

## Some Examples of The Sacred in Art



### at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

The Rev Vern Barnet, DMn



With its unique history, the quality and range of its collection, its leadership, support, policies, environment, and the new Bloch Building, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art is one of the planet's great art institutions. Those interested in understanding the world's faiths will be enriched by repeated visits and informative membership.

The Museum's resources include the Ford Learning Center, the Spencer Art Reference Library open to the public, the Museum's own publications about its col-

lections (available in the Museum Shop), enthusiastic and knowledgeable docent tours, recorded audio tours, and a web site ([www.nelson-atkins.org](http://www.nelson-atkins.org)) with photos, written descriptions, and audio. Public programs on a variety of art topics are regularly offered.

Prepared for Kansas City's first **Festival of Faiths**, 2007 Nov 7 - Nov 18, this essay identifies a few details about several works in the permanent collection as a way of discovering the sacred in art. It is produced independently of, but with deep appreciation for, the Museum.

#### INTRODUCTION

### Art and the Spirit

Religion begins with ineffable experiences of awe and wonder. Art imitates, creates, recalls, participates in, or directs us to such experiences. Structuring space and time within a frame, great art plays with words, sounds, actions, shapes, colors, movement, texture, light, themes, and other materials and devices.

Art may be sacred even when it has no subject other than how its own materials are patterned, as in music or abstract painting. We admire playfulness and technical skill because expertise may be an expression of human or divine creativity, making the world, or part of it, anew, or showing it, comic tragic, or mundane, in fresh ways.

From earliest times, humanity has survived and advanced through the ability to recognize patterns — patterns in the sky and seasons, in materials and actions, and in social relationships.

Whether art is figural or abstract, referring directly to the world or only to itself, it can affect us spiritually when it offers a sense of order or direction beyond the often disjointed character of our lives. This is one reading of the inscription on the south of the Nelson's 1933 building:

IT IS BY THE REAL THAT WE EXIST;

IT IS BY THE IDEAL THAT WE LIVE.

Patterns resonate within us, and the power of art pulls us into seeing, hearing, feeling, or contemplating relationships that satisfy our hunger for order in an often chaotic and even profane world. Such power, transcending its frame, nourishes our deepest being, illumines our joys and disappoint-

ments, and moves us with the demonstration of imagination and skill. We are connected to ourselves and the world in original, larger, more intense ways. We may be guided in paths of enjoyment and service.

Especially because our secularistic age has neglected the spirit, sacred art directs, awakens, and renews our attention to things that matter. Art shows us our place in the cosmos.

The word "sacred" may be used in exactly this sense: what is truly important, that from which the meanings of our lives derive, the source of our physical and spiritual survival, which includes the essential impulse to create patterns, to play, *lila* in Sanskrit.

(Even decorative arts may point to a life-supporting service: a bracelet enhances the arm, the arm is an instrument for getting food into our mouths, and food is required.)

The question of our survival is implicit in this

statement by nuclear physicist J Robert Oppenheimer: “Today, in a secular world, it is almost wholly through the arts that we have a living reminder of the terror and nobility of what we are.”

This list is a tiny sampling of the riches in the Nelson’s expansive collection. The interpretation of each selection only hints at the many ways these objects are spiritual evidence.

For artistic information, consult the labels and other resources; detailed identifications appear at the end of this essay.

## INTERPRETATIONS

### A Brief Tour



#### ANCIENT ART

1. *Winged Genie Fertilizing a Date Tree*. Assyrian. Gallery P1.

A potent figure, perhaps having withdrawn male flowers from his pail, now shakes them over the date palm tree to fertilize it, as the tree flourishes best with human care. This human interaction displays an awesome intimacy with nature, which in turn produces food and other benefits. Such power also symbolizes the sacred role of King Ashurnasirpal II in providing for his subjects. Perhaps this can be a reminder about our ultimate dependency on nature, a lesson for dealing with our environmental crises respectfully. (See also the *Tree of Life* in the tradition we call Hinduism, Gallery 228.)

2. *Horus of Buto*. Gallery P3.

3. *Torso of a Satyr*, a Roman copy of a much earlier Greek original. Gallery P3.

