

# Religious museum designed to provoke conversation

BY ANGELA BIANCHI  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

GLASGOW, Scotland — This city's newest attraction, The St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, offers visitors a cerebral alternative to the usual motley crew of historical museums and picture galleries.

Designed to provoke conversation and stimulate our emotions, the museum, dedicated to Glasgow's patron saint, endeavors to showcase the central importance of religion in daily life.

Through icons, pictures and text, the museum's collection of sacred relics offers the lay person theological insight into seven prominent religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Taoism.

Nestled in a quiet corner of downtown Glasgow, the multi-faith museum is divided into three galleries devoted to art, religious life and religion in western Scotland.

At the main entrance a Buddhist-Zen garden acts as the museum's corner of tranquillity. Specially raked by a Zen garden expert, the white sand represents the sea, the rocks are for mountains and grain for land. Visitors are cautioned not to walk over the garden, which is considered a sacred site by Buddhists.

Half way into the museum hangs Salvador Dali's famous "Christ of St. John of the Cross" (1951), which was slashed by vandals in 1960 and later restored.

Steps away on a raised shelf rests the 19th century bronze statue of Hindu God Shiva, because as Hindu custom orders, no person is allowed to look down on this God. In the same room, a familiar mediative object, the

Islamic prayer rug, points to Mecca.

The museum has attracted numerous visitors since it opened last April. One unwelcome visitor was a religious fanatic who attempted to vandalize the Shiva to protest the exhibition of a foreign God in a Calvinist country.

The most recent controversy stirred up around a color photo of a young woman being circumcised in Cario, in 1980. Some visitors were apparently offended by the photo's graphic details, but fortunately the curators have chosen to keep the photo on display.

The main religious exhibit takes us on a chronological life journey from birth to the after life.

The various displays focus on areas like spirits and saints; divine rule; conversion; war and peace; persecution; marriage; adulthood; sex; religion as a profession and coming of age.

For believers and non-believers, a careful walk through every display requires about an hour.

A statue of Isis nursing Horace, the child she had with her brother, is an interesting part of the birth display, which holds objects dedicated to fertility, motherhood and ceremonies, like name giving, circumcision and baptism.

A picture of Adam and Eve is to remind us of the original creation.

For marriage and sex, the symbols become even stronger: the Western wedding dress, yin and yang Chinese symbol of perfection, Lourdes water bottle, charms, St. Brigitte's cross and a color photo of a four-year-old bride with her husband taken in 1970 in Rajasthan, India.

The text accompanying the display reads, "... power of sexual union is

an important symbol for some religions, and for others sex is a dangerous temptation." It also touches on modern-day issues, like arranged marriage and divorce.

The subject of spirits and saints, pilgrimages and healing charms is handled in a light-hearted fashion, whereas a sensitive hand was involved in mounting the display on conversion, called Spreading the Word.

To highlight the often tragic consequences of mixing politics and religion, a memorable picture of Bloody Sunday, (Jan. 30, 1972, a day in which 30 people were shot in Derry, Northern Ireland) hangs in close proximity to a smiling photo of Pope John Paul II.

The war and peace display takes us on a historical journey starting with the 12th century Holy Wars to present-day Ireland, Lebanon and Israel. Objects of art of particular interest include the Christian sword, the Islamic armor, a head-hunter shield, the samurai hero, a ceramic statue of Joan of Arc, and a beautiful peace banner that dates back to the peace marches of the late '50s.

Every so often the curators have purposely planted a photo that startles the viewer into questioning the revolutionary nature of every religion. In this last display, emotions are revved high by a photo of a pit grave of massacred Jews, uncovered at Belsen in 1945, and by an actual prayer book used in a Wustegiersdors concentration camp.

■ St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, 2 Castle Street, Glasgow. Admission: Free; Open Mon.-Sat. 10-5; Sun. 11-5.

Angela Bianchi is a Toronto-based freelance writer