

Add art to Advent preparation

If you're looking for an artful way to prioritize Christ this Advent season, visit the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore.

The Walters is filled with images of the Madonna, the Nativity and the Annunciation, as well as all sorts of other works inspired by the Gospels.

Its seasonal traditions include a free tour that focuses specifically on the Christ Child and his mother, Mary. While the works are on permanent display, docent Barbara Pour will lead "The Christmas Story in Art," an hour-long tour dedicated to them, Dec. 16 at 1 p.m.

The tour begins with a brilliantly-colored circa 1430 altarpiece depicting the Annunciation. Panels at the base of the work by Bicci di Lorenzo recall scenes from Mary's life.

Around the corner is a life-size terra cotta sculpture of a very weary – some say meditative – Joseph sitting on a bench. The Tuscan piece was probably once part of a Nativity scene.

"He certainly had a lot to worry about," said Pour, who has served the Walters for more than two decades.

The tour includes several Madonna and Child depictions, including the Raphael work that graced a U.S. postage stamp in 2011. Known as the "Madonna of the Candelabra," the painting places Mary and the baby Jesus between the flames of two candelabra, a symbol used in images of ancient Roman rulers.

Pour chose Bernardo Strozzi's 1615 work, "The Adoration of the Shepherds," – shown on the cover of the December issue of the Catholic Review – to follow this majestic painting. In the humble scene, Jesus rests in a battered straw-filled basket and Mary wears simple clothes. They are surrounded by shepherds, not kings.

"Strozzi was an artist who felt Christ came to serve the poor," Pour said, of a work in which, she added, "We finally see a painting where the mother and baby have eye

contact.”

The tour includes several sculptures, including Neapolitan doll-sized images of the Magi, dressed in rich robes of real cloth, three medieval versions of the Madonna and Child from Germany, France and Spain, and an unusual ivory Madonna that opens into a triptych with scenes of the Passion of Christ. A French work, it dates to about 1200.

Pour also includes depictions of Jesus’s life between Bethlehem and Calvary, including a Spanish work of the “Road to Emmaus” by Spaniard Alonso Cano and the Holy Family’s “Flight to Egypt,” by Giovanni Odazzi. A 15th-century French ivory sculpture depicts the toddler Jesus playing at Mary’s knee.

The finale is an elaborate Belgian 1492 altarpiece whose centerpiece is the crucifixion with his mother fainting at his feet. Other sections of the work depict the whole Passion from Judas’ kiss to the walk to Calvary to the Resurrection.

“I never get tired of looking at it,” Pour said, noting that she always sees something new.

The Christmas Story in Art is one of several walk-in tours at the Walters, which also offers Spanish-language tours focused on Christmas and the Epiphany.

“We have so much devotional artwork in the museum,” observed Veronica Betancourt, manager of gallery learning at the Walters. “December is a busy time of year. And a deeply religious time.”

IF YOU GO

Walk-in tours at the Walters Art Museum are free on “free” Saturdays and Sundays, 1-2 p.m. No registration is required. In addition to the Dec. 16 tour, Pour is offering to lead group tours at other times in December.

For more information, visit thewalters.org/visit/tours/group-tours.