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‘Living With the Gods: Art, Beliefs and Peoples’ Review: Seeing the Sacred Anew

An exhibition at Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts emphasizes the stories and rituals surrounding religious artworks and objects.

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‘Shiva Nataraja’ (late 19th-early 20th century). PHOTO: THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

Houston

Museums are great levelers. Inside their walls, narratives, portraits, icons and altarpieces become paintings; crucifixes, totems and temple gods become sculptures; sacred objects, out of context, become works of "Art." The benefit is that museums' religious artworks—acting as cultural emissaries—enable us to come face-to-face with diverse, spectacular interpretations of the divine. The downside is that those spiritual objects—secularized, aestheticized—lose some of their intended mystery and magic.

"Living With the Gods: Art, Beliefs and Peoples," at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, purports to resurrect sacred art's spiritual dimension, emphasizing its stories, purposes and rituals, rather than its aesthetic beauty. The show is guest-curated by Neil MacGregor—the former director of London's National Gallery and British Museum—on whose 2017 BBC radio series and subsequent book, "Living With the Gods: On Beliefs and Peoples," the exhibition is based.

'Celestial Conch Shell' (900-1521). PHOTO: THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

A globetrotting odyssey comprising some 200 objects spanning 4,000 years, the show—mixing art of numerous cultures and eras, from ancient to contemporary—blankets a block-long suite of galleries half the size of a football field. Arranged thematically (rather than by region, era or religion), it explores the divine power and nature of gods, spirit guides, water, light, fire, animals, pilgrimages and communal eating. And it addresses the big questions: the mysteries of heaven and earth, life and death, good and evil.

"Living With the Gods" opens—in the section "The Mysteries of the Cosmos"—like a big bang, with Thomas Glassford's fluorescent light sculpture "Aster 350 T12/5000K" (2001), a white starburst, 12 feet in diameter. Nearby is a Phoenician weather god; a bronze sculpture of Shiva, the Hindu god of wisdom and the performing arts, dancing in a halo of flames on top of the dwarf of ignorance; and the large Mexican "Celestial Conch Shell" (900-1521)—carved with skulls, stars and mythological warriors and gods engaged in battle.

An image from Bill Viola's 'Ascension' (2000). PHOTO: THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

But the immense, comprehensive show has just gotten under way. It includes an Egyptian bronze statuette of Isis nursing Horus; and a falcon-shaped grain "mummy" symbolizing Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld. Here are Cycladic idols; marble sculptures of Athena and Venus; Assyrian and Mayan reliefs; African masks, fertility and power figures. And there are kachinas, prayer rugs, ceremonial lamps and chalices. The section "The Abstract Divine" features Mark Rothko's vibrant "No. 14 (Painting)" (1961); Bill Viola's hypnotic (though one-note) slow-motion video "Ascension" (2000), in which a Christ-like figure plunges into water; and Gerhard Richter's "Abstract Pictures (Rhombus Cycle)" (1998)—a bland series of indistinguishable, washy red paintings inspired by the wounds of Christ.

'Baptismal Font' (1483). PHOTO: THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

We encounter an ink rubbing of a second-century Chinese tomb, a Gutenberg Bible, Torahs, Korans and Islamic calligraphy. And there are huge objects, too, such as the German bronze "Baptismal Font" (1483)—sporting sculpted deacons as legs; a 23-foot-long carved wooden "Crocodile Spirit Figure (Taki)" (1900-33), from Papua New Guinea; and a 900-gallon, gleaming-silver urn (15 feet in diameter) used by the Maharajah of Jaipur to carry Ganges water to London, where, in 1902, he attended the coronation of Edward VII.

High points include Diego Velázquez's "Kitchen Maid With the Supper at Emmaus" (c. 1617-18), in a section devoted to sharing food; and El Greco's towering, 9-foot-tall oil painting, "Pentecost" (c. 1600), in a gallery dedicated to divine fire. In the Velázquez, simple objects—a bowl's interior, which becomes convex; an advancing plane of a back wall; a tilted tabletop—awaken us to the magic of transfiguration. In "Pentecost," on loan from the Prado, the Holy Spirit (a blazing dove) descends from the dome of heaven, igniting the heads of Mary and the Apostles like a flickering candelabra. El Greco's metallic yellows, reds,

blues and greens leap and advance, transforming the figures, and especially their fingers, into dancing flames—and the entire scene into a furnace.

Diego Velázquez's 'Kitchen Maid With the Supper at Emmaus' (c. 1617-18). PHOTO: NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND

Midway through the exhibition, two large groupings depicting Christ and Buddha, respectively, face off with startling results. In Gianlorenzo Bernini's life-size bronze sculpture, "The Crucified Christ" (c. 1650) , Jesus pulls upward and away from the cross, soaring like a regal bird. In Francisco de Zurbarán's "Veil of Veronica" (1630s) , his visage inspires empathy, sorrow. And in El Greco's "The Crucifixion" (1575-80) , Christ is the structure that holds the malleable cross upright. Opposite, sublime groupings of Buddhas—from Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Thailand—hover blissfully. They express not agony, sacrifice and resurrection, but serenity, lightness, emptiness. The greatest of these Christs and Buddhas convey divine majesty, otherworldliness, inner calm.

"Living With the Gods" is illuminating, surprising—and offers much to venerate. It's exhaustive in scope and inclusive to a fault. The only god conspicuously absent is Eros—without whom, it has been argued, none of the rest could have been born. But the show could have benefited from some judicious editing. Focused as it is on sacred subjects, it gives every object—good or bad—equal footing. Museums may be the new churches, but they inspire us to make aesthetic distinctions: not to claim that Allah or Buddha or Christ or Vishnu reigns supreme, but that Bernini's mysterious sculpture "The Crucified Christ" is far superior to William-Adolphe Bouguereau's sentimental painting "Pietà" (1876) and Robert Mallary's expressionistic, ragged-cloth assemblage "Crucifixion, Homage to Franz Kline" (1962) . Sacred art, after all, must be worthy not just of museums, the public or the faithful—but of the gods.

Living With the Gods: Art, Beliefs and Peoples

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—Mr. Esplund, the author of "The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art" (Hachette), writes about art for the Journal.

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