



Michael Landy as St. Jerome, 2012. © Michael Landy, courtesy of the Thomas Dane Gallery, London. Photo: The National Gallery, London.

MICHAEL LANDY  
SAINTS  
ALIVE

THE  
NATIONAL  
GALLERY

An introduction for teachers and students

## SAINTS ALIVE

This exhibition consists of seven kinetic sculptures that are operated by visitors. The sculptures represent figures and stories of popular saints taken from the history of art. They are made from cast representations of details taken from National Gallery paintings, which have been combined with assemblages of recycled machinery, broken children's toys and other unwanted junk.

In the foyer to the exhibition, a selection of related drawings and collages is displayed. The collages are made from fragments cut out from reproductions of paintings in the collection.

## THE ROOTSTEIN HOPKINS ASSOCIATE ARTIST SCHEME

The National Gallery is a historical collection that ends with work by Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists. At the time of the Gallery's foundation in 1824, one of the stated aims was that it should provide a resource from which contemporary artists could learn and gain inspiration. Taking its cue from this idea, the Associate Artist Scheme began in 1989 with the appointment of Paula Rego.

The essential requirement for the Associate Artist is that he or she makes new work by engaging with, and responding to the collection or some aspect of the collection. The artist is given a studio in the Gallery for a period of around two years. Michael Landy is the ninth artist to be invited to undertake this project.

## MICHAEL LANDY

Michael Landy first came to prominence in the late 1980s as one of the YBAs (Young British Artists). He was one of the exhibitors in the famous 'Freeze' exhibition of 1988, curated by Damien Hirst.

At the time of his appointment as Rootstein Hopkins Associate Artist at the National Gallery, Landy's most celebrated achievement was his epic work *Breakdown*, a remarkable act of destruction and self-denial in which he destroyed everything he owned. Taking place in an empty C&A department store in Oxford Street, every item in his possession, from his car to his passport, was systematically catalogued, then ground down with industrial shredders before being sent to landfill.

### Jean Tinguely and Kinetic Art

In 1982, while a student at Loughborough, Landy visited an exhibition of works by Jean Tinguely at the Tate Gallery. Tinguely (1925–1991) was a Swiss kinetic sculptor best known for his sculptural machines, which he called 'meta-mechanical'. Central to Tinguely's works was the idea that they should be operated by visitors to his exhibitions. The machines were cobbled together from junk and were deliberately dysfunctional, a subtle social critique underlying their apparent whimsicality. Landy loved this exhibition and developed a lasting admiration for the artist's work. 'Everyone had smiles on their faces,' he recalls.

### Landy at the National Gallery

Landy's interest in Tinguely and his fascination with images of saints in the National Gallery's collection inspired this exhibition. He began by drawing, taking different elements of National Gallery paintings and joining them together in unlikely looking combinations.

He then moved onto collage, cutting out different elements from reproductions of paintings and combining

them with drawn sections of machinery. These provided the original ideas from which the sculptures were made. The sculptures were produced by skilled technicians under Landy's close direction.

Landy had always wanted the public to be directly involved in this exhibition and therefore the sculptures of *Saint Apollonia*, *Saint Jerome*, *Doubting Thomas* and *Multi-Saint* are operated by means of foot pedals, which cause the sculptures to judder violently into action.

*Saint Apollonia* is designed to gradually deface herself, while the *Multi-Saint* is a combination of different saints' attributes – Michael, Saint Peter Martyr, Saint Catherine, Saint Lawrence and Saint Lucy. The *Saint Jerome* sculpture beats his chest with a rock. As Landy points out: 'Artists are always beating themselves up!'

*Doubting Thomas* seems especially violent. As the sculpture is operated during the course of the exhibition, the finger of Thomas, which has a metal tip, will gradually punch a real hole in the side of the torso of the Christ figure.

*Saint Francis Lucky Dip* is operated by a push-button that drops a grab claw down inside the hollow sculpture; it will

occasionally come up with a prize for a lucky winner. This takes the form of a T-shirt printed with the words 'Poverty – Chastity – Obedience', a reference to the three vows of Saint Francis who gave away all of his worldly goods, including his clothes.

*Spin the Saint Catherine Wheel and Win the Crown of Martyrdom* is manually operated. Resembling a giant Wheel of Fortune, it is inscribed with incidents from the legend of Saint Catherine as told in *The Golden Legend* (see below). Where the wheel stops, a pointer indicates the fate of the visitor who has spun the wheel.

