areas of focus in defining sacred space, of those four one applied most heavily to the concept of domestic sacred space. This concept being the "*axis mundi*: a central point or pole around which the spiritual world is focused,"¹ while broadly this term can be applied to entire religions much like how Mecca acts as the *axis mundi* of Islam, on a smaller scale a church functions as a central spiritual location for a community, and a home altar functions as a central location for family or personal spiritual practice.

Analysis of communal sacred space outside of the home:

Three main topics that this section are meant to cover are sacred space in regards to holy land, sacred space in terms of structures in different religions, and inclusive cross cultural sacred space.

In "Angels, Ritual and Sacred Space in Islam" Burge describes the Islamic definition of sacred space as well as discusses what elements and features make a sacred space sacred. One of the major topics of discussion within the writing is the designation of Mecca as the Islamic Holy

¹ Burge, S. R. "Angels, Ritual and Sacred Space in Islam." *Comparative Islamic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): 221.

Land held in highest esteem. Jerusalem is mentioned as being important to Islam in its relationship with prophets. However, Jerusalem is not seen as highly as Ka'ba the most sacred site in Islam the cube structure surrounded by the most holy Mosque Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is because of how far back mentions of Ka'ba being a holy place go. Early mention of Ka'ba connect all the way back to Adam the first man in Abrahamic religions, establishing it as an important site aging back to the early days of humankind. Angels are luminous beings created by Allah and in their worship of Allah are a model for reverent behavior and worship. The conception of angels is referenced within the article as important in their relation to Ka'ba. Angels are said to act in a different, more reverent way when located near Ka'ba. Additionally, angels are said to face Mecca when in prayer. So while angels are not found exclusively in proximity to Ka'ba it is clear that it is held in high regard amongst divine beings². The Islamic view of Ka'ba grants perspective into one of the major elements of sacred space, the presence of the divine and establishes this connection through the history of Abrahamic religions and the presence of angels. Even though, it is these particular connections within Islam that establish connection with the divine other means may be utilized in order to connect with the divine.

Public spaces give insight into the priorities and ideals of the community that creates them. The analysis of communal sacred space gives insight into the priorities of the communities that created them. Both mosques and churches seek to connect religious attendees with the divine, however the visual and structural methods that they employ to achieve this goal are very different. Both mosques and churches may employ vertical height and natural lighting in order to evoke an ethereal and otherworldly effect. Mosques often utilize non-corporeal shapes in the

² Burge, S. R. "Angels, Ritual and Sacred Space in Islam." *Comparative Islamic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): 221.

form of calligraphy to decorate their walls, focusing not only on beautifying the space but also on using religiously acceptable means to do so. Catholic churches are often decorated with images of Christ and saints. Instead of telling a story in the written word the images in Catholic churches show the viewer biblical stories. This illustrates the different means through which different religions chose to educate followers on religious stories. The differences between Catholic and Islamic structures illustrates how different religions may emphasize different aspects of belief and implement them in ways that are more applicable to their particular doctrine or belief structure. This malleability of physical space between different religions can be extended to private practice and personal space.

In “Gardens of sacred Space: Sacred Space in Judaism, Christianity and Islam Summary”, Kahera analyzes the architectural aesthetics of Abrahamic religions Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Kahera utilizes John Ruskin’s *Seven lamps of Architecture* as a structure to analyze different sacred spaces within these traditions³.

Communal space is often as unique to a community as personal space is to an individual. The differences in ideological approach to religion is often reflected in the approach to architecture and furnishings of a sacred space. It is because of these differences in approach to sacred space across different religions that attempting to create inclusive sacred space where many different people are able to partake in religious activities presents a challenge. In “From Chapel to meditation room: A case study of religion and spirituality,” Harper describes two of Ohio University’s spiritual centers, the Helen Mauck Galbreath Memorial Chapel of 1957 and The United Meditation Room of 2017. These two locations are compared in terms of “religious diversity, inclusion, and functional space”. The Chapel, while initially built with inclusivity in

