

Visualizing the Virgin Mary

According to Christian belief, a maiden named Mary gave birth to the son of God, Jesus Christ. Over the long course of the Middle Ages (about 500–1500), the Virgin Mary came to occupy a central place in the devotional lives of European women and men who were fascinated by her different roles. Mary's multivalent nature, ranging from earthly mother to heavenly queen and miraculous intercessor, also provided artists with plentiful options for interpretation. Images of Mary often appeared in paintings, stone, and precious metal but proliferated above all in illuminated manuscripts like the ones shown here, mainly drawn from the Getty Museum's collection. Such representations attest to Mary's popularity in the Middle Ages and to the role that devotees, authors, and artists played in developing and disseminating the veneration of one of the most adored figures in the Christian tradition.

The pages of illuminated manuscripts are made of parchment (prepared animal skin), tempera (pigment with egg white or gum arabic), and often gold or silver. Because some of these materials are sensitive to light, this exhibition is presented at low light levels.



Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome in the exhibition.

Mary beyond the Bible

Even though the Virgin Mary appears only rarely in the Bible, as the mother of Jesus Christ she occupies a unique place in Christian history and devotion. Responding to a burgeoning desire among the faithful to know more about Mary, medieval authors supplemented biblical accounts by creating stories about her childhood, adulthood, and death. These stories were accompanied by detailed and colorful images in illuminated manuscripts, which serve as a record of the continuous development of Marian legend from a few biblical passages into the focus of widespread reverence.

Miraculous Mary

Fascination with the Virgin Mary increased during the course of the medieval period and continued to find expression in all forms of art—from music and manuscripts to sculpture and textile. The stories of miracles performed by Mary and belief in her role as intercessor for the faithful helped to secure and spread her growing importance. Across the towns and cities of medieval Europe, Christians believed that Mary would miraculously appear when pious men and women asked for her aid, sometimes as they performed devotions before images of the Virgin, which came to life in answer to their prayers.

Mary in the Americas

Fascination with the Virgin Mary and her image persisted long after the Middle Ages, arriving in the Americas in the sixteenth century with Spanish colonization. One widely venerated image is the Virgin of Guadalupe, said to be imprinted by flowers on a cloak in Mexico City in 1531. Over the centuries, the image has become an icon associated with cultural and social issues in addition to its religious role. Although imagery of Our Lady of Guadalupe is linked with medieval traditions, it has been reinterpreted for each new generation. Whether serving as divine intercessor, consoling mother, national symbol of unification, emblem of colonial oppression, or feminist role model, this figure has been continually reimagined by artists to create different meanings for viewers across time.

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