

ACTS OF FAITH: RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN WEST

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Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West

By Jessica Nelson, Ph.D., guest curator and former director of religion and culture initiatives

APR 20-AUG 4

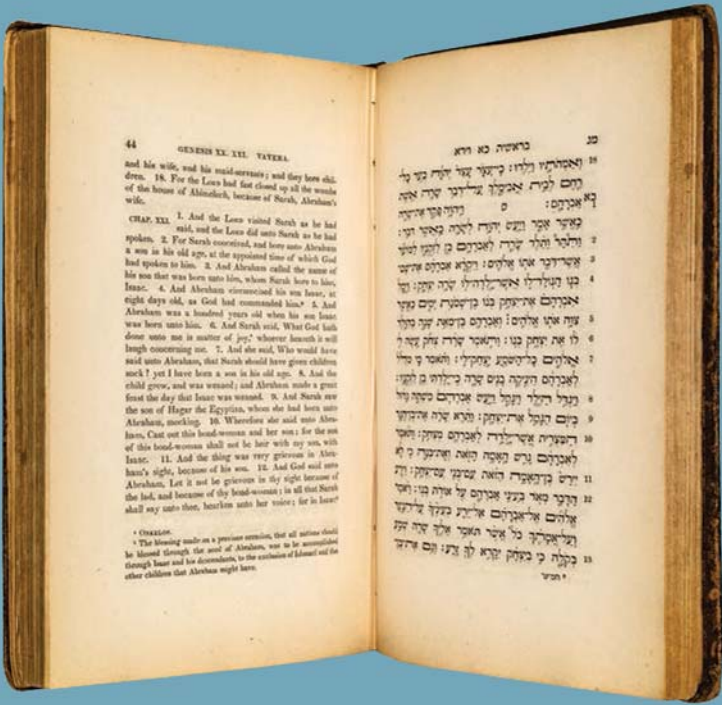
C.C.A. Christensen (1831–1912)
Crossing the Mississippi on the Ice, ca. 1878
 Tempera on muslin, 77 7/8 x 114 in.

Brigham Young University Museum of Art, gift of the grandchildren of C.C.A. Christensen, 1970

On May 15, 1840, residents of Taos, New Mexico, embarked on a procession that would weave through their fields, seeking God's protection over their crops for the upcoming year — as they had done every May 15 for decades. They carried with them a *bulto*, or carved statue, representing St. Isidro, a Spanish farmer who lived from circa 1070–1130, hoping to invoke his patronage. Although the procession was clearly grounded in Catholic theology and practice — culminating in a Mass celebrated in a small temporary shelter in the fields — the ritual also drew upon both Hispanic and Native traditions. The Taos Pueblo people, who had lived in the area from time immemorial, had a deeply ingrained knowledge of the importance of invoking supernatural forces to provide rain and good growing conditions for food. Spanish colonization had brought Catholicism to the region, but Taos' distance from the colonial center of Mexico City had allowed a distinctly local, *nuevomexicano* version of Catholicism to emerge, one that incorporated more leadership from lay people (as opposed to ordained



Jose Benito Ortega (1858–1941)
Bulto of San Ysidro, late 19th century–
 early 20th century
 Wood, gesso, paint, cotton, glass beads
 Museum of International Folk Art,
 bequest of Cady Wells, A9.1954.23 B



Isaac Leeser
The Law of God, edited with former translation diligently compared and
 revised, 1845
 Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society

priests) and longstanding local practices. Ten years later, the village of Taos would be considered part of the United States. American Catholic bishops sent one of their own, Archbishop Jean-Baptiste Lamy, to try to standardize New Mexican Catholicism and bring it more into alignment with the practices of the eastern U.S. That same year, American settlers such as Sarah Royce crisscrossed the territory, many on their way to the gold fields of California. Like the people of Taos, Royce also called upon supernatural powers for protection, writing in her journal that she “poured out her heart to God in prayer, and He gave me comfort.”

Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West, an exhibition opening at the Eiteljorg on April 20, tells the stories of the Taos procession participants, Sarah Royce and dozens of others, offering visitors a glimpse of the ways that religion has shaped the lives and experiences of people living in or moving to the West since the early 1800s. Spanning more than two centuries of American history, and packed with more than 80 objects from a wide range of traditions, belief systems and practices, *Acts of Faith* offers both a feast for the senses as well as thought-provoking questions about the past and future of religious diversity in the nation.

A mix of traditions

No singular narrative can explain the history of religion in the American West. *Acts of Faith* embraces a multi-faceted perspective that explores the many ways that religion and spirituality have impacted peoples’ lives. Chronologically, the exhibition’s story starts in upstate New York in the 1820s, where construction of the Erie Canal gave the United States easy access to the West but also challenged Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) landholdings and traditional religious practices.

An oversized photograph of a beautifully embroidered skirt by Caroline Parker (Tonawanda Seneca) illustrates Parker’s response to colonization: incorporating both traditional Haudenosaunee and Christian beliefs and imagery. Parker’s hybrid approach was not the only response: also highlighted are paintings by Ernest Smith (Tonawanda Seneca) of a Seneca man named Handsome Lake, who in the early 1800s preached the need for his people to resist colonialism by embracing *Ongwehonweka:a* (the Longhouse Religion); and a Book of Common Prayer, contributed to by Presbyterian minister Eleazar Williams (Mohawk) for speakers of Mohawk and Oneida.

New forms of community

In the exhibition, visitors can immerse themselves in several expansive displays. Step into an evocation of the New York City Tract House where Protestant missionaries printed and sent out thousands of Bibles and pamphlets in an attempt to Christianize the West. View life-size murals portraying the San Ysidro processions, as well as the forced migration of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Utah. Peer into a miniature diorama that tells the story of the first Jewish congregation formed in the American West: a *minyan* (group of 10 adults) holding prayer services to celebrate Rosh Hashanah in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1836. A translation of the Hebrew scriptures by Rabbi Isaac Leeser from 1845 is also on view. Enter the wagon of Sarah Royce to read snippets of her diary and see how she was inspired by the Christian allegory of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. For many people, building a life in the American West was an act of faith, one that led them to depart from established homelands and create new forms of community in new places.

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Thomas Moran (1837-1926)
Mountain of the Holy Cross, 1876
 Paper

Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, New-York Historical Society



Josué Rivas (Mexico / Otomi)
People cross a handcrafted bridge to Turtle Island, a sacred site and burial ground, 2016
 InkJet print
 Museum purchase. 2023.19.1

Ivan McClellan (b.1980)
Scrawney Brooks, Liberty, Texas, 2022
 Epson archival pigment inks printed with an Epson P20000 printer on Hahnemuhle Fine Art Baryta Satin archival paper
 Museum purchase with funds provided by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. 2023.17.3



Unidentified photographer
 Clara Brown, ca. 1875-80
 Photograph Denver Public Library Special Collections, Z-275

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Strife and resilience

These acts of creation, however, often brought violence and conflict as well. Paintings by contemporary artists who are all of the Cherokee Nation — America Meredith, Bill Rabbit and Traci Rabbit — show the heartbreak of Cherokee removal from their traditional homelands in the 1830s and the resiliency of the Cherokee people as they rebuilt their nation in the West. Later in the 19th century, Chinese immigrants to California (who arrived via sailing east across the Pacific) strove to maintain their traditional burial practices, which included shipping the bones of deceased individuals back to China to be buried with their ancestors; but prejudice against Asian peoples led to this practice being restricted and penalized with fines in 1878. Clara Brown, born into enslavement in Virginia around 1800, found community and empowerment through Christian community as she built a thriving business empire as a free woman in Denver in the 1860s and 1870s. But an Oglala Lakota man named *Thátháŋka Ptéćela*, or Short Bull, faced persecution for his participation in the Lakota Sun Dance. Visitors are invited to contemplate these tensions in a replica of a 19th-century schoolhouse, where questions over religious pluralism often have been debated.

