



Is God evolving? Totems in contemporary art



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This article explores the evolution of totemic symbolism in contemporary visual art and its profound link with religious concepts, particularly the image of God. It examines how artists reinterpret sacred themes through totems, reflecting both historical religious traditions and modern societal transformations. Through a review of totemic representations from ancient to contemporary artworks, this study illuminates the evolving portrayal of divine figures – from traditional religious icons to more personalised spiritual symbols. This evolution not only signifies changes in artistic expression but also suggests a deepening societal understanding of divinity. The analysis highlights the totem's role as a mediator between the human and the divine, offering insights into the spiritual connections that transcend conventional religious frameworks. This research not only enriches the discourse on the relationship between art and religion but also underscores the dynamic interaction between cultural heritage and contemporary artistic exploration.

Contribution: This study enriches the field of art history and religious studies by tracing the transformative representation of totems in art from ancient symbolism to modern reinterpretations. It underscores the totem's role as a dynamic symbol in contemporary visual culture, facilitating deeper spiritual connections and dialogues across various cultural and religious landscapes. The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how contemporary art mediates complex theological concepts, thus offering new perspectives on the intersection of art, religion and spirituality.

Keywords: Totem; contemporary art; religious symbolism; spiritual evolution; artistic expression.

Introduction

The fusion of visual culture and religious themes

In visual culture, religious themes and symbols not only retain their traditional significance but are also reinterpreted and integrated into a variety of expressive forms. From the Neolithic era to the modern day, the depiction of God and its religious meaning have evolved in response to changes in social, cultural and religious perspectives.

Early history: Art as a vassal of religion

In early history, art was almost entirely a vassal of religion, with God and religious services at the centre of artistic creation. This phenomenon continued from the Neolithic period through the Middle Ages, with artists predominantly focussing on religious themes, reflecting society's deep reliance on religion (Elkins 2004:7).¹ While the focus of religious themes in much of Western artwork was primarily on Christianity, discussions on the relationship between art and religion span the entire history of various religions, including Hinduism and Islam, which also have rich traditions of religious art. These discussions reveal differing attitudes and interpretations of images in early Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy and Byzantine Orthodoxy, particularly contrasting the periods of Iconoclasm with the veneration of icons in Byzantine Orthodoxy.

Renaissance and Reformation: Shifting paradigms

The Renaissance and the Reformation marked significant shifts in human thought, with artists beginning to transcend the confines of religious service to explore broader themes. During this period, the ties between art and religion began to loosen, with artists' creations no longer limited to traditional religious subjects but encompassing a wider array of exploration:

The relations between art and religion can be observed through conflict, autonomy, dialogue, and integration – the point of view depends on the examiner's own position, but is also related to the time period under examination, or, in other words, changes with the course of history. Thus, in the Christian

¹Elkins (2004) insists that from the Neolithic period to the Middle Ages, art served religion, continuing up until the Renaissance. See Elkins (2004:7).

Note: Special Collection: SASRF - Empathy and Religion.

Church, right from the beginning, but also in subsequent centuries, there have been two sides to the relationship between art and religion – the deification of images, and the hostility toward images. The second of the ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai admonished the Israelites ‘not to make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth’ (Exodus 20:4). Therefore, the production of primarily three-dimensional figures of God the Father or of Christ was unthinkable for the early Christians; the risk of confusing the image with the one being depicted was too great. (Andreson 2013:194–195)

Secular themes and religious manifestation

Tillich’s (1970) theory emphasises that even artworks with secular themes can exhibit religiosity because the presence and power of God are visible in society. This perspective reflects a broad understanding of the manifestation of God in art, suggesting that God’s image is no longer confined to traditional religious icons but can be presented in art through various forms and themes. Tillich (1970) explains that:

Whatever the subject matter which an artist chooses, however strong or weak his artistic form, he cannot help but betray by his style his own ultimate concern, as well as that of his group, and his period. He cannot escape religion even if he rejects religion, for religion is the state of being ultimately concerned. And in every style the ultimate concern of a human group or period is manifest. It is one of the most fascinating tasks to decipher the religious meaning of styles of the past such as the archaic, the classic, the naturalistic, and to discover that the same characteristics which one discovered in an artistic creation can also be found in the literature, philosophy, and morals of a period. (p. 70)

Secular subjects can also be seen as religious themes.² In Tillich’s (1970) theoretical perspective, artworks can manifest religiosity even without religious content or symbols, as God exists in society, and God’s power is visible. Artworks from the 19th to the 20th century, based on personal mythology and religious themes rather than propagandistic religious subjects, illustrate this concept. Many Impressionist artists, particularly Georges Seurat, Oscar-Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne, eschewed religious depictions, focussing instead on portraying natural light.

Modern art: Personal myths and new religious forms

Entering the 19th and 20th centuries, with the emergence of modern art, artists began to freely explore personal myths and new religious forms. The art during these periods transcended the constraints of religious tradition, demonstrating an interest in esoteric and theosophical forms of spirituality. Modern art not only challenged traditional interpretations of God’s image but also introduced new religious concepts, such as exploring mythological thinking in primal cultures through ‘totemic art’.

2. I appreciate the anonymous reviewer’s suggestion. To address the question, ‘Can secular subjects express religious themes?’ I clarify as follows: artworks with secular themes can indeed exhibit religiosity because the presence and power of God are visible in society. Tillich (1970:70) clearly states that the style of an artwork can reveal the ultimate concern of the artist, their group, and their era. This ultimate concern is essentially a religious experience, manifesting even in artworks with secular themes devoid of religious content or symbols.

Transforming image of God in art

These evolutions reveal the transforming image of God in art over time. From early religious services to individual explorations in modern art, artists have significantly altered how they perceive God and God’s role in human life. This shift not only reflects the evolution of societal and cultural ideas but also deepens the understanding of religion and divinity. *Is God Evolving? The God in Art* discusses this historical transformation, highlighting the irreplaceable role of art in exploring and expressing the image of God and its religious significance.

Contemporary visual culture: Adaptability and universality

This phenomenon showcases the universality and adaptability of religious themes, especially regarding God and spirituality, within ever-changing cultural contexts. In contemporary visual culture, particularly concerning the relationship between religion and art in the 21st century, we can demonstrate this through specific examples such as installation art, video art, performance art, digital imagery and graffiti art.

Anish Kapoor: Exploring the cosmos

Anish Kapoor’s installations, like *Cloud Gate*, engage viewers with existential questions through their reflective nature and form. While not overtly religious, Kapoor’s works symbolically link humanity with the cosmos, merging the inner self with the external world.

