

As cards come this Christmas, take time to look and see

By Maria Wiering

Earlier this month, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., opened an exhibition dedicated to Renaissance and Baroque images of the Blessed Virgin Mary. "Picturing Mary: Woman, Mother, Idea" is curated by Monsignor Timothy Verdon, a New Jersey-born priest and Yale-educated art historian with the happy career of curating the cathedral museum in Florence, Italy.

I had the great pleasure of touring the exhibit with Monsignor Verdon Dec. 3. His descriptions of the artworks conveyed his expertise and sincere devotion to their subject matter, which he expressed with a graceful humor that becomes any scholar. His tour reminded me to look carefully at the 60-some pieces, mostly paintings, as not to miss their meaning. I admit that as a Catholic – even with a graduate degree in art history – it's easy to gloss over familiar religious artwork, such as portrayals of the Madonna and child.

This exhibit is full of them.

I concentrated on looking, noticing, thinking and reflecting. Most of the works were created for churches or personal devotion. These weren't portraits as much as they were prayers, a visual theology.

One of the most famous works on display is Botticelli's "Madonna of the Book," a 15th-century painting that regularly graces Christmas cards. In it, Mary sits at a table with a prayer book holding in her lap the Infant Jesus, who has turned away from the text to face her. The figures are stunning, especially their filigreed golden halos.



Sandro Botticelli, Madonna of the book, 1480-81. (Courtesy National Museum of Women in the Arts)

At first glance, the scene shows a tender moment between mother and son. Monsignor Verdon stepped that observation up a notch, noting that the child sits between the book and Mary, revealing he is the "word made flesh."

In other paintings, the Christ Child hands his mother cherries, symbolizing the sweet character that comes from good works. The foreground of an Annunciation scene features a potted lily, a sign of Mary's purity.

In one particularly striking 19th-century work, Mary sits on a throne wrapped in her mantle, holding a book, also an allusion to Jesus as the Word. Around her, men present symbols of their work: a scroll, fabric, wool, anvil and book. Titled "Faith with Representations of the Arts," the work by Nicolò Barbino comes from

Monsignor Verdon's museum and portrays Mary as an idea: the embodiment of faith, and the Christian's humble submission of his work to her.

Each artwork has layers, and the deeper one goes, the more fascinating and intimate it becomes.

I highly recommend "Picturing Mary," which is fascinating and reverent (and an easy walk from the Metro Center station). Of the many things I took away from the exhibition was my own recommitment to study the religious art I encounter (and often easily dismiss) this Christmas on cards, ornaments and in my own parish church.

There's so much to explore, if we only look.

Maria Wiering is a former staff writer for the Catholic Review.