



## PRESS RELEASE

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### DUTCH RENAISSANCE ARTISTS ON VIEW AT MOBIA

MASTER PRINTMAKERS OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FEATURED IN NEW EXHIBITION

OPENING JUNE 5

NEW YORK, May 19, 2009—The Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) presents *Scripture for the Eyes: Bible Illustration In Netherlandish Prints of the Sixteenth Century*, a collection of 79 seldom-seen engravings, woodcuts and illustrations by some of the greatest figures in the history of graphic art, on display from June 5 to September 27, 2009. The exhibit features dramatic and richly executed works by such Dutch Renaissance and Low Country masters as Philips Galle (1537-1612), Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617), Lucas Van Leyden (1494-1533) and Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619) on loan from 13 institutions including the British Museum, Antwerp's Plantin Museum, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and the Royal Library of Belgium. The show examines the explosion of international interest in prints produced in today's Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg in a time of dynamic and sometimes violent religious and political change.

*Scripture for the Eyes* explores the role of printing in the volatile conflicts of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, when the rapid spread of printed Bibles spurred outcries against the Catholic hierarchy, fueling the growth of Protestantism and promoting wider literacy. Printmakers navigated through raging arguments over the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. As some factions sided with the Roman Catholic Church and others protested its corruption, blood spilled across Western Europe and religious wars splintered society. *Scripture for the Eyes* probes a fascinating period when Holland formed the epicenter of fierce international debate catalyzed by the printed word and image. As New York celebrates the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Henry Hudson's voyage, the exhibition examines the Netherlands' tumultuous history and its part in a sweeping metamorphosis that indelibly altered European culture.

Prints played a central role in one of the most complex periods of religious transformation in early modern Europe. In cities such as Antwerp and Amsterdam, prints were the primary medium for the invention and dissemination of biblical imagery that gave viewers new ways of relating to scripture and hence to God. Far from merely following artistic developments in the monumental arts, Old and New Testament subjects in prints were agents of innovation, offering a clarifying lens through which the Bible -- newly available in vernacular and Latin editions -- was interpreted. "It was a time of strident religious argument and conflict," notes MOBIA's Director of Exhibitions, Paul Tabor, "and these artists helped to drive the dialogue."

### Exhibition Highlights

The sixteenth century Netherlandish School of printmaking is among the most prolific, innovative and brilliant in the history of European art. Producing in a period of upheaval, printers employed a number of different strategies to engage with the turbulent political and religious environment. Some printers strove to diffuse the friction by choosing images that might unify the populace, selecting moral and devotional themes that could be universally embraced. Viewers interpreted the prints according to their own particular convictions.

Notable works include *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1510, *right*) by Lucas Van Leyden, regarded as one of the greatest engravers in the history of art. The deft, fluid, richly detailed illustration dramatizes the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son, or Lost Son, the tale of two brothers who choose opposite courses. One remains loyal to his father, the other wastes his fortune and leads such an extravagantly dissolute life that he winds up half-starving as a swineherd in a pig sty. When the son returns home in shame, he is not reprimanded, but celebrated and embraced. Sixteenth century Reformers interpreted the figure of the lawless son as a symbol for the corrupt institutional Church, while the old man was God forgiving the clerical elite for its immorality and dissipation. Counter-Reformers read the same image far differently. Eager to win back those who had left Catholicism behind, they saw it as a signal that the Roman Catholic Church had regained its strength and now welcomed straying Reformers back into the fold.



Typical of the medium, the prints in *Scripture for the Eyes* display a wide variation in their relationship to painting. Some are linear and graphic, while others are so beautifully

modeled, they assume a painterly quality, with remarkably subtle gradations of light and shadow. The mastery of Hendrick Goltzius is apparent in *The Adoration of the Magi*



(c. 1593-1594, *left*) a magnificent work which shows exquisite delicacy in its rendering of the figures, from their expressive faces to the flowing folds of their garments. The circuitous journey of the Magi to Christ's crib symbolizes the appearance of Christ to the world; but at a time when the Christian world was splintered, this beautiful image of devotion was received in quite different ways. Reformer and Counter-Reformer alike identified with the image. The established Church saw its journey of persecution and schism as ending in true devotion. The Reformers, however, saw their challenge to the established

Church and the risk of excommunication as a dangerous journey of its own leading to true adoration.

*Scripture for the Eyes* is organized by MOBIA and curated by Dr. James Clifton, Director, the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation and Dr. Walter S. Melion, Asa Griggs Candler Professor of Art History, Emory University. It will travel to the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta, Georgia, from October 17, 2009 to January 24, 2010.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalog which presents groundbreaking scholarship on the forms, functions and meanings of printed images and their relationship to the Bible. *Scripture for the Eyes: Bible Illustration in Sixteenth Century Low Countries*, which covers 130 prints, engravings, woodcuts and etchings, is published by D. Giles Limited, London in association with MOBIA.

### **Altered Religious Texts: Four Contemporary Artists**


In *Altered Religious Texts*, a concurrent exhibition in MOBIA's adjacent Education Center, four contemporary artists confront their personal relationships to the religions they grew up with by transforming sacred texts. *Altered Religious Texts* explores how artists Mary Button, Dean Ebben, Miriam Schaer and Terri Garland have used pages of actual text as the "canvas" for their work. Religious texts altered by human hands, including coloring, cutting and adornment, result in objects with intriguing painterly and sculptural presence. In *Words of God Slip Through My Hands*, Miriam Schaer has cut and stained her own Bat Mitzvah


Bible, collecting the cuttings in a hand-shaped box. The meaning of the book of her rite of passage has become colored and sometimes lost in the tides of adult experience of spiritual doubt. Terri Garland's *Katrina Bibles and Prayer Books* present the residue of these texts, discovered in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as "found objects" imbued with a haunting symbolic resonance. Dean Ebben's *Crescendo* (right) incorporates four copies of the same choir book. The New York City artist has performed a series of incisions on three of these volumes, cutting more and more of the lyrics away, in stages, until the book is transformed into a delicate lacework of lost meaning. Mary Button's *Hymnbook Project* similarly grapples with themes of reappraisal, rejection, re-appropriation and renewal. *Altered Religious Texts* runs from June 5 to September 27.



#### The Museum of Biblical Art

Located near Lincoln Center at 1865 Broadway at 61<sup>st</sup> 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 Tobi Kahn, Louis Comfort Tiffany and Andy Warhol. Admission to MOBIA's exhibitions is free for children and members and pay-what-you-wish for adults, with a suggested adult 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](http://www.mobia.org) for information on lectures, art workshops and events.

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