

GUIDE TO GALLERIES

EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence



The Menil Collection
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WEST, WEST CENTRAL, and EAST GALLERIES

EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH: GANDHI AND IMAGES OF NONVIOLENCE

ohandas K. Gandhi (born India, October 2, 1869) was the twentieth century's greatest advocate for taking peaceful direct action against oppression and injustice. As a London-trained lawyer fighting discrimination in South Africa, he pioneered techniques of nonviolent resistance based on *ahimsa* (literally "non-harming") and his own concept of "truth-force," *satya* + *agraha* (also called "soul force"), and then from the mid 1910s until his assassination in 1948 Gandhi led their deployment in the mass struggle against British rule in colonial India. He coined the term *satyagraha* to name "the force which is born of truth and love or nonviolence." A prolific writer, Gandhi began to tell this story in his 1927/29 autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*.

Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence explores the resonance of Gandhi's ethics of satyagraha in the visual arts. No single set of styles or aesthetic preferences connect the works in this exhibition. Rather, Experiments with Truth proposes that associative threads run between different groups—devotional pieces, artworks without religious or spiritual context, various kinds of documentary materials that connect to central concepts promoted by Gandhi and other leaders of nonviolent struggles, and artifacts that belong to one or none of these categories.

The project's catalyst was the image reproduced on the front cover: a mysterious, anonymous photograph of a group of Gandhi's possessions, a carefully constructed image that combines the characteristics of a still life with a portrait of someone who is absent and whose life had just ended. The photograph documents a deliberate arrangement of some objects that Gandhi owned at the time of his death—two eating bowls, a wooden fork and spoon, porcelain monkeys (see-hear-speak no evil), a pocket watch, eyeglasses, prayer beads, a small closed book, an open book apparently of verse (probably his ashram song/prayer book), a water vessel, a letter opener, and two pairs of sandals. The strikingly formal composition of this arrangement, its straightforward symmetry, underscores the symbolic significance of the objects, which serve as both reminders and incarnations, a sort of visual reliquary, of Gandhi's ascetic lifestyle and his philosophy of living truth as he saw it. The absence of Gandhi as a person seems to only increase the compelling nature of this image; it manifests a powerful dialectic between presence and absence, life and death, portrait and still life, uniting them all.

The first part of the exhibition features an extraordinary group of photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson taken just days and even hours before Gandhi's



Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Gandhi's funeral*, Delhi, February 1, 1948. Gelatin silver print, $6^{5/8}$ x $9^{5/8}$ inches (16.7 x 24.5 cm). Collection Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris. © 2014 Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

assassination in New Delhi on January 30, 1948, and right after. Most of these photographs do not isolate Gandhi from his environment, as does Margaret Bourke-White's iconic portrait of him spinning. Rather, they narrate his story in a broader way, mostly through his interactions and, after his assassination, through the reactions of India's people as they as they gathered to watch the funeral procession and cremation with grief-stricken faces. These pictures tell us of Gandhi's impact on the ordinary citizen. Cartier-Bresson's images of these historic events were published in Life magazine, and their revelation of the extraordinary emotional impact of Gandhi's death helped make him one of the first world-famous photojournalists.

This first gallery also includes portraits and documents of Gandhi's most important predecessors and contemporaries—Leo Tolstoy (1820–1910), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), and

Margaret Bourke-White, Gandhi using his spinning wheel at home, 1946. Gelatin silver print, 14^{1} /k x 11 inches. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Given in honor of Marjorie G. Horning by Mr. and Mrs. Meredith Long; Isla and Tommy Reckling; Mr. and Mrs. Durga D. Agrawal; Milton D. Rosenau, Jr. and Dr. Ellen R. Gritz; Dr. Ninan and Sushila Mathew; Drs. Ellin and Robert G. Grossman; Mr. and Mrs. Vinold Bhuchar; Mr. and Mrs. Philip J. John, Jr.; and Dr. and Mrs. A.P. Raghuthaman. © 2014 Margaret Bourke-White/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

