

MOST HIGHLY FAVORED

The Life of the Virgin Mary

IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE to overstate the influence that the Virgin Mary has had upon Western culture. For nearly two thousand years Mary has been the most often used name for girls. There are literally dozens of variants for her name found all around the world. Mary is the English form of Maria, which has its origins in the Hebrew name, Miriam. Even in predominately Muslim speaking countries, Maryam (Arabic) is a very popular name due to the respect given to the mother of Jesus. Literally hundreds of churches, colleges, universities, and seminaries have chosen "Saint Mary's" as the name of their institution. Without a doubt she has been portrayed more than any woman in western art and music. It would be impossible to count all of the "Madonna and Child" paintings. How many times have the *Magnificat* and *Stabat Mater* texts have been set to music over the centuries?



Mary is recognized by all Christians as the mother of Jesus, but devotion and admiration for her has been mostly within the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. While her role in the nativity and birth of Jesus is recalled each December at Christmas, Protestants hear little about her the rest of the year. Many can identify with the author, Kathleen Norris, when she wrote about her upbringing; "We dragged Mary out at Christmas ... and packed her safely in the crèche box for the rest of the year." For too long she has been the victim of a Protestant conspiracy of silence,

but recently there has been a growing interest in the person of Mary and the rightful place she played in the life of Jesus and the life of the church. This exhibition has been curated to help the viewer learn and explore more about this Most Highly Favored Lady.

The title of the exhibition, drawn from the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary in Luke 1:28 and the Basque hymn, *Most Highly Favored Lady*, sets the tone of the show. **Most Highly Favored: the Life of the Virgin Mary** reflects the varied understandings of Mary by artists rendered in the visual vocabulary of their times and places. The show is divided into four sections: Mary as Madonna, Mary in the Bible, Mary in Tradition, and Mary around the World, each depicting in visual terms an important aspect of the life of Mary.



Most Highly Favored includes fifty paintings, sculptures and objects of devotion by artists from over twenty countries. The art comes from such places as Greece, Sweden, Japan, Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, Africa, the Balkans, Central and South America, and the United States. This exhibition includes works by internationally known printmakers such as Albrecht Dürer, Anders Zorn and Annibale Carracci. Some of the works are by contemporary artists such as Bruce Herman, Joan Bohlig, and Duncan Simcoe who see Mary as still having relevance in our time. Totally unknown artists, calligraphers and craftspeople, who have spent countless hours crafting beautiful objects that help us recall the life of the Virgin Mary, are also included in the show.

The art in **Most Highly Favored** covers a wide range of media: Italian Renaissance style paintings, medieval and modern woodcuts, delicate etchings, along with classically sculpted statues, Byzantine inspired icons, Ethiopian leather paintings, and illuminated manuscripts from Europe and the Middle East. All of these come together to offer a visual feast that inspires and communicates not only how the life of Mary has influenced the church, but also how her life still lives on in cultures around the globe.



Most Highly Favored Lady

Basque carol, paraphrased by Sabine Baring-Gould, 1831–1924

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
With wings as drifted snow, with eyes as flame:
“All hail to thee, O lowly maiden Mary,
Most highly favored lady.” Gloria!

“For know a blessed mother thou shalt be,
All generations laud and honor thee;
Thy son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold,
Most highly favored lady.” Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head;
“To me be as it pleaseth God,” she said.
“My soul shall laud and magnify God’s holy name.
Most highly favored lady.” Gloria!

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ, was born
In Bethlehem all on a Christmas morn,
And Christian folk through-out the world will ever say:
“Most highly favored lady.” Gloria!



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