



## 5. COSMOLOGY AND BELIEF

### Introduction

In the Book of Genesis, from the Old Testament, a community sharing a common language gathered to build a monument that would tower to heaven. “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’”<sup>1</sup> Because the people who built this tower tried to celebrate the glory of men, God destroyed it, scattered people across the earth, and gave them many languages to make communication more challenging. This biblical story offers an explanation of realities that are difficult to understand—why people inhabit much of the earth, why we don’t speak a common language, and how divine forces affect the destiny of humans.

Religious stories, myths, and folklore presented in the form of visual art transcend language differences and provide explanations that bind people together and help them understand their place in the universe. Artists from around the world and throughout history have played a major role in reinforcing the spiritual and cosmological beliefs of cultures, as well as shaping the evolution of those ideas.

### Creating the Cosmos

Stories from different cultures about the creation of the universe vary, but they share themes and archetypal characters. Often the narratives include the creation of something from nothing or chaos; thoughts or words of a supreme being; a maternal or primal cosmic egg or womb in a glittering form like the sun or moon; parents who become separated; diving into waters by creatures sent by a supreme being to find mud or clay; or emergence from other worlds.

Archetypal characters in these creation myths almost always include the basic essence of a creator that wrenches cosmos from chaos, either from clay or from its own body, sometimes with an equal or opposing natural power. The first male and female often have fallen from grace but continue the process of creation. Many myths include a flood and a hero who represents new beginnings.<sup>2</sup>

Separation at the moment of creation occurs in a number of other creation myths.<sup>3</sup> According to ancient Egyptian belief, for example, the separation



Figure 1. *Genesis, Frontispiece Depicting the Creation*, from the Luther Bible, 1st edition; colored woodcut; Germany; 1534; private collection. Photograph courtesy of Art Resource, NY.



occurred between world parents called Geb (the male earth) and Nut (the female sky) by Shu (the spirit of life), which enabled creation to take place.<sup>4</sup> Genesis recounts God's division of light from darkness, sky from sea, night from day, until finally he separates a rib from Adam to create Eve—separating woman from man.

A depiction of Genesis is found in the first edition of the Luther Bible, published in 1534, shown in Figure 1 on page 135. The colored woodcut shows God, with flowing robes and rays of light emanating from his head, presiding over the creation of the earth, oceans, and heavens. This depiction emphasizes the all-powerful nature of the Christian God—the source of all existence. The belief in a creator to be revered is a shared concept among many world religions.

Environmental surroundings often shape the particulars of a culture's creation story. The importance of these stories as vehicles to help people understand who they are and why they exist has inspired artists around the world to represent them in a visual form that communities can share over generations.<sup>5</sup>

In Maori mythology, Rangi and Papa, the primordial couple, lie in a tight embrace. Their children inhabit the darkness between them and, as their male offspring grow, they discuss the restrictions of their existence and how to free themselves from it. Each child attempts to separate his parents without success until Tane, the god of forests and birds, forces his parents apart with his strong legs. Now separated, the parents grieve. The sky father, Rangi, weeps and sends his tears—the rain—to his estranged wife, Papa, the earth mother. After the forced division of the parents, the children are let loose into space, and repercussions of their release are made manifest on earth. The god of storms and winds, angered by his siblings' actions, gathers an army of his children—various types of winds and clouds—and directs their wrath upon his earthbound brothers, causing storms and earthquakes and impacting crop growth.



Figure 2. Cliff Whiting (Maori, b.1936); *Te wehenga o Rangi Raua ko Papa* (*The Separation of Rangi and Papa*); carved and painted wood; 1974; National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, NZ. Photograph courtesy of the National Library of New Zealand and the artist.

Like other creation myths, this story helps to explain the environmental conditions that people encounter.<sup>6</sup>

In Figure 2, on page 136, *Te wehenga o Rangi Raua ko Papa (The Separation of Rangi and Papa)* (1974), Cliff Whiting (b.1936), a New Zealand Maori artist and scholar, depicts the separation of these primordial parents. Whiting's work, which is on display in the National Library of New Zealand, draws upon the designs of the traditional Maori carvings. The vibrant juxtaposition of patterns and colors visually depicts the explosive consequences of the gods' displacement throughout the cosmos. Whiting makes carving and painting wood, a traditional Maori technique, modern, as he updates the myth for the public.

### Mapping the Universe

For millennia, people have created images, objects, and structures to map the organization of the cosmos and represent the place of humans in relation to the gods.<sup>7</sup> They also have used artistic pieces to explain how climactic and celestial phenomena produce seasonal changes.

While some cultures used two-dimensional representations as cosmological maps, the ancient Maya used architecture. At the ruins of the pre-Hispanic City Chichén Itzá in Mexico, the central structure seen in Figure 3 is El Castillo,



Figure 3. Unknown artists(s) (Mayan); *El Castillo (The Castle)*; stone; ca. 800-1000; H: approx. 79 ft. (24 m.); Chichén Itzá, Yucatan, Mexico. Photograph © Michele Falzone/JAI/Corbis.

“The Castle” (ca. 800-1000), a temple that may have been dedicated to the plumed serpent Kukulcan (a.k.a. Quetzalcoatl), a creator deity.<sup>8</sup> The cosmological significance of El Castillo becomes most apparent on the spring and autumn equinoxes (March 20/21 and September 20/21, respectively). During the sunrise and sunset on these dates, the corner of this step pyramid casts a shadow in the shape of a serpent along the west side of the north staircase. As time passes, the shadow slithers from the top of the pyramid—near the heavens—down the north face of the pyramid to the carved stone serpent’s head at the base, which leads to the sacred cenote, a water hole that connects to the Underworld.

In the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the Greek poet and scholar, Aratus of Soli wrote the *Phenomena*, 1,154 lines of verse inspired by the similarly named work of the Greek astronomer Eudoxus of Cnidus (ca. 370 BCE). Aratus describes the organization of the heavens based on the view of Eudoxus, reflected in Figure 4 (pg.139). This cosmological map, from an 11<sup>th</sup>-century French version of *Phenomena*, features the earth as a sphere in the center of a larger sphere—the celestial realm. Twelve signs of the zodiac are represented alongside illustrations of the planets. At a time when the lines between science, religion, and the occult were blurred, these celestial bodies were regarded as manifestations of the order God imposes on heaven and earth. Also included in this diagram are seasonal and astronomical information.<sup>9</sup>

In the work by Aratus, the poet credits Zeus with conveying through the constellations important information that was vital to life on earth—how to grow crops successfully:

For himself it was who set the signs in heaven, and  
marked out the constellations, and for the year devised  
what stars chiefly should give to men right signs of the  
seasons, to the end that all things might grow unfailingly.<sup>10</sup>

Aratus’s work was popular for centuries, inspiring the writing of commentary and copies well into the medieval period. There was not a major shift in astronomical thinking until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Copernicus asserted that the earth revolves around the sun.



