

# Ritual



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The background features a parchment-like texture with faint, light-colored illustrations of hands in various gestures. In the bottom right corner, there is a stack of books. The top book is a colorful manuscript page with a large decorated initial 'I' and various illustrations. Below it is another book with a similar style. At the very bottom, an open book shows text in Hebrew with small illustrations interspersed.

# Ritual of Reading

RELIGION AND THE  
ILLUSTRATED BOOK

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# Ritual of Reading


RELIGION AND THE  
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DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY present

## *Ritual of Reading: Religion and the Illustrated Book*

hroughout history, the acts of reading, religious practice and spiritual contemplation have been deeply connected. Fostering greater understanding and stronger engagement, the book serves a significant role in the expression of particular narratives and beliefs. Through the incorporation of visual imagery into the medium of the book, these acts of reading and religious consideration are elevated, engaging the reader on multiple, interrelated levels. Within the illustrated book, text and artistic representation are united as religious and creative expression are seamlessly intertwined. The exhibition, *Ritual of Reading*, in the T.R. Anderson Gallery, in Wilson Library, March 22–May 14, 2010, demonstrates the key role art and artists have played in the cultivation and promotion of religion, faith and spirituality through the medium of the book and print culture. Addressing a variety of audiences and historical contexts, examples from the Francis V. Gorman Rare Art Book Collection and the University's Special Collections present the diverse intersections of religion and the illustrated book, with selections on exhibit dating from the Early Modern period to the present. Organized into five, thematic sections, the books on display focus on personal acts of prayer, the overlap of religion and politics, literary interest in religious narratives, modern art theory and spirituality, and the reproduction of great works of religious art. Ultimately, the exhibition presents the significant, complex relationship between visual art and religious word, as illustrated books invite the viewer to participate, reflect and engage in varying issues of faith, belief and spirituality.

## Personal Prayer

Spanning a range of religious traditions and practices, the illustrated book is an important, at times integral, component in acts of personal prayer and devotion. Through the powerful combination of text and image, religious narratives and prayers are enlivened. On display are examples from ancient to contemporary times, including the Christian Bible, the Jewish Passover Haggadah, and the Hindu Bhagavad Gita. The images and decorative illustration are instrumental to capturing the curiosity of the viewer and artfully absorbing their attention in the text and its accompanying religious principles. The Haggadah, a compilation of prayers, stories and songs composing the order of the Passover seder or meal, dates back to the first centuries of the common era and is one of Judaism's most fundamental texts. In more recent times, rabbis and other religious scholars have attempted to modernize the traditionally conservative Haggadah, imbuing the text with a deeper religious significance and enhancing understandings of the Passover festival. These innovations include the incorporation of decorative design, lettering and accompanying illustrations, as seen in an exquisite Passover Haggadah published in Jerusalem in 1956. Combining rich, decorative text with vivid, evocative imagery, the book visually presents the scenes and symbols of the Passover ritual. The events and figures from the biblical story of Exodus are brought to life, as the heroic story of Moses leading the Hebrew people out of Egypt to freedom is creatively illustrated. This distinctly modern Haggadah employs visual imagery and embellishment to create an aesthetic, ritual experience of the Passover meal. The illustrated book invites a more sentient, involved reading of the Passover story as told in the Book of Exodus, highlighting the theological, historical, and cultural importance of the holiday to the Jewish people.



Images from *Haggadah Shel Pesach (Passover Haggadah)*  
(Jerusalem: Masadah u-Magen, 1956).

# History, Politics, and Religion

**T**hroughout history, culture and religion are often closely connected, as society and its devotional traditions become intertwined and, at times, indistinguishable. Fundamental texts, such as the Persian *Shāhnāmé* and examples of Aztec codices, including the Codex Borgia, present the historical, mythical, and religious past of a people within one narrative. Written around 1000 CE by great poet Ferdowsi, the *Shāhnāmé*, translated as *The Book of Kings*, is an epic poem presenting the complex history of the Persian civilization from its creation story until the advent of Islam in the 7th century. As a source of great national and cultural pride, innumerable reproductions of the text exist, including remarkably, illuminated manuscripts. The most revered version of the *Shāhnāmé*, commissioned by Shah Tahmasp in 1522, exhibited here in facsimile, includes lavish, detailed miniature paintings depicting the grandeur of Persian cultural and religious traditions as well as legends of its great kings, heroes, and mythical beings. For example, a common theme depicted in the illustrations of the *Shāhnāmé* places the figure of the heroic king in opposition to a div, a demonic, false god in

Persian folklore. In these scenes, the king, a symbol of virtue and piety, battles the embodiment of evil and godlessness, within the mystical, dream-like setting of the miniature painting. In his poem, Ferdowsi presents religion, spirituality, and the history of Persian kingship as intertwined, as each strengthens and legitimizes the other. Through the inclusion of both written text and striking, visual imagery, Shah Tahmasp's *Shāhnāmé* reinforces this belief, as Persian history, politics, mysticism, and religion are visually and narratively combined into one, epic tale of a nation and its people.



