



THREE

Public and Private Dimensions of Votive Giving

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So many offerings made to the pagan and Christian shrines were homely and unsightly. Devotees of the sanctuary at Delos gave arrows and ox-goads, anvils and spindles, rouge pots, worthless clay bowls, and a ship's rudder.¹ At the church of Mariahilf in Vienna in the eighteenth century, pilgrims presented needles, bullets, jammed weapons, fish bones, pipes, and three worms in a flask: bric-à-brac attesting to obscure crises and maladies. A man who had lost his appetite brought a spoon.² What kinds of gifts were these? Did they beautify the shrines? Did they honor the deities? Some offerings had real value: money, birds, animals, food, libations, lumps of wax, sacks of grain or flax, furs. The pilgrimage itself was already an expenditure of time and energy, a self-dedication. But then upon arrival many votaries offered up prosthetic limbs, crutches, and broken chains and fetters; knives, carts, belts, and anchors; replicas in wood, wax, or metal of extremities and internal organs as well as nude figurines fashioned of wax; models of buildings and ships; wax donkeys, horses, cows, pigs, fish, birds (in hopes of recovering a falcon), and a wax simulacrum of a punishment wheel; shrouds, human hair, kidney stones, diseased bones, a tapeworm, and other insalubrious rubbish.³ Such dedications did not ornament

the shrine so much as evince devotion, document miraculous rescues, or gloss petitions for relief or cure, indicating for example the location or nature of a bodily ailment. They expressed gratitude for divine succor or protection. They testified to disasters averted, as in the case of Horace's "dripping garments" suspended at the shrine of the god of the sea (*Odes* 1.5), admittedly in this case tokens of an amorous rather than a maritime misadventure.

Many offerings to pagan shrines were beautiful and finely crafted: jewelry, metalwork, textiles, statuettes, vessels, small altars. There are fine examples of such gifts in this exhibition. Christian pilgrims, in later centuries, also brought lavish and decorous oblations, if they could afford them. At the shrine chapel of St. Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral in 1401, one could admire brooches, buttons, beads, rings, lockets, an emerald valued at three thousand pounds, as well as a silver ship and a gilded cross, supplements to the virtue or beauty of the holy personage.⁴ A woman offered her "best dress and a silk veil" to the Virgin of Altötting in Bavaria.⁵ In one case the Virgin of Regensburg explicitly asked for a woman's "best veil."⁶ Some supplicants dedicated works of art, as did artists themselves. A painted panel depicting the *Rest of the Holy Family on the Flight to Egypt*, now in Berlin, is inscribed: "Albrecht Altdorfer, painter of Regensburg, for the salvation of his soul, consecrated this gift [*munus*] to you, divine Mary, with a faithful heart. 1510" (fig. 3.1).⁷

There are two basic kinds of offering, it would seem, ornamental and evidentiary. The ornamental offering is oriented toward the shrine and is meant to please the god. The evidentiary offering points backward toward the life of the votary and is meant to testify. (Some offerings point in both directions.) The deities seem satisfied with both kinds.

The humanist scholar Leon Battista Alberti, writing about Christian practices of his own day but in disguised fashion, found it improbable that the gods appreciated the nonornamental gifts. In his satire *Momus* (1450), Alberti expressed contempt for the merely testimonial offering through the character of the goddess Juno, who complains to her husband, Jupiter, because he has transferred heaps of offerings, "filthy junk" (*replesti foedissimum*

votorum obscenitate), into her once clean house. She begs him to clear everything away except the offerings made of gold.⁸ Alberti is saying: If you are going to give a gift to a god, let it at least be a suitable gift. Once removed from the shrine, the wooden model of a foot, the wax uterus, and the broken chain are meaningless. The gold and jewelry at Durham, by contrast, would retain their value if put back in circulation.

Alberti's Olympian fantasy failed to recognize that the testimonial offerings were addressed not only to the gods but also to other mortals. The models of organs and extremities publicized the god's power to heal. They were evidence of events and decisions and, as such, fragments of an autobiography. Wax body parts, reproducing the plasticity of flesh and so combining lifelike and deathlike qualities, seemed direct evidence of anguish and aspirations (see fig. 2.6). Georges Didi-Huberman invokes the capacity of wax to adapt plastically to the pace of symptoms and desires: "Wax gives organic form to psychic time."⁹ Alberti was not unaware of the power of offerings to channel real states of body and mind. He simply found the direct contact with the supplicants' emotions repellent: "the hatred, fear, anger, pain and other rotten and corrupt plagues which lie deep in the human heart and which filled all of their prayers, were sticking to these votive objects [*vota*], so that foul and revolting smells filled every dwelling in heaven."¹⁰

For the clergy managing the shrine on earth, however, and for pilgrims and other visitors, the body parts and crutches, figurines, and model organs represented mindfulness of the divine sphere, loyalty to the healing god, and the votary's constancy of purpose. The evocation of physical and psychological states, indeed sequences of states, and of decisions taken and honored, was complex, compelling. Behind every offering loomed an excerpt from an unwritten life of an unnamed person.

In fifteenth-century Italy, a completely new kind of gift emerged that made that life story more legible: the painted ex-voto, a small panel depicting an individual's escape from a predicament, thanks to a miraculous divine intervention (fig. 3.2). Such humble, straightforward reports have nothing to



Fig. 3.2 Votive painting of a woman's possession. Switzerland, ca. 1600. Oil on wood. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Kr V 318. Cat. 28.

do with the beautiful paintings offered in hopes of salvation, such as Altdorfer's *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*. They are rather to be understood as elaborations of the testimony provided by wax figurines, models of body parts, or relics of imprisonment. Like those objects, they identify a single, crucial event or condition in the life of the votary.

A "votary" is one who gives herself to the deity. The term describes an inclination, an avidity, a self-dedication without limits. A "votive offering" may express that inclination. The substantive "votary" and predicate "votive," derived from the Latin *votum* and *votivus*, refer to a vow. The Latin *voveo* was the equivalent of the Greek *euchomai*, to pray, promise, boast, affirm publicly. The votive offering fulfills a promise of fealty to a god. But the

Greek and later the Roman terms also came to mean "wish" (a private, unvocalized desire or the expression of that desire) as well as "promise" (the public affirmation of an intention to carry out a course of action).¹¹ This ambiguity is preserved in the French *voeu*, which means both vow and wish. (English also splits the Latin *votum*, but slightly differently: a "vow" is a pledge to sustain the impulse behind the wish, as a matter of principle, whereas a "vote" is the direct expression of a present-tense wish and entails no commitment to the future.) In fact, many so-called votive gifts do not fulfill promises but register a more general wish for some advantageous outcome in the future. Other gifts simply express gratitude. Offerings that follow a predicament or illness, however, have a quite precise reference.