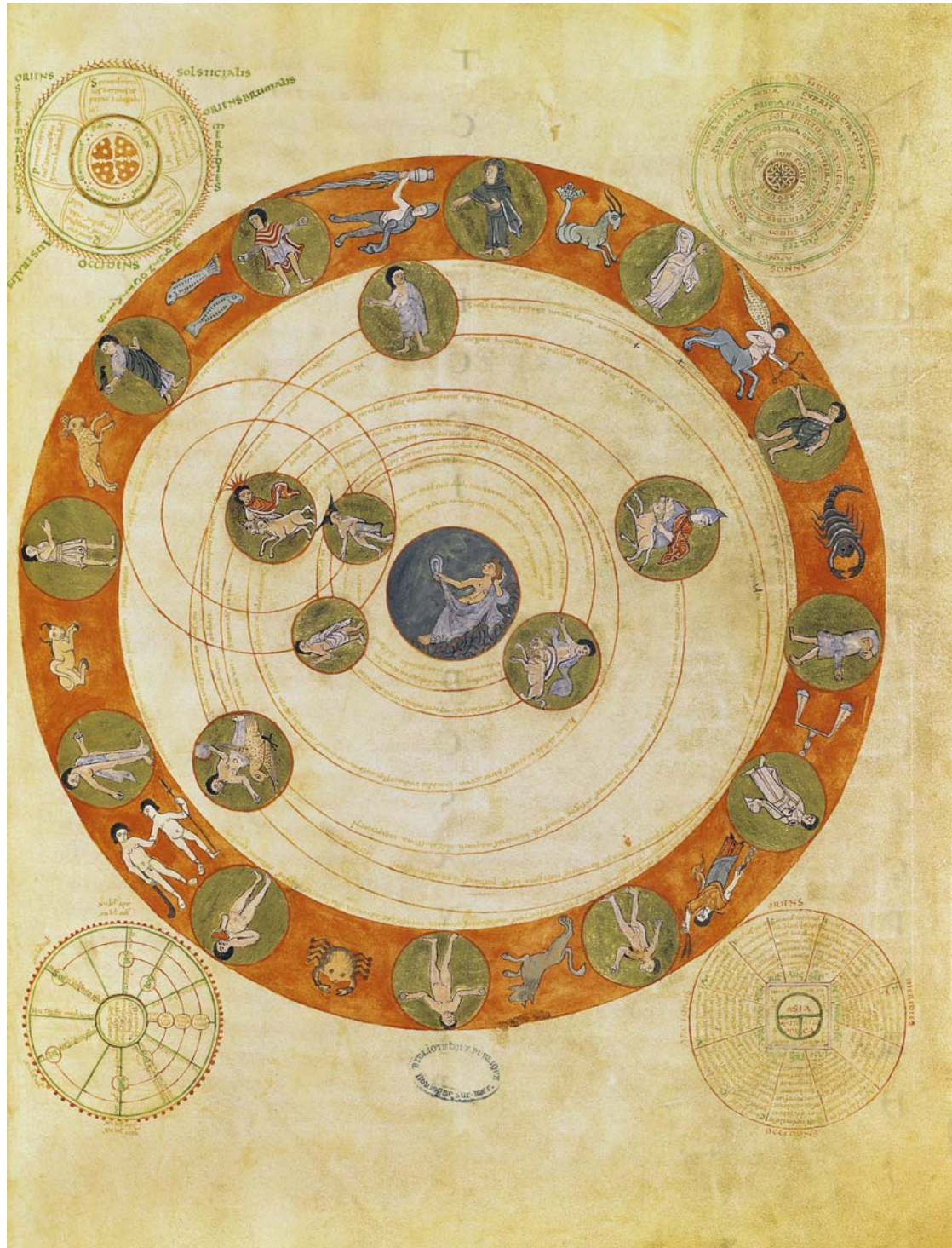


Figure 4. French School; *Cosmological Diagram (Map of the Heavens)* from the *Phenomena of Aratus*; vellum; 11<sup>th</sup> century; H:14 1/8 in. (36 cm.), W:11 3/4 in. (30 cm.); Musée Municipal, Boulogne-Billancourt, France. Photograph courtesy of Lauros/Giraudon/the Bridgeman Art Library.



The Christian universe in Jan van Eyck's (ca. 1380-1441) *Last Judgment* (ca. 1430) is organized into three tiers—the heavenly kingdom of God, the earthly domain of men, and the realm of eternal damnation, hell. He presents *The Crucifixion* and *The Last Judgment* in a diptych. In addition to delineating the divisions between heaven, earth, and hell, van Eyck also uses scale to distinguish the relative importance of the figures.<sup>11</sup>

Tibetan Buddhists use the “Wheel of Life”<sup>12</sup> to visualize six distinct realms of existence. The wheel is a map of both physical and spiritual worlds. It displays glyphs and symbols associated with deities, symbolizing the different stages in the process of attaining enlightenment and the escape from suffering (*samsara*).

