

The Anniston Star

'Scripture for the Eyes': Atlanta exhibit of 16th-century prints reveals a vibrant discussion on faith

By Lisa Davis, Features Editor

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In the first half of the 16th century, Europe was a stew of new religious ideas. Martin Luther had just posted his Ninety-Five Theses, breaking with the Roman Catholic church and beginning the Protestant Reformation. French theologian John Calvin was developing his own system of Reformed theology.

At the same time as religion was being democratized, so too was the written word. Gutenberg had printed his first Bible in the 1450s, and the cities of Antwerp and Amsterdam had since become major centers of publishing. Bibles were printed in many different languages. Biblical images — much more affordable than paintings — were printed in astounding numbers.

Some of the finest of these prints have been collected in the exhibit Scripture for the Eyes, which opens today at the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta. It features 80 engravings and woodcuts by the foremost Dutch and Flemish masters of the 16th century, exploring Biblical themes at a time of dramatic religious and political upheaval.

In particular, the Low Countries — known today as the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France — were a great center of exchange and discussion. "You have Lutherans, you have Reformed (Calvinist) churches, and you have Roman Catholics. You have all these communities living side by side," said Andrew Melion, professor of art history at Emory and co-curator of the exhibit.

It made for lively conversation, at least until the divisions turned violent in the last half of the 16th century.

Some of the prints in the exhibit are definitely Catholic, deifying the Virgin Mary, or emphasizing the role of good works in personal salvation.

Others are defiantly Protestant, illustrating that salvation depends solely on the mercy of Christ, not works.

But many more are deliberately nonpartisan, and speak to Christians of any stripe.

Melion points out one image, labeled "Dissension in the Church," of a melee that has broken out in a sanctuary. "When you look closely, all the figures are enacting Biblical scenes of violence against one another — Cain and Abel, Saul about to throw the spear against David, the brothers of Joseph putting him in the well, the High

Priest of Jerusalem striking the prophet Jeremiah," said Melion. "The argument is that Christians should not perpetrate violence against fellow Christians."

It is significant, added Melion, that so many of these images are neither Catholic nor Protestant. "Many could have divided themselves, but didn't choose to do so."

Artistically, these prints are exquisite, rich and rife with detail. Some are accompanied by magnifying glasses, the better to examine them.

"We now live in a very visual culture. We're saturated by images all the time," said Melion. "But in the 16th century, the way most people had images was in the form of prints. It was a way to bring images into your home, to engage with them." It was a new art form, it was affordable, it was incredibly popular.

"Say you were a relatively wealthy merchant, you could afford a few paintings — but you could afford hundreds of prints," said Melion. Collectors would buy prints and paste them into albums, or store them in elaborate cabinets.

There were prints to help interpret Scripture, prints to aid in prayer and meditation, prints to encourage morality and good works.

Often the Biblical figures are in Greco-Roman clothing (the 16th-century idea of ancient dress), while bystanders are wearing contemporary clothing. "People mistakenly think these are errors, but they're not," said Melion. "It's an invitation to draw parallels between Biblical truths and your life here and now.

"These prints can make their case in ways that paintings cannot — many have text, so there's this wonderful conversation between text and image," Melion said. "People clearly loved these images in the 16th century. I want people in the 21st century to love them, too."

'Scripture for the Eyes'

When: Today through Jan. 24

Where: Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University, 571 S. Kilgo Circle, Atlanta

Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; noon-4 p.m. Sunday.

Admission: \$8 adults; \$6 students, seniors and children ages 6-17; free for children 5 and under. Admission is free from 1-4 p.m. on Nov. 6, Dec. 4 and Jan. 8, as well as from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. on Dec. 30.

Info: (404) 727-4282 or carlos.emory.edu.