

The **Capstone Course** in Religious Studies,
Skidmore College, 2019:

THINGS

Studying *Religion* Through Material Culture

RE 375

classroom: Tisch 307
meets: Wed & Fri
12:20-2:10 pm

Prof. G. Spinner

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office hrs: Wed 10:15-11:15 am,
or by appointment.

Course Description

Through a cross-cultural examination of various objects, icons, relics, replicas, so-called fetishes, and other ‘bodies’ of evidence, we consider sacred materiality. In so doing, we recognize how often religious traditions themselves focus on special things for worship, veneration, and spiritual practice. This topic then provides us with a welcome opportunity to reconsider what it is we mean when calling any thing “sacred” or “religious.”

Religious objects are made and used, and they can be paraded, purchased, resold, stolen, returned, copied, and consumed. In short, they circulate within economies of the sacred, and by tracing the routes such objects travel, we can learn a great deal about religious life. We can also compare recent scholarship with foundational ideas from the discipline’s established canon. We get to traverse conceptual boundaries, such as between magic and religion, and between persons and things. Surveying ancient techniques along with modern technologies, we critically explore notions of agency, aura, and commodity. The range of our inquiry is global, our method is comparative, and our approach eschews sloppy or hurried reductionism.

This course is conducted as an advanced seminar, emphasizing student research, writing, presentation, and collaboration. Each student will prepare and share a capstone project that synthesizes previous studies, summing up their undergraduate careers as Religious Studies majors. Along the way, students will engage each other’s work, giving feedback to and providing support for their classmates. As part of this collaborative effort, we will also analyze a full-length academic monograph from start to finish, taking its arguments apart and putting them back together again, so that students can better understand how to build their own arguments.

Required Materials

Annabel Jane Wharton, Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks.
(University of Chicago, 2006).

Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein, They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing, 4th edition (W.W. Norton, 2018).

All other readings will be made available as Course Readers, distributed by the instructor, or posted to Blackboard.

Learning Goals

Through taking this course students will learn to:

- (i.) craft and complete research projects that synthesize the theoretical tools and methodological training acquired as Religious Studies majors;
- (ii.) refine their skills at oral communication;
- (iii.) undertake sustained critiques of complex, interdisciplinary arguments;
- (iv.) examine the default setting presuming that things do not act like persons, and to move beyond polemical classifications of objects (“idol,” “fetish,” etc.) so as to re/consider the complicated relations between values and objects;
- and (v.) recognize how materiality involves relationality, a vital aspect of religious experiences and social interactions.

What is Material Religion?

As Matthew Engleke has asserted, All religion is material religion. It is not a distinct way of being religious, but rather a matter of *how we study it*. Material religion designates a methodological strategy, an approach that expands our field of critical inquiry beyond a too-narrow focus upon textuality. It corrects a stubborn tendency among scholars of religion to de-materialize their subjects, even though many of the traditions they study clearly place great value on sacred objects, holy places, and sensory experiences.

Since 2005, an academic journal called *Material Religion* has been published, mapping some of this newer terrain. (We are fortunate enough to have one of its founders, S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate, visiting our classroom.) Religious Studies has long been a site for interdisciplinary investigation, and over the past several decades a range of established disciplines (such as anthropology, philosophy, history, and art history) have called more critical attention to the body and the senses, to expressive or material culture, and to epistemologies that collapse the Cartesian binary. Across the humanities, there has been a growing recognition of doing as a way of knowing, coupled with the belated acknowledgment of the manifold ways in which identities are embodied. Our course builds upon this important intellectual work, and allows students to explore their interests in religion through focusing on material objects.

Projects & Presentations

Your capstone project is tailored to your own interests, but it will also be shared with the group. At every important step of the research process, we discuss what we are doing: we talk over potential topics together, we critique bibliographies, and help each other in developing theses. You will read each other's drafts, and comment upon them. Your research project should result in a substantive paper, 20-25 pages in length, complete with academic citation.

You will also make a formal, oral presentation to the class, summarizing your research. As your paper is the detailed, long-form fruit of your labors, this is the condensed version, in which you present your research as clearly and concisely as possible. The required format is *Pecha Kucha*.

Pecha Kucha is a style of presentation developed in Tokyo to maximize information in a minimal amount of time; it consists of "20 x 20": twenty images or slides, each shown for just 20 seconds. On YouTube, Marcus Weaver-Hightower delivers a *Pecha Kucha* on, "How to Make a Pecha Kucha." That can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32WEzM3LFhw>

You can also consult www.pechakucha.org for more background.

Breakdown of Grading

Participation	10 %
<i>Class Assignments</i>	
Ekphrasis	5 %
Reflection: Tang visit	5 %
Response: Rodriguez-Plate	5 %
Intellectual Autobiography	5 %
<i>Capstone Project</i>	
Annotated Bibliography	10 %
Paper Outline	10 %
Drafts	10 %
Final Paper	25 %
<i>Pecha Kucha</i> Presentation	15 %

Major Deadlines

Annotated Bibliography	Oct 11
Outline	Oct 30
Draft	Nov 13
Revised Paper	Dec 6
Final Paper & <i>Pecha Kucha</i>	Dec 16

Student Disabilities

Skidmore College is committed to making reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you need accommodation, then please formally request academic accommodation from the school. Contact Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, who can explain how to provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

Title IX

Skidmore College faculty and staff are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. We consider sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations.