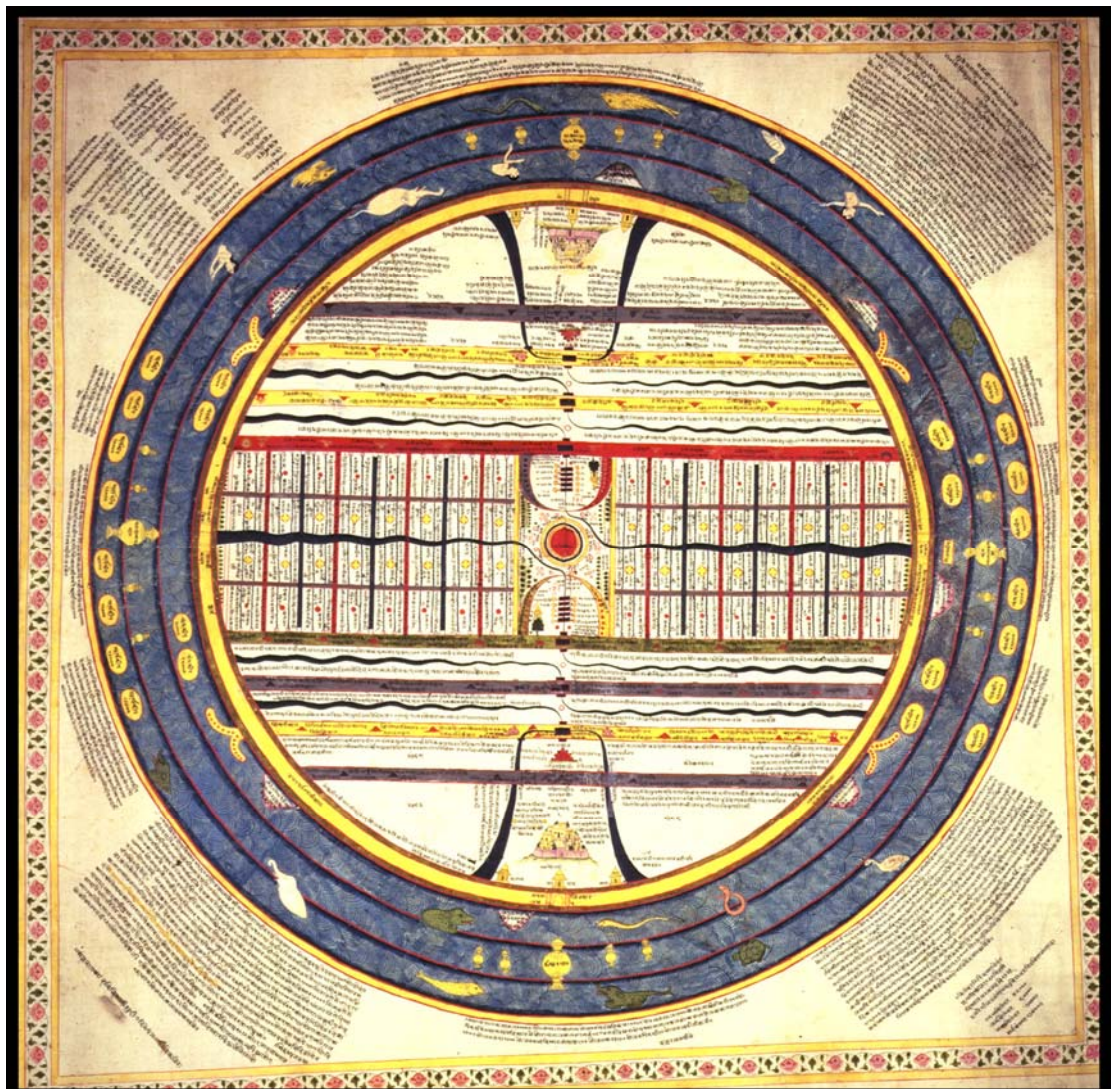


Figure 5. Indian School; *Jain diagram of the universe*; watercolor on cloth; ca.1822-40; British Library, London, UK / © British Library Board. Photograph courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library.

The sand mandala is a diagram laden with symbols used to facilitate meditation. Monks may create the intricate patterns of the mandala for days or weeks in fine grains of sand, only to later brush the sand together and spread it as a blessing for all beings. This artistic creation and ritual reflects Buddhist ideas about the transitory nature of earthly existence, and the tenet that all beings pass and reincarnate until they attain enlightenment.

Figure 5 (pg.140) presents a geometrically abstract chart of the universe from the northern Indian region of Rajasthan, created during the years between 1822 and 1840. The cosmological diagram incorporates references to ancient Buddhist texts, the Puranas, the Mahabharata, and the Jain tradition. In the center is Mount Meru, also known as “Roseapple,” the city of Brahma or the paradise of Indra. Surrounding this are the elements of the four principal quarters: the seas and oceans, the islands inhabited by man, idyllic regions known as the Uttarakuru, and the lands to the East and West. The diagram is inscribed with explanations in Sanskrit, and rivers and land areas are marked with their dimensions within the three rings of oceans.

The way in which Amazonian Indians of Brazil adorn themselves corresponds to their three-tiered world order—the rain forest canopy that is closest to the heavens, the middle ground of the earth, and the space of the underworld. In the Kayapó culture, the headdress contains the feathers of the birds that soar above the rainforest, shown in Figure 6 on page 142. The belt worn around the torso is made of the pelt of the jaguar, representing earth creatures. Ankles are adorned with anaconda skin, which connects to the underworld. Dressed in this way, the individual literally embodies the Kayapó cosmological map.

Many of the world’s cultures have been inspired to represent in visual form the cosmological order believed to have been imposed by deities. Although religions and belief systems vary widely, art created by individuals separated by time and cultural differences reflects a shared quest to understand their role in the universe.

## **Representing the Divine**

To bring the devout closer to their deities, for centuries artists have created images of gods, goddesses, and spiritual beings. Some believe that the deity itself is actually present in the art object, while others believe the object simply represents it. Many such objects are considered sacred, and only used by clergy or shamans in rituals and ceremonies, while other objects exist as instructional aids, or private, personal devotional objects. Ironically, while gods have often been understood as artists sculpting the human form, it is humans, in turn, who give shape to the divine.





Figure 6. Kayapó Mekrãgnoti artist (Brazil); *Dorsal Headdress (meiityk-re kru wapu)*; cotton, fibers, bamboo, vegetal fibers, feathers (red macaw, harpy eagle, bare-faced curassow); 20<sup>th</sup> century; H: 39  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (101 cm.), L: 37 in. (94 cm); Collection of Adam Mekler, Houston Museum of Natural Science, Houston, Texas. Photograph courtesy of Adam Mekler.

While many religions depict God with human attributes, for some early cultures animals represented deities who controlled natural phenomena, such as weather and environmental change. Animals were thought to possess special powers, or were seen as earthly manifestations of supernatural forces in the cosmos. Ancient Egyptian deities were mostly personifications of natural forces, such as the goddess Hathor, associated with the sky, stars, love, and happiness, who was depicted in the form of a cow, or a combination of a cow and a female. A sun divinity revered in numerous early cultures included Amaterasu-o-mi-kami (Shinto), Helios (Greek), Surya (Hindu), Utu or Samas (Mesopotamian), Tsohanoai (Navajo) and Khepri, Atum, and Ra (Egyptian).<sup>13</sup>

In Andean indigenous mythology, the ancient divinity of Mother Earth, Pachamama, was said to reside in the mountains. The serpent represented a protector, ruling the waters that sprang from the earth and rained down from the sky, and was also seen as the sun-related divinity that first organized the world. For the Inka, the serpent also represented lightning and the rainbows believed to connect the earth and sky. The jaguar, or feline, was a symbol of royalty and considered the most powerful divinity of Pre-Columbian and Meso-American people across Mexico and Central and South America.

The ancient Greeks believed that their principal gods, the twelve Olympians who were thought to reside atop Mount Olympus, had distinct personalities and relationships with each other that resembled those of humans on earth. Greek gods were always depicted in human form—reflecting a belief the Greeks considered superior to other religions, whose followers worshipped animals or mountains. Classical depictions of the gods were idealizations that conformed to Greek standards of masculine and feminine beauty.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 7, *Zeus of Artemision*, on page 144 (ca.480–300 BCE), named after the location on the Greek Islands where it was discovered under the sea, represents either Zeus or Poseidon.<sup>15</sup> If the implement missing from the upraised hand was a thunderbolt, the statue was intended to represent Zeus, the head of the Greek pantheon. If the hand held a trident, the god was Poseidon, god of the sea. Although the sculpture reflects a mastery of human anatomy, enhancements have been made and proportions altered to create a physique that exceeds human perfection. The awe-inspiring magnificence of the work was intended to please the public as well as the gods.

