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Mrs. Rockefeller's Exquisite Corpse

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In the months before Christmas 1931, two of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's associates took it upon themselves to create and present a gift book for their employer, benefactor, and friend. After Mrs. Rockefeller's death in 1948, a secretary prepared the book for inclusion in Mrs. Rockefeller's archives by typing a transcript of its contents and identifying many of its contributors. The secretary also gave it a title: "Tribute Book." Both book and transcript rested in the subterranean vaults of the Rockefeller Archive Center in Tarrytown, New York until October 2014, after which the book was removed to a reserved area of the collection, available to researchers only with special permission.

The Tribute Book's transformation from forgotten to special object was put in motion entirely by happenstance. I had traveled to the Rockefeller Archive Center to see what I could learn about Rockefeller's religious views and habits in the decade when she was also busy founding the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. I had spent nearly two days reading through files and boxes that presented an expansive image of Mrs. Rockefeller's multiple artistic, domestic, family, religious, and philanthropic investments before turning to several boxes of ephemera. The "Tribute Book" was in one of these boxes, filed among ocean-liner passenger lists, prayer books, and other sundry materials; the finding aid entry made no mention of its fascinating arrangement of contributors, nor of the presence of a small painting by the artist Diego Rivera that it contained.

Together, the book's contents and the inadvertent way that they had come to my attention set me on a different train of thinking about the role of religious networks and influences in MOMA's earliest years. Taking to heart the peculiarity of the Tribute Book's position within the archive and likewise the peculiarity of my encounter with it, I have sought in this essay to keep the sense of these juxtapositions alive in my analysis, and to use them to broaden our ways of thinking genealogically about the location of religion and spirituality within "secular" organizations—in this case, secular modern art museums.

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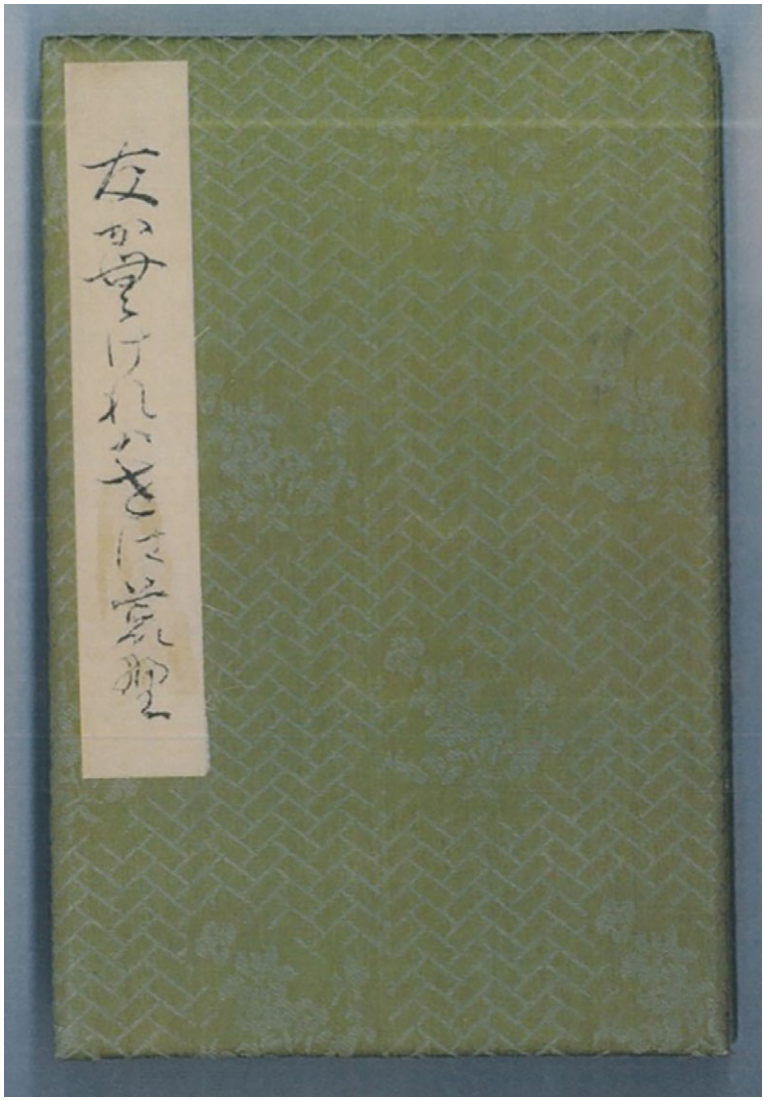


FIGURE 1: "Tribute Book," cover. Rockefeller Archives Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 2 Series AA-AAR Box 12 Folder 146.

My reading of Mrs. Rockefeller's Tribute Book offers a slight unsettling of the familiar distinction and attendant comparisons that scholars of religions and museums typically take in stride, namely the secularity of museum settings and spaces. Scholarship on religion and museums typically asks how *religious or spiritual objects* come to be housed, displayed, transformed, and interpreted

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FIGURE 2: "From Frances Flynn Paine," José Diego Maria Rivera 1931. Rockefeller Archives Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 2 Series AA-AAR Box 12 Folder 146.

within *secular* museum institutions.[1] And while there is robust scholarly interest in the ways that museum objects are understood to be religious or sacred, and

[1] The secularity of museum space is consistently assumed rather than explained or described, so that the "sacralization" of museum space is offered as evidence of breach of norms or noted as an

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FIGURE 3: "Sugar Cane," José Diego Maria Rivera 1931. Philadelphia Museum of Art. © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

furthermore growing attention to the politics of community and museum classifications, much less attention has been paid to the conditions that shape museums' secularity. Likewise, little attention has been paid to the specific histories and practices through which any museum's secularity takes shape. As a consequence, struggles around religion in museums are typically understood as being about the definitions of objects and their uses and communities: both museums and religious communities deem objects as special and sacred, and also as unsettling. Both also "produce" religious objects, but museums and religious communities are generally understood to operate within distinct and often incommensurate semiotic ideologies that mobilize different understandings about care, ownership, and history.[2] The Tribute Book invites a different point of entry into how and where we consider religion in museums. Its somewhat unique artifactual qualities prompt an exploration of ways of understanding religion as shaping secular art museums without succumbing to narrative modes that view all religious influences as "religionizing" museums. In so doing, I draw on what I see as the slightly surrealist cast of the Tribute Book's manufacture. As an object that is both in and about yet not quite of the museum,

unexpected innovation (for example, Joan R. Branham, "Sacrality and Aura in the Museum: Mute Objects and Articulate Space," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 52/53 (1994/1995): 33–47; Gretchen Buggeln, "Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred," *Material Religion* 8, 1 (2012): 30–50; Pamela Smart, "Crafting Aura, Art Museums, Audiences, and Engagement," *Visual Anthropology Review* 16, 2 (2000): 2–24.

[2] Webb Keane, "On Semiotic Ideology." *Signs and Society* 6, 1 (2018): 64–87.

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it offers a distinctive entry point from which to build an interpretation that takes account of the religious particularities of museum histories (much as scholars also, already, have developed better language for understanding the particularities and complexities of the religious objects that museums house).

To be more explicit, this essay offers an interpretive experiment generatively suggested by the Tribute Book's form. The book bears passing resemblance to the result of a game of "exquisite corpse," the name given to an antique parlor game that European surrealists incorporated within their modern projects of inciting the new or surfacing unmentioned or unfamiliar relations.[3] Reading the book's arrangement and content as an inadvertent, exquisite corpse invites me to consider and indeed to trace a range of personal and cultural networks. Attention to the unexpected adjacencies created within this object make visible (or make possible to envision) a body of religious, secular, and spiritual relations that are largely absent from representations of New York's modern museum worlds. I imagine that this reading of the Tribute Book as a quasi-surrealist project would have surprised many of its contributors. I return to consider the implications of the decision to align my interpretation with the contingencies of my chance encounter with this forgotten object at the essay's close. Before moving into this experiment, I will first say a bit more about the state of the field.

