

DON'T BE AFRAID OF RELIGIOUS ART:

Thinking Through and Resources for Art Educators

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When the words “religion” and “school” appear in the same sentence, they are often met with strong emotion and misunderstanding. Indeed, in researching this article I came across several news stories that describe parent concerns that their children’s school’s attempts to teach about religion were actually attempts to indoctrinate (Brumfield, 2015; Calvert, 2013; Tobias, 2013; Wertheimer, 2015). It is not surprising then that many teachers shy away from teaching about religion (Wertheimer, 2015).

In the United States, Christianity is the religion of the majority, about 70% of people. Almost 23% are unaffiliated, and slightly less than 7% practice other religions (Sandstrom, 2016). While 7% may not sound like a lot, it means that a growing number of Americans have neighbors, schoolmates, and colleagues who practice diverse, often unfamiliar, faiths (Ackland Art Museum, 2012a).

When we look globally, the Pew Research Center (2012) reported that Christians account for a little less than one third (31.5%) of the world population, while Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists make up almost half (45.3%). Yet many of us lack even the most basic knowledge about these religions (Wertheimer, 2015). We must attend to this “because it is too easy to dismiss what is not understood, to deny the necessity of what is unfamiliar” (Ackland Art Museum, 2012c, para. 11). Learning about world religions is essential to understanding our communities and the world we share.

This past year, I presented on religious art at the Pennsylvania Art Education Conference by sharing a unit that I teach to my 5th and 6th grades. Many colleagues applauded my efforts, yet some also expressed the concern that these lessons would not be well received at their schools. My school has a mission of diversity. We believe that people who are different from you are interesting and worth getting to know, so I was confident that teaching about religious art would be supported. A teacher in a public school might not feel the same.

In this article, I present five artworks that introduce stories that are at the foundation of each of five religions: Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. I chose these pieces because I have shared them with my students and because they allow something of a crash course in world religions. Naturally, there are many stories and countless works of art one could include. I also outline the lessons that I implemented with my middle school students as a practical way to think about what students might make. Finally, I provide resources for learning about religious art, talking about it with students, and gaining support from colleagues in the hope that teachers who consider teaching about religious art may feel empowered to do so.

Hinduism

Hinduism is considered “the oldest living religion.” Some elements of the faith reach back many thousands of years (BBC, 2009). Within Hinduism, there is an immense variety of traditions, which makes sense when we remember that India is a large country with many distinct regions, languages, and cultures (Ackland Art Museum, 2012b).

The foundation of Hinduism is Brahman, which can be thought of as the source of all that exists. Hindus believe that “Brahman can be called by many names, thought of in many forms, and worshipped in many ways” (Ackland Art Museum, 2012b, para. 13). Thus, Hindus may worship a wide variety of deities. Three main gods make up a trinity: Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the protector, and Shiva, the destroyer. Hindus believe that birth, death, and then rebirth are part of a continuous cycle. This belief means that all things must end so that they may begin anew (Ackland Art Museum, 2012b).

This statue represents the Shiva Nataraja or Shiva as Lord of the Dance (Figure 1). In this role, Shiva shows us an infinite cycle of energy. The sculpture is rich with symbolism—Shiva dances in a halo of flames, which represents the universe. His topmost right hand holds a small drum from which emanates the first sounds of creation, while his topmost left hand holds the fire of destruction. With his lower right hand he makes the sign of “abhayamudra,” a blessing to dispel fear. Shiva’s lower left hand points to his dancing left foot, which creates a safe place for troubled souls. Beneath his right foot is a creature, which represents illusion. Shiva tramples the illusion, which leads people astray (Khalid, 2018; O’Neill, 1987).

In 11th-century India, art was made predominately in the service of religious practice, like that in medieval Europe. The sculpture’s modest size suggests that it was meant to be movable, perhaps carried in a procession, which is still a popular practice today. At these ceremonies, Hindu statues are often adorned with beautiful clothing and flowers. The worshipper believes the statue to literally embody the divine and that when they pray Shiva is present (Khalid, 2018).



