

LUISA ELENA ALCALÁ DONEGANI &
JUAN LUIS GONZÁLEZ GARCÍA (EDS.),
*SPOLIA SANCTA. RELIQUIAS Y ARTE
ENTRE EL VIEJO Y EL NUEVO MUNDO*

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Reviewed by

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Relics and reliquaries historiography has tended to focus primarily on the European world. In scholarship on the early modern Spanish world, for instance, attention has been limited to the El Escorial complex and the Iberian Habsburg collecting tradition. However, during the last decades, these research areas have expanded, both spatially and temporally.¹ *Spolia Sancta. Reliquias y arte entre el Viejo y el Nuevo Mundo* (Relics and Art between the Old and the New World) serves as a compelling demonstration of how continuing in this vein and widening the scope allows art historians to grasp broader dimensions of movement, staging, displacement,

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Philippe Boutry, Pierre-Antoine Fabre, and Dominique Julia (eds.), *Reliques modernes. Cultes et usages chrétiens des corps saints des Réformes aux révolutions*, 2 vols., vol. 2, Paris 2009. Stéphane Baciocchi and Christophe Duhamelle (eds.), *Reliques romaines. Invention et circulation des corps saints des catacombes à l'époque moderne*, Rome 2016. The authors of this review are members of the GLOBO Project at the Institute of Art History, University of Bern, Switzerland. The project investigates relics and human remains during the early modern period in various areas of the Iberian monarchies.

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exchange, and artistic production in and around relics. The volume features contributions covering many regions of former Iberian monarchies corresponding with areas in present-day Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Puerto Rico, and Spain. Therefore, across a range of geographies, the volume multiplies the approaches, reuniting eighteen scholars with different backgrounds and origins. Indeed, the assorted case studies provide points of reference for readers as they illustrate the relic's multiple social, religious, historical, political, and emotional layers of meaning. It accounts for the creation, acquisition, donation, even theft, and resemanticization of relics and reliquaries as well as gives special attention to transformative journeys across geographical, artistic, and cultural spaces.

The volume uses the evocative term “*spolia sancta*” as soon as in its title, to describe relics and objects related to them. Derived from the Latin “spoils” (*spolium*), the term *spolia* refers to the reuse of parts and fragments of ancient architectures and artworks generally aiming to convey continuity, appropriation, and/or transformation.² Thus, differentiated from the relics – of which the definition has generally been limited to the categories of sacred human remains and their contact objects, along with sacred images or icons (*acheiropoietia*) – the “*spolia sancta*” are presented here as a wider category: artifacts, human remains, for sure, but also containers, staged or built spaces, rituals and performances, as well as images (sacred or not, miraculous or human-handmade). The term thus includes the elements surrounding the relics that carry a kind of sacredness and have an active role in social life and social fabric.

Spolia Sancta is divided into four sections, corresponding to four main questions. The contributions in the first part, “Imagen y Reliquia” (Image and Relic), are devoted to similarities, differences, and the interplay between the two similar, yet different categories of objects. The book begins with an examination of a theoretical treatise by the Jesuit Martín de Roa from 1623 on the veneration of images and relics. Cécile Vincent-Cassy pleads for a joint examination of image and relic “to underline that both are united and their legitimacy is subordinated to the cult of the saints” (p. 24). After this opening, which offers the volume a theoretical theological basis from the early modern period, the contributions are devoted more to the practical context of images and relics as cult objects. María José del Río Barredo and Katherine Mills investigate the ritual use of these two categories of objects and their respective functions, particularly through the movement of the relics and images and their placement in liturgical spaces. Equally interested in the interplay between images and relics is Carmen Fernández-Salvador in her contribution on the “image-relic” of the altarpiece of the Virgen

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Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen has analyzed the relationship between spolia and relics in the Middle Ages in various studies, for example: ead., *Spolia as Relics? Relics as Spoils? The Meaning and Functions of Spolia in Western Medieval Reliquaries*, in: Cynthia Hahn and Holger A. Klein (eds.), *Saints and Sacred Matter. The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, Washington, DC 2015, 173–192.

del Pilar in Quito, a copy of the original in Zaragoza. She raises questions about the relationship between the original and the copy, but also the staging of the “image-relic” in relation to other relics around it to increase the authority of the copy.

