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On the advantage and disadvantage of history for life

by Stephen Schloesser

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Gallery View, Late Gothic Hall.

Image: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

In the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche published his ruminations “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life” (*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*) in the essay collection *Untimely Meditations* (1874). Tempering the tide of historical studies that marked the age of nation states, Nietzsche argued for the vital importance of *forgetting* as well as remembering: “In the case of the smallest or of the greatest happiness . . . it is always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel unhistorically during its duration.” A decade later, Ernest Renan famously declared in his lecture “What is a Nation?”

(1882) that “the essence of a nation is that all of its individual members have a great deal in common and also that they have forgotten many things.” Almost exactly a century later, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) reiterated Renan’s insight: imagined communities depend on collective forgetting as well as remembrance.

The presentation of objects loaned from the Sistine Chapel Sacristy, described by Jason Farago in the *New York Times* as the “diplomatic and liturgical coup” of *Heavenly Bodies*, provides a useful case study in forgetfulness. Reflecting on the exhibition catalog’s dual function as an art object and as a thesis statement, Genevieve Valentine noted for *NPR* the tension between the “handsome” and “gorgeous” aesthetic qualities of the exhibition and the “strange silences” in terms of contextual analysis. Although the exhibit itself is “a cultural history of enormous complexity that begs examination beyond the allure of a beautiful garment,” the “context is often absent”—a forgetting that makes for “a beautiful, if slightly tidy, interpretation of Catholic tradition.” Writing for *artnet News*, Eleanor Heartney was more pointed: “Nevertheless, the overriding premise of the show remains troubling. ‘Heavenly Bodies’ presents Catholicism as eye candy. This is not really what Andrew Greeley had in mind when he theorized about the *Catholic Imagination*.”¹ This seamless garment (so to speak) representation was expressed by attendees at the gala opening. Cardinal Timothy Dolan’s official remarks employed an appropriately trinitarian summary: “It’s because the church and the Catholic imagination are all about three things: truth, goodness, and beauty.” Admiring the delicate gold filigree on a cape of Pius IX, designer Jean Paul Gaultier observed: “It’s part of my education. I am born Catholic. . . . It is beautiful to see this thing that is such a part of our lives.”

But is it? Is Pius IX’s cape a part of our lives? And if so, what part does it play within an overall context of forgetting?

Pius IX’s cape is the largest and most elaborate piece in a suite of vestments that “required the collective effort and skill of fifteen women . . . over the course of almost sixteen years,” according to the exhibit catalog’s first volume. The suite had been commissioned for the extreme reactionary Pope Gregory XVI by Empress Maria Anna Carolina of Austria in 1845, the year preceding the pope’s death. Ever since the restoration of the Papal States and the papal monarchy at the Congress of Vienna (1815), Austria had been a major power on the Italian peninsula and a significant obstacle to Italian nationalists’ *Risorgimento* desire for a unified nation state. In 1846, one year after the vestment suite’s commission, Pius IX succeeded Gregory XVI to the papal throne. Initially considered somewhat liberal, especially in contrast with his reactionary predecessor, the trauma of his forced exile (1848-1850) during the mid-century revolutions profoundly impacted his politics as he lived out the last days as pope of the millennium old Papal States.

Sixteen years after its commission, the vestment suite was completed—in 1861, the same year that nationalist victories made possible the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy (under Victor Emmanuel) and the declaration of Rome (still in the Papal States) as Italy’s imagined capital. Is it only coincidence that the chasuble from this suite is adorned on its front with an image of the first fratricide, Cain’s murder of Abel? And its back an image of Abraham on the verge of slaying his only son, Isaac, a test-case of unwavering faith and obedience in the face of seeming absurdity (Romans 4:3)? The dalmatic’s two sides feature a Christ sweating blood in his agony in the garden and another bloody face as he struggles beneath the weight of the cross. The cope’s depiction of David’s pouring of water on the ground (2 Samuel 23:15-17) implicitly compares the papal monarch to King David who wanted Bethlehem recaptured from the Philistines and once again firmly under Israel’s control. The expulsion of Adam and Eve after the original sin and Joseph’s placing the marriage ring of the House of King David on Mary’s finger further elaborate the extended analogy of the papal monarchy’s reason for being in this valley of tears.

