New York’s Museum of Biblical Art to close, lacking funding

by David Van Biema

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NEW YORK (RNS) On the heels of what seemed like its greatest triumph—a magnificent display of sculptures by the Renaissance pioneer Donatello—a small but important museum in midtown Manhattan that specialized in religious art regarded with a neutrally secular eye announced Tuesday (April 28) that it was going out of business.

A press release from the Museum of Biblical Art, known as MOBIA, explained that after learning in February that the American Bible Society, which had housed it for a decade, was selling its building and moving to Philadelphia, the museum explored multiple options but could not raise the funds needed to keep going at a new location.

The museum will close to the general public on June 14 and cease operations on the 30th, although an exhibit it co-organized on Spanish colonial religious art will open in Palm Beach, Florida, in March next year.

MOBIA’s fate was not a total surprise: The Bible Society, once MOBIA’s sole funder, had been ramping down its support by mutual agreement, and the sale of the building had been rumored since 2012. But the closing nonetheless deeply rattled the museum staff and those who treasured MOBIA as one of the few museums in the country that routinely acknowledged art’s religious context.

“I’m stunned,” said Dale T. Irvin, president of the New York Theological Seminary, who sometimes took classes to MOBIA to see cross-cultural study of scripture illustrated. “I can’t believe that it’s slipping away. It was such a valuable resource.”

Brian O’Neil, one of two trustees who have been on the museum’s board throughout its trailblazing 10-year run, said board members made a last-minute fundraising push in hopes that the buzz from the Donatello show might “change the game.”

But while he thinks the museum could have survived the Bible Society's zeroing-out of its cash contributions, the addition of $5 million a year to configure a new space was prohibitive. "The possibilities were never real enough for us to say, 'We're just a few dollars away,'" he said.

In 1997, the Bible Society, a near-200-year-old Bible translation and dissemination ministry, decided to capitalize on its extravagantly tourist-friendly location just north of Columbus Circle by creating an art space.

But Ena Heller, the 33-year-old art historian they selected to run what became "The Gallery" at the American Bible Society, made it clear that although she was eager to concentrate on biblically based (i.e., Christian and Jewish) art, she would accept only if exhibits were addressed in a nondevotional, religiously neutral light.

"They were visionary enough to say, 'You're right,'" she said. "'If you do it this way you're going to get a much broader audience."

The result turned out to be an almost total novelty on the American cultural scene. Although it was not initially intended to do so, MOBIA filled a significant hole in American museums' treatment of their religious holdings. Most big institutions have a tremendous amount of religious art—after all, Western art was almost exclusively religious for centuries—but until very recently they have been "notoriously bad," as Heller put it, at addressing it in terms of belief.

By abstaining from religion-oriented exhibition themes, wall placement and even labeling, museums routinely ignored biblical inspiration, artists' faith, ritual practice, private devotion and the role of theological debates.

This huge blind spot—traceable to the French revolutionaries who stripped all religious references out of Louis XVI's art collection when they took the Louvre public—accumulated additional rationales over two more centuries: "art for art's sake," abstraction, postmodernism and culture warfare. By the late 20th century, it was a mostly unspoken assumption.

Thus Heller and her three successors had plenty of material for over 60 shows. One exhibit traced the artistic development of the motif of Christ as "the man of sorrows"; another featured the seldom-seen World War I Passion paintings of 20th-century master Georges Rouault; sleuthing by a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary presented telltale evidence that before their expulsion from Spain,

medieval Jews worked side by side with Christians creating Christian altarpieces.

Other shows expressing the topic's endless potential included one of African-American religious art, and "Louis C. Tiffany and the Art of Devotion," presenting the glassmeister's religious production. All the exhibits were accomplished without evangelizing or engaging in apologetics.

This philosophy was formalized in 2005, when the museum was chartered under its current name as an independent nonprofit, and began winning grants from government bodies.

Gradually, the arbiters of the New York art world caught on. Superlatives in The New York Times became almost routine.

In February, the museum's current director, Richard Townsend, mounted "Sculpture in the Age of Donatello: Renaissance Masterpieces From Florence Cathedral," which continues until June 14. It includes six attributed and three confirmed Donatellos for the first (and probably last) time in the United States, while their home, the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence, is being renovated.

Any number of variables seem to have contributed to MOBIA's outmaneuvering other museums for the show; but the Museo's director, Monsignor Timothy Verdon, observed: "It impressed me that they focus on the meaning of the works they show. These things are usually seen in terms of their style. That's a voluntary blindness, of course."

Townsend notes that the show, like the rest of MOBIA's offerings, "served both people of faith and those from the other end of the spectrum," who are interested only in aesthetics.

But in the end, neither group felt beholden enough. O'Neil said: "The people who wanted to fund things that have a very religious mission didn't feel that we did what they wanted. And at the same time, in an increasingly secular culture, our religious subject matter may not have been a fundraising additive. The way the world works now, the in-between has very little support."