The theme of Religion, Ritual and Performance is found throughout all of the museum galleries this year. The works featured here make broad thematic connections among a range of cultures and time periods, and explore a number of religious practices, the importance of rituals around the world, and how notions of performance can be expressed in the visual arts. Examples include a 13th-14th-century South Indian bronze sculpture of the dancing baby Krishna, a Netherlandish ivory sculpture of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, and eight works of art from Africa, some of which are recent acquisitions to the AMAM collection. Look for the “RR&P” logo in the galleries and use this booklet to learn how these objects reflect the concepts of Religion, Ritual, and Performance.

Religion, Ritual, and Performance labels were written by Education Department summer assistants Briggin Scharf (OC ’12) and Nicole Alonso (OC ’13), Academic Programs summer assistant Hanna Exel (OC ’12), and Curatorial Assistant in the Office of Academic Programs Lucas Briffa (OC ’12).
**French**

**Reliquary Chasse Depicting the Martyrdom of Saint Thomas à Becket**, ca. 1210

Gilded copper alloy and champlevé enamel over wood core

*Gift of Baroness René de Kerchove, 1952.20*

Depicted on this chasse is the beheading of Thomas à Becket at the altar of Canterbury Cathedral by knights of King Henry II (the result of an ongoing feud between Becket and Henry over the separation of Church and State). Becket’s blood stained the floor and was collected by the cathedral clergy, diluted with water, and distributed to pilgrims who traveled to Canterbury after the saint’s death. Known as “Becket Water,” this mixture was said to perform miracles, curing illnesses and healing deformities when consumed. Limoges Becket chasses like this one may have contained Becket Water at one point, or perhaps the saint’s corporeal relics that were distributed all over Western Europe. [BS]
Netherlandish
**Expulsion from Paradise (Adam and Eve)**, ca. 1600
Ivory
R.T. Miller, Jr. Fund, 1959.114

This small-scale object features Adam and Eve after their expulsion from paradise. Both figures are evidently ashamed: their bodies are hunched forward and shrouded, with Eve holding onto Adam’s arm, raised to obscure his face. Neither figure looks upward, building tension between the viewer and the depicted subjects. It is as if the viewer is being immersed in the very moment that God uttered to the pair, “What is this that thou hast done?” (Genesis 3:13).

The scale and intended installation of the object in a collector’s cabinet would have permitted a close and personal viewing experience. The medium also played a notable role in situating the viewer’s encounter with the sculpture. Ivory was considered a precious material and objects carved from it were admired for their fine detail. [NA]
American Indian (Alaskan)  
**Pipe**, 19th century  
Walrus ivory and ink  
Gift of Charles King Barry, 1918.9

This pipe reflects the prehistoric tradition practiced by many Native Arctic, Alaskan, and Canadian peoples of transforming organic materials, like wood or ivory, into functional, religious, and decorative objects. By the end of the 19th century, ivory carvings achieved a new status as ideal commodities for European and American traders, explorers, and whalers in Northern Alaska and the Arctic. Tobacco pipes, like this one, were being carved out of ivory instead of traditional materials like wood and stone, to be traded with foreigners, but rarely for functional purposes like smoking. The pictographic engravings on this pipe emphasize the essential Inuit values of hunting for survival and respect towards all animals. These scenes show the various stages of the hunt: the unsuspecting caribou and birds, the hunter approaching alone by kayak or on foot, the attack, and finally the capture and the return home. [BS]
Yombe peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo  
**Diviner's Mask**, 20th century  
Wood  

In the culture of the Yombe peoples, the worlds of the living and the dead are believed to exist parallel to one another. Diviners and healers known as *nganga* work to mediate between the two worlds and to mitigate conflicts that might arise. This mask belongs to a *nganga dimphomba*, a diviner who specializes in detecting witches or others guilty of anti-social crimes in the community. The diviner would don this mask (along with a touraco feathers skirt and a belt with small brass bells) for public rituals during which he would identify wrongdoers and declare verdicts relayed to him by ancestral spirits. The mask’s calm expression, half-closed eyes, and a tongue protruding as if in the act of speaking suggest a peaceful, trance-like state. [HE]
For the Baule peoples of Africa’s Ivory Coast, the realm of the human is closely linked with the spirit world called *blolo* (“the village of truth”). Elaborately carved wooden objects such as this diviner’s tapper play a central role in rituals in which spirits (*asye usu*) possess the bodies of diviners and communicate important messages and insights. Diviners summon the spirits by striking a gong tapper, or a *lawle*, which is typically made by professional carvers and bears imagery relevant to both the individual diviner and the spirit it is intended to conjure. The handle of the AMAM’s tapper depicts the figure of a spirit with extensive body scarification, while the upper part, which is the gong beater, takes the form of a stylized buffalo mask known as *Bonu Amuen*. Worn all over, the surface of the tapper reveals a long history of ritual use, cleaning, and oiling. [HE]
East Gallery

Ivory Coast of Liberia, West Africa, Dan-Wee People

**Mask**, 19th or 20th century

Wood, brass, beads, braided human hair, and traces of paint

R.T. Miller, Jr. Fund, 1955.43

According to Dan-Wee tradition, forest or bush spirits appear in dreams and request to be represented in the human realm in the form of male or female masks. The vertical scarification pattern on the forehead, curved cheek marks, and white clay/powder (*kaolin*) around the eyes of this mask are characteristic of female beautification marks. Additional materials were attached to increase its supernatural powers—specifically the ability to detect and prevent sorcery.