For example, his installation *Cloud Gate*, although not overtly religious in symbolism, its reflective nature and form inspire viewers to ponder their relationships with the sky, ground and themselves, symbolically linking humanity with the cosmos and the inner self with the external world. Kapoor’s works, through this fusion of form and content, showcase art as a powerful medium for exploring religious and spiritual issues (Arca 2019:17).³

Bill Viola: Modern reinterpretations of Christian themes

In the discourse on Bill Viola’s artwork *Man of Sorrows*, the piece reinterprets the traditional Christian theme of the *Man of Sorrows* through the medium of modern video art. Viola’s rendition, along with his other explorations of the theme of suffering, such as *Dolorosa* and *Unspoken (Silver and Gold)*, provides profound insights into how religious and sacred themes can be expressed and experienced in contemporary art.

Particularly, *Man of Sorrows* is not merely a static religious image; it is a dynamic video installation that portrays a man in a state of perpetual sorrow, transforming this continuous emotional state into a profound religious experience. In this way, Viola’s work exposes the deep emotional and spiritual

3. Arca (2019), after describing Anish Kapoor’s artwork ‘Cloud Gate’ (also known as ‘The Bean’), refers to Biles (2009)’ explanation: ‘the people who congregate within the chamber of the sculpture evoke something like a communal religious experience, which makes Cloud Gate an emblem of enchantment elicited through a recovery of religion’ (Biles 2009, as cited in Arca 2019:17).

dimensions of religious themes, directly immersing the viewer in this experience. Through this innovative approach, the artwork engages with viewers on a deeply emotional level, facilitating a unique spiritual journey that challenges traditional representations of piety and devotion in art:

Man of Sorrows is the portrait of an anonymous individual's encounter with deep sorrow pain and loss. Like the traditional devotional icons of the suffering Christ (traditionally referred to as the 'Man of Sorrows') here is an image of a man in tears ... With the image cycle continuously repeating and his suffering unrelenting, he remains in a state of perpetual tears and eternal sadness. (Bernier 2023:228–229)

Bernier (2023) demonstrates how Bill Viola explores Christian themes through his artworks, showcasing how he utilises modern technological means – video art – to provide new interpretations and expressions for these ancient themes. By integrating traditional religious symbolism with contemporary art forms, Viola's works reveal the universality and timelessness of religious experiences, while also reflecting the profound inner experiences of individuals confronting suffering and sorrow.

Marina Abramović: Performance and spiritual awakening

When discussing the religious themes in Marina Abramović's artworks, her performance *Rhythm 10* offers a compelling argument. In this performance, Abramović executed a series of actions, recording the sounds on a tape recorder. After completing the actions, she replayed the recording and attempted to replicate the stabbings of her fingers with the same knife, mimicking the previous motions and mistakes. This performance art piece's themes of self-sacrifice and the experience of pain resonate with religious themes of asceticism and self-transcendence, emphasising the importance of physical experience and suffering in the process of spiritual awakening.

Olafur Eliasson: Human cognition and the divine

Olafur Eliasson's work, particularly *The Weather Project*, serves as an example of showcasing religious themes. This example reinforces the argument about how digital artists explore religious themes in their work.

The Weather Project (2003–2004), displayed at the Tate Modern in London, utilised lighting and mist machines to create a massive simulation of the sun, offering a breathtaking, religious-like experience. Eliasson's work demonstrates human cognition and worship of higher powers, while prompting viewers to reflect on humanity's role within nature and delve into deep contemplation about existence, creation and cosmic order (Sosler 2022:248).⁴ It reveals human awe towards the universe and nature, a core concept in many religious traditions.

4.Schachter (2016) describes, 'Closer to Rosen's historical outline of the sublime is Olafur Eliasson's "The Weather Project" (2003–2004) in which lighting a large orb and haze machines created the effect of a blazing sunset on the inside of the Tate in London. This work does the unthinkable; it contains nature'. See Sosler (2022:248).

Andres Serrano: Challenging religious norms

Photographer Andres Serrano's work, especially *Piss Christ*, represents his challenge to social norms and religious concepts. This piece, immersing a crucifix of Jesus Christ in the photographer's urine, explores the nature of religious icons and the boundaries of religious belief. Serrano's choice of action and medium sparked widespread controversy and discussion on the limits between art and blasphemy, faith and freedom of expression. The *Morgue* series showcases how Serrano uses the theme of death to challenge modern society's aversion to and secularised views of death, revealing the fragility of life and the inevitability of death through grotesque and provocative imagery (Sosler 2022:562).

Regarding *Piss Christ* and other works by Andres Serrano featuring religious themes, Serrano sees himself as a religious artist, with the religious elements in his works reflecting his attraction to religious aesthetics and his questioning of religious dogma. In addition, Serrano's works often provoke strong reactions from the public and critics, which in turn confirms his success in challenging viewers' inherent perceptions of religion, death and societal norms.

Banksy: Alienation and connection

The religious theme in the artwork *Space Girl and Bird* by the street artist Banksy, depicting a dialogue between a space girl wearing a heavy helmet and a bird, subtly hints at the alienation and connection between humans and nature, as well as the impact of this relationship on religious understanding.⁵ This piece is interpreted as a religious reflection on the relationship between people and the environment in modern society, where the central heart-shaped image symbolises the potential for love and connection, even when seemingly isolated by a technologically centred and self-focussed worldview.

Art and religion: Coexistence and mutual enhancement

Some critics may perceive art and religion as antagonistic in the modern context. However, Schachter (2016) endeavours to demonstrate that the relationship between art and religion is not always adversarial. This perspective challenges the notion present in some existing literature that contemporary art and religion are irreconcilably conflicted. In Ben Schachter's (2016) review, the approach primarily explores Aaron Rosen's *Art and Religion in the 21st Century*. According to Schachter's (2016) review, Rosen's book is depicted as a comprehensive collection and analysis of the intersection between contemporary art and religion, grounded in extensive historical and contemporary art research. By delving into Rosen's work, Schachter (2016) aims to illustrate, with rich examples, that art and religion are not always in opposition. Schachter (2016) points out that Rosen introduces the concept of the sublime and demonstrates, through the

5.For a commentary on the work, see Cruchley (2010): 'Banksy offers us such a curious collision of images here, conveying simultaneously intimacy and alienation. The Space girl lives in her own bubble represented by her great helmet. Is she from the same planet as this little bird? Yet the heart hovers above these two figures. Perhaps the heart signifies what exists between these two figures or is yet still beyond them' (p. 198).

analysis of various artworks, how art and religion can coexist and even mutually enhance each other in certain contexts. Aaron (2015) posits that art is always, in some way, connected to religion, allowing people to access the realm of the spiritual through art. He also suggests that religious practitioners could learn from the ways art and religion coexist, as both provide potent perspectives that help us see each other and perhaps ourselves more clearly (Aaron 2015).

I concur with these views, as they propose that religious practitioners can learn from the coexistence of art and religion, offering powerful lenses through which we can gain clearer insights into one another and perhaps a clearer vision of God and ourselves.

