



**IMAGINING  
THE DIVINE**

Art and the Rise of World Religions



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- This is the catalog for a major exhibition, which is the first attempt to show the developing visual cultures of the world religions in the first millennium A.D. both individually and in dialogue with each other
- The catalog tells both the stories of each individual religious culture and gives some hints as to shared themes and interconnections
- The catalog contains a fine selection of illustrations, comparing the religions and their art

Religion has always been a fundamental force for constructing identity, from antiquity to the contemporary world. The transformation of ancient cults into faith systems, which we recognize now as major world religions, took place in the first millennium AD, in the period we call 'Late Antiquity'. Our argument is that the creative impetus for both the emergence, and much of the visual distinctiveness of the world religions came in contexts of cultural encounter. Bridging the traditional divide between classical, Asian, Islamic and Western history, this exhibition and its accompanying catalog highlights religious and artistic creativity at points of contact and cultural borders between late antique civilizations.

This catalog features the creation of specific visual languages that belong to five major world religions: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. The imagery still used by these belief systems today is evidence for the development of distinct religious identities in Late Antiquity. Emblematic visual forms like the figure of Buddha and Christ, or Islamic aniconism, only evolved in dialogue with a variety of coexisting visualizations of the sacred. As late antique believers appropriated some competing models and rejected others, they created compelling and long-lived representations of faith, but also revealed their indebtedness to a multitude of contemporaneous religious ideas and images.