
Produced to accompany the exhibition organized by the Museum of Biblical Art in 2009, Scripture for the Eyes: Bible Illustration in Netherlandish Prints of the Sixteenth Century focuses on the artistic production of prints illustrating biblical scenes created during the religious upheaval of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Belgium and the Netherlands from the sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries. This exhibition takes the opportunity to diverge from more traditional approaches of organizing prints by artist, chronological order, or narrative, choosing instead to divide them into “the five principal visual functions and treatments of the Bible” with the following categories: “Sacred History and Geography,” “Exegesis,” “Worship,” “Morality,” and “Politics and Polemics.” Influential artists of the period are featured including Philips Galle, Jan Swart, Hieronymus Wierix, and Lucas van Leyden.

Northern Renaissance scholars and the exhibition’s co-curators, James Clifton, Director, the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation and Walter S. Melion, Asa Griggs Candler Professor of Art History, Emory University, contribute thoughtful essays and many of the detailed catalog entries. Clifton’s preface provides the reader with an overview of the historical and religious context in which these prints were produced. He includes a brief background summary on the development and spread of printmaking in the Low Countries during the sixteenth century and the increasingly widespread access to printed texts and images. In his introductory essay, building on the framework laid by Clifton, Melion claims that scriptural prints from this period “offered a clarifying lens through which the word of God was received, pondered, and interpreted by sixteenth-century readers and viewers.” Through the detailed analysis of examples from the biblical illustrations gathered for this exhibition, Melion clearly demonstrates that the sixteenth-century reader of these visual texts had more complex, layered, and varied interpretations of biblical imagery and its functions than previously imagined.

Indexed, with references, and a comprehensive bibliography, Scripture for the Eyes brings together a substantial collection of eighty biblical prints (etchings, engravings and woodcuts) from repositories in the United States and Western Europe. The entries are fully described, well-researched, and cataloged with the original and revised numbers from Hollstein’s Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450-1700. Illustrations are high quality, in color, and reproduced in full or half-page size.

Aimed at upper level undergraduates or graduate students, reasonably priced, and expertly produced, this exhibition catalogue makes an excellent addition to the academic research library that serves art history or religious studies departments.

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