

Path to the Self: Exploring the Relationship between Iconography, Religion, and Identity

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Abstract

The way in which people learn about themselves is often a reflection of the world around them. Path to the Self investigates the question of how one's sense of identity is molded by previous experiences, religious beliefs, and interactions. The research is based primarily on Eastern ideas because this culture places a stronger emphasis on understanding the internal self than Western culture. One of the main influences for this concept was the Buddhist *mandala* because of its symbolic quality of representing a path to enlightenment which, in this project, is compared to a path to understanding one's self. Symbolism plays a prominent role in Eastern art through the use of iconography and symbolic hand gestures, or *mudras*. In this series of clay sculptures, hands serve as the vehicle for expressing the concept of one's life journey because of their symbolic quality and their central role in communicating messages. Hands have been used throughout time to convey sacred and symbolic messages in art and in conversation. For this research, *mudras* act as the connecting thread that relates hands and symbolism since a *mudra* can be thought of as a symbol. Path to the Self references the artist's personal journey in learning about how experiences, beliefs, and interactions with people, places, and ideas have shaped who she is today.

1. Introduction

We spend a large portion of our lives talking to and trying to get our ideas across to others in an effort to better understand each other as global citizens. People communicate many of their ideas through the use of hand gestures in a face-to-face setting or through symbolism in art and writing. The intention of this research project is to analyze the various factors of religion and society that shape one's identity. This project primarily explores the religion of Buddhism because of its rich history in iconography and its central theme of learning about the Self.

After studying abroad in Kathmandu, Nepal in the summer of 2012, I experienced a dramatic shift in my understanding of the world and of my place in it. The series of sculptures that I created for this research are meant to demonstrate how this trip, the distinctive culture (and its strong ties to religion), and the people and beliefs that I encountered affected my view of myself. While abroad, I recognized the tremendous power religion has on culture and society and also on the individual. The religion of the part of Nepal where I lived was a hybrid of Buddhism and Hinduism, so I developed a basic understanding of each and of how they work together. This fusion of beliefs and rituals motivated me to think about my purpose in life and in a larger worldly perspective, which is shown in Path to the Self. Being surrounded by this belief system and way of life that was so dissimilar from my own culture, I recognized a difference in how Eastern and Western societies promote the realization of self and purpose. This paper investigates the specific traditions and beliefs which promoted the beginning of my spiritual journey in hopes that others will be inspired to either take a deeper look into how their lives have been shaped by experiences, religious experiences, and interactions with people and places.

In this primarily Buddhist and Hindu country, hands and symbols are of crucial importance in conversation and in art. Western culture does not honor the hand or gestures in the same way as a Buddhist or Hindu society. Hands

typically serve as supplements to verbal communication in Western culture in ways such as pointing at something or a thumbs-up. However, when one enters a foreign society with a vastly different culture and language and in which hand gestures are the main method of communication, the hands become especially important and can often say more than words. Hands play a central role in the link between complex religious ideas and the viewer's comprehension of the implied meaning of the hand. The meaning of specific gestures in Eastern culture has a definite intention and deeper roots in religious ideology and culture. For example, when people in a Buddhist society greet each other, the hands are placed in a prayer position in front of the chest or face (Figure 1) and the couple exchanges the greeting *Namaste*, which translates to "I acknowledge the divine in you." Respect for the individual and for others in society is built into the language, behaviors, and values. The hands translate this respect through the *Namaste* gesture. I referenced this symbolic quality of hands in my own work in many ways. For *Unity*, I created a sculpture of two hands—one placed on top of the other—to replicate the gesture of holding hands which is often associated with junction or with marriage (Figure 2). Another important function of the hands in Buddhism is as the vehicle for *mudras*, which are precise hand gestures that represent a larger idea. *Mudras*, for this research, served as the connecting thread that relates hands and symbolism since a *mudra* can be thought of as a symbol.



Figure 1 - *Namaste Greeting*, 2011, Charlie Ferguson; Figure 2 - *Unity*, 2012, Emma Bussard

Buddhist art exhibits a vast amount of iconography that symbolizes the life of the Buddha and his teachings. While in Nepal, I took a Buddhist art theory class and became very intrigued by the intricate iconography and its meaning. The class focused on learning to draw the complex layout and details of symbols within the traditional Tibetan *mandala*. Each symbol within the *mandala* had a specific meaning and purpose, as did the arrangement of these symbols and colors within the design (Figure 3). These images are considered sacred in Buddhist culture because of the deep complexity of the symbols and iconography as well as the spiritual ideas that they represent.



