City of peace, division, or both? Art show celebrates Jerusalem

by David Van Biema in the October 25, 2016 issue

Four years ago, the cocurators of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new show, Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven, visited Theophilos III, the city's Orthodox patriarch, and solicited his community's cooperation.

After a "pregnant pause," the gray-bearded prelate asked quietly, "Whose story do you intend to tell?'

Cocurators Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb recall replying: "All of them and none of them."

Over the millennia, each of the Abrahamic faiths has created an immense body of art and artifacts supporting its own story.

The show features 202 illuminations, devotional objects, architectural elements, textiles, weapons, and pieces of jewelry created in or inspired by Jerusalem. As wondrous as some of the individual items are—like a two-foot-tall, gold-plated, jewel-encrusted relic box from 12th-century Limoges, France, or a pair of elegant and frightening longswords—the show's true spectacle is aggregate.

The fascination with Jerusalem, the curators say, began at the turn of the first millennium, when an increase in travel brought merchants and pilgrims of all three faiths into the city. The Crusader occupation of 1099 to 1187 was only the most dramatic of more than a half dozen regime changes, each bringing new soldiers, clergy, and dependents.

"The world passed through a period of intense longing for Jerusalem: to be in Jerusalem, to do things in Jerusalem, to be creative in Jerusalem," Holcomb said.

The show, which will be open at the New York City museum until January 8, includes nonreligious art from the city: textiles, pottery, and metalwork establishing its vitality as a merchant hub and trading post.

Some of the pieces in the show are landmark examples of the three faith's initial stakes in the city. There is a sketch by Judaism's most famous jurist, Maimonides, of

the layout of the first Jewish temple.

A few steps away are bejeweled Christian reliquaries from all over Europe, crafted to hold splinters from the cross on which Jesus was crucified. The True Cross was purportedly recovered right next to the tomb where Jesus was buried; they are together at Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

A watercolor dating to Persia in 1314 (a locale and time where portraying Muhammad was allowed) shows the prophet, mounted on his half-human horse Buraq, arriving in heaven during what the Qur'an calls the Night Journey. Their earthly jumping-off place is understood to have been either the Al-Aqsa Mosque or its neighboring Dome of the Rock shrine, making the city Islam's third-holiest place after Mecca and Medina.

All this competing sanctity helped birth the Crusades, which produced some remarkable art:

- A 12th-century Egyptian watercolor initially seems like an artistic study of heads and limbs; in fact, it's a realistic depiction of carnage.
- A lance-wielding saint on a white horse chases a fleeing Muslim across a page of a 13th-century French picture book, impaling him under the arm.
- A treatise on armor created for Saladin, who retook the city for Islam in 1187, includes an elegant illustration of a shield with a concealed crossbow.

Boehm explained how an image of the prophet Isaiah before the city's walls was part of what could be called a multimedia recruiting poster.

"Imagine," she said, "you're in a church where the entrance points intentionally toward the Holy Land, you're singing 'Jerusalem the Golden,'" a famous Crusading hymn, "and in the middle of the musical page is this image."

Even in peacetime Jerusalem's passionate observers could entertain partisan views of the city. A German nobleman-bishop brought an artist along on pilgrimage and produced a best-selling book, whose seven-page foldout map is at the Met.

The map accommodates both a Christian outlook from the Mount of Olives and a frontal view of the Holy Sepulchre—a perspective that Boehm called "almost cubist." Its detail is breathtaking, with a glaring exception: it omits most of the city's Muslim shrines.

The reverse—what might be considered unintentional inclusion—is represented by a 700-year-old Jewish wedding ring complete with what its designer may have thought was a tiny replica of the original Jewish temple. Instead, its hexagonal shape suggests it was mistakenly modeled on the Muslim Dome of the Rock.

Or perhaps the jeweler just understood that to be the temple's ideal shape. Medieval images often didn't represent the real Jerusalem, but rather a perfected version from the holy past or the apocalyptic future.

Many of the show's Christian images reflect the geometrically perfect, bejeweled new Jerusalem of the book of Revelation. A Catalan Jewish Bible from about 1380 offers a highly stylized image of the Mount of Olives splitting in two as prophesied by Zechariah. And the mascot for the exhibit is the angel Israfil from a late 14th-century Syrian or Egyptian manuscript, blowing a trumpet to summon all humanity to Jerusalem for what the Qur'an calls the Day of Resurrection.

In Jerusalem, Boehm said, there was a "very thin membrane" between the earthly and the metaphysical.

That porousness is the origin of all the show's marvelous art and of many of the city's troubles, past and present. Almost lost on one wall of the show is a photograph of a glorious pulpit that stood in the Al-Aqsa Mosque from 1188 until 1969, when an Australian torched it. He was trying to destroy the mosque so that the temple could be rebuilt to facilitate Jesus' return.

And yet, the curators insist, the city's religious crosscurrents unite as well as divide. Many medieval Jerusalemites, they say, were proud of the city's polyglot nature. As proof the exhibit offers a 13th-century Gospel book illustration by a group of monks who had been forced to leave the city and then returned.

It portrays Jesus' entry on Palm Sunday. Yet the city in the illustration is not first-century Jerusalem, but 13th-century Jerusalem—or perhaps an idealized version. A cheery group of inhabitants of every kind fill the page: young, old, dark-skinned, light-skinned, the women veiled and unveiled. —Religion News Service

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