

Using the Ashmolean collections to investigate Christianity

- Our collection contains many paintings that are a rich resource for studying Christian symbolism. The Church was a key patron of the arts and many paintings would have been produced to decorate church buildings. Others were commissioned by wealthy individuals for their own private use.
- Our collection also contains a variety of objects that can be used to explore Christian beliefs and practices.
- It is also possible to use our collection to highlight the diversity of Christianity as a religion, covering the Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Coptic Churches as well as the spread of Christianity to the Far East

Key galleries containing objects relating to Christianity

Gallery 28: Asian Crossroads - pilgrimage tokens

Gallery 30: Mediterranean World - Jerusalem, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church

Gallery 41: England 400-1600 - church architecture and pilgrimage tokens

Gallery 42: Early Italian Art

Gallery 43: Italian Renaissance

Gallery 46: Baroque Art

Gallery 55: Silver - church silverware

Gallery 4: Conservation

1. Allegory of Faith

By anonymous northern European artist, 1600s



This painting is from a series that focuses on Christian virtues. The woman represents Faith. She holds a chalice and a cross whilst reading the Bible. An x-ray revealed that there was once a communion wafer near the chalice, referencing Catholic worship. It may have been painted over to make the painting acceptable to a Protestant.

WA1845.32

Gallery 30: Mediterranean World

2. Model of Church of the Holy Sepulchre

Made in Palestine, 1600s



The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, dedicated to the Tomb of Christ is one of the most important Christian shrines. This elaborate miniature model was made to be sold as a pilgrim souvenir. Produced in olive wood with ivory and mother of pearl inlay, it has lettered parts which would have made it easier to carry and reassemble.

AN1887.3089.2009.2

Gallery 30: Mediterranean World

3. Icon of the Embrace of the Apostles,
Peter & Paul
By Angelos Akotantos, 1400s



The East–West Schism of 1054, formally divided the State church of the Roman Empire into Eastern and Western branches. Icons play a key role in the decoration of Eastern Orthodox churches, although they are not objects of worship themselves.

WA1982.192

Gallery 42: Early Italian Art

4. The Annunciation
By Paolo Uccello, 1400s



The Angel Gabriel is sent by God the Father to announce to the Virgin Mary that she will bear the son of God. With its lavish use of gold and ultramarine, this would have been an expensive image to produce.

WA1850.7

Gallery 43: Italian Renaissance

5. The Virgin & Child with a view of Venice
By Giorgione or a pupil, late 1400s / early 1500s



Scenes like this emphasise Christ's childlike nature and humanity. The Virgin is a popular image in Catholic art.

WA1949.222

Gallery 43: Italian Renaissance

6. The Adoration of the Shepherds
By Italo-Flemish artist, 1560s / 70s



Three shepherds bring gifts to the newborn Christ, while the earlier Annunciation to the shepherds can be seen on the right. The classical ruins refer to the passing of the old pagan order.

WA.1937.122

Gallery 46: Baroque Art

7. The Deposition

By Anthony van Dyck, c 1619



The taking down of Jesus from the cross is a popular theme in Christian art. Scenes like this encourage reflection on the nature of suffering. In addition to Christ himself it also shows the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and John the Evangelist.

WA.1869.1

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

8. Thomas Becket casket

Made in Limoges, France, c 1200



The front of the casket shows the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral - the hand of God appearing from the heavens is a reminder of the sacred setting of this murder. The sides show Jesus and Mary, whilst the top shows the burial of Thomas. The casket was made to hold a relic of the Saint and has a lockable door at the back.

WA1947.191.255

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

9. Cranmer's band (The Oxford Martyrs) Oxford, 1500s



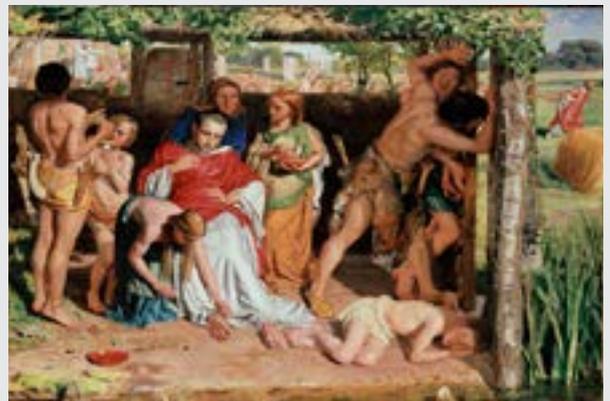
This iron band is said to have been used to confine Archbishop Thomas Cranmer during his imprisonment in Oxford in the 1550s. Having played a key role in establishing the Church of England, Cranmer was convicted of heresy during Mary I's reign and burnt at the stake in Oxford in 1556.

AN1877.226

Gallery 67: Pre-Raphaelites

10. A converted British family sheltering a Christian missionary from the Persecution of the Druids

By William Holman Hunt, 1850



This painting depicts an early incident in the history of the English church. The painting is full of symbolic allusions - the mother in blue, the sponge being put to the missionary's face, the removal of the thorn from his foot and so on.

WA1894.1

Lines of enquiry: RE

- How are stories from the Bible depicted in religious art? What key Christian themes and beliefs are conveyed?
- The use of Christian images for prayer and worship – how can images help or hinder the worshipper?
- Diversity within religion - why are there different branches of Christianity? What are the differences between them?
- Why is Jerusalem an important centre of Christian pilgrimage? What other pilgrimage sites do Christians visit and why?
- Why is Jerusalem also important to Jews and Muslims? How has this given rise to conflict in the past and in the present?
- Why have some people been prepared to martyr themselves for their religious beliefs? Why and how have martyrs subsequently been remembered ?

Cross curricular links

- Art & Design: religious artefacts and their function / use to practising Christians
- Citizenship: cultural diversity, religion and national identity
- History: The English and European Reformations, Jerusalem and the Crusades, role of Christianity in the development of the British Empire
- History of Art (A level)

Working with objects: key questions

- Who made it?
- Where and when was it made?
- What materials is it made from?
- How was it made?
- What was it used for? How was it used?
- Who used / owned it?
- How might it be interpreted by different people? at different times?



Carved shell pilgrimage souvenir showing the nativity from 18C Palestine . On display in Gallery 30: Mediterranean World

Further resources

Ashmolean Education Learning Resources. Search under World Religions to find zoomable images of many of the paintings featured in this booklet.
<http://www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources>

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