Now the vow is prompted by a crisis. A Christian in distress commends herself to a saint or to the Virgin Mary and in addition promises to undertake a pilgrimage, perhaps under onerous conditions, such as wearing a woolen shirt, and to make an offering in exchange for a cure or rescue achieved by a successful intercession—that is, a request for succor that the petitioned saint or Mary communicates directly to Christ.

The origins of the offering in desire are encoded in the Italian *boti* or *voti*, modern words that transfer the Latin *votum*, meaning “vow,” to the thing vowed. Note that the Greek word for a dedicatory offering, *anathema*, literally meant something set up or mounted; likewise the English words “oblation” and “offer,” and the German word *Opfer* (sacrifice), derived from Latin *offere* (to bring before), point not backward to the source or motivation of the gift but rather forward to the gift’s destination, the display at the shrine. Already in the New Testament *anathema* is used to mean “something devoted to evil”; this led to the modern senses “something cursed” or the curse itself. The term *ex voto*, employed as a substantive, emerged only later, not before the late sixteenth century. It echoes the inscription legible on many surviving Roman tablets and dedicatory altars, *ex voto susceptum* (made on the basis of a vow) (fig. 3.3). *Ex voto* narrows the reference: the term points to an origin not in generalized desire for intimacy with the deity but to a specific moment of need.

In the early Middle Ages the Church was wary of vow-based devotion, a practice inherited from pagan cults. The transactional logic of the vow—“I will pledge myself to you *if* you are able to cure me”—seemed to introduce an unseemly pragmatism or even mistrust into the relation between believer and holy personage. Later, between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, as thaumaturgic cults centered on the tombs of saints proliferated, clerics were less likely to object to such pledges.¹² The infirm but mobile need little encouragement to visit the tomb of a holy man or woman with healing powers. There is plenty of evidence from the later Middle Ages of sick people hobbling long distances to shrines.¹³ Any offerings these pilgrims left were either prospective signs (e.g., body parts

indicating to the saint what needed healing) or immediately offered testimonials to miraculous cures effected on site (e.g., discarded crutches). But not all calamities allowed for cure-through-visitation. The gravely ill, the shipwrecked, the imprisoned, or the waylaid traveler could only call for help. The Church, hoping to bring these sufferers as well within reach of the saint’s beneficent power, encouraged promises that included a commitment to undertaking a pilgrimage.

To promote local holy men and women to beatified or saintly status, clerics compiled lists of miracles performed and sent the dossiers to Rome. The compilers were quite ready to accept evidence of cures and rescues brought about by long-distance petitions. The beatification dossier assembled in 1311 reveals that of the eighty-three posthumous miracles attributed to Margaret of Cortona, only three occurred at her tomb shrine.¹⁴ Local cults were sustained by testimony of such remote-control miracles. The lists of miracles and the offerings at the shrines demonstrated simultaneously the faith of the faithful, the responsiveness and efficacy of the holy person, and the good faith of the cured in honoring their own promises.

Clerics came to favor gifts that fulfilled vows also because they wanted the petitioners to filter their desires through private dialogues with holy personages rather than seek to manipulate them with gifts. The conditional vow introduces responsibility and trust into the transaction between the supplicant and the miracle worker. Instead of a simple, direct, and psychologically uncomplicated request for relief, the canonization dossiers speak of persons making promises, receiving and recognizing miracles, and then fulfilling the promises. According to these micronarratives, the interceding saint or the Virgin Mary trusts the person to fulfill his vow. Such promises, made in distress and often in private—silently or in the darkness of a prison cell—were not guaranteed by witnesses as vows in ancient societies tended to be. Christian supplicants now had to act as their own witnesses. This system suits believers who are more than happy to make only conditional promises—that is, promises of devotion that expire if the healer fails to deliver. It was a practical system from both points of

