

What is the Power of Relics? An Exhibition at Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht

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indigenous peoples had chosen to visually manage the remains of their deceased ancestors in the context of similar handover ceremonies.

⁵ Cited in "Skulls Repatriation Process Irks Rukuro." *The Namibian*. Accessed September 1, 2018. <https://www.namibian.com.na/180939/archive-read/Skulls-repatriation>

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what is the power of relics? an exhibition at museum catharijneconvent, utrecht

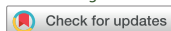
What is the power of relics? Why are they cherished, and why do people travel thousands of miles to see them? From October 12, 2018 to February 3, 2019 more than a hundred remarkable relics could be seen in Utrecht, in Museum Catharijneconvent,

the Dutch national museum for Christian art and culture. Among the relics were a splinter from Christ's crown of thorns (see Figure 1), ZamZam water from Mecca, word-relics of the Buddha (see Figure 2), as well as exceptional remains of ancestors, historical heroes, pop idols and sports champions (see Figure 3). Many of the objects on display were from Museum Catharijneconvent's own collection, such as the hammer with which St Martin of Tours supposedly destroyed idols, and the scarf with which the English princess Cunera was



FIG 1
Relic crown with fragment of Holy Lance, True Cross and Crown of Thorns of Christ, Liège?, ca.1260–1280. Musée du Louvre, department des Objects d'art, Paris. OA 9445. (Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais [Musée du Louvre]/Martine Beck-Coppola.)

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FIG 2

Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha
with votiv offerings,
Koen, Japan,
1249, Museum für
Ostasiatische Kunst Köln.
(Photo: Rheinisches
Bildarchiv Köln, rba_
c004106.)



FIG 3

House altar with a hair
of football player Diego
Maradona. Copy of the
Maradona-altar in Bar Nilo in
Naples, 2016. Collection Karin
Guggeis and Stefan Eisenhofer,
Munich. (Photo: © Nicolia
Kaestner.)



FIG 4

Bodhitree Maha
Bodhitemple Bodhgaya
India. (Photo: Wikimedia
Commons, photo ©
Hiroki Ogawana.)



strangled. In addition, objects had been given on loan by the Louvre in Paris, the Khalili Collection in London, the Museum of East Asian Art in Cologne, the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands, the Hague Historical Museum, and the Basilica of St Servatius in Maastricht. Museum Catharijneconvent also made an appeal in *Trouw*, a Dutch daily newspaper with Protestant roots, which pays particular attention to religion, and on Facebook, asking people what objects they cherish as relics and inviting them to share their personal stories with the museum. From the many responses, the museum had selected a couple of objects and their stories, which were shown next to—for example—a thirteenth-century gilded relic pendant from Trier, which contains a splinter of the True Cross, a sixteenth-century house altar with relics of early Christian martyrs, a Shiite prayer string made from clay from Karbala (a popular pilgrimage site for Shiite Muslims because Muhammed's grandson Hussain was killed there), and a leaf from the Bodhi tree under which Buddha

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gained insight in the origins of human suffering. The definition of “relics” used by the museum was thus quite broad. It included body parts of holy men and women, the belongings of saints, such as clothes, sandals and a begging bowl, sand and pebbles from holy tombs and cult sites, and things belonging to loved ones, kept by their owners as an object of reverence: hair, earrings, and a signed postcard of a pop idol. The aim of the exhibition

Relics was to show that the keeping and veneration of relics is a universal phenomenon, not just

a survival from the Christian Middle Ages which only lives on in societies dominated by Roman Catholicism, and to contribute to a better understanding of the role of physical objects in religious experience and in processes of creating identity and giving meaning, in past and present. The focus of the exhibition was not on doctrines defended by orthodox élites, but on the practices of lived religion, on what people do and what they consider meaningful. Relics turn out to be remarkably popular still. They have a universal appeal. They are part of social and religious life in many communities—Christian, Islamic, Buddhist or not—and attract people from all layers of society (see Figure 4). Relics connect people. They are believed to transcend death and bring comfort, cure, happiness, and good fortune.

The *Relics* exhibition, which presented relics from different times, cultures and religions, is part of a series of exhibitions about world religions organized by Museum Catharijneconvent. The first in this series was *Holy Scripture* (October 2016–January 2017), a collaboration with Utrecht University Library, which compared the holy writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

For more information about the *Relics* exhibition see: <https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/english/relics/>.

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