Although the Hindu divinity *Shiva Vinadhara* (ca. 950) in Figure 8 (pg.145) takes human form, the sculpture has four arms, which represent the otherworldly powers with which he is endowed. The third god of the Hindu trinity (along with Brahma and Vishnu), Shiva is the Creator and Destroyer. His right rear arm bears an axe signifying his ability to destroy, while the left arm carries an antelope (now headless). At one time, two of his arms held a lute-like instrument, representing his mastery of music.



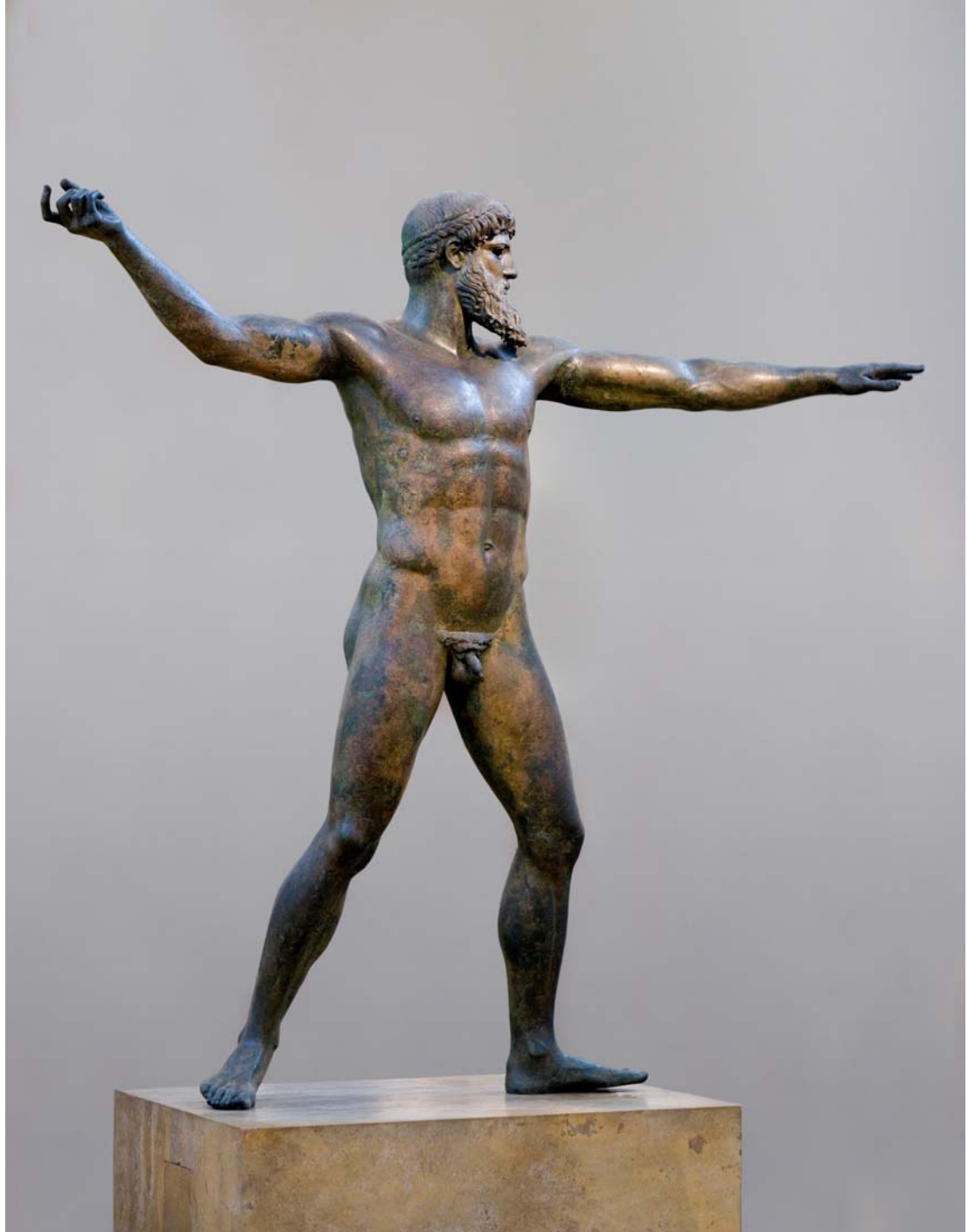


Figure 7. Unknown Artist (Greek); *Zeus of Artemision* (also called Poseidon); bronze; ca. 460 BCE; H: approx. 7 ft. (2.1 m.); National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. Courtesy of Vanni / Art Resource, NY.