Multidimensional interpretations of religious art

First perspectives: Studies in material and visual culture in the history of religious art

Contemporary visual art exerts a profound impact in challenging and reinterpreting religious concepts, particularly the evolving notions of God. The research of theorists such as Durkheim, Eliade, Plate and Belting, along with T.J. Clark and his theory of *The Social History of Art*, highlights how artists explore the complex interactions between society and religion through their work.⁶ Plate's (2005) in-depth discussion on the technical reproducibility of art demonstrates how artworks are liberated from ritualistic dependencies and established on new political practices, providing a theoretical basis for understanding the connection between contemporary art and religious traditions.

Plate (2005) also analysed how the Bakhtinian movement and new media technologies facilitate the widespread dissemination of religious symbols, and how he applied religious ideas such as Kabbalistic mysticism for political purposes, deepening our understanding of the relationships between religion, art and politics. These insights offer new pathways for exploring the role of religion in contemporary artistic expression, as well as new perspectives on the relationship between the individual and the divine.

Belting (1994) adopts an interdisciplinary research approach, examining the role and significance of images in human culture from a broad perspective, revealing the social and cultural dimensions of images. In China, the extensive exploration of contemporary art and its interaction with Christian forms demonstrates the richness and expansiveness of the literature in this field. This interdisciplinary exploration covers traditional religions such as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as modern interpretations of totemism, showing how contemporary art reflects on and questions religious themes through the study of visual and material culture, and anthropological analysis.

⁶ Additional scholars include Plate (2005), Morgan (2005), Promey (2003), Elkins (2004), Gouveia (2023), Apostolos-Cappadona (2005), and Belting (1994).

Case studies

In recent years, contemporary art exhibitions have extensively explored themes of religious and so-called 'primitive' art, both in China and globally. Notably, the *Situation and Care: The 5th China Christian Art Exhibition* held in Nanjing in 2015 and the *First China Religious Art Exhibition: Christian Art Showcases the Belief, Hope, and Love of Christians* at Peking University Library in 2014, have demonstrated the profound influence of the Christian spirit on the transformation of contemporary Chinese art (Christian Times 2014, 2015). The curators' comments emphasise the contemporaneity and professionalism displayed by Christian art, observing that it provides a clear direction for the transformation of contemporary art and reflects the profound influence of faith on artists' creativity.

Simultaneously, in the domain of 'godless' primitive art, modern artists and curators have explored Western admiration and imitation of non-Western cultures through exhibitions such as 'Literary Primitivism', *Primitive Art*, and others such as *TOTEM* and *Totems & Relics* (Art News Africa 2024; De Souza Gallery De Souza Gallery 2023; The Art Story n.d.). These exhibitions showcase the impact of primitive art on the work of modern artists and simultaneously reflect complex views on primitivism and cultural appropriation.

These exhibitions collectively emphasise how religious and 'primitive' concepts in art and cultural practice are reinterpreted and integrated into modern society. Whether it's the modern transformation of Christian art or contemporary explorations of primitive art, these displays highlight the central role of art in cross-cultural dialogue and cultural re-identification processes. They not only reveal artists' focus on traditional religious and cultural heritage but also showcase new understandings and innovative expressions of these themes in a globalised context.

Evaluation

In the exploration of the 'God Problem' in art exhibitions, Morgan (2005) and Cain (2001) offer two distinctly different perspectives on the in-depth analysis of religious visual culture. This exploration revolves around profound spiritual and theological questions, while also touching upon how religion is incorporated into the structure of contemporary art from an anthropological perspective. In his work *The Sacred Gaze*, Morgan (2005) examines religious visual culture from a broader sociological and anthropological perspective, particularly emphasising the sociological function of art and religion as visual enterprises and the importance of 'aura' management. He views the 'aura' as a concept closely related to the divine, considering the production of sacredness to be a social process that crosses a network of interactive institutions, involving weaving various kinds of artworks into networks of relationships that stabilise their divinity.

In contrast, Cain (2001), in her article *Playing with Totems*, adopts a method more focussed on form and symbolic

meaning, exploring the status and influence of primitive art in modern art. She specifically addresses how primitivism has been constructed and misunderstood in Western art history and how this misunderstanding has influenced the comprehension and imitation of non-Western cultures. Cain's (2001) analysis delves into the application of primitivism in art and its simplification and misunderstanding of other cultures, highlighting the complex interplay between art and religion in cultural self-analysis.

By contrasting the viewpoints of Morgan (2005) and Cain (2001), we observe the complexity of interpreting religion in contemporary art exhibition catalogues from an anthropological and/or sociological perspective. This anthropological lens allows art and religion to be 'thickly' described as interrelated practices shaped and formed by the broader socio-cultural world. However, this approach also has its limitations, as it may lead to thin interpretations of other aspects of religious significance in art studies. Morgan's (2005) sociological and visual culture analysis offers a framework for understanding how religious images circulate and are consumed in contemporary society, while Cain's (2001) critique of primitivism reveals how Western culture's simplification and misunderstanding of non-Western cultures have shaped our understanding of primitive art.

Together, these perspectives showcase how contemporary art exhibitions explore religion from an anthropological angle, revealing the complex interactions between art and religion within visual culture. Through such analysis, we can not only gain a deeper understanding of the religious and cultural implications behind artworks but also recognise the importance of an interdisciplinary approach when studying religious visual culture.

Second perspective – Studies in spirituality and religious spirituality in the history of religious art

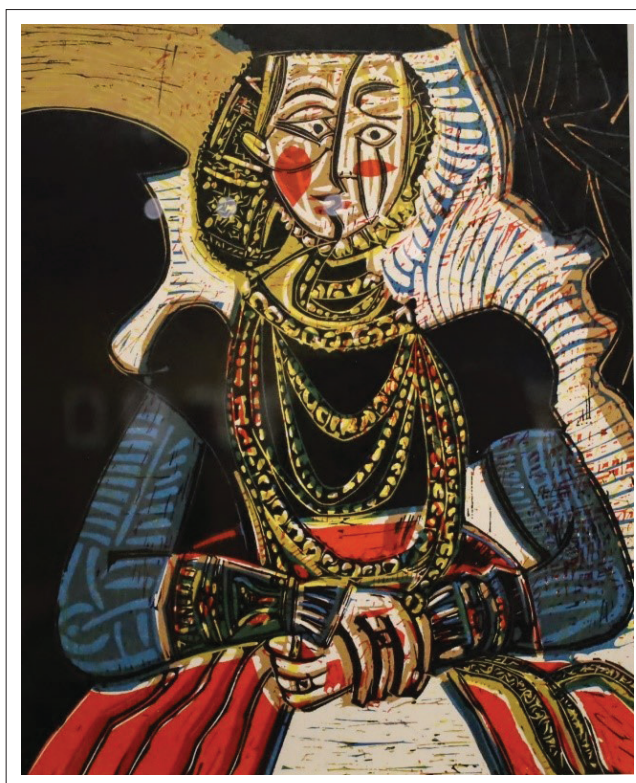
Transpersonal art and religion

Beyond contemporary Christian art, there emerged another trend in the 20th century where religion was embraced as a new, alternative form of spirituality in modern art. From Cézanne to Van Gogh, modernists and surrealists deeply explored religious elements as themes within their artworks, transforming art into substitutes for personal mythologies and new religions. During this period, some artists showed a keen interest in new forms of spirituality, such as mysticism, theosophy and idealism. For instance, futurism evolved into a special quasi-religious movement that integrated religion and mythology, casting the artist in the role of 'God'.