John Ruskin (1819–1900). Their ideas and writings about social reform, tolerance, and nonviolence had a major impact on Gandhi's thinking. Other leaders



Henry Dunant, 1863. Photograph by Frédéric Boissonnas. International Red Cross Photo Library

in the fight for human rights and social justice include the abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth (1797–1883); Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), a leader of the abolitionist movement; Clara Barton (1821–1920), an activist on behalf of women's rights and civil rights for African Americans and founder of the American Red Cross; as well as the English aristocrat Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), a social reformer and the founder of modern nursing. Both Barton and Nightingale shared their passion for improved medical care with the Swiss businessman Henry Dunant (1828–1910), whose coincidental experience of a bloody



Jina, possibly Mahavira, the last of 24 Jain great teachers. India, Karnataka or Tamil Nadu; second half of the 9th century. Copper alloy, $8^{7/8}$ x $7^{5/8}$ x $3^{1/4}$ inches (22.5 x 19.4 x 8.3 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, From the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase. Photo © 2014 Museum Associates/LACMA

battle in Italy in 1859 turned him into a peace activist. Four years later Dunant founded what became the International Committee of the Red Cross and helped write the first Geneva Convention, two paramount humanitarian achievements of the nineteenth century, and he was co-recipient of the first Nobel Peace Prize. Dunant's visionary drawings are virtually unknown and have never before been displayed in the United States.

Central to the exhibition is the presentation of major works of art that exemplify diverse artistic visualizations of nonviolence, including the—often dissimilar—iconographies from various religions. Some of these reach far back in time and history, such as the devotional sculptures and paintings from the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions of India of the sort that informed Gandhi's thinking. They are displayed among sculptures, paintings, drawings, prints, manuscripts, and books from the Abrahamic religions, where we encounter very



Krishna in His Universal Form (Vishvarupa), a rare depiction for the *Bhagavad Gita*. India, Rajasthan; 19th or 20th century. Opaque watercolor and gold on cloth, 56 x 36 inches (142.2 x 91.4 cm). Nancy Wiener Gallery, New York. Photo: Stan Schnier Photography



Saint Onouphrios, a Christian desert ascetic. Creto-Venetian; Crete, Iraklion; early to mid 17th century. Attributed to Emmanuel Lambardos. Tempera and gold leaf on wood, 21^{7/8} x 14^{3/8} inches (55.6 x 36 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

different imagery as well as the shared themes of compassion, asceticism, and generosity. Tolerance and generosity have, perhaps, historically been core elements of almost any ethical system or religious tradition. Examples in Christian iconography include the Rembrandt prints of Christ preaching and of Christ healing the sick, as well as the anonymous sculpture of Saint Martin giving half his cape to a beggar. A statue of Green Tara, a representation of a female bodhisattva, is also in the exhibition. Bodhisattvas emblematize Buddhist qualities and virtues, in this case the practice of compassion and the realization of emptiness. Sublime and beautiful abstractions from the Menil's permanent collection by artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Agnes Martin appear throughout the exhibition, resonating with the spiritual concerns that underpin Gandhi's vision.

Other galleries explore Gandhi's legacy through portraits of some of the most eminent leaders of social and political reform movements in the decades following his death. Martin Luther King Jr. (1928–1968) in the American South, Nelson Mandela (1918–2013) in South Africa, the 14th Dalai Lama (b. 1935) of Tibet, and Aung San Suu Kyi (b. 1945), Myanmar's moral leader, are among the

most prominent who have walked in the footsteps of Gandhi; documents and photographs also illustrate John and Dominique de Menil's personal involvement with some of the same leaders on their course to create a singular art space dedicated to human rights, the Rothko Chapel.

