



Gandhi's last possessions. 1948. Photographer unknown.

EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH: GANDHI AND IMAGES OF NONVIOLENCE

**EXHIBITION TRACES THE VISION AND REALITY OF PEACEFUL SOCIAL CHANGE
AS SEEN IN ART THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES AND AROUND THE WORLD**

HOUSTON, TX, May 20, 2014 — Bringing together paintings and sculptures from half a dozen religious traditions, works of contemporary art, a wealth of documentary images and texts—and as the focal point the ideas and example of Mohandas K. Gandhi—the Menil Collection will present ***Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence***. Organized by Menil Director Josef Helfenstein in consultation with the noted Indian artist Amar Kanwar, the exhibition is the first to trace the resonance of the ethic of nonviolence (*satyagraha*, literally “truth-force,” or the outward, transformative power of inner peace) in the visual arts throughout the centuries and around the world. Opening October 2, 2014 (the 145th anniversary of Gandhi’s birth), ***Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence*** will remain on view through February 1, 2015.

Echoing the title of Gandhi’s autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), the exhibition presents more than 130 artworks, artifacts, and documents that shed light on the

theme of nonviolent change: from a stone sculpture of a meditating Jina (seventh century, northeastern India) and a folio of the Quran (mid-seventh century, possibly Medina) through an abstract woodcut by Zarina (2013) and a mixed-media work by Theaster Gates (2014). Also on view will be images of figures from the Abolitionists to Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama, dramatic photographs of events in the Civil Rights movement and documents such as a letter by Albert Einstein on resistance to the Holocaust.

Origins of the Exhibition

A memorial image that evokes the radical simplicity Gandhi chose in his life, and his conviction that historic transformation ought to begin “with the individual, at home” will introduce all of the works and set the tone for ***Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence***. This carefully composed still life, made circa 1948 by an anonymous photographer, shows the only things that Gandhi owned at the time of his death: two pairs of sandals, two dinner bowls, his eyeglasses, a prayer book, and a handful of other small items.

“I must have seen this famous photograph for the first time as a teenager, when I read Mohandas K. Gandhi’s autobiography,” said Helfenstein. “This captivating image not only felt like a portrait *in absentia* of a charismatic person but an allegory of an extraordinary way of life. It was when I started working at the Kunstmuseum Bern that a vague idea emerged that this enigmatic image deserved a more thorough examination. The idea of using it as the catalyst for a project happened in 1998, when the Indian architect Charles Correa gave a lecture at the Kunstmuseum about his design for the memorial museum at Gandhi’s Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. A conversation with Correa encouraged me to begin formulating the idea of an exhibition, which continued to develop after I had the opportunity to meet Professor Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, at the University of Illinois.

“But it was only when I arrived in Houston at the Menil Collection, in 2004, that the idea of a project focusing on Gandhi and images of nonviolence seemed at last to have found the right place to be brought to fruition. There are beautiful works of art and compelling artifacts and documents in this exhibition—and although they may be drawn from different and sometimes distant cultures, I have learned over the many years of conceptualizing this project that they are not unrelated. Our goal is to allow for an undistracted, not didactically over-orchestrated experience of these works, in the hope of eliciting a deeper understanding of their dialogue.

Together, they speak to an ancient, complex topic that has concerned humankind throughout history: how to deal with and overcome violence through nonviolent means.”

Artworks and objects in the exhibition are drawn from the holdings of the Menil Collection, private collections, and institutions including the Rothko Chapel; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Holocaust Museum Houston; the McNay Art Museum, San Antonio; the Morgan Library & Museum, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Yale University Art Gallery; the Library of Congress; the National Portrait Gallery; Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris; and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva.

On View in *Experiments with Truth*

Gandhi’s Final Moments and the Memorialization of His Predecessors:

Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence begins with a gallery dedicated to photographs by Margaret Bourke-White and Henri Cartier-Bresson showing Gandhi toward the end of his life and the events surrounding his funeral. Posters and magazine photographs that testify to the reverence he was accorded after his assassination lead the way toward objects that show how other revered public figures, notably Abraham Lincoln, have been depicted after death. Having opened this historical perspective, the exhibition presents nineteenth-century photographs and documents of figures associated with spiritually inspired movements for social change: Henry David Thoreau, Sojourner Truth, Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale, Henry Dunant (the founder of the Red Cross), and two authors who were especially influential on Gandhi, John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy. Also included in this initial gallery is a selection of Indian carpets (which evoke Gandhi’s emphasis on handcraft) and the sculpture *Prayer Wheel* (1954) by Jean Tinguely.

Religious Traditions of Selflessness and Compassion: In the next gallery are major works of art that exemplify the complex iconography and diverse artistic visualizations of inner peace and self-control in different world religions, including devotional sculptures, paintings, and manuscripts from the religious traditions that informed Gandhi’s thinking. Works on view will include a mid-seventh-century folio from a Quran in Hijazi script, possibly from Medina; a ninth-century copper sculpture of a meditating Jina, from southern India; an eleventh-century sandstone *Head of an Ascetic* from the Candella dynasty of central India; a fifteenth-century

thangka of Buddha from the Ladakh region of the Himalayas; a sixteenth-century Persian illuminated manuscript page depicting the funeral of the Sufi poet Rumi; a seventeenth-century icon of *Saint Onophrius* by the Cretan painter Emmanuel Lambardos; and an etching of *St. Francis Praying* by Rembrandt (1657).