Examining the relationship between religion and art during the 19th and 20th centuries, especially around the Enlightenment, reveals a divergence. Modern art broke away from the confines of traditional religion, positioning itself as an independent form of art while creating its own myths and spiritual narratives. Moreover, modern art exhibited a strong interest in new forms of spirituality such as

alchemy, theosophy, witchcraft and shamanism, significantly impacting its theory and practice. Examples include Pollock's connection to primal religions, Picasso's relationship with African masks (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), and the avant-garde futurism's association with mythology.

The theme of primal cultures in modern art is intricately linked to the ideological background of artists opposing the Enlightenment. Since the 1990s, artists have been renewing their work with images and objects from 'primal' cultures to evade the influence of institutional religions, particularly Christianity. During the Enlightenment, religion was deemed



Source: Photograph taken by Aixin Zhang

FIGURE 1: Pablo Picasso (1958), *Portrait of a Woman after Cranach the Younger*, West Bund Museum, Shanghai, China.



Source: Photograph taken by Aixin Zhang

FIGURE 2: Pablo Picasso (1955), *Les femmes d'Alger, version O*, West Bund Museum, Shanghai, China.

corrupt and modernity secular, prompting artists to contest the Enlightenment's inherent ideologies and contemplate art in a way functionally similar to religion. Morgan (2005) reminds us that the rituals and objects of non-Western cultures have always been an indispensable element in modern art creation, ensuring the freedom of art as a cultural force requires the appropriation and proper utilisation of non-Western cultural resources (Morgan 2005).

Ethnological and area studies have revealed the existence of ancient Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern civilisations, which are rich in philosophical and spiritual traditions. According to Eliade (1987), although these ancient civilisations lack some of the modern materials and cultural foundations necessary for science and industry, they still possess a soulfulness absent in our industrial culture. Therefore, the discriminatory or speculative perspectives of the 18th and 19th centuries should not be applied to viewing the spiritual cultures of the Other, primal or exotic, especially because many modern artworks are imbued with primal religious or exotic spiritual cultures. Considering this, it seems inappropriate to avoid discussing the religious significance among these works. For instance, in a study carried out by Andreson (2013), the concept of mythological thinking is found in Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism theory and practice. Andreson (2013) emphasises that we should focus on the mythological thinking related to primal religions, which the concept and artistic practice of Suprematism blur. According to Andreson's (2013) observation, it can be considered that Suprematist formal innovation was driven by mythological thinking from primal religions. Thus, these studies demonstrate a close connection between Malevich's art and the mythological thinking of primal religions, often propelling the development of the first generation of abstraction.

Case study: Western Totems and contemporary art case study

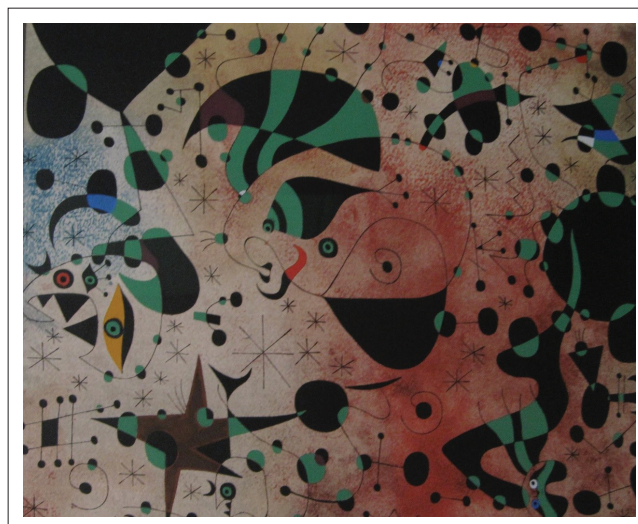
Totems hold a prominent place in the realm of Surrealism, particularly exemplified in the works of artists such as Joan Miró. Braun (1989) points out that Henry Moore's work was deeply influenced by pre-Columbian art, further underlining the significance of 'totems' in Surrealism not just as visual elements but as bridges connecting modern individuals with ancient cultural traditions. The works of Henry Moore and Joan Miró, among others, represent a form of formalist narrative that elevates primal humanity to a tradition, showcasing a typical mode of biomorphic abstraction that emphasises organic over geometric forms of abstract art (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

In the context of Abstract Expressionism, the concept of totems also finds its place in the works of artists such as Tony Smith. Masheck (1995) observes that abstraction and detachment in Tony Smith's Minimalism are manifested through crystalline forms, reflecting the impact of anthropomorphism and animism, linking different artists through deep philosophical and aesthetic concepts.



Source: Photograph taken by Aixin Zhang

FIGURE 3: Joan Miró (1941), *Ciphers and Constellations in Love with a Woman*, West Bund Museum, Shanghai, China.



Source: Photograph taken by Aixin Zhang

FIGURE 4: Joan Miró (date unknown), *Woman and Bird in the Night*, West Bund Museum, Shanghai, China.

During the 1940s, totems became a focal point of creation for New York artists such as Barnett Newman. Rushing (1988) explores the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy and Northwest Coast Indian art on Newman's abstract sublime concept, highlighting the central place of totems in his art. As a form and concept, totems not only influenced other artists of the same period, like David Smith, but also had a wide-reaching impact both within and outside the art world. Particularly in the 1940s in America, totems emerged in 'Western art' as a primordial metaphor for primal humanity. This period saw American Neo-Expressionism offering new gestalt perspectives to this form through its vertical axes and mythical imagery.

Examples of contemporary Chinese art exhibitions

In the exploration of contemporary art, the theme of totems is associated not only with positive and unified spiritual aspects

but also with diverse and multifaceted interpretations. Through a series of international and Chinese exhibition cases, artists and curators have delved deeply into the role and significance of totems in modern society, revealing diverse interpretations of spiritual concepts.