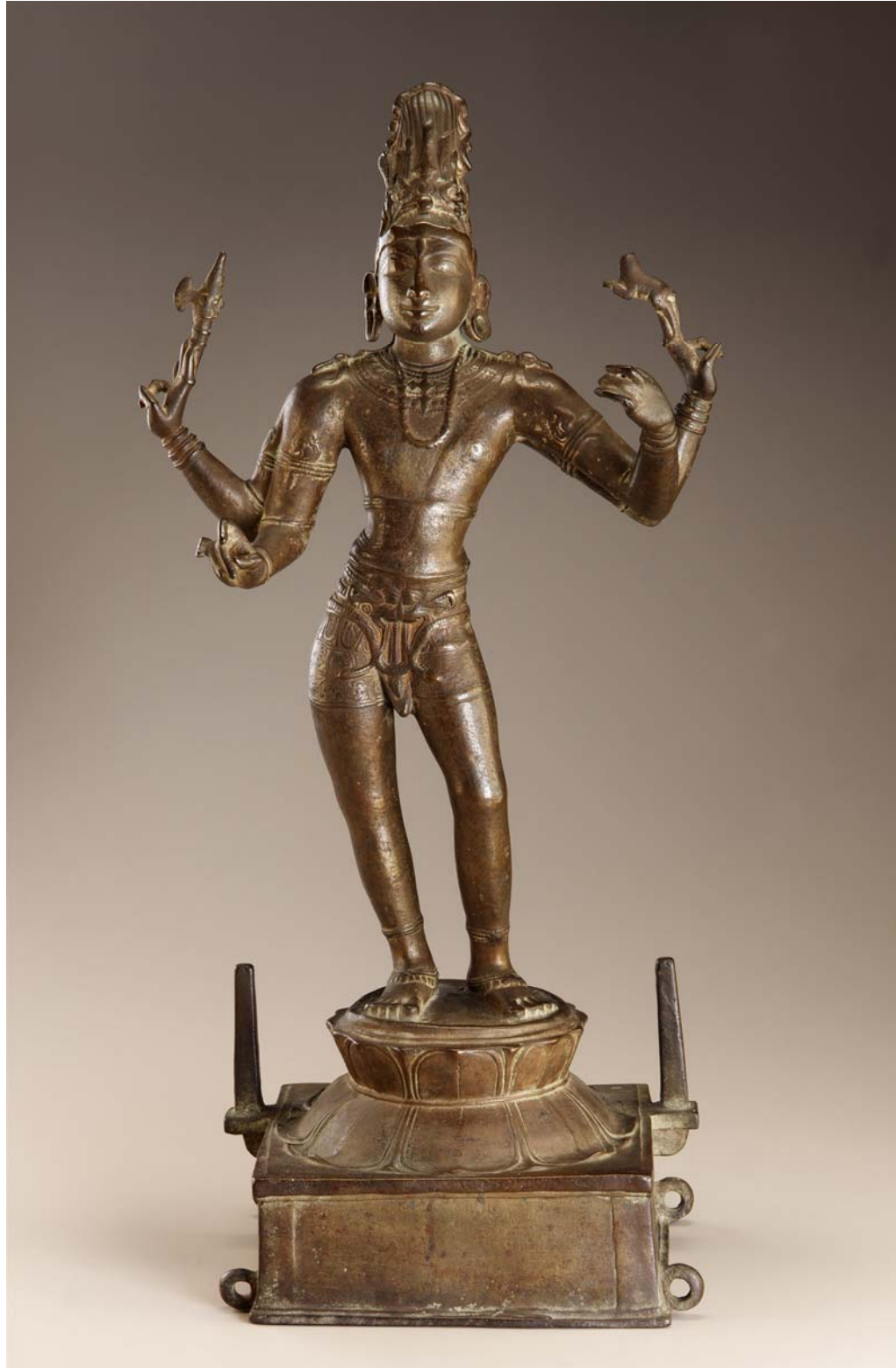


Figure 8. Unknown artist (Indian); *Shiva Vinadhara (Holder of the Lute)*; bronze; Chola Dynasty, ca. 950; H: 29 in. (73.6 cm.); W: 14 in. (35.8 cm.); D: 9 ¾ in. (24.9 cm.); Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Photograph courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.



An artist created the sculpture *Buddha Shakyamuni* (1200-1299), shown in Figure 9, using canonical iconography to convey the teachings of the Buddha. Thirty-two major and eight minor physical features indicate certain spiritual attributes associated with the state of enlightenment. The six *mudras*, or hand gestures of the Buddha, each represent an incident associated with the Buddha's life, such as the renunciation of worldly desire, the steps to achieving enlightenment, the granting or acceptance of charity, the absence of fear, the appeal to reason, and the moment of instruction. The Buddha has a protuberance called a *ushnisha* at the top of his head, which symbolizes divine wisdom, as does the *urna*, or tuft of hair between his eyebrows, that resembles a third eye. The Buddha is depicted in a human form so that his followers will see themselves in him, thus aspiring to attain enlightenment.



Figure 9. Unknown artist (Nepali); *Shakyamuni Buddha*; copper; 1200-1299; Rubin Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Rubin Museum of Art.

In Figure 10, an image of God that truly emphasizes his humanity is central to *The Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-1515) by Matthias Grunewald (1470/80-1528), which depicts the Crucifixion in excruciating detail. The limbs are twisted in pain, the skin is gray-green, covered with wounds. The altarpiece was commissioned for the hospital chapel of Saint Anthony's Monastery in Isenheim, Alsace (then part of Germany). There, monks cared for patients afflicted with Saint Anthony's Fire, a disfiguring skin disease, who may have identified with Christ's suffering.

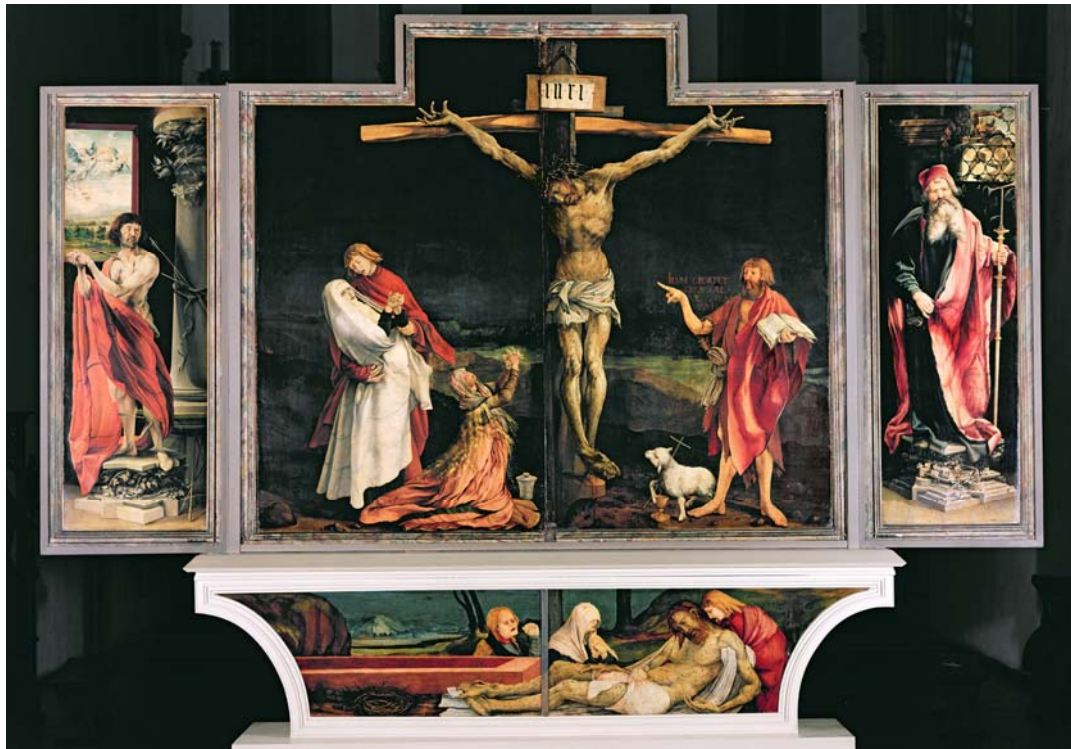


Figure 10. Mathis Gothart Neithart (Matthias Grünewald) (German, 1480-1528); *Isenheim Altarpiece*; oil on wood panel; ca. 1515; (central panel) H: 8 ft. 9 5/8 in. (2.69 m.), W: 10 ft. (3.07 m.); (wings) H: 7 ft. 6 5/8 in. (2.32 m.), W: 29 1/2 in. (75 cm.) (each); (Predella) H: 29 7/8 in. (76 cm.), W: 133 7/8 in. (340 cm.); Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France. Photograph courtesy of Giraudon/the Bridgeman Art Library.

