

FIVE FAITHS PROJECT



Introduction

ACKLAND
ART MUSEUM

INTRODUCTION

Art museums are a little like bank vaults. In a very secure setting, objects of value are maintained and preserved. On behalf of the community, the museum takes responsibility for the works of art within its collection. Objects are acquired and catalogued. The art is kept clean and stored in a climate-controlled setting. Not only does the museum have an obligation to protect and preserve works of art, but also to make them available for viewing by as wide an audience as possible. Museums, however, preserve, protect and display more than art objects. Museums hold the stories of individuals and cultures, stories of artists and children, wars, religions and politics, feasts and famines. Whatever the medium, each work offers its beauty or craftsmanship, its historical or cultural significance, as well as the stories that exist within it, about it, and because of it. Some of the stories are well known, some are not. There are stories about the makers of each piece and its use, its home, its history and acquisition. The object itself may relate a story in symbols or in pictures or even in words etched into its surface. The object may represent the thoughts of a solitary artist or artisan or the beliefs and aspirations of many people who worked and lived together in a particular time and place. Each object was made in the context of a landscape and climate, a culture, a local community, a studio or a workshop.

The objects in a museum preserve these stories, allowing those in each generation a new opportunity to discover for themselves the richness of our human heritage. Art objects and their stories also confirm history, the place of individuals within it, and the capacity of the human spirit to create, to memorialize, to honor and remember. All of this and more can be said about collections of religious art.

The importance of religious art.

Religious art may be loosely defined as works which represent to the viewer particular beliefs, stories and practices within religious traditions. Works deemed to be religious art are works "in service." These works serve the religions from which they come. The art teaches, illustrating truths and devotions. Religious art may depict the tenets of a particular belief system or the individual beliefs of the artist. For the viewer, this representation of beliefs is easier to recognize when there is a base of knowledge concerning the religion represented. A cross may be quickly identified as a meaningful symbol to a Christian, calling to mind the stories of Jesus. The same may be said for a Muslim, who recognizes a prayer mat, knows how it is used, and remembers the story of Muhammad and his Night Flight. Jewish men and women may quickly identify a Torah Scroll. A Buddhist will understand the symbolic meaning of the flame atop the Buddha's head. But when a viewer is confronted with objects whose roots are in traditions less familiar, it is more difficult to see the symbolic importance. The works themselves hold the stories awake to the initiated, but what happens when the story is unknown to the viewer?

Religious art, like religion itself, has its own language.

Each tradition employs a particular language of symbols, colors, attributes and styles which communicate the stories of that tradition. It is difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate fully the significance of the object without some knowledge of the language and familiarity with the stories. One may recognize the beauty and craftsmanship, but religious art also seeks to instruct and inspire. As stated earlier, religious art is in service to religion, to deities, to sacred truths. In order to understand the art object better, something of the religion it serves must be known. The viewer needs to know when and where and how this work was made. The viewer also needs to know why.

While the study of religious art is a broad and deep academic tradition, with scholars devoting their life's work to the details and history of individual pieces, it is possible to gather enough information to begin an accurate and meaningful exploration of works. With the help of sacred stories and texts, as well as living members of the faith tradition, viewers can begin to understand the "language" of these works. For example, the different hand gestures of the Buddha, called mudras, convey special meanings, each suggesting one of the principles of the Buddha's teaching. The blue face of Krishna indicates his divine nature and makes him recognizable in intricate Indian miniatures. The use of gold as a symbol of purity and holiness is found in virtually all of the religious traditions, perhaps suggesting the precious nature of belief throughout the world. The deeper meanings and the hidden messages emerge with remarkable clarity when the viewer takes the time to ask questions and research possible answers.

Religious art can also inform our understanding of history, politics and culture.

In addition to their religious significance, these objects offer clues into the nature of a culture at a particular time and place. For example, identifying India as a country on the world map, and even knowing something of its culture, will not offer the opportunities that art does to appreciate India as the birthplace of one of the world's oldest religious traditions: Hinduism. The art objects from this tradition follow a precise canon of iconography and manufacture. Within the Hindu tradition, artistic innovation is not valued in the same ways that it is so often valued within contemporary Western art and culture. Knowing this may open a new discussion of the culture of India, its history and development. Beyond that, knowledge of the traditions of India may enliven discussions of the American culture and its love of innovation. What are the political systems that support innovation? How does a culture maintain its heritage? What is the American heritage? Hinduism, with its roots in India, is a rapidly growing faith in contemporary America. What are the implications of this development? What impact is this faith having on the shape of American culture? The same kinds of questions can be raised with regard to Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. How

has each faith helped to shape its country of origin, and how is that faith woven into the fabric of American society today?

