

Sacred Objects

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson talks about sacred objects. These are things used in ritual prayer and worship as a way of communicating with the sacred. It is a way of linking the everyday world with the sacred world. Many world religions use objects as a link between the common, everyday world and the world of the sacred and supernatural. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Murti

2. Totem Poles

1. Murti

The sacred object may be used to persuade a deity to act or react in a particular way desired by the adherent of a particular tradition, or it could be used to ask for protection and to prevent a deity from causing harm. Often, a ritual will accompany the use of a **sacred object**.

However, in some traditions—such as Islam, Judaism, and some sects of Protestant Christianity—having or worshipping images of a deity is strictly forbidden and looked down upon. In the Hebrew Bible in the book of Deuteronomy, it says: “I am the Lord thy God which brought thee out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods before me. Thou shalt not make thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the waters beneath the earth.”

However, many religious traditions do include prayer and worship of representations of their respective gods. The central act of Hindu worship is to gaze upon the image of a deity in order to gain its blessings. The act of worship is religiously charged in Hinduism because of the belief that the deity is present in the image. These are called **murti**.



Nataraja (Shiva murti) from Tamil Nadu, India

Murti are viewed by Hindus as not simply the likenesses of gods or goddesses. Rather, they are the deities themselves taken form. Here you see a depiction of a devotee worshipping Shiva, here as a cosmic dancer. Shiva also manifests as destroyer and transformer.





In Hinduism, a devotee looks within and beyond the murti to call on Shiva in His spiritual body of light. (Image circa 1000 CE.)



TERMS TO KNOW

Sacred Object

An object that may be used by a particular religious tradition to persuade a deity to act in a certain way.

Murti/Murthi

A Hindu statue of a deity gazed upon to gain blessing

2. Totem Poles

Other customs and rituals involving sacred objects that are linked to the spirit world include many Native American traditions. **Totem poles** are sacred objects of the tribes from the Pacific Northwest, such as Willapa, Chinook, Tlingit, and other indigenous cultures.

These are monumental sculptures carved from large trees, usually cedar trees. The word totem is derived from the Ojibwe word “odoodem,” meaning “his kinship group.” While they are not objects of worship, the meanings of the designs on totem poles and their purposes are as varied as the cultures that make them.



Totem Poles in Kitwanga, British Columbia, circa 19th Century.

Photo by Darren Kirby

Totem poles may recount familiar legends, clan lineages, or notable events. Some poles celebrate cultural beliefs, but others are mostly artistic presentations. Certain types of totem poles are part of mortuary structures and incorporate grave boxes with carved supporting poles or recessed backs for grave boxes. Poles illustrate stories that commemorate historic persons, represent shamanic powers, or provide objects of public ridicule.



TERM TO KNOW

Totem Pole

A sacred object, often a monumental sculpture carved from large trees, by cultures of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast of North America.



SUMMARY

A sacred object is an item that's used during worship and prayer as a means of communicating with the sacred. It's a way of linking the everyday world with the unseen. Judaism, some branches of Christianity, and Islam are religions that prohibit the use of idolatry and creating images of God. In Hinduism, **murti**

are a representation of deities. It is believed that the god manifests him- or herself in the object when the devotee is gazing at it and involved in a devotional activity. You also learned about the Native American tradition in the Pacific Northwest of constructing **totem poles** as a way of connecting with ancestor spirits, nature spirits, in general, and as a way of binding the community with the sacred.

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