Figure 3 - *Mandala of Vajradhatu*

Although there are many forms of non-verbal interaction, this work focuses on two in particular: gesture of the hands and symbolism with a particular emphasis on Buddhist symbolism and gestures. Symbols are used to

represent complex and profound ideas that a word may not be able to convey as effectively. These symbols add a layer of mystery, depth, and meaning to the pieces. Both symbolism and gestures are modes of communication commonly found in pious art with a purpose of empowering the individual through faith in a greater good and a guiding spirit. Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who studied the interpretation, purpose, and representation of symbols within a culture, defined religion as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an order of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”¹ This thorough definition of religion reflects how symbols can shape religion and culture. In my sculptures, I used symbols in a similar manner to convey this relationship between religion and symbols because most major religions have a universal symbol.

2. Background Influences

One of the foundational principles of Buddhism deals with reflecting inward to the Self in order to realize one’s status in the larger universe. In addition to this major theme, Buddhist art exhibits a strong interest in the form of the hand and its symbolic importance. Connecting these Eastern principles to my own Western background seemed intriguing. Growing up with a very secular childhood, I was seldom interested in religious ideology. I often felt like an outcast amongst peers because of this lack of belonging to a religious group. Religion was a source of pain that I did not desire to investigate.

Taking humanities and art history classes at UNC Asheville as well as living in a Buddhist community in Nepal sparked my curiosity toward religion and why people believe what they do—whether it is the result of upbringing, the pressure to conform from society, or from personal exploration of ideology. Being surrounded in Nepal by Buddhist/Hindu religious beliefs which emphasize love, compassion, understanding, and acceptance,—all themes which I desire in my life—I chose to explore the field of religion as a way of empowering and connecting people. Since I had always felt disconnected from people as a result of not belonging to a specific religion, I wondered what the contrary might be like and the positives of identifying with a specific religious group. The relationship between a feeling of belonging within society and a sense of true identity came through as a dominant theme in the process of this research and throughout the series.

While different religions may have slightly different origins and worship one or a variety of embodiments of a God or Gods, they all seem to share similar foundational principles regarding life, death, existence, and purpose. This idea that most religions are relatable on a basic level was the inspiration for the piece *What’s Next?* (Figure 4) In this sculpture, I reference the idea of death and what happens to the body, soul, or spirit of a person after they die. A lot of religions explore the post-death stage of life and have different scenarios. The gesture of pointed upward references the thought of transcending this life and moving onward to a different destination.



Figure 4 - *What's Next?*, 2012, Emma Bussard

This project aims to emphasize Buddhism's amenable approach toward people of all backgrounds through an exploration of the major themes of the religion in relation to identity and moral direction. This investigation of the fundamental principles of Buddhism, and of religion in general, helped guide me through my spiritual journey. Without roots in any form of belief system, it can be hard to understand how one becomes their ultimate Self. The individual's quest for self-discovery is often interconnected with religion. Religion provides a framework of values that people apply to their own life as a way of exploring the meaning of life and their own purpose in this existence. As curious human beings, we want to look to something larger than ourselves for comfort and guidance. Praying to a God, providing offerings and blessings to deities, and living according to holy doctrines are a few such ways in which religious beings venerate these higher powers/entities/energies. The concept of religion in this series is used because of it is often the foundation of beliefs and moral codes off of which people base their thoughts.

In Tibetan Buddhist canon, the *mandala* is often considered a metaphor for the path to enlightenment. Mandalas are ubiquitous in Buddhist society: located on sculptures, at temples, and in the 3D form of the *stupa*, a sacred mound-like structure that houses Buddhist relics. Because the *mandala* is used as a diagram of a three-dimensional *stupa*, it contains architectural features that reflect this metaphor. There are several levels in the traditional *mandala* that usually depict a combination of circles and squares. These levels represent the elements of the cosmos. For example, in the *Kalachakra mandala*, the various circles of the *mandala* represent air, fire, water, earth, mountains, and other components of the universe.² The lines in cardinal directions and T-shaped entrance gateways orient the viewer and provide avenues by which one can reach the center, or enlightenment.