The exhibitions *Totem: Sacred Beings & Spirit Objects* and *Totems – Pink Noise Project* explore totems as objects of ritualistic dimensions, demonstrating how artists explore the concept of the sacred in their unique ways. These exhibitions, through the artists' exploration of ritualised processes and direct representation of physical totem forms, challenge traditional understandings of spiritual concepts, emphasising the complex interaction between spirit and matter in modern society.

Mysterious Objects – Yan Zhilong Contemporary Art Exhibition and *Mirror of Birds – Yan Zhilong Contemporary Art Exhibition* showcase artist Yan Zhilong's in-depth exploration of totemism and mysticism (see Figure 5 to Figure 7). These exhibitions not only examine the role of totems in individual and societal relationships but also break through the limitations of traditional artistic mediums, exploring the entangled relationship between totemic consciousness and contemporary art through oil painting, sculpture and ink.

The organisational approach of these exhibitions is similar to the *As Above, So Below: Portals, Visions, Spirits, and Mystics* exhibition held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in 2017. They deconstruct spiritual concepts into different thematic groups, thereby exploring the diversity and complexity of the spiritual world. This method of exploration reveals multiple interpretations of spirituality in contemporary art, showcasing art's unique ability as a visual technology to construct and maintain sacred objects, while also presenting the complex interaction between art and religion within visual culture.

Conclusion

By delving into the spiritual elements in contemporary art, this article reveals the openness of art dialogue and the diversified expressions of religion within contemporary art themes. This diversity is commendable, as it broadens our perspectives on religious and spiritual exploration, encouraging cross-cultural and interfaith dialogues. However, this openness and diversity also pose challenges to the rigour of art history. As William (2017) observed, mysticism, while appealing and often seeking to validate religious experiences, its excessively personal mode of expression may not establish a universal authority in broader cultural and academic discussions. Therefore, while appreciating the rich spiritual experiences offered by these artworks, we must also approach them with a critical eye, questioning the theological foundations behind these pieces.

Third Perspective – Theoretical and theological and/or philosophical analysis of religion and art

In the interplay between contemporary visual art and theology, Kearney (2010) introduces a novel perspective in



Source: Drawing by Zhilong Yan

FIGURE 5: Work by Zhilong Yan.



Source: Drawing by Zhilong Yan

FIGURE 6: Work by Zhilong Yan.



Source: Drawing by Zhilong Yan

FIGURE 7: Work by Zhilong Yan.

his concept of 'Anatheism' (Kearney 2010), which is not just a new way of understanding God but a radical new approach to perceiving and experiencing the sacred. Kearney (2010) argues that the 'disappearance' of traditional theological concepts has opened a door for us to explore spiritual and mystical experiences as depicted by modernist literary figures such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf.

Meanwhile, James Elkins in his book discusses the systematic exclusion of religious art within the modern art world (Elkins 2004). Elkins observes that while the art world may accept artworks that critique religion, there is little place for artists who directly express conventional religious beliefs. This indicates a systemic oversight and exclusion of works with explicit religious and spiritual themes within modernist culture, reflecting a broader cultural phenomenon of marginalising traditional religious beliefs. The role of theology in contemporary visual art is complex: on the one hand, it challenges and reinterprets traditional religious concepts; on the other hand, it involves a subtle yet ongoing exploration of religious elements within cultural and artistic practices.

Diverse perspectives in academia: Interpreting modern and contemporary art through theological philosophy

The philosophy of theology offers a multifaceted and complex perspective for understanding modern and contemporary art, encompassing a broad range of philosophical and cultural criticism. Many thinkers have explored different theoretical paths, such as Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the 'Death of God', which signifies a gradual decline in traditional religious beliefs and authority in modern society. Some scholars believe that contemporary art reflects the societal and cultural state following the 'Death of God'. The concept of 'God after God' might refer to the emergence of new spiritual or religious forms following the weakening of traditional religious beliefs. Nietzsche's post-'Death of God' theological transformation has significantly influenced art. This includes discussions on the 'God after God' concept, where thinkers such as Kearney (2010) perceive a non-religious theological model manifesting in modern art. Additionally, concepts such as 'enchanted secularity' and new materialism have been proposed as new ways to understand the relationships between theology and materiality in art.⁷

From another perspective, modern and contemporary art serve as platforms for engaging in dialogue with traditional theology. Unlike scholars who perceive fractures and opposition, Howes (2007) and Rosen (2015) argue that there is a highly constructive dialogue between art and religions such as Christianity and Judaism, which fosters continuity and reciprocity between religion and art. This viewpoint reveals how artworks participate in broader cultural and religious discussions.⁸ Since 1900, the rediscovery of expressive elements in art has injected new

7. For instance, Sun Zhouxing (2019) in *To Create as a Means of Resisting Mediocrity* explores how to find or create meaning and magic in an increasingly secular world. This perspective suggests that even in a disenchanted environment, people can still discover the mysteries and depths of life through creative means. Žižek (2008) in *The Fragile Absolute* emphasises the common stance of Christianity and Marxism in the modern spiritualist wave. He argues that a new interpretation of Christianity can deepen the critique of modern art, especially in its manifestations under capitalist logic.

8. Howes (2007) believes that 'Art can give theology the eyes to see ourselves in all our dimensions, and the ears to hear the voice of our inner lives' (p. 156). This indicates that art can enhance the expressive capacity of theology, allowing it to understand all aspects of human life from a more comprehensive perspective. This point can be used to emphasise the role of modern and contemporary art in renewing theological expression and practice.

vitality into the relationship between religion and visual art (Tillich 1970).⁹ This rediscovery has made religious art viable again in modern and contemporary contexts, indicating that modern art not only continues the theological tradition but also mutually enhances and responds to it.

Through the lens of theological philosophy, modern and contemporary art transcend mere formal and aesthetic presentations to become arenas for probing humanity's fundamental beliefs and philosophical questions.

Theological perspectives in art criticism and historical research reveal deep meanings in artworks

In the field of art criticism and historical research, a theological perspective provides a profound method for interpreting artworks, particularly those that may appear ostensibly unrelated to religion. This perspective can reveal an 'ontological passivity' within the works; a non-intuitive connection established between the viewer and the piece (Smith 2003). For instance, the integration of phenomenology with theology offers us a new way to understand the interactions between subject and object within art, which, in certain cases, reflects deep-seated religious themes.

Smith explicitly states in his research that:

[T]heology becomes, in this situation, an indisputable authority concerning any theory of painting. Having sometimes denied this, other times simply forgotten it, aesthetic thought finds itself entangled in long aporias. (Smith 2003: Preface)

This assertion highlights the crucial role of the theological perspective in analysing artworks, particularly as it can unveil profound meanings that are often overlooked in traditional aesthetic and theoretical discussions.

Furthermore, James Elkins (2004) in his study observes that even seemingly non-religious works in modern art often engage in religious discourse metaphorically through their structure and themes. Elkins emphasises that theological criticism can reveal how these pieces intricately participate in the cultural systems of religion and belief.