Although the vestment suite and its imperial commission were profoundly political, that context is invisible in *Heavenly Bodies*, the embodiment of a necessary forgetting that has made possible the coexistence of the Vatican City state and the Italian nation state—imagined communities—for the past ninety years. In his brief essay written for the exhibit catalog, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi rightly observes that “Liturgical vestments, like other objects dedicated to worship, are a veritable mirror of the historical phases of the Catholic Church.” But in this exhibition, the mirror is somewhat biblical as the historical phases are only minimally marked: “For now we see through a glass, darkly.” (1 Corinthians 13:12) The Austrian Empress’s commission of such opulence tightly interwove warp and woof, transcendent and terrestrial, represented the divine legitimacy of monarchies (both the pope’s and her own) against the nineteenth-century tide. “There will always be viewers who want to reduce [an exhibition] to a political polemic,” said curator Andrew Bolton. Had this exhibition taken place a century ago, it would have generated enormous controversy—including among New York City’s Garibaldi enthusiasts—given the objects’ profoundly political nature symbolizing church-state conflicts. However, as the historical context is set aside the political is transformed into the purely aesthetic.²

The more closely one examines the Vatican loan, laid out with minimal commentary in the catalog’s first volume (separated from the rest of the exhibition in the second volume), the more apparent is the inextricable interweaving of terrestrial and transcendent. There is the shield of Pius VII, made for his coronation in 1800. He succeeded Pius VI who had died the preceding year as a prisoner in France. Napoleon had refused to allow his burial and one of Pius VII’s first tasks was to negotiate with the emperor for the body. Eventually, Pius VII would likewise be deposed by Napoleon and deported as a prisoner to France. In the end, however, the pope outlasted the emperor and returned to his throne in the Sistine Chapel—whose sacristy is the home of this Vatican loan—a triumphant scene painted by the French Romantic Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres in 1814, the year of Waterloo.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (French, 1780 – 1867), "Pope Pius VII in the Sistine Chapel," 1814, oil on canvas, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.23

In 1854, Queen Isabella II of Spain gave Pius IX the tiara fitted by the jeweler of the royal house of Bourbon, perhaps as reparation for the Spanish government's anticlerical laws. 1854 is the year in which Pius IX proclaimed (on December 8) the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, an anti-modernist image that figures in *Heavenly Bodies*.³ Isabella's ill-fated reign was bitterly tumultuous and she eventually abdicated and went into exile on June 25, 1870. A month later, Vatican Council I defined papal infallibility, just before French troops abandoned Rome in August for the Franco-Prussian war. On September 20, 1870, the nationalist Italians' capture of Rome ended both the Papal States and the papal monarchy.⁴

In 1871, for his silver jubilee as pope, Pius IX—now the ex-monarch and self-styled "Prisoner of the Vatican"—received yet another tiara, this one from women in Belgium's royal court. The words "In Terra Regum" (presumably "[King] Of Kings on Earth") are inscribed on the tiara's front, a progressively shrinking terrestrial cohort. A clasp given for the same jubilee reads "Non deficiat Fides" (Luke 22:32). Jesus tells Simon Peter (first of the popes) that he has prayed for him "that your faith may not fail," an effort at papal consolation in the political catastrophe of 1871.

Even more remarkable in 1871 is the ring given for Pius IX's jubilee by Britain's Queen Victoria. The Latin inscription reads "By this sign you will conquer" ("In hoc signo vinces"), the heavenly apparition that led the Emperor Constantine to his eventual Christian conversion and with him the Roman Empire. This gift by the Head of the Church of England, titular descendent of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, would seem astonishing in any context. It is even more so, however, given the ridicule that the previous year's definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I had received in the British press. Queen Victoria, however, had good reasons to emphasize the divine legitimation of monarchs. Her English royal coat of arms inherited from Henry V reads: "Dieu et mon droit."

