

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF ANCIENT RITUAL

Exhibition presents a multicultural perspective on the sensory experience of religious ritual in the ancient world
November 9, 2018–March 3, 2019

November 6, 2018, New Haven, Conn.—In the ancient world, religious rituals were multisensory experiences, filled with vibrantly colored representations of supernatural beings, resonant musical sounds, billowing clouds of incense, and the taste of food and drink. *Sights and Sounds of Ancient Ritual* considers the ways in which these rituals appealed to the senses through objects that would have drawn worshippers into closer proximity to divine forces. The exhibition brings together more than 80 works from the Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Babylonian Collection at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History that span three millennia—from approximately 1500 B.C.E. to 1500 C.E.—and represent diverse traditions, including those of ancient Greece and Rome, Western Europe, Egypt, West Africa, the Near East, China, and Mesoamerica. The works on view depict gods and goddesses, illustrate aspects of religious ritual, or had ritual functions themselves, ultimately showing how ancient cultures used visually and sonically evocative objects to create powerful connections with the sacred.

Sights and Sounds opens with a musical instrument known as a *sistrum*, a small yet powerful object that sets the stage for the exhibition. Made in ancient Egypt, the sistrum was used as a rattle during rituals for the goddess Hathor, who often assumed the guise of a cow and is shown here with bovine ears. The head of the goddess is surmounted by a temple-like doorway, an imposing post-and-lintel structure pierced by metal rods that hold small pieces of metal, which would have clacked together when the instrument was moved. The two faces of Hathor, which look out on either side of the instrument, represent her omnipotence as a solar deity. The rituals celebrated the return of the goddess, and the sound of the rattling sistrum was intended to evoke the rustling of the rushes and grasses under her feet as she walked toward her temple. The vivid blue color and brilliant surface of the object are the result of its manufacture in faience, which carried connotations of the immortal gods and was meant to recall the shimmering light of the sun. One section of the exhibition, curated by Daphne Martin, MC '19 and the Betsy and Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., B.A. 1966, Intern, delves deeper into the use of faience and blue pigments to explore the manufacturing process and the importance the color held in various ancient traditions. This section also highlights conservation research conducted at



Sistrum (Rattle) with the Head of Hathor,
Egyptian, Ptolemaic, ca. 304–30 B.C.E.
Faience. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of
Mr. and Mrs. Fred Olsen

Yale's Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage by presenting digital reconstructions of the original pigmentation of two sculptures in the exhibition from Egypt and ancient Greece.

Visitors encounter striking comparisons as they move through the galleries. A gold Javanese armband decorated with a lion head, which was used to adorn large statues of the gods, is displayed near a gilt-bronze Chinese statue of a bodhisattva, a figure worshipped as a deity in Mahayana



Dancer, China, Tang dynasty, 7th century C.E. Earthenware with slip and traces of pigment. Yale University Art Gallery, University Purchase

Buddhism. A sculpture of Xochipilli, the Mesoamerican god of music, dance, and pleasure, is placed near Roman coins that depict the nine Muses, Greek goddesses of creativity, many of whom are shown playing instruments. Flutes, bells, and drums invite visitors to imagine the music that was played during ancient rituals, while medieval manuscript pages display musical notations for psalms sung during the Catholic Mass. In addition, two Chinese earthenware tomb figures of young dancing girls are juxtaposed with an ancient Greek figure from southern Italy of a mourning siren, a mythological creature that was thought to sing lamentations for the dead.

Sights and Sounds of Ancient Ritual focuses on how ancient cultures visualized intangible divine powers through artworks; how ritual objects such as costumes and musical instruments enhanced dances, processions, sacrifices, and other religious ceremonies; and finally, how funerary objects included elements of music and dance to forge a link between the living and

the deceased. Carolyn M. Laferrière, exhibition curator and Postdoctoral Associate at Archaia: Yale Program for the Study of Ancient and Premodern Cultures and Societies explains, “Though we now encounter the ancient world through the objects displayed in quiet, contemplative museum spaces, in antiquity, the visual arts were, more often than not, intended to be used in religious and funerary rituals—rich ceremonies that would have been enhanced by both visual and auditory spectacles. In bringing together objects from Greece and Rome, the ancient Americas, early China, and more, this exhibition encourages visitors to engage with the vibrancy of religious ritual and, at the same time, to discover broad connections between how these cultures used sights and sounds within their ritual practices.”

Visitors can experience the sounds of the ancient world during a rich array of programs offered during the run of the exhibition, including a performance by U.K.-based artists Barnaby Brown and Stef Conner on February 7, 2019. Conner sings compositions inspired by ancient texts and melodies, and Brown performs them using reconstructions of a variety of ancient instruments, including the aulos, a Greek double-reed instrument similar to an oboe.



Mourning Siren, Greek, South Italian, Tarentine, ca. 350–300 B.C.E. Limestone with blue, brown, and red pigment. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Molly and Walter Bareiss, B.S. 1940S

Susan B. Matheson, the Molly and Walter Bareiss Curator of Ancient Art, comments, “*Sights and Sounds of Ancient Ritual* beautifully illustrates the encyclopedic range of the Gallery’s collection and brings together University collections to create an even more compelling experience for museum visitors.” The exhibition forms part of a multidisciplinary, yearlong project sponsored by Archaia: Yale Program for the Study of Ancient and Premodern Cultures and Societies that explores the relationship between the senses and ancient ritual. For more information on the project, including the related spring graduate seminar, “Sensory Experiences in Ancient Ritual,” visit archaia.yale.edu.

On View

November 9, 2018–March 3, 2019

Exhibition Credits

Exhibition made possible by the Jane and Gerald Katcher Fund for Education, the John F. Wieland, Jr., B.A. 1988, Fund for Student Exhibitions, and the Nolen-Bradley Family Fund for Education. Additional support provided by Archaia: Yale Program for the Study of Ancient and Premodern Cultures and Societies. Organized by Carolyn M. Laferrière, Postdoctoral Associate, Archaia: Yale Program for the Study of Ancient and Premodern Cultures and Societies, with Daphne Martin, the Betsy and Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., B.A. 1966, Intern, and Andrew D. Turner, former Postdoctoral Associate, both of the Department of Ancient Art, Yale University Art Gallery.

Related Programs

Performances

Thursday, November 8, 2018, 5:30 pm

Gallery+Blue

Thursday, February 7, 2019, 5:30 pm

Barnaby Brown and Stef Conner

Gallery Talks

Wednesday, November 14, 2018, 12:30 pm

“Listening to Ancient Ritual”

Carolyn M. Laferrière

Wednesday, December 5, 2018, 12:30 pm

“Musical Processions in Ancient and Premodern Ritual”

Carolyn M. Laferrière

Wednesday, February 6, 2019, 12:30 pm

“Seeing Blue in the Ancient World”

Daphne Martin

All programs are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. For more detailed programming information, visit artgallery.yale.edu/calendar.

Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 250,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

General Information

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday-Friday, 10 am-5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September-June); and Saturday-Sunday, 11 am-5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at artgallery.yale.edu.

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