Critics may harbour reservations about the legitimacy of using a theological perspective, arguing that it might limit the diversity of interpretations of the artwork. However, as Duve (2001) illustrates, the relationship between modernist art and religion is more often misunderstood or overlooked. In his book *Look: 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, he provides a comprehensive review of the evolution of modern art over the past century, exploring the various ways modern art has dealt with or sometimes ignored spiritual and religious themes.

Kearney (2010) further explores the impact of 'post-God' theology on art, employing Merleau-Ponty's insights to

9. Tillich notes: 'Therefore, the rediscovery of the expressive element in art since about 1900 is a decisive event for the relation of religion and the visual arts. It has made religious art again possible' (Tillich 1970:74). This reflects that modern and contemporary art not only maintains continuity with theological traditions but also fosters mutual promotion and response.

bolster his theory. In his posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty describes how phenomenology transcends traditional dualisms between body and mind, reality and ideal, subject and object. Merleau-Ponty considers flesh to be our most intimate 'element', enveloping us in the systolic and diastolic movements of existence, the acts of seeing and being seen. He explores the enigma of flesh as a mutual interweaving, stating that the observer is captivated by what he observes; the vision he exercises is also something he experiences passively, as many artists have articulated, feeling themselves to be observed by the objects around them (Kearney 2010:89).

These scholarly works suggest that such deep philosophical and theological discussions provide us with a novel way of understanding modern and contemporary art.

Case study: Bill Viola's *The quintet of the unseen*

Before discussing the symbolism of God's presence in modern art, it is pertinent to introduce Bentley's (2016) concept of 'Deep Incarnation', which proposes a cosmological theological perspective where God's incarnation is intrinsically connected with all material entities – both living and non-living.

Bentley (2016) elaborates further:

Working from the same three point formulation of 1 Corinthians 15:28, it suggests that God is not only distinct from creation, but is also distinctly integrated with creation. Taking cognisance that the cosmos as we know it, and life as experience on earth forms part of cyclical development, including evolutionary processes, the Incarnation becomes the meeting point between God and the material in all its totality. (Bentley 2016:7)

This perspective provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how deep human emotions connected to a universally present divinity can be expressed in artworks.

Bill Viola's *The Quintet of the Unseen*, by showcasing the extremely slow changes in human emotions, not only challenges our understanding of traditional religious imagery but also embodies the cosmological divine connection mentioned in 'Deep Incarnation'. In this connection, the sacred is not only situated in the high heavens but also permeates the mundane in human existence – each shift in emotion potentially reflecting a transcendent experience. Through Bentley's 'Deep Incarnation' we gain insight into the nearly sacred emotional experiences in Viola's work, grounding them in religious roots.

In his artistic practice, Bill Viola uniquely reinterprets Christian imagery and symbols. Through his work *The Quintet of the Unseen*, Viola delves into universal human emotions such as sorrow, anger, fear, joy and ecstasy. This piece is not just a modern reimagining of traditional religious images; it also challenges our conventional interpretations of these images. In *The Quintet of the Unseen*, the subtle changes in emotions are displayed through extremely slow

movements of five characters: a technique that allows viewers to experience intense emotional fluctuations within almost still frames. Viola utilises high-speed photography to capture these facial expressions, which are then presented in high-definition slow motion during exhibitions, magnifying every minor emotional transition, and allowing the audience to clearly see the process of emotions evolving from one state to another.

Viola's work deeply draws from the Western religious art tradition, particularly Christian imagery. In *The Quintet of the Unseen*, the exaggerated portrayal of the characters' expressions reflects an almost sacred emotional experience, mirroring the depiction of saints in traditional religious paintings. This mode of expression in modern art reinterprets the Christian themes of suffering and redemption, allowing these religious themes to transcend their original cultural and temporal contexts, reaching a broader scope of universal human emotions and experiences. This innovative approach reveals the evolution of religious art from a closed system of traditional symbols to an open and expansive platform for exploring human emotions. Viola, using the language of contemporary visual art, not only reinterprets Christian imagery and symbols but also extends their significance and impact in modern society, ensuring that these images are no longer confined to interpretations within a religious framework.

Conclusion

Theological analysis within the context of contemporary art remains an underdeveloped field. Despite opening important avenues for research, the methodologies employed – whether from the perspectives of art history, theology or a combination of both – tend to be relatively immature. This situation often leads to two extremes: one is an overly deterministic interpretation that can feel as though meanings are being imposed on the artwork; the other is an overly generalised interpretation that detaches the artwork from its unique cultural and historical contexts, reducing it to generic theological or art historical formulas. Among the four domains we have surveyed, theology is indeed the least developed, yet given its potential historical depth and the broad range of issues it encompasses, it also has significant potential for development.

Furthermore, traditional theological analysis typically adopts a perspective of exploring God's 'manifestation' (how divinity is expressed in art), while fields such as totemic studies offer methods for analysing God's 'hiddenness' (how the divine exists metaphorically in art). For instance, eco-theology is a perspective that examines how God is represented in various forms of life and vegetation in nature, with common symbols including stories where God incarnates as a bird. In the final section, I will introduce several theoretical frameworks related to eco-theology, which can enrich our theological analysis of contemporary art.

Contemporary art and totemic analysis: A new perspective

The global art market has seen a growing interest in indigenous (totemic) art, particularly highlighted during the 2024 Venice Biennale, where works by or inspired by indigenous peoples were prominently featured. This trend reflects not only a deeper appreciation of the intrinsic values of native cultures but also demonstrates respect and admiration for diversity and different cultural backgrounds within a globalised context.

From the perspective of eco-theology, the focus on indigenous (totemic) art extends beyond mere aesthetic appreciation; it signifies an acknowledgment of living harmoniously with nature and respecting the spiritual aspects of the natural world. Indigenous (totemic) cultures often possess profound views of nature and the cosmos, which align closely with the ecological stewardship and respect for the Earth advocated by eco-theology. The integration of indigenous cultural expressions and eco-theological concepts through art presents a new global vision. In the context of globalisation, this approach reevaluates and reinvigorates the values and significance of non-Western and native cultures, breathing new life into their global recognition and relevance.

Theoretical and philosophical background

When exploring the relationship between ecology (nature) and divinity, we can discern the manifestations of God (the Divine) through symbols and metaphors present in nature. This theme not only involves a direct dialogue between religious faith and the natural world but also touches on deep philosophical reflections and ecological considerations. Starting with specific discussions from eco-theology, this exploration will reveal the sacred attributes of nature and its connection with divinity. Subsequently, the sections on natural theology and the re-enchantment of nature will explore transcendent interpretations of natural beauty, pointing to possible divine implications.