The main intentions of the traditional Tibetan *mandala* are to assist in the practice of meditation, as a prayer for others' wellbeing and to represent human instinct, and to provide one with a diagram of the vast universe, or cosmos.³ The three dimensional *mandala*, called the *stupa* (Figure 5), is revered by circumambulating, or walking clockwise around, the various levels of the *stupa*. These levels represent stages of the mind and of advancement of worship. The typical *stupa* is categorized vertically with the highest point—also the center point in the *mandala*—representing the most sacred realm. The higher the worshipper climbs mentally, the closer s/he is to reaching the ultimate goal of understanding the cosmos' purpose of allowing one to let go of self and earthly desires and instead wish for the betterment of others.⁴ Because of its association with the *stupa* and the physical movement of circumambulation, a pathway is implied in the design of the *mandala*. These components of mentally traveling through the echelon of the cosmos are echoed in the directions, lines, and gateways that are typical of the Tibetan *mandala* (Figure 6). The symbols on each level embody challenges or matters that the worshipper may face at corresponding points in the mental process. Another crucial feature of the Buddhist *mandala* is its symmetrical design. This rigid symmetry is meant to provide the viewer with a sense of order and permanence.⁵ In this way, the *mandala* can be viewed as a map or a guide for how to maneuver one's way through the universe.



Figure 5 - Aerial View of *Boudhanath Stupa* in Kathmandu, Nepal



Figure 6 - Traditional Tibetan *Mandala* drawing, 2012, drawing by author

This idea of the *mandala* as a mode of transforming the self reflects the connection between identity and religion. The Buddhist *mandala* could be thought of as a visual metaphor for the journey of life in which seekers can imagine the journey in their mind's eye. In *Reassurance* (Figure 7), I etched a *mandala* with symbols that reveal my personal path in life on the palm of a large scale hand. These symbols and depictions reflect my understanding of who I am and my actions in order to try to metaphorically and visually represent my path in life. For example, in the center of the *mandala* is an eye, representing the idea that at this point in my life, exploring and learning about the world around me is my highest priority. Another symbol I used was the foot because my hobby of running has enabled me to get to where I am today (with a scholarship to UNCA), has provided me with countless hours of self-reflection, and has functioned as a way for me to make and achieve goals and dreams in my life. This personal *mandala* differs from the traditional Eastern *mandala* in that it is a direct representation of the Self. In the Eastern *mandala*, the intention is to represent the transcendence of Self. By “Westernizing” and individualizing the *mandala*, I tried to create a design that involved recognizable symbols that could be understood by a variety of audiences, regardless on their background of the Buddhist *mandala*. This demonstration of the course of life in both my own work as well as in Buddhist art is bursting with symbols and details, most of which represent key themes and ideas.



Figure 7 – Detail of *Reassurance*, 2012, Emma Bussard

Many religions and cultures use gestural or symbolic expressions, such as a pair of praying hands in Christianity or the Om symbol in Eastern religions, as a mode of sharing human experience and bringing people together. Most also have some tie between gesture and symbolism as well as between symbols and identity. For example, a pair of praying hands implies the idea of faith and can relate to one's identity in that it offers a personal mode of discovering one's faith. The purpose of my sculptures is to join these ideas of gesture, symbolism, and identity together in one space to create pieces that cause one to reflect on the shared beliefs that we experience as an individual who is part of a larger global community. This awareness of global community is implied in the piece *Om Shanti Shanti Shanti* (Figure 8) consists of a flat circle of cutout hands onto which a basic *mandala* design is drawn. Floating on top of these hands is a globe created by two sets of cupped hands. The continents are carved onto this globular shape. This piece contrasts the others of the series in that it references a broader perspective of life and the world. *Om Shanti Shanti Shanti* is a mantra that calls for peace in the mind, speech, and body.



Figure 8 - *Om Shanti Shanti Shanti*, 2012, Emma Bussard

Hopefully these works will prompt the audience to think about their own lives and how they have become who they are as a result of various experiences, decisions, events, people, and other influences. While I encourage people to bring their faith into the viewing of my pieces, I also do not want viewers to feel obligated to do so in order to understand the intention of the pieces. In his book *Iconography of Religion*, Moore states that “images are not automatically self-explanatory, [but that] they are given a human interpretation.”⁶ In this way, I encourage any kind of audience to bring in their own experiences to the interpretation of the symbols to try to relate to the pieces and personally reflect on their own life and purpose, regardless of spiritual beliefs. Because this show will be presented in America, and in the South, I used everyday gestures that can be easily understood by a local audience. By looking at ways in which people speak with and hold their hands and emulating these specific gestures in the sculptures, these hand gestures become symbols of ideas, thoughts, and emotions.