The exhibition is completed with a *Donation Box*, which takes the form of Saint Francis of Assisi from Botticelli's painting in the National Gallery (NG 598). When a coin is dropped in, the saint bashes himself on the forehead with his Crucifix.

### Saints in the National Gallery

There are two kinds of saints represented in the Gallery's collection: real historical figures, such as Saints Jerome and Francis of Assisi, and legendary figures, such as Saints Catherine or Lucy, who may indeed have once existed but whose stories have become so embellished as to be now understood as legends and fables.

*The Golden Legend* was an extremely popular anthology of stories of the saints, written in around 1266 by Jacobus de Voragine. It became a source book for artists and

tells the stories of both historical and legendary saints. However, even the stories about historical figures were often embroidered with wild and fantastical stories.

The earliest Christian saints were often martyrs who suffered agonising deaths because they refused to worship pagan gods. Indeed, the word 'martyr' means 'witness', referring to a saint's role in testifying to the Christian faith. Other saints performed charitable deeds or led extraordinary lives, retreating from society to live as hermits, going without food and drink or mortifying their flesh through self-flagellation.

After their deaths, saints often became the focus of cults. Their bodily remains or objects they had owned or touched became preserved and venerated. These are known as 'relics'. Institutions such as churches or monastic foundations that possessed these relics often became centres of pilgrimage for the faithful. Pilgrims visiting these relics could invoke the saint's assistance in curing their ailments or misfortunes. Different communities, towns and cities all had their own patron saints, who could be invoked for help or protection during times of trouble.

Images played an important role in the cult of saints. Painting them, or even commissioning them to be painted, became seen as acts of devotion in themselves. The saints' attributes (objects with which they were associated) became well known and easily recognizable, Saint Catherine and her wheel, for example, or Saint Francis of Assisi and his stigmata.

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## SAINT JEROME about 341–420

Jerome is known as a Doctor of the Church for his translation of the Bible from its original Hebrew and Greek into Latin, which was then a spoken language. This translation is known as 'The Vulgate'. Jerome was born in Dalmatia and travelled to Rome to learn Latin and Greek. He was ordained at the age of 29 and later retreated to the Syrian Desert to live as a hermit, where he fasted, prayed and beat himself, in order to purge his mind of impure thoughts. He returned to Rome as secretary to Pope Damasus I before moving to Bethlehem where he established a monastery. A legend that became attached to him, tells the story of the lion with a thorn in its paw. The other monks in the monastery fled but Jerome removed the thorn and the lion became his devoted pet.

Jerome is represented in art in a variety of ways, often accompanied by his lion. He is either shown in the desert, stripped to the waist, contemplating a crucifix while beating himself with a rock, or else depicted as a scholar dressed in the red robes of a cardinal. The office of cardinal never existed in Jerome's lifetime, but he was posthumously given the red robes as an attribute in acknowledgment of his role as papal adviser. He is patron saints of libraries, librarians and scholars.



Cosimo Tura, *Saint Jerome*, probably about 1470 © The National Gallery, London

## SAINT CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA 3rd century

Saint Catherine may have existed but her story is so packed with fabulous legends that her cult was suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1969, along with several other popular saints such as Ursula, Christopher and Valentine. However, in 2002, her cult was reinstated by Pope John Paul II.

Born in Alexandria, Egypt, the daughter of a pagan king and queen, Catherine dedicated her life to Christianity after she experienced a vision in which the Virgin Mary gave her to Christ in a mystical marriage. At the age of 18, she was ordered by the Roman Emperor Maxentius to offer sacrifice to the idols in the pagan temple, but she refused. Maxentius then sent for 50 of the best philosophers and poets in the Empire to engage her in debate, but they were so impressed by Catherine that they were converted to Christianity, leading Maxentius to order that they be burnt alive. Catherine was then imprisoned but succeeded in converting some 200 Roman guards and the Emperor's wife, who was duly executed after having her breasts torn off.

Maxentius then ordered Catherine's torture and execution on a spiked wheel, but an angel descended from heaven and shattered the wheel. She was finally beheaded with a sword but instead of blood, milk flowed from her body and a miraculous oil with healing properties issued from her bones. Her body was then carried off by angels to Mount Sinai.

Catherine is nearly always represented with her wheel, either whole or fragmentary, and often shown with a sword as a symbol of her decapitation. The subject of her mystic marriage was also very popular: the saint is often shown with the Virgin Mary and the Infant Christ, who places a ring onto her finger.



