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## EXHIBITION REVIEW

# ‘Sights and Sounds of Ancient Ritual’ Review: Art Meant to Excite the Soul

From noisemakers to imaginative drinking vessels, the objects in this exhibition show that spiritual practice could be a multisensory experience.

By Edward Rothstein

Dec. 10, 2018 4:14 p.m. ET

New Haven, Conn.

You can’t hear the rattling of the ancient Egyptian sistrum at the Yale University Art Gallery’s exhibition “Sights and Sounds of Ancient Ritual,” but you can glimpse aspects of its religious power. Constructed in the early centuries of the first millennium, this ceremonial noisemaker is coated in brilliant blue faience, which retains its otherworldly gloss. At its base, from which a handle once protruded, the head of the goddess Hathor gazes out, her fertile powers suggested by bovine ears. Above her a Grecian temple arch stands; between its pillars we see remnants of metal pieces that once rattled against each other when the instrument was shaken. During rituals, we learn, such sounds would have “evoked the rustling of rushes and grasses” under the goddess’s feet as she walked toward her temple; sistrums wielded by multiple celebrants would have produced a shiver of sound over the earth’s surface.

### Sights and Sounds of Ancient Ritual

Yale University Art Gallery  
Through March 3, 2019

Again and again, as we explore this remarkable exhibition, we are asked to imagine the effect of ritualistic sounds. A flute from Mexico (c. 900-1519) would have produced tones through the carved head of Xochipilli, god of music, dance and pleasure (who makes several appearances here); a cast

bronze priest’s bell from 13th-century Java topped by a demonic-looking lion might have summoned the spirit world; the curved body of a ceramic ocarina in the shape of a kinkajou from Costa Rica (1200-1550) contains finger-holes for altering pitches, thus transforming animal cries into melody.

The sounds, we see, are also being produced in images. In one sensuously carved tableau made of schist (c. late first-early fourth century), a South Asian musician plays a drum as a dancer claps and steps amid acanthus leaves; it would have once adorned the steps of a domed stupa, housing relics of the Buddha. And a fifth-century B.C. Greek bell krater, in which wine and water would have been mixed, shows a priest about to wash his hands before sacrificing a goat as a musician stands nearby playing an aulos (a double-reed wind instrument); above them all, rows of minuscule marks in the pottery’s black background seem to suggest ethereal vibrations of music and chant.

Yet as we look, all is silent. No surprise there. That is how we usually think of the ancient world. But we also begin to see how much we are missing. The curator, Carolyn M. Laferrière, is a postdoctoral associate at Archaia—Yale’s Program for the Study of Ancient and Premodern Cultures and Societies—who is working on a study of ancient Greek music and ritual. She has gathered more than 80 works from the Art Gallery and the Yale Babylonian Collection at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History; they span over three millennia, from about 1500 B.C. to A.D. 1500, and range widely geographically as well, originating from Greece, Rome, Western Europe, Egypt, West Africa, China and Mesoamerica. Ritual, the exhibition argues, is a multisensory experience in which smells, tastes and sounds have a vital role.

Ritual, in other words, is spiritual theater. A ceramic sculpture (600-1200) of the god Xochipilli—whose domains, we learn, include not just music and dance but lust, gambling and hallucinogens—doubles as an incense burner; clouds of fragrant smoke



Egyptian sistrum (rattle) with the head of Hathor (c. 304-30 B.C.) PHOTO: YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY



A ceremonial, zoomorphic jar from Costa Rica (1000-1350) PHOTO: YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

would  
have

emanated from his image. A small Chinese bronze incense burner (from second-century B.C. to A.D. second century) is said to represent the Isle of the Blessed where revered ancestors dwell; smoke would have arisen around the mountain peaks like billowing clouds. Visual power is crucial: However faded, a painted processional crucifix from 12th-century Spain commands attention. Illuminated pages of a 15th-century choir book with the Latin Mass shine with retrospective glory; the leaves, with their early forms of musical notation, prefigure the evolution of Western art music.

These artifacts, from vastly different cultures and times, also show something about ritual's purpose. Ritual often marks a passage from one realm into another—the profane and the sacred, life and death, the animal and the human. The exhibition's objects often seem at home on both sides of such divides. In some cases, instruments (like that Mexican flute) turn the player into a god. In others, as in images of Dionysos from Greece and Rome, music turns players into half-beasts. A ceremonial jar from Costa Rica (1000-1350) is shaped like a grotesque humanoid animal; the head pours a presumably intoxicating drink into the celebrant's mouth, but the jar, thus upturned, would replace the drinker's face with an animal's behind, within which a rattle adds sound effects.

But music is the crucial force. It can touch on the demonic and the divine at once, even bridging life and death (some artifacts here were buried with the dead). Music is an intoxicant and a revelation, an accompaniment to mourning and to celebration; it bears the marks of both Apollo and Dionysus. I wish the gallery had figured out a way to provide a more vivid auditory and visual sense of these objects in action. But then I would have imagined less. Spend some time here and you may even suspect, with Keats, that heard melodies are sweet, unheard melodies sweeter.

—Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.



Double-sided processional cross (c. 1310), by the Master of the Gubbio Cross PHOTO: YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY



Vessel with gods of drunkenness from Guatemala or Mexico (600-900) PHOTO: YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

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