

THE DIVINE & BELIEF

self-guided tour



**MUSEUM
OF FINE ARTS
ST. PETERSBURG**

THE DIVINE & BELIEF

Through all ages, people have recognized a power beyond themselves that influenced their existence. Their explanations depended on their locations, experiences, and cultures. Many ancient civilizations thought this overwhelming influence must be shared among a number of gods, and some current beliefs espouse this. Three of the widest spread faiths, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, believe in a single deity, but each approaches this belief with different names and explanations. Others maintain that the deity is found in nature and the universe. Many people, however they worship, still today express a reliance on a power beyond their mortal comprehension.



SCAN THIS CODE FOR A MAP IDENTIFYING
THE LOCATIONS OF THE ARTWORKS

REMOVER OF OBSTACLES

Ganesha, 800-900

FIND THIS IN THE ASIAN ART GALLERIES

The Hindu god Ganesha is a popular divinity with many names, abilities, and origin myths, some of which are represented in this sculpture. One of Ganesha's many powers is removing obstacles. Thus, Hindus often invoke him when starting something new. Here, this power is symbolized by the *pasha*, or lasso, in his raised left hand. In his back right hand, he raises an axe, while his outstretched left hand holds a broken tusk. These items refer to myths about how he gained his elephant head. Ganesha is widely worshipped today, and on his birthday people may make some of his favorite sweets—including *laddoo*, which he holds in his left hand.



ON THE VERGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Manjushri, c. 1000s

FIND THIS IN THE ASIAN ART GALLERIES

Bodhisattvas are complex figures in Buddhist religion generally associated with one's search for enlightenment. In some beliefs, bodhisattvas are those on the verge of enlightenment who remain behind in order to help others on their path. Known bodhisattvas vary across cultures, depending on the form of Buddhism, but most share a similar set of iconographic traits. Bodhisattvas are often depicted in elaborate dress, including scarfs, bracelets, and elaborate accessories. This is at odds with representations of Buddha who is often depicted in modest clothing. The fanciful dress of a bodhisattva references Siddhārtha Gautama, an aristocratic youth who renounced his privileged life in search of greater truth, and is considered to be the founder of Buddhism, as well as a Buddha himself.



COMMUNION

Master of the Greenville Tondo, *Adoration of the Christ Child by Mary and Joseph*, Early 16th Century

FIND THIS IN THE EUROPEAN ART, 13TH-18TH CENTURIES GALLERIES

In this painting, Mary and Joseph adore Jesus, believed by Christians to be the son of God. The painting is filled with symbols relating to the communal meal that is part of many church services, in which the body of Christ is symbolically consumed. For instance, the child's head rests on a sheaf of wheat, symbolizing both his birthplace Bethlehem—Hebrew for “House of Bread,” and the bread of the communion. Above him, in the sky, is an angel announcing the birth to shepherds. The angel is surrounded by a circle of light. The circle also resembles the communion bread. For Roman Catholic Christians, this bread is actually transformed into the living flesh of Christ after it is blessed by a priest.



MYTHOLOGICAL BARGAINS

Carle van Loo, *Apollo and the Cumaen Sibyl*, 1755

FIND THIS IN THE EUROPEAN ART, 13TH-18TH CENTURIES GALLERIES

Classical myths were a very popular theme in French painting in the eighteenth century. This painting tells the story of the sun god Apollo, with his lyre, in all his glory as the patron of the arts, harmony, and order. According to the Roman poet Ovid, Apollo attempted to seduce the sibyl. In exchange, she required that he grant her wish that she could live for as many years as the number of grains of sand she could hold in one hand. When she refused to succumb to Apollo's desires, he granted her the wish with one caveat: because she did not include eternal youth in her wish, she lived and aged for 1000 years.

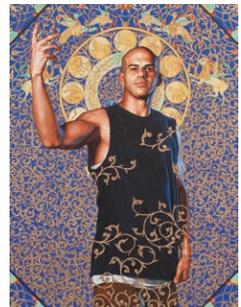


JEWISH SYMBOLISM

Kehinde Wiley, *Leviathan Zodiac (The World Stage: Israel)*, 2011

FIND THIS IN THE GREAT HALL

There are two forms of divine belief expressed in this work, as well as an evocation of personal power. The religion of the Israeli Jewish subject is referenced in the frame, with depictions of the Lion of Judah, the hands of the priestly blessing, and the Ten Commandments. The figure's pose however emulates statues of ancient Greek and Roman rulers and their postures of strength, righteousness, and divinity—often meant as military propaganda or projected idealization. Wiley has stated, “Art is about communicating power, and it's been that way for hundreds of years. What I choose to do is take people who happen to look like me, black and brown, people all over the world increasingly, and allowing them to occupy that field of power.”



AGRICULTURAL TRADITIONS

Ciwara Mask, 20th Century

FIND THIS IN THE AFRICAN ART GALLERY

Traditionally, Bamana society was divided into farmers, who produced food for the community, and artists, who created pots, sculptures, metal tools, textiles, and other objects. Each profession required specialized knowledge for its success, and this was passed down in families from generation to generation. Farming traditions include a myth about how such knowledge was given to the Bamana. According to oral history, it was learned from watching the *ciwara* or “cutting beast.” The *ciwara* looked like an antelope but would cut into fields with his hooves. Behind him followed his wife, who dropped seeds into the holes and covered them up with her hooves. *Ciwara* masks—such as this one—take the form of the mythical farming antelopes.



SUN GOD

Mask of the Sun God, Kinich Ahau, c. 100 B.C.–A.D. 350

FIND THIS IN THE ART OF THE AMERICAS GALLERIES

In Mayan culture, which flourished in Mesoamerica before the arrival of Europeans, jade masks were both more valuable than gold and possessed of incredible power. These objects were used to invoke the gods and were worn by nobles to denote their holy authority. This mask depicts Kinich Ahau, the sun god, and one of over one hundred and sixty-five gods in the Mayan religion. It was believed that Kinich Ahau was born in the East with the sun and aged throughout the day. At night, the god transformed into a jaguar. Kinich Ahau was depicted both in masks, as well as sculptural decoration on Mayan pyramids. Because the sun brought both life and drought, Kinich Ahau was a god who was both loved and feared.



NATURE AS DIVINE

George Inness, *Early Moonrise, Florida*, 1893

FIND THIS IN THE AMERICAN ART, 19TH-21ST CENTURIES GALLERY

George Inness was a follower of the Swedenborgian Christian faith, which held a profound belief in the spiritual beauty of nature, and of both rural and industrial labor. Drawing on Swedenborgian ideas about perception—and particularly about the natural world as a manifestation of the divine—Inness explored his spirituality through resonant color, ambient light, and a nuanced, unified atmosphere. This painting was made near the artist’s winter home in Tarpon Springs, north of St. Petersburg. Inness skillfully captured the radiant light of the moon, using it to contrast the shadowy, softly painted trees and ground. The painting also suggests a remarkable calmness and quiet—an almost church-like hush suggesting Inness’s own meditations about his faith.



Cover: Carle van Loo, *Apollo and the Cumaen Sibyl* (detail), 1755, Museum purchase with funds donated by the Stuart Society
Inside: George Inness, *Early Moonrise, Florida* (detail), 1893, Gift of Costas Lemonopoulos

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