Although spirit masks embody unique personalities, most were used for a range of social, political, and religious purposes. Female masks with facial features similar to this one are commonly referred to as *deagle*, or guard masks, and would serve as protectors and mediators between secluded initiation camps for adolescents and the main village. Alternatively, a male masquerader (*gela*) may have performed with this mask during public funeral ceremonies. In response to his vigorous dancing, elders praised the masquerader and frequently offered him money, first touching it to the wooden mask before offering it to his attendant. Hooks on the back of the mask would have been attached to a conical cloth headdress and worn with a dried grass skirt during the *gela’s* performance. [BS]
Nigeria, West Africa, Benin Kingdom

**Leopard Hip Ornament**, 18th century

Brass

Friends of Art Fund, 1955.22

This ornament was made to be worn only by the divine king of the Benin people, called the *oba*, or by an official or soldier who was given permission by the *oba* to take a human life. In this way, it served as a reminder of the king’s power, and ultimately, the power of the gods and spiritual ancestors. [BS]
Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo

**Lukasa Memory Board**, 20th century

Wood, beads, and nails


The Luba people of the Congo used *lukasa* memory boards to preserve their history. They would bring the board out for storytelling or dispute and read from it using a mnemonic device, *lukasa*. The two heads protruding from the top of this wooden board denote the ancestors of a specific family, whereas the surface represents their descendants. The individual beads document the places where ancestors stopped during their travels, while the intricate geometric carvings elaborate on those stories. In some cases, it would take hours to translate only a small section of the board due to the complexity of the *lukasa*. Held in the left hand and read with the right forefinger, *lukasas* required the reader to interpret the symbols on the board as they related to the past and present. The *lukasa* memory board was instrumental to the Luba as it served to record vastly more information than could be passed down orally. [LB]
Bakongo, Democratic Republic of the Congo

**Nkisi Figure**, 20th century

Wood, cloth, feathers, ritual materials, bush rope, animal fur, glass, and nails


Figures such as this masterfully crafted standing male sculpture from central Africa were meant to combat evil witchcraft or sorcery that resulted in sickness, infertility, or unexpected tragedy. Ritual experts (ngangas) prescribed them to members of Congolese tribes during times of imbalance or chaos in their lives. The word “nkisi” (plural “minkisi”) refers to the package containing organic and inorganic materials placed inside a cavity carved in the body—here in the figure’s belly. Considered to possess magical properties, these packets held items such as the remains of predatory animals, stones, or sand from the graves of past chieftains. After receiving the nkisi, the figure would be covered with other magical materials and its face painted white as a symbol of death thus connecting it with the spirit world. The nganga would then ‘activate’ the nkisi as a way of counteracting the evil forces that afflicted the recipient of the figure. [LB]
In the late 15th century, Portuguese traders developed routes that allowed them to purchase goods directly from West Africa. Ivory quickly became one of the most valuable commodities to travel along these routes, its craftsmanship documenting a profound cultural interaction.

This saltcellar, though created with traditional African motifs, was likely commissioned by a Portuguese merchant. It is one of three saltcellars attributed to a craftsman known as the Foliage Master—the most skillful carver of the Floral Workshop, one of many that operated along the Sierra Leone Estuary. With its spherical top and conical base, the shape of the saltcellar refers to European metal chalices. To the European traders who commissioned this object, the mother and child figures depicted on the crown of the saltcellar would have evoked Western representations of the Madonna and Christ child. In West African culture, however, this symbol would have been interpreted as an ancestor protecting and guiding her descendants. [LB]
The Congolese elephant tusk depicts the narrative of a harvest procession, meant to be read along the relief from base to tip. Traditionally in the Loango culture, elephant tusks were used to decorate the altars of ancestors. This object, produced to provide Europeans with a visual way to share stories of their travels, deviates from that tradition by depicting a ceremonial activity. [LB]
Poised at the beginning of a celebratory dance, this elegant figurine of the Hindu deity Baby Krishna was a popular devotional image in South India during the end of the later Chola Dynasty (1246-1279). Most likely displayed in a temple with other cast bronze sculptures of Hindu gods, this figure would have been exhibited for public veneration. On special occasions, poles were inserted into the four holes at the base of the sculpture to carry in processions outside of the temple. It was likely clothed and adorned in flower garlands, and traces of red are still present on the bronze surface, suggesting that the deity was also blessed with sacred powders.