I also noticed that *mudras*, symbolic hand gestures found in traditional Buddhist art, represent an analogous theme in that they are used in Buddhist rituals as a way to “induce certain states of mind which help advance on the path of

the interior quest.”⁷ As I molded these ceramic sculptures of hands using my own hands, it allowed me to internalize these traditional Buddhist ideas promoted in the *mandala* and in *mudras* that relate to finding your life path. I reflected on my own life and experiences and on my personal interpretation of symbolism in our society. In his book, *Iconography of Religions*, Albert Moore explores the origin and purpose of symbolism and comments that when provided with iconographical references, the “viewer is drawn in to look for a deeper meaning to the images.”⁸ Moore also says that iconography can discourage viewers if it not easily understood, interpreted, and contextualized. With this in mind, I aimed to create symbolism that could be universally understood. I referenced Buddhist ideas in the iconography but also tried to use universal symbols to make the pieces accessible to a range of audiences.

One of the most subconscious forms of communication is through body language—specifically with the hands. We can convey a large range of emotions, thoughts, and actions simply with one movement of the hand. As one source says, “the hands [play] such a central role in our experience of being human, it comes as no surprise that many of the world’s greatest spiritual and artistic traditions have considered the hands as sacred.”⁹ Although Western culture does contain a small number of well-known gestures that we use in everyday conversation such as using our hands to demonstrate action when talking, waving hello, or giving a high five; the true importance of hands can easily be overlooked. This is because we, as a culture, tend to use our eyes as our main supplier of external information. John Napier writes about this paradox of using the eyes over the hands in his book, *Hands*. He says that we tend to rely on what we can see with our eyes the majority of the time. Despite the fact that we use our eyes the most to observe our surroundings, as a society, Westerners tend to *trust* what they can physically feel rather than what they can just see. Out of the five senses, our hands provide us with the primary vehicle for the sense of touch. We use our hands as a reliable method of observing our surroundings and perceiving our environment. Napier also discusses the purpose of the hands as tool-users and tool-makers and points out that “imagination is basic to tool-making,” which he regards as transforming a natural object into something that has a purpose.”¹⁰ By taking clay, a naturally occurring substance, and transforming it using my hands and imagination into gesture sculptures that have meaning and purpose, these sculptures can be referred to as tools with a purpose of aiding the viewer’s thinking about my path in life. Symbols reflect my understanding of who I am and my practices in order to try to metaphorically and visually represent this path. Furthermore, upon reflection the viewer might seek to explore this concept within her/her own life.

Much of the inspiration for this idea to sculpt expressive hands came from the importance of the hand throughout history in various cultures and religions. For example, many Southeast Asian countries idolize the hand and gesture via traditional dance and theater (Figure 9). In Classical Indian Dance, there are a plethora of specific hand gestures that are used as symbols for concepts and words ranging from “oil lamp” to “god of transformation” to “defense.” In the realm of Christianity, Jesus Christ is often depicted giving a gesture of benediction with his hands (Figure 10). The *Hamsa* is a common symbol representing protection for a variety of religious groups including Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism (Figure 11).¹¹ The notion of the hand as a symbol has been a significant aspect of religious art and communication throughout history.

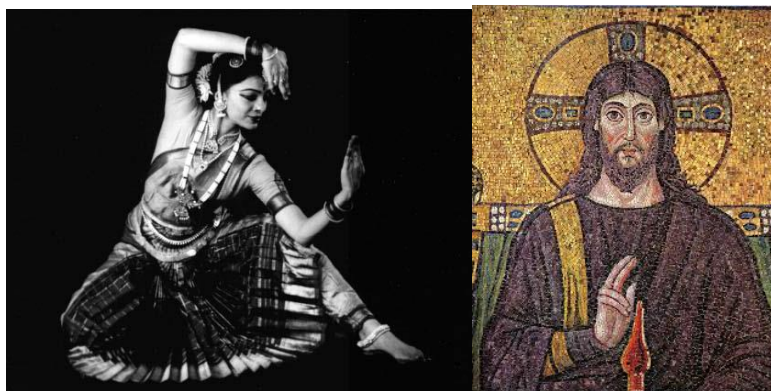


Figure 9 – Classical Indian dancer; Figure 10 – Ravenna Mosaic, Jesus with benediction gesture;