Delving deeper into philosophical mythology, particularly through the lens of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, we will analyse nature as a dynamic and creative process. These processes demonstrate a dependency on and response to the divine. Finally, employing Neo-Platonism, especially the theories of Plotinus (2018), we will explore how nature, even in its most elementary forms, establishes a connection with the divine through intrinsic contemplation and aligns with higher forms of the divine. This comprehensive examination integrates various theological, philosophical and ecological perspectives to offer a nuanced understanding of how nature reflects and interacts with the divine realm.

Eco-theology

In her book *Eco-Theology*, Celia Deane-Drummond indeed explores the sacredness of nature and its symbolic

representation of divinity. In a particular passage from the book, Deane-Drummond (2008) states:

In the Eucharist, also, humanity offers the creation back to God, in such a way that creation is brought into relationship with God, freed from its natural limitations and transformed into a bearer of life. Creation acquires for us in this way a sacredness which is not inherent in its nature, but 'acquired' in and through Man's free exercise of his imago Dei, i.e., his personhood!.. (p. 60)

Berry's (2017) work *The Great Work* also complements the theme of 'Ecology (Nature) and Divinity' discussed in my thesis. Berry (2017) introduces the concept of 'Ecozoic Theology', which aligns closely with my research. He contends that the environmental crisis faced by modern humanity is fundamentally a crisis of spirit and theology. Berry (2017) emphasises the necessity of returning to nature, recognising and respecting the divinity inherent in the natural world. In Berry's (2017) view, humanity must address environmental issues not only on a material level but also from spiritual and religious perspectives, redefining the relationship between humans and nature to seek a deeper, mutually beneficial symbiosis. As he articulates in his book, this redefinition calls for a profound reassessment of how we perceive and interact with our environment, urging a shift towards a more reciprocal and respectful engagement with the natural world:

The key is this: the emergent will be communal through and through – like the communion of saints or the mystical body, a vast communion of the living and the dead and of all beings known and unknown. The emergent will not be me but a we vast as the universe and specific as each event or creature that comes to us. (Berry 2017:442)

Natural theology and the re-enchantment of nature

Griffin (2001), in his book *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion*, points out that while many beautiful phenomena in nature, such as the vivid colours of flowers, can be partly explained through mechanisms of natural selection, these explanations do not fully account for the beauty of nature. He argues that these beautiful traits often transcend their biological functions, suggesting a deeper, non-utilitarian value (Griffin 2001:186).¹⁰ Griffin implies that even the aspects of natural beauty that science struggles to fully explain may carry a higher, divine meaning and value. This notion challenges us to consider the possibility that there is more to the natural world than just survival and reproduction, opening up discussions on the inherent worth and perhaps sacred aspects of the environment.

Philosophy of myth

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* discusses

¹⁰ Griffin (2001:186) discusses how the beauty of nature points towards a deeper, potentially divine interpretation: 'Much of the world's beauty is indeed explainable, at least partly, in such terms. The bright colors of flowers, for example, are explained in terms of the selection of bees: insofar as bees are attracted to the brightest flowers, those flowers will be pollinated and hence will survive. After all such explanations have been given, however, there is still much beauty left over, which seems to demand another kind of explanation'.

how God manifests in nature through the interaction of understanding and yearning. In this work, Schelling employs a series of metaphors and philosophical concepts to elucidate his views on the relationship between divinity and nature:

The first effect of the understanding in nature is the division of forces, since only thus can the understanding unfold the unity that is unconsciously but necessarily immanent in nature as in a seed, just as in man the light enters into the dark yearning to create something so that in the chaotic jumble of thoughts, all hanging together, but each hindering the other from emerging, thoughts divide themselves from each other, and now the unity hidden in the ground and containing all raises itself up. (Schelling 2006:30)

The vitality and dynamic changes in nature not only represent a direct expression of the divine presence in the material world but also reflect a deeper level of divine activity, where nature itself demonstrates its dependency on and response to God through continuous creation and renewal.

As McGeough (2013) points out in his analysis of Schelling's natural philosophy, Schelling's perspective on nature transcends the traditional frameworks of idealism, offering a profound ontological viewpoint. Schelling posits that nature is not only a static state of being but also a vibrant and dynamic process. This process itself reveals a profound divinity (McGeough 2013:150).¹¹ This viewpoint challenges the traditional notion that simplifies nature to a passive and static existence and instead emphasises nature as an active, self-organising system. The intrinsic dynamics and creativity of nature are manifestations of its divinity.

Neo-Platonism

Plotinus (2018) discusses the role of nature in producing actual effects through contemplation, which supports the theme of exploring the connection between nature and the divine. In his treatise *On Nature, Contemplation, and the One*, Plotinus (2018) points out that even in the lowest levels of nature, there is a form of contemplation that traces upwards to the ultimate 'One'. This ascent from lower to higher contemplation is not exclusive to rational beings but is present at every level of nature, including the unconscious nature itself:

Nature's contemplation produces without being itself affected. Nature would say that its product flows from its contemplation, just as it flowed from its producer. Its contemplation is only an image of a higher form of contemplation and its product a by-product (Enneads 3.8, Section 4). Plotinus (2018:354)

This passage reveals that nature is not only passively receiving creation from the divine but also actively participating in its connection with the divine through its intrinsic 'contemplation'. This suggests that nature is not just a passive and unconscious existence but expresses a longing and contemplation for the transcendent through its intrinsic,

11. 'Schelling thus begins to think of the Absolute itself less in terms of a harmoniously unfolding archē-telos than something radically self-divided, "subject to suffering and becoming". This ground is nature or actuality (wirklichkeit); rather than a mere concept, the ground is the living basis through which the Absolute creates itself. However, this ground is not rational but a desire, the "yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself[,] ... not the One itself but ... co-eternal with it". As co-eternal with the One, but not the One, the ground is therefore "something in God which is not God himself"' (McGeough 2013:150).

dynamic activity. In other words, even the most foundational levels of nature are involved in a higher cosmic order, essentially pursuing and embodying the ultimate 'One'. This perspective sheds light on nature's active role in the cosmic hierarchy, engaging in a form of divine contemplation that transcends its material existence.

Ecological interpretations of totemic art – Principal case: Joseph Beuys

In the realm of contemporary art, eco-theology and totemic art have demonstrated a deep exploration of the relationship between divinity and the natural world through the symbols and metaphors of nature. These two artistic forms influence and complement each other, revealing the profound spiritual and philosophical connections between humans and nature. According to Arca (2019), the expression of spirituality in modern art should not be confined within the framework of Western religion but should also embrace a broad exploration and inclusion of non-Western and ancient cultural spiritual concepts:

The spiritual is equally manifested in art from non-Western and ancient cultures. For this reason, the concept of 'Immanent spirituality' coined by Spretnak, as well as the Orientalist issue will be taken into account as they provide a useful background to reflect not only on the different modes of the spiritual, but also to highlight possible controversies when approaching different cultures' philosophies and beliefs. (Arca 2019:10)

Non-Western cultures, including totemic art as previously mentioned not only explore the existence of the divine but also offer a novel perspective on the relationship between God and nature through natural symbols and metaphors. This aligns with Arca's broad and inclusive discussion on the definition of spirituality, resonating with the diversity of spiritual views across different cultures. This holistic approach enables a richer understanding of the interconnectedness of spirituality and artistic expression across various cultural landscapes.