³ Kahera, Akel Ismail. "Gardens of the Righteous: Sacred Space in Judaism, Christianity and Islam." *CrossCurrents* (2002): 328-341.

mind, was more oriented to interdenominational Christian practices. Major architectural and furnishings within the Chapel indicate Western ideology and religious beliefs. Some architectural features of the chapel include the nave, pews, and altar, in addition to this additional items in the chapel such as the organ are heavily related to Christianity⁴. Although the Chapel was well suited to interdenominational Christianity, the overtly Christian elements of the building's structure has the propensity to make people of other religions feel alienated and uninclined to visit or worship in that space. Indicating how important a suitable and welcome sacred space is to not only community worship.

Alternatively, the Meditation room is essentially one large open room with a fabric divide intended for religious practices where men and women worship separately, and the only furnishing is a location to temporarily store personal items. As a former conference room repurposed for meditation the University was better able to accommodate different religious practices without crafting a space that was overtly evocative of a particular religion. While the chapel had deterred followers of different faiths from using those facilities the meditation room allows space not only for those who follow different religions but also it also holds space for those who are spiritual but not religious. Lastly the location of the meditation room within the library offered higher convenience than a free standing building making it better suited for private personal practice. Harper concludes that while the original Chapel was an attempt to make an inclusive space the Meditation room more successfully accomplished that goal⁵.

⁴ Harper, Daniel J. "From Chapel to Meditation Room: A Case Study of Religion and Spirituality on Campus." *Journal of Interior Design* 44, no. 2 (2019): 119-131.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12139>. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12139>.

⁵ Harper, Daniel J. "From Chapel to Meditation Room: A Case Study of Religion and Spirituality on Campus." *Journal of Interior Design* 44, no. 2 (2019): 119-131.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12139>. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12139>.

The feeling of connection is important, while the means of connection and what connection individuals or a community utilizes in order to establish that connection are important but not as critical. The differences between each belief system and the focus therein indicates not only what is most important to that community but is reflected in their sacred space. It is because sacred space reflects so much of what is important to religious communities entering into a sacred space that is different from what an individual is culturally or ideologically accustomed to invokes a feeling of alienation. If a designated sacred space is intended to accommodate different religious and spiritual backgrounds the most practical method is to allow them to temporarily craft their own temporary sacred space within a religiously nondescript and sparsely furnished location.

Domestic practices:

Designated space within the home may also be a form of sacred space but it is on a much smaller scale and is more specialized for not only the spiritual and aesthetic views of those practicing a particular faith but also the particular functional needs of those living in the house. In "Sacred Places Domestic Spaces Culture, Church, and Home at Our Lady of the Assumption and St. Brigitta" Konieczny examines the homes of two different congregations asserting that the differences in domestic decor correlate to the church that they attend. Parishioners of the more traditional church tended towards more plain and less unique decor that was utilitarian and promoted collective family function. Parishioners of the more modern church tended to have more expressive decor and separate spaces designated for different members of the family, an individualistic approach to the home⁶. As these differences were correlated with communal and

⁶ Konieczny, Mary Ellen. "Sacred Places, Domestic Spaces: Material Culture, Church, and Home at our Lady of the Assumption and St. Brigitta." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 419-442. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lynchburg.edu/stable/40405638>.

individualistic approaches to sacred space respectively; the differences in these spaces once again relates to differences in how different groups ideologically approach religion in different ways. These differences in approach to religion are no less valid, but understanding what values are more highly prioritized (in this case in this case community based practice versus personal based practice), enables the average practitioner to better connect with their religious or spiritual practice.

In Klingorová, Kamila and Banu Gökarıksel's, "'God was with me everywhere': women's embodied practices and everyday practices in Czechia,"⁷ article, women self report places that feel the most sacred to them. The majority of the spaces that the women photographed and reported to be spiritual in nature were mundane spaces. Mundane or "profane" spaces were converted to spiritual spaces through perception rather than sacred spaces being sought out to experience spiritual connection. Even in the religious structures that the women photographed the spaces that they chose to photograph are typically used more for mundane work. This article argues for a more inclusive analysis of both mundane and spiritual places in order to examine how they overlap and interact with each other. More inclusive analysis of both mundane and spiritual places enables a better understanding of how individuals relate to the divine on a daily basis. This approach enables and encourages a more accessible relationship between religious or spiritual individuals who would otherwise not experience a beneficial connection to the spiritual.