Because faith traditions have shaped much of human history and continue to have an impact on art and politics, cultures and communities, educators are increasingly aware of the need to introduce students to the core language and beliefs of the world's religions. Once the core information is examined, it is possible to explore implications within the study of world literature, history, social studies and art.

The scope of this project

Within the scope of this project, teachers are invited to use this and the following sections, as well as sacred texts to introduce students to the study of religions in general terms and to the core tenets and practices of Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. The materials are appropriate for use in grades 7 – 12. Designed to serve as a resource used in conjunction with the established curricula in each grade, the Five Faiths Project offers information about each tradition. It does not endorse or provide religious instruction.

The Ackland Art Museum has established two principle goals in the creation of this Project. First, we hope to encourage educators to use art objects as primary source material in the study of our human heritage, in art, literature, history and social studies classes. Second, we hope to foster a respectful, on-going dialogue that will enhance current understandings of religious diversity and its impact on contemporary culture. In order to achieve these goals, the museum has involved scholars, educators and faith leaders in the development of both the original idea and the present content of the *Five Faiths Project*.

The role of the Constitution in the growth of religious diversity in America.

In our Constitution, the guiding document for our nation, the framers guaranteed religious freedom for all Americans. This freedom acknowledges and supports the natural or inalienable right of human beings to their individual conscience. The Constitution guarantees “full freedom of conscience for people of all faiths or none.” In other words, Americans are guaranteed freedom with regard to what they believe. The government cannot force or require particular religious affiliations or beliefs among its citizens. In fact, no person, organization or agency can force anyone in American society to believe or disbelieve any one thing. This freedom secures the right to maintain, change, explore and practice religious beliefs in an atmosphere without coercion. It secures the rights of believers and atheists alike.

While it was once uncommon to have a Hindu temple in your neighborhood, or a Muslim mosque just down the road, more and more Americans are participating in or witnessing the growth of diverse, and often unfamiliar, faith communities. It is

increasingly likely that citizens of this country will work with, go to school with, and live near people who hold unfamiliar beliefs. As these faith communities grow and become more visible in America, the need to hear their stories and to understand their beliefs becomes more and more urgent. It is urgent because it is too easy to dismiss what is not understood, to deny the necessity of what is unfamiliar.

Understanding does not mean that we will ultimately agree, or choose to believe the same things, but rather, it places us in a position to share the responsibilities freedom requires of us more fully. Our Constitutional freedom makes it possible for us to increase awareness, without insisting on full acceptance. Students can study other beliefs without practicing them and inform one another, without requiring conformity. As educators, we will approach all beliefs with an academic sensibility, without promotion of any particular devotion. This approach offers students information, stories, art, and texts without any intention or expectation of conversion of any kind.

The Supreme Court has consistently upheld the notion that the study of religion is appropriate in public education. In *Abington v. Schemp* (1963) the court stated:

“...one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.”

Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education (2011) offers a list of guidelines for educators in the implementation of such a course of study. The following guidelines are included within that list.

- The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional.
- The school strives for student awareness of religions but does not press for student acceptance of any one religion.
- The school sponsors study about religion, not the practice of religion.
- The school educates about all religions; it does not promote or denigrate any particular view.

The central task in teaching about religion.

At the core of any academic study of religion, educators must maintain these careful distinctions. As stated earlier, educators are teaching about religion. The first responsibility of the educator is to present, as accurately as possible, the ways in which people within each faith tradition understand and practice their faith. Then teachers may go on to discuss how traditions differ, both within and across traditions. Teachers and more advanced students may also wish to explore ways in which religion is interpreted by modern disciplines such as sociology and psychology. At every

opportunity, the teacher must reinforce the notion that knowledge about a tradition is distinct from practice and belief within this context. For example, to know what a prayer wheel is and how it is used within the Buddhist tradition is not the same thing as believing in its efficacy.

The materials in this project are not intended to represent a comprehensive exploration of faith in America, nor should they be misconstrued as a full representation of any one tradition. Each faith system has many beliefs and expressions within its current practice and in its developmental history. These materials are neither comprehensive nor fully authoritative. This is a sampling and an introduction.

To further clarify, imagine that you have before you an oil painting. Attached to the work is a small tag with the title of the painting, the name of the artist and the year in which it was completed. Upon investigation, you discover that art historians have verified the painting as completed by Degas in 1878. Scholars have also verified its authenticity. No matter how thoroughly you and your students study the image and examine the techniques the painter employed, you will not discover a full understanding of Degas' work without other resources. You may wish to look at several of Degas' paintings. You might look to periodicals and go to the Internet to see as many of Degas' works as you can find. In the process, you discover that many of Degas' works are in mediums other than oil. You might inquire at a local art museum requesting information about Degas' life and work. Further study leads you and your students to investigate the region in France where Degas lived, worked and painted. In the process, you learn that he was in relationship with other painters. Your students may wish to compare and contrast the works of Degas and his contemporaries: Pissarro, Monet, Morisot and others. No matter how deeply you investigate the original image, one painting by Degas can only hint at all of the artist's works and the vast influence of the Impressionist Movement. Similarly, while the teacher and students may examine the painting carefully and closely, recognizing techniques employed by the artist in the making of this particular painting, still, no one has lifted a paintbrush and learned how to paint in the process. The same can be said for the objects which instruct about faith traditions. The teacher and students can examine the work closely, understand its original use and context, but that does not constitute becoming a member of that faith tradition. In the same way, no single religious art object can provide a comprehensive knowledge of any faith system.

