

# Self-Guide

## Gifts and Giving

Whether they're humbly homemade or extravagantly expensive, warmly received or grudgingly given, presents often dominate this holiday season. So stifle your inner Scrooge and get in a generous groove with works that embody the season's magnanimous mindset.



GALLERY 207

### *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1519) by Jan van Scorel

Perhaps one of the world's most famous scenes of gift giving is that of the three wise men, or magi, who came from distant lands to honor the newborn Christ Child. While the event is recounted briefly in the Gospel of Matthew, early Christian commentary and medieval narrative expanded on the tale, specifying the magi's number as three and exalting them to the status of kings. By the mid-15th century, the trio reflected the three ages of man with the youngest magus being an African, as depicted in this work by Dutch master Jan van Scorel. Painted on a fir panel, Scorel's *Adoration* sets the main players—the Virgin, Child, and three kings with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh—on a central stage-like platform, while Joseph and the magi's retinues are set back amid the ruined architecture and mountainous landscape.



GALLERY 234

### *Whitfield Cup* (1590) by John Spillman

Some gifts are prized for their inherent value; others for the relationship they symbolize. Double esteem, then, goes to this elaborately embossed and engraved cup. Gilded silver cradles an extremely rare specimen in 16th-century England, an ostrich egg. These exotic eggs, still known as “gripes eggs,” were believed to have been laid by the mythical griffin. But the *Whitfield Cup* gets even better. The piece was created by Elizabeth I's jeweler, John Spillman, and is thought to have been commissioned by the queen herself because at the bottom of the egg's interior, Spillman placed a Tudor Rose, an emblem reserved solely for Elizabeth's use. While the exact details of the cup's production and early existence are not entirely clear, evidence suggests that it was presented to John Whitfield by the queen. No wonder the Whitfield clan was sure to name this piece in their wills through the generations.



GALLERY 396

### *Cadeau (The Gift)* (1963) by Man Ray

Not all presents are pleasant; after all, even Santa is said to deliver lumps of coal to those on the naughty list. American artist Man Ray certainly didn't opt for “pleasant” when he conceived the artwork he entitled *Cadeau*, the French term for gift. On the contrary, he transformed common household items—a flatiron and some tacks—into a potentially threatening object. Originally created in 1921 as a last-minute addition to his first show in Paris, *Cadeau* was indeed gifted to the composer Erik Satie, but the work was subsequently lost. Thankfully Man Ray made several replicas of *Cadeau*, the Art Institute's among them. The artist admitted that the only thing his newly created item would be good for was “tearing a dress to ribbons,” and he actually put it to use that way, shredding a garment and photographing one of his models wearing the tattered remains.



GALLERY 397

### ***Homage to Tamara Toumanova* (1940) by Joseph Cornell**

This dreamy assemblage by American Joseph Cornell was not only, as the title suggests, an homage to the ballerina Tamara Toumanova but also actually given to its esteemed subject along with other boxes or dioramas he made in her honor. Cornell was profoundly interested in all forms of dance, designing covers and contributing commentary to the journal *Dance Index*, but he was most enamored with 19th-century Romantic ballet and the great stars of his own day, including Toumanova whom he met through a friend and fellow artist. In this collage, Cornell integrated a photograph of the ballerina into an ethereal environment populated with butterflies and plants and creatures from the sea. This both aerial and underwater world perhaps links Toumanova's fairy-like dancing with the watery settings of ballets like *Swan Lake*, *Ondine*, and *Les Sylphides*.



GALLERY 171

### ***Geneva Tribunal Testimonial* (1873) by Tiffany and Company**

There is the thank-you gift, and then there is the thank-you-for-awarding-us-\$15-million gift, like this candelabra. It all started with the “Alabama Claims,” a lawsuit filed by the United States against Great Britain for breaching its vow of neutrality during the Civil War and selling five war vessels to the Confederate Army. Representatives from three neutral countries—Brazil, Italy, and Switzerland—were entrusted with deciding the merits of each country's claims and, after meeting in Geneva in 1871–72, found in favor of the United States, ordering England to pay war reparations of \$15 million. To show its gratitude to the arbitrators, the U.S. government commissioned Tiffany and Company to produce three identical suites of silver—each consisting of a punch bowl plus two candelabras and two wine coolers. The Art Institute's was the first suite made, indicated by a stamp of “No. 1” on the bottom of each piece, and originally given to the Brazilian representative, Viscount d'Itajubá.



GALLERY 140

### ***Goddess Tara Seated with Hand in Gesture of Gift Giving* (14th century), Tibet**

As the Buddhist goddess of compassion, it's only fitting that Tara was born of the tears of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. As he wept for a world full of suffering, Avalokiteshvara's tears formed a lake on which a white lotus appeared. When the lotus opened, Tara and her powers of sympathetic generosity emerged. In this 14th-century bronze sculpture from Tibet, where the goddess became most popular, Tara sits upon a lotus throne. As in many depictions of the empathetic goddess, she points her left hand upward in *vitarka mudra*, the gesture of teaching, while extending her right palm outward in *varada mudra*, the gesture of giving. A very explicit signifier of open-handed generosity, the *varada mudra* is quite common among representations of peaceful Buddhist deities.

## ***Need to cross some gifts off your list?***

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