Figure 11 – Hamsa symbol

While the hand has repeatedly been used as a symbol, the use of the hands to form *mudras* is specific to Eastern antiquity. *Mudras* not only have symbolic meaning, but they also revere the hand as a sacred vehicle for the message. The different *mudras* correspond to various associations, depending on their usage. Currently, *mudras* have three main usages in society: (1) a part of traditional Indian customs such as in yoga practice, meditation, and mantra, (2) a ritual in devotion or in worshipping gods or deities, and (3) in Indian dance and theater to project specific meanings and values.¹² When the hands are in *mudra* posture, they are used to “reveal the intention to both seal and to demonstrate, in other words to ‘translate’ words by different means. In short, a species of visual alphabet that serves to attain the essential beyond speech.”¹³ For example, in ancient sculptures of the Buddha, the gesture of a hand with thumb and forefinger touching and creating an “O” shape corresponds to the idea of the wheel of the law, which is the Buddha’s teaching on how one reaches enlightenment. How the Buddha holds his hands in depictions can determine which stage of his life he is in and/or the intention of the work of art and why the artist created it (Figure 12). Using the hand as an allegory for sacred principles through the use of *mudras* in spiritual art reinforces the importance of the hand in this culture.



Figure 12 – *Buddha Hands*, 2012, Emma Bussard

In terms of carving technique, the original inspiration was Islamic art and architecture. These ancient objects and buildings produced visual interest in the form of pattern. Islamic buildings such as the Great Mosque of Cordoba demonstrate the use of complex architectural details such as two-toned, double tiered interior arches with mini arches inside the larger arch that create playful negative space and draws the attention upward. Calligraphy and elaborate carvings decorate every free plane of the Mihrab wall and also create designs and paths to guide the eyes (Figure 13). The patterns created Islamic architectural features look different depending on one’s perspective—from afar or close up. This twofold view is one I try to create within my work—having a distant appearance (the gesture of the hand) that creates interest for the viewer and draws the attention to the closer, more detailed perspective (the carved designs).



Figure 13- Great Mosque of Cordoba *mihrab* (wall of mosque that is in the direction of Mecca)

Similar to the patterning of Islamic architecture, the art of *mehndi* also inspired the floral and symbolic characteristics of the carvings on my ceramic pieces. Often referred to as henna tattooing in Western culture, *mehndi* is the Hindi word for this ancient custom performed in many places of the world including North Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Indian and Moslem communities. *Mehndi* ink is applied to the skin (most commonly on the hands and feet) in elaborate patterns and designs and temporarily dyes it a reddish color (Figure 14). This ceremonial custom is practiced when celebrating special occasions and in wedding ceremonies as a kind of blessing for the betrothed. In addition to being adorned with *mehndi* for celebratory reasons, it is also a sacred practice meant to bring luck and good fortune into the wearer's family life, home, and relationships. Roome describes it as "a blessing upon the skin."¹⁴ The reason for the placement of *mehndi* on the hands is because it recognizes and honors the hands for their service in our everyday actions. The palm also retains the color of the henna paste the most vibrantly and for the longest amount of time compared to the rest of the flesh. *Mehndi* on the hands can be thought of as a celebration of the hands "as a miracle of creation and a vehicle of love."¹⁵ My process of carving on the clay sculpture relates to this process of drawing on the form of the hand in that I think of the hand as a canvas on which to construct messages through text and symbols. Moore points out that the hand is "full of mystery and character...it's already-existing patterns and lines provide a perfect springboard for the imagination—an irresistible invitation to innovation and improvisation."¹⁶ This thrill of creating one's own enigmatic but meaningful design was part of the inspiration for the mandala reference on my piece in Figure 7. Similar to fascination of adornment and ornamentation of the body, the carvings on my pieces are an adornment of the clay body. This search for one's inner chi reflects my journey within myself when creating the mandala on *Reassurance* and reiterates the importance of identity in this series of work.