This article is salient in that it conveys a self reported connection to the sacred in mundane spaces. This helps lend footing to the integration of sacred space into domestic life as

⁷ Klingorová, Kamila and Banu Gökarıksel. "'God was with Me Everywhere': Women's Embodied Practices and Everyday Experiences of Sacred Space in Czechia." *Null* 25, no. 1 (2018): 37-60. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2017.1398138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1398138>.

well as depict how the integration of these things might play out. Additionally many of the times where individuals are discussing how the sacred and mundane are woven into ritual, which assist with context for how others might interact with and construct sacred space that supports spiritual practice and everyday life.

In “Religion, immigration, and home making in diaspora: Hindu space in Southern California”⁸, Mazumdar et. al assert the importance of religion for many immigrants struggling to maintain some sort of identity in a new unfamiliar place. While this grounding effect of religion is described by other researchers through observation, interview, and archival research, it seeks to look more closely at religious practices within the homes of Hindu immigrants. In the article the making of a sacred space is described as consisting of four major components, home blessings, home altars, home aesthetics, and home gardens. Mazumdar et. al discuss religious norms and environmental factors in the location that the families have immigrated to influence the kinds of decisions and practices that affect the components of their practices.

The use of material objects in religious practice:

One major way in which an individual may bolster their connection with the divine is through the objects with which they perform spiritual and religious practices. These objects play a major role establishing and maintaining a connection that bridges the gap between physical practice and spiritual connection with the divine. For many spiritual and religious individuals the role of material objects as a means of connection is fundamental to their practice. There are many defining factors that may affect the objects that an individual chooses to utilize in their practice. Some of these factors include quality, price, value, and accessibility.

⁸ Mazumdar, Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar. "Religion, Immigration, and Home Making in Diaspora: Hindu Space in Southern California." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 29, no. 2 (2009): 256-266.

In “Objects, Object-Ness, and Shadows of Meanings”, Younes discusses the physical object of the rosary as an object following the process of creating the rosary and the materials that are used in the construction of the rosary beads. Some of the materials have spiritual and religious significance which extends beyond the importance of the rosary itself. Some religious practitioners such as the Iranian Sufi murshid Younes Saramifar learn a particular form of rosary making which utilizes naturally occurring materials that are said to have important religious connections. Some of these Sufis go so far as to refuse to use rosaries made from plastic beads because they find the quality not up to the expected standard of a tool used for religious purposes⁹. So while objects of a certain type may be important to a religion, the material quality of the object can affect the interaction a practitioner has with said object.

A Butsudan is a small furniture type religious fixture common in many Japanese homes. These structures consist of several different *levels* and are used to honor ancestors, Buddha spirits, the spirits of their land as is common in Shintoism, and the Buddha. It is a religious piece which is commonly constructed of wood and comes in many different styles and budgets. The Butsudan came into common use in accordance with a reaction to state enforced Buddhism. The Butsudan coming into more common use also helped to empower the average citizen with a more direct connection to religious powers. Really interesting syncretism between Buddhism and Shintoism in the relationship between the Butsudan and Kamidana. The Butsudan is a resting place for the recently passed and is more tied to those who are currently living. The Kamidana is for long passed ancestry and spirits.¹⁰

⁹ Saramifar, Younes. "Objects, Object-Ness, and Shadows of Meanings: Carving Prayer Beads and Exploring their Materiality Alongside a Khaksari Sufi Murshid." *Material Religion* 14, no. 3 (2018): 368-388. doi:10.1080/17432200.2018.1487765.