In the second part, “Reliquias en la Practica Artistica” (Relics in Artistic Practice), the authors explore in case studies the mobility of relics and the craftsmanship underlying the production of reliquaries. José Riello starts this part by drawing a direct line from *acheiropoieta* (images made miraculously without a human hand) and reliquary busts to the modern genre of portraiture. In his analysis of a drawing of Maria Magdalena’s reliquary in Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume, Riello highlights the core feature that links reliquary busts and portraiture: they both hold the tension between the visible and the invisible; between the presence and the absence of the depicted. This is contrasted by a case studied by Pablo F. Amador Marrero and Ramón Pérez de Castro that deals with the alleged impossibility to copy two Castilian medieval sculptures of Christ. The comparative study of these two sculptures highlights the curious interplay between these sculptures-as-relics and their attempted copies. Roberto Alonso Moral, in his contribution to the volume, analyzes the socio-cultural dimension behind the production of reliquary busts in Naples for a global market by the end of the 16th century. As the demand for suitable relic containers grew, the production of busts as anthropomorphic reliquaries reached a peak and had a significant effect on the local economy. In contrast to this macro-perspective, Yessica Porrás ends part two by highlighting a small-scale practice of nuns from a female convent in New Granada. Spatially restricted by life in a convent, these nuns turned their imposed limitations into creativity and made use of paper reliquaries to house the few small relics that they received. The complex paper structures resembling gardens and landscapes of pilgrimage allowed them to travel spiritually to achieve individual proximity to their saints.

The third part, “Identidades y Espacios” (Identities and Spaces), examines the different ways private individuals as well as religious and political actors and institutions made use of relics. The four chapters showcase how relics could take on the role of “sacred goods” in a devotional market, necessitating human intervention to extend their sacredness into new contexts and spaces. In an essay about the female private collector Mencia de Mendoza (1508–1554), Noelia García Pérez offers a nuanced understanding of her relatively small but distinct collection of relics of female saints connected with motherhood and childbirth. She does so by delving into the Marquise’s biography and her connection to humanist practices, offering a vista onto a wider context in which to situate this collection’s particularities. Almudena Pérez de Tudela Gabaldón discusses the acquisition strategies of Philipp II (1527–1598) for El Escorial. She documents the relics entering the collection of El Escorial, introduces us to exhibition and storage spaces, and gives new insights into the celebrations revolving around the arrival

of the relics. She thereby uncovers the underlying political, diplomatic, and social dynamics connected with the trade of relics. The chapter by Antonio Joaquín Santos Márquez deals with the collection of the cathedral of Seville and explores the social significance of relic donations. It traces their movement and emphasizes the various ceremonies and festivities surrounding their arrival in the collection during the second half of the 16th century. In Agustina Rodríguez Romero's case study on the relics of the holy cross (*lignum crucis*), the focus shifts from the human actors handling relics to the venerated objects themselves. The author examines the function of cross relics as tools for evangelization processes in the viceroyalty of Peru and discusses how visual and written representations of the cross relics shaped religious and cultural communities.

The concluding section, “Éxitos, Fracasos y Resignificaciones” (Successes, Failures, and Resignifications), delves into the significance of martyrdom (in its widest definition) in Latin American history and investigates how the religious model of relic veneration was sometimes transposed to secular contexts. To do this, Escardiel González Estévez examines martyrdom episodes in America and Asia, analyzing how they generated relics and narratives that circulated between these regions and Europe, making relics pioneering objects of globalization. She questions why relics from America did not benefit from similar traffic as others, and why the New World lacked its own saints until well into the 17th century. She also highlights the fluid exchange between Christian relic worship and indigenous rituals in the Americas, particularly in the Andes, where ritual practices surrounding human remains were more prevalent and well-documented. Maria Berbara examines the reaffirmation of relic power that took place in 16th-century Brazil, in parallel to the Reformation movements which threatened relic legitimacy in Europe. She also describes that in Portuguese America, relics intersected with shamanic practices, leading to conflicts between Christians and indigenous peoples over their possession. Maria Judith Feliciano discusses the failed attempt to establish a local cult to Spanish martyr saints in Puerto Rico due to socio-economic factors and the lack of reliability in the context of the “Reconquista” martyrdom – at the hands of Arabic soldiers during the so-called “Reconquista” – for the local Puerto Rican population. This failure sheds light on the challenges of implanting devotional practices in island contexts and prompts a reevaluation of colonial diversity and religious mechanisms. This article also shows how difficult it can be to retrace a specific relic's history and the complexity of researching when sources lose track of them for a while. This section then also demonstrates ways in which relics have been repurposed to serve political and historical narratives, contributing to the formation of collective memory in and of modern Latin America. Patricia Zalamea Fajardo, for example, explores the contemporary (19th- to 21st-century Latin America) reinterpretation of martyrs and saints through similar practices in ritual and arts, like protecting,