It was in South Africa around the turn of the twentieth century that Gandhi developed and tested his concept of nonviolent resistance, and works related to this country and its longer story are therefore critical. Portraits of Nelson Mandela by Jürgen Schadeberg and Marlene Dumas are powerful examples of this figure's important role in recent history. Schadeberg, one of the pioneer photojournalists of the anti-Apartheid movement, first met Mandela in 1951 when the latter was the president of the African National Congress Youth League, and they became friends over the next decades. The German-born Schadeberg left South Africa in 1964, the same year that Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment. Released in 1990, Mandela revisited his prison cell shortly after he had been elected the first black president of South Africa in 1994. Schadeberg was invited to accompany him on this historic occasion. The images he captured of Mandela gazing out of his prison window became icons in recent portrait photography. Several animations by South African artist William



Dan Budnik, Selma to Montgomery March: John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr. leading religious dignitaries at the end of the first day, Hall Farm Road, Dallas County, Alabama, March 21, 1965. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches (40.6 x 50.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil. © 2014 Dan Budnik. Copy photo: Hester + Hardaway



Marlene Dumas, *An Older Nelson Mandela*, 2004–5. Ink and acrylic on paper, 23³/₄ x 19³/₄ inches (60.3 x 50.4 cm). Collection of the artist. © 2014 Marlene Dumas. Photo: Bernard Ruijgrok

Kentridge (on view in the East Gallery, see map) also evoke the complex history of South Africa under Apartheid.

Robert Gober's untitled wall installation re-imagines the prison cell in a complex way, calling to mind how Gandhi, King, Mandela, and many other political prisoners have used it as a place of reflection, education, and intellectual production during their struggles. The prison cell has deep allegorical meaning in this project, a place of confinement and humiliation, and yet also of forced introspection and possibly inner stillness, in alignment with Gandhi's idea of individual transformation and self-control as preconditions to realizing the political goal of self-rule and nonviolent behavior. In a different way, Cartier-Bresson's photographs of refugee camps in 1947 invite a conversation with Amar Kanwar's A Season Outside, Zarina's Abyss, and Shilpa Gupta's 1:14.9 - 1188.5 Miles of Fenced Border—West North-West. Several artists and their families (including Kanwar and Zarina) were directly affected by the traumatic events of the Partition in 1947, and their participation in and selection of works for this project are therefore all the more meaningful. Zarina's Abyss pictures the Pakistan-India border, while her large wall piece Veil seems to merge ancient expressions of spiritual, yet ecumenical, experience and the (not necessarily spiritual) Euro-American tradition of abstract painting. Suzan Frecon's paintings on paper and canvas can be associated with a similarly broad context, even while those included here seem to obliquely reference the sphere



Suzan Frecon, four-color composition on small paper 1 (fountain and shadow), 2009. Watercolor on found old Indian paper, 11 x 7¹/₄ inches (27.9 x 18.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London. © 2014 Suzan Frecon/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

of Islam—its architecture, manuscript pages, and some words of Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi. This thirteenth-century theologian, jurist, and mystic is best known in the United States as a poet, and his influence has long transcended religious, national, and ethnic boundaries. Interestingly, the years of Rumi's life (1207–1273) overlapped with those of Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), the popular Catholic patron saint of animals and the environment, who established poverty as the essential lifestyle for his followers and compassion as the core of their ethical conduct. Saint Francis is also famous for his attempted Christian–Muslim reconciliation when he visited the sultan in Egypt in 1219 in the midst of a bloody crusade.

For his powerful film-poem *A Season Outside*, Amar Kanwar used footage filmed in different locations in India, including the daily militaristic ritual at the opening and closing of a crossing on the Pakistan-India border, a train bulging with travelers slowly moving through the heavily guarded border zone, episodes of violence among animals, historical footage of Gandhi visiting villages devastated by communal violence, and a sequence about Tibetan refugees. The soundtrack includes a thought-provoking text (spoken by the artist himself) that meanders around the dilemma of violent or nonviolent resistance, including two dialogues: a famous exchange between Gandhi and a representative of

Shilpa Gupta, 1:14.9, 1188.5 Miles of Fenced Border – West, North-West, 2011–12. Thread, wood, glass, and brass, 64¹/₄ x 22 x 20 inches (163 x 55.9 x 50.8 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Chemould Prescott Road. © 2014 Shilpa Gupta. Photo: Anil Rane

the British Empire and Kanwar's own probing conversation with an exiled Tibetan monk, which is interrupted by short documentary scenes of raging Chinese police brutality against peaceful monks in Tibet. The raw beauty of the film and the melancholic, nonjudgmental complexity of the spoken word touch on many issues at the heart of this inquiry, and making the work a centerpiece of the exhibition.