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND SECULARITY — AND THE MODERN ART MUSEUM

The museum, as an institutional form, participates within discursive and organizational fields of secularity. We understand art museums (as one class of museums) to be secular in part because of their authority to categorize and organize—indeed, to identify—objects and collections as aesthetic and historical objects. Practices of taxonomy and interpretation shape the museum field: "religious" objects, things—whether Catholic reliquaries, Chinese Buddhist statues of bodhisattvas, Blackfoot medicine shirts—are placed in different histories and take on different meanings and interpretations (some, indeed, becoming "religious" for the first time in these transpositions). "The secular" being no less static than "religion," we see more importantly that secular art museums are understood to be secular in part because of their capacity to recognize the alterity or otherness of the objects in their collections. Museums' varied efforts at managing such materials and their sometimes-confounding religious specialness create a performative space for secularity. Given the ongoing range of contestations and collaborations over objects in art museums—issues of provenance and ownership, display and interpretation, curation, and the like—one can argue that

[3] Kimberly Jannarone, "Exquisite Theater," in Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, Davis Schneiderman, and Tom Denlinger, eds., *The Exquisite Corpse: Chance and Collaboration in Surrealism's Parlor Game* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

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in our contemporary moment a museum's recognition of the religious alterity embedded in its collection is a central component of reinforcing an art museum's authority as secular. In this respect, the modern art museum's responses to religious or spiritual claims made by "outside" communities on its collections marks an important component of secular museum practice, where secularity embraces incommensurability and plurality.[4]

In contrast to the universal art museum, the secularity of the *modern* art museum seems to be distinctive. Modern art museums, housing collections of works of art that are almost entirely made in the "modern" period (a period already distinguished from earlier eras by its struggle to secularize the arts) do not typically include objects that were used originally or primarily by a religious or spiritual community.[5] But as scholars of *modern* art museums and religion suggest, this absence is met by another kind of presence, namely the "spiritual."[6] The history of modern art and its interaction with "the spiritual" is itself a contested field with its own histories and fault lines. "Modern" arts and artists were frequently in conversation with—and variously poached from or aligned themselves with—movements that claimed to be post-religious and thus "spiritual," including theosophy, spiritualism, and transcendentalism. These movements, and their various children and offshoots, often likewise wrapped the spiritual into modernist celebrations of the primitive, as well as other orientalist and colonialist visions of non-Western artistic cultures.[7] Thus, in contrast to "historical" art museums where the presence of older religious objects made it

[4] This is resonant with Hussein Ali Agrama's argument that secular governance can be characterized by its continual asking of questions about what is or is not religious, such that secularism is a "problem-space, constituted by a historical ensemble of questions and stakes and characterized by continual contestation." *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 105. See also Pamela Klassen, "Fantasies of Sovereignty: Civic Secularism in Canada," *Critical Research on Religion* 3, 1 (2015): 41–56.

[5] In other words, modern art museums include works made by recognized modern artists for religious use (e.g., vestments designed by Henri Matisse), but only rarely pieces made for religious use by lesser-known figures and then brought into the museum. But see notes 6 and 9. Cynthia Fowler, "A Progressive View on Religion and Modern Art: The 1944 *Religious Art of Today* Exhibition at Boston's Institute of Modern Art," *Religion and the Arts* 19, 5 (2015): 488–530; see also Vera Zolberg, "American Art Museums: Sanctuary or Free-For-All?" *Social Forces* 63, 2 (1984): 377–92.

[6] Peter Van der Veer, "Spirit," *Material Religion*, 7, 1 (2011): 124–30; Gauri Viswanathan, "Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy," *PMLA* 123, 2 (2008): 466–76; Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[7] Tracy Fessenden, "'Woman' and the 'Primitive' in Paul Tillich's Life and Thought: Some Implications for the Study of Religion." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14, 2 (1998): 45–76; Josef Sorett, "'We Build Our Temples for Tomorrow': Racial Ecumenism and Religious Liberalism in the Harlem Renaissance," in Sally Promey and Leigh Eric Schmidt, eds., *American Religious Liberalism Revisited* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 190–206; Kathryn Lofton, "The Perpetual Primitive in African American Religious Historiography," in Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler, eds., *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 171–91.

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possible to tell the story of the museum as one of secularization, modern art museums (which begin their history after art "became" secular) operated within a milieu where the "spiritual" was (and is) the vexing term, both inside and extra to the project of modern arts. As always already secular (and modern, contra Bruno Latour), the modern art museum was both made, and made off-kilter, by the unsteady position of spirituality in art and indeed within modernism itself.[8]

Consequentially, the distinctions between religious objects and secular museum spaces that orient most discussions about religious objects in art museums likewise are not easily transposable to the stickier histories of religion and spirituality in the context of the modern art museum. The comparative absence of visible religious objects that are "other" or "alter" within modern art museum collections casts the question of the secularity of modern art museums in quite a different light. It also creates different challenges, and perhaps opportunities, for considering how religion is at work in the modern art museum—turning attention from the materials housed in museums' collections to their organization as institutions and considering how the valuation of modern art took shape within changing frames of secular and religious meaning, the development of the "spiritual" and the ways that such changes shaped museums' institutional orientations to exhibition and education.

While these are promising avenues, the challenges of studying the place of religion in modern art museums are heightened by what remains the perennial popular and scholarly frame of reference wherein the presence of spirituality in modern art is presented as a surprise or a discovery—a tradition of presentation that resonates with its own familiar and even ritualistic qualities. Within the ambit of the history of modernism in the United States, scholarly inquiries that reveal spirituality in modern art have not destabilized the ongoing claims for the purity of secular modern arts, and indeed may even have the effect of reinforcing them.[9] While polemical arguments made by mid-twentieth century modernists who warned of the dangerous sullying power of the spiritual have fallen somewhat out of fashion,[10] concerns about the presence of spirituality remains a space where modern art museums can reproduce and reassert their secular purity.[11]

[8] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[9] Elayne Oliphant, "Beyond Blasphemy or Devotion: Art, the Secular, and Catholicism in Paris," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 21 (2017): 352–73; Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Pierre Bourdieu, "The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987): 201–10.

[10] Clement Greenberg, "Toward a New Laocoön," *Partisan Review* 7 (1940): 296–310; Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Carol Duncan's classic *Civilizing Rituals* comports likewise with this pose of unmasking: *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[11] Alexandra Munroe and the Guggenheim Museum (New York), *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009).

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This is particular so as the question of spirituality is figured as a problem of handling or managing the spiritual desires that a museum's publics bring to the secular museum. This museum orientation toward spirituality preserves and renews a museum's claims to its secular authority and reframes spirituality as something that can at least potentially be managed, interpreted, and curated—much as universal art museums must manage, interpret, and curate the religious objects in their collections.[12] This uneasy parallel, positions spirituality as external to the modern art museum's own creation or its collection.

With this in view, scholarly approaches to spirituality (and religion) shaping the secularity of modern art museums therefore confront a peculiar situation, one in which familiar standards of genealogical analyses seem to be entangled, and in which demonstrating or exposing the hidden or dismissed religious or spiritual elements of modern practice can provoke yet another turn for secular purifications. With this challenge in view, this paper takes a different path. My aim in reading the Tribute Book is neither to reveal the spirituality of MOMA nor to argue that its secularity is shaped by a particular genealogy of religion. Rather, I read the Tribute Book and the peculiarities of its fabrication instead as an invitation to consider how MOMA's early practices took shape within and adjacent to religious ideas, taste cultures, and frames of value that circulated in and around the museum. My approach offers a different emphasis to our thinking about how religion or spirituality might shape and indeed be present within a secular museum space, that thinks with and about the presence of religion within such spaces while resisting the interpretive project of tidying up. This, I wager, will set a different pathway understanding of the social force and power of art museums in the contemporary world.

SEARCHING FOR ROCKEFELLER, FINDING THE TRIBUTE BOOK

In October 2014 I was conducting research on the various spiritual investments of the founders of the first modern art galleries and museums in New York City in the first decades of the twentieth century. Many of the most influential modern art galleries were led by individuals or small collectives who explicitly invested modern aesthetics and art with spiritual meaning and power,[13] and my research had yielded a rich range of materials about the public nature and qualities of their positions and their articulations of the value (and values) of modern art. I had nonetheless steered clear of New York's largest and most successful modern art

[12] Kiersten F. Latham, "Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects," *Visitor Studies* 16, 1 (2013): 3–20; Pamela Smart, "Crafting Aura: Art Museums, Audiences and Engagement." *Visual Anthropology Review* 16, 2 (2000): 2–24.

[13] See, for example, Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity 1915–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999); and Karol Vail, *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting: Hilla Rebay and the Origins of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009).

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museum: The Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929 with the financial backing of the Rockefeller family. MOMA was quite different from the galleries I was studying. In contrast to the smaller, idiosyncratic and decidedly avant-garde galleries that preceded it, MOMA was professionally organized and corporately oriented. Despite the overlapping networks and dependencies that were necessarily borne of MOMA's shared investments with such galleries, MOMA embraced a program of bringing aesthetic modernism into a mainstream American current and quickly capitalized on its elite supporters' networks to expand its reach and influence: its inaugural exhibition in fall 1929 attracted forty-seven thousand visitors during its one-month run.[14]

Nonetheless, I had become increasingly curious about whether I could fully rely on these impressions of MOMA's earliest years, and I traveled to the Rockefeller Archives Center to discover what I could learn about Rockefeller's religious, artistic, and philanthropic activities.[15] I was particularly curious about her religious perspectives or habits, and if there was anything to suggest that she had visited the modern art galleries I had focused on, or if she had opinions about them. Where did she fit in the networks of modern art, in New York's 1920s?