Figure 11 (pg.148) is an illustration from 1863 of the *Bhagavata Purana*, a Hindu manuscript that describes creation. The work depicts the god Vishnu, who was reincarnated on earth to eradicate the evil and save the righteous whenever a threat arises to the *dharma* (the order of the universe). The blue figure of Vishnu reclines upon a five-headed serpent with his consort Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Central to the scene is a white lotus containing the god Brahma, responsible for creating the heavens and the earth, which plants and animals have begun to populate.





Figure 11. Kalurama (Indian, n.d.); *Vishnu Reclining on a Serpent* from the *Bhagavata Purana*; paint on paper; 1863; The British Library, London, UK. Photograph courtesy of HIP/Art Resource, NY.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) sought to convey the soul of things in nature, rather than an accurate representation of them. In 1911 he published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which articulates his perspective on conveying divine essence through abstraction. The following year he painted *The Garden of Love*, shown in Figure 12 on page 149.

The work's title suggests the Garden of Eden, but the composition lacks the conventional elements common to previous depictions of the biblical scene. The result conveys the idea of love through line and color. Kandinsky considered his approach to communicating emotional and spiritual truth as musical, and gave this painting the alternate name *Improvisation 27*.



Figure 12. Wassily Kandinsky (French, born in Russia, 1866–1944); *The Garden of Love (Improvisation Number 27)*; oil on canvas; 1912; H: 47 3/8 in. (120.3 cm.), W: 55 1/4 in. (140.3 cm.); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

In Africa, the supreme creator god of the Yoruba religion, Olòdúmarè, is not represented in art or worshipped directly. Rather, more than 400 òrìsàs—gods and goddesses who each have special powers—serve as intermediaries. Sculptures and other objects, like the dance vest in Figure 13 (pg.150), are created to honor the òrìsàs and facilitate communication through them.

This 20<sup>th</sup>-century object features several carved figures representing the òrìsà most commonly represented in Yoruba art. Known as Esú, Eshu, or Elegba, the god serves as a messenger to other gods, but also brings chaos and conflict. The figures are adorned with cowrie shells, symbols of wealth.





Figure 13. Yoruba artist (Igbóminà Region, Nigeria); *Dance Vest with Esù Staff Figures*; wood, cowrie shells, leather, and pigment; 20<sup>th</sup> century; H: 20 in. (50.8 cm.) (with mount), W: 9 in. (22.86 cm.); Newark Museum, Newark, NJ. Courtesy of Newark Museum, Gift of Bernard and Patricia Wagner.





Figure 14. Vitaly Komar (Russian, b.1943); *Forest as a Temple*; tempera and oil on canvas; 2007; H: 72 in. (183 cm.), W: 36 in. (91.5 cm.); collection of artist. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

*Forest as a Temple* (2007), shown in Figure 14 on page 151, is a painting by the Russian-born artist Vitaly Komar (b.1943). Part of the artist's *New Symbolism* series, the work is a continuation of his *Three-Day Weekend* project, which explores the potential for peaceful coexistence among people with different religious beliefs. In an effort to devise ecumenical symbols, Komar combines traditional iconic images from institutionalized religion with basic geometric shapes occurring in nature and common to the art of many belief systems.<sup>16</sup>

*Forest as a Temple* also depicts trees bending in a way that suggests the arches of a Gothic cathedral. Emblems of Islam (the moon), Judaism (a menorah), and Christianity (a cross) bathe in the light emanating from the open space in the trees. The *Three-Day Weekend* project promotes the notion that people of all beliefs should join Muslims, Jews, and Christians in observing the three holy days of rest—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, respectively.

### Inspiring Devotion

Art objects may serve important functions in religious rituals, inspiring devotion and assisting the worshipper to invoke a divinity. For example, the thurible, or incense burner, is a decorated liturgical vessel from which a Catholic priest may disperse incense to represent prayers rising to heaven. In the Tibetan tradition, the spinning of prayer wheels and the hanging of prayer flags send the messages written upon them in the ten directions of the winds.

Relic containers, created for use in church ritual, are from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Especially popular in the late Middle Ages, these precious objects were used to store bits of clothing, body parts, and bones of a holy person, or objects touched by such a person, and were kept at pilgrimage sites for veneration.

The example in Figure 15 (pg.153), a *Reliquary Arm* (ca.1230) from Valley of the Meuse (present-day Belgium), features a bronze-gilt hand on an oak base arm covered in silver and decorated with gems. The relic inside can be seen through two windows cut in the arm that were once covered with crystal. Sometimes the sculptural form of the reliquary represented the body part it contained, such as a portion of the arm bone. Objects like this were thought to preserve the saintly power of the holy person who was the source of the relic. The faithful might travel a great distance to see a relic, seeking the intercession of a saint. As a direct connection to divinity, clergy used such reliquaries to bless people and heal the sick.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 15. Unknown artist (Valley of the Meuse, present-day Belgium); *Reliquary Arm*; silver over oak; hand: bronze-gilt; appliqué plaques: silver-gilt, niello, and cabochon stones; ca.1230; H: 25 1/2 in. (64.8 cm.), W: 6 1/2 in (16.5 cm.), D: 4 in. (10.2 cm.); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters Collection, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



For the Taino people of the Dominican Republic, figurines called *zemís*, like the example in Figure 16, represented their gods and symbolized fertility, political power, and social status. Made of stone, clay, shell, or wood, the figures were created in different forms and sizes and kept in special shrines. *Zemís* were used in ceremonies that involved taking hallucinogenic snuff to produce visions the Taino believed were messages from their deities and ancestors.<sup>19</sup>



Figure 16. *Deity Figure (Zemí)*; ironwood, shell; Taino, possibly from the Dominican Republic; 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, H: 26 31/32 in. (68.4 cm.), W: 8 5/8 in. (21.9 cm.), D: 9 1/8 in. (23.2 cm.); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.

The power of the religious icon, like the example in Figure 17, is connected to how closely it resembles previous versions copied from the original, believed to have been painted from life by Saint Luke. Because the artists who painted icons had to conform to established rules and patterns, craftsmanship was more important than artistic innovation.<sup>20</sup> Images created by tracing copies of the original, according to the artistic tradition of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, facilitate direct communication with the divine.



Figure 17. Moscow School (Russian); *Icon of the Virgin of Vladimir*, gold leaf and tempera on panel; late 17<sup>th</sup> century; H:12 in. (30.5 cm.), W:10 5/8 in. (27 cm); private collection. Photograph courtesy of Mark Gallery, UK/the Bridgeman Art Library.



This version of the *Virgin of Vladimir* is a late 17<sup>th</sup>-century copy of an original icon created by a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine artist, which would have been on display in the state cathedral. The original work was credited with enabling Russia to overcome enemies in significant battles. For this reason, Russia's rulers protected the icon, keeping it in the capital.

The work depicts the Virgin lovingly holding the Christ child in her arms as she looks out to the viewer. It is likely a private owner used this version of the icon—smaller and more portable than the original—for personal devotion.

