

Walking in Memphis with (images of) Jesus

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

June 25, 2014

Memphis is known for blues, barbecue, and kings. Elvis Presley, the “king of rock ‘n’ roll,” shook, rattled, and rolled his way to stardom by drawing from the art of African Americans. He was, arguably, bigger than Jesus before John Lennon made that controversial claim for the Beatles in the 1960s. In that decade, Memphis became infamous for what happened to the preacher King. There to support the sanitation workers strike of 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and the legacy of bloodshed continues to haunt the city.

Elvis and Martin are not the only kings of Memphis. There’s also the king of kings. To enter the downtown YMCA, one has to pass two Christ figures. The first is a six-inch-tall replica of [Bertel Thorvaldsen’s white marble *Christus*](#). It was originally completed in the late 1830s, and is most popular now among Mormons. Massive versions are in several Mormon welcome centers, while smaller ones and pictures of it populate Mormon homes and businesses. The second is [Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ*](#), the most reproduced image of Jesus in the world. Although neither explicitly references race, a look around Memphis and Tennessee may leave us with “suspicious minds.”

Travel four miles east from the YMCA and one can witness very different images of Jesus. In the main building of Memphis Theological Seminary, the artwork of [Mary Button](#) lines the walls. At present, she is the minister of visual art at First Congregational Church, UCC, in Memphis.

Button’s two separate *Stations of the Cross* feature brown Jesus figures. One set places him in the [context of the Syrian uprising](#) of 2011; the other in [U.S. mass incarceration](#). The connections are beautifully jarring. They produce what King might have called “creative tension.” On one corridor, we encounter Jesus in close proximity with those targeted in the War on Drugs. On another, we witness girls holding signs that draw attention to Syrian government violence. In many ways, Button’s depictions bring Jesus’s last journey into the theology of global liberationist [Dwight Hopkins](#) and the legal scholarship of [Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*](#).

This is not the first time that imagery of Jesus has conveyed distinct racial meanings in Tennessee. Almost one hundred years ago, educator and art historian Cynthia Maus was in Nashville to participate in educational training for African American churches. On her office wall, she had placed [Harold Copping's Hope of the World](#). Before Sallman's *Head of Christ*, Copping's piece was extraordinarily popular in American and British Sunday School classrooms. In it, five children gather around Jesus. Four of them touch or are embraced by Jesus, except a mostly naked dark-skinned child, whose face viewers cannot see. One African American teacher looked intently at the picture and then asked Maus, "Why is it . . . that the only one of these children of the world who is not touching Jesus is the little black lad in the foreground?"

This was news to Maus, for whom "such a problem had not presented itself," she wrote later. She told the teacher, "honestly, I do not know . . . perhaps because your race is one of the most backward of all the races of the children of men." Maus didn't stop there. "But are you not glad," she continued, "that, at last, an artist has appeared with a sufficiently world-wide consciousness of what the 'Go ye' of the Master meant to include even the most backward child-race in *The Hope of the World*?" Maus, who recorded this story, failed to indicate how the black teacher responded. My guess is that gladness wasn't high on his emotional register at that point. My guess is that this adult was not thrilled to be likened to a child and to have the black painted person blamed for the obvious racism of the white artist.

The biblical Jesus said that he would always be with us. In Memphis and throughout the United States, images of him continue to speak subtly and not-so-subtly to racial, political, and military issues in our nation and beyond. Some, such as Button's, are directly tied to political problems. Others, like those at the YMCA, have racial histories that some may not think about, as Maus did not. But not thinking about it does not mean it is not a problem.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [Kate Bowler](#).