Abigail Greene Aldrich Rockefeller (1874–1948) was the focus of my attention because of her central role in MOMA's earliest years. Rockefeller, along with friends Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan, was responsible for founding the museum in 1929 and of the three, Rockefeller remained actively involved in the decades that followed. Rockefeller was the museum's principal financial backer in its first decade, served on its board of trustees as secretary and treasurer, and participated directly in its first staff hires.[16] Rockefeller was nevertheless in many respects an atypical devotee of modern arts. The daughter of a Rhode Island senator, educated in boarding schools, and married to the financier and oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874–1960), Abby Aldrich Rockefeller was public female face of the wealthiest family in the United States, and by 1931 an entrenched representative of the power and respectability of an increasingly cosmopolitan American global elite class. The Rockefellers traveled around the world to inaugurate the many philanthropic ventures—schools, hospitals, hotels, institutes—that they founded to advance liberal Protestant ideals worldwide. Mrs. Rockefeller was committed to a number of Protestant

[14] Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003); Glenn D. Lowry and Steven Schoenfelder, *Art in Our Time: A Chronicle of The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004).

[15] Mrs. Rockefeller has been consistently represented as having less than stellar taste in modern art while being praised for her organizational acumen and liberal support of Barr and MOMA staff. She appears to have done very little to challenge this view, and in fact may have courted it, as it seems to have worked to her advantage. "Beginning of the Museum of Modern Art," Rockefeller Archives Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 2, series AA-AAR box 7, folder 99.

[16] Bernice Kert, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: The Woman in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1993). Bliss died in 1931, and her art collection was given as a bequest to the museum and established its permanent collection. Sullivan served on the MOMA board until 1933.

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philanthropic ventures closer to New York as well, among them the New York Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) where she was a long-term board member. She cultivated interest in folk arts and fine arts. Rockefeller also managed several East Coast family homes and was the mother of five children. None of these many pursuits suggested clear links to the changing but still primarily avant-garde modern art circuits in New York's 1920's.

The archivist who assisted me in navigating Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's papers suggested that I first peruse the boxes relating directly to MOMA, of which there were quite a few. As she brought them to my table, she observed somewhat archly that they "showed signs of being well read." Indeed, in contrast to most of the other boxes in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller collection the papers in these boxes were well ruffled, with paperclips missing, and pages out of order. Their contents were also familiar: these were the sources that informed much of the story that I had read about Rockefeller's involvement in the museum, including a narrative that she had been asked to write about the museum's early days and her role in it. She described herself as an avid amateur, the faithful supporter of the great task undertaken by the best experts in the land. I moved on from the MOMA papers to a raft of ledgers. Rockefeller's ledger books were organized by type of expense: one group laid out to the penny her gifts to organizations and also to individuals in need, another recorded her art purchases, and yet another the decorating expenditures for the homes in Pocantico Hills in New York, Seal Harbor in Maine, and Manhattan. The worlds in which Abby Aldrich Rockefeller made financial decisions were strictly separated into the lines and boxes of the balance books, a modern life organized in a modern way. By 1925, however, the funds and accounting for Rockefeller's philanthropic gifts had shifted from the domestic realm to the family's office headquarters downtown; her art and domestic purchases remained her own purview, recorded by her secretaries at the Rockefeller residence in midtown Manhattan. Instructive as these materials were in shaping my view of a modern woman represented to herself and others through categories of a modern economy, there was little within them that offered much further insight into Rockefeller's interests in art or for that matter, religion.

Rockefeller's secretaries played major roles in the organization and record keeping of her collections and her activities, so it is perhaps not surprising that these tasks spilled over into the compilation and creation of Rockefeller's "prayer books." It was these to which I turned next, kept in boxes filed under "personal papers." Even in this realm of the archive, the clearest vision one received of Rockefeller was of her intense interest in collecting: Rockefeller gathered prayers from church bulletins, printed programs of YWCA and other Christian women's associations, as well as Christian newspapers and magazines. Hundreds of these prayers were typed onto pages of small loose leaf ringed binder pages, the majority losing their authors or sources in the process of transfer. The prayers did not lose their overwhelmingly public tone, however. In page after page, the

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prayers offer hymns of gratitude or supplications from a collective "we," eschewing a more familiar or intimate "I." How or whether Rockefeller used these small books during her morning devotions (she alone among her family took breakfast in her private rooms each morning) remained tantalizingly unclear.[17]

I came upon the Tribute Book in a box of ephemera. Its grass-green silk cover was inviting to touch, with a handwritten inscription in an Asian script pasted on its cover. The book was constructed with firm paper in an accordion-fold; each page held a signed note of greeting or thanks, most only a line or two in length. "It is a pleasure to add my tribute at Christmas time to a 'Lady, sweet and kind,'—one whose friendship we treasure" wrote the director of the International House in upper Manhattan. "'Between friends a simple thank you may express the deepest feeling.' You mean so much to all who are associated with you that we can only say 'Thank you' and we know that you will appreciate its full content," wrote the general secretary of the YWCA. I recognized many of the book's twenty-seven signatures, including MOMA's Director Alfred Barr and Associate Director Jere Abbott, and I was struck by a page that contained a watercolor signed by Diego Rivera. But most of the other signatures were unknown to me. A typed transcript accompanying the book identified them as MOMA staff, leaders of the Young Women's Christian Association, fellow members of the Riverside Church Women's Sunday school class, as well as Rockefeller's dressmaker, secretaries, and housekeepers.

On the train back to Manhattan I looked again at the images I'd made of the book, and read through the transcript, questions mounting: Who had written the passage in Japanese? Was that really a watercolor by Rivera? But I also wondered how the creation of the book had struck those who had participated. The final entry, written by Henry Emerson Fosdick, the Rockefellers' minister at Riverside Church in upper Manhattan, spoke of a "we," that is, a community assembled in relation to Mrs. Rockefeller, who had planned it together: "There are folk to whom, since they have so much already, one can give nothing except gratitude. Now, gratitude is a commodity not always easy to pass from one to another, and so, sometimes, it stays for years locked up in hearts that had intended to forward it to its proper destination. This little book, coming at Christmastime, is our way of getting into your possession some sincere and cordial thankfulness which has belonged to you for a long time."

The numerous claims for the "us" and the "we" made in the book, and particularly by Fosdick, seemed not to fit with the jumble of signatures contained within it. I imagined the book as it passed hand to hand in November 1931, how its purpose was explained to contributors, and how the book itself began to

[17] "Prayers—Disbound Transcripts, 1920, n.d.," series 2, box 13, folders 154–55, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Papers (FA336), Rockefeller Archive Center. John D. Rockefeller Jr. continued his father's tradition of holding a Bible study every morning before breakfast, which all in the family including guests were expected to attend.

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provide its own explanation as its pages filled. It struck me that the Tribute Book seemed to mimic a game of exquisite corpse, the term that early twentieth century surrealists had given to an old-fashioned parlor game, wherein several "players" draw parts of a figure (torso, legs, or head, etc.) without seeing the others' contributions until the whole is completed. Taken up in the 1920s by Andre Breton and others who "prized works that traded in heterogeneity and decalage, which is the incongruity between things that manifests itself in a temporal, physical, or psychological gap," surrealists used the game as a generative technique where excitement lay in the ability of the makers "to see the use of unforeseen creatures and … to have created them."[18]

The Tribute Book was not the product of an actual game of exquisite corpse, of course. At least some of its contributors read through it before setting their pen to page, thus breaking the parlor game's fundamental rule. Accordingly, while the book's creation might give form to an "unforeseen creature," this "creature" was not a new image of Rockefeller. The quasi-public nature of the book project certainly offers an image of Rockefeller's connections and influence, but this is not something that would have been new to its contributors. Rockefeller's amply networked "self" was hardly hidden: there was no avoiding that her wealth and power established her "self" as expansive, shaped by the circulation of commodities that she kept in motion with the help of those who had written in the book. With the possible exception of her personal secretaries, the contributors in the book recognized Rockefeller as a person (patron, employer, associate, friend) whose daily activities, material connections, and interests extended well beyond their particular occupations.[19] The book's makers took an image of Mrs. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller as a person with investments in a wide range of non-overlapping organizations as a matter of course. This was part of the impetus for making the book: to gather disparate figures together and to unlock the commodities of gratitude that were rightfully hers and belonged likewise to her vast worlds of exchange and collection.[20] But if it was not Mrs. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller who had come more clearly or unusually into view through the book, then who or what had?

One "image" that comes into view through the Tribute Book is of MOMA. In this sense, the game of exquisite corpse, in my reading, does not offer a new iteration of a body, person, or thing that already exists: the "exquisite corpse" is not a transformed representation of a body already known, but rather a new

[18] Kimberly Jannarone, "Exquisite Theater," 229.

