

Roundup: “Religious Art” panel, Advent songs, the Christmas tree’s praise, BBC Nativity film

Posted on December 18, 2020 by Victoria Emily Jones

PANEL DISCUSSION: “Religious Art,” organized by the Forum for Philosophy: I posted about this live online event a month ago, and now that it’s passed, I want to share the video recording. Theologian Ben Quash (King’s College, London), curator Lieke Wijnia (Catharijneconvent Museum, Utrecht), and art historian Mehreen Chida-Razvi ([Khalili Collections](#), London) discuss the relationship between art and religion, how art can function within religious practice, how to exhibit religious art in a museum, and artworks as sites of conversation across religious traditions.

Quash opens by proposing different categories of “religious art”: art for religion, art about religion, art with religion, and art instead of religion. The three unpack those a bit, discussing the intentions of the artist or patron versus how the artwork is perceived by the viewer. Quash mentions [Haruspex](#) by Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva (a fascinating installation commissioned by the Vatican for the 2015 Venice Biennale, a contemporary artist’s response to “In the beginning . . . the word became flesh”; [read Quash’s essay](#) and an [artist interview](#)), the [East Window at St Martin-in-the-Fields](#) by Shirazeh Houshiary, the [Raphael Cartoons](#), and Aaron Rosen’s 2016 [Stations of the Cross](#) exhibition throughout the city of London, which shows the permeability of the boundaries between sacred and secular. (I participated, as viewer/pilgrim, in a [2019 iteration of the Stations project in Amsterdam](#).)



Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva (Macedonian, 1971–), *Haruspex*, 2015. Organic materials. Installation at the Pavilion of the Holy See at the 56th Venice Biennale.

In reference to Hadzi-Vasileva's canopy of pig's caul fat, Quash says that challenge or provocation can be a meaningful thing to happen in a religious context:

“ Works that ambush you are also religiously important, because a sort of religious art that only gives you what you already expect and want quickly becomes kitsch. It's just a reward of your expectations. And that shouldn't be what religious art does, it seems to me. It should actually want to take you somewhere else, just as good religion should—it should be transformative, not merely confirming where you already are. So there's a role for these sorts of artworks within religion as well as outside it.

Chida-Razvi shares slides of Islamic architectural spaces, devotional objects, and manuscript illuminations, including a Mughal painting that exemplifies the interfaith dialogue going on at the court of Akbar in Lahore, and Wijnia shares her experience curating objects people pray with for museum display and (forthcoming) an exhibition on Mary Magdalene. Such great content!