Pintoricchio, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria with a Donor*, probably about 1480–1500 © The National Gallery, London. Bequeathed by Lt.-General Sir William George Moore, 1862

## SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISSI 1181–1226

Francis was born into a wealthy family, but after experiencing visions, against his father's wishes he renounced his inheritance and gave away all of his worldly goods, including the clothes off his back. He took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and lived among his disciples in Assisi, Italy. Here in 1210 he was authorised by the Pope to found the Franciscan order, who are identified by their plain brown habits. Francis travelled the country, preaching, experiencing visions and performing miracles.

Towards the end of his life, his sustained prayers led to a miracle in which the five wounds of Christ made when he was crucified – that is, the holes made in his hands and feet and the lance wound on his side – were impressed upon Francis's body so that he himself became Christ-like. These marks are known as his stigmata.

Francis can be recognised in art by his monk's tonsure and plain brown habit with three knots, symbolising his three vows. He is differentiated from other Franciscan saints by the marks of the stigmata.



Sassetta, *The Stigmatisation of Saint Francis*, 1437–44 © The National Gallery, London. Bought with contributions from The Art Fund, Benjamin Guinness and Lord Bearsted, 1934.

## SAINT PETER MARTYR 1205–1252

Born in Verona, Peter became a Dominican preacher. He was renowned for his orthodox zeal and determination to root out and mercilessly punish heretics. His preaching aroused a great deal of hostility and he was assassinated during an ambush. His head was split with an axe and stabbed in the side with a dagger.

He is shown in art as wearing the traditional black and white habit of the Dominicans and, more remarkably, by the dagger or axe embedded in his head.

Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Peter Martyr*, about 1476 © The National Gallery, London.



## SAINT LUCY died 304 or 310

A legend, that first appears in the 15th century, tells how a suitor greatly admired Lucy's beautiful eyes. He would not accept that Lucy had dedicated her life as a virgin for Christ. Accordingly, Lucy plucked her eyes out and presented them to him as a gift. Miraculously, her sight was restored.

She is patron saint of the blind and those suffering from eye disease.

Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Lucy*, about 1476 © The National Gallery, London.



## SAINT LAWRENCE died 258

Born in Spain, Lawrence moved to Rome and was ordained as a deacon. His martyrdom occurred when he was roasted alive on a gridiron.

According to the *Golden Legend* he shouted out to his tormentors: 'Look, you have me well done on this side, now turn me over'. He is patron saint of cooks.

Hans Memling, *Saint Lawrence*, about 1480 © The National Gallery, London.



## SAINT APOLLONIA died 249

According to the Golden Legend, Apollonia was an aged virgin who was tortured by having her teeth beaten out. Later stories, however, preferred to describe her as a beautiful young woman whose teeth were extracted with pincers. Her depiction in art tends to favour this more romanticized version.

She is patron saint of dentists and those suffering from toothache.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Saints Genevieve and Apollonia*, 1506 © The National Gallery, London.



## SAINT MICHAEL

Although an archangel, Michael was adopted by Christianity as a saint. In the Book of Revelation, he appears as the leader of the army of God in the final combat against the Devil and the rebel angels. The *Golden Legend* records the belief that the archangel Michael will call the dead to rise on the Day of Judgement. He is shown in art as an armoured warrior angel trampling on the devil and often holds a pair of scales, symbolising the judgement of souls.

Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Michael*, about 1476 © The National Gallery, London.



## SAINT THOMAS

According to the Book of John in the New Testament, 'Doubting' Thomas, as he has become known, did not believe the account of his fellow disciples that they had seen Jesus Christ, miraculously risen from the dead. Thomas said he would not believe until he had put his finger into Christ's wounds. Accordingly, Christ appeared before him and invited Thomas to put his hand into the wound in his side.

Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, about 1502-4 © The National Gallery, London.



## STARTING POINTS

What does historical painting have to offer contemporary art and artists?

Why are some old paintings seen as 'timeless' whereas others are seen as less relevant today?

Why should anyone have the right to respond to sacred art?

Where can we find traditions equivalent to relic worship in secular society?

How can we view secular art as an act of devotion?

If the stories of saints are not true, then how can we understand them as meaningful?

Why do stories of religious figures and events become embellished over time?

'Seeing is believing.' Does faith need proof? Why? Why not?

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This guide can be downloaded from the National Gallery website.