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Sacred Visions:

Nineteenth-Century Biblical Art from the Dahesh Museum Collection

Opens at the Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) in New York

October 18, 2013 - February 16, 2014

New York, NY --- The Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) will present ***Sacred Visions: Nineteenth-Century Biblical Art from the Dahesh Museum Collection***, an exhibition that considers the rich diversity and transformation of biblical subject matter produced during the nineteenth century by masters of the academic tradition. **Sacred Visions** features approximately 30 religious paintings, drawings, and sculptures by well-known artists like Léon Bonnat, Alexandre Cabanel, Gustave Doré, Paul Delaroche, and Jean-Léon Gérôme, as well as their lesser known, but equally gifted contemporaries. In addition, on display are volumes drawn from the American Bible Society's Rare Bible Collection, of popular nineteenth-century Bibles richly illustrated by Doré and James Tissot, and that issued by publisher Thomas Macklin. **Sacred Visions** will be on view at the Museum of Biblical Art, 1865 Broadway at 61 Street, New York City from October 18, 2013 to February 16, 2014.

"Sacred Visions is an ideal intersection of our respective missions," says Rena Zurofsky, MOBIA's Interim Director, "MOBIA explores great artwork inspired by the Bible, and Dahesh's nineteenth-century academicians excelled at representing biblical themes. We are also pleased to be able to show in their artistic context three exquisite Bibles from the Rare Bible Collection @ MOBIA."

David Farmer, Dahesh Museum of Art Director of Exhibitions, agrees. "It's always a pleasure to work with another museum in a complementary way. The Dahesh Museum has a fine collection of nineteenth-century art, including a diverse and excellent selection of religious work. MOBIA has added a refined biblical context to themes of the exhibition and to the art itself."

Overview

Although the nineteenth century is today best known for secular art, the Bible remained an important source of subject matter for artists, especially those trained in formal academies, such as the École des Beaux-Art in Paris. Biblical narratives were assigned to artists competing for

the Prix de Rome, vital to an artist's career, and those skills and knowledge insured commissions by traditional patrons – State and Church – as well as wealthy individuals. As artists began to travel, they were drawn to the Holy Land, where archaeologists were exploring and documenting cities and peoples known from the Bible. As the century progressed, artists sought to reconcile their academic models for depicting biblical narratives –with new ideas about spirituality and realism of representation.

Organized by Dahesh Associate Curator Alia Nour and Research Assistant Sarah Schaefer, *Sacred Visions* is arranged in six thematic sections and traces 100 years of continuity and change in artists' representation of crucial episodes, figures, and locales from the Old and New Testaments. The exhibition begins with Neoclassical examples in the first decades of the century, then the high academic style of the mid-century, and finally concludes with Realist examples in the late century. While France was the center of the art world, its influence was felt by academically trained artists from Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland, represented here.

The Bible and the Academy: Drawing from the Bible

The Bible served as source material in training young artists to explore the human form, while tackling complex, emotional compositions. Drawing, especially of anatomy, was the foundational skill upon which any finished painting rested. **Léon Bonnat's** *Jacob Wrestling the Angel* (1876), emphasizes tensed musculature and the interaction of anatomical forms and demonstrates how integral life drawings of nude male models in the academy were to a fully realized composition. The drawing by **Giuseppe Cammarano**, *Lot and His Daughters* (1821), and **François-Joseph Navez's** *Body of Christ* (ca. 1813-1816) are superb examples of the Neoclassical style.

The Bible and the Academy: Prix de Rome

The French Academy organized competitions for student painters and sculptors, and the most prestigious was the Prix de Rome, a three-to-five-year stipend to live and study in Rome at the Villa Medici. Between 1797 and 1863, a third of the assigned competition subjects were drawn from the Bible, especially from Genesis and Exodus. Each year, the prizewinners were required to send back proof of their progress, called an *envoi*. The exhibition includes both a preparatory drawing for **Alexandre Cabanel's** *Death of Moses* (1851) as well as the final, monumental *envoi* painting. Inspired by the Renaissance painters Michelangelo and Raphael, Cabanel depicts Moses dying before God while glimpsing the unreachable Promised Land. The artist wrote how intimidating this scene was for such a young artist, but the work was a major accomplishment and helped to establish his reputation and career.

Selling the Sacred: Church, State, and Private Commissions

Despite the French Revolution's overthrow of the Catholic Church in 1798, the confiscation or destruction of church property throughout France, and widespread anti-Catholic sentiment, the next century saw periods of rejuvenation of the Church, and a strong demand for art representing biblical subjects. Wealthy individuals commissioned paintings of familiar Bible stories for

private chapels and homes, and the State often employed biblical iconography to express its power to the public. Major publishers commissioned well-known artists to produce Bible illustrations, some small and affordable and others quite luxurious. Bibles illustrated by Gustave Doré and James Tissot, as well as those published by Thomas Macklin reveal the power and beauty of their illustrations. In Paris, church attendance declined, but in the countryside it continued to thrive and provide artists with enthusiastic patrons. *Lamentation* (1820) by **Paul Delaroche**, a deeply moving depiction of the mourning Virgin, exemplifies the religious imagery that found favor in the opening years of the Bourbon Restoration (1814-1830) when the Catholic Church regained much of the power it had lost during the French Revolution. Delaroche, then an unknown student, was commissioned by the wife of the future King Louis-Philippe to paint this scene for the family chapel in Paris. A small oil sketch of the same subject by **Isidore Pils** is a preparatory study for a decorative project for the Paris churches of Saint-Eustache and Sainte-Clotilde. **Francois-Joseph Navez**, a Belgian artist who studied with Jacques-Louis David, painted *The Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Elizabeth* (1823) for an altarpiece in a Roman Catholic Church in Amsterdam. Other drawings were meant for viewing in secular settings. People paid one shilling to see **Gustave Doré's** monumental biblical paintings at his gallery in London; the exhibition's *Massacre of the Innocents* is a highly finished drawing by Doré that relates to the gallery painting. A magnificent *Last Judgment* drawing by the eccentric **Paul Chenavard** may be part of a commissioned mural cycle, planned but never completed, for the Panthéon in Paris. The artist was deeply anti-clerical, yet religious, choosing to emphasize Jesus' humanity.

