

ENTER THE MITHRAEUM



SKYLAR MASUDA - SPRING 2024

What if a MUSEUM felt like an ADVENTURE?

Enter the Mithraeum invites visitors to explore the forgotten ancient religion of Mithraism, popular in the Roman Empire from the 1st to the 4th century CE. Multisensory and cinematic, the exhibit introduces visitors to the religious diversity of the Roman Empire by transporting them to an ancient religious site right after a ritual has been completed.



SUBTERRANEAN AND SECRETIVE, these Mithraea were sites for religious worship of the god Mithras. No written accounts of the religious practices or beliefs survive, so modern scholars base their understanding on archaeological evidence from hundreds of these religious sites across the Roman Empire.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



Visitors to the Mithraeum were invited to form their own interpretations of the recreated archaeological site, sharing with each other and adding to a board of collective ideas outside of the immersive experience.



Audience Goals

Experience the space as the ancient people did through immersive sensory experiences.

Discover how the objects, art, and food of Mithraism were viewed in the context of the temple.

Wonder and discuss the beliefs, activities, and symbology of Mithraism.

Inspire curiosity about the religious diversity of the Roman Empire, breaking down monolithic misconceptions about Roman identity.

YOU ARE A DETECTIVE

Visitors are welcomed in groups of 3-4 into the first room, where they are asked to sit for their “briefing.” Here, they learn they are the newest recruits for the “Society of Historical Experience Detectives”, and they are about to embark on their first “Experience Expedition.” As Experience Detectives, they will be transported across the world and back in time, their job is to pay attention to the smells, tastes, sounds, feelings, and sensations lost to time.

They learn their expedition will take them to a Mithraeum, and that the S.H.E.D. technology will only allow them to stay for 90 seconds, time which they should spend gathering information for the Experience Archive (a collaborative board outside the exhibit room).

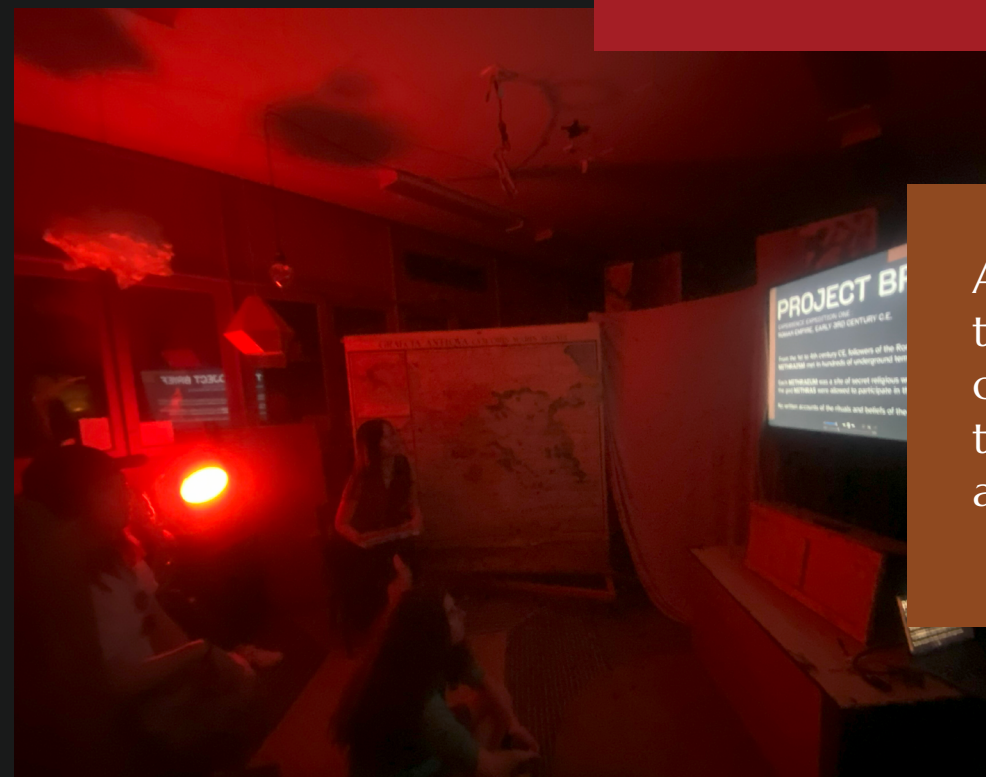
Visitors are then prompted with roles to adopt during their expedition, sharing their choices with their group members.

