

How does religious art suggest a reality beyond everyday life experience?

One of the most important purpose of art has always been its possibility to visualize what is not possible to see. This is the reason why spiritual function has been playing such a major role in art history. Religions has been playing a key role in the development of visual language because art can represent gods and goddess using a system of symbols and conventions that let the viewer recognize what is represented as non-human or transcendental. Such a system of symbols and conventions creates a sort of visual dictionary that is called *iconography*.

Iconic traditions

Human figures and animals, associated and/or combined together, are recurring in many different religious iconographies from all over the world (see ancient and Greek Egyptian art and Hinduism, for example). Such figures can have distinctive objects or features (attributes) that identify their identity. His blue skin distinguish Indian god Krishna, the trident is the attribute of ancient Greek god Poseidon.

A luminous disk, often made of gold and positioned behind or over the head of gods or saint people is common to diverse iconographies, ranging from Christian to Buddhist. That is a solar symbol called *halo* and emphasize the figure who has it by evoking the image of the sun shining in the sky and its greatest power. In Christian orthodox tradition most halos are round, but if you spot a square one it means that the person was alive when the picture was made.

Aniconism

With the growth of Christianity, richly decorated images of religious figures, known as *icons*, became popular. Some church leaders thought icons could help teach religion,

others believed icons were idols or false gods and wanted to destroy them. These people were known as *iconoclasts*, which means image-smashers.

Any art tradition that prefer abstract representation instead of human figures and animals in the depiction of religious subject is a form of *aniconism*. Islamic, Hebrew and some Buddhist iconographies refuse the use of images and propose a conceptual perception of the transcendental space, or of what goes beyond everyday life experience, by using abstract symbols. For example the menorah of Jewish tradition or the written name of god itself.



Sometimes images become actual gateways to other worlds: *mihṛāb* is a semicircular niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca and hence the direction that Muslims should face when praying and so is represented also on the praying carpets. In Japan *torii* is a traditional gate most commonly found at the entrance of or within a Shinto shrine, where it symbolically marks the transition from the profane to the sacred space. *Stūpa* and *maṇḍala* are three and two dimensional meditation tools, based on the combination of geometric forms and shapes with symbolic colors and images. Used in some Buddhist traditions they act as a sort of visual guide for the meditation.