Figure 1. *Shiva as Lord of the Dance*, India, 11th century. Copper alloy, H. 26 7/8 inches. Diam. 22.25 inches. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In learning about Shiva Nataraja, we also looked at an Indian miniature painting and contemporary Vimanika Comics. My students and I practiced mindful movement together. Then I asked my students to think about times they feel confident or at peace as they created figurative sculptures in clay.

Christianity

The Christian faith begins with the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Messiah prophesized in the Old Testament. Christians believe that God sent his Son to earth to save humanity from the consequences of its sins. The story of Jesus’s life is central to Christian worship (BBC, 2009).

In Sandro Botticelli’s *Madonna of the Pomegranate*, we see the Christ Child lying in the arms of his mother, Mary (Figure 2). Although he is only a baby, his hand is raised in blessing. The mother and child are surrounded by angels and bathed in a golden light, which symbolizes the heaven above. Botticelli made this

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Figure 2. Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Pomegranate*, Italy, 1487. Tempera on panel. Diam. 56.5 inches. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. "Madonna of the Pomegranate" by Nanae Livioandronico2013 is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.

painting in 1487, at the height of the European Renaissance. This is one of several paintings of the mother and child by Botticelli, a subject that has been portrayed by many artists over the centuries. The halos above their heads are common iconography, as are the roses and lilies the angels carry as symbols of Mary. The angels also hold books alluding to literacy and religious knowledge. The words *AVE GRAZIA PLENA*, "Hail [Mary] full of grace" can be seen on one of the angel's sashes (Adams, 2001, p. 229).

Christian teachings hold that, as a young man, Jesus advocated for peace and demonstrated that he was the Son of God by performing miracles. As a result, some government and religious leaders perceived him to be a threat to established authority and arrested him. He was hung on a cross and left to die, which was a common way to execute criminals at the time. Jesus's death is called the Crucifixion. Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead, which is called the Resurrection (Ackland Art Museum, 2012c). The sad expressions of

the angels in Botticelli's painting foretell Jesus's death, while the pomegranate that Mary and Jesus hold signifies his resurrection (Adams, 2001).

My students and I looked at *Madonna of the Pomegranate* and Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* together. As part of our discussion, I asked them to think about how the paintings showed caring and how we show caring in our own families. I asked, "What are some of the things you enjoy doing with your family?" Then, my students created their own family portraits.

Judaism

The foundation of Judaism is the belief that the Jewish people have a covenant with God. God takes care of the people. To show thankfulness, Jewish people try to bring the sacred into their everyday lives. This covenant began with Abraham, the first prophet of the Jewish people and the first to teach that there was only one God. Judaism is the oldest of the Abrahamic faiths. Christianity and Islam are also Abrahamic faiths. His family's story is told in the Torah, the Jewish holy book, as well as in the Bible and the Qur'an. This mosaic depicts a critical moment in which God tests Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Figure 3). Heavy-hearted, Abraham takes his son to the top of a mountain. Assured of his faith, God provides a ram to be killed in Isaac's place and promises Abraham that his descendants will be cared for with land and a continuing relationship with God (Bard, 2016; BBC, 2009).

Dating from the Byzantine period, the Beit Alpha Synagogue was preserved under the earth, in northeast Israel, for almost 1,500 years and was discovered by local farmers in 1929. Excavations indicate that the synagogue was in the center of an ancient Jewish village. The walls are plain plaster and stone, yet the prayer hall is completely covered with mosaic. Colorful geometric patterns, birds, and animals abound. The *Binding of Isaac* is the first panel that worshippers would have seen upon entering. On the right,



Figure 3. *Binding Isaac*, Beit Alpha Synagogue, Israel, 5th century BCE. Mosaic panel. "Beth Alpha Synagogue" by Talmoryair is in the Public Domain.

Abraham and his son Isaac stand before a fiery altar. Abraham holds his son and a long knife. The Hebrew letters above them spell out their names. In the center, we see a ram tied to a tree and the Hand of God, accompanied by Hebrew text, which reads “lay not your hand [upon the lad].” At the left, stand two servants who lead a donkey (Bard, 2016).