Throughout history, people of different faiths have created special spaces for worship. In the Saudi Arabian city of Mecca, the Ka'ba, shown in Figure 18, is the site to which millions of Muslims make a pilgrimage and toward which all the world's Muslims face during daily prayers. The focus of devotion is on the exterior of the granite cube, covered by a black silk cloth called the *Kiswa*, which is replaced every year. The Ka'ba is located in the middle of a vast public square near the Masjid al-Haram mosque.

The Ka'ba was designated as a blessed place by Abraham, according to the Qur'an, and served as the first house of worship for all religions. When the Prophet Muhammad was born in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the structure—which contained images and statues depicting the gods of numerous religions—was already an important pilgrimage site. The Ka'ba became associated

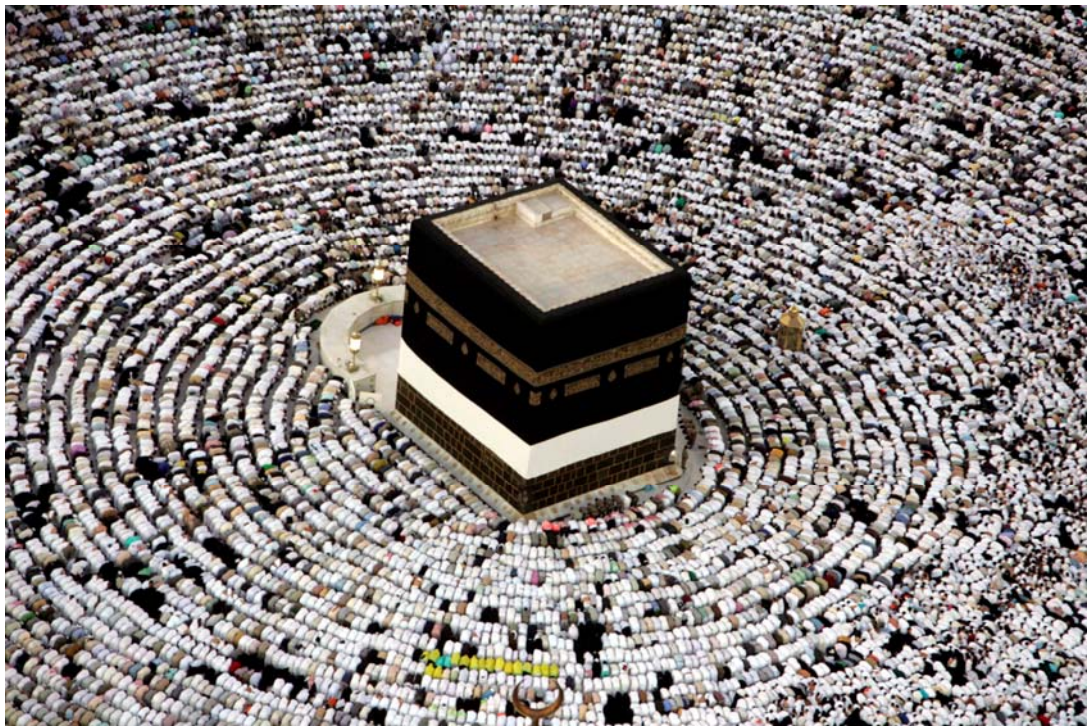


Figure 18. Unknown architect(s); *Ka'ba*; granite and marble, covered with silk; rebuilt multiple times; latest 17<sup>th</sup> century; H: 49 ft. (14.93 m.), W: 39 ft. (11.88 m.), D: 33 ft. (10.05 m.); Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Photograph © Mohamed Messara/epa/Corbis.



exclusively with Islam in 630, when Muhammad returned to Mecca, his birthplace, and called for the worship of a single God, ridding the Ka'ba of religious imagery.

The Great Mosque of Córdoba, shown in Figure 19, has architectural features that inspire devotion. With its rectangular prayer hall and enclosed courtyard for meditation, the design follows traditions established in the Umayyad and Abbasid mosques of Syria and Iran. More than 500 columns connected by two tiers of arches are organized without a hierarchy in rows that appear to expand endlessly. The pillars seem to represent individual devotees of Islam, equals brought together to pray as a community. The Prophet Muhammad taught that every Muslim can gain access to Allah through the observance of certain rites: daily prayer performed throughout the day, charity, fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The head of the Umayyad Dynasty in Spain, Abd al-Rahman, ordered construction of the structure, which began between 784 and 786, on the site of what had been the oldest church in Córdoba, and—before that—a pagan temple. The Great Mosque represented the dominance of the Umayyad Dynasty and Islam in the western part of the Christian world. In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the mosque was expanded twice to accommodate the growing Muslim population. When Christians reconquered Córdoba in the thirteenth century, the mosque was converted into a church.



Figure 19. Unknown architect(s) (possibly Syrian); *La Mezquita (Great Mosque)* (interior); stone, brick, marble, porphyry, jasper, and other materials; Umayyad Dynasty, begun ca. 784-86; enlarged in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries; (Columns) H: approx. 13 ft. (3.96 m.) (each); Córdoba, Spain. Photograph © Pawel Wysocki/Hemis/Corbis.

The Basilica of San Marco in Venice reflects both Eastern and Western aesthetic influence. The structure was built and rebuilt multiple times. By the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, precious materials, including gold, gems, mosaics, and marble, covered the interior. The layout—based on a Greek cross—is similar to that of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. The image in Figure 20 shows the central dome, which features a painting of Christ's ascension into heaven following his resurrection from the dead. The dominant Byzantine aesthetic of the Basilica reflects the significant relationship Venice had with the Eastern Empire.



Figure 20. Unknown artist(s) (probably Greek or Byzantine); *Ascension Dome from the Basilica di San Marco (St. Mark's Basilica)*; mosaic; 1150-1200; D: 42 ft. (13.8 m.); Venice, Italy. Photograph courtesy of Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

Immense Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages were designed to inspire awe among the faithful. While the flying buttresses of Notre Dame Cathedral (1163-1250), shown in Figure 21 on page 159, provide physical support for the outward thrust of the nave vault, they also symbolize the spiritual support of the Lord through the earthly intervention of the Catholic Church. Likewise, within the cathedral space, the vaulted ceiling and vertical columns direct the worshipper's gaze to the heavens. Stained glass windows enhance the mystical aura by transforming light into a multicolored spectacle.<sup>21</sup>