¹⁰ Rambelli, Fabio. "Home Buddhas: Historical Processes and Modes of Representation of the Sacred in the Japanese Buddhist Family Altar (Butsudan)." *Japanese Religions* 35, no. 1/2 (2010): 63-86.

In “Home Buddhas” Rambelli discusses the styles and structure, religious practices, and history of the Butsudan. Rambelli also discusses the prominence of funerary tablets that grew into popular use along with the Butsudan, as well as the Butsudan’s relationship with the Kamidana. Butsudan being a major home fixture in Japanese Buddhism is available in a range of styles, structures and price ranges in order to coordinate with the lifestyle of the family that is purchasing the item. There is some debate regarding the acquisition of these structures if it is better to inherit a family Butsudan or purchase one at a certain age. Additionally, it is usually advised that a family only purchase a Butsudan that is within their means and not purchase one that is overly grandiose and foolishly over budget. Much like in Saramifa’s “Objects, Object-Ness, and Shadows of Meanings..”, having a butsudan of suitable quality is of important religious significance however a balance between quality and affordability should be considered.

Factors that could affect a practitioner’s ability to acquire goods that are created with the intent to be used in their religious or spiritual practice are cultural significance, geographic location, and funds. The quality and craftsmanship of similar items are also deeply affected by the same factors. Cultural significance relates to whether religious and spiritual practices of this type of religion are commonly used, essentially is the kind of domestic practice that is occurring at home closely related enough to other religious or spiritual practices that there would be enough demand for the kind of item that would be used in that practice. Geographic location refers to whether the items that the practitioner would have the desire to use is in their area. A change in a geographic location from an area that holds similar religious and spiritual beliefs can decrease access to physical resources that easily fit within their practice. Lastly access to funds impacts the ability of a practitioner to be able to purchase the spiritually related goods.

Ideally, the religious practitioner would belong to a prevalent practice, live in close proximity to the culture where these practices are common, and have the funds to purchase religious items. However, often practitioners must deal with non-ideal factors such as a practice that is not common, living far away from where a practice that they identify with is located, or having insufficient funds to purchase spiritual goods. Within “Religion, Immigration, and Home Making in Diaspora...”, Mazumdar, Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar discuss the difficulties that Hindu immigrants face finding religious items in America that were readily available in India¹¹. If a practitioner lives in a location where their own religion is prominent, having lower funds available may pose less of an issue in that there are likely lower cost alternatives. In cases where an individual lives farther away from an area where their practice is prominent, if they have access to a lot of funds they might be able to order certain goods to their home or visit where iterations of their own practice is more popular. If a practitioner has a religious or spiritual practice that is not common enough to have many people creating goods specifically for that kind of practice and they have funds available to them they might be able to commission items that are specifically made for their practice. However, in many cases practitioners either elect or must resort to making or repurposing items in ways that fit with their practice.

Quality, value, and associations that a practitioner has with the object that they use can impact how effectively they interact with the object. A use-what-feels-most-salient approach to material objects could be beneficial to those struggling with how they interact with objects that are meant to facilitate a connection with the divine. While all of the material aspects of an individual object may impact what a practitioner may select to work with, the most important element is the ability of the object to facilitate connection with the divine. Sometimes even the

¹¹ Mazumdar, Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar. "Religion, Immigration, and Home Making in Diaspora: Hindu Space in Southern California." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 29, no. 2 (2009): 256-266.

most physically appropriate item may not hold enough religious significance until the object has been sanctified or activated in an appropriate manner.

Activation of Spiritual objects (by ritual means):

The activation of spiritual objects through ritual means is a common action across different religions. This action can be seen in Christian denominations, namely Roman Catholicism, where the Eucharist involves the process of transubstantiation. Through this process, the communion bread and wine is not only blessed it takes on an additional nature becoming the body and blood of Christ. The spiritual activation of objects takes the original physical object and adds to it another dimension. As stated by Romberg, in “Ritual Life of an Altar Home,” an inanimate object may become spirited, “Only after she had performed a few rituals did that inert plaster figure become La Monja,” then once the physical object is vacated, “she ritually disposed of the icon, which turned into just matter again,”¹². In spiritual activation there may not be any physical or chemical change to the given object during this spiritual activation; however, the object has become a vessel for a spirit, ancestor or deity.