There are beautiful works of art and compelling artifacts and documents in *Experiments with Truth*, and their "aura" will change depending on the viewer, the context, and over the course of time. The goal is to create conditions that allow for a contemplative, undistracted—and not didactically orchestrated—experience of these objects from various backgrounds. While many of the objects are drawn from different and sometimes distant cultures, might they be related? What does nonviolence look like? In addition to the showing of famous and anonymous peacemakers, is there an art, or arts, of peace? Our hope is to elicit a deeper understanding and appreciation of these works of art, artifacts, and other materials gathered in conversation, to explore a complex question that has concerned humankind throughout history: How do we overcome violence through nonviolent means?

 —Adapted by Clare Elliott from Josef Helfenstein's text in the accompanying book

Satyagraha definition from Timothy Flinders, "How Satyagraha Works," in Eknath Easwaran, Gandhi the Man (Petaluma, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1978), 150.

WEST CENTRAL GALLERY

AMAR KANWAR, THE SOVEREIGN FOREST

The Sovereign Forest attempts to reopen discussion and initiate a creative response to our understanding of politics, human rights, and ecology. The validity of poetry as evidence in a trial, the discourse on seeing, on understanding, on compassion, on issues of justice, sovereignty, and the determination of the self—all come together in a constellation of moving and still images, texts, books, pamphlets, albums, music, objects, seeds, events, and processes.

The Sovereign Forest travels to different cities but is also permanently open for public viewing at the Samadrusti campus in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. With overlapping identities it continuously reincarnates as an art installation, a library, a memorial, a public trial, a call for the collection of more "evidence," an open school, a film studio, an archive, and also a proposition for a space that engages with political issues as well as with art.

—Amar Kanwar

he Sovereign Forest, 2012/ongoing, explores the conflict between mining and commercial activities with the existing communities, economies, and environments of Odisha (formerly Orissa), a state in east central India on the Bay of Bengal. Combining elements of video installation, art exhibition, and library/archive, *The Sovereign Forest* continues to evolve and synthesize elements contributed by Kanwar or the farmers and activists with whom he collaborates.

Sympathetic governmental policies have allowed commercial interests in Odisha to appropriate resource-rich lands since the 1950s, impacting the environment and displacing local farmers and villages. India's rapid economic expansion over the last twenty years has resulted in a pronounced increase in the area's transformation. Kanwar began to document the effects of industrialization on Odisha's landscape and populations in 1999, and he has returned repeatedly since. The result of the artist's intense involvement in the region's conflicts is an immersive installation that seeks to both record and resist the consequences of this commercial activity.

The central film of the installation, *The Scene of the Crime*, 2011, presents images of areas targeted for acquisition by the government or corporations. There is no narration nor score, only those sounds Kanwar captured on site: birds, water, wind. Although in some cases expropriation of the land has been successfully halted, in many others Kanwar's meditative film is now a memorial of a lost landscape.

Visitors are invited to turn the pages of three large hand-sewn books, each with its own projection. *The Counting Sisters and Other Stories* preserves the



Amar Kanwar, *The Scene of the Crime* (video still), 2011, in *The Sovereign Forest*, 2012/ongoing. Mixed media installation: single-channel videos, handmade books with projections, handmade books, found evidence, and digitally-printed photographs. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. © 2014 Amar Kanwar

narratives of individuals displaced from their land. The pages of the book are embedded with remnants of the tellers' lives such as betel leaf, fishing net, and newspaper. *The Prediction* refers to the murder of Shankar Guha Niyogi. A leader of a large labor union, Niyogi had predicted his assassination before it occurred, in 1991. Although two industrialists were found guilty of the crime, their convictions were overturned by the Supreme Court. Finally, *The Constitution* is a wordless book whose woven pages suggest the many voices that are excluded from our political decisions.

