

'UNITS OF LIGHT FORM THE STRUCTURE'
FROM HISTORY OF RELIGIONS SERIES



MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

The Jordan Schnitzer resurrects popular Carl Morris exhibit, History of Religions

PHOTOS COURTESY, JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART

A rabbi and a priest walk in to an art studio ... Sounds like the beginning of a highfalutin *bon mot*, but it was a crucial step in the production of the late Portland painter Carl Morris' *History of Religions* murals that will open at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art Dec. 21 — only the second time they've been shown since the inaugural exhibition more than 50 years ago.

When Morris was approached to do nine murals for Oregon's Centennial Exposition in 1959, he was concerned about the task at hand: representing the history of religious faiths. The project was already late due to legislative feet-dragging, but before he could get to work, a jury made up of a priest, a rabbi and local church representatives had to approve the concept.

"They came to look at the sketches," Morris told Sue Ann Kendal in a 1983 interview for the Northwest Oral History Project. "I had made three schemes for these and I put them out on the floor and then turned to them and said, 'Now I'm going to go and make a drink. I'll take orders and when I come back you will have made a decision. Either you'll let me have the commission or you'll go out and find someone else in a hurry because there isn't any time.'"

Thusly, Morris took charge and completed the series in eight weeks (with some help from his wife, sculptor Hilda Grossman), an incredible feat for nine 8-by-10-foot oil paintings. Because Morris was sensitive to showing favoritism towards any one creed, he abstracted religious symbols, and, focusing on the universal theme of man's search for lightness, created a visual religious language all his own.

"I think he was really clever the way he went about it," Jordan Schnitzer's McCosh Fellow curator Danielle Knapp says. "All these symbols will be recognizable to an extent but they offer leeway for personal interpretation." McCosh will lead a gallery talk on Morris' work 5:30 pm Wednesday, Jan. 16. ■

History of Religions shows at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art Dec. 21 through Jan. 20.

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