Object-based learning in the study of religion.

The intention of this project is to begin an educational journey within the classroom setting, using methodologies common to museum educators. Object-based learning is a teaching strategy which acknowledges the object at hand as one authority. It is right there. It exists. It is a primary source. By using works of art, sacred texts and living

stories as the “objects” in our object-based journey, students will be encouraged to find historical, cultural and individual significance.

In the museum setting, religious art objects are displayed outside of their original context. This will also be true in classroom settings. Not only may these works be thousands of miles from the landscape in which they were made, but they have also been moved from a sacred setting to a secular one. An altarpiece from a fifteenth-century cathedral has been moved from a sanctuary to a museum. A personal icon has gone from the home of a believer to a shelf in a gallery. A bronze head of the Buddha has been moved from an outdoor garden to a climate-controlled room on the other side of the world. A Mosque lamp has been placed in a Plexiglas box. Were the objects still in their original settings, it might be possible to gather even more information about their uses and meanings by simple observation. But once a piece has been moved, and its devotional function ended, then other sources must provide information about its original context and use.

In the course of this study, students will turn to traditional research methods and sources for additional information: newspapers, library books and the Internet. They may also turn to one another. Again, our communities are becoming as diverse as the galleries in an art museum. Each classroom in which this material is used will have its own demographic, with its own particular mix of ethnicity, nationality and religious affiliation or lack thereof. Classrooms, like neighborhoods, are far from homogenous. A Christian may be seated next to a Hindu, a Jew and a Muslim. Even if one classroom lacks this level of diversity, the community at large, be it a small town or the whole state, offers diversity within reach.

In teaching about religion, even through this object centered methodology, challenging questions are likely to arise. Invariably, thoughtful teachers and students will struggle to define terms and explore implications. A respect for the human capacity to believe is essential, particularly as students engage new information about the various expressions of this capacity and examine the impact of believing on the study of literature, art and history. All five of the faiths explored in this text have shaped world culture to some degree. To the believer in any tradition, the faith is true, the practices meaningful and life-affirming. To minimize depth of belief or the richness of a tradition merely because it is unfamiliar, or not our own, hinders the potential for understanding. With that in mind, it is possible to suggest four strategies for this work.

Four strategies for implementation:

1. Model respect and tolerance
2. Resist quick comparisons
3. Encourage inquiry
4. Check sources

Within these materials, each tradition is introduced as a coherent and legitimate faith system. No attempt is made to verify the truth of each tradition, beyond the use of appropriate and widely accepted texts and art objects from within the faith itself. Scholars and faith leaders have reviewed the introductions to each system, with an eye to accuracy and integrity. Practitioners within each faith heritage offer stories. Children from within faith communities created the photographs in the catalogue of the Wendy Ewald exhibition. Artists and craftspeople, by way of the museum's collection, offer the sacred objects. Each has its own undeniable authority, as it is rooted within the faith of the individual and her/his religious heritage. The obligation of teachers and students alike is to give these objects their due respect. Giving attention is the first step in showing respect.

For example, when reading the stories and following the discussion questions for each of the stories, students are invited to look for possible connections to the art objects, encouraged to do additional research and reminded of the importance of their own stories. The same methodology will apply to the art objects. Each object represents only a small part of a living faith tradition. Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam are not merely historical institutions and movements, but active, living communities present in contemporary society.

Within these materials, no attempt is made to make qualitative comparisons. Each tradition is introduced and explored in its own right. Further study may lead students to consider what both Hinduism and Christianity teach about the afterlife, or evil, or the problem of suffering, but they are encouraged to do so while employing techniques which do not easily lend themselves to a discussion of which one is "right."

Comparing and contrasting differing beliefs and practices can be useful in that many traditions share certain common elements: the presence of sacred stories, leading figures, teachers and prophets, sacred spaces and some elements of prayer and practice intended to aid in a true appreciation of truth and divinity. However, in the suggested plan on feasting and fasting, Ramadan is not directly compared to Lent, but rather, the students are introduced to the notion that denial of bodily needs is present in many faiths. By seeing these common elements, students may deepen their appreciation of differing expressions of faith.