The process of spiritual activation is a method where otherwise mass produced objects take on or are given a spirit rendering them fit for spiritual and ritual use. Raquel Romberg, documents the experience of working under Haydée, a Puerto Rican espiritista bruja roughly translated to, spiritualist witch focus on the process of transformation stating, “mystical transformation occurs during ritual that causes something that up to that point has been ‘just

¹² Romberg, Raquel. "Ritual Life of an Altar-Home: A Photographic Essay on Transformational Places and Technologies." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 13, no. 2 (2018a): 250-266. doi:10.1353/mrw.2018.0020.

matter' to become spiritualized matter or materialized spirit"¹³. The transformation of an object process follows proper construction and consecration of the practitioner's working space. It is during this process that an ordinary object takes on spiritual qualities or ordinary objects are prepared to house spiritual entities¹⁴.

The activation of objects for spiritual practice requires work from the practitioner. This activation of an object requires "reciprocal exchanges or gifts between healers and deities" and would require "ritual labour" from the practitioner in the form of offerings of money, food, objects, smoke, ritual practices, or other relationship ties.¹⁵ This means that the practitioner has to offer something of worth in order to create and maintain spiritual relationships at their altar. Working with spirited objects requires that the practitioner must work to maintain their end of the spiritual relationship, feeding, visiting, and communing with the spiritual at their altar caring for their relationship with the spiritual as they would mundane relationships.

In "Home Buddhas" Fabio Rambelli states, "It should be noted that *butsudan*, funerary tablets (*ihai*), and the *kamidana* are not just symbolic objects and catalysts for religious activities. As veritable sacred objects, they are infused with the "spirits" of, respectively, the buddhas, the ancestors, and the *kami*"¹⁶. This source differs from the "Ritual Life of an Altar Home" in that the Butsudan is a common household object so instead of the person who works with the object on a regular basis the family takes it to a temple to have ritual done by a priest.

¹³ Romberg, Raquel. "Ritual Life of an Altar-Home: A Photographic Essay on Transformational Places and Technologies." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 13, no. 2 (2018a): 250-266. doi:10.1353/mrw.2018.0020.

¹⁴ Butsudan is more like the latter than the former in that it is inhabited by Buddhas, however, it is crafted with the intent to be used for spiritual practice if at different price points.

¹⁵ Romberg, Raquel. "Ritual Life of an Altar-Home: A Photographic Essay on Transformational Places and Technologies." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 13, no. 2 (2018): 250-266. doi:10.1353/mrw.2018.0020. Pg. 260.

¹⁶ Rambelli, Fabio. "Home Buddhas: Historical Processes and Modes of Representation of the Sacred in the Japanese Buddhist Family Altar (Butsudan)." *Japanese Religions* 35, no. 1/2 (2010): 63-86.

The Butsudan is not a spiritual object intended only for use by priests or clergy it is an object which is important in domestic practice.

However, there are some similarities shared between “Home Buddhas” and “Ritual Life of an Altar Home”, in the transformative process. Namely the ritual that is done in order to bring the spirit of Buddha into the object is done in a sanctified place and the object is prepared to be a vessel for the spirit. Additionally, there is a required maintenance of the spiritual object and its inhabitants in order to preserve and maintain the habitation of the object. Maintenance required includes physical offerings such as food, drink, and incense, as well as labor in cleaning the area, and metaphysical offerings in prayer or meditation. There are two functions that these activated objects have which serve to connect those within these practices to the divine. The first being the post ritual presence of spirit within the object. Once the ritual is performed to activate a particular object it is believed that there is spirit within the object that can be interacted within in a physical manner. The second function that an activated object has in connecting the individual with the divine is the element of “ritual labour”¹⁷ the fact that the presence in the activated object must be maintained. This requires that the practitioner return to the sacred space on a regular basis establishing and maintaining a ritual of interaction with the space, facilitating regular connection with the spiritual.