Contemporary connections

Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West is a traveling exhibition curated by the New-York Historical Society and developed in partnership with the Eiteljorg Museum. The Eiteljorg has curated an additional section of the exhibition that incorporates a diverse array of modern artists. A piece

by contemporary artist Tanzila Ahmed, *Aunties with Deadly Stare #17*, offers a humorous take on the role played by the Muslim “aunties” in her life. Photography by Josue Rivas (Mexico / Otomi) and Tom Kiefer, both newly acquired for the Eiteljorg’s permanent collections, call attention to the ways in which land and water are sacred, or can be imbued with sacred meaning. Historical objects from the 20th century bring to life other stories, such as photographs and a prayer book belonging to Jewish refugee Alfred Daube, who escaped Nazi Germany in 1937 to join family in Oklahoma. A “church purse” belonging to Lillian Stevenson, a trailblazing African-American nurse from Indianapolis, shows the importance of religion in sustaining her commitment to community improvement and racial equality.

One of the highlights is a newly-completed piece by Rupy C. Tut. A California-based artist born in Punjab, India, Tut uses traditional Indian miniature painting techniques to create modern explorations of identity. The piece in *Acts of Faith* focuses on the experiences of women in California in the 1930s and 1940s, where a blended Catholic Mexican and Punjabi Sikh community emerged. “Creating this work . . . has allowed me to connect the threads of varying identities and ancestries that exist and mesh together through my own artistic practice,” Tut said. “Observing history from a feminist lens has enabled a story that is also feminist in nature and interconnected through a common thread of labor that brown women and all women relate to on many levels.”

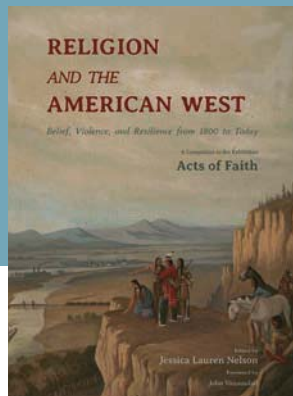
Finally, everyone is invited to contribute their own stories to the



Rupy C. Tut (b. 1985), pictured in her studio. Image submitted by the artist



Tanzila Ahmed
Aunties with Deadly Stare #17,
 2021
 Acrylic, eyeliner, and collaged
 paper on wood
 Loan from the artist



The exhibition's companion book, *Religion and the American West: Belief, Violence and Resilience from 1800 to Today*, is available for \$34.95 at the **Frank and Katrina Basile Museum Store**.

exhibition. Kyle Ragsdale, an artist based at the Harrison Center in Indianapolis, will lead the effort to create a community art project that will be installed in *Acts of Faith*. Both the Eiteljorg and Harrison Center will host art-making days where participants can paint a representation of their own beliefs to be included in the installation. "I love experiencing different groups making art together," said Ragsdale, who is excited about the range of artists represented in this project. "There will be five-year-olds next to people with a lot of artistic skill." When brought together, the individual pieces will create a dazzling display of movement and light — an ever-changing landscape of patterns, intersections, and surprising juxtapositions.

Learning and understanding

This wide-ranging exhibition will provide Eiteljorg visitors the opportunity to see parts of their own stories, ancestry or practices reflected — and learn something new about other traditions and spiritualities. Although religion can be a contentious topic, the exhibition engages with the sincerely-held beliefs of many groups, and emphasizes the importance of respectful dialogue. The museum worked with a local advisory committee comprised of representatives of many different faith traditions who have provided valuable guidance to the Eiteljorg in serving as local venue for the New-York Historical Society's traveling exhibition. The companion publication, *Religion and the American West: Violence, Belief, and Resilience from 1800 to Today*, is available in the Eiteljorg Museum Store. A full slate of events and programming will accompany the exhibition. *Acts of Faith* is part of a project supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment's Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative.

Public programs involving *Acts of Faith* exhibition will engage audiences

The Eiteljorg will host related programs visitors should not miss. All are included with regular admission:

Saturday, March 16, 11 a.m.-3 p.m.

Community Art Project: In the museum's studios, create a painted representation of your beliefs to be included in the *Acts of Faith* community art installation.

Saturday, April 20, 1 p.m.