Why did Egyptians often portray their gods using animal forms (theriomorphism) while the Greeks favored human images (anthropomorphism)?



The Egyptians, whose land was unified by the Nile and who were threatened by the harsh desert a few miles on either side of it, valued what was unchanging and dependable, like the daily rising and setting of the sun and the river’s yearly flooding, for example, making food crops flourish. Political stability

was also prized. Horus, presented also as a falcon in the same gallery, is the son of the first pharaoh, Osiris, insuring that stability. While animals may be associated with certain qualities (lion as an emblem of rule or courage), the Egyptians found that animal species, whose individuals appear more like each other than human beings do, better represent this stability. The pharaoh, considered the son of the sun, was himself a force of nature, and his rule was not distinguished from the sacred laws of nature.

The geography of Greece is opposite, divided by hills, rivers, and waters among the islands. In their separate city-states, the Greeks were curious about each other, and their many religious festivals (the Olympics continues in our day) were ways of exploring what it means to be human. How far can human skills reach? While the temples were carefully oriented to the natural environment, a sensed unity of body and spirit generated the impulse of showing, *θεορία*, *theoria*, related to our words theory and theater. To a vision of *seeing* a god face to face or *seeing* like a god, the ecstatic might exclaim *Theos!* (“God!”). In their beauty, flaws, and perfections, the gods were projections of human capacities, hopes, and fears; and through the various arts, divine forms behind nature are *shown* to us, as the human-like torso appears to breathe, a “sacred” (life-supporting) function indeed.

#### CHRISTIAN PAINTING

4. *Virgin and Child in a Domestic Interior*. Petrus Christus. Gallery P7.

Although the Bible gives little information about the childhood of Jesus, artists have imagined his infancy. In this painting, he may not be the most beautiful baby you have seen, perhaps recalling Isaiah 53:2, “he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.”

Nonetheless we are attracted to the scene. His mother, Mary, supports the child who points to scripture and prefigures his crucifixion and reign with the cross and the orb held in his other hand. Joseph enters this 15th Century upper middle class home of the artist’s time, relating the holy family to the life of his own day, in contrast to earlier painters whose stylized works emphasized the gap between the divine and the human.

Although the vanishing-point perspective the artist uses actually originates five centuries earlier in the studies of the Muslim al-Hazen from whom it was dispersed to Christian Europe, Petrus Christus may have discovered it independently.



Our eyes move from the naked Child to Mary in red and blue to Joseph in blue and red to the green bed, all illumined by pure, divine light from above.

5. *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*. Caravaggio. Gallery P15.

Caravaggio was another innovator. Instead of presenting tidy, idealized saints, he challenged traditional representation with the drama that gave the Roman Catholic Church a visual edge in its response to the Reformation’s emphasis on “secular” subjects. Caravaggio chose sacred subjects but presented them as ordinary folk, here with dirty toenails.



With only the reed cross remaining of his usual emblems, the brooding Baptist here intrudes from the shadows into our space, suddenly visible in bright light. Dare we place ourselves in such service as he was to render?

#### EXPLICIT / IMPLICIT

6. *The Martyrdom of St Lawrence*.

Girolamo Da Santacroce. Gallery P-11.

7. *Twelve Views of a Landscape*, detail.

Xia Gui. Gallery 222 or storage.

Lawrence was entrusted with the wealth of the persecuted Church and he distributed it to the poor. When Roman authorities demanded that he produce the treasury of the Church, he brought forth the poor and the afflicted, saying, “These are the true treasures of the Church.” He was roasted on the gridiron (the grim legend has him saying, “I am already roasted on one side and, if thou wouldst have me well cooked, it is time to turn me on the other”).



Note the dramatic human subject of the painting. No such drama is found in the

Chinese landscape scroll.

In the West, a painting was a window through which a scene could be viewed.



The handscroll, unrolled and rolled to contemplate one portion, then another, is more like a video viewed through time, emphasizing process rather than entities. The *geometrical* perspective of the painting could not work in an extended scroll which is organized *organically*. This scroll was originally 16 feet in length.