If you look at *mehndi* on a surface from afar, it can seem uncontrolled and overwhelming. In regards to the specific nature of *mehndi* as being pattern-based, it is important not to write off pattern as simply a decorative art. Instead, pattern, in terms of *mehndi* and in this series, is meant to embellish the form of the hand and draw the viewer's attention to the central image upon the canvas that is the hand. In this series, it is also intended to enhance the beauty and form of the human hand. In *Consciousness*, (Figure 15) I used mehndi design on half of the hand as way to create movement through the piece and to adorn the form of the hand. Another aspect that was important to me in sculpting this piece was to create a sense of balance. I aimed to reflect my emotional and spiritual progression through the series to a point where the sculpture promotes a feeling of peace.



Figure 14 - Traditional *Mehndi*



Figure 15 - *Consciousness*, 2013, Emma Bussard

3. Methodology

In making my pieces, I follow a standard process. Before I begin working on a piece, I think of the idea that I want to communicate to the audience. I learned in Nepal that the pre-creating phase of art making is one of the most important because, especially in the Nepalese style of art, every decision made by the artist is intentional. I thoroughly research the conceptual ideas that I wish to portray which are usually results from either my experiences in Nepal or from podcasts by Buddhist lecturer Tara Brach. Author of two books, one on true refuge and the other on acceptance, Brach's talks focus on a combination of Western psychology and Eastern spirituality.¹⁷ Her main themes that influenced this series include ideas of acceptance—both by society and the self, sense of belonging, the spiritual path, and trusting oneself. Other sources of inspiration come from Buddhist mantras and iconography in ancient art.

Once I have decided on the subject of the sculpture, I typically use one of two techniques. Depending on the configuration of the sculpture, I either create: (1) a collection of hands working together to create a reference object such as a tree (Figure 16) or lotus (Figure 17) or (2) large scale sculptures which depict either one larger than life size hand or a detail of an enlarged hand. I play with the scale of the pieces, from life size to an almost three foot long hand because it adds variety and interest to the series.

If the piece is made of multiple life-size hands, I begin by rolling out a slab and cutting out the outline of my own hand. After that, I add clay to the flat shape in order to replicate the three dimensionality of the human hand. My own hands are used as models for this process so as the end result contains subtle details which hint at the presence of the artist in the piece (for example, my long skinny fingers). I then manipulate the hand to form the intended gesture and allow the single hand to harden so that it is stiff but still slightly pliable. Then the inner mass of the hand is carved out in order to reduce the weight of each individual hand so as not to work against gravity when making tall pieces. When I have the number of hands that I need to create the larger sculpture, I score and slip the hands together into the desired shape.

In terms of the concept of these two multi-handed pieces, I employ the hand as a symbol, representing external influences on the self. For example, in *Branching Out*, the underlying idea was how people have roots which are planted by others (parents, siblings, relatives, friends) in childhood, and from there they can grow and branch out in many different directions throughout life. The hand is used in this case as a symbol for experiences, and therefore reflects how we can explore many different directions in our lives. In *Blossoming Self*, I used the hand in a similar way. The hands radiating outward from the two hands in the center (representing the true Self) are meant to reflect the process of realizing who we are and blossoming as a person. The lotus flower is a prevalent symbol in Buddhism representing purity and awakening because its roots are typically situated in mud. The flower has a long stem which, when it reaches the top of the water, expands into a pristine blossom. This journey is symbolic of the “self emerging from unconscious depths—the awakening of the human soul, rising from the darkness of ignorance and seeking clarity and enlightenment.”¹⁸ *Blossoming Self* reflects this natural process as well as its symbolic connection with the self with its reference to the path of life during which one has influential experiences, grows as a person, and blossoms with the realization of true identity.



Figure 16 – *Branching Out*, 2012, Emma Bussard Figure 17 – *Blossoming Self*, 2012, Emma Bussard

In the alternative scenario of building larger-than-life size hands, I coil build the basic shape of the hand and use additive and subtractive methods to reach a realistic quality. The mounds of flesh, intricate crevices of the palm and fingers, and fingernails are significant details that are necessary to reflect the authenticity of the human hand. The scale of the pieces within my series was also very important to me. Although I began *Path to the Self* by sculpting only life-size hands, I eventually wanted to explore a variety of sizes and scales. I attempted to create a large range of scale within the pieces in order to keep the viewer engaged and interested.

These larger scale sculptures can be challenging to build and also require more decision-making in terms of the carving. However, these pieces provide me with plenty of surface area on which to carve (Figure 18). The large

scale also demands attention and sparks interest from viewers. The hope is that the larger size creates a curiosity in the viewer on the association with size and importance. To create an object larger than the size it is normally viewed is to initiate curiosity as to the reason behind the exaggerated size. In my work, I utilize this method of overemphasizing the hand in an effort to highlight the importance of the hand in communication.



