

Netherlandish Bibles Tell Their Stories in Ancient Engravings

By *Tammie Smith* **Posted: 10/19/2009**

From the heart-gripping images of Jesus' crucifixion to the symbol-laden depictions of heaven, biblical pictures have always functioned as important mediums for religious storytelling and teaching.

And now, many of those famous Christian images have come together in a collection of ancient masterpieces to share the stories and messages of Christianity with pictures that truly are worth a thousand words (of Scripture).

This ancient collection of engravings and woodcuts, courtesy of the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and several other museums, is now on display at the Carlos Museum's newest exhibit, *Scriptures for the Eyes: Bible Illustration in Netherlandish Prints of the Sixteenth Century*, which opened on Saturday.

The Carlos Museum and New York's Museum of Biblical Art are currently the only two locations playing host to this exhibit.

Director James Clifton of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation and Asa Griggs Candler Professor of Art History Walter Melion are curators for Emory's new exhibition.

The exhibit features works by Dutch and Flemish engravers and painters of the 16th century, many of whom are considered some of the leading engravers in the history of art, including Lucas van Leyden and Maarten van Heemskerck.

In addition to their artistic and historic importance, engravings from both the Old and New Testament also played an important role in translating the biblical Scriptures into the common language of the 16th century Netherlandish people.

Antwerp and Amsterdam were important publishing centers for these vernacular Bibles and the many engraved images that accompanied them.

Of the almost 80 pieces of art on display at the Carlos Museum, several sit in glass boxes on the yellowing pages of large, ancient Bibles, while the remainder hang on the walls throughout the exhibit.

The engravings are examined under a number of theological themes, which divide the exhibit and all of its contents into sections about morality, worship, exegesis, politics and polemics and more.

Within the worship section, “Christ Nailed to the Cross from the Seven Bleedings of Christ,” an engraving by Herman Jansz. Muller, recounts the famous scene of Jesus’ crucifixion.

The work displays a withered and pained depiction of Christ that is typical of medieval art and most unlike the sort of angular, heroic portrayal of Christ that characterized Italian art and continues to be used in today’s depictions.

Displaying the political influence on religion, an engraving by Jan Wierix depicts Christ giving a globe surmounted by the cross and decorated by a crown, sword and olive branch to the kneeling Pope Gregory XIII and King Phillip II.

The piece reveals the role of divine right in political regimes at the time as well as themes of power, war and peace.

And one of several pieces featured on the topic of morality, “Deathbeds of the Righteous and Unrighteous Man” is a more visually complex pieces by Cornelis Anthonisz that pulls inspiration from Christ’s prophecies about judgment day and is artistically influenced by medieval images.

The piece depicts two men who lie dying on either side of a bed, with the surrounding images and figures that accompany the scene creating a stark contrast between the portrayal of the death of the pious and the selfish. The pious man lies surrounded by women who kneel by his side or hover above him with mournful expressions, while a heaven of angels and light break through the clouded sky overhead.

On the opposite side, the selfish man lies with blank, empty eyes that stare out toward the viewer, rather than upward into heaven, as the pious man seems to do. The death-like personage of a skeleton holding an hourglass towers over the selfish man, while a gargoyle-like monster tugs at his arm, as though to pull him into the broken ground that leads to hell.

Like many of the 16th century artists featured in the exhibit, Anthonisz was both a painter and an engraver, though he completed only two paintings in his life.

Anthonisz also came from a very prominent family of artists, including Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen, his father, and portrait painter Dirck Jacobsz, his uncle.

In addition to these 400- and 500-year-old pieces of art, educational events will also accompany the exhibit throughout its time here at Emory.

Several lectures and workshops will examine how this visual biblical imagery has affected religious worship and experiences, as well as other historical or religious themes within the engravings.

And with so much artistic genius, religious analysis and historical insight packed into these engravings and woodcuts, gallery-goers may just come away with more biblical expertise than any Sunday church service will provide.