



Faith & Values: Carlos Museum's artifacts bring Bible stories to life

BYLINE: CATHERINE FOX
Staff

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The ancient Middle Eastern oil lamps tucked away in a back corner of the Michael C. Carlos Museum are not much more than slabs of clay turned up at the edges. Common as light bulbs in their day, they don't hold a candle to the colorful Egyptian mummy cases nearby.

Yet, these lamps have a story to tell, too. In fact, they make a number of cameo appearances in what some call the greatest story ever told.

The lamp makes an appearance in Psalm 119:105, as a resonant metaphor for the Torah when the poet writes, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." And it figures in the parable of the brides and bridegrooms in the New Testament's book of Matthew, which you can hear in "Times and Texts of the Bible," a new audio guide for the museum's permanent collections of ancient Near Eastern, Egyptian, Greek and Roman arts.

The guide is part of the museum's Five Faiths Initiative, an effort to weave the importance of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism throughout the institution's programming.

"[The initiative] is a natural for us because Emory has such a large faculty dealing with religion," says Carlos director Bonnie Speed. "It's a way to be an object-based resource to them."

Seventeen faculty members from the departments of Middle Eastern studies, religion, art history and the Candler School of Theology participated in selecting objects that resonated with their research and teaching, and they speak about them on the guide, which features 35 stops.

Brent Strawn, a professor of Old Testament in the Candler school, found a depiction of the traditional weighing of the hearts on a mummy coffin of particular interest because it related to his research on the book of Exodus, particularly the language about the Pharaoh hardening his heart.

"The insight into literary motifs is very fascinating," he says.

The guide, intended for a general audience, also uses the objects to help visitors visualize how the peoples of the Bible lived -- or, as with the reliefs on a Persian quiver depicting the siege of a city, how they died. They also show the interconnections between all of the ancient cultures in the Middle East.

Speed sees it as another avenue to help visitors engage with the collection. "I love watching school kids come through," she says. "These objects transport them into a different time. All of a sudden, they begin to take on meaning.

"Art is about more than aesthetics," Speed says. "It isn't made in a vacuum. It grows out of its times. "

EXHIBIT TOUR

Michael C. Carlos Museum

- "Times and Texts of the Bible," random-access audio guide, \$3, available at the first-floor reception desk.
- Permanent collection: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 12-5 p.m. Sundays. \$7. 571 S. Kilgo Circle, Atlanta. 404-727-4282, www.carlos.emory.edu.
- "Cradle of Christianity": 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Sundays. \$15. Through Oct. 14. Timed reservations suggested through Web site or by calling 404-727-4280.

Photo

Carlos Museum

Insights into biblical passages can be found in descriptions on a mummy coffin that's part of the Five Faiths Initiative, an effort to highlight major religions in the Carlos Museum programming.

Photo

Strawn

Photo

Carlos Museum

Pazuzu

This tiny amulet features the snarling Pazuzu, one of the most feared demons of the Mesopotamian world. The piece jump-starts an audio commentary on demons in Hebrew apocalyptic literature and the practice of exorcism among early Christians, noting Pazuzu's cameo appearance in the 1973 film "The Exorcist."

Photo

Bruce White

Gold wreath

The gold wreath is modeled on the ones awarded to the victors in Greek athletic games. The apostle Paul used the familiar object in Corinthians, contrasting it to the Christians' "imperishable wreath" as a symbol for their eternal reward -- a strategy akin to preachers using football images in their sermons.

Photo

Bruce White

Tiberius

Tiberius, Roman Emperor during much of Jesus' lifetime, was responsible for appointing Pontius Pilate to administer the Palestine province. This head belonged to a monumental sculpture, among many erected throughout the empire, as the guide says, to help enforce the message that taxes must be paid to him. Jesus made reference to this in his words: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's."