

Performative Rites and Sensory Experiences: Practices of Dressing and Undressing Religious Images in Sacred and Secular Environments (13th-15th century)

The performative act of dressing and undressing religious images in sacred and secular environments was a common practice between the Middle Ages and the modern times, and it formed an integral part of the daily lived experiences of religious and lay people. Numerous documents have survived testifying to such practices, which mention the objects (the images, the clothing, sometimes the jewelry used in the ritual), the names of the individuals involved, and occasionally the times of the liturgical year in which the ritual was to take place; at the same time, the material objects that were involved in the performance are sometimes still preserved, albeit to a limited extent.

Scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Julie Hotchin have examined the significance that such performances had in the religious sphere, with specific reference to certain German communities of Benedictine nuns, where the practice of dressing sculptures in church served identity as well as devotional purposes. This paper broadens and complements their reading, expanding the investigation to different geographical and social contexts, and taking into consideration various aspects of the ritual to capture and shed new light on its numerous meanings. Specifically, I will focus on Italian centers in the period between the 13th-15th century, considering evidence from different types of churches (parish churches, mendicant churches, cathedrals), but also from secular environments (dwellings and public places); the active role of the laity both in the offering of objects and in the associated ritual practices will also be investigated. The performative rites will be reinterpreted against the background of the sensory experiences lived by the faithful, where the act of touching (directly, or mediated by a material object) a sacred image formed integral part of the devotional strategies accomplished to encounter the divine.