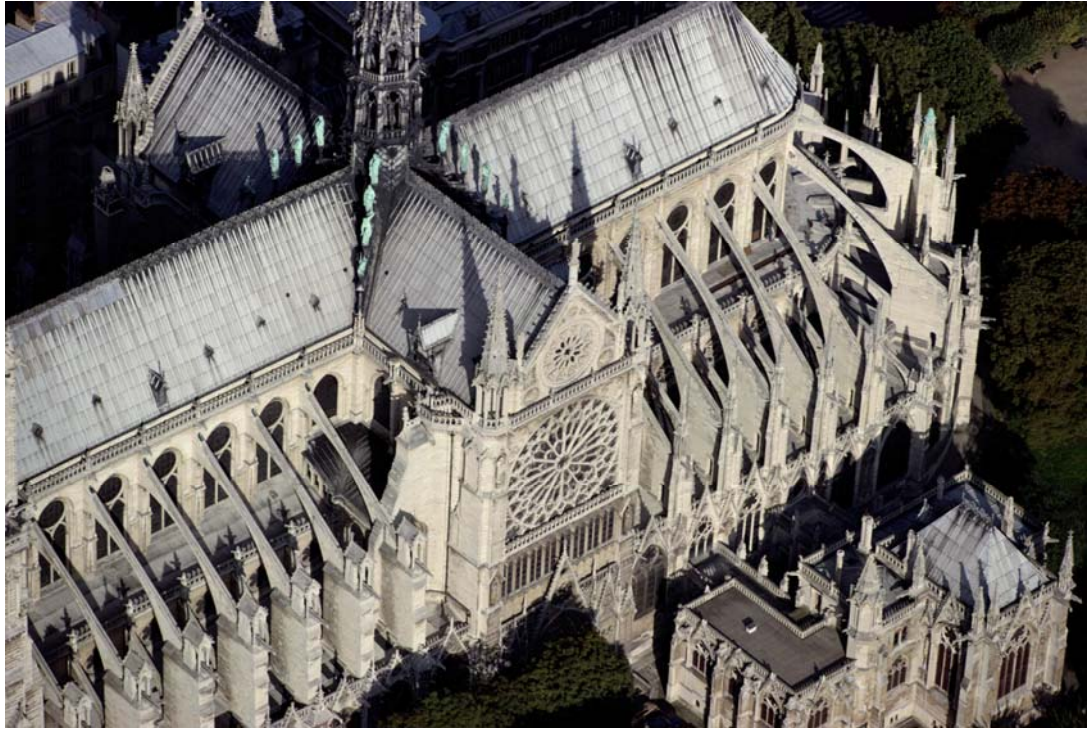


Figure 21. Unknown architect(s) (French); *Aerial View of Notre Dame Cathedral*; stone; ca.1163-1345; L: approx. 420 ft. (128 m.), W: 157½ ft. (48 m.) (transept); Île de la Cité, Paris, France. Photograph © Yann Arthus-Bertrand/Corbis.

Lacking all conventional religious iconography, the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, (Figure 22), page 160, was designed by artist Mark Rothko (1903-1970). The chapel was commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil, and initially was intended to be a Roman Catholic place of worship, but ultimately it became a non-denominational spiritual landmark. The project provided Rothko with the opportunity to create and control the environment to display the 14 works he created especially for it. The artist collaborated on the plans with the original architect, Philip Johnson, and then with Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry. It was dedicated in 1971.<sup>22</sup>

An abstract expressionist who used vast canvases of color to convey emotion, Rothko consciously attempted to convey to the viewer the religious experience he felt when creating the works. The compositions of deep brown, black, and purplish red express what Rothko called “the timelessness and tragedy of the human condition.” Regarding the works, art historian Robert Rosenblum noted, “It is as if the entire current of Western religious art were finally devoid of its narrative complexities and corporeal imagery, leaving us with the dark, compelling presences that pose an ultimate choice between everything and nothing.”<sup>23</sup>





Figure 22. Mark Rothko (American, 1903-1970), Philip Johnson (American, 1906-2005), Howard Barnstone (American, 1923-1987), and Eugene Aubry (American, n.d.); *The Rothko Chapel* (interior); 1971; Houston, TX. Photograph courtesy of Hickey-Robertson.

Throughout time, artists in many societies have created works to represent the divine or environments designed for worship. The work of architects, painters, sculptors, and craftspeople has prompted contemplation of the questions that have puzzled all human beings: What is our place in the universe? What is the meaning of life?

Works of art provide a window into how cultures developed their ideas about the universe and divinity, and built a society based on their beliefs. Even if we can't understand each other's spoken languages, art visually conveys ideas that help people recognize what spiritual values we share with contemporary communities as well as those from the past, and how those beliefs diverge.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 11:4.

<sup>2</sup> David Leeming with Margaret Leeming. *A Dictionary of Creation Myths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), viii.

<sup>3</sup> A. Seidenberg. "The Separation of Sky and Earth at Creation (III)." *Folklore* 94.2 (1983):192-200.

<sup>4</sup> Leeming, *A Dictionary of Creation Myths*, 101.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Hamilton. *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Leeming, *A Dictionary of Creation Myths*, 181-183.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Lazzari and Dona Schlesier. *Exploring Art* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 239.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Schele and David Freidel. *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: Morrow, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> A. V. Kuzmin. "The Celestial Map: The Symbolism of Historical Eras and Reflection of the World Model." *Astronomical and Astrophysical Transactions* 20 (2001):1056-1058.

<sup>10</sup> Callimachus, Lycophron, and Aratus. *Callimachus: Hymns and Epigrams* (Loeb Classical Library No. 129), trans. A. W. Mair and G. R. Mair (London: William Heinemann, 1921).

<sup>11</sup> "Jan van Eyck and Workshop Assistant: The Crucifixion; The Last Judgment (33.92ab)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/euwl/ho\\_33.92ab.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/euwl/ho_33.92ab.htm) (October 2006).

<sup>12</sup> "Wheel of Life." Rubin Museum of Art Web site: <http://www.himalayanart.org/image.cfm?icode=591>.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Jordan. *Encyclopedia of Gods* (New York: Facts on File, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Lazzari and Schlesier, *Exploring Art*, 227.

<sup>15</sup> George E. Mylonas. "The Bronze Statue from Artemision." *American Journal of Archaeology* 48.2 (1944):143-160.

<sup>16</sup> Vitaly Komar, "Artist Statement," in *Vitaly Komar: Three-Day Weekend*. Andrew Weinstein, ed. (New York: The Humanities Gallery, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, 2005).

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<sup>17</sup> "Reliquary Arm [*Mosan*] (47.101.33)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site:  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/07/euwl/ho\\_47.101.33.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/07/euwl/ho_47.101.33.htm) (October 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Lazzari and Schlesier, *Exploring Art*, 287.

<sup>19</sup> "Deity Figure (*Zemí*) [Dominican Republic; Taino] (1979.206.380)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site:  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/canc/ho\\_1979.206.380.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/canc/ho_1979.206.380.htm) (October 2006).

<sup>20</sup> H. W. Janson. *History of Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979), 213-214.

<sup>21</sup> Janson, *History of Art*, 288.

<sup>22</sup> "Inside the Rothko Chapel: A Virtual Tour." The Rothko Chapel Web site:  
<http://www.rothkochapel.org/Virtual-Interior.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Dore Ashton. *About Rothko* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).