

Self-Guide

Cracking the Code

Ever since *The Da Vinci Code* hit the bestseller list, everyone is looking to unlock the mysteries hidden in works of art. Use this guide to crack the code on some of the museum's most symbol-filled objects.



GALLERY 205

Virgin and Child with Young Saint John the Baptist (c. 1515) by Antonio Allegri

Italian High Renaissance master Correggio created many paintings depicting this holy trio, but this work includes a peculiar feature—a lemon-laden trellis behind the Virgin where drapery would usually fall. Lemons had become somewhat accidentally associated with both Christ and the Virgin, mainly due to a confusion of the lemon plant with the cedar of Lebanon; both trees were known in Italian as *cedro*. Along with being one of the four woods of the Cross, cedar signified Christ through its strength, perfume, and healing properties and represented the Virgin's goodness and beauty. Lemons, in addition to being confused with this established symbol, became linked with the Virgin through their poison-fighting powers and sweet-smelling flowers.



GALLERY 243

Stacks of Wheat (End of Day, Autumn) (1890/91) by Claude Monet

Thirty paintings of stacks of wheat! What was it about those structures that so captivated Monet? Like his other serial paintings of Rouen Cathedral and the Houses of Parliament, Monet's haystacks have traditionally been viewed merely as vehicles to examine the seasonal effects of light, color, and mood, not as the true subject of the works. Yet recent scholarship suggests that the meaning of these dwelling-like piles of wheat were also quite important to Monet. As urbanization and industrialization encroached on the rural landscape, the stacks served as a tribute to France's rich farming tradition and fertile land. They are also tied to man's ability to control or contain nature, a theme that Monet would explore further both in tending to and painting his famous water-lily gardens.



GALLERY 134

Incense Burner in the Form of a Duck (12th century), China

This happily quacking duck is no noisy nuisance but rather a symbol of a happy and felicitous marriage. According to Chinese folklore, mandarin ducks mate for life, and this monogamous waterfowl is calling to its mate, an action emphasized when the incense burned inside the vessel wafts delicately out of its beak. The duck's floral accoutrement, a lotus, only adds more marital and familial promise. Boasting a seedpod bursting with seeds, the lotus is emblematic of summer's abundance and often refers to having lots of children. Additionally, in Buddhism, the flower, which roots itself in the mud but blooms elegantly atop murky waters, represents spirituality—rising above ordinary life to enlightenment.



GALLERY 155

Emblem of the God Shiva (Linga) (10th/13th century) Cambodia

The linga, a complex symbol for the god Shiva, is in fact a phallus, symbolizing his energy and procreative powers. The form is derived from Hindu mythology in which Shiva appears on the waters of creation as an endless pillar of fire between cosmic time cycles. The god Vishnu dives down in his boar incarnation to see where this pillar begins, and the god Brahma flies up in his goose form to see where it ends. Finding it infinite, they return to meet in the middle and acknowledge Shiva's supremacy. This Khmer-style linga of polished stone highlights Shiva's superiority in this Hindu trinity: the square base represents Brahma the creator, the middle octagonal section Vishnu the maintainer, and the smooth top Shiva the destroyer or transformer.



REGENSTEIN HALL

Pitcher (c. 1890) by Edward Kemeys

Edward Kemeys, the sculptor who created what has become the most recognizable symbol of the Art Institute, its famous lions, also designed this earthenware pitcher. Bearing four Native American countenances—on the spout, the handle, and each side—the vessel celebrates the ideals that Native Americans grew to represent for many artists of the American Arts and Crafts movement: a loving reverence of nature, a skilled devotion to handicraft, and the absence of industrialization's dehumanizing aspects. These complex themes are also explored in the striking photographs by Gertrude Käsebier and Edward S. Curtis, also on view in the special exhibition *Apostles of Beauty: Arts and Crafts from Britain to Chicago*.



GALLERY 292

Untitled (1989–96) by Robert Gober

What do kitty litter, a wedding dress, and wallpaper filled with disturbing images have to do with one another? In this new Modern Wing installation, Robert Gober combines these symbolic elements to expose how the ugly history of racial violence in the United States has been repressed in a sort of collective amnesia. The wallpaper's image of a lynched black man remind us of the horrible crimes that took place, while the image of the sleeping white man suggests both passive involvement in and a willed forgetting of these crimes. As Gober explained, "[The wedding dress] represents the supposed white purity that often triggered or justified the violence depicted on the walls" and the kitty litter is a material that "both absorbs the stench of excrement (the wallpaper) and allows for domestic intimacy (think diapers)."

Looking for more mysterious masterpieces?

The hidden symbolism of Caravaggio's paintings played a starring role in *The Da Vinci Code*. Don't miss the rare opportunity to see one of this influential Italian painter's most highly regarded paintings, *The Supper at Emmaus*. The work, on loan from the National Gallery, London, will be on view in Gallery 211 through January 31, 2010.