

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

INTRODUCTION

- 1. Greek, *Female Head from Grave Stele*, early fifth to late third century BCE, carving: marble, 5.5 x 3.3 x 4 in. (13.9 x 8.3 x 10.2 cm). Gift of Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott, 1958.16.2.
- 2. Roman, *Allegorical Figure of Autumn*, third to fourth century CE, carving: marble, 8 x 5.3 x 2 in. (20.3 x 13.3 x 5.1 cm). Gift of Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott, 1958.16.3.
- 3. French, Bernard Picart, *Pandora's Box*, 1730, engraving: ink on paper, 190.2.17.

HEROIC JOURNEY

- 4. Gandharan, *Scenes from the Life of the Buddha*, third to fourth century CE, carving: gray schist, 18 x 4.9 in. (45.7 x 12.4 cm). Estate of Milton E. Flower, 1996.4.2.
- 5. Byzantine, *Assumption of the Virgin*, thirteenth to the nineteenth century, painting: oil on wood panel, 18.5 x 15.5 in. (46.9 x 39.4 cm). Gift of Miss Mildred Sawyer, 1951.2.15.
- 6. Israeli, Reb Shalom of Safed, *Jonah and the Whale*, twentieth century, print: color lithograph, 17.8. x 21.9. Gift of Meyer P. and Vivian O. Potamkin, 1989.1.67.
- 7–9. Balinese, *Monkey King Sugriva, Hanuman, and Monkey Warrior*, twentieth century, shadow puppets: hide, string, sticks, hair, 24 x 8 x 0.75 in. (60.9 x 20.3 x 1.9 cm). Gift of Joseph Ellis, 1985.8.19.5, 4, 16.

NATURE

- 10. German, Michael Wolgemut, *Last Judgement* from the *Nuremburg Chronicles*, 1493, woodcut: ink on paper with handcoloring, 17.9 x 12.5 in. (45.4 x 31.8 cm),2008.1.
- 11. Islamic, *Decorative Tile*, sixteenth to seventeenth century, ceramic: glazed earthenware, 8.9 x 8.9 in. (22.5 x 22.5 cm). Gift of Mrs. Lloyd Gamble Cole, 1965.1.38.
- 12. Chinese, *Dragon Tea Bowl*, nineteenth century, ceramic: porcelain, 5.8 in. (14.6 cm). Gift of Mrs. Lloyd Gamble Cole, 1965.1.35.
- 13. Japanese, *The Married Rocks of Futami*, late nineteenth to early twentieth century, painting: pigment on silk, 19.5 x 14 in. (49.5 x 35.6 cm). Gift of Mrs. Lloyd Gamble Cole, 1966.3.1.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

- 14. Japanese, *One of the Twelve Juni Shinsho Guardians*, nineteenth century, Surimono woodcut: ink on paper, 8.5 x 7.2 in. (21.6 x 18.1 cm). Gift of Charles Sellers, 2003.2.5.
- 15. Yoruba, *Eshu Shrine*, nineteenth to twentieth century, carving: wood, 2.5 x 4.4 in. (31.8 x 11.1 cm). Gift of Charles E. and Kathleen Myers, 1975.1.21.
- 16. Thai, *Teapot with Hindu or Buddhist figures*, nineteenth century, metal and ceramicware: brass and porcelain, 10.8 in. (27.3 cm). Gift of Mrs. Lloyd Gamble Cole, 1967.1.14a, b.

PRACTICE

- 17. Bamana, *Antelope Dance Headpiece*, twentieth century, carving: wood, 39 x 15 in. (99.1 x 38.1 cm). Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1994.6.3.
- 18. Iranian, *Devotional Portrait of Ali*, late nineteenth to early twentieth century, painting: pigment on paper, gold frame mounted on silk (fragment from a kiswah), 15.5 x 16.2 in. (39.4 x 41.2 cm). Gift of Mrs. Lloyd Gamble Cole, 1965.1.39.
- 19. Ethiopian, *Solomon and Sheba*, twentieth century, painted scroll: pigment on cloth, 47.5 x 16 in. (120.7 x 40.6 cm). Gift of Charles E. and Kathleen Myers, 1975.1.121.

FURTHER READING

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Cover: Balinese, *Monkey King Sugriva* (detail), twentieth century, shadow puppet.