[19] On relational personhood and the embedding and disembedding of forms of relations through "contracts, titles, and deeds," among other "modes of textualizing," see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff. "On Personhood: An Anthropological Perspective from Africa," *Social Identities* 7, 2 (2001): 267–83.

[20] Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

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creation or fabrication. This unforeseen document puts things not usually in proximity into proximity, and makes it possible to think about them together, to imagine what kinds of corpora stand alongside the ones that we know and that reverberate within the given worlds.[21] Even as the archives and Rockefeller's testament to her role at MOMA present an image of separation of spheres of influence, and distinctions among her various domains, the Tribute Book suggested a quite different story. Here, at least for a moment in late November 1931, the book put in motion activities that made visible various proximities, adjacencies, and hierarchies that open up a new orientation wherein we can think about the secular and religious worlds that shaped MOMA.

Given the durable dynamics within museums that draw upon readymade distinctions between religion and secularity that I wish to rethink, my reading the Tribute Book as creation that says or speaks something unforeseen (rather than presenting it as a talisman that unlocks a hidden or more "true" story of the museum reality) offers an opening into thinking about religion (or spirituality) as a part of this museum's life and history in a different way than what is usually considered. In an important respect, playing a game of exquisite corpse refuses a mode of interpretation that requires readymade distinctions as a condition of comparison, or that views the co-presence of any term as either a surprise or a problem that instigates efforts to purify or tidy up.[22] I thus see the Tribute Book as offering an unexpected set of images of relation that in turn invites uncertainty and enables multiple and different stories about MOMA, Rockefeller, and the book itself to take the foreground. And, in this light, the Tribute Book also offers up additional interpretive associations that extend well beyond what I pursue here.[23] Thus rejecting Fosdick's claim that the book's contributors constitute

[21] Jeremy Biles writes that in "maintaining a curious accord with what Freud called the 'fundamental rule' of psychoanalysis—free association—one may and must instigate and submit to a mode of 'exegetical effervescence,' freely and obligatorily entering into a delirium of interpretation in relation to the most everyday, obvious, and seemingly insignificant phenomena"; "The Task of *Surrealism in a Time of Triumph," *American Religion* 1 (2020): 98–120, 106. Biles claims one task for surrealism in the present political context: putting its methods to work in an ongoing act of subversion of any and all political and personal projects that derive confidence for political action through the work of exclusion, purification—work that we might add is itself brokered through common modes of comparison and distinction. See also Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* (New York: Verso, 1994).

[22] James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, 4 (1981): 539–64; Derek Sayer, *Making Trouble: Surrealism and the Human Sciences* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2017).

[23] It is worth underlining that the gaps and connections—nascent networks and juxtapositions — of the twenty-seven contributors to the Tribute Book offer the opportunity to assemble other corpora and thus other stories and interpretations of other religious and social interactions. To take one example, the contributions by a number of prominent Black and white leaders of New York's Young Women's Christian Association might offer a new, or complimentary, image of relationships at the YWCA at a time when it was on the cusp of major organizational changes that would result in major changes in the YWCA's programs on race both in New York and nationally. See Nancy M. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA 1906–1946* (Urbana: University

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a self-understood "we" or "us" (one that as I note in the pages that follow, is apparent in the text itself), we can find multiple groupings, threads, and possible interpretive moments, where contributors are regarding themselves and others in unexpected ways.

MAKING THE EXQUISITE CORPSE 1931

In the months and then years that followed my encounter with the book, I amassed a small archive (that I called "Rockefeller-MOMA-Riverside-New York November-December 1931") to help me figure out who had created it, how it had traveled, who the various contributors were, and who had written the Japanese inscription. In a growing archive filled with its own gaps, I learned that the idea developed in a conversation between two women: Rockefeller's personal secretary Alice Kelly, and Henry Emerson Fosdick's secretary Katherine Willard Eddy. This was, anyway, what Kelly wrote in a memo to Edith Halpert, an art dealer and owner of the Downtown Art Gallery. Kelly asked if Halpert would assist them by identifying artists whom Rockefeller "supported" and who might be willing to add sketches of various buildings that Rockefeller had had a hand in developing (Halpert was encouraging, but the drawings of Riverside Church, the International House, and Grace Hotel among others did not join the book). It seems likely that it was Eddy who selected the richly covered Japanese book and who penned the aphorism from Francis Bacon's essay "On Friendship" in Japanese script on its cover. (The words, "without friends the world is but a wilderness" are not translated into English.[24]) Starting its life in Eddy's hands, the book's organization was then determined by geographic proximities and adjacencies, passed between Eddy and Kelly as it moved around the New York region and spaces inhabited by Rockefeller's influence.

From Eddy's office in Riverside Church in upper Manhattan, the book moved across the street to the International House, where Rockefeller had had a hand in the décor of the newly opened building for international students that was sponsored by her husband and Columbia University. The book then traveled across the George Washington Bridge to New Jersey, to the Bayway Community House, a women's housing organization funded by Mrs. Rockefeller, where Elizabeth Henry wrote, "It has been such a pleasure for me to work this past year under you, Mrs. Rockefeller. Your understanding, sympathy and vision have made it seem as if you were by my side whether in dispensing relief or promoting recreation…." From there, the book traveled north to the Rockefeller family compound in Pocantico Hills, where members of the housekeeping staff added their contributions. It then returned to midtown Manhattan and to the

of Illinois Press, 2007); Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA 1905–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[24] My thanks to Zhaohua Yang and Michael Como for their assistance in translation and identification.

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MOMA, where staff members were busy putting together its Diego Rivera exhibition. Several midtown and downtown art dealers and gallerists including Edith Halpert added their names, and the book traveled once more to Pocantico Hills and then to Riverside Church gaining the names of Sunday School friends, and then to the New York YWCA headquarters. In the course of its jagged November journeys the book also gathered a few unexpected submissions—and also a few unexpected omissions. Missing the signatures of numerous others from Rockefeller's church and YWCA networks, many other household employees, most of her principal art dealers, and many philanthropic leaders, the collection of signatures in the book thus tells a very partial story of Rockefeller's relationships.

The happenstance order and inadvertent inclusion of the twenty-odd contributors prompted me to consider how the book may have been presented and explained to those who were asked to contribute to it. Had Fosdick's "benediction" on the book's last page been written in the book at the outset, as a guide for those who would write? We do not know, but many of its contributions seem to bristle at the notion that all writers in the book share the same relationship to Rockefeller, and some in fact seem to subvert Fosdick's explanation that the book's contributors (its "us") were equally eager to make public the private gratitude they felt toward her. Certainly, some of the writers in the book complied with this sentiment—in addition to Miss Henry, Mary Sands, an assistant at MOMA wrote, "To work for such a cause as 'your' Museum of Modern art is bound to be a satisfaction, but to work for so kindly and friendly a leader makes every task a pleasure as well as a satisfaction." Yet other contributions to the book shows signs of hearts *unequally* unlocked. For example, Mrs. Emma Peck Willard, a member of the Riverside Sunday School writes simply, "My text? Seven words from II Cor. 12.14." Many other contributions seem similarly written in private code—perhaps taking a cue from the untranslated Bacon inscription on the book's cover. Katherine Eddy herself signed the book with a note that she had written it "at Abeyton," the name of a guest house at the Rockefeller's Pocantico Hills estate, marking thus a type of intimacy not shared by many of the others. Other entries verge on the impersonal, as for example the first entry in the book written by the director of the International House: "It is a pleasure to add my tribute at Christmas time to a 'Lady, sweet and kind'—one whose friendship we treasure."

Indeed, many writers appear to resist the equivalence of this kind of commoditization implied in such relation, none more so than several of the MOMA staff members whose pages directly follow the contribution by Florence Sunderkotter, housekeeper at the Rockefellers' Pocantico Hills estate. Her entry reads "It is not always easy to put into words just what one feels. But I would like you to know that I do appreciate the privilege of working for you. You have the welfare of humanity so much at heart that you cannot fail to gain the respect and affection of those around you. May the coming years bring you ever happiness."

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And Cary Ross, a young MOMA intern writes on the next page, "May I add to Miss Sunderkotter's expression an appreciation of your courage in recognizing the diversity of men's spiritual expression and of your loyalty to an ideal."

Ross' inclusion in the book was almost certainly inadvertent. He was a "volunteer" at the museum: a graduate of Yale whose friendships with literary modernists including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein seemed for a time to be important to the museum's interactions with the avant-garde. Ross, however, was quickly becoming disenchanted by what he saw as MOMA's conservatism.[25] Yet he was in the room in November 1931 when the book was passed around and penned the first entry among the many MOMA signatures. Did Ross, a young, Spengler-reading dandy, know that Mrs. Sunderkotter was one of Rockefeller's housekeepers? Should we read his entry as sincere agreement with her comment on Rockefeller's appreciation of the "diversity of men's spiritual expression," or as an ironic commentary on the world of relationships that the book brought into focus? Can we read it as both?