Nonviolent Resistance in Action: This section of the exhibition will focus on images of figures and events associated with Abolitionism, the Civil Rights era, and the struggle against apartheid, among other movements, up through the activities surrounding the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi. Also on view are photographs by Eve Arnold, Bruce L. Davidson, and Danny Lyon showing the color line being crossed during the Civil Rights era; a United Farm Workers poster of Cesar Chavez; and the medal designed by Jim Love (1981) for the Truth and Freedom Awards at the Rothko Chapel. Drawings, prints, portrait photographs, and news photographs mingle with a variety of artworks, including Marlene Dumas's portraits of Nelson Mandela (2004-08), René Magritte's painting *Le Survivant (The Survivor)* (1950), and Robert Gober's untitled installation evoking the sky as glimpsed through a prison window (2003).

Creative Responses to a World Distorted by Violence: Photographs from 1961 by Shomei Tomatsu, evoking the nuclear bombing of Japan through images of humble everyday objects damaged in the blasts, introduce a gallery devoted to creative responses to a world torn by violence. Among the works on view are Yves Klein's painting *Hiroshima* (ca. 1961), Ai Weiwei's *Feet* (2002), Barnett Newman's drawing for the sculpture *Broken Obelisk* (1963) and his painting *Be I* (1949), and Robert Rauschenberg's lithograph *Landmark* (1968).

Religious Traditions of Charity and Social Action: As a counterpart to the images of asceticism and compassion, a gallery dedicated to the charitable ideal will present objects such as the statue of a Green Tara (India, ninth - tenth century), a female Bodhisattva of compassion and action; a wood sculpture of St. Martin and the Beggar (the Netherlands, ca. 1500-1510); and Rembrandt's *Hundred Guilder Print (Christ Healing the Sick)*, 1649. Abstract works on paper by Agnes Martin, Suzan Frecon, and Zarina that evoke a sense of fragility, meditateness, and concentrated action are shown alongside a fragment of a Quran folio of Islamic calligraphy made by the grandson of a conqueror who late in life became a proponent of peace.

The Division Gandhi Sought to Avoid: In the final gallery, photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson show the devastation that resulted from the partition of India and Pakistan. A mixed-media work by Shilpa Gupta, *1:14.9* (2011-12) represents the length of the border between India and Pakistan in the form of a hand-wound ball of thread. Amar Kanwar's widely acclaimed installation, *A Season Outside* (1997)—one of the best-known of the subtle and poetic film and video works of this New Delhi-based artist—shows the inflammatory military ritual at the India-Pakistan border and the burdensome, artificial separation imposed on the people of the region, juxtaposed with texts and images that recall Gandhi's insistence on nonviolence as a form of active, peaceful intervention.

Additional galleries contain contemporary works by artists including Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol, William Kentridge, and Kimsooja, as well as Amar Kanwar's recent installation *The Sovereign Forest* (2010-12), his research project on the effects of population displacement and environmental degradation on communities in Orissa (now Odisha), India.

Website, Public Programs, Publication, Exhibition Tour, and City-Wide Commemoration

A dedicated interactive website, linked to the Menil's main site, will offer an array of information on Gandhi, his followers, and nonviolent struggles for social justice around the world, while serving as a vehicle for commissioning essays and other material surrounding the exhibition. Scheduled to go live one month before the opening of ***Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence***, the website will also feature a live connection to Amar Kanwar's *Sovereign Forest* installation and archive in Orissa.

A full calendar of lectures, panel discussions, film screenings, conversations with artists, and other public programs and events will soon be announced.

An illustrated book of the same title published by the Menil Collection and distributed by Yale University Press accompanies the exhibition. The book is edited by Josef Helfenstein and Joseph N. Newland, with Amar Kanwar as artistic advisor and Vinay Lal, Associate Professor of History at UCLA, as historical advisor.

Following the presentation of *Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence* at the Menil Collection, the exhibition will travel to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva.

In Houston, *Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence* will be central to a city-wide commemoration of the ideas, achievement, and life of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Celebrated at various sites within the Menil campus and at other cultural organizations throughout the city, this commemoration—“Gandhi’s Legacy: Houston Perspectives”—will take place during the run of the exhibition.

About the Menil Collection

A legacy of the late philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil, the Menil Collection opened in 1987 in the Houston neighborhood where the de Menils created the Rothko Chapel in 1971. The Menil’s main museum building anchors a thirty-acre campus, which includes the Cy Twombly Gallery, a site-specific Dan Flavin installation, and outdoor sculpture. Presenting regular rotations of artworks from the growing permanent collection, the Menil also organizes special exhibitions and programs throughout the year, publishes scholarly books, and conducts research into the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The museum is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11a.m. to 7p.m., and charges no admission fee.

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