My student and I looked at this mosaic together as well as Marc Chagall’s stained glass windows in the Abbell Synagogue, which tell the stories of Jacob’s 12 sons. I prompted my students to tell their own family stories with drawing and collage. I gave the directions this way:

You might tell a story that happened before you were born, perhaps a story an elder told you about when they were a child. You might tell a story about something funny that happened just the other day. Or you might draw a picture of something ordinary that you and your family do every day. (Personal communication, February 10, 2017)

The students used a variety of media, including paper mosaic tiles and transparent tissue papers.

Islam

The Islamic faith began in Mecca, in 610 CE. There, Muhammad received his first revelations from Allah, the Arabic word for God. Allah is the same God as that of the Christian and Jewish faiths. Muhammad believed that he was chosen to carry God’s message to Arab peoples. At the core of his teaching was the belief that his society needed to take care of its poorer members. Muhammad continued to receive revelations over the next 21 years. Written down, these revelations became the Qur’an, the Muslim Holy Book (Armstrong, 2002).

The Dome of the Rock is the oldest extant Islamic monument (Figure 4). Built in Jerusalem, in 691, a city historically sacred to both Christians and Jews announced a quickly growing Muslim presence. The Dome of the Rock is believed by many Muslims to be the “farthest mosque” of the prophet’s miraculous night journey. Tradition accords that Muhammad traveled with the angel Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he sat in prayer with past prophets of the Christian and Judeo religions. The five daily prayers



Figure 4. *The Dome of the Rock*, Israel, 691 CE. Diam. 65 feet. “The Dome of the Rock” by Andrew Shiva is licensed under Creative Commons Attributions-Share Alike 4.0 International.

were revealed to Muhammad as he stood in the presence of Allah (Waines, 2003).

Octagonal in form, the Dome of the Rock shares a close relationship to Byzantine church architecture. The mosaics depart from this tradition in that they contain no figurative imagery. Instead, the façade is decorated entirely with geometric tile work. Inside, curling garlands and plant motifs intertwine in endless scrolling patterns (Ettinghausen, Grabar, & Jenkins-Madina, 2003). Verses from the Qur’an are inscribed, in Arabic, along the top edge of the building (Macaulay-Lewis, 2018).

Learning about Islamic art, we used geometric-shape templates to create our own symmetrical tile designs. I also taught my students about the Hajj, a pilgrimage that many Muslims make to Mecca. We looked at Hajj paintings, as well as photographs of prayer rugs and the Kaaba. I asked my students to create a painting about a journey that had meaning for themselves and their families. I suggested that it could be a visit to a friend or relative’s house, a trip to the park, or a family vacation to someplace far away. One student painted a campfire he made with his father and uncles at a cabin in Vermont (Figure 5). Other works included a family wedding and a trip to the ocean (Figure 6).

Buddhism

Buddhism is a practice that emphasizes spiritual growth of the self. Buddhism is different from many religions in that there is no direct reference to God. Instead, Buddhists look within for a deeper understanding of life. Like Hindus, Buddhists believe in



Figure 5. Unnamed student, *Campfire on Family Trip to Vermont*, inspired by Hajj paintings. Photo courtesy of the author.

Figure 6. Students working: *A Cousin's Wedding and Family Trip to the Ocean*, inspired by Hajj paintings. Photo courtesy of the author.



reincarnation, the circle of life, death, rebirth, and that change is inevitable (BBC, 2009).

Buddhism begins with the story of the Buddha. In the 6th century, in what is now Nepal, Siddhartha Gautama, a young man from a royal family, set off on a journey to find meaning. He saw people suffering extreme poverty for the first time. Troubled, he became a monk and practiced asceticism. Still not satisfied, Siddhartha sat and reflected on his experiences under the Bohdi Tree, called the “Tree of Awakening.” He became so deeply absorbed in meditation that he found enlightenment and became known as the Buddha or “Awakened One” (BBC, 2009).