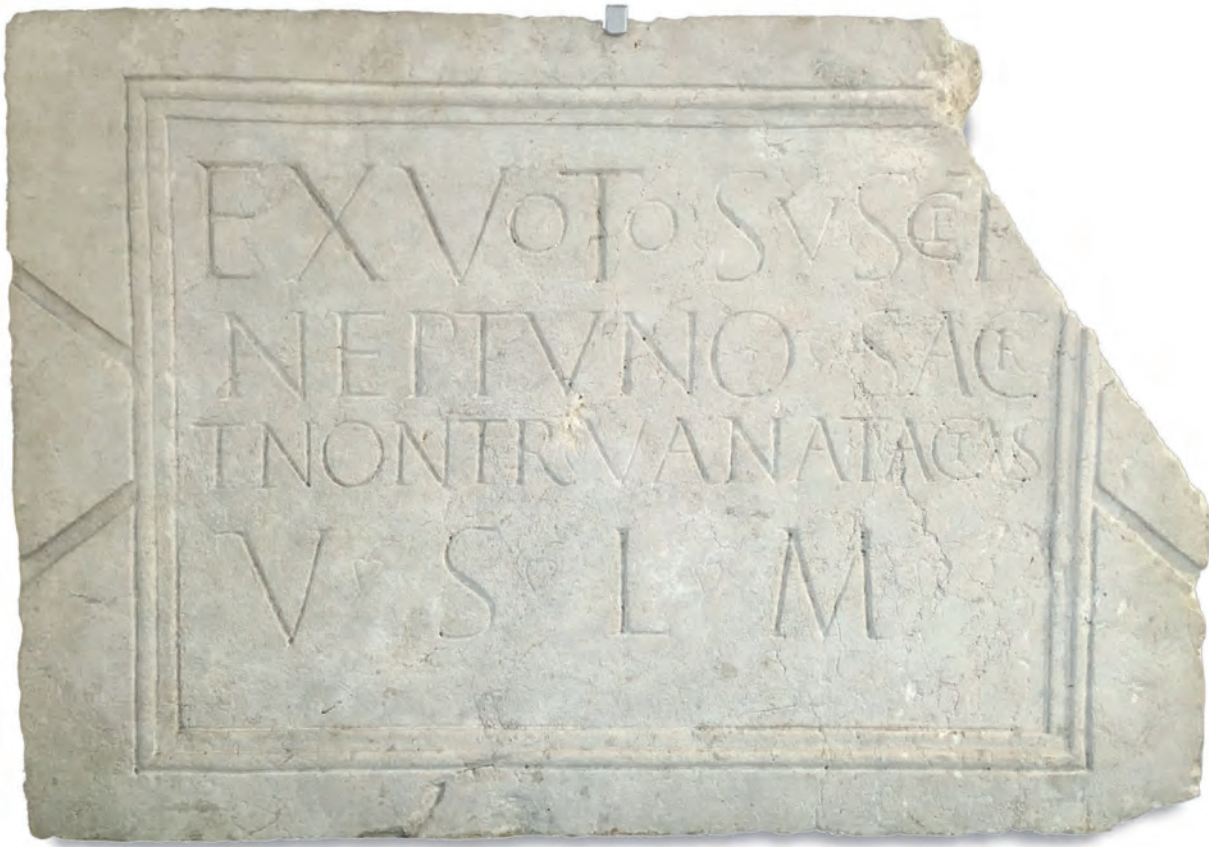


Fig. 3.3 Roman tablet with a votive inscription. Musée Romain de Lausanne-Vidy, Switzerland.

view, clerical and lay. The only risk from the clergy's perspective was that some people would be cured but neglect to undertake the promised pilgrimage, either because they attributed the cure to other causes or out of laziness. The person who is cured long-distance but fails to visit the tomb or shrine is useless to the clergy because there will be no record of the miracle. Although a vow can be pronounced and a miracle can occur anywhere, the beneficiary will need to show up at an agreed-upon place before a cleric can record it.

One must presume that clerics established the system of conditional vows through preaching as well as on-site exhortation and instruction, though this is hard to prove. The evidence for clerical promotion of the votive model are the canonization dossiers sent to Rome as well as the so-called miracle books, the manuscript and printed lists compiled on site but not necessarily associated with a formal appeal to the Holy See. The miracle books were not inventories of the offerings left

at the shrine but rather reports of miracles and miracle-inducing behavior. Jakob Issickemer, for example, canon at the Marian Chapel of Grace at Altötting in Bavaria, in the list of recent pilgrimages to the shrine he published in 1497, records the miracle or "sign" itself and the fact of the vow. He is less likely to mention the content of the vow.¹⁵ A typical story involves the merchant Jakob Reyder of Heidelberg, attacked by robbers in a forest and bound fast to a tree, wounded. Issickemer reports that Reyder called on the Virgin for help, promising a pilgrimage to Altötting with "substantial offerings" (*vermöglichen opfern*). The reader learns that Reyder was liberated but does not learn what he brought to the shrine.¹⁶ At Regensburg, where four miracle books were published within three years, pilgrims were said to have "promised themselves" (*sich versprechen* or *sich verheissen*) with a vow (*Gelübde*). In these inventories, the material offerings that in most cases accompanied the giving of the self are secondary. At most, the books add the

phrase “together with a gift.”¹⁷ A woodcut of around 1520 by Michael Ostendorfer depicts a horde of pilgrims, many bearing votive gifts, converging on the temporary wooden chapel housing the miraculous *Beautiful Virgin of Regensburg* (see fig. 1.1).

The sources never address the tangled ethical implications of transactions with God and his deputies. One might well wonder whether the person is really promising herself in the long term, or is her debt discharged once she leaves the material offering? Is it the payment of a debt or an offering of thanks? Isn't the very idea of a conditional promise problematic: should a holy personage be placed on probation? And after all why do Margaret of Cortona or Mary or Christ select some petitions over others? Do they hear all the petitions? Do they ever try to effect a cure but fail? Such questions troubled the Protestant reformers.

Of the eighty-three miracles attributed to Margaret of Cortona in 1311, forty-four occurred after a vow to visit the tomb.¹⁸ Two centuries later, in Germany, the proportion of miracles brought about by a promise of a visit to the shrine, rather than an actual visit, was often even higher. Among the 731 miracles attributed to the *Beautiful Virgin of Regensburg* between 1519 and 1522, only fourteen involved healings that commenced when the sufferer, disappointed that his vow had not been heard, began the journey to the shrine. There were only four reports of healings brought about at the chapel and by the votive offering itself.¹⁹ The rest were prompted by the vow. The inventory of miracles compiled at St. Blasius in Bopfingen (1512) is less punctilious about procedure. Most of the entries simply report that the miracle took effect “as soon as” the individual “promised himself” or made himself *zinsper* (acknowledged his indebtedness).²⁰ The written sources do not always say whether the vow took place before or after the cure. A vow made after a cure is of course no longer conditional. It is simply an expression of gratitude. When a new cult image was mounted—the *Madonna della Vittoria* by Andrea Mantegna, painted for the chapel built by Federico Gonzaga as a votive gift in 1495, is a famous example—votive offerings tendered by the local faithful accumulated within a day or two. Obviously, these offerings were not the fulfill-

ments of earlier promises. Who has time anyway to make a vow in a crisis? Surely not the scholar and cleric Tommaso Inghirami, called “Fedra,” when he fell under the wheels of an ox-cart in the streets of Rome in 1508, an event commemorated by an unusually refined and loquacious painted ex-voto (fig. 3.4).²¹ It is more plausible that Inghirami simply cried out for help and then formulated his vow—if at all—from his sickbed. The inscription below reads: “T[ommaso] Phaedrus rescued from such great danger.”

The normative vow-based miracle report glosses over ethical and theological implications. The very term “ex-voto” veils the existence of the many non-vow-based offerings. Instead, it brings out the psychological dimensions of the vow. A private promise or pledge creates *conscience*—honesty with oneself—as a criterion of piety. Conscience is a doubling of the self into selfish ego and grateful superego, a doubling that can never be taken for granted. Remember Christ's disappointed observation that only one in ten lepers he cured bothered to thank him (Luke 17: 11–19).