Catholicism in Relation to Spiritual Objects

Catholicism is a useful religion to use as a lens through which to view the importance of domestic sacred space. This is in part because of the diverse practices that Catholics follow

¹⁷ Romberg, Raquel. "Ritual Life of an Altar-Home: A Photographic Essay on Transformational Places and Technologies." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 13, no. 2 (2018a): 250-266. doi:10.1353/mrw.2018.0020.

which can roughly be divided between orthodox church practices and folk practices. While there is definitely a strong presence of mass attendance and regular church going practices in regional practices such as Mexican Catholicism there is an abundance of domestic altars that reside within the home and are utilized by individuals or entire families. Catholicism also emphasizes both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Orthodoxy in this case is concerning the correct belief for worshipers to have while orthopraxy is more concerned with the correct practices or rituals. The emphasis on orthodoxy is common in many Christian denominations; personal belief is a major component to the religion. However, Catholic emphasis on orthopraxy also indicates practices that must be performed as well as holy days that must be observed. It is in part because of this more physical aspect of the Catholic denomination that a physical space within the home to perform religious acts can be a boon to Catholics. The Orthodox church acknowledges both saints and icons supporting rich visual storytelling and space building.

Due to the conquistadors' involvement in colonization of Mesoamerica, indigenous peoples were forced to convert to Catholicism. It is due to this forced conversion that the syncretization of indigenous religions and the Christian Catholic religion occurred. In "Idols Behind Altars - Revisited...", Minjares describes how this syncretization occurred, "the belief structure that remains from indigenous times, that resisted the colonizing technique of the new religion, prevails through the adaptation of idols. The indigenous religious beliefs have been embedded into the cultural beliefs through a manner of passive resistance, or a type of compromise,"¹⁸. The indigenous population of what is today Mexico was able to preserve their cultural values and religious beliefs by melding them with Catholic religious practices. Their pantheon expanded to include the Christian god and they used their own techniques in order to

¹⁸ Minjares, Maria Luisa. *Idols Behind Altars - Revisited: Examining the Construction of the Mexican Artistic Identity through Visual Culture and Folk Art in the United States* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018.

create religious icons of Jesus and Mary. They maintained their own sense of culture and religion through how they interacted with the religious beliefs thrust upon them.

Today, Mexican and Mexican American Catholicism is partially known for the aesthetic elements in their sacred spaces. While the sacred space is usually created and maintained by women and is normally associated with women that is not always the case. In the Mexican Catholic Sacred space there is usually an abundance of colors, textures, and objects. Images heavily featured on these altars include Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, as well as Christ, additionally many altars include pictures of deceased relatives and. Other elements that are prevalent in these spaces are some sort of altar cloth, folk art, prayer candles, patterned surfaces, flowers, crosses, and figurines of Mary, Jesus, or different saints. These spaces are focused on family and are a key fixture in the lives of many Mexican Catholics. This feature blurs the boundary between the sacred or religious, and the secular or profane.

Although the icons discussed in Margarita Voulgaropoulou's "From domestic Devotion to the Church altar...", are of Byzantine origin and art style these Orthodox works are evocative of the importance of icons within Catholicism as well. Voulgaropoulou depicts the prominence and importance of the Byzantine art style in Christian worship during the Late Medieval and Early Modern Adriatic period in stating, "icons were considered to be the true likeness and material embodiments of Christ and the saints and were often treated as equivalent to relics... early icons were believed to have been created not by human hands but by divine agency" and these Icons were credited with having "thaumaturgic powers of healing and protection".¹⁹ The mystical and religious properties attributed to Byzantine artwork through the method and style of painting as well as their reportedly religious origin contributed to the high regard that these icons are held to.

¹⁹ Voulgaropoulou, Margarita. "From Domestic Devotion to the Church Altar: Venerating Icons in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Adriatic." *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 10, no. 6 (2019): 390. doi:10.3390/rel10060390. Pg. 3.

