

PRESS RELEASE

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JESUS GOES HOLLYWOOD

RARE VINTAGE MOVIE POSTERS ON DISPLAY AT MOBIA

NEW YORK, February 6, 2009—*REEL RELIGION: A CENTURY OF THE BIBLE AND FILM*, on view at the Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) from February 6 to May 17, 2009, probes the fascination the Bible has exerted on filmmakers as different and distinct as Cecil B. DeMille, Mel Gibson, John Huston, Pier Paolo Passolini and Martin Scorsese. The exhibition features some 80 rare vintage movie posters reaching back to the dawn of film in 1898 and to Thomas Edison's invention of the kinetograph. A selection of original costumes worn by Hollywood screen stars is also on display, together with related film ephemera. *REEL RELIGION* explores how filmmakers have mined the Bible for drama and exoticism while taking audacious creative liberties to heighten its sex appeal, theatricality and violence.

Among the exhibition highlights is an early Art Deco masterpiece, a 1923 poster for the film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play, *Salomé*. One of only three existing prints, this exquisite lithograph was designed by Natacha Rambova, the wife of screen legend Rudolph Valentino, and inspired by Aubrey Beardsley's stunning, stylized black-and-white illustrations of 1894. Director Charles Bryant, unimpeded by the Hays Code's later restrictions, cast a middle-aged Alla Nazimova as the teenage princess who trades a seductive dance for John the Baptist's severed head. The production remains notorious for its wild extravagance, with towering hairstyles and ornate costumes that included real silver lamé loincloths. Dubbed "a hothouse orchid of decadent passion" by *Photoplay Magazine*, *Salomé* fed a popular obsession with "deadly beauty" that dates back to the 1890s. Though commercially disastrous, *Salomé* is regarded as one of the first American art films.

"Film is a recognized art form that has developed relatively recently," notes Paul Tabor, MOBIA's Director of Exhibitions. "Not unlike painters, filmmakers from the outset turned to the Bible for emotionally powerful source material. The posters made to promote these films were often works of art in themselves." Beautifully produced and designed with a rich art historical

awareness, they were sometimes inspired by the compelling iconography and striking compositions of artworks by celebrated masters. Although created by artists who generally remained anonymous, many of these rare vintage movie posters occupy a unique position between high art and advertising. “*REEL RELIGION* lets visitors delve into the Bible’s impact upon art, visual and popular culture,” observed Dr. Ena Heller, Executive Director of MOBIA.

Exhibition Overview

REEL RELIGION presents roughly 80 classic posters from America and Europe alongside several original costumes. These include the chest plate worn by Yul Brynner while playing the role of “Rameses” in DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956, MGM) and the gown worn by actress Nina Foch as “Bithiah”, both created by Hollywood’s legendary costume designer, Edith Head. Also on display is Charlton Heston’s mauve cape, adorned with gold trim, designed by Elizabeth Haffenden for William Wyler’s 1959 MGM production, *Ben-Hur*.

In mid-century America, the Bible’s influence on cinema had escalated, with directors hiring entire armies of scantily-clad extras in a quest to achieve epic, cinematic grandeur. While American audiences may be most familiar with “the sword and sandal” genre, the Bible has long ignited filmmakers’ imaginations. *REEL RELIGION* will allow viewers to trace the roots of cinema back to its earliest origins, revealing how film’s history is entwined with stories and characters drawn from the Bible.

In the late 1890s, the first films ever created were shown, not only in movie houses, but in churches. They were documentary recordings of the German Ober-Ammergau Passion Plays, world-famous theatrical productions which portrayed Christ’s final days. In addition to exhibiting the oldest movie poster in existence, from 1898, MOBIA will display a number of posters from other Passion Plays, including one from a 1908 film by Richard Hollaman. Entitled *The Passion Play*, the movie employed inventive new special effects to depict the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. Its original title enticed audiences by suggesting the film was made by Thomas Edison, who sued for patent infringement.

While the earliest films hewed closely to the Bible narrative, filmmakers became increasingly free in their adaptations, looking to extra-biblical sources, borrowing from scenes of brutality, suffering and lust while fabricating entirely new storylines. Cecil B. DeMille’s 1927 *King of Kings* paired a not-yet-converted Mary Magdalene with Judas in a made-for-Hollywood romance

– complete with feathered headdresses and zebra-drawn chariots. The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences has recently obtained and conserved a rare billboard-size poster advertising *King of Kings*. Though the original is too fragile to travel, the exhibition will display a brilliantly colored, eye-catching reproduction. Documentary footage will demonstrate the process used to conserve this extremely rare work of poster art.

Among other rarities is an outstanding Spanish lithograph of exceptional quality, produced by Mirabet in Valencia to advertise the 1949 Italian film *Fabiola*. Directed by Alessandro Blasetti, set in Ancient Rome, it is based rather loosely on the early life of Saint Fabiola as envisioned by novelist Cardinal Nicholas Patrick Wiseman. It tells a lurid tale of martyrdom and love between a beautiful, spoiled noblewoman and a low-born gladiator.

Rendering the Bible: Reflections of Art History

Celebrated visual artists have had a profound impact upon the history of cinema. Among other objects, *REEL RELIGION* displays an illustrated Bible by the French artist James Tissot, on loan from the American Bible Society's Rare Scripture Collection. Tissot's Bible, tremendously popular, has influenced the posters, costumes, sets and cinematography of numerous films from 1906 to 2004. Franco Zeffirelli, for instance, drew upon Tissot in arranging the composition of a pivotal moment: Christ being brought before Pilate in the 1977 film, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Tissot also inspired William Wyler's rendering of the cross at Golgotha in *Ben-Hur*. Such intriguing influences and unexpected juxtapositions are explored in depth in *REEL RELIGION: A CENTURY OF THE BIBLE AND FILM*.

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ABOUT THE COLLECTORS

Noted American collectors have loaned the works featured in the exhibition. Father Michael Morris, O.P., Professor of Religion and the Arts at the Dominican School of Philosophy & Theology at the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, California, owns one of the premier collections of vintage biblical film posters in the country. Collector Mary Strauss, co-owner of the historic Fox Theater, in St. Louis, has restored the ornate 1927 4,500-seat movie palace to its original opulence. She is Executive Producer of the award-winning documentary *The Gateway Arch: A Reflection of America* and the author of *The Fabulous Fox*.

ABOUT MOBIA

Located on Broadway and 61st Street, MOBIA fosters an understanding and appreciation of art inspired by the Bible and its legacy through the centuries by highlighting the connection between art and religion in Jewish and Christian traditions. Public programs for *REEL RELIGION: A CENTURY OF THE BIBLE AND FILM* include lectures, film screenings, concerts and a fair for children and their families. Admission to MOBIA's exhibitions is pay-what-you-wish. Please visit www.mobia.org for more information on upcoming events.



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