In the *Genealogy of Morality* (1887) Friedrich Nietzsche identified the modern, morally domesticated person as one split into two selves, the self who makes the promise and the self who keeps the promise: “This necessarily forgetful animal, in whom forgetting is a strength, representing a form of *robust* health, has bred for himself a counter-device, memory, with the help of which forgetfulness can be suspended in certain cases,—namely in those cases where a promise is to be made. . . . [Memory] is an active *desire* not to let go [*Nicht-wieder-loswerden-wollen*], a desire to keep on desiring what has been, on some occasion, desired, really it is the *will's memory*.”²² This was a deplorable development, for Nietzsche, for why should a person pledge his own future self? His life is now stitched together by memory; he becomes a continuous person. But the “*desire to keep on desiring*,” even beyond the extinction of the desire, is in conflict with the drive to self-preservation. A promise, according to Nietzsche, conflicts with a positive ideal of personhood. The vow is contrived, restrictive, enforcing a dreadful continuity. That is why it had to be monitored by a



Fig. 3.4 School of Raphael (attrib.). Votive painting offered by Tommaso Inghirami, ca. 1508. Oil on wood. Basilica of S. Giovanni Laterano, Rome.

community. In the Old Testament, the maker of the vow often came to regret it. The warrior Jephtha was constrained by a badly formulated vow to sacrifice his own daughter (Judges 11:29–40). Such external constraints came to seem false and mechanical to Christians. Martin Luther contended that the hero Samson fell not because his hair was cut, and presumably not because he had rejected God, but simply because he had broken his Nazirite vow.²³

Such unnatural behavior as the honoring of one's own promises, no matter how inconvenient, was encouraged by preachers but also by the folk-tale, for example "Rumpelstiltskin," a distorted version of the distress story as recorded in the miracle books.²⁴ A miller's daughter is ordered by the king to spin straw into gold. A mysterious little man appears and offers to help in exchange for the girl's first-born child. In despair, she makes the

pledge. The straw is transformed into gold, and the girl, now queen, bears the king's child. She forgets her promise, but the dwarf does not. A vow, arresting through formalization the usual ebb and flow of volition, locks in an impulse. The fateful quality of any vow connects it to legend and folklore. The vow-taker participates in a sphere larger than life.

If in ancient religions people made sacrificial contact with the gods by relations of contiguity, "a series of successive identifications,"²⁵ Christianity psychologized the communication. If in ancient religions promises were ratified by a public, Christianity internalized the listeners. A private vow must be self-enforced. The Christian votive system asks the believer to submit his private wishes to the constraints of public speech acts. That is a lot to ask. The unknowability of the transaction—there is no access to the mind of

the other—opens up space for self-deception and regret. The positive ideal of personhood is now no longer public consistency but truth to oneself, internal continuity.

Ancient pagan sources were less likely than Christian sources to address the psychology of vows. Only a few inscriptions on surviving ancient Greek offerings speak of the fulfillment of a conditional vow.²⁶ A passage in the *Iliad* seems to indicate a relative indifference in the pagan cult to the prospective-retrospective distinction. A brother of Hektor who is also an augur urges Hektor to ask their mother, Hekuba, to approach the goddess Athena and implore her to protect the city from the savage warrior Diomedes:

 speak to our mother; tell her to call together
 women in age like hers, unlock the shrine
 of grey-eyed Athena on our citadel,
 and choose that robe most lovely and luxurious,
 most to her liking in the women's hall,
 to place upon Athena's knees.

 Then heifers, twelve, are to be promised her,
 unscarred and tender, if she will relent
 in pity for our men, our wives and children,
 and keep Diomedes out of holy Troy.

(6.86–95)²⁷

Hekuba and the other women carry out these instructions. They make a preliminary offering to the goddess, the *peplos*, or dress, but prudently hold back the valuable cattle in case the goddess chooses not to listen to the request. In the event, she did not. However, there is no evidence in the text that this hedging approach to the petition was judged critically by the deity.²⁸

The Christian interest in private promises encouraged the development of a person, in Nietzsche's words, "*reliable, regular, necessary* [*notwendig*], even in his own self-image, so that he, as someone making a promise is, is answerable for his own *future!*"²⁹ This "necessary" or inexorable person (*notwendig* in its archaic sense, "not ceding") is guided by conscience, as opposed to the reckless but formula-bound vow-taker of archaic society.

The clerical preference for the cycle of pledge and fulfillment favors exchanges with the deity

focused on health and well-being rather than salvation. Many forms of Christian dedication, however, aim not to secure health but to increase the likelihood of spiritual salvation, which, if achieved, will come too late for any sublunary expression of gratitude. Donors buy chapels, altars, altarpieces, candles, and masses in hopes of securing the destiny of their souls in the afterlife. Donors install portraits of themselves on or near altars—effigies or painted portraits embedded within religious paintings—symbolizing the constancy of their devotion. An example is the Ferrarese panel of the 1420s in the Metropolitan Museum of Art depicting Pietro de' Lardi kneeling before the Virgin Mary and Christ. The inscription reads: "Beloved Mother of God, to whom the whole world bows, with devout heart Pietro de' Lardi, whom his pastor Saint Nicholas presents to you, had this picture painted for you" (fig. 3.5). This panel belongs to the large class of panel and mural paintings, also sometimes called "votive images," that depict kneeling donors commending themselves to saints or to the Virgin in hopes of permanent protection and salvation. The detachment of such requests from urgent matters of health obscures any punctual reference (that is, reference to a specific event or episode). Salvation, in contrast to health, is an abstract idea. No records can be kept of who is saved and who is not. As Michele Bacci has reminded us, the painting offered *pro remedio animae*, because more loosely referential, was a more various and flexible institution than the *ex-voto*.³⁰ Many such paintings were significant works of art. From the vast corpus of salvational images involving portraits of the donor, one need only invoke the *Madonna of Canon van der Paele* by Jan van Eyck (1436, Groeningemuseum, Bruges) and Titian's *Pesaro Madonna* (1526, Frari, Venice).

In the late Middle Ages, however, a high proportion of shrine-visiting pilgrims were tending not to the salvation of their souls but simply to their health and well-being. At Regensburg 77 percent of the recorded miracles involved illnesses; 15 percent involved accidents; attacks, imprisonment, and wartime afflictions made up the rest.³¹ Already the *Canterbury Tales* tells of pilgrims wending their way to the shrine:



Fig. 3.5 Master G. Z. *Madonna and Child with Donor*. Ferrara, ca. 1420–30. Tempera and gold on wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Adele L. Lehman, in memory of Arthur Lehman, 1965, 65.181.5.

The holy blisful martir for to seke [seek],
That hem hath holpen, whan that they
were seke [sick].

