

Imagining the Divine

Art and the Rise of World Religions

19 October 2017 – 18 February 2018



Footprints of the Buddha c.AD 100–300, Found at Amaravati, India, Carved limestone; © The Trustees of the British Museum, 1880,0709.57

Images such as this either signified the presence of the Buddha or commemorated his presence in the past. The footprints are embellished with auspicious symbols that reflect the Buddha's superhuman nature.

Why do we think of Jesus Christ with a beard? Or Buddha as cross-legged? Today, the pictures people conjure when they think of the world's major religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism – are distinctive and immediately recognisable. But two thousand years ago that was not the case.

Between 1–1000 AD, systems of belief developed across Europe and Asia. The images associated with them were forged not in isolation but in a vibrant exchange of ideas and in the contact between different societies and local traditions. One of the earliest known depictions of Christ shows a young man bearing a striking resemblance to a Classical god, not the bearded holy-man we know today. Before the invention of the cross-legged figure in meditation, the Buddhist faithful were inspired to worship by an impression of the Buddha's footprints.

This unprecedented exhibition showcases some of the world's oldest religious art from India to Ireland, and reveals how the exchange of ideas and objects in the first millennium influence our thinking about the divine today. On display will be the first known depiction of Christ north of the Alps, as well as some of the earliest surviving Qurans.

Bust of Jupiter Ammon, c.AD 150–200

Roman empire, carved marble, © The Trustees of the British Museum, 1856, 1226.1744



The sculpture has the face of Jupiter and the characteristic ram horns of the earlier Egyptian god Ammon. The amalgamation Jupiter Ammon emerged from two cults.

Statue of Kriophoros (ram-bearer)

c.AD 200–400, Found at Zubeir, Iraq, Carved marble, © The Trustees of the British Museum, 1919, 1213.1



Traditionally, Mercury (Hermes), the messenger of the gods, was depicted in this way. Early Christians, however, used the same type of image to represent Christ the Good Shepherd. Potentially, this sculpture could function as a pagan or Christian image, depending on who was looking at it.

Panel with New Testament scene

c.AD 420–30, Rome (?), carved ivory; © The Trustees of the British Museum, 1856, 0623.4–7



This ivory panel is one of the first images to show Christ on the cross. Previously, Christians had shied away from depicting the moment of the crucifixion. The panel is one of four that probably formed the sides of a box. Near the youthful Christ, his betrayer Judas hangs from a tree with the bribe of 30 pieces of silver in a bag at his feet.

Book cover

AD 1499, Bengal, Tempera on wood; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, IS.101-1955



In medieval India manuscripts of palm leaf or paper were protected by wooden covers. This cover of a manuscript about Vishnu depicts the ten forms or avatars which he took to restore order to the world.

Relief of Vishnu, c.AD 1050, Bengal, Carved siltstone; Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, on long term loan to the Ashmolean Museum, LI894.12



Vishnu stands between Sri Devi (a form of his consort Lakshmi) and Sarasvati, the goddess of knowledge. He is surrounded by his ten avatars and holds emblematic attributes: a mace, discus, and conch. His fourth hand is folded in a boon-granting gesture. A small Garuda (eagle) can be seen under the god's feet.

Nurse's Quran (donated by Fatima, nursemaid of a North African prince)

Ink, watercolor, and gold on parchment. Donated to the Great Mosque in Kairouan, Tunisia, 1020, Private Collection



The so-called Nurse's Quran was commissioned by a woman called Fatima, a nurse in the court of the Zirid princes who were governors of North Africa. Its style is typical of North African Qurans. With only 5 lines per page and on a huge scale, the full text would have numbered many volumes and allowed for multiple users. It is also one of the only early Qurans to come with a dedicatory line saying when it was made, where, and who commissioned it.

Brooch with cross and Islamic seal

c.AD 700–90 Found at Ballycotton, Ireland, Gilt copper alloy and glass; © The Trustees of the British Museum, 1875,1211.1



This intriguing brooch, manufactured in continental Western Europe, probably reached Ireland by way of trade or as plunder. Its maker embedded in it an Islamic glass seal with an Arabic inscription, probably meaning '[as] God wills'.

Incantation bowl

ink on pottery, Kish Iraq 300-700 AD, AN1927.3327



In the centre of the Sasanian Empire, bowls such as these (often depicting chained demons) were buried in the houses of Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians to ward off evil spirits or bind them within the bowls. This bowl is inscribed in fake Aramaic script. It shows a quadruped and two demons.

Fragment from a roundel with a menorah

c.AD 300–400, Found in Rome, Glass and gold leaf; Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, AN2007.6ab



This was once the bottom part of a drinking vessel: the fragmentarily preserved Greek inscription probably invited the owner to drink and live well. The menorah (ritual candelabrum) shows that he was Jewish. One of its branches is surmounted with a lamp; to the side is a lighted taper.

Architectural ornament

c.AD 750–800, Found at al-Hira, Iraq (from Mound IV)
Carved stucco; Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, EAX.6002



Al-Hira was the capital of the Arab Lakhmids, vassals of the Sasanian Persians. Islamic, Persian, Christian, Jewish, and Arab influences intersected there. This stucco fragment, a piece of religious art, which decorated a doorjamb in the house of a wealthy resident, combines geometric and vegetal motifs into an intricate design.

Working with objects: key questions

- Who made it?
- Where and when was it made?
- What materials is it made from?
- How was it made?
- What was it used for? How was it used?
- Who used / owned it?
- How might it be interpreted by different people and at different times?

Further resources

Ashmolean Eastern Art Online:
www.jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/

Ashmolean Education Learning Resources:
www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources

This is a charging exhibition but FREE for pre-booked UK school groups and for under 12s.

To book a group visit please contact the Education Department:

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