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Imagining  
the Divine

Religious Mythology and Art



THE TROUT GALLERY  
THE ART MUSEUM OF DICKINSON COLLEGE



IMAGINING THE DIVINE: RELIGIOUS MYTHOLOGY AND ART

The ancient Greeks and Romans told the story of Pandora, the first woman created by the gods (fig. 1). At the time of her creation, each god bestowed a particular gift or attribute upon her. Imbued with gods-given qualities such as beauty, guile, grace, and creativity, Pandora (“all gifts”) was sent down to earth and given a mysterious jar to take with her. She was told never to open the jar under any circumstances, but Pandora was quickly overcome by an overwhelming urge to discover what was inside. Her curiosity prevailed. From the jar emerged all the evils of the world, which flew away, populating and corrupting the earth. Once disease, famine, suffering, and heartache had fled, only hope remained. Hope sat in the jar and stayed with Pandora, who passed this gift on to her sons and daughters.



Fig 1. French, Bernard Picart, *Pandora's Box* (detail), 1730.

*Imagining the Divine* draws together objects from a wide range of religious traditions, all of which reflect the world-view of the peoples who made and used them to disseminate ideas about their faith and to foster group identity. This exhibition explores different types of myth, the beliefs they express, and their primary function within their respective cultural contexts. It considers several categories of myth including those that describe heroic journeys, natural phenomenon, and the intervention of deities in human lives, as well as those that have impacted the practices of the groups who created and revere them.



Fig 2. Gandharan, *Scenes from the Life of the Buddha*, third to fourth century CE.

narrative relief from the ancient region of Gandhara, which depicts two scenes from the life of the Buddha (fig. 2). The first scene shows the historical Buddha’s mother, Queen Maya, giving birth against a fig tree. Next to her are the four Great Lords, gods who came to witness the Buddha’s birth and to protect Queen Maya as she welcomed her baby. To the left is an episode from the Buddha’s adult life. It represents the Buddha’s first sermon, when he describes the fundamental Buddhist precept that suffering is endemic in human life but that it can be eliminated by quelling desire. This relief illustrates two scenes from the Buddha’s heroic journey, in which he transforms from a pampered prince to a spiritual leader who ignites a religious movement.

Scholars of religion regard the story of Pandora as an etiological myth, a way for the Greeks to explain the source of evil in the world and why humans could, nevertheless, maintain hope. This story illustrates how religion is a way people understand and interpret their world, and how myths are their vision of the world manifest in sacred narratives.

The term “myth,” however, carries negative connotations since it is often used colloquially to characterize a fictitious account and to denote a faith tradition that is unlike one’s own. Indeed, the term “mythology” is often applied to the religions of societies that were once labelled “pagan.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars, however, employ the term “myth” or “mythology” to the collection of stories that are sacred and fundamental to the religion itself. These stories represent a group’s understanding of reality—literal, symbolic, or otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

HEROIC JOURNEY

Some of the most widely disseminated myths are those that describe heroic figures embarking on character defining, transformative journeys. These myths often contain moral lessons and examplars. Several works in the exhibition illustrate such figures and episodes from their lives. Among these is a



Fig 3. Balinese, *Hanuman*, shadow puppet, twentieth century.



Fig 4. Chinese, *Dragon Tea Bowl*, nineteenth century.



Fig 5. German, Michael Wolgemut, *Last Judgement from the Nuremberg Chronicles*, 1493.

A second example of a heroic journey appears in the Ramayana, one of the most important and exciting myths in Hinduism. It tells of prince Rama, whose wife has been tragically kidnapped by his enemy, Ravana. In order to save her, he enlists the help of an army of monkeys led by their king, Sugriva, and their general, Hanuman. Throughout the myth, Rama and Hanuman form a close bond and Hanuman plays a crucial role in the fight to safely rescue Sita. Hanuman also becomes an important mythological figure in his own right, and is widely revered for his intelligence, courage, and loyalty. Such a dramatic narrative is well suited for theatrical renditions of the story, as illustrated by a set of Balinese shadow puppets (fig. 3), which depict Sugriva, Hanuman, and a soldier from the monkey army. The puppets and the myths they tell reflect an important function of mythology—to present entertaining stories filled with heroic figures who display qualities that captivate and inspire the audience.