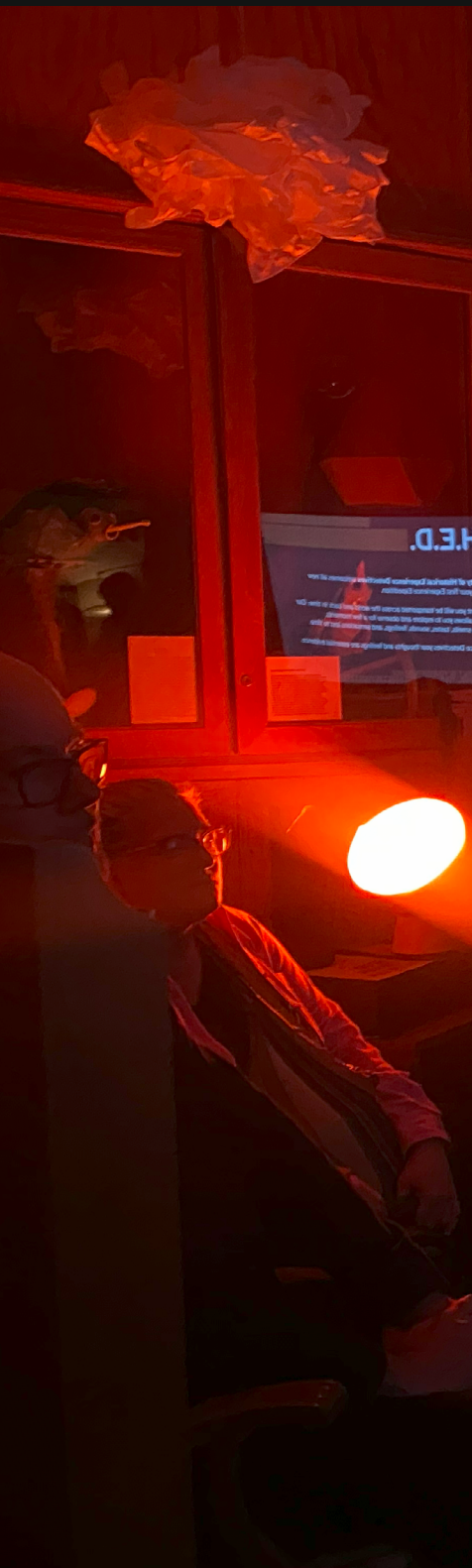
The Timekeeper is tasked with noticing what material will survive for future archaeologists, and what will likely be lost.

The Recorder is tasked with reporting where people interact with the space, where they may have stood, kneeled, or reclined.

The Theorist is tasked with theorizing what icons may have had spiritual significance for the cult, and what they could have meant.

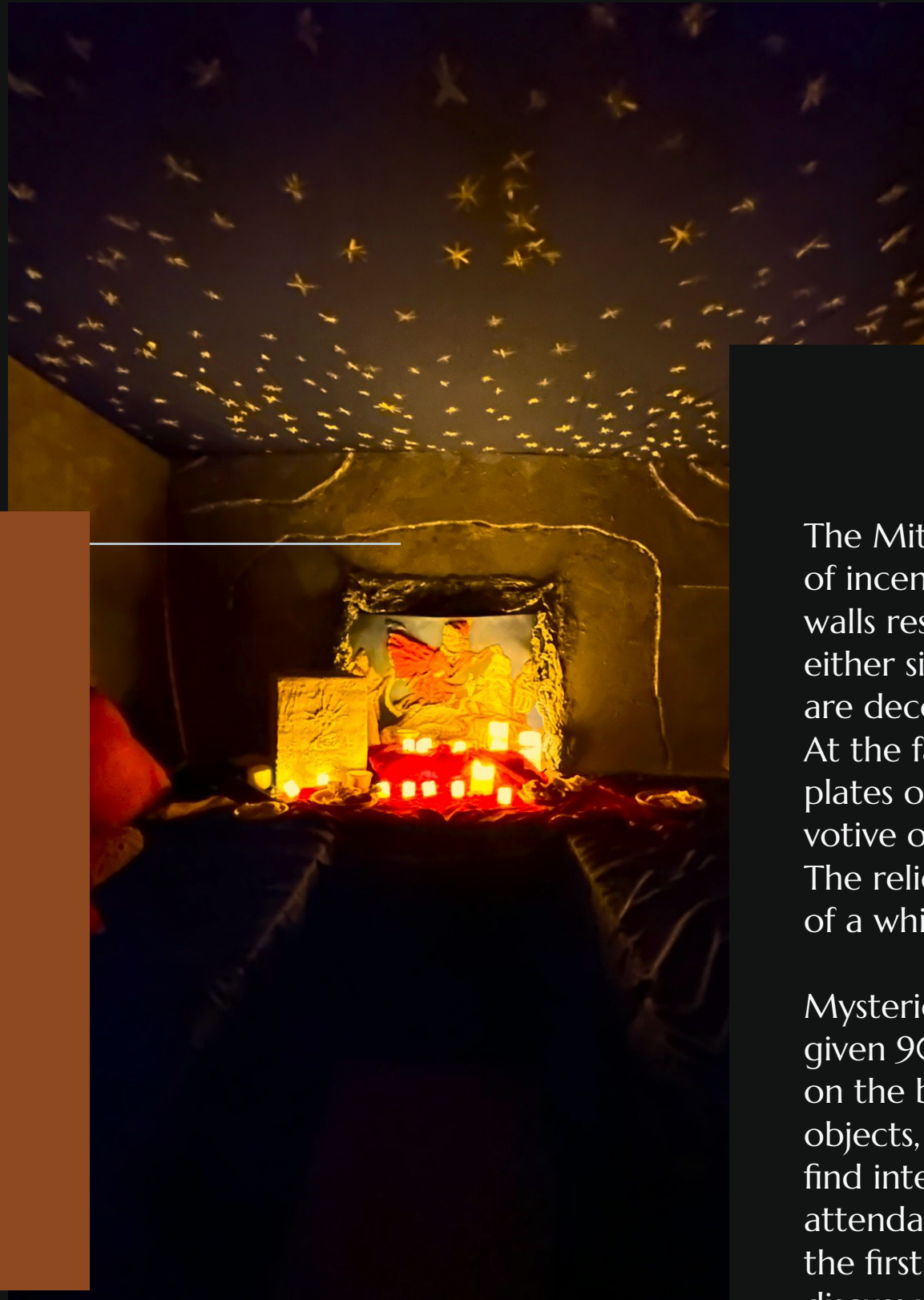
All visitors are encouraged to take photos, take notes, draw, or write what they notice, and to notice what they are thinking and feeling in the space.