Curator Tour

Join Jessica Nelson, Ph.D., guest curator and former director of religion and cultural initiatives, for a tour of the exhibition.

Saturday, April 20, 3 p.m.

Special Musical Performance

Enjoy live music related to the themes of *Acts of Faith* and performed in the museum's Allen Whitehill Clowes Sculpture Court.

Saturday, May 18, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Expressions of Faith Community Celebration:

Featuring performances from choirs, dance groups and more, the event celebrates many different religious traditions and how they express their faith or spirituality through the arts.

Friday June 14, 2-5 p.m.

Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture Conference:

Join conference attendees for two sessions on Juneteenth and African-American religious expressions. Participants will also have time to explore *Acts of Faith* alongside scholars of religion. The event is in conjunction with the Eiteljorg Juneteenth and Jazz Community Celebration the next day, June 15.

Saturday, July 13, 1 p.m.

Duniya Dance & Drum Company: A workshop and dance performance of the piece *Half and Halves* explores the Punjabi-Mexican communities of California. Hear and watch artistic director Joti Singh and other company members perform. Learn about the artistic choices they made to combine the dance styles of two different faith communities.

See eiteljorg.org/acts-of-faith and page 12 for more details.

Public Programs Manager Elizabeth Bostelman and Storyteller magazine editor Bryan Corbin contributed to this story.

ACTS OF FAITH: RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN WEST

APR 20–AUG 4

Eiteljorg Special Exhibitions Gallery

This exhibition has been organized by the New-York Historical Society.

Locally supported by



Support for *Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West* is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Henry Luce Foundation.

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Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in these programs do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Robert Walter Weir (1803–1889)
Sagoyewatha, or "Red Jacket"
(ca. 1758–1830), 1828
Oil on canvas
New-York Historical Society,
Gift of Winthrop Chanler, 1893.1

Saturday
MAR 16

11 a.m.–3 p.m.

Community Art Project

In partnership with the Harrison Center and artist Kyle Ragsdale, the public is invited to the museum's studios to participate in a community art project to be installed as part of a new art installation in the Eiteljorg's *Acts of Faith* exhibit. See story, page 5.

Friday
APR 19

5:30–7:30 p.m.

Acts of Faith: Members-only Opening Reception

Eiteljorg members can join us at a Friday night reception to welcome the stunning new exhibition. Contact jhiatt@eiteljorg.com or 317.275.1360 to register.

ACTS OF FAITH Religion and the American West

APR 20 – AUG 4

The Eiteljorg and New-York Historical Society are collaborating on a traveling exhibition, *Acts of Faith*, that explores the roles of different religions and spiritual beliefs in shaping the American West during the 19th century, through paintings, photographs, textiles, cultural items and more. See story, page 2.

Saturday

APR 20

9 a.m.

Coffee and Conversation

Learn about the *Acts of Faith* exhibition with curator Jessica Nelson, Ph.D. To register, contact jhiatt@eiteljorg.com or 317.275.1360.



Chong Hou Tong bone repatriation book, 1903
China Alley Preservation Society, Hanford, CA.
Restored and digitized by Tung Wah Museum, Hong Kong

For additional details, visit eiteljorg.org/acts-of-faith

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Locally supported by



Lilly Endowment Inc.
A private foundation since 1937



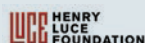
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Angela Ellsworth (American)
ChiaroVeggente: As Above, So Below
(33.487549, -112.073994), 2019
15,696 pearl corsage pins, colored dress pins, fabric, steel, pedestal
Eiteljorg Museum purchase. 2023.1.1

Saturday

APR 20

1 p.m.

Curator-led Tour of Acts of Faith

Join Jessica Nelson, Ph.D., guest curator and former director of religion and cultural initiatives, for a gallery tour of the exhibition.

3 p.m.

Special Musical Performance

Enjoy live music related to the themes of *Acts of Faith* performed in the museum's Allen Whitehill Clowes Sculpture Court.

Saturday

MAY 18

11 a.m.–4 p.m.

Expressions of Faith Community Celebration

Join local groups for a daylong celebration of expressions of faith through the arts. The event will feature multiple performances and activities.