The discomfort of the project's leveling effect, marked by contributors' various efforts to maintain their own distinctive relationships with Rockefeller, is most starkly evident on the page offered by Frances Flynn Paine. Paine alone among the many contributors to the book does not offer words at all, but rather the image by Diego Rivera that is signed and captioned "From Frances Flynn Paine." The gift complicates the book, the image failing to comport with Fosdick's explanation, and moreover introducing another "author" (or artist) into the mix of the circulating materials of gratitude. Paine's choice of contribution and her decision not to "speak" the words of gratitude brings into outline the challenging relationship that Paine had with Rockefeller, whom Paine sought to address as an equal or as a partner in promoting modern arts—an understanding that Rockefeller did not apparently share. Paine was an important museum figure and supporter of Mexican artists, and her networks were crucial to MOMA; her connections with Rivera made her the obvious choice to send to Mexico in summer 1931 to escort him (and his companion the artist Frida Kahlo) from Mexico to New York. To this official museum role Rockefeller supplemented a personal shopping list of decorative objects, furniture, and folk pieces that Paine was to collect for the Rockefeller homes. When the Tribute Book reached MOMA's offices and studios in November 1931, Paine found a solution to the problem that the book posed, and both marked her gratitude and made her position distinct among others in the book by summoning another's work to stand in for words. (The communist Mexican painter's choice of image to provide for the book as a gift from Paine, a peasant digging in a field and oblivious to his "situation," itself suggests a space of freedom far removed from the coils of patronage into which he has been painted.)

[25] Cary Ross: Correspondence 1931–42, Alfred Stieglitz/Georgia O'Keeffe Archive, YCAL MSS 85, box 42, folders 1006–7.

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The Tribute Book's contributions reverberate as "fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions that work to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities." Designated a piece of ephemera, that is, as something that exceeds any particular story or domain, it encourages its readers to take pleasure in "cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms" that (we can never be sure) take shape in our encounter with it.[26] Even as the Tribute Book clearly participates within the world of November and December 1931 and presents an image of that world to us, it also invites musing and imagination about relationships and meanings that exceed that world as it was, and suggest other paths and routes not taken, other meanings offered but not taken up. How might we take such an invitation wrought of unexpected juxtapositions and strange connections to think further about religion, or spirituality, at MOMA in its early years? I now turn to consider the Tribute Book's moment in another way that highlights the adjacencies of religion to MOMA.

JAPAN AND THE BUDDHA IN THE LIBERAL PROTESTANT AESTHETIC

John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller traveled to Asia in 1921 to open the Peking Medical Union and to sightsee and conduct business through Korea and Japan. Mrs. Rockefeller was also traveling on behalf of the Young Women's Christian Association and made several visits to local chapters. Katherine Eddy, at the time a YWCA missionary in Japan, organized and hosted teas and receptions in Tokyo where Mrs. Rockefeller met Japanese Christian women.

On returning to the States, Rockefeller performed her expected duty for the YWCA, dutifully reporting her observations on the social status of women in Asia during speeches to various Protestant women's groups. Rockefeller was a strong advocate and supporter of women's issues, and her "international" visits on behalf of the YWCA appear to have redoubled her interests in promoting women's opportunities through housing—an interest visible in the Tribute Book's many YWCA-connected contributors. Yet her greatest interest and memory of her first trip to Asia appeared not to be the living people she encountered or the institutions her family was building, but rather the religious and artistic sites and materials she encountered. Rockefeller's letters to her sister Lucy during this 1921 trip make little mention of the official aspects of the tour and focus instead on the couple's many visits to temples and shrines. Shortly after her return to the States, Rockefeller began to amass an unparalleled collection of Asian statuary, religious objects, ceramics, and antiquities. These purchases were made possible by the presence of established Chinese and Japanese art dealers working in California and the East Coast, whose ability to guide an

[26] Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," 540, 549.

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enthusiastic purchaser to authentic purchases was crucial. After a massive earthquake in Tokyo in 1923 and a subsequent collapse of the Japanese economy, these same dealers brokered the purchases of pieces from the collections of the Japanese imperial family, some of which also made their way into Rockefeller's collection. Among them were two Buddhist table-top shrines which Rockefeller told Lucy were "extraordinarily beautiful and I had rather have them than almost anything I have ever seen."[27]

Between her return from her Asia trip in 1921 and 1925, Rockefeller installed a "Buddha Room" in three of the family's residences. Rockefeller's son David reminisced that the Buddha room in the family's Manhattan home was "filled with many statues of the Buddha and the goddess Kuan-Yin, where the lights were kept dim and the air heavily scented with burning incense." While Rockefeller's decorating choices took shape in a moment when the fashion for "period rooms" was strong in both "prominent" American houses and American art museums, Rockefeller's curiosity, or interest, in Buddhism extended beyond the decorative.[28] Rockefeller wrote to her sister on several occasions about the books she had purchased and read about Buddhism, and of her determination to overcome the feeling of being "extremely unintelligent about my own Buddhas and what they mean." As she wrote to Lucy in 1922: "You probably know all about this, [but Buddhism] is a brand new subject to me and very illuminating because of the influence it has exerted on Chinese art and also because of the influence that the Greeks and the Persians had upon India."[29] Nonetheless, her reading seems not to have led her to any strong appreciation of Buddhist concepts (likewise, whatever she learned about Buddhism did not appear to diminish her appreciation of her "own Buddhas"). In an undated address on "Philosophy," Mrs. Rockefeller explained to her audience how it was that she could both appreciate her artistic collections while not finding herself in agreement with the theologies or philosophies that they addressed or that had instigated their creation. "I think Buddhistic art most inspiring and spiritual. The Buddha certainly reached lengths that few Christians reach, but he seems to have failed to discover a personal God."[30] The spiritual, inspirational aspects of Buddhist art were distinct from Buddhist philosophy. A white American Christian could appreciate Buddhist aesthetics, and even find within them

[27] Abby Aldrich Rockefeller to Lucy Aldrich, 13 Feb. 1925, in *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's Letters to Her Sister Lucy* (New York: private printing, 1957), 128–29. See also Yuriko Kuchiki, "The Enemy Trader: The United States and the End of Yamanaka," *Impressions* 34 (2013): 32–53.

[28] David Rockefeller, *Memoirs/David Rockefeller* (New York: Random House, 2002). David Rockefeller also reminisced that dealers would occasionally bring prospective buyers to the Rockefeller residence at 12 West 54th Street to view the Buddha room. See also Neil Harris, "Period Rooms and the American Art Museum," *Winterthur Portfolio* 46, 2/3 (2012): 117–38.

[29] Abby Aldrich Rockefeller to Lucy Aldrich, 14 Sept. 1922, in *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's Letters*, 77.

[30] Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 2, series AA-AAR, box 13 folder 159, Rockefeller Archives Center, Pocantico Hills, New York.

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universal inspiration and spirituality, while still remaining true to the personal God whom she encountered in the Christian Bible.

The distinctions between form and content that Rockefeller embraced were informed by the theological orientations and taste cultures of the liberal Protestant milieu in which she had learned to be a Christian, and they were largely self-evident to members of the cosmopolitan East Coast elite. Art history and Protestant theologies both shared an orientation that understood that works of art could participate and be appreciated within their local context of creation (and carry parochial or local meaning) while also participating within something more universal. That said, the universal aspect of any object or project was not necessarily self-evident; the ability to distinguish between an artwork's "philosophy" and its "beauty" had to be cultivated, as Rockefeller herself noted. But the potential for all true works of art to be appreciated for their beauty was nonetheless obvious.[31] In this respect, Rockefeller's orientation to art was aligned with a range of appreciation techniques. Rockefeller's ability to appreciate and value beauty in such a way that difference was subsumed was thoroughly in step with the liberal Protestant sensibilities and symbolic economies in which she also partook. In letters to her sons, Rockefeller drew on an analogous distinction to explain her understanding of God that, it seemed, she expected would lead them to a piety much like her own. Rockefeller attested to the simultaneous particularity of Christianity's truths and the universality of God's work among men. In the breach, she did not urge them to go to church, but rather to listen to their hearts. "You are denying the existence of the very thing that you crave," she wrote, "Why not admit that, and acknowledge the presence of God (call Him what you like) in you, and let the influence of Christ's teaching be your guidance. Remember that 'God is Love.' Just try letting love be your Guide." With "love" as her guide, she found language to encourage her wayward sons to connect to the universal within themselves—but in a way that, she certainly understood, would guide them to the particular and most noble values of liberal Christianity. This was a perspective on love that she likewise embraced in her Asian collections: empowered to distinguish the particular and the universal in the art works that she deemed Buddhist.

