



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

## Acts of Faith

*A traveling exhibition tells the story of religion alongside the history of the American West.*

Organized by the New-York Historical Society Library and Museum and now on view at the Eiteljorg Museum is the thought-provoking exhibition *Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West*. In more than 100 pieces that span 200 years, including present day, the exhibition tells quite the story of “many religious beliefs and spiritual practices of the peoples who lived in or moved to the American West,” says Jessica L. Nelson,

guest curator and former director of religion and culture initiatives at the Eiteljorg Museum.

Nelson also shares that the start of the exhibition began when the Eiteljorg Museum realized the need for nuanced and careful analysis of religious ideas, identities and histories in museums. “When we heard about the exhibition being developed by New-York Historical, we reached out to collaborate with them,” she says. “New-York Historical [found] that their archive had a lot of

material about religious New Yorkers looking westward in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also knew that it wouldn’t be accurate to tell a story of religion in the American West that moved in a single direction (from New York westward). Instead, they created a multi-faceted exhibition experience that tells over two dozen individual stories, and then brings the threads of those stories together into an overarching narrative.”

Visitors to the exhibition will find contemporary artwork, historical artifacts,



Laura Friedman and Elizabeth Steele, *San Ysidro Feast Day, Taos, Nuevo México*. Commissioned by the New-York Historical Society.



Ernest Smith (Tonawanda Seneca/Heron Clan, 1907-1975), *Progress*, 1935, oil on canvas. Courtesy of RMSC, Rochester, NY.

antique books and newly created dioramas divided into four sections, beginning with *Homelands & New Lands (1810s – 1840s)*, centering on the experiences of the Pokagon band of Potawatomi, Protestant missionaries in New York City, Jewish merchants in St. Louis and more. *Trails & Trials (1840s-1860s)*, highlights stories like that of the Mormon and Oregon trails; and *Insiders & Outsiders*

(1860s – 1890s) focuses on social, legal and political debates over marriage, ceremonies, schools and burial practices. “[And finally,] curated by the Eiteljorg and titled *Religion: Here & Now (1900 – today)*...touches on a wide range of religious developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, like the increasing role of women leaders in religion and the growing presence of Asian religions in the American West,” says Nelson.

Find riveting imagery like that of Josue Rivas’s black-and-white photograph, *People cross a handcrafted bridge to Turtle Island, a sacred site and burial ground*. “The First Amendment protects freedom of religion—but what happens when someone’s spiritual practices are not considered ‘religion’ by the law?” asks Nelson. “Rivas (Mexico/Otomi) brings this question to the forefront in his artwork. [He] spent several weeks living with the Water Protectors, Lakota people, who were opposed to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. The Water Protectors understood their actions as a form of spiritual practice,

defending sacred soil—but as Rivas’s photo makes clear, not everyone saw their actions in that way.”

Additional highlights include Laura Friedman and Elizabeth Steele’s painting *San Ysidro Feast Day Taos Nuevo Mexico*, a piece commissioned by the New-York Historical society, depicting a blended Catholic culture of Spanish and Indigenous practices; and Seneca artist Ernest Smith’s *Progress*, “showing a melancholy scene as Seneca people look out from a bluff and see their ancestral homelands being occupied by others,” Nelson notes.

Visit the exhibition through August 4 to learn “new and perhaps surprising information—maybe history or modern-day perspectives that [you] haven’t encountered before,” says Nelson. ♡



Rupy C. Tut, *Cooking the same, only talk different*, 2024, handmade pigments and shell silver on hemp paper. Eiteljorg Museum purchase with funds provided by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. 2024.1.1.

### Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West

April 20-August 4, 2024

Eiteljorg Museum  
500 W. Washington Street, Indianapolis, IN  
46204, (317) 636-9378, www.eiteljorg.org