(General Prologue, 17–18)

The fixation of the devout on their bodily health was a source of exasperation for reformers such as Chaucer’s contemporary the Lollard William

Thorpe, who said in 1407: “examyne who so ever will twentie of thes pilgremis, and he shall not fynde thre men or women that knowe surely a com-maundment of God, nor can say their Pater Noster and Ave Maria nor their Credo redely, in any maner of langage. And as I have learnid and also know somewhat by experience of thes same pilgremis tellyng the cause why that many men and women go hither



Fig. 3.6 Votive painting: intercession in a fall from a ladder, appealing to St. John of Capistrano, 1522. Casein on wood. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Kr V 115.

and thither now on pilgrimadis, it is more for the helthe of their bodies than of their soules.”³² The typical modern scholar has a strong anti-Lollard bias and is thus unlikely to hold it against a pilgrim that she visits a tomb-shrine only to be cured. On the contrary, correcting for the antimaterialist and anti-instrumental biases of previous scholarship, the modern scholar is likely to sympathize with premodern pragmatic, nondogmatic, and affect-driven devotional practices.

As mentioned earlier, a new format was invented in central Italy in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. These panels, drawing on recently developed powers of the art of painting,

were capable of portraying the votary and legibly narrating her story. They disclosed the essentially referential nature of the votive offering. An example is the panel dated 1522 depicting a saint protecting a child who had fallen from a ladder (fig. 3.6).

Wax or silver models of bodies or organs, as well as the full-scale effigies in wax favored by some Italian elite, were also referential, even if their referents were unnamed. Some figural wax ex-votos and unshaped offerings of wax, the so-called measurement offerings (discussed in chapter 2), referred by a quantitative correspondence to the body of the votary. They too were portraits of a rudimentary kind. The painted ex-voto panels offered much



Fig. 3.7 Votive painting of miraculous appearance of the type “Christ seeking his Clothes,” 1746. Oil on wood. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Kr V 420.



Fig. 3.8 Ex Voto: Recovery from an illness, 1849. Oil on tin. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950, 1950-134-814.

more, supplementing the miracle books with their inscriptions, which typically included a name, a date, and a profession of faith in the first person. Along with the anatomical model, since the seventeenth century the small painted ex-voto, usually horizontal in format, has been the most common form of offering at shrines in Europe and in the Americas (figs. 3.7 and 3.8).

Most wax and metal ex-votos are multiples, cast from molds. The ex-voto panel is not mechanically produced but rather hand-painted by an artist who relays the story told to him by translating it into a set of pictorial conventions (the Virgin, the attitudes of prayer) derived from religious paintings but also from other ex-votos. Style is attenuated so that it does not interfere with the reference to the patient. The ex-voto panel is unique but does not rise too far above the prosaic. There is some early evidence of the use of templates. At the Sanctuary of the Madonna della Quercia at Viterbo, a sixteenth-century artist used a stock depiction—a stencil or pattern—of a man in a sickbed for more than one panel, customizing it later with color and an inscription.³³ But this is an exception. The point of the ex-voto panel is its singularity: each votary gets her very own panel made from scratch.

Many ex-votos depict elements of the real setting, such as family members, the home (fig. 3.9), or features of the local landscape. The ex-voto is conventional but no panel can substitute for another. A good analogy would be the stock love letter composed for an illiterate suitor by a hired scribe, such as the ones found in the “Arcade of the Scribes” in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Conventionality does not mean inauthenticity. The painted ex-voto depicts its own origin. Like a photograph, it is an *occasional* work: the real circumstances of its genesis persist to become an aspect of the work’s content. The pictures are amplifications of the wax figurine’s or abandoned crutch’s micronarrative. They plot out a plight unfolding in time, making visible a crisis, a response, and a resolution (fig. 3.10).

Before it was translated into two-dimensional form, the devout’s story was honed by tellings and retellings to neighbors and kin. Such stories were shaped by earlier stories of cures and rescues, by



Fig. 3.9 Votive painting of a farm robbery, 1828. Oil on panel. Rudolf Kriss collection, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Kr. V 134.



Fig. 3.10 Votive painting of an intercession in an imprisonment with appeal to Saint Leonard, 1791. Oil on panel. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Kr. V 246.

folk hagiography, and by remembered pictures—the preexisting “scenarios” that organized the votary’s experience.³⁴ Unlike the folktale or legend whose origin is lost in its retellings, this story begins with a secure reference: the first person who, from within the position of grammatical objecthood (the afflicted “me”), finds the utterance (originating from an “I”) that wins his own liberation. But storytelling simplifies, and depiction simplifies still further. We may know the name of the “author”—the referent of the “I”—but that ego is temporally plural. The mindful, promise-keeping person proposed by the ex-voto, the necessary or inexorable person, the person and his spectral double “conscience,” is a person spread across time. The distension of the votive testimonial into pictorial narrative raises questions that the crutch or body part had not. Which point along the continuum of personhood is the true origin point of the ex-voto? Is it the moment of plight, the moment of the pledge, or the moment of the recollection of the pledge in a state of relieved tranquility? Is it the moment of loss of confidence in the medical cure? Or is it an impulse of gratitude that renders moot the whole question of an earlier pledge?

Illness involves false alarms, spells and charms, laments and appeals, the ebb and flow of strength and spirit, trials of medicines or regimens. Medieval written sources often register this complexity. The life of the twelfth-century holy man Godric tells of a child who went blind. The parents vowed a penny to Thomas à Becket, but no cure followed. “They then went to Finchale where he was healed at Godric’s tomb, after which the coin intended for Becket was offered to Godric.”³⁵ A broken fetter or abandoned crutch, a more rudimentary retelling, simplifies such complex tales, offering only a single origin point. Even a painted panel has no choice but to simplify. A painting trims a branching tree of impulses, velleities, decisions, half decisions, and reversals. For any patient, cure-by-miracle was only one option. There were physicians, herbal healers, folk remedies, spells, and charms. The Regensburg miracle books list seven cases in which the person was cured by the Virgin Mary and “without recourse” to doctor or medicine. These words imply that in many other cases doubt could remain about

the reason for the cure.³⁶ Appeals to physicians or other medical technicians were of course never depicted in the painted votive panels.