[31] Sally Promey argues that liberal Protestant aesthetic sensibilities taking shape in the late 1800s and beyond understood the appreciation of beauty and "taste" (in the terms of Horace Bushnell) as "democratic in that anyone could cultivate it: taste was a 'universal possibility' open 'to all.'" A "harder" and more "masculine" articulation of beauty and the beautiful would take shape in the mid-twentieth century, Promey argues, with a different alignment of taste, beauty, and culture. Promey, "Visible Liberalism: Liberal Protestant Taste Evangelism, 1850 and 1950," in Sally Promey and Leigh Eric Schmidt, eds., *American Religious Liberalism Revisited* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 76–96; and "Taste Cultures: The Visual Practice of Liberal Protestantism, 1940–1965," in Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Marc Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 250–93.

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Rockefeller opened an address titled "Tolerance" (and likely given in 1925) with an image that summons the spaces of nature and museums as the sites where she can envision and experience a shared humanity through appreciation of beauty. "…I was sitting on a cliff watching a marvelous sunset, which was reflected in a placid little lake at my feet and the colors of which were tinting the ocean miles out to sea into beautiful shades of pink, rose, mauve and blue. As I watched the sun descend, I thought of the many, many other people, who were made happy as I was by the beauty of the scene, and I felt strongly the unity of beauty, whether in nature or in art or in character." She continued,

> The experience further brings to mind a recollection of being in the great European museums, where I had seen people in the museums standing before some great picture or statue, people of many different races, all bound together by the spell of beauty, and I wondered if we ever put enough emphasis upon admiration for the good and beautiful in other lands, in other people or in unfamiliar works of art. Not alone by similarity are we drawn together for do not differences attract us to one another quite as much? Think how dull it would be if we all thought and acted the same way.[32]

Rockefeller's two parallel images, "the unity of beauty" through which she is connected to a shared human happiness, and the diverse world of museum goers held together by the "spell" cast by artistic greatness, offer some resonant images likewise through which to consider her investment in MOMA. Writing to her college-aged son Nelson (future governor of New York and for many years the public face of the Rockefeller family at MOMA), Rockefeller observed, "I do have a rebellious, even at times a revolutionary nature. I want to sweep aside much that seems to me to be false and unjust in life—I hate stupidity, sensuality and obscenity. I loathe war and graft. I want to put in their place beauty and decency, and I am counting on you to do some of these things for me, and I believe that the greatest weapon against sin is love, patient, nurturing love for your fellow man." Rockefeller's investment in beauty and spirituality imagined a shared, universalism—this was a form of cosmopolitan orientalism that enabled her to "appreciate" the (religious) arts of others. From her self-assigned roles as a rebel and collector, Rockefeller would come to view MOMA as a platform for educating a widening public's understanding of beauty through experiencing and appreciating modern art works. Her power—and desire—to replace indecency with decency, and sin with beauty, nonetheless was not without its sharper points. If love was her weapon, then we should keep in

[32] "Tolerance," Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, undated speech, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 2, series AA-AAR, box 13, folder 159, Rockefeller Archives Center, Pocantico Hills, New York.

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mind Merleau-Ponty's observation, "In its own eyes, Western humanism is the love of humanity, but to others it is merely the custom and institution of a group of men, their password and sometimes their battle cry."[33]

Rockefeller's capacity to distinguish form and content, spirit and religion, took many analogous forms and was well in effect in the mid 1920's as she encouraged her children to seek spiritual health, made room in her homes for the Buddha—or embarked on building a modern art museum. Rockefeller's interests in modern art had taken off rapidly in 1925, her first purchases of modern art taking place in that year. As was the case with each of her collections, she was assisted by the advice of well-positioned dealers (of whom Edith Halpert and Francis Flynn Paine were but two). By the end of the 1920s, Rockefeller's interests would take shape in and around the museum. The architect Philip Johnson, an early staff member at the museum, reminisced that MOMA was a "one woman, one man band. Of course, the result was we had only one person to go to—Alfred Barr, see, because she wouldn't see you. You don't call the Queen Mother and complain." Rockefeller's presence in the museum's offices was constant, and despite Johnson's claim that she would "never interfere" in the museum's handling of things, he also observed that little was funded without her approval. "Mrs. Rockefeller was … I don't know anything about her because she was too grand and too awe-inspiring. I feel about her the way I do about the Queen Mother. I met [the Queen Mother] only once, but there is a woman that you walk into a room and you know royalty is not dead. Felt exactly the same way with her…. But she was always modest about that. Modest until she got that steel backbone."[34]

CAPITAL, COMMUNISM, AVERTED GAZE

By early November 1931, the Tribute Book had made its way to the Heckscher Building on West Fifty-seventh Street in New York, just a few blocks north of the enormous construction zone between Fifth and Sixth Avenues that would become the multi-block skyscraper complex of Rockefeller Center, and a few blocks north of the Rockefeller family's townhouse on West Fifty-fourth Street. MOMA had rented several floors of the Heckscher for both its offices and exhibitions: MOMA's first solo show showcasing the work of Henri Matisse was on display, while several floors below Diego Rivera was working in an unheated studio to finish six major works that he had agreed to create on site for his solo exhibition.

Rivera was an artistic superstar, enjoying world-renown for his revolutionary-themed murals and frescoes. Where other American museums and public

[33] Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur*, quoted in Clifford, "Ethnographic Surrealism," 562.
[34] Oral History Program, interview with Philip Johnson, 18 Dec. 1990, pp. 18–19, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

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buildings invited Rivera to create permanent on site works for their buildings in the 1930s, MOMA, itself without a home, developed a different plan in its invitation to Rivera for his New York show. The museum invited him to create "mobile frescos" that would be fabricated and painted on site, and arranged for Rivera along with Frida Kahlo to come to New York in October to do the work. All of Rivera's fees were covered by the museum, which in turn planned to capitalize on Rivera's works to cover those costs. Rivera consented to the arrangements and Frances Flynn Paine was dispatched to Mexico to ensure that Rivera's journey to New York was successful (and to attend to Rockefeller's personal shopping list), and she accompanied the painter and Frida Kahlo to New York. A blending of museum business and Rockefeller business would also mark the trio's passage, as Rivera spent most of his time en route to New York painting a work that Rockefeller had commissioned for her personal collection, to add to Rivera's "Soviet Notebooks" which she had purchased earlier in 1931.

The Rivera exhibition was a huge success for the museum. Rivera and Kahlo's arrival in New York was covered in all of the city's papers, and MOMA staff were delighted when reporters continued to drop by Rivera's studio in the weeks leading up to the exhibition's opening. Newspaper reports toggled between scenes of Rivera at work in the studio and dancing late into the night in Harlem. When the show opened Rivera had completed all of the contractually agreed upon Mexican themed frescos; by its closing, several additional frescos depicting scenes in New York City had also joined the show. True to Rivera's sensibilities, the New York frescoes starkly depicted effects of the Great Depression on the city and the chilling and isolating effects of urban inequality. The Rockefellers were apparently untroubled by Rivera's caricature of the aged John D. Rockefeller Sr. in a cavernous and empty bank room on one of these, and likewise, they seemed untroubled by Rivera's communism. Art historian Leah Dickerman observes that while the Rockefellers' support of "such an outspoken critic of U.S. capitalism may be what is most perplexing to the contemporary critic," she also observes that in the "1930s capitalism and Communism" were far less antipodal than we might imagine.[35]

The ability to hold these dissimilar things together, however, also seems less confusing and more straightforward in the world of MOMA when we consider the Tribute Book itself as a marker of these relationships. And, if we furthermore note how the protestant visual style operated: what made it possible for Abby Aldrich Rockefeller to distinguish Buddhist religion from the spirituality of an antique Buddha could be similarly mobilized to distinguish the political meaning from the formal characteristics of works by artists such as Rivera.

[35] Leah Dickerman, "Leftist Circuits," in Leah Dickerman and Anna Indych-López, eds., *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 10–47.

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While MOMA's early exhibitions experimented with a number of curatorial and exhibition styles, many of Alfred Barr's own favored techniques sought to enable visitors to identify this double nature of art works, and to seek out the formal aspects of works of art as distinctly valuable (and modern). Mary Ann Staniszewki observes that "modern" art installations were strikingly distinct from the typical museum installations that preceded them. Traditional European exhibition styles typically grouped paintings in assemblages, encouraged museumgoers to see and look for relations among paintings, whether in terms of style or theme (even as they also ended up "skying" some paintings, that is, placing them well above visitors' heads). In contrast, at MOMA Barr installed all paintings at eye level and paid scant attention to the visual "symmetry" of paintings displayed on a wall or a room. Using only neutral wall colors, the white wall space between objects allowed (or perhaps demanded) each painting to be appreciated as an individual work.[36] While a similar form of installation and display at the Bauhaus had been developed in hopes of discouraging viewers from seeing works of art as suspended in "timeless idealized space," the effect at MOMA was to present art works in a history of art (that is, form and style) that minimized attention to historical or political meanings.[37] These display styles emphasized—or rather, helped to usher in—ways of seeing modern art that both recognized and yet nonetheless subordinated artists' political meanings or efforts.[38] MOMA's proposal to Rivera (one to which he agreed) to create "portable" murals for the exhibit, and to effectively transform a form that is regularly understood as unmovable and public into something moveable and private might be seen as one more example of this orientation toward the political, historical, and artistic. The mural form, itself a public practice of art production that made art and politics visible and durable in public spaces, was in MOMA translated into "individual" and "portable" pieces, further transferring and sublimating the political character of Rivera's practice.