Every square inch of the canvas is painted in color; much of the scroll has not been touched by the brush. God appears *atop* the painting; the Tao, the Way, is expressed *everywhere* in the scroll. While the viewer is *in front* of the painting, it has been said that the viewer *participates* in the scroll. In the West the painting is *explicit*; this Southern Song Dynasty scroll's power comes from what is *implicit*. The West has argued and divided over creedal statements. The *Tao Te Ching* says, "He who knows does not speak."

8. *Shiva Nataraja*, detail. Gallery 228.

Shiva is a multivalent Hindu deity, on one hand a severe monastic ascetic, on the other a devoted family man. Don't we all contain contradictions? Shiva as Destroyer is often grouped with Brahma the Creator and Vishnu the Sustainer (the *trimurti*).



Here he dances the cosmic dance. His four arms suggest he's pretty busy. One hand holds the drum of creation, another balancing it with the fire of destruction. The second pair of hands say "Fear not" and point to victory over ignorance or apparent evil, represented by the dwarf, Muyalaka.

Another image of Shiva in the gallery is complete, with the circle of fire emanating from his dance of transformation.

9. *Stele with scenes from the Lotus Sutra*, detail. Gallery 204.

This monument portrays the historical Shakyamuni Buddha preaching the *Lotus Sutra*, proclaiming that his teaching is not just for monks but for all humankind.

Though carved centuries later, with scenes of the Buddha's birth and death (entrance into nirvana) and past and future Buddhas, it marks the eruption of Mahayana Buddhism in which the Buddha becomes the essential grace of the universe itself. Donors are portrayed according to their contributions in spreading the universal message, thereby gaining merit with this stele.



## TWO BUDDHIST IDEALS



10. *Luohan*. Gallery 229.



11. *Seated Guanyin Bodhisattva*. Gallery 230.

The earlier Theravada Buddhist ideal is the luohan (Chinese; *arhat* in Sanskrit), an individual who, leaving home for monastic life, by his own effort, frees oneself from the defilements of addictive behavior and afflictive emotions for one's own benefit. The position of the hands emphasizes the practice of meditation and the powers of his mind to reach Enlightenment.

The Mahayana ideal is the bodhisattva, who may have a family, hold civic position, possess wealth, etc — but is neither neurotically attached to, nor deceived by, them. Realizing that Enlightenment is the

only thing worth having, the bodhisattva-to-be achieves freedom from compulsive desires for power, wealth, status, and pleasure in order to enter into Enlightenment. But at the threshold, since seeking Enlightenment can itself be an attachment, the bodhisattva, moved by compassion for others, vows to forgo Enlightenment in order to bring all other sentient beings to the same threshold, thus choosing endless postponement — and paradoxically achieving the only possible Enlightenment, working on behalf of others.

Guanyin ("regarder of the world's cries") is the proper name of the bodhisattva of compassion (Avalokiteśvara in Sanskrit). Seated in "royal ease," Guanyin is relaxed and alert, serene but ready to spring into action if called, in contrast to the more symmetrical, unmoving posture of the luohan.

## ORDER AND CHAOS

12. *The Meeting of the Theologians*. Abd Allah Musawwir. Currently in storage.

13. *Tracer*. Robert Rauschenberg. Gallery L3.



The elements and the activities of the Muslim painting are disciplined by the design, an orderly whole of intricate details, carefully balanced, an abstract artistic parallel to the Islamic idea of justice as balance. In Islam, the scholar is more valued than the one who merely prays. Study is regarded as an elevated form of *jihad*, "struggle" to improve oneself and society. The scholar approaching the two beggars depicts another theme of the faith, *zakat*, alms-giving, generous support of those in need.



14. See next page.

*Tracer*, by contrast, may seem undisciplined. We see images of Army helicopters, three-dimensional box outlines, the emblematic American bald eagle, an urban street scene, and Ruben's painting *Venus at her Toilet* (Rauschenberg appears to have brushed out Eros, holding her mirror). The painting employed the silk-screening technique, which may be hinted at by the title. But the title may also suggest he is tracing, and with Ruben's mirror, reflecting, a chaotic world. A tracer is also ammunition that makes its path to a target visible to others. Some might say that tracing the chaos of the modern world, in news and in advertising, is itself a sacred gift to see outside our usual mental boxes.

