

'Picturing Mary' exhibit: More than a Christmas sugar plum

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WASHINGTON (RNS) She was a simple Jewish girl whose love for her miraculous son embodied a message of love from God.

She was the new Eve, the woman offered paradise—eternal salvation—who made the right call.

Mary, possibly the most frequently imagined woman in all of Western art, takes center stage in a landmark Washington exhibition of sculptures, portraits, prints and other works by acclaimed Renaissance and Baroque artists.

"Picturing Mary: Woman, Mother, Idea" opens December 5 and runs through April 12 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, just in time for Christmas and stretching past Easter.

The theme of the show is Mary's symbolic power, expressed in the arts. She touches people's hearts "not only in a religious dimension but in a human dimension," a way of seeing the human experiences of love, devotion and suffering, said Marian scholar Monsignor Timothy Verdon.

He's a curator for the show, director of the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence, and a co-author of the show catalog. The exhibition shows Mary exhibited from multiple perspectives.

In Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna of the Book*, the Christ child is centered between Mary and an open Bible. It's a physical enactment of an idea that Christ was "God's Word made flesh" to enter human history, Verdon said.

And Mary's mournful look in the painting, like the tiny nails in Jesus' fist and his bracelet ring of thorns, shows her awareness that her son "will suffer, as will we all,"

Verdon said.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Mary learns early of her son's fate. Yet, she's still a young mother, a human figure, not just a saintly one.

Elisabetta Sirani, one of four female artists featured in the exhibition, offers an image of the duo at play. It's one of several that show them giggling, teasing, enjoying the delightful side of love, Verdon said.

Showing Mary as a real woman, a real mother, portrays a "view of the earthly world and humankind as the most compelling manifestation of God's love," as the curators note in the exhibit guide.

Still, there's a tension between scenes of human love and Mary's awareness of the suffering—and salvation—to come.

Verdon points to an early masterpiece by Caravaggio, "Rest on the Flight into Egypt." It draws on apocryphal "Infancy Gospel" versions that describe the Holy Family accompanied by angels on their journey.

The viewer first focuses on the dominant figures of a rustic Joseph who holds the music for an angel musician. But then the eyes rest on Mary and her sleeping child, "so delicate and sweet."

And so telling. Sleep is often shown as a foreshadowing of death.

Verdon marveled that Caravaggio, a violent and troubled artist, could reveal a believer's soul in this work.

Washington Post critic Philip Kennicott called this a Christmastime crowd-magnet exhibit that was a bit too merry Mary, although "Mary isn't entirely a feel-good icon."

His review concluded with a complaint that modern and controversial artworks were omitted and that the overall show message is narrowly within the Roman Catholic tradition.

A companion online exhibit, "A Global Icon: Mary in Context," offers images from beyond Europe, in partnership with the Google Cultural Institute. The Museum is also offering an online highlights tour of the D.C. exhibit and there will be scholarly programs offered by The Catholic University.