Among all these decisions, there were two that counted: promising to transfer something from the worldly to the divine sphere and making good on that promise. The origin of the thing’s career as a votive offering is the moment of dedication or “setting aside,” the decision, for example, to hold onto the useless crutch and carry it to the shrine. This decision may precede by some interval the “setting up” at the shrine. It is not important *when* this decision is taken but rather that the votive author decides for himself. At that moment, he is not playing a role in a ritual staged by a priest, nor is he a stage prop in the story of the thaumaturgic saint as assembled by scribes for presentation in Rome. He is the will behind the verb “dedicate.” Nor are the crutches and the chains mere props. They are commonplace objects and yet nonsubstitutable.

The key notion is that the decision-maker, the consecrator, is a private person. He is not playing a role in a ritual. He is a founder, an *auctor*, an author. The referential and occasional quality of the offering isolates a personal decision. Although pagan votive offerings had done this, Christian practice dramatized, personalized, and above all dilated that decision into a miniature autobiography (fig. 3.11).

The ex-voto refers to a decision taken outside the framework of ordinary social existence. The crisis is defined by its break with the quotidian rhythms of household, workshop, or farm, lending a subsocial quality to votive authorship, a falling away from assigned roles. In the crisis, social norms are suspended. Thomas More, in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1530), a rejoinder to Protestant reformers, acknowledged but was not alarmed by such “evil petitioners” as highway robbers who ask God to bring them good fortune. And as for women who ask Mary to disencumber them of their husbands, in More’s opinion there is neither “great harm nor unlawfulness” in that.³⁷ Lauren Berlant describes a generic predicament of our own time, when so many people faced with the undoing of “conventions of reciprocity” no longer have at their disposal, or no longer trust, the



Fig. 3.11 Votive painting for sick cattle, 1794. Oil on wood. Rudolf Kriss collection, Asbach Monastery, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Kr V 160.

“affective scenarios” or ready-made genres meant to help them manage life and sustain optimism.³⁸ The ex-voto offers the sufferer knocked out of his rhythms and roles just such a genre.

The origin point of the picture, which is the occasion of the whole votive performance, is the subsocial, extraecclesiastical consecration, a resolution marked by a prayer, that is, by a conventional

posture and verbal formula. The psychic content of a prayer, if any, is undepictable. The panels depict a gesture of appeal, but one cannot say whether the gesture contains a petition accompanied by a vow or just a petition, and that very indeterminacy is valuable. It signals that the vow is private. The recollecting of the vow has not been delegated to an audience.

The risk of privatizing the vow is that vows will be “forgotten.” Donna Bruna’s son’s legs were covered with sores. He was cured after her vow, but the sores returned several times when she neglected to visit the shrine of Margaret of Cortona as she had promised. At last she undertook the visit and the legs cleared up for good.³⁹ But many vows are surely forgotten also because the cured one herself cannot know for sure whether it was the Virgin who cured her or the doctor, the herbal potion, or the passage of time. The etiology of a cure or a rescue is always in doubt. In fulfilling her vow, the votary makes a determination of cause. An inscription of 1718 on a votive panel in Vienna proposes the simplest explanation: the cause is Mary no matter what!

Alle Medizin vergeblich ist
Wo Du Maria kein’ Helferinn bist.
(All medicine is useless / unless you,
Mary, are helping.)⁴⁰

The votive painting hides the moment of decentered consecration by embedding it within a narrative. Late medieval English sources tell of a practice that, by contrast, marks that moment. Supplicants bent pennies over ailing bodies, even over the afflicted part of the body.⁴¹ The consecrator contracts to bring that very penny, not just any penny, to a shrine. The bending transforms the coin from a substitutable token into a singular object, marking it as consecrated but also putting a mark in material reality, signifying the intention to consecrate. The penny will be offered, but it is unlikely to be the entire offering. The act is conspicuous because it would be pointless in everyday life. The bent penny, tethered to an invisible decision, is removed from circulation and enters a state of nonrelationality to other coins, just as a promise is a speech act that withdraws from relations

with the rest of language, permitting it to persist through the vicissitudes of emotion and thought. The votary brings the penny and so retains contact with the initial impulse that launched the pilgrimage. Nonfungibility is dramatized by the coin but holds generally for all offerings. The life of Thomas à Becket tells of a woman who vowed a candle. Her husband instead gave two pence. The saint appeared and told her to fulfill her vow exactly.⁴²

To move an object from a condition of substitutability into a condition of nonsubstitutability is to reverse the logic of death, which moves singularities back into an ecological nonindividuation. The bent penny occupies the place in the drama where death could be. The story that gives rise to an ex-voto differs from all those stories that one way or another are enclosed by death. In this story of healing, death is by definition absent. The ex-voto, the offering, is added to the story and takes the place of death.

The English coin bending discloses the mentality of every miracle seeker. The penny formalizes attention at a location far removed from the shrine. The pilgrim then brings that material figure of attention to the shrine. This changes the shape of the votive episode. The bent penny “sets up” the penny as an offering even before it has arrived at the shrine, weakening the prescriptive force of such terms as “anathema” and “offering,” which point forward to the shrine and not backward to the impulse. The bending leaves a mark not in measurable space but in a nongeometrical field of event, conscience, and narration. That point, even when not marked by a penny, is the notional origin point of the hybrid iconic-narrative form, the painted ex-voto.

The painted ex-voto is set up at the shrine but like the coin aims elsewhere and backward in time, opening a window onto a scene of consecration or commendation. The panel covers with a stock image of supplication an unknowable sequence of events and awarenesses. The panel figures a narrative, an excerpt of a life, whose crux lies just beyond its own representational reach. A painted ex-voto is a pictorial reconstruction of the circumstances framing a consecration. The momentum of that initial impulse, preserved by conscience, materializes as the panel.

We are now in a position to address a question the literature on votive offerings mostly evades: what is the relation between an ex-voto and an artwork? We have noted that at pagan and Christian shrines alike expensive and well-crafted offerings—jewelry, metalwork, devotional paintings—were displayed side by side with humble artifacts or even mere foodstuffs. The painted ex-voto panel sharpens the question. It resembles painted artworks and yet is functionally closer to the waxbody parts, nonart objects. The painted ex-voto panel emerged historically at exactly the moment when Italian painting was establishing itself as an art form and detaching itself from religious functions. The ex-voto took advantage of the new developments in painting in central Italy in the mid-fifteenth century: individuation or portrayal and convincing disposition of bodies in virtual spaces constructed by linear perspective. But whereas the art of painting over the course of the next two centuries went on to acquire undreamt-of expressive and seductive powers, even as it rivaled poetry in its capacity for allusion, metaphor, and self-reference, the ex-voto remained prosaic. The ex-voto does nothing more than restage the collaborative production of a miracle: petition plus promise plus intercession and result. The ex-voto seals a vow and closes off doubt about the votary's intentions. "Beauty" is all in the event: the ex-voto pays tribute to beauty through its tribute to health and in the embedded image of the Virgin, who is beauty itself. To add beauty or pattern or other triggers of desire on the level of the signifier would be to add superfluous, competing origin points.