Smaller books and photographs document local resistance efforts along with the sometimes brutal government response. Selections from what Kanwar has named the Evidence Archive offer verification of local ownership. Tax records, proofs of occupancy, maps, and lists of residents challenge the official record, as does a book of poems and a recording by a local singer. In 272 Varieties of Indigenous Rice Seeds, varieties of rice gathered from different microclimates display a complex system of local knowledge that would otherwise be lost as small-scale indigenous farming gives way to industrialized agriculture.

First shown in 2012 at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, *The Sovereign Forest* or parts of it have been presented at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kerala, India (2012–13); the Sharjah Biennial, UAE (2013); the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid (2013–14); the Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2014); Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, UK, (2013–14); and the Edinburgh Art Festival (2014). The installation in Odisha mentioned by Kanwar in the quote has been open since August 15, 2012. Its visitors have access twenty-four hours a day and are invited to contribute their insights, experiences, and further evidence to the project.

EAST GALLERY

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH

ormally devoted to modern and contemporary painting and sculpture in the permanent collection, for *Experiments with Truth* the East Gallery showcases video installations by contemporary artists Kimsooja and William Kentridge presented in tandem with a selection of works from the museum's holdings.

KIMSOOJA. A NEEDLE WOMAN

A Needle Woman, 2005, is a video installation by the South Korean-born, New York-based Kimsooja. The second of two works with the same name, A Needle Woman captures set-shot, time-lapse images of the artist standing motionless with her back to the camera on various crowded city streets. Oncoming crowds move toward and around her silent figure as she embodies a moment of stillness surrounded by energetic motion. As Kimsooja describes the experience of making the films:

I felt a great empathy for the humanity around me, just by gazing at people coming and going. It's a short moment, but in it one can grasp the essence of human reality, and I felt affection toward the people I was encountering. All kinds of emotions about people were accumulating in my body and embracing me. The presence of my body seemed to be gradually erased by the crowd. Simultaneously, my sustained immobility was leading me toward a state of peace and balance in my mind, and I passed through the state of tension between the self and others—and reached a point at which I could bring and breathe others into my own body and mind. My heart began to slowly fill with compassion and affection for all human beings living today. Experiencing the extreme state that the body and mind could reach, and embracing sympathies for humankind, paradoxically liberated my mind and body from the crowd.

The artist's selection of locales in this second version of the work resonates with the themes of *Experiments with Truth*. Patan, Nepal; Havana; Rio de Janeiro; N'Djamena, Chad; Sana'a, Yemen; and Jerusalem are all, in the artist's words, "cities in conflict, ones experiencing poverty, violence, postcolonialism, civil wars, and religious conflicts." Kimsooja's meditative installation adeptly manifests both the self-rule/self-control of "soul force" (*satyagraha*) and the spiritual/transcendental aspect of Gandhi's philosophies.



Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman* (video still; Patan, Nepal), 2005. Six-channel video projection, color, 10 min. 40 sec., loop. Courtesy of the Kimsooja Studio



William Kentridge, Felix in Exile (film still), 1994. 35mm film shown as video, black and white with sound, 8 min. 43 sec. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. © 2014 William Kentridge

