

TRANSCENDENCE :

Using Prints As Companions For A Spiritual Journey

Reflections by the Guest Curator

Transcendence is the capacity to move outside one's self and to engage the world beyond one's own concerns and one's own comfort zones. Experiencing transcendence can happen in a moment or over time. It can happen suddenly or unexpectedly or as the result of a decision to seek out the experience. It can happen through reliving a memory, recapturing a long-forgotten practice, or taking up something new. The experience of transcendence, of becoming aware that we have moved outside our self, and have engaged the world in a different way, changes our lives and perspectives in ways both subtle and profound.

Artistic expressions are a brimming resource for the spiritual journey of transcendence. The prints gathered into this exhibition and the thematic groups, in which they are arranged, invite you into this journey.

When using visual arts, such as prints, as a resource for my own spiritual journey, I find it helpful to ask what story is being told by the work. Not necessarily the story the artist is telling, but what story is being told by the work. This process is both imaginative and creative. It is not enough to describe the work. For example, it is easy and obvious to say: "It is a print of a rose bush." Ask these questions to develop the story: In whose garden is this rose bush growing? Is the blossom fresh or fading? If someone picked the rose, where would they take it? Who was the last person to smell the rose – a child, an elder, the gardener, a passerby? What happened right before this moment was captured, and what happened next?

Practice this method with the print entitled "Mariposa." This print shows a nun against a dappled blue and white background. A yellow butterfly is above her. What is the nun doing? Is she a cloistered nun, never leaving the convent, focusing her energy on prayer? Or is she part of a convent working in the community? How would that change what you think she is doing? What is the nun looking at? Is she reading, praying, or listening to a child who is just outside the image? What does the butterfly represent? A butterfly? A prayer? The freedom to come and go, a freedom the nun would not have if she were cloistered? How much freedom does the nun have under any circumstances? How much freedom does the butterfly have? How much freedom do you have? How have your choices, like the woman's decision to become a nun, limited, enhanced, or changed your freedom? Tell the truth to yourself.

Integrating seemingly disparate ideas, looking for connections and contrasts between works of art is another way to use visual art as a spiritual resource. The works in this exhibition are displayed in thematic groups.

From the entrance door, turning to your immediately left, the first group is “Journey.” All of the works except one illustrate the same story from the Christian sacred text, specifically, Matthew 2: 13 – 23, which is posted with the grouping. Please read it as you view the works.

Now, looking at the works, what emotions are conveyed in the faces of the grown-ups, Joseph and Mary? The journey takes place at night, so the images are relatively dark. When has your journey taken you through darkness? Where did you find light during that part of your journey? The text in Matthew says Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt to escape danger. It also says they returned to the land of Israel. Could any of these prints illustrate the return trip? Which ones? What emotions do you imagine they would feel on the return trip? What did you feel when your journey through darkness ended? How were you changed?

The print of a Muslim family has connections to the others. It is a family of three – father, mother, and child. Their faces are filled with emotions. What emotions do you see in their faces? Given the suggestion of a mosque in the background, are they someplace familiar? Does familiarity always mean a feeling of safety and security? Could they also be facing some kind of danger? Before you go too quickly to a violent form of danger, what other news might destabilize a family: a lost job, medical diagnosis, a house fire, news of a relative’s death, news of a birth in the extended family, a job offer in another town, necessitating a goodbye to friends and neighbors?

Maria Harris, one of the most important religious educators of the last 50 years, suggests four steps for seeing and engaging the arts as a spiritual resource.

First is **contemplation**, taking time to be at rest with ourselves, to give attention to the moment of encounter with the work.

Second, **perception**, bringing all five senses to the work, not just the sense of sight, but smell, taste, hearing, and touch as well.

Third, **interpretation**, “a wondrous step that has no right answer. The artist’s intention often helps us to interpret, and we are wise to ask, ‘What did the artist intend here?’ But it is also true that genuine works of art have a surplus of meaning.” (1) My emphasis on asking questions and creating a story from the work is a framework for interpreting it.

Yet, the fourth step, **response**, may be the most important. After we have asked questions about the work, we must also ask what the work asks from us? What questions about our own life, our own journey, does the work prompt?

In this exhibition, I think the grouping “Evolution” asks the most of us. The word “evolution” is so closely associated with Charles Darwin, biology, and controversy, we forget its core meaning is “change over time.” The prints in this section evoke life and creation in many different ways. Let the prints in this group ask you: “How do I cope with change? How have I changed over time? How comfortable am I with change in my life, in the society, in my mind? What aspects of myself do I want not to change? What aspects do I want most to change?”

My hope as guest curator of “Transcendence” is that you will continue to use the arts as a resource for changing over time, for your own evolution, for your own journey.

Jim Peck

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**Please come to the Turner Museum Gallery,
Meriam Library for the rest of the exhibition!
Hours are M-F 11am to 4PM.**

(1) Maria Harris, in Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource, Volume 3. Cleveland, Ohio. United Church Press, 1996.