The painted ex-voto does not compete with painted cult images. It is not itself an object of devotion, and it has little value once removed from the shrine. The painted ex-voto has a double orientation: in space, to the shrine it adorns; and in time, backward to the event. It is locked in space and time, whereas the artwork is mobile in all dimensions. A beautiful artwork mounted near an altar has the potential to override the shrine's centripetal pull. The work of art respects no center other than itself. The artwork offered to a deity—Altdorfer's *Rest on the Flight*, for example—was hardly drained of significance when at some later point it was removed

from the Marian shrine and transferred to the private sphere and eventually, in 1876, to the museum in Berlin.

The painted ex-voto has a ready-made answer to the question of its own origin. It proposes the votary as "author," bypassing the painter. The ex-voto gives us no chance to propose a different answer. The artwork is more evasive about reference and authorship.

In the past, art historians excluded ex-votos from their canons. Adolfo Venturi included two among the eighteen thousand illustrations in his eleven-volume *History of Italian Art* (1901–1940), but only because he thought they could be attributed to the young Raphael.⁴³ More recent art historians turn the tables, using the ex-voto to relativize the very idea of fine art. They point out that many paintings now displayed against white walls in art museums were once enmeshed, like ex-votos, in the affective lives of the devout and in local symbolic economies. This debate goes nowhere because an artwork can easily come into being within a functional matrix but later leave that matrix behind. Art may well individuate, portray, and name. But the artwork will exceed and absorb its own references. The uncoupling from reality achieved by artistic fiction, by the open-endedness of metaphoric or rhetorical signification, and generally by the nonpropositional nature of pictorial representation impedes reference. The ex-voto's closure and spatial tethering are incompatible with art. An artwork's anarchic refusal to cohere reproduces the incoherence of the human subject itself. The work of art assembles its fiction out of fragments of sensory experience but blocks any view back onto experience integrated by a concept of personhood. The ex-voto gives us exactly that view onto integrated personhood, making the case that a particular segment of experience was uniquely open to an authority beyond experience. The ex-voto, because it pictures a coherent person, is poor and underdetermined as art. The ex-voto discourages the viewer through its own stylistic austerity from appending meanings not already contained within it. The sufferer's sufferings meant everything to the sufferer, but much less to the beholder. There is little room for us.



Fig. 3.12 Guidoccio Palmerucci. *Madonna and Child between Two Angels, Adored by Donors*, 1340s. Tempera and gold leaf on wood. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Gift from the Samuel H. Kress Study Collection, 1960.0043.

This analysis permits us to address a final riddle whose contours came into view earlier: why are so many of the votive images associated with salvation, as opposed to cures and rescues, successful as artworks? These are paintings placed at or near altars, depicting holy personages together with portraits of the devout in attitudes of prayerful submission. An example is the panel of the 1340s depicting an enthroned Madonna and Child, flanked by angels, adored by two kneeling adult figures and a child, all depicted in smaller scale (fig. 3.12). Behind this work may lie a crisis or a punctual decision, but neither crisis nor decision dominates the work. The moment of the work's "consecration" is dilated. And this gives the artist—the panel

is attributed to one Guidoccio Palmerucci—an opening, an opportunity.

The discourse of reference profiles the ex-voto and the artwork against each other, revealing that the two categories cannot be collapsed into one any more than they can be disentangled. The ex-voto, by maintaining its referential address, does not permit the painter to wrest authorial control away from the votary. The artwork, meanwhile, cancels reference by engulfing it.