In 1877, the penultimate year of his reign, Pius IX was given a crosier featuring Saint Peter sitting in his barque and holding the keys of heaven. The crosier was given by the Bavarian diocese of Regensburg at the very end of Otto von Bismarck's bitter anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf* (1871-1876). The crosier bears the coats of arms of Pius IX and the city of Regensburg, a fierce statement of cosmopolitan Catholic solidarity in defiance of Prussian hegemony. A decade later, in 1888, a remarkable reversal of fortune was signaled by the miter given to Leo XIII by the newly crowned Wilhelm II, emperor of Germany and king of Prussia. Wilhelm's coronation brought him into immediate conflict with Bismarck who would be dismissed by the emperor just two years later. In retrospect, the surprising German imperial gift seems intended to have made amends for the *Kulturkampf* and foreshadowed Bismarck's imminent political demise.

To the very end of his reign, as David Kertzer has shown, Leo XIII held on to the fantasy of a restored papal monarchy and the end of a papacy in exile as the “Prisoner of the Vatican.” The two keys given to Leo XIII by the diocese of Ferrara in 1903, the year of his death, symbolize the endurance of this dream into the twentieth century. The gold one signifies his power to open the doors of heaven and the silver one his terrestrial reign. Leo did not live to see the resolution of the “Roman Question” over the legal standings of Rome and the Roman Pontiff. Neither did his next two successors.

Eventually, the “Roman Question” was not settled until the Lateran Treaty of February 11, 1929. The pectoral cross given to Pius XI by the King of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III, seems appropriately modest and temperate. This is not so true of the miter given for the same occasion by Benito Mussolini, the Italian prime minister and architect of the Lateran Treaty. The concord was short-lived. A mere two years later, on June 29, 1931, Pius XI would be forced to confront Fascist anticlericalism in his encyclical *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*: “But in our own day, on the occasion of the Lateran Treaties, the unparalleled enthusiasm which united and overjoyed Italians would have left no room for anti-clericalism if it had not been evoked and encouraged on the very morrow of the Treaty.” It would be the fate of his successor, Pius XII, elected in 1939 on the very eve of the Second World War, to deal with the world-historical consequences of Fascism. It seems fitting, then, that the gifts of a pectoral cross and ring given to Pius in 1939 are both made of amethysts. Their deep purple, the Catholic liturgical color for penitence and passion, eerily evokes the long cataclysm that was about to begin for both Italy and the world.

Writing for the *Washington Post*, [Robin Givhan](#) evaluated the Vatican loan housed in the Fifth Avenue galleries as an “emphasis on the glories of the Church” and “a study in hierarchies, paternalism and duty. The garments are beautiful but the experience is cold.” Aesthetically speaking this judgment may (or may not) be true. Historically speaking this conclusion requires a significant amount of forgetting. These objects’ provenances convey nearly unbearable heat—the unbearable lightness of being. They evoke a heartbreaking amount of human misery, extending from Napoleon through the Second World War and, if John Paul II’s red shoes are added in, postwar Soviet Communism. Admittedly, this vast store of conflict, misery, and loss cannot be read transparently off the surfaces, especially in artifacts this sophisticated. In this complex gift exchange system that forged bonds between givers and recipients, the visual and material grandeur intentionally served both as counter-balances to the historical weight that was mostly painful as old worlds died and new ones struggled to be born. But this context can only be seen after a process of un-forgetting, un-concealing, disclosure—*aletheia*.

William Faulkner famously wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” As I write in the last week of June 2018, Pope Francis and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte continue to cross swords over the migration issue. In an inversion of nineteenth-century arrangements, the Vatican occupies the far left and the Italian government the far right. Spain is accepting refugees refused by Italy. Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron enjoyed an exceptionally long visit with Pope Francis this week. It ended in the president’s kissing the pope on both cheeks and the pope reciprocating the warmth. The meeting followed Italy’s Deputy Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio’s demand earlier this month for a formal apology from Macron over comments the French president made about Italian immigration policy. Following Macron’s highly publicized meeting with the pope, Italian Interior Minister [Matteo Salvini](#) went for the jugular: “French arrogance is no longer in fashion in Italy.”

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