Even in the Renaissance when religious imagery was being created in what was regarded to be more fashionable and artistically significant byzantine art was still believed to have greater religious significance.

The relic-like status of the icon is part of what grants the painting high esteem. The other feature of Byzantine iconography which affords it high esteem is the lack of naturalistic focus that was believed to indicate a higher religious importance because instead of focusing on worldly imagery Byzantine art was more focused on depicting divine ideals and stories rather than depicting realistic features. The focus on the divine was seen as more of an indication of being more focused on God and things of religious importance rather than the physical which would be portrayed as base and of little import.

The existence of the icon is spiritual and religious by nature and in its creation. The object is not “spirited” by a priest or religious practitioner. Instead as the creation of these objects is said to be created through divine will moving through the painter. In part because icon paintings were unsigned, stories were often created about the origin of the work. The mysterious nature of the origin of these paintings often bled over to the painting itself. Miracles have been attributed to these icons and have been seen as important in part due to the painting process and the painter. For example some icon paintings were believed to have been painted by a saint or angel. There is little evidence of these claims however much cultural value and significance is granted to these paintings whether in religious practice or the miracles attributed to them.

Catholicism, though both in its rigid structures along with the folk practices of individuals in regions where Catholicism was forced upon indigenous peoples, has a history of utilizing objects in order to connect with the divine and illustrates the diverse ways that people craft and syncretize practices in order to better connect with the divine.

Personal Sacred Space

The line between the sacred and the profane in my room has been smudged and blurred to a point where the distinction is unclear at best. There are pockets of the sacred that exist in different areas of my room. One of the more covert sacred spaces in my room is my drafting table. This is a place of healing, safety, and creativity which function on both mundane and sacred levels. While this location does not contain objects that would be traditionally considered sacred it is a place that assists me in the sacred act of artistic creation. The tools that I use to create art are the very same tools that I use to connect to something very spiritual both within myself and outside of myself and enable me to communicate that connection to others. The tools that I use to paint facilitate creation in the same way that a rosary is used to facilitate prayer. Although the artworks I create are not icons, my goal is to breathe life into my work much like another painter would breathe life into an icon. I pour myself into sacred labor in order to transform my painting into a sacred object. My sacred space, although it is mixed with the mundane and profane world, is no less sacred for its lack of organized religion than that of any world religion.

The most overtly sacred space is the spot above my dresser where my mother and grandmother's scarves hang and placed atop the dresser are pieces of art and nature that are an ode to them. There are pictures of my mother on the dresser which harkens back to Mexican Catholic home altars. In addition to images of her I have placed works of art that I made that she loved alongside these images. I curated items that belonged to my mother and my grandmother along with their bibles. I placed seashells because my mother loved the beach and a painting of irises because my grandmother used to grow them right in front of her porch. These items are

just as sacred and valuable to me as any religious paraphernalia and just as moving as stepping into a cathedral.

Domestic sacred space and home altars are first and foremost personal places. There are many ways that they can be approached that place emphasis on form or appearance over function or ease of use, place family usage over individual use, or place quality over affordability. What is most important is that a domestic sacred space fits and fulfills the needs of those utilizing that space. The most important function of a sacred space is that it is able to facilitate spiritual connection; it is in that vein that the home altar can be just as important a sacred space that is recognized by an established and organized religion.

Conclusion

A home altar functions as a place for growth, connection, and healing. Transformation is a cornerstone of the process that occurs within this space. It is through examining the function of Catholic sacred space that the importance of the home altar as a transformative space where the sacred is able to be woven into the profane workings of life. Given the looming pandemic how time and space are allocated at home is even more important than in previous years. The creation and maintenance of a home altar may play an important role in ensuring that those who practice any form of belief have a place to retreat to, to process in, and a place from which to derive hope. It is within even the humblest of home altar or domestic sacred space that spiritual practices are performed that are just as valid, impactful, and important as the altars within grand cathedrals occur.

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