01:30:00

The timer begins and music plays as the attendant pulls back a curtain and guides the visitors into the next room.



The Mithraeum is a small room, smelling strongly of incense, cooked chicken, bread, and moss. The walls resemble stone there are wide benches on either side of the short, tiled room. The benches are decorated with colorful fabric and pillows. At the far end, there is a cult niche with an altar, plates of food, dozens of (fake) candles, and other votive offerings in front of a large painted relief. The relief is a man in a red hat cutting the throat of a white bull.

Mysterious cave music plays while visitors are given 90 seconds to explore the space, sitting on the benches, tasting the food, handling the objects, and taking photos of anything they find interesting. When the music concludes, the attendant opens the curtain for them to reenter the first room, where they are given a moment to discuss what they saw, gather their belongings, and exit the exhibit.

History

Inside of the exhibit visitors encounter many recreated elements including a 1:1 recreation of a mithraic relief in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. This relief, as well as dozens of recreated votive offerings were hand sculpted out of foam clay and painted to approximate their original appearance.

The blue celestial ceiling, as well as other aspects of the Mithraeum, were informed by archaeological publications on Mithraea across the Roman Empire. The result is a fictionalized historical site using the combined knowledge from hundreds of archaeological sites.

Because the intention was not to represent a single archaeological site, the exhibit also combines recreations of objects from museums in America and the United Kingdom which lack provenance information. These imperfect foam recreations of the artifacts become powerful learning tools when viewed in context alongside other objects and within the lighting, color, and environment of the room. The recreations also allow for a level of interactivity that would damage real artifacts.

Mithras Slaying the Bull (Tauroctony)
Virginia Museum of Fine Art
Object Number 67.58

The colors on the recreated relief were based on an article published in 2019 studying the polychromy on a similar relief in the National Museum of Rome.



Why?

Enter the Mithraeum is intended as an experiment, sharing the possibilities of immersive exhibit design in antiquities museums. It comes as the final step in a research project about antiquities museum design, which looked at the complex relationship between looted artifacts, museum accessibility, and classics education.

When speaking with current undergraduate and graduate-level students in classics, who could potentially become curators at America's top antiquities museums, many expressed concern over the content of museum collections. For a few, especially non-white students, this tension made it difficult to consider a career in museums.

While they loved studying history and enjoyed visiting antiquities museums, these Classics students felt that working in an antiquities museum in America would feel like a betrayal of their personal values, especially because they felt that many of their families and friends would not benefit from their work.

"I always thought that museum work would be great, but it would be better if I could be doing work that was increasing accessibility."

- Anonymous Classics Student



Sharing this exhibit I hope to reveal the potential for environmental storytelling as a tool for the development of equitable and engaging exhibits about ancient Rome. visitors are welcomed into an immersive environment offering multiple modes of engagement, all of which can serve as memorable and meaningful pathways to learning. This opens the door for visitors with diverse educational backgrounds and learning preferences to engage with complex topics. The impetus for this project is the need to innovate within antiquities museums as calls for repatriation necessitate changes in museum collections.

Using immersive experiential design, this project explores how exhibits without artifacts could introduce new pathways for learning in antiquities museums. Constructed by one student over the course of two weeks using low-cost materials, this exhibit serves as a prototype for higher-quality immersive exhibitions at larger museums or educational institutions.



Enter the Mithraeum was an immersive exhibition developed for my undergraduate thesis in Human-Centered Design, open at the Rick and Susan Sontag Center for Collaborative Creativity from April 29th-May 1st, 2024 for students, professors, and community members at the Claremont Colleges.

Visit my website for more information on this project & my other work.

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