To completely avoid comparison and contrast would deny the obvious context of shared human experience. It is one thing to make a sterile investigation of a particular object or faith, and quite another to seek the respect which grows out of empathy and recognition of commonality despite differences. Students may need assistance in setting aside preconceived ideas and expectations in order to understand the information better. By paying attention to the nature of student investigation, redirecting attention back to the object and to the acquisition of accurate information concerning all the traditions, teachers build a foundation for tolerance. Again, the teachers are offering instruction concerning the beliefs of adherents to

each tradition. The first step in building tolerance is to give the time and attention necessary not only to learning the facts, but also to building a respectful relationship to these facts. This relationship supports students in the recognition of familiar elements, while, at the same time, invites them to acknowledge and explore the unfamiliar.

Open-ended questions that invite further investigation form the foundation for this course of inquiry. Students will be encouraged to look, to see, to gather and to analyze data. Friends, family, newspapers, the Internet, dictionaries and even travel brochures may be legitimate sources for answers to open-ended questions. But at every turn, just as an art object is authenticated as a part of its care and protection, teachers and students will want to check their sources as well. Students are encouraged to pay attention to the context in which any new information is found. Students are consistently encouraged to continue their inquiry, seeking out new questions rather than arriving at simple answers.

In conclusion

The *Five Faiths Project* has been designed for use as a resource material within the traditional classroom setting for students grades 7 – 12. Teachers are encouraged to use all or any part of the materials provided, and to exercise professional discretion in their implementation. In the younger grades, teachers may use the introductions to each tradition as they prepare lesson plans and instructional time. In the higher grades, teachers may distribute copies of the introductions and other elements of the project to students for independent reading and research. The reading level of all introductions is approximately 9th grade. Teachers are encouraged to create new lesson plans, building on the content of the Five Faiths Project.

By adding art objects and stories into a standard curriculum, the Ackland Art Museum hopes that students will be given greater context in which to explore our culture and our communities, past and present. Students may wonder as they look at a twelfth-century crucifix, or a bronze sculpture of dancing Krishna. They may laugh as they read the story of the parrot who puts out the forest fire with water from his wings. They may even talk to one another and to their parents, grandparents, families and friends as they seek to understand the richness of each faith tradition. It is our hope that the project will open an informed dialogue between museum educators and teachers, teachers and students, believers and non-believers, resulting in a fuller educational experience for all.

Further Research & Points for Discussion

- Using the library and/or Internet, ask students to find pertinent passages of the United States Constitution and rulings of the Supreme Court with regard to teaching Religion in Public Schools. Ask students to consider the implications of the rulings.
- Check local resources for additional information on each of the faiths presented in the material. Local museums and faith communities may be able to provide additional images and stories.
- Establish classroom norms for respectful discourse. What norms can students agree will be necessary in this course of study? List norms and expectations.
- Provide students with objects which are difficult to understand when removed from their original context and use. Certain tools, special silverware, even something like a shower curtain might be misunderstood when taken away from the shower. The object may also be a piece of something larger, such as a broken piece of pottery, or a page out of a book. Each object should offer clues as to its use and meaning. Include objects which are familiar and unfamiliar, as well as at least one object which may not be recognizable to the students. Ask students to examine each object, either as a class, or in small groups. Documenting observations, they will attempt to determine original use and context. Compare their findings with the actual context and use of the object.
- Discuss how information is gathered, what assumptions observations are based on, and how conclusions are drawn. Consider what resources students might use to verify their observations and conclusions.
- **WRITING EXERCISE**
Ask students to write a one-page story about a real event in their lives. Upon completion of the story, students may make a single illustration which holds all the important elements of the story or find an existing object which when carefully viewed provides key information held in the story. Working as a class, or in small groups, have students examine the object or illustration and reconstruct a story. Compare the reconstructed story with the original version. Consider how the illustration or object might be improved or altered in order to more clearly express the story. Consider what elements in the object or illustration help to establish the story as a real event rather than fiction.

- **VIEWING EXERCISE**

Select an image in student textbooks. Choose an image which has many different objects, people and other elements as possible. Ask students to open to that page. Give them one minute to view the image. Ask students to close their books and list as many individual elements as possible within the next three minutes. Working as a group, list all the elements identified. Compare the list with the image. Ask students to look for any other elements which are not listed.

Contemporary Research Questions

- Over the course of this study, ask students to gather ten newspaper and periodical clippings which pertain to the five faiths, the constitution as it speaks to religious freedom and other relevant events.
- Assign teams to research the questions surrounding the Constitutional protection of religious freedom. Using textbooks, newspapers and other print media, as well as the Internet, students must find the Supreme Court rulings which relate to this issue as a foundation for the assignment. Role play a debate in which one side argues for religious freedom within this country and the other for removal of that right from the constitution. Option: Using primary source materials, students may be able to assume the roles of the signers of the Constitution as a part of the assignment.