In his artistic endeavours, Joseph Beuys masterfully combined natural materials with philosophical concepts, exploring themes of life, energy and regeneration through a series of profound symbols and ritualistic actions. Let's delve into two core aspects: the germination of plant sprouts and the formation of fat, along with the use of mineral materials (copper).

Space and material

The growth of plant sprouts and the formation of fat occupy symbolic spaces in artistic creation. This process not only showcases the regenerative capabilities of nature but also symbolises the extraction and transformation of art from the natural world (Harlan & Beuys 2012:139). Beuys uses the direct demonstration of these natural processes to deepen the audience's understanding of the essence of life.

Time and change

The formation of fat represents a slow chemical process, symbolising the passage of time and the transformation of matter (Harlan & Beuys 2012:139). In Beuys' work, time is not

just a driving force for physical processes but also a key element in understanding the cycles of life and regeneration.

Body and transformation

Discussing the use of copper as a mineral material, Beuys emphasised the interaction between the body and substances (Harlan & Beuys 2012:105). The use of copper, not only for its physical properties as a conductor but also as an implication of the energy transfer between the spiritual and material worlds, highlights the conversion and circulation of energy.

Audience and interaction

By presenting the growth of plant sprouts and the formation of fat, the audience is invited to observe, reflect, and even feel the connection between natural processes and artistic creation.

Symbolism and meaning

The transformation processes of plant sprouts and fat not only symbolise the continuity and change of life but also reflect Beuys' profound interest in life energy and natural regeneration. The use of copper further intensifies the exploration of transformation and the flow of energy.

Through the integrated analysis of these elements, Beuys' artwork challenges and expands our understanding of the relationship between natural processes and artistic practices. In the growth of plants, the chemical processes of fat, and the physical and symbolic properties of copper, we not only come to understand the environment and thereby comprehend ourselves – a core tenet of eco-theology – but also engage with a language of mysticism.

Joseph Beuys regarded nature as a wellspring of creativity and a symbol of inspiration, equating the protection of nature with the preservation of humanity's spiritual and cultural heritage. He viewed nature historically as a mirror of creative force, and depictions of gods, creators and natural creative principles across different cultures suggest that human existence itself is an expression of some creative principle (Beuys 2019). Furthermore, Beuys highlighted a critical moment in anthropological terms – the declaration that 'God is dead' – which signifies an unprecedented degree of freedom for humanity, implying that divinity now resides within us, thereby making us the creators of the future.

Clinger (2011), in his analysis of Beuys' installation *Lightning with Stag in Its Glare*, pointed out how the artwork, through its physical form (employing materials such as copper, iron and wood) and spatial arrangement, constructs a place where the supernatural and the natural merge. This aligns with the previously mentioned important theme of God manifesting His divinity in nature, creating a dialogue.

At the intersection of modern totemic art and eco-theology, Joseph Beuys' works offer a unique perspective. His use of natural materials and exploration of ecological themes

demonstrate a profound connection between nature and divinity (for a detailed definition of Beuys' totemic art, see Zhang 2023). This theme is not only manifested in Beuys' artistic practice but also finds theoretical support in the natural philosophical thoughts of Emerson (1836) and Henry David Thoreau, who similarly explored the deep links between nature and spirituality.

Emerson (1836), a prominent figure in American Transcendentalism, argued in *Nature* that nature is not merely a collection of physical phenomena but also a manifestation and symbol of the divine, serving as a source of spiritual and moral truths. Emerson (1836) emphasised that every element in nature directly represents a mystical truth, providing a theoretical basis for interpreting the art of Joseph Beuys. Similarly, Thoreau (1854) in *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* detailed his experiences living in nature, which afforded him a transcendent, almost religious experience. Thoreau (1854) believed that immersing oneself in nature transcends the material level, touching the depths of human spirituality. His observations resonate with Beuys's notion that art and nature are integrally connected, showing that nature is not merely a passive backdrop but an active participant in spiritual exploration.

This scholarly discourse opens new pathways for understanding the connections between totemic contemporary art and theology, yet it reveals deficiencies in both art historical and theological methodologies. These shortcomings manifest in two primary ways: a tendency to provide overly determinative interpretations that might impose fixed meanings on artworks, and overly generalised interpretations that simplify artworks into common totemic symbols or repetitive art historical paradigms. Despite these issues, research in totemic contemporary art remains nascent but shows immense potential for development, covering a broad range of historical and thematic scopes.

Conclusion

This article has multidimensionally analysed the evolution of totems in contemporary art and their close relationship with religion, particularly the concept of God. By exploring the intertwined history of art and religion from ancient times, deeply analysing the totemic elements in contemporary artworks, and the underlying religious philosophy and theological thought, this paper reveals an ever-evolving image of 'God'. This image not only reflects the artists' personal understanding of religion and divinity but also mirrors the modern interpretation of the relationship between the sacred and the self in society. From the early strict adherence to religious imagery, through the gradual separation of art and religious themes during the Renaissance, to the reintegration and exploration of totems and religious symbols in modern art, we have witnessed the evolution of how God is represented in art. This evolution is not just a change in artistic styles and expressions but more importantly, it reflects a fundamental shift in humanity's attitude and cognition towards the sacred.

In contemporary visual culture, totems are no longer merely symbols in ancient religions or belief systems but are endowed with broader meanings. They have become bridges connecting deep connections between humanity and nature, the physical and the spiritual, the individual and the cosmos. This transformation signifies that our understanding of the concept of 'God' is evolving – from a traditional religious symbol of authority to a more personalised, diversified spiritual symbol in modern society.

Through the analysis of the use and representation of totems in contemporary art, we also find that artists are not only exploring religious and spiritual themes in their creations but they are also engaging in a broader dialogue about the meaning of human existence, the pursuit of transcendence and the intrinsic, and the process of seeking and reshaping the sacred in an increasingly secular society.

This article not only elucidates the path of 'evolution' of God in contemporary art but also demonstrates art as a powerful medium for exploring human spirituality and religious experiences. As society continues to develop and human cognition deepens, the image and significance of God in art will continue to evolve, and this process will undoubtedly provide us with more profound insights into faith, art and the essence of humanity.

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Z.Y. conceptualised the study. A.Z. was involved in writing and designing the subject, data acquisition, analysis, or interpretation, or making key modifications to important knowledge content.

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