The extent to which the projects of distinction shaped the worlds of Alfred Barr and MOMA are perhaps particularly clearly on view in Barr's early 1931 essay reviewing a major exhibition of Russian icons on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The show had been sponsored by the Soviet government. In the course of his erudite observations about the formal qualities of the icons, Barr praises the Soviet art restoration group that had taken care to

[36] Mary Ann Staniszewski, *The Power of Display* (Boston: MIT Press, 1998). Barr experimented with a number of display techniques in the early years of MOMA, and in the 1930's several Bauhaus-trained curators would continue the MOMA's experimental projects. See Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Both Staniszewski and Turner argue that these varied practices were connected in their vision of a solitary, independent, and "autonomous" viewer of modern art.

[37] Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly* 1, 1 (Jan.–Mar. 1937): 77–98.

[38] Staniszewski, *Power of Display*, ch. 2.

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preserve and conserve rare and beautiful Russian icons. All of the works had been removed from churches, an act that Barr found critical to their preservation. Barr criticizes the Russian Orthodox church for its failure to maintain these objects, for allowing them to be in constant contact with smoke and incense which damaged them, and (more troublingly) for promoting incorrect and dangerous overidentification of the viewing subject with the iconographic image. He writes, "Whatever one's religious beliefs, it can scarcely be denied that the Russian church from a social point of view often worked for evil. It encouraged superstition of the most primitive order. Icons were worshiped almost as fetishes and employed for all manner of magical as well as devotional purposes. Rasputin's power would have been impossible in a more enlightened religious tradition…." Barr thus lauds the Soviets not only for rescuing and restoring icons (we might observe, furthermore, that they have been rescued from the faithful!) but also for restoring a proper relationship between believers and works of art, and which for Barr meant unquestionably a liberal-secular viewing subject.[39]

Translating and explaining artworks—be they those of Russian Orthodox Christians, or communists, or Buddhists, or others—was an ongoing project, an effort at the perpetual elevation of form (or in Rockefeller's view, "beauty"). [40] It is not surprising, then, to hear a resonating claim in the exhibition catalogue for the 1931 Rivera exhibition authored by Frances Flynn Paine and Jere Abbott. In her culminating essay, Paine writes "Diego's very spinal column is painting, not politics." Paine's essay draws attention to Rivera's pursuit of form and color that everyone, and not only the elites, can appreciate. Thus, she says, his painting "speaks a language of great purety [*sic*] and beauty, a simple language that all can understand."[41] Paine acknowledges Rivera's anti-elitist position through color and form, paying only slight attention to the frescoes' powerful and graphic

[39] Alfred Barr, "Russian Icons," *The Arts* 17 (1931): 297–313, 355–62. See also Richard Meyer, "Revolutionary Icons: Alfred Barr and the Remaking of Russian Religious Art," in Sally Promey, ed., *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 215–24.

[40] This process could be applied in different ways, at different turns. In 1936, for example, MOMA's first major show of surrealism, *Fantastic Art*, nonetheless downplayed surrealism's "literary, theoretical, and political engagements and focused on its techniques of automatic processes and on the fashionable psychological content of its paintings." Barr's choices to emphasize the "fantastic" in art as process rather than surrealism as politics translated the irrational in art into technique of artistic production. To the further shock and outrage of surrealists, the exhibition also included works by children and the mentally ill. Living artists withdrew their work from the planned national tour that was to follow, angry at discovering their work "actively framed as both an escape from and an antidote to the anxieties of the Great Depression, the state of world politics, and even modern life in general." See Sandra Zalman, "The Vernacular as Vanguard: Alfred Barr, Salvador Dalí, and the U.S. Reception of Surrealism in the 1930s," *Journal of Surrealism in the Americas* 1 (2007): 44–67, 48.

[41] Frances Flynn Paine and Jere Abbott, *Diego Rivera* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1931), 35.

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political imagery, their meaning or their references. The politics of Rivera's work and, likewise, the facts of their materiality, the value of the mural as public art, receive only passing mention in the catalogue's text. Readers of the catalogues would learn that the true value—the best way, in fact, to understand Rivera's work—was to focus on its aesthetic power. The frescoes' "purity and beauty" was distinct from and in fact incidental to the artist's revolutionary message and representations, and likewise to the materials and process of his artistic practice.

Reading these public explications of Rivera's work in MOMA's official explanatory text prompts us to imagine a milieu, and indeed a room, where Rivera chose to paint his contribution (on Paine's behalf) in the Tribute Book, and to think about the adjacent resonances and conversations to which it is speaking or responding. The sketch in the Tribute Book is made with the same paints and brushes that Rivera was using to create his mobile frescoes, and—we can imagine—quickly executed, marking a pause in his promised work. How has this man or boy, in this field, been borne of this moment, and to what and whom is it speaking? We notice that the man in the image, shoveling dirt on a wide plain, is dressed in the same peasant garb as the figures in the 1931 fresco "Sugar Cane." In that famous image, peasants are pressed into the scene of colonial peonage, and Rivera extends and compresses their bodies against the weight of their labor. The man in the Tribute Book appears so different to them, their cousin in dress and time, and in actual fabrication—but he is alone, free, unbothered. One sees the sky, the body is untethered. This man owes no one tribute, and it is easy to think of his presence in this book as offering a sly commentary, challenging Paine's claims on him, and her published interpretation of his work. Or we might imagine equally the peasant's indifference to the whole matter. Is Rivera playing with this idea—that with all the attention paid to the "purity" of his paintings' form, his political positions might be allowed to flourish in plain view?

Rivera would dramatically meet the limits of the Rockefeller family's tolerance when he was invited to return to New York in the summer of 1932 to create a grand public mural for the newly completed Rockefeller Center. As he worked on this epic artwork, word was leaked to the press that the mural included portraits of Marx and Lenin and glorified the communist leaders and their parties. A mob assembled outside of the skyscraper complex and the police were called. Overnight, the unfinished mural was painted over, and Rivera was dismissed. Most chroniclers of the mural's destruction have assumed that the images of communists were what led the Rockefellers to their quick assent to this act, but Dickerman notes that it may have been another portrait on the mural, that of the staunchly Baptist pro-Prohibition capitalist John D. Rockefeller, Sr. drinking a martini and laughing with dancing girls that had raised their ire. This, she argues, was the step too far, and

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marked the true limit of the Rockefellers' capacity to appreciate form for its own sake.[42]

CONCLUSION

Barr and early MOMA staff did not always see art or its value in the same way, yet it might be said that the museum was, overall, *universally* interested. Its staff's abilities, and capacities, to bring the varieties of modern arts and design into their museum required translations and transformations, not only political but also social and historical. To find and to assign beauty and form to works of art within modernism did more than suppress politics within modern art. It made modern art so that religion and politics could be seen in a particular way within it. A way that was as fungible and moveable as a "mobile fresco."

It would be incorrect to say that Barr or others at MOMA understood their work, their interpretations of art, or their practices of display as being spiritual, much less religious. However, MOMA's efforts to shape new ways through which a wide swath of the American public could apprehend and understand modern arts appears in a different light through a reading of the Tribute Book. The Tribute Book's adjacencies and contingencies resonate in such a way that we can sense the proximities of "modern" liberal Protestantism to the museum milieu, and we can furthermore begin to note how these ideas, so powerfully engaged by Rockefeller, reverberated across the landscape in which MOMA took shape.

The circuitous route of the Rockefeller Tribute Book in November 1931, and my inadvertent way to it in October 2014, offer a way to understand MOMA's (and Barr's) strategies as cultivating a powerful imagination of modern art that reverberated easily within and around a liberal protestant orientation toward universalism and beauty. These ideas were not, of course, the purview of Protestantism alone. But in highlighting the way that the museum's patron articulated them in her global project of institutionalizing beauty, and in seeing how the group authors of the Tribute Book responded and worked within this view, we see its effects in a more granular way.

I think it would be too easy, and not quite right, to say that MOMA's early display and exhibition practices simply translated a protestant imagination of beauty (such as Rockefeller's) from one context to another, or to otherwise argue that the Tribute Book (or my interpretation of it) "reveals" something religious that has been hidden or subterranean within the world of New York's modern art worlds. (Much less would I wish to argue that its exhibitions impressed upon its viewers a spiritual outlook in some occult fashion.) Arguably, these relationships between the protestant and the modern that I have marked here have been far

[42] Leah Dickerman, "Leftist Circuits," in Leah Dickerman and Anna Indych-López, eds., *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 10–47.