## BACK TO NATURE

14. *Fountain*. Isamu Noguchi. See image on previous page. Gallery L12.

The two fountains, one with a rounded top, the other rather flat, recall the Japanese *tsukubai*, ritual wash basins used before entering sacred space. The play of water flowing over rock is endlessly fascinating to watch in changing light, and to hear, inviting meditation. The two objects gain meaning from their similarities and differences as they relate to each other. The sculpture is placed on a bed of white rocks extending outside the glass wall of the gallery into the park, as Japanese architecture and gardens often interpenetrate.

## FROM PRIMAL CULTURES

"Primal" peoples may be extraordinarily sophisticated in recognizing ancestry as an ongoing influence in the culture's sacred social order.

15. *Commemorative Head of an Oba*.

Gallery L9.

16. *Totem Pole*. KC Sculpture Park, west of the building, facing Oak.



From the Benin Kingdom of West Africa, this 16th Century ritual object, portraying a deceased divine ruler, would have been

placed in the royal courtyard by the current generation for veneration, thus accessing the wisdom of the past.

A totem pole is made from a tree and is a "family tree" as well, celebrating animal ancestors or powers, a different perspective from those who see humans as the product of a special creation superior to the creatures over whom they are given dominion.

This pole was carved to mark the Nelson's 1977 exhibition, *Sacred Circles: Two Thousand Years of North American Indian Art*. The heritage proclaimed on this pole is certainly unique. According to the Museum, "Between the raven, which holds the symbol of Kansas City in its claws, and the frog below, are three figures representing the patron, the mayor of the city, and the director of the Museum."



17. *Sheep Piece*. Henry Moore. Southeast in the KC Sculpture Garden.

Inspired by the form of Mayan *Chacmoöl* figures, Moore invites us to contemplate the



mystery of human and abstract organic and landscape shapes. More selected *Sheep Piece* for this site. It plays in countless angles and varied light, hiding and revealing itself as you walk around it, perhaps a metaphor for the surprises and delight when we look at life from various angles.

18. *The Bloch Building*. Steven Holl.

What is the spiritual message of the Bloch Building?

It is more than a superb container of art. It respects the 1933 structure in such a way that its own distinct dignity is enhanced, just as we humans are ennobled by joining respect for others with self-respect.

And the building's doors and windows welcome the outside—from the contiguous lawn to the sun 93,000,000 miles away, whose energy rebounds at night through the building's "lenses." Light is a manifestation of the transcendent. Thus the building says of itself and of the art it houses, "Behold!"



Ankur Desai provided research assistance for this project, and Lara Kline of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art provided initial consultation. Vern Barnet is minister emeritus at CRES, a Kansas City area multifaith community resource for exploring spirituality. He writes the "Faiths and Beliefs" column Wednesdays in *The Kansas City Star*. Funding was generously provided by the Rev David E Nelson, DMin, of The Human Agenda, [www.humanagenda.com](http://www.humanagenda.com).

**CRES**   
Box 45414, KCMO 64171, [www.cres.org](http://www.cres.org)

## DETAILED IDENTIFICATIONS

1. *Winged Genie Fertilizing a Date Tree*, 884-860 BCE, Assyrian, Nimrud. Limestone, 91 1/4 x 71 1/4 inches (231.78 x 180.98 cm). Purchase: Nelson Trust, 40-17. Gallery P1.

2. *Horus of Buto*, Late Period XXVI Dynasty (664-525 BCE) to Ptolemaic period (304-30 BCE). Bronze H: 23.25" (59.1cm). Purchase: Nelson Trust, 44-64. Gallery P3.

3. *Torso of a Satyr*, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Marble H: 23" (58.4 cm), Roman copy of a 3d or 2d Century BCE Greek Original. Purchase: Nelson Trust, 34-35. Gallery P3.

