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## CHECKLIST

Leonard Gaultier, French, 1561–1641,  
after Michelangelo Buonarroti, Italian, 1475–1564  
*The Last Judgment*, about 1600  
Engraving on laid paper  
*Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisition Fund; 2005.4*

Wassily Kandinsky, Russian, 1866–1944  
*Large Resurrection (Sound of the Trumpet)*, 1911  
Color woodcut on laid paper  
*Purchased through the Adelbert Ames Jr. 1919 Fund; PR.984.27*

Francesco Trevisani, Italian, 1656–1746  
*The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, about 1690  
Oil on canvas  
*Purchased through the Florence and Lansing Porter Moore 1937 Fund; 2005.59*

Bill Viola, American, born 1951  
*The Quintet of the Silent*, 2000  
Single-channel video on wall-mounted plasma screen  
*Purchased through gifts from the Lathrop Fellows; MIS.2002.7*

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Wassily Kandinsky, *The Large Resurrection (Sound of the Trumpet)*, 1911, color woodcut on laid paper.  
Purchased through the Adelbert Ames Jr. 1919 Fund; PR.984.27  
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## CONTINUITY OF THE SPIRITUAL Old and Modern Masters



Bill Viola, *The Quintet of the Silent*, 2000, single-channel video on wall-mounted plasma screen. Purchased through gifts from the Lathrop Fellows; MIS.2002.7

The representation of emotion and spirituality in art has interested painters and scholars alike at least from the time of Socrates, but it took a particular turn in the Renaissance, when artists began to display a new confidence in their ability to express these qualities. From the fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries, European artists developed a visual rhetoric of spirituality that appears at once ambitious and archaic to today's audiences. There has, however, been a modern resurgence of interest in the art of spirituality and emotion that looks directly to these Old Master works for inspiration. Artists such as the early-twentieth-century painter Wassily Kandinsky and, more recently, contemporary videographer Bill Viola have appropriated the rhetoric of Renaissance modes of expression for their own visualizations of spirituality, creating a dialogue across the centuries about our ability to comprehend and empathize with our fellow human beings through purely visual means.

In an engraving dated to about 1600, Leonard Gaultier reproduced Michelangelo's renowned *Last Judgment* fresco as it appeared before its censorship by Pope Pius IV in 1565. This black-and-white representation of Michelangelo's painting captures some of the original's sweep of emotion by carefully replicating its composition and figural forms. Michelangelo drew on traditional Christian rhetoric to create a diagram of spirituality that strikes an evocative balance between hope

and fear. Clear registers separate the earthly and heavenly spheres: the blessed horde forms a mandorla around Christ, whose gesture symbolizes both blessing and damnation; trumpeters waking the dead mark the border between the judged of the earth below and Christ the Judge above; and the elect rise from their graves on the left while the damned are pulled down by demons on the right. Michelangelo builds on the tension of this scene by twisting his muscular figures into a variety of complex poses and overwhelming the viewer with detail, thereby monumentalizing the energy and emotion of the composition. Although many devout critics at the time objected to the apparent heresy of Michelangelo's nudes, there is no doubt that the *Last Judgment* successfully conveys the spiritual tumult associated with apocalyptic Christian beliefs.

Francesco Trevisani's *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (about 1690) further exemplifies the ability of the Old Masters to move the soul through the medium of painting. In this case the artist relies on light and color, rather than composition, to convey the pathos of the martyrdom of Saint John, who was beheaded at the behest of Herod's wife, Herodias, and her daughter, Salome. The scene is illuminated by three sources but the strong diagonal movement of light from the women in the doorway to John slumped in the middle of the painting draws attention immediately to the saint and his executioner. This diagonal thrust is further reinforced by Trevisani's repeated use of red along the plane, which is particularly prominent against the otherwise somber palette. Even though the viewer can mentally complete the arc of the executioner's sword by following the sweep of the diagonal to Saint John's bared neck, this motion is never visually realized. The tenebristic lighting of the painting underscores the scene's tension by highlighting the strain upon the central figures' sculpted musculature and creating deep shadows around them. The celestial light and descending cherubs in the upper right corner, however, recall John's subsequent heavenly ascent, supplying a spiritual atmosphere that is tinged with hope for divine redemption.

In his 1911 treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky whittled down the visual rhetoric of the Old Masters to what he considered the essentials of emotional expression: form and color. While he approved of the rhythm of compositions like the *Last Judgment* and the *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, Kandinsky believed that the subject of an image is secondary in its spiritual impact. *The Large Resurrection* (1911) represents an early step in Kandinsky's exploration of the abstraction of figures in favor of form and color. Although the woodcut references recognizable symbols of the Christian

doctrine of the Resurrection of the Dead, Kandinsky disassociates his concept of spirituality from Christianity by rendering his figures with a strict economy of means and dissolving the traditional registers of the scene that had been established by artists like Michelangelo. Instead, Kandinsky relies on the sheer force of color, playing with our associations among colors, concepts, and sounds. Red, for example, is here meant to invoke thoughts of fire, blood, and the resounding vibrations of a trumpet, while deep blue balances this spiritual stimulation by retreating from the viewer and invoking stasis.

Rather than modifying the visual language of the Old Masters to create a contemporary sense of spirituality, Bill Viola's *Quintet of the Silent* (2000) uses new technology to reinterpret that language. At first glance, his video seems like a modern Caravaggistic painting—the figures are illuminated by one source, creating a strong chiaroscuro effect, and they are set in a shallow, indeterminate space, making them immediately available to the viewer. Yet Viola does not intend to create an exact replica of an Old Master image but instead notes, “I'm interested in what the old masters didn't paint, those steps in between” (Walsh, 36). As the actors' movements unfold, the image is enlivened and the nuances of their expressions are revealed in excruciatingly slow detail. This exploration of emotion is unhindered by either context or narrative, allowing viewers to bring their own associations to the art and map their own spirituality onto it. The process of watching *Quintet of the Silent* in fact mimics the way in which the Old Masters expected their art to be viewed, over a long duration and with deep introspection.

By juxtaposing the work of these old and modern masters, we can achieve a deeper understanding of the subtleties of human emotion. Through their careful presentations of symbolism, form, color, and both literal and suggested movement, these artists enable us to both see *and* perceive the invisible spirit within.

Karysa Norris '12, Class of 1954 Intern

Leonard Gaultier, after Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Last Judgment*, about 1600, engraving on laid paper. Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisition Fund; 2005.4



Francesco Trevisani, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, about 1690, oil on canvas. Purchased through the Florence and Lansing Porter Moore 1937 Fund; 2005.59



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