Left: Ferdowsi's Prologue: In Praise of God and the Intellectuals  
Right: Hushang Slays the Black Div from *The Houghton Shahnameh*  
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

## Spiritual Contemplation

**S**elebrated modern artists Wassily Kandinsky, in his theoretical work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, and Paul Gauguin, in his travel journal *Noa Noa*, express the connection between visual, aesthetic and spiritual understanding. In 1911, Kandinsky, a Russian painter and art theorist, wrote *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, originally published as *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, in an effort to relate the spiritual life of humanity to the formal elements of works of art. Through an “analysis of color, form and the role of the object,” Kandinsky suggests that an artwork can deeply influence the viewer, cueing an inner emotion or “spiritual vibration.” Ultimately, in this text, Kandinsky strives to reveal “the spiritual foundations of art and the nature of artistic creation,” providing a framework for modern artists to understand and follow. In addition to writing this seminal text, Kandinsky experimented with these theories and hypothesis in creating his own art, establishing himself as one of the most innovative and influential abstract painters of the twentieth century. Through both the medium of the book and the two-dimensional canvas, Kandinsky presents art and the creative process as a significant point of reflection, considering the place of beauty, faith and spirituality in one’s life. Furthermore, Kandinsky presents a highly effective combination of written word and visual imagery, as his book on visual art theory inspires acts of spiritual contemplation, thought and consideration.



Left: Image from Wassily Kandinsky's *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (London: Constable, 1914).

Right: Wassily Kandinsky, Watercolor from *Picture with White Edge*, 1913

## Religion and the Literary Narrative

The realms of the written and visual arts are naturally connected, and this relationship is celebrated through the integration of religious and literary narratives. In examples of poetry and prose, including John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *All Religions Are One*, illustrations bring innovative works of literature to life, engaging the viewers with visuals that encourage a deeper understanding of the religious and spiritual nature of the text. Completed between 1790 and 1793 and shown here in a reproduction dating to the early twentieth century, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is a parody of traditional, Christian books of prophecy, reflecting Blake's personal and revolutionary beliefs concerning religion and morality. Published as printed etchings, the book includes handwritten prose, poetry and illustrations colored by Blake himself. Interspersed throughout the delicate script of the text, Blake depicts various figures and settings, evoking both the cherubic and demonic, referencing the traditional, Christian notions of heaven and hell. Integral to the larger message of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake's visual illustrations reveal what he sees as the repressive and dangerous conventions pervading contemporary society, ultimately calling for a split from the oppression of popular religion and moral order.



As a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent: the Eternal Hell revives. And lo! Swedenborg is the Angel sitting at the tomb: his writings are the linen clothes folded up. Now is the dominion of Edom, & the return of Adam into Paradise; see Isaiah XXXVI! & XXXV Chasp: Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.



## Religious Art and the Reproducible Book

Beginning with the great masters of the early Renaissance and continuing through the modern period, religion and religious narratives have significantly inspired the visual artist and the creative process. Through the reproduction of important works by artists such as Italian painter Giotto, German artist Albrecht Dürer, and Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn, the illustrated book introduces the past to the present-day, serving important artistic, historical and religious roles. During the 19th century, art history emerged as an important academic discipline in Europe, leading to a revival in the study and appreciation of significant, historic artists, particularly through the medium of journals, books and other print publications. In 1897, renowned German art historian and curator Wilhelm von Bode compiled and published *The Complete Work of Rembrandt* in Paris, including a history of the 17th century Dutch artist, accompanied by heliographic reproductions of all major works. An influential work, Bode's study of Rembrandt emphasizes the breadth of the artist's oeuvre, prominently illustrating the place of religion and biblical narratives in the paintings, drawings and etchings of the Dutch master. A deeply religious man, Rembrandt found inspiration in the figures and events of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, bringing religion and spiritual belief to a contemporary audience through the medium of art, for theological as well as moral reflection. Through the reproduction of these works in Bode's compilation, Rembrandt is again presented to the public, for historic, artistic, and religious study.



Heliogravure Rembrandt

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Ascension*, 1636

## From the Curator

As a doctoral student in the Department of Art History at the University of Minnesota, curating this exhibition has allowed me to further explore my interests in religious art and artistic production, by way of the medium of the book and print culture. Through this exhibition, I hope to reveal the diverse, complex relationships that exist between book culture, art and visual imagery, and issues of religion, theology and spirituality. Illustrated by the great breadth and variety of the objects on display, this topic is vast and goes well beyond the confines of this exhibition. I hope this show both opens your eyes as well as peaks your interest in the intersection of religion and the illustrated book, inspiring you to further explore the issue in your own life and experiences.

I would like to especially thank Deborah Ultan Boudewyns and Professor Gabriel Weisberg for their support and guidance through the completion of the exhibition. I would also like to thank the staff of the University of Minnesota Libraries for their assistance and help in making this exhibition possible.

## About the Collection

The Gorman Rare Art Books Collection began with a gift to the University of Minnesota Libraries' art librarian and art research collections by alumnus Francis V. Gorman in 1981. The annual Gorman Rare Art Book exhibitions are supported by the endowment established by Francis V. Gorman, the University of Minnesota Libraries, and participating departments.

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