

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Contacts: Debbie Bujosa, 212.408.1436

Lisa Dierbeck, 917.364.0755

Uneasy Communion: MOBIA Exhibit Sheds New Light on Artistic Collaboration Between Christians and Jews of Medieval Spain

NEW YORK, January 25, 2010—Highlighting a rare instance of artistic collaboration between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages, *Uneasy Communion: Jews, Christians, and the Altarpieces of Medieval Spain*, on view at the **Museum of Biblical Art** from **February 19 through May 30, 2010**, explores the coexistence of these two groups in 14th- and 15th-century Spain and provides a nuanced picture of interfaith relationships and dialogue during this period. Over 30 panel paintings, manuscripts, ceramic tiles and Jewish ceremonial objects from this period will be on display in this groundbreaking exhibit.

Curated by Dr. Vivian B. Mann, Director of the Masters Program in Jewish Art at the Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary, *Uneasy Communion* is a fascinating study on how *retablos* (large multi-paneled altarpieces) and related artwork produced during the 14th- and 15th-centuries belie commonly held assumptions that Jews were not artists during the Middle Ages; that most medieval depictions of Jews were negative stereotypes; and that Jews lived apart from Christians, an unknown "Other." Instead, these works attest to the intimate knowledge Christians and Jews had of one another in the small towns and cities of medieval Spain. They also document the growing conflicts between the Church and the Jewish community and hint at the cataclysm to come in the Expulsion of the Jews in 1492.

"This exhibit intends to fill a gap in the scholarship of Jewish-Christian coexistence in medieval Spain, which to date has not used the art of the period as a source of valuable information," said Dr. Mann. "Art created by both Christian and Jewish artists, though, offers valuable glimpses into both the understanding of the Other and the ever-present conflict."

"Museum-goers will have the unique opportunity to view artwork that reflects the relationship between Christians and Jews in this turbulent time period," said MOBIA Executive Director, Dr. Ena Heller. "Soaring altarpieces, intricately-decorated manuscripts, and decorative tiles and ceramics culled from major national and international collections paint a fascinating and previously unknown picture of a fruitful yet difficult collaboration between artists from these two religious groups."

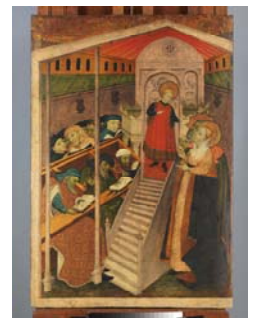
Exhibition Overview:

Uneasy Communion explores the last two centuries of Jewish life in Spain from the vantage point of religious art and demonstrates the cooperative relationships that existed between Christians and Jews who worked either independently or together to create art for both the Church and the Jewish community. Their co-existence, or *convivencia*, is defined as the mutual interpenetration and creative influence that existed alongside mutual friction, rivalry, and suspicion. Religious art was not created solely by members of the faith community it was intended to serve. Jewish and Christian artists worked together in *ateliers* producing both altarpieces as well as Latin and Hebrew manuscripts. Jews and *conversos* (Jews who had converted to Christianity) were painters and framers of these altarpieces, while Christians illuminated the pages of Hebrew manuscripts.

MOBIA examines this exciting moment of artistic collaboration by providing a glimpse into the lives of these communities which lived side by side. As a result, the exhibit also unveils the darker side of this co-existence, exposing the constant tension between acceptance and prejudice, between cooperation and conflict.

Exhibition Highlights:

Uneasy Communion features a complete *retablo* along with 15 panels on loan from renowned national and international institutions, including the Museo de Zaragoza, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Hispanic Society of America. These works depict scenes of the early life of Jesus or episodes from the lives of saints. In the panel *Christ Among the Doctors* (early 15th century, tempera and gold on wood; *right*) Jewish worshippers are seated along the walls of a contemporary synagogue; such as the one recently discovered in Lorca (Murcia).



Also on view is the panel *Interrogation of a Jew* (1485-87, oil on panel; *left*) an example of a scene from Christian history which the artist peopled with his Jewish contemporaries. The scene is staged just inside an arcuated gate that marked many of the entrances to Jewish quarters or *juderías*. Judas, the Jewish witness in the foreground, is bearded and wears a cloak in accord with governmental dress regulations.

Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* (1348, ink and gouache on vellum; *right*), will also be on view. The *Guide* is a manuscript of vital importance in showing that inter-religious *ateliers*, or workshops, produced works of art and manuscripts for both Christians and Jews. Ferrer Bassa (d. 1348), the chief artist of the workshop, used the same figure styles and decorative motifs in both Christian and Jewish works. In mixed ateliers, the influence of both Christian and Jewish models can be seen in a miniature of the Maimonides' manuscript that is based on a Byzantine composition of four evangelist symbols.



About the Curator:

Vivian B. Mann is Director of the Masters Program in Jewish Art at the Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Curator Emerita of the Jewish Museum. Her latest book, *Art and Ceremony in Jewish Life. Essays in Jewish Art History* was published in 2005. In 1999, Mann received the Jewish Cultural Achievement Award in Jewish Thought from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. She is one of the senior editors of *Images, A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* and was recently elected to the American Academy of Jewish Research.

###

Publication:

The exhibition is accompanied by the publication edited by Vivian T. Mann, with essays by Marcus B. Burke, Carmen Laccara Ducay, Thomas F. Glick and Vivian B. Mann, which provide a fascinating study of the production of altarpieces in late medieval Spain and the artistic overlap between the Jewish and Christian communities that this industry spawned. *Uneasy Communion: Jews, Christians, and the Altarpieces of Medieval Spain* is published by D Giles Limited in association with the Museum of Biblical Art and will be available at MOBIA and online at www.mobia.org. Hardcover, 9" x 12" / 176 pages / 70 color and 10 b/w illustrations. Price: \$55.00.

Major support for MOBIA's exhibitions and programs has been provided by the American Bible Society and by Howard and Roberta Ahmanson. Support for the catalog has been provided, in part, by the Robert Lehman Foundation. This program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the City Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support for *Uneasy Communion* has been provided by the David Berg Foundation, Robert and Sandra Bowden, Hester Diamond, and Brian O'Neil.

The Museum of Biblical Art

Located near Lincoln Center at 1865 Broadway at 61st Street, MOBIA presents critically acclaimed art exhibitions while offering an array of affordable arts enrichment programs to visitors of all ages. MOBIA celebrates and interprets art related to the Bible and its cultural legacy in Jewish and Christian traditions through exhibitions, education and scholarship. Past exhibitions have ranged from "outsider" art of the American South and medieval liturgical art to the works of Marc Chagall, Albrecht Dürer and Georges Rouault. Upcoming exhibitions will feature work by Louis Comfort Tiffany and by Andy Warhol. Admission to MOBIA's exhibitions is free for members and children under 12 and pay-what-you-wish for adults, with a suggested admission of \$7; Sundays are always free. Museum hours are: Tue., Wed, Fri., Sun.: 10:00 AM-6:00 PM; Thurs: 10:00 AM-8:00 PM; Mon: Closed. Visit www.mobia.org for information on public programs.