NATURE

Myths are often created to account for the inexplicable—those parts of the natural world that defy rationalization. For example, in China, the dragon has long been a potent symbol of strength and good fortune, where it figures often in the religious, literary, and visual arts. These mythical beings are intimately connected with natural phenomena, like wind and rain, and are believed to live among the clouds. Dragons are also said to live in and watch over bodies of water, so many rivers in China have been named after them. A decorated porcelain bowl (fig. 4) provides an image of this mythic being. In this example, the dragon’s eyes are wide with anticipation as it reaches out to grasp a flaming pearl, thought variously to represent the male and female aspects of yin and yang, thunder and lightning, or the moon.

There are many natural phenomena which intrigue and perplex humans, but perhaps no aspect of nature is as mystifying as death. This subject is a perennial concern of human existence and religions often account for death, and importantly, for the time thereafter. Thus, death and the afterlife remain vital topics in many myths. In the Christian tradition, the Book of Revelations describes the end of time and a final evaluation or Last Judgement of all humanity by Jesus Christ. In a print from the *Nuremberg Chronicles* Christ serves as judge, deciding whether the souls below will be sent to the welcoming gates of heaven escorted by the angels or pulled by demons to the fiery pits of hell (fig. 5). For a fifteenth-century European audience, it was a sobering reminder of the necessity of their Christian devotion and represents a belief in a time to come. This work also illustrates the human need to explain the enigmatic phenomenon of death and to produce a story which might answer essential, yet unanswerable, questions about the future.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

Myths often tell of divine figures who live in an otherworldly realm, but occasionally come to the realm of the living to intervene in human affairs. Some of these interactions are benevolent while others promote chaos and mischief. The Yoruba peoples of Nigeria maintain a pantheon of gods (“orisha”) some of whom are worshipped universally and others only locally. One of the most important figures is Eshu-Elegba, shown here carrying his signature club and calabash (fig. 6). He is known for provoking conflict, such as tricking the sun and moon into switching places, and for inciting a heated argument between friends. For all his mischievous behavior, the trickster god Eshu is also crucial to Yoruba society and is believed to mediate the powers of good and evil. Most importantly, he is a messenger god who can move freely from the human to the spirit world, bringing human offerings to the upper echelon; without him the sacrifices of his devotees would never reach the deities. The many tales which are told about Eshu illustrate a point asserted in many myths—that gods are real forces who act in the human world, and their actions have consequences for human lives.



Fig 6. Yoruba, *Eshu*, nineteenth or twentieth century.

PRACTICE

Many religious myths impact not only how people see the world, but how they act in it as well. Myths can inspire performance of all kinds, including ritual and everyday worship. This can be seen in a devotional object from Iran that depicts Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, the most important prophet in Islam and the figure to whom the Quran was revealed by Allah (fig. 7). In the Shia tradition, Ali received the moniker walad al-Ka’ba (“the baby of the Ka’ba”) because he is the only individual to have been born inside the Ka’ba (“cube”), a square granite structure in Mecca believed to have been built by Abraham and Ishmael. Muslims on Hajj (“pilgrimage”) to the holy site in Mecca are required to circumambulate the Ka’ba seven times and touch the sacred Black Stone, a small piece of rock embedded in the eastern corner of the shrine. During Hajj, the Ka’ba is covered with a black cloth called the kiswah. Upon completion of the ceremonies, the kiswah is divided into small pieces and distributed to important pilgrims. The black background on which this small painting of Ali, “the baby of the Ka’ba,” is mounted is one of these treasured pieces of the kiswah. This small devotional painting mounted on a fragment of the kiswah is thus intimately connected to one individual’s spiritual pilgrimage and shows how myth can be the inspiration and justification for rituals, which are crucial aspects of a religious tradition.

*Imagining the Divine* presents a comparative study of various objects, myths, and traditions, illustrating a number of common themes and how they serve to define their respective faiths. These works make clear that myths are living histories and experiences of a people, and their relevance extends far beyond the mere telling.

—Abbie Cottle ’20



Fig 7. Iranian, *Devotional Portrait of Ali*, late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century.

1 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963).  
2 David Adams Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).