Figure 18 - *Reassurance*, 2012, front and back, Emma Bussard

The etching component of my process comprises the majority of the message created by the piece. I use different sizes of sgraffito tools in order to create lines in the clay that are large enough to read easily but minor enough to not distract too much from the form (Figure 19). The carving process tends to be tedious, but it is a meditative part of the process. The messages created by the carvings on the sculptures are meant to enhance the form and provide meaning for the shape of the form. For example, in *Fine Print* (Figure 20), the lines of text carved onto the finger are meant to emulate the undulating lines of an individual's fingerprint. Although each person's fingerprint is unique and distinctive to its beholder, this idea is juxtaposed with the text of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of Buddhism. In contrasting the idea of the individual with Buddhist foundational beliefs, this piece demonstrates the importance of understanding one's Self within a larger framework.



Figure 19 - Detail of carving process



Figure 20 - *Fine Print*, 2012, Emma Bussard

All of the carvings have surface meaning in terms of what is visually pleasing on the piece, but behind this intention is the idea of symbolic iconography. For example, in *Reassurance*, the backs of the fingers have lotus stems emerging from the knuckles to the fingertips. At the tip of the finger is the flowering lotus (Figure 21). The reason for the use of the lotus in this case is because of the long stem of the flower. Since the fingers are the most elongated portions of the hand, they provide a visually appealing space on which to place this extended symbolism. The placement of the carvings depends on the form of the piece but is meant to enhance this form.



Figure 21 - *Reassurance* Detail

After bisque firing the piece, I apply a black iron oxide to the surface. This oxide seeps into the crevices created by carving. In an effort to create a worn and aged appearance to reflect the influence of ancient East Asian art, I wipe the stain off of the surface so that it will stay in the carved places but only slightly stain the rest of the form (Figure 22). Next, I apply a light layer of red oxide onto the piece to create warmth. Red pigments such as this red oxide were very abundant amongst ancient archaeological sites because of its availability. Pure black, such as the black iron oxide used in the first step of staining was a commonly used addition to ancient art such as in the Paleolithic age because it was derived from soot or charcoal, both of which were results of fire. I wanted to hint at this reference to ancient “glazing” techniques because of the influence of ancient art on this series.¹⁹ In addition to this allusion to antiquity, the color red is also a significant and special color in Buddhist society. It is thought to have protective qualities and also symbolizes passion, so bringing this specific hue into the piece adds another layer of sacredness and importance.



Figure 22 - After black iron oxide is applied

4. Artistic Influences

As previously stated, people and interactions can have a strong influence on actions. Although much of the inspiration for this research project was from personal experience and place, the work and ideas of other artists were also a driving force in terms of technique and subject matter.

Pattern and detail can be found all around us in the natural world and in man-made creations. I have always been drawn to these geometrical and organic repetitions of line and the patterns created by them such as the repetition of line on a building or the way the shadow of an object highlights the negative space of it. Gary Jackson, a potter who creates detail oriented earthenware, helped me to understand that not everyone notices the details in everyday life. He points out that most people do not stop to recognize these fascinating shapes and patterns created in and by the world around us.²⁰ His detail-oriented perception of the world influenced me to really commit to focusing on the details within the created designs and patterns. His work also influenced my use of oxides instead of glazes because I recognized how the details in his work really stood out with black oxide.

The work of an Iranian photographer, Shirin Neshat, instigated the idea of combining iconography and gesture. In her series, *Women of Allah*, Neshat produced a controversial exhibit about the struggles of Iranian women. This series as well as her other work capture striking portraits of Iranian women with text on certain parts of the body which are not suppose to be publicly shown according to Islamic law (Figure 23).²¹ Seeing her work motivated me to combine text with the body, appearing almost as a tattoo. Neshat's work provided the framework for my process of sculpting hands and carving symbolic and intricate designs onto the form.