collecting, and exhibiting in museums some objects that belonged to important historic personalities. She discusses how heroic figures have been portrayed with saint-like qualities, blurring the lines between martyrdom and heroism, between relic-image and civic portraits, between divine sanctity and politico-national sacredness.

The diverse approaches of the contributors shed light on a wide range of agents who operated with, through, and because of relics. Further, Rodríguez Romero in her chapter on the *lignum crucis* lets the objects themselves take center stage and highlights their agency. In a similar manner, Berbara examines the function of human bones as mediators. She brings a new aspect to the well-known case of the Tupinamba's appropriation of Francisco Pinto's bones and the interaction between Tupi and Christian actors by looking at how the contact affected visual argumentation in the confessional conflict in Europe. This contribution to the volume extends a line of thinking proffered by Margit Kern, who has addressed "transcultural negotiations" around the matter of human sacrifice in Mexico and Europe.³ And, more generally, these essays show the continued interest in tracing the cultural, social, and global lives of objects – their "biographies" – in ways that have been robustly mobilized by object-focused disciplines such as archaeology, art history, and museum studies over the course of the last twenty-five years.⁴ The notable range of social actors highlighted in the book points to the quite divergent socio-historical stories that can be accessed by taking relics as a starting point. There is an expanded range of male actors like King Henry of Portugal (1512–1580), involved in diplomatic processes, a bishop like Benito de Ribas (c. 1600–1668), trying to establish the cult of martyr saints in Puerto Rico, and artists building up a production process in Naples to meet the high demand for bust reliquaries. But female agency also takes a starring role in more than one case study, and this amounts to a seminal contribution to the volume as a whole. This starts with the contribution by Río Barredo and Mills, in which the nuns of the Convent of Las Descalzas Reales in Madrid moved the relics within liturgical frameworks. But these nuns also play an important role as the authors of the "rich, but still underutilized" (p. 49) notebooks, which make it possible to study this case at all. Porrás also considers the role of nuns, but in relation to the production of paper reliquaries, which is generally female connotated and enables an intimate form of devotion by making. In his study on bust reliquaries, Moral emphasizes the role of women as collectors of relics. While he mentions several active female figures, another author focuses on one specific case in detail: García Pérez sheds light not only on Mendo-

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Margit Kern, *Transkulturelle Imaginationen des Opfers in der Frühen Neuzeit. Übersetzungsprozesse zwischen Mexiko und Europa*, Berlin 2013.

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Igor Kopytoff, *The Cultural Biography of Things. Commoditization as Process*, in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986, 64–92.

za's role as a wealthy, humanistically educated collector. She also looks at the significance of the collection for Mendoza as a woman with specifically female experiences. This emphasis on the roles of women in the processes that accrued in and around relics and reliquaries is a strength of the book, if it is only revealed when reading the individual articles and not explicitly stressed in the volume's framing.

In conclusion, the case studies presented in *Spolia Sancta* represent a welcome geographical and thematic expansion of scholarship on the role of relics in the early modern period. The works of the authors, focused on a single category of object, demonstrates the productive application of diverse historical and, notably, art-historical methods and perspectives in their analysis. For scholars and readers interested in the early modern use of relics and sacred objects, *Spolia Sancta* is a valuable resource, likely to be revisited frequently, even after an initial reading.