- 1 On the Delos offerings, see W. H. D. Rouse, *Greek Votive Offerings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 347.
- 2 On the Mariahilf offerings, see Edmund Friess and Gustav Gugitz, "Die Mirakelbücher von Mariahilf in Wien (1689–1775)," in *Deutsche Mirakelbücher: Zur Quellenkunde und Sinnggebung*, ed. Georg Schreiber (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1938), 77–134, 118n1 and 119.
- 3 For these examples, see Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 157–158; Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 96–98; Michele Bacci, "Pro remedio animae": *Immagini sacre e pratiche devozionali in Italia centrale (secoli XIII e XIV)* (Pisa: ETS, 2000), 187.
- 4 See John Raymond Shinnars, ed., *Medieval Popular Religion 1000–1500* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 1997), 199.
- 5 Jakob Issickemer, *Das buchlein der zuflucht zu Maria der muter gottes in alten Oding* ([Nuremberg], 1497), Cvir. The text is reproduced and transcribed in Robert Bauer, "Das Büchlein der Zuflucht zu Maria: Altöttinger Mirakelberichte von Jacobus Issickemer," *Ostbairische Grenzmarken: Passauer Jahrbuch für Geschichte, Kunst und Volkskunde* 7 (1964/65), plate 14, and p. 222, no. 57.
- 6 See Gerlinde Stahl, "Die Wallfahrt zur Schönen Maria in Regensburg," *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Bistums Regensburg* 2 (1968): 158.
- 7 On this painting, see Franz Winzinger, *Albrecht Altdorfer: Die Gemälde* (Munich: Hirmer, 1975), 75–76.
- 8 Leon Battista Alberti, *Momus*, trans. Sarah Knight (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 116–117.
- 9 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ex-voto: Image, organe, temps* (Paris: Bayard, 2006), 47.
- 10 Alberti, *Momus*, 120–123.
- 11 This account of the word-histories is based on Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 489–491.
- 12 On the shifts in cult practices and on vows and ex-votos, see André Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Age* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1981), 451–460, 524–529, and 544–548.
- 13 See, for example, Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 85–92.
- 14 See Joanna Cannon, *Margherita of Cortona and the Lorenzetti: Siennese Art and the Cult of a Holy Woman in Medieval Tuscany* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 55.
- 15 Issickemer, *Das buchlein der zuflucht zu Maria der muter gottes in alten Oding*; Bauer, "Das Büchlein der Zuflucht zu Maria."
- 16 Issickemer, *Das buchlein der zuflucht zu Maria der muter gottes in alten Oding*, Bivr; Bauer, "Das Büchlein der Zuflucht zu Maria," plate 10 and 214, no. 12.
- 17 Stahl, "Die Wallfahrt zur Schönen Maria in Regensburg," 134.
- 18 See Cannon, *Margherita of Cortona*, 55.
- 19 See Stahl, "Die Wallfahrt zur Schönen Maria in Regensburg," 101–102.
- 20 See Wolfgang Irtenkauf, "Das Bopfinger Mirakelbuch," *Blätter für württembergische Kirchengeschichte* 63 (1963): 176–201.
- 21 For a discussion and illustration of the Inghirami *tavoletta votiva*, see Fredrika H. Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33 and 34, fig. 13. This is the most important book about the painted ex-votos. See also Jacobs's "Humble Offerings: Votive Panel Paintings in Renaissance Italy," in *Ex Voto: Votive Giving across Cultures*, ed. Ittai Weinryb, fig. 9, 153–154, (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2016).
- 22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Second Essay, § 1, p. 39; original text in Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 5:292.
- 23 See Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Works*, vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 40, no. 289, June 28, 1532.
- 24 For a study of the Grimm tales and their sources, see Heinz Rölleke, *Grimms Märchen und ihre Quellen* (Trier, Germany: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1998), esp. "Rumpelstiltskin," 111–113.
- 25 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 225.
- 26 See *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*, 1:278, texts 43, 48, 51, 54.
- 27 *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Anchor, 1974), 144.
- 28 It has been suggested that the heifers are promised and not given because women in Homer never carry out animal sacrifices. *Iliad*, Book VI, ed. Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 165. G. S. Kirk, however, points out that at line 308 the priestess Theano offers to sacrifice the oxen "straightaway," that is, as soon as Athena grants the favor; *The Iliad: A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2:196–197.
- 29 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Second Essay, § 1, p. 39; original text in Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, 5:292.
- 30 Michele Bacci, "Italian Ex-Votos and 'Pro-Anima' Images in the Late Middle Ages," in Weinryb, *Ex Voto* esp. 95–101; and Bacci, "Pro remedio animae."
- 31 See Stahl, "Die Wallfahrt zur Schönen Maria in Regensburg," 114–134.
- 32 The text, published in Antwerp in 1530, is excerpted in Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (New York: Norton, 1989), 260–261.
- 33 For the Viterbo *tavoletta votiva*, see Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety*, 31, and "Humble Offerings: Votive Panel Offerings in Renaissance Italy," in Weinryb, *Ex Voto*, 152–153, fig. 7 (152).
- 34 On the concept of the scenario, see Christopher S. Wood, "The Votive Scenario," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60 (2011): 207–227.
- 35 Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 92, quoting the "Life of St. Godric."
- 36 See Stahl, "Die Wallfahrt zur Schönen Maria in Regensburg," 102.
- 37 Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Thomas M. C. Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard C. Marius (New Haven, CT: Princeton University Press, 1981), 6:235; Shinnars, *Medieval Popular Religion*, 208–210.
- 38 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 7, 9.
- 39 See Cannon, *Margherita of Cortona*, 57n14.
- 40 Friess and Gugitz, "Die Mirakelbücher von Mariahilf," 117.
- 41 On penny-bending, see Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 94–95; Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1988), 91–92; Pierre-André Sigal, "Le voeu et l'ex-voto dans l'Angleterre médiévale d'après le procès de canonisation de saint Thomas de Cantiloupe évêque de Hereford," in *Homo religiosus: Autour de Jean Delumeau* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 87–88.
- 42 See Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 93.
- 43 See Adolfo Venturi, *Storia dell'arte italiana* (Milan: Hoepli, 1938), 11.1:181–182. See also Leopold Dussler, *Raphael: A Critical Catalogue of His Pictures, Wall-Paintings and Tapestries* (London: Phaidon, 1971), 61.

Agents of Faith

Votive Objects in Time and Place

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Frontispiece: Votive bust of a young man. Etruscan, 3rd–2nd century BCE. Terracotta. Musée du Louvre, Paris, MNE 1341. Cat. 185.

Contents

ix	Director's Foreword <i>Susan Weber</i>	67	THREE Public and Private Dimensions of the Votive Offering <i>Christopher S. Wood</i>
xi	Of Votive Things <i>Ittai Weinryb</i>		
xix	Note to the Reader	87	FOUR Memory and Narrative: Materializing Past and Future in the Present <i>Fredrika Jacobs</i>
	PART I AGENTS OF FAITH		
	ONE		FIVE
3	Place, Shrine, Miracle <i>Jaś Elsner</i>	109	Votive Giving Today <i>David Morgan</i>
26	Terrestrial Gateways to the Divine <i>Alexandra Beuscher and Darienne Turner</i>	128	Votive Giving at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial <i>Anne Hilker and Alyssa Velazquez</i>
	TWO		
33	Votive Materials: Bodies and Beyond <i>Ittai Weinryb</i>		
60	Edible Offerings: Food in Votive Culture <i>Michael H. Dewberry and Alexander Ekserdjian</i>		

	PART II		
	VOTIVE OBJECTS IN TIME		
	AND PLACE		
	SIX		
141	Clever Devices and Cognitive Artifacts: Votive Giving in the Ancient World		
	<i>Verity Platt</i>		
	SEVEN		
159	<i>Lob und Danck</i> : On the Social Meaning of Votives in German Pilgrimage Culture		
	<i>Mitchell B. Merback</i>		
182	Votive Wax: The Hipp Workshop in Pfaffenhofen		
	<i>Nina Gockerell</i>		
	EIGHT		
191	In Search of Blessings: Ex-Votos in Medieval Greater South Asia		
	<i>John Guy</i>		
	NINE		
225	Votive Giving in Islamic Societies		
	<i>Sheila Blair</i>		
	TEN		
241	Action in Form: African Art as Voiced Engagements		
	<i>Suzanne Preston Blier</i>		
	ELEVEN		
255	Votive Giving in the New World		
	<i>Diana Fane and Fatima Bercht</i>		
	TWELVE		
285	The Contemporary Ex-Voto: Reenchanting the Art World?		
	<i>Mechtild Widrich</i>		
296	Checklist of the Exhibition		
327	Acknowledgments		
328	Bibliography		
345	About the Authors		
346	Index		
351	Lenders to the Exhibition		
352	Photo Credits		