Seeking Authenticity: The Holy Land and the Biblical Past

Throughout the nineteenth century, artists traveled to the Holy Land to view its locales and peoples. Some, like David Roberts, sought to document sites and monuments mentioned in the Bible. James Tissot who traveled to the Holy Land in the 1880s, created his illustrated Bible using the people he met in the region as living relics of the biblical past. Archaeological explorations of the Middle East and North Africa produced artifacts from excavations of ancient biblical cities, and their documentation in prints, drawings, photographs, and illustrated travel accounts was an important source for artists who did not travel to the region.

Jean Lecomte du Nouÿ, a favorite student of Jean-Léon Gérôme and a prolific Orientalist painter, visited Greece, Egypt, Turkey, and Asia Minor, and utilized his observations in his work. His Jewish heroine *Judith* (1875) reveals more interest in the details of her costume, especially the headdress traditionally worn by married Jewish women of Bethlehem, than in the traditional narrative representation of her story. **Jean-Léon Gérôme** depicts another biblical heroine, *Bathsheba* (1895), caught in the private moment of bathing. Inspired by the recent discovery that ancient sculpture was often painted, Gerome tinted his marbles to imitate ancient sculpture and to imbue them with life. This rare plaster version, based on a painting and then a marble of the same subject, still bears traces of paint in her hair and on the urn.

The British artist **David Roberts'** on-site sketches and watercolors were published in a six-volume work, *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumena, Egypt, Nubia*. The book's 250 lithographs gave

many nineteenth- and twentieth-century audiences their first views of sacred sites. Louis Haghe's *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* (1839), a lithograph after David Roberts, presents the city amidst a landscape with famous biblical sites. The Mount of Olives is mentioned several times in the New Testament, and the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was betrayed, is pictured at the foot of the slopes of Jerusalem. **Hubert Sattler's** *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* (1847), another panoramic view, was painted after his first visit to the Middle East in 1842. **Gustave Doré's** powerful drawing *Moses before Pharaoh* pictures a moment from Exodus 11,12, when God slays the first born of Egypt in order to convince the Pharaoh to release the Jews from enslavement. Doré incorporates realistic Orientalist details in garb and architecture, gained from diverse contemporary sources – he did not travel to the Holy Land – while working in the academic tradition that valued Renaissance perspective, composition, and gestures.

Visions of the Virgin Mary

In the decades following the 1830s, “Marian Apparitions” or personal visitations by the Virgin Mary to women or children, multiplied. As news of such events as the famous vision of Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes in 1858 spread, a more humanized depiction of Mary appeared in art, often in a provincial setting with divinity hidden. Of the three works in this section, an elegant sculpture by the influential **François-Joseph Bosio** captures the age. *The Virgin* (1843) combines a Neoclassical approach to Mary, who is idealized like an ancient Greek goddess, while her humble headscarf, downcast eyes, and serene expression suggest her holy identity. **James Pradier**, known for sensuous classical as well as religious figures, chose a traditional pose and style for his Pietà, while **Lecomte du Nouÿ's** red chalk drawing of the *Death of the Virgin* (1895) represents Mary as a woman you could know.

Embodying the Spirit: The Bible and the Countryside

The nineteenth century experienced rapid industrialization. Lamenting urban density, speed, cacophony, and poverty, many artists and writers longed for and idealized the countryside and its pious peasants. Rural life was seen as a font of spiritual enrichment, as was nature itself. **Léon Lhermitte's** brilliant pastel, *Samaritan at the Well* (John 4:1-42), shows Jesus, dressed in simple garb, without a sacred halo, convincing a Samaritan woman that he is the Messiah. Jesus, the carpenter's son who spoke for the poor and disenfranchised, became an important symbol of the laboring class, even to those who no longer accepted Christian dogma.

Returning to nature was another way of finding spiritual enrichment. The sensational landscape of *Abel's Offer* (1908) by the Danish academician **Hans Andersen Brendekilde** combines realistic animals, a monumental setting, and the figure of Abel, glorifying God. Genesis 4:3-5 tells the story of Abel, the son of Adam and Eve, making an offering that God accepts, while his brother Cain's is rejected, leading to the infamous murder of one sibling by the other. Within this charged landscape, an attentive flock and alert dog regard Abel, in the moment before his life would be dramatically changed, a poignant scene of innocence that every nineteenth-century viewer could understand.

The final canvas in the exhibition is the newly restored, monumental *Christ and the Children* (1894) by **Franck Kirchbach**, who studied in Munich and Dresden and later with Hungarian painter Mihály Munkácsy, famous for his monumental history paintings. Displayed for the first time in decades, the large-scale biblical work, exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1895, was shown around Europe before its purchase by a wealthy American collector in Oklahoma. It combines the familiar story of Jesus blessing the children with allusions to other biblical events that contemporary viewers would have easily decoded, like Rebecca at the well. With its humble sentimentality, this late-century painting was a model for popular representations of Bible stories throughout the twentieth century to the present and serves as the dramatic finale to the exhibition.

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An introductory brochure and audioguide accompany the exhibition, along with adult, family, and community programs, and a scholarly symposium.

The Museum of Biblical Art is open six days a week: Tuesday - Sunday: 10am – 6pm, and offers programs on selected evenings. For details, visit mobia.org and daheshmuseum.org.

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