The word mandala comes from the Sanskrit word for circle. Mandalas are used to guide practitioners in meditation. The

mandala symbolizes the universe in the form of an imaginary palace. Each design inside the mandala represents a lesson or guiding principle. The mandala also contains deities who serve as role models on the path to enlightenment. Buddhist monks, in Tibet, have a long tradition of creating mandalas with colored sand as a meditative process, which may take several days (Figure 7). To begin, the spiritual leader, called a lama, blesses the site and leads the monks in chant and prayer. The overall design of the mandala is marked with chalk. Then, beginning in the center, sand is applied with small metal funnels called chak-pur, which allow the sand to flow in a thin, steady line. The completed mandala serves as a tool for contemplation; then it is destroyed, as a reminder that nothing in life is permanent. The sand is carefully swept into an urn and,



Figure 7. Robert Trombetta, *Four Monks Making Sand Mandala*. 2007. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike.

finally, poured into flowing water to send the healing energy of the mandala out into the world (Thorpe, 2017).

When my students and I explored Buddhist art, we experienced a little serendipity. Our work coincided with the Dalia Lama's proposed visit to Philadelphia. A representative from the Friends Council on Education asked us to participate in a prayer flag project to celebrate the International Day of Peace. Learning about prayer flags that bless mountain passes in the Himalayas, we used permanent marker to write our "wishes for the world" on fabric flags. Although health problems prevented the Dalia Lama's visit, our flags were hung with those of students from many other schools in the courtyard of City Hall.

Talking About Religious Art

Leading a conversation about religious artworks with our students can be straightforward. I always begin by asking students, "What do you notice?" Visual Thinking Strategies offer open-ended questions to dig deeper: "What's going on in this picture?" "What do you see that makes you say that?" and "What more can

we find in the picture?" (Landorf, 2006). This approach aligns with *Teaching Tolerance's* recommendation that we allow the student's observations to lead us into conversations about a work's religious context. *Teaching Tolerance's* guidelines for teaching about religious art also advise us to present our students with accurate information, rather than allowing them to offer their own interpretations or "make up their own stories" about a piece. Finally, they remind us to treat the artwork of each religion with the same status and not to assume that our students already know the religious stories behind any given piece (Williams, 2009).

Getting Support

Meet with your supervisors and explain how teaching about religious art fits with your larger curriculum goals. Show them the artworks you will discuss and the assignments you have planned. Consider partnering with a language arts or social studies teacher. Ask what challenges they anticipate. Finally, communicate clearly to parents. For me, back to school night was the perfect time. In presenting the middle school art curriculum to parents, I highlighted the religious art unit.

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Conclusion

Teaching about religious art is, in essence, teaching about multicultural art. Our goal is to help our students understand the ways that art functions in different cultures and through art to appreciate cultures different from their own (Chalmers, 1996). This work can affirm our students. Although I did not ask my students about their religions, I found that many students were excited to share their knowledge and stories. In teaching about Islam, for example, one student proudly shared that his grandfather had gone on the Hajj a few years before. Whether teaching about religious art for the first time or building on what we already do, exploring these rich traditions with our students is well worth the challenge. ■

Resources

- The Ackland Art Museum's Five Faiths Project offers a wealth of information about religion, a glossary of religious terms, and teaching guides for the artworks in their collection at <https://ackland.org/five-faiths-project>.
- *Teaching Tolerance's* "Religious Diversity: Guidelines for a Simple, Respectful Approach to Religious Diversity" is comprehensive and concise. Written by Ray Williams, curator of Education, Ackland Art Museum, the article can be found online at www.tolerance.org/magazine/religious-diversity.
- The American Civil Liberties Union's "Religion in Public School: A Joint Statement of Current Law" clearly outlines what is and is not allowed in regard to both teaching about religion and expression of religious values in public schools. You can find these guidelines online at www.aclu.org/other/joint-statement-current-law-religion-public-schools.
- The BBC website on world religions features "at a glance" sections as well as more in-depth information on topics including religious texts, ethics, and holidays. While the website is no longer updated, its archived pages can be accessed at www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions.
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art offers a wide variety of curriculum resources for educators about religious art in a visually engaging format. Start exploring at www.metmuseum.org/learn/educators/curriculum-resources.

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