4. *Virgin and Child in a Domestic Interior*, ca. 1460-1467. Petrus Christus, Flemish, ca. 1410-1475/1476. Oil on wood panel (oak), Unframed: 27 3/8 x 20 1/16 inches (69.53 x 50.96 cm). Framed: 33 3/4 x 26 7/16 inches (85.73 x 67.15 cm). Purchase: Nelson Trust, 56-51. Gallery P7.

5. *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, 1604-1605. Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio,

Italian, 1571-1610. Oil on canvas. Unframed: 68 x 52 inches (172.72 x 132.08 cm). Framed: 77 1/4 x 60 7/8 x 4 inches (196.22 x 154.62 x 10.16 cm). Purchase: Nelson Trust, 52-25. Gallery P15.

6. *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*. Girolamo Da Santacroce. Venetian School 1458-1556. Oil on panel with tempera highlights. 66.5-82.6 (27.1x32.5). Gift of Mrs Mary E Evans and Mrs John E Wheeler in memory of Harry Martin Evans [40-44/1]. Gallery P-11.

7. *Twelve Views of a Landscape*, 1220c –1250c. Xia Gui. Handscroll; Ink on Silk. 11x90.75 (28x230.5 cm) overall. Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). Purchase: Nelson Trust. Gallery 222 or Storage.

8. *Shiva Nataraja*. 13th century Indian, Tamilnadu. Bronze 34 1/4 x 27 1/2 x 13 inches (87 x 69.85 x 33.02 cm). Purchase: Nelson Trust, 34-7. Gallery 228.

9. *Stele with scenes from the Lotus Sutra*. 537. Limestone 98x31.25 (248.9x79.4 cm) Jui-Ch'eng Hsien, Western Wei Dynasty (535-556). Purchase: Nelson Trust. Gallery 204.

10. *Luohan*. 10<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century earthenware w 3 color lead glaze, height 40" (101.6 cm). Chinese Liao (907-1125) to Chin (1115-1234) Dynasty. Purchase: Nelson Trust. Gallery 229.

11. *Seated Guanyin Bodhisattva*. Chinese Liao Dynasty (907-1125). Wood with paint, 95 x 65 inches (241.3 x 165.1 cm). Purchase: Nelson Trust, 34-10. Gallery 230.

12. *The Meeting of the Theologians*, c. 1540-49. Abd Allah Musawwir. Miniature from a manuscript. Persian, Iran active (mid-sixteenth century until 1575). Painted at Bukhara. Color on paper 13x9 in page size (33x22.9cm). 11.4x7.5 in miniature size (28.9x19.1cm). Museum Purchase: 1943. Storage.

13. *Tracer*, 1963. Robert Rauschenberg. American, b. 1925. Oil and silkscreen on canvas. Unframed: 7 feet 1/8 inches x 5 feet (213.68 x 152.4 cm). Framed: 7 feet 1/2 inches x 5 feet 3/8 inches x 2 inches (214.63 x 153.35 x 5.08 cm). Purchase, F84-70. Gallery L3.

14. *Fountain*, 1987. Isamu Noguchi, 1904-1988. Basalt, two sculpted, similarly-sized but differently configured, with water flowing over tops and sides.

Noguchi Sculpture Court, Gallery L12.

15. *Commemorative Head of an Oba*. Nigeria, Benin Kingdom, 16th century. Brass, 9 1/8 inches (23.18 cm). Purchase: Nelson Trust through the generosity of Donald J and Adele C Hall, Mr and Mrs Herman Robert Sutherland, and an anonymous donor; the Nelson Gallery Foundation; and the exchange of a Trust property, 87-7. Gallery L9.

16. *Totem Pole*, 1977. Charles Heit, North American Indian, b. 1957, Kenny Mowatt, North American Indian, b. 1944. Wood and pigment, 17 feet 4 1/2 inches x 32 inches x 24 inches (529.59 x 81.28 x 60.96 cm), Gift of Estelle and Morton Sosland, F77-22. KC Sculpture Park, west of the building, facing Oak.

17. *Sheep Piece*, 1971-72. Henry Moore, 1898-1986. Bronze, four tons. Gift to Kansas City, MO, from the N Clyde Degginger Trust.

18. *The Bloch Building*, opened 2007. Steven Holl Architects.