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, ANIMATED FILMS

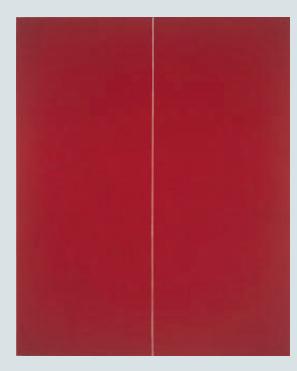
William Kentridge creates distinctive stop-motion films that explore the artist's experience, which was shaped—as was Gandhi's—by the specific and extreme manner in which racial and social distinctions were enforced in South Africa. the artist's birthplace. He grew up under Apartheid ("separation" or racial segregation). Kentridge creates all of his animations without a script or storyboard: the narrative evolves extemporaneously through his signature process of filming successive stages of charcoal drawings as he creates, erases, and revises them. On view is *Johannesburg*, 2nd Greatest City after Paris, 1989, the first animation that Kentridge made. It introduces us to Soho Eckstein, a wealthy businessman/mining magnate, and his foil Felix Teitlebaum, a melancholic poet/artist. Their stories play out against the backdrop of Johannesburg in the subsequent films—Monument, 1990; Mine, 1991 (the year apartheid was repealed); and Felix in Exile, 1994—which are shown in order in a single gallery. In the final gallery, Kentridge's most recent film, Other Faces, 2011, portrays Eckstein's collision with a black preacher outside of a large church. The encounter incites an argument between the two that inflames a crowd of churchgoers. The narrative then dissolves into Eckstein's thoughts and memories as he tries to make sense of how past events have led to his current predicament. As in all of Kentridge's films, the individual's internal psychological and emotional state is inexorably linked to the external world of politics, society, and history.



William Kentridge, *Other Faces* (film still), 2011. 35mm film shown as video, color with sound, 9 min. 36 sec., loop. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. © 2014 William Kentridge

RELATED WORKS FROM THE MENIL COLLECTION

In between the two galleries showing Kentridge's films is a selection of material from the Menil's diverse holdings. It includes works by old masters such as Joshua Reynolds, Aelbert Cuyp, and George Morland that were collected during the course of The Image of the Black in Western Art. A research project initiated by Dominique and John de Menil in the 1960s, it was an ambitious effort to address racism through the study of art and history. Joshua Reynolds's portrait of an African servant in many ways embodies the de Menils' goal for their project, which they hoped would demonstrate, in her words, that "a sketch by a master could reveal a depth of humanity beyond any social condition, race, or color." Also on view are works from the museum's collection of African art. objects chosen to illustrate aspects of the interactions between Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The Portuguese musketeer from Nigeria illustrates the violence that many times accompanied such encounters. The Congolese figure of Toni Malau (Saint Anthony) combines details from European depictions of the Christian saint with those from the traditional faiths of Central Africa. A pair of iron shackles, a remnant of the American slave trade, is a potent reminder of the history of exploitation and oppression in Africa and the African diaspora.



Barnett Newman, *Be I*, 1949.
Oil on canvas, 93½ x 75½ (236.5 x 190.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Annalee Newman.
© 2014 The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Paul Hester

The spiritual dimension in twentieth-century abstract painting is a matter of aesthetically autonomous construction that can reflect spiritual beliefs without ever being a translation of them.

—Ulrich Loock

In the galleries flanking *A Needle Woman*, abstract paintings by Suzan Frecon, Brice Marden, Ad Reinhardt, Frank Stella, and David Novros stimulate moments of quiet reflection. The room with Mark Rothko's alternate paintings created as he prepared the Rothko Chapel commission creates a link with that neighboring institution, one crucial to our experiments with truth, and a vital contributor to the larger community effort of "Gandhi's Legacy: Houston Perspectives," and the art of living nonviolence.

Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Josef Helfenstein.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Gandhi's Legacy: Houston Perspectives, an initiative of the Menil Collection, is an exploration of nonviolence and the resonance of Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy by Houston cultural, educational, and social justice organizations. For further information on numerous public programs and community events, please visit: GandhisLegacyHouston.org.

BOOK

Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence
Edited by Josef Helfenstein and Joseph N. Newland, with essay or reprints by
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Aung San Suu Kyi, and others
352 pages, 221 illus.; hardcover, \$50
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Cover: Some of Gandhi's last possessions, ca. 1948-50. Jamis Otis/GandhiServe

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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