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from hidden. While the story of MOMA is not told this way, it can hardly be a surprise that MOMA's practices took shape within and alongside the strong presence of religious ideas and expressions. As such, recognizing the presence of such effects as one way in which religion shapes secular museum spaces does not make the museum any less (or more) secular, but more properly speaking reshapes the ways that we seek out an understanding of what informs a museum's interpretations of its collection, meaning not only (or even particularly) its descriptions of art works, but more precisely the exhibition and curatorial practices that shape ways of seeing. Such considerations may bring into focus goals and visions that a museum does not articulate for itself, and that circulate within more clearly mandated purposes and programs.

And, insofar as these resonant alternatives are present, we can also think about what else they might have, or could still, make possible within a museum's messy and imperfect form and execution. I have observed that the Tribute Book's written contents include quite a bit of language that refers explicitly to Christian ideas, texts, and institutions, including Bible verses and the use of titles like "reverend." On the other hand, the word "spiritual" only appears once, in lines penned by Cary Ross: "May I add to Miss Sunderkotter's expression an appreciation of your courage in recognizing the diversity of men's spiritual expression and of your loyalty to an ideal." It is certainly possible to read his line as a wry comment, as I have suggested. But it harbors additional resonances that seem to reach beyond the distinctions of religious and secular that were taking shape in MOMA's adjacent relation to liberal protestant spiritual aesthetics. Perhaps this line signals Ross' hope for another, unrealized MOMA—one that would have fully embraced the cosmopolitan, queer, avant-garde modernism to which Ross had set his allegiance. As it happened, Ross' tenure at MOMA was not a very long one. He wrote to Alfred Barr from England in March 1932 to resign from the museum, telling his mentor the photographer Alfred Stieglitz that his decision had not been an easy one, but "how can one sing hymns of purest joy where one is fighting heart and soul with a dragon?" But, in December 1931 we can imagine that Ross still held out hope for a near future for MOMA where modernism would not be colonized by good taste or beauty, and where there would be room for a different diversity of "spiritual expression." We might imagine that Ross, standing in the cold Heckscher Building studio while Rivera painted in the book, watched Rivera's figure take shape and in the same moment recognized in it the impossibility of this desire being fulfilled by this museum.[43]

Or perhaps he realized that the possibility of such diversity could only be glimpsed through a transgressive breach.

[43] Cary Ross to Alfred Stieglitz, 6 Mar. 1932, Alfred Stieglitz/Georgia O'Keeffe Archive, YCAL MSS 85, box 42, folder 1006; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

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I have taken some quasi-surrealist liberties in this essay. Approaching the book as an "exquisite corpse" has kept in the foreground the disjointedness of the stories that it artificially combines. One value of the surrealist's game, I believe, lies in how it signals the artificiality of any body that comes together in interpretation. The instability of this object's classification—is it a gift, an artwork, an ethnographic object, or something else?—invites other routes and pathways within it or from it, that yield other stories or interpretations, or frames of comparison.

My own ends in this essay have been to tell a story about how I have been grappling with the entanglement of secularity and religion produced in museums, that extend into the very modes and methods of interpretation and comparison that shape the conditions of all of our inquiries into the shape of the secular and of the religious. It is thus to move past the point where many genealogically oriented studies of religion and secularity reach their natural limit, where we find many recent scholarly projects that offer a revelation of religion within secular spaces aligned (intentionally or not) with modern practices intent on purifying modern secular museums. Thus, and contra André Breton's claim for surrealism's games, which expose "the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought,"[44] my own interest in playing a game of exquisite corpse is not to replace one story with another that I argue is better. While I take heart in the invitation to find my way to a vigorous consideration of "previously neglected associations" at MOMA that arise through the "disinterested play of thought" represented in the Tribute Book's fabrication, this object is not a smoking gun. It does not hold a "key" to unlock a new and better way of thinking about religion and museums.

The aim in gesturing toward the quasi-surreal is not to replace one set of distinctions and comparisons with another. Such projects, familiar to us through many of the interpretive practices deemed "genealogical," remain tethered too often to the kinds of secular practices on display in the MOMA of this essay, devoted that is to rituals of revelation and exposure (and perhaps also, purification).[45] In this milieu, other methods of comparison and juxtaposition become all the more necessary.[46] This includes embracing modes of comparison and play—surrealist and otherwise—that draw attention to the resonances and interactions

[44] André Breton, "First Surrealist Manifesto," in *Surrealism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1924), 66–75.

[45] Liane Carlson, "Critical for Whom? Genealogy and the Limits of History." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 31, 3 (2019): 185–209.

[46] Biles marks this approach as consistent with Bataille's version of surrealism which, in "deviating and descending from Breton's correlative "belief in the superior reality of previously neglected associations" [instead approaches] analogy as a base reality, parodically, entering into its tenebrously mirrored chambers as one must enter psychoanalysis: through the back door." ("Task of *Surealism," 116).

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that extend beyond the discursive, and without which we cannot make sense of the durability of our senses of the secular museum.

A FINAL REFLECTION

It is evident that my use and interpretation of the Tribute Book hinges on an interpretive presumption. I took the conditions in which I found the book as evidence that it had been forgotten and, in some respects, abandoned. Placed in a box with other materials that did not clearly attach themselves to important domains in Rockefeller's life, it appeared to me as one more speck in the vast ocean of Mrs. Rockefeller's worldly possessions, of which the holdings of the Rockefeller Archive Center provide testament. Keeping these conditions in mind also kept at arm's length the questions of what, if anything, the Tribute Book meant to any particular community of people living in 1931, or what it might mean to any particular community living now. What kind of story might they have told, individually or together? What additional networks of interpretive possibility hover over the book's surface, and how would an analysis that pays different (or closer) attention to the worlds of its makers challenge or resonate differently with the one I have offered?

I have sought to avoid these questions. Interesting as they are, I have not sought an interpretive claim that locates the book's meaning in a definitive social or historical stream of interpretation or even with one community. This is, I hope, at least partially evident in my method. The book is not a game of exquisite corpse, but only like one. In this respect, my interpretation says something about the book, but I have also used the book to say something about something else. I have, in short, used it as a found object that fashions a different space from which to consider how the secularity of modern art museums like MOMA might look from other angles, and to use these orientations as alternative routes into the contrasts and distinctions of religion, spiritual, and secular things and spaces in museums. I have sought to think about the book as an ordinary (although curious) object, a book that had its rightful place in a box of ephemera.

Yet at the same time I cannot help but feel some affection for the book and some responsibility for its evident transformation.

But responsibility for what? After I left the Rockefeller Archive Center, I spent a few days looking at the quick photographs I had taken of the Rivera in the book, puzzling over it, wanting to know more—wanting assurance, in fact, that it was a "real" Rivera. I mulled over the possibility that it was not. After all, it had been so thoroughly forgotten in the archive, that the Rivera was not even mentioned in the finding aid, that whoever had written in Frances Flynn Paine's first name had misspelled it, with an "i" instead of an "e." I wrote to the archivist, curious about what she thought. Her response came a day later and bore no uncertainty. She thanked me on behalf of the Archives for bringing this valuable object to their attention. Now that they knew about the painting, she told me, they

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had locked the Tribute Book safely away in a special part of the archives open only to staff. The book is now out of bounds of researchers like me, Rivera's signature having summoned to it another kind of power—one that came clear to me in the realization, not long afterward, that I am the last person who will ever hold the book without wearing gloves.

Abstract: The "exquisite corpse" in this title refers to a gift book presented to Mrs. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in December 1931, which contains signed notes from Rockefeller's domestic employees, friends, ministers, art dealers, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) employees, and also a signed painting by Diego Rivera. The book's construction highlights the intersecting social networks and associations among a variety of religious, artistic, philanthropic, and domestic organizations and individuals that are more typically investigated as distinct or non-connecting. As such, the book invites an alternate reading of influences shaping MoMA's earliest years. This interpretation takes inspiration from the surrealist games and conceits of ethnographic and artistic surrealism—an approach that is generatively suggested by the Tribute Book's construction. Read in this way, I take the gift book to open up a range of associations that make possible modes of interpretation through which to consider the secular and the modern religious. I use the book's intertextual qualities as an entry point into a new consideration of the presence and effects of liberal-protestant spiritual aesthetics in MOMA's earliest years. I argue that such spiritual aesthetics shaped the secular museum's curation, display, and interpretation of political artists including Rivera and European surrealists.

Key words: Museum of Modern Art (NYC), Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, secularism, surrealism, Diego Rivera, museums, exquisite corpse, Protestantism, spirituality

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