If you choose to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that person is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator. That administrator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available to the student. For further information, consult [://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/](http://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/) or contact Joel Aure, Title IX Coordinator, or Sarah Green, Deputy Coordinator.

A Few More Things

As third and fourth year students, you are familiar with Skidmore's Honor Code, to which I expect you to strictly adhere. But in case you need a reminder, please see:
https://www.skidmore.edu/student_handbook/honor-code.php

Be proactive about your learning: when something is unclear, or you feel unfocused or overwhelmed, then please contact me and we can set up a meeting to address the issue. (Email is the quickest method for communication.) If you run into any problems, kindly notify me sooner rather than later.

Stow your electronic devices away when you come to class.

Successful collaboration requires civility. Please adopt an attitude somewhere between courtesy and kindness, and show respect to everybody in the room. Come to every class, and read all the materials beforehand. Make that effort; and make your deadlines. And let us commit to making this a memorable, brilliant semester.

Dr. Spinner

Schedule for RE 375

THINGS

Studying *Religion* Through
Material Culture

- Sept 4. Introductions. **Show & Tell.**
Sept 6. **Locks, Traps & Categories.** Reading 1.
- Sept 11. **Looking at Things: A Visit to the Tang Museum.** Reading 2.
Sept 13. **Thinking with Things: Re-viewing the Tang visit.** Reading 3.
- Sept 18. **Making the Scroll: A Visit with Rabbi Linda Motzkin.** Reading 4.
Sept 20. **A Sorcerer's Bottle.** Reading 5.
- Sept 25. **Plundered Skulls & Stolen Spirits.** Reading 6.
Sept 27. *Research Project: Finding & Evaluating your Sources.* Reading 7.
- Oct 2. **Objects as Agents, Objects as Evidence.** Reading 8.
Oct 4. **Saintly Bones & Unpainted Icons.** Reading 9.
- Oct 9. *No class: Yom Kippur.*
Oct 11. **The Buddha Made Present.** Reading 10.
- Oct 15. **"The Spiritual Life of Dolls: The Technological Quest for the Soul from Adam to Barbie to AI."**
Lecture by S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate,
Emerson Auditorium, 6:00 pm.
- Oct 16. **Talking about Things: A Visit with S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate.** Reading 11.
Oct 18. **Living Property & Trophies of War.** Reading 12.
- Oct 23. **Praying the Book: A Visit with Dean Michael Orr.** Reading 13.
Oct 25. *No class: Study Day.*
- Oct 30. *Research Project: Building your Argument.* Reading 14.
Nov 1. **Commodities, Values, Sentiments.** Reading 15.

Schedule for RE 375,
continued

- Nov 6. **Returning Things.** Reading 16.
Nov 8. **Fragmented Jerusalem.** Reading 17.
- Nov 13. **Replicated Jerusalem.** Reading 18.
Nov 15. **Fabricated Jerusalem.** Reading 19.
- Nov 20. *Research Project: Revising your Work.* Reading 20.
Nov 22. **It's a Surprise!** Reading 21.

Thanksgiving Break

- Dec 4. **Mechanically Reproduced Jerusalem.** Reading 22.
Dec 6. **Spectacularized Jerusalem.** Reading 23.
- Dec 11. Conclusions.

Dec 16. *Pecha Kucha Presentations.*
1:30 - 4:30 pm.

Reading Assignments for RE 375

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Studying *Religion* Through Material Culture

- Reading 1. Imperato, Legends, Sorcerers & Enchanted Lizards. Gell, “Vogel’s Net.”
- Reading 2. Paine, Religious Objects in Museums.
- Reading 3. Paszorty, Thinking with Things.
- Reading 4. Schleicher, “Engaging All the Senses.”
- Reading 5. McAlister, “Sorcerer’s Bottle,” *available on Blackboard*.
Spinner, “Bad Objects.”
- Reading 6. Riding in, “Repatriation: A Pawnee’s Perspective.”
Colwell, Plundered Skulls. pp. 1-53.
- Reading 7. They Say, I Say, pp. 1-52.
- Reading 8. Harvey, “Things Act.” Hughes, “Mysterium Materiae.”
Eliade & Sullivan, “Hierophany.”
- Reading 9. Freeman, Holy Bones, Holy Dust. Belting, Likeness and Presence.
Geary, Furta Sacra.
- Reading 10. Swearer, Becoming the Buddha. Strong, Relics of the Buddha.
- Reading 11. Plate, The History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects.
- Reading 12. Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography of Things.” Davis, Lives of Indian Images.
- Reading 13. Wieck et.al., Time Sanctified. De Hamel, “Books for Everybody.”
- Reading 14. They Say, I Say, pp. 53-99.
- Reading 15. Marx, Capital. Harvey. Appadurai. SNL, “Sentimental Value Pawn Shop.”
- Reading 16. Davis, Lives of Indian Images. Colwell, Plundered Skulls.
- Reading 17. Wharton, Selling Jerusalem, pp. 1- 47.
- Reading 18. Selling Jerusalem, pp. 48-96.
- Reading 19. Selling Jerusalem, pp. 97-143.
- Reading 20. They Say, I Say, pp. 100-145.
- Reading 21. *To Be Announced*.
- Reading 22. Selling Jerusalem, pp. 145-188. Benjamin, “The Work of Art
in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”
- Reading 23. Selling Jerusalem, pp. 189-238. Baudrillard, “The Precession of
Simulacra.” Additional, internet sources *will be linked to via email*.