Baby Krishna, who was raised among a rural community of cow herders, is typically associated with the devotional item of butter. Krishna’s love of butter constantly got him into trouble with his foster-mother, Yashoda, who tried her best to hide the butter supply, but always failed. This sculpture captures Baby Krishna’s graceful dance of pure joy that immediately followed his consumption of a forbidden buttery treat (at one point, there may have been a miniature butter ball in the figure’s right hand). Baby Krishna’s mischievous nature and adorable features continue to be popular among many contemporary Hindus. [BS]
A variety of engravings cover every surface of this sculpture, highlighting the ritual practices associated with Buddhist devotion in China during the 5th and 6th centuries. On all four sides of the square base are etchings of a procession of elaborately robed figures holding flowers and umbrellas. The group most likely represents the wealthy donors who paid for the work, as well as the monks responsible for maintaining the complex of sacred mountain caves where this Buddha, along with many other sculptures and wall paintings, resided. Most of the figures offer flowers to the Buddha, in addition to reciting prayers and hymns, instructing other devotees visiting the caves to do the same. At the base of the lotus pedestal—flanked between two miniature lions—a small human figure holds up a teardrop-shaped object with markings reminiscent of both flower petals and flames, and could indicate another offering of a flower, fire, or burning incense.

On the pedestal beneath is a central scene of three overlapping wheels. The final, active stage of the Buddha’s life is commonly referred to as “spinning the wheel of the dharma.” The presence of animals, humans, and other Buddhas surrounding the larger figure reinforces the central message of Buddhism: to learn from the life of the Buddha and to share his teachings with others. [BS]
The Egyptian Book of the Dead contains both oratory and imagistic components for ritual funerary incantation, as well as mystical guidance in the afterlife. Often referred to as “chapters” or “spells,” they were used in order to ensure that various elements of the deceased person’s being were preserved in the afterlife, as well as to aid in protecting the spirit from hostile forces.

The title on this leaf, “The Spell for the Opening of the Mouth,” indicates that this object did not serve a spoken ritual function but rather was a secular and spiritual document to reanimate the deceased in the afterlife. Three spells are present in the subtext of this object: Spell 23, “the spell for the opening of the mouth,” Spell 26, to retain the deceased’s use of the heart, and Spell 126, which refers to a protective piece of papyrus, known as the hypocephalus, which is placed under the head of the mummy to protect his soul during his final judgment in the afterlife. [NA]
Egyptian (Ptolemaic Period)
**Burial Figure**, 332-30 BC
Glaze and faience
Purchase Show Fund, 1957.9

The ancient Egyptians believed the journey to the afterlife to be one of great hardship. Just as in life, many would be required to continue carrying out laborious daily activities. The financially prosperous who lived from the late Middle Kingdom (ca. 1900 BC) until the Greco-Roman Period (ca. 664 BC) were able to afford funerary statuettes such as this one in order to carry out physical labor for them in the afterlife.

During the Ptolemaic Period (332-20 BC), from which this piece originated, figures such as this had come to be referred to primarily as ushabti, meaning “follower” or “to answer,” denoting the intended function of the figurine. [NA]
St. Cecilia’s status as the patron saint of music relates to an account from her life in which she was presented to a pagan for marriage. God took the form of *cantantibus organis* (a 16th-century Latin term for the organ) in her heart, allowing her to remain pure. For this reason, St. Cecilia is often depicted with a musical instrument as her defining attribute. The instruments themselves also maintain a symbolism rooted in popular associations with bridal motifs and heavenly presence. The portable instrument in this image of St. Cecilia is a twenty-peg harp. The artist’s choice of instrument is consistent with 16th- and 17th-century trends, while prior to this time the saint was often depicted with an organ.

When the Academy of Music was founded at Rome in 1584, Cecilia was made patron saint of the institute; today, musical associations known as “Cecilian societies” are common. [NA]
Jan Davidsz de Heem (Dutch, 1606-1683/4)

**Still Life**, ca. 1645

Oil on canvas

Mrs. F.F. Prentiss Fund, 1954.21

The 16th century was a critical period for the evolution of still-life painting in Northern Europe. The themes and moral implications of past works still existed, but a growing interest in everyday subject matter allowed for these still-lifes to carry dualistic meanings for both secular and religious activity. Still-life paintings were widely seen as a “lower” genre of painting, while still maintaining popularity among middle-class patrons due to their affordability and relatively small size.

This particular painting falls into a still-life genre known as *vanitas*, used to convey the fragility and brevity of life. While the banquet scene depicted appears at first to be an exposition of wealth, the grapes, wine, and seafood show elements of deterioration that aim to communicate subtle moral messages. Death, mindfulness of greed, self-awareness, and transcendence of earthly pleasure are all themes addressed commonly in vanitas still-life painting. [NA]