

Further reading

J. DRAYCOTT & E.-J. GRAHAM, *Bodies of Evidence. Ancient Anatomical Votives Past, Present and Future*, London, New York: Routledge, 2017.

C. PERRÉE, “Exposer le miracle ou mettre de l’ordre dans le désordre de la foi. Étude de trois salles votives au Brésil, en France et au Mexique”, in: *Terrains & travaux* 30.1, 2017, pp. 143-162.

J.-P. TROMBETTA, “Les ex-voto : continuité et renouveau”, in: C. PRIGENT (Ed.), *Art et société en France au XV^e siècle*, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1999, pp. 613-620.

I. WEINRYB, *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*, New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2016.

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THE UNUSUAL OBJECTS No. 6

A vow for a miracle: ex-votos, items of the people’s devotion

While the Béguinage remains closed for renovation, Erasmus House is putting an unusual object from the municipal museums’ vast historical, archaeological, folk art and religious collections on display each month. Five ex-votos are on display this month.



“[V]ows, through which something is promised to God...” is how the 13th century theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, Part 2-2, Q88) introduces the subject of *votum*, a pagan practice that was taken over by the Church at the start of Christianity (according to Erasmus). The materialisation of such vows as objects or money offered to a specific saint are called ex-votos, from the Latin *ex-voto suscepto* (from the vow made). These votive objects could take many forms – paintings of saints, engravings of thanks, wax objects representing diseased limbs, and so on – with lit candles in church being the most widespread today.

The ex-voto ritual

According to Roman Catholic rites, the wishes must be made in a holy place and the believer must deserve this action of grace through an effort, gift, pilgrimage, or some commitment or restriction that s/he places on her/himself. Two categories of ex-voto are recognised: propitiatory ex-votos, which accompany the request for help, and gratulatory ex-votos to thank the intercessor for her/his mediation. Ex-votos are never addressed to God or Jesus Christ directly, but to the Virgin Mary or a particular saint, depending on the latter's "specialisation". So, Saint James the Greater is invoked to cure rheumatism, Saint Sebastian for protection against plague, and Saint Guy, the patron saint of Anderlecht, to combat dysentery and livestock diseases. Moreover, a saint who fails to deliver will quickly lose her/his worshippers. Ex-votos were mass produced but could be customised (precious metals, refinement, etc.); the cost and quality of the object were directly correlated with the magnitude of the service requested.

Erasmus House ex-votos

The wax anatomical ex-votos that you see here represent miniaturised limbs or extensions of the devotee's body, sometimes in an idealised form, and either healthy or afflicted by ills, that were given in supplication for divine action or in thanks after healing. They include a heart, eyes, a leg with varicose veins, and a runny nose and were probably made before the end of the 19th century, at which point ex-votos took the form of engravings of thanks. Many ex-votos of the past have since disappeared, with the most valuable ones having been melted or smelted down and re-used.

1 Heart-shaped anatomical ex-voto

Wax votive figurine representing a heart.

Belgium, end 19th century

Wax

7,5 x 6,5 cm

Inv. BEG 5904

2 Anatomical ex-voto of a leg

Wax votive figurine representing a leg.

Belgium, end 19th century

Wax

6,4 x 4,2 cm

Inv. BEG 5918

3 Anatomical ex-voto of a pair of eyes

Wax votive figurine representing two eyes.

Belgium, end 19th century

Wax

4,3 x 9 cm

Inv. BEG 5909

4 Anatomical ex-voto of a leg

Metal votive figurine representing a leg.

The grooves on the leg may represent varicose veins.

Belgium, end 19th century

Metal

9,7 x 4,5 cm

Inv. BEG 5905

5 Anatomical ex-voto of a nose afflicted by rhinorrhoea

Metal votive figurine representing a runny nose.

Belgium, end 19th century

Metal

6,8 x 4,4 cm

Inv. BEG 5907