Figure 23 - *Women of Allah*, 1993-97, Shirin Neshat

A.J. Fosik's pieces also explore the idea of *mudras* and religious iconography. His sculptures of traditional *mudras* have the intent of exploring "the powerful medium of language and metaphor to emphasize narrative and interpretation." His purpose in his work is to explore spiritual iconography, which connects to my idea of Buddhist *mudra* gestures and their connotations. His exhibit, *Time Kills All Gods*, reflects the innate quality of humans as creators (Figure 24).²² Fosik's work juxtaposes the idea of human creation with spiritual iconography to create a dialogue about the comparison. His work influenced mine in terms of the idea of creating alphabetical letters though gesture. In my piece *Morality* (Figure 25), I spell out a word and concept. I chose to spell love because, in Buddhism, all moral lessons point in the direction of love—love for oneself as well as love for others and the surrounding world.



Figure 24 - *Time Kills All Gods*, 2011, AJ Fosik



Figure 25 - *Morality*, 2012, Emma Bussard

Another artist who sparked my interest in exploring religious syncretism is Meg Hitchcock. Based out of New York, Hitchcock works in the two dimensional realm creating works that reflect her personal journey with her spirituality. Born an Evangelical Christian, Hitchcock now says that she has “since renounced all organized religions in favor of a spirituality based on personal experience and observation.”²³ Her focus on the exploration of individual’s spiritual beliefs and experiences relates to my theme of celebrating the formation of the individual. Her goal is to bring together the texts and ideas of various, diverse religions to point to the concept that there is a universal need for all of us to connect with something beyond ourselves. She does this by creating shapes and forms out of lines of words and letters that she has cut from religious texts of various religions (Figure 26). I emulated her technique of using words to create movement in *Fine Print*. I sculpted a large-scale thumb and carved Buddhist beliefs such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path with the lines of text in the shape of a thumbprint (Figure 27). Hitchcock’s work emphasizes the basic idea of unification and acceptance, which is a concept that I referenced in *What’s Next?* when combining symbols and idea of different beliefs into one piece to represent this connectedness.



Figure 26 - *Meditations and Hymns*, 2010, Meg Hitchcock



Figure 27 – Detail of *Fine Print*, 2012, Emma Bussard

Hitchcock’s work also influenced mine because, conceptually, it made me think about the individual within the community, similar to the visual representation of an inner pattern within an outer design. We all experience our own individual journey through life, and everyone has a different path. Regardless of where we all end up, each person develops a sense of self, or at least tries to learn about themselves, as a way to understand the world around them. This attention to the psychology behind one’s own personal identity is often times an initial point of interest for artists. However, artists also create works in an effort to speak to or relate to their surroundings and community. My pieces attempt to create this dual dialogue, fueled by my personal struggles with identity, between exploring one’s inner self, but also in connecting with the world around oneself.

5. Conclusion

Through Path to the Self I have grown and progressed with my pieces. When I first began this series, I felt unsure of myself and was not comfortable reflecting on my past to recognize how it shaped my personality. Creating works that reflect on self as well as on the external world has helped me to develop a better understanding of my outlook on life and on my own identity. Through learning about myself, I also began to question my life and purpose which led to the inclusion of religion in the concept. The use of hands as gestures and symbols allowed me to expand beyond my own interpretations and to think about how society and culture view objects and ideas. Although neither this paper nor this project was originally intended to focus on the influence of religion, the subject of spirituality seemed undeniably connected. Creating this series, which reflects movement through life, has aided in my spiritual journey and has also given me a broader perspective on life.

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¹ Winzeler, Anthropology, 10.

² Brauen, The Mandala, 22.

³ Fisher, Art of Tibet, 28-29.

⁴ Brauen, The Mandala, 29.

⁵ Fisher, Art of Tibet, 28-29.

⁶ Moore, Iconography, 27.

⁷ Levenson, Symbols, 72.

⁸ Moore, Iconography, 23.

⁹ Carroll and Carroll, Mudras, 21-22.

¹⁰ Napier, Hands, 99.

¹¹ Carroll and Carroll, *Mudras*, 21-22.

¹² Carroll and Carroll, *Mudras*, 9.

¹³ Levenson, Symbols, 69.

¹⁴ Roome, *Mehndi*, 2.

¹⁵ Roome, *Mehndi*, 41.

¹⁶ Roome, *Mehndi*, 46.

¹⁷ Brach, About Tara Brach.

¹⁸ Roome, *Mehndi*, 20.

¹⁹ Winzeler, Anthropology, 91.

²⁰ Jackson, Artist Statement.

²¹ Sheybani, Women of Allah.

²² Magana, AJ Fosik: Time Kills All Gods.

²³ Hitchcock, Artist Statement.