

Devotion and ritual

The terms 'devotion' and 'ritual' evoke practices that are followed piously, in a prescribed order, often involving the performance of rites or ceremonies which are regularly and routinely observed. In the ancient and tribal worlds, devotional and ritualistic acts are remarkably varied and complex. Within regions, societies developed specific mythologies and belief systems unique to that locality, and each has its stories and legends that have become integral to their culture. Different groups produced devotional objects—some for ritual use—that are the hallmarks of their cultures and civilisations.

The objects in this exhibition speak not of one codified or universal belief system, but a compilation of many different customs and traditions. Selected archaeological and ethnographic works from the Mediterranean, Indus Valley, African, Mesoamerican and Oceanic regions represent unique artefacts and relics associated with ceremonial practices, belief systems and sacred customs of the ancient and tribal worlds.

Despite the diversity and multiplicity of forms in this exhibition all the works have in common a focus on the human figure. Rooted in archaic beliefs or ancestral traditions, the human figure is an integral element in most ancient civilisations and tribal cultures. Many of these images constituted a people's representational vocabulary; some also had magical or supernatural attributes. Commonly found on vernacular and ceremonial objects, such as figurines, sculptures, amulets, decorative items and masks, the representation of the human effigy, or face, is an enduring subject that transcends both time and place.

The Keith and Zara Joseph Collection

This exhibition features for the first time selected works from the Keith and Zara Joseph Collection, which was donated to the University of Melbourne in 2009 by Peter Joseph, Marilyn Sharpe and Susan Rubenstein in honour of their parents Keith Joseph (1913–1982) and Zara Joseph (1913–2007).

The Keith and Zara Joseph Collection is a significant collection of thirty rare ancient (Near Eastern and Egyptian), classical (Greek and Roman) and Mesoamerican (Valdivian) antiquities, spanning more than three millennia. Highlights of this assemblage include: bronze finials from Luristan; Syro-Hittite Bronze Age votive terracotta figurines, a bronze statuette of the Alexandrian Harpocrates; a marble seated statue of the goddess Cybele; Hellenistic Tanagra-style moulded terracotta female figurines; Roman period heads and figures; and miniature idols from Ecuador.

Keith Joseph acquired most of the works from antiquities dealers in Europe (principally France) in the late 1970s and early 1980s and had some of the objects authenticated at the British Museum in London. The collection, with its particular focus on figurines and effigies, reflects the antiquarian interests of Keith Joseph, and the family's generous gift to the university ensures these objects will inspire future generations of students and the wider community.