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Contact: Anne Edgar, 646-336-7230,
anne@anneedgar.com

**MOBIA EXPLORES IMPACT OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY
ON THE WORKS OF SELF-TAUGHT ARTISTS IN THE SOUTH**

*Inaugural Exhibition of New York's Newest Museum
On View May 12 to July 24, 2005*

New York, NY — The Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA), the nation's first scholarly museum of art and the Bible, opens in a newly designed facility at Broadway and 61st Street on Thursday, May 12, 2005. A ground-breaking inaugural exhibition, *Coming Home!: Self-Taught Artists, the Bible, and the American South*, examines the phenomenon of modern-day folk art in the South as an outgrowth of the region's deep evangelical Christian roots.

Coming Home! sheds light on the different streams of Christian tradition that flow into untrained artistic expressions in the South – rural white as well as African-American. As one of the most comprehensive exhibitions ever organized on the subject of Southern vernacular art, *Coming Home!* assembles more than 120 works by 73 artists, from the acclaimed to little-known but gifted practitioners whose work will be new to New York audiences. More than a quarter of those represented identify themselves as ministers, street preachers, or missionaries, as well as artists.

Coming Home! has been organized by the Art Museum of the University of Memphis with support from Humanities Tennessee, National Endowment for the Arts and The Rockefeller Foundation.

MOBIA is a new museum that aims to create a new model for exploring the meaning of religious art and artifacts in culture, one which emphasizes the

original functions and meanings of objects growing out of the Christian and Jewish traditions.

“MOBIA has been established to shed light on the many ways in which the stories and symbols of the Bible have influenced art,” says Dr. Ena Heller, executive director of the Museum of Biblical Art. “*Coming Home!* exemplifies how this mission can yield new, even surprising, insights. MOBIA’s inaugural exhibition is a pioneering study, the first of many we hope to present in the coming years.”

Dr. Carol Crown, organizer of *Coming Home!*, and associate professor of art history at the University of Memphis, says: “Many avant garde artists have been drawn to the creations of self-taught artists, especially for their pictorial rule-breaking and free play of non-traditional materials. Although stylistic affinities exist, they belie gaping differences. More often than not, the self-taught artists represented in this exhibition mean what they say: they are proclaiming the word of God as found in the Bible, which they believe to be an unerring authority on morality and the future.”

The title of the exhibition, drawn from a gospel hymn, refers to a commonly held fundamentalist belief that the Day of Reckoning is imminent, when Christians will enter paradise and dwell eternally with God. In *Coming Home!*, “end-time” scenarios reoccur in the work of artists of different generations and regions. Joe Minter, the creator of an extraordinary yard installation outside Birmingham, Alabama, which he calls the African Village in America, illustrates an event foreseen in the Book of Revelation in a delicate, exhortatory sculpture entitled *The Last Trumpet* (2001), fabricated from discarded parts of bicycles and appliances tethered to a battered brass trumpet.

Terrifying foretellings of end-time demons and the seven-headed beast, who has sometimes been interpreted as the Antichrist, are contributed by artists as varied as Myrtice West of Centre, Alabama, who has created numerous paintings inspired by end-time prophecy; Robert Roberg of Gainesville, Florida, who has painted more than a hundred; Samuel David Phillips of Chicago,

Illinois; Alyne Harris of Gainesville, Florida; Annie Lucas of Pink Lily, Alabama; Minnie Evans of Wilmington, North Carolina; and Cherry ShaEla'ReEi of East Texas.

On loan from the collection of Aurora University Library, Aurora, Illinois, are adventual materials that provide a sense of the long legacy of end-time teaching in this country. These include a Millerite Chart of 1843, so-named for its popularization by the lay Baptist preacher William Miller, the Bingham Prophecy Chart of 1927, and a hand-painted banner created in the early 20th century as a teaching aid for the Advent Christian Church.

Coming Home! identifies other evangelical themes in the art-making of the modern-day South: original sin, as embodied in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and conveyed pointedly in a number of works, including Ned Cartledge's brightly painted, carved wooden sculpture of a naked Eve alongside a human-sized snake and three tiny apples, under which the artist has carved the words: "Get wise, eat an apple, direct from the Tree of Knowledge"; the possibility of being redeemed or "born again," thanks to Jesus' suffering and sacrifice on the Cross; and the importance of Christian community in the fight of good versus evil. Scenes of ecstatic worship are depicted in Charlie Owens' *Holy Church of God-in-Christ* (n.d.), Linda Anderson's *Mt. Vernon Fire Baptized Pentecostal Holiness Church* (1984), and Clementine Hunter's *Tent Revival* (c. 1950s).

John W. Cook, President Emeritus, The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Biblical Art, says, "In presenting *Coming Home!* MOBIA hopes to stimulate an ecumenical and cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas about the particular ways in which Christianity has taken shape in the American South and is manifested in the arts."

Catalog

Coming Home!: Self-Taught Artists, the Bible and the American South is accompanied by a comprehensive catalog of the same name published by the University of Memphis in association with the University Press of Mississippi in

Jackson. The fully illustrated catalog includes essays by such leading scholars as Charles Reagan Wilson, director, Center for Southern Culture, University of Mississippi. (\$30, softcover; \$ 65, hardcover)

Companion Exhibition

Also on view from May 12 to July 24 is *For Glory and for Beauty: Highlights from the Collection*, featuring 29 rare Scriptures drawn from one of the world's largest collections, which has been placed on long-term loan to MOBIA by the American Bible Society. The exhibition is the first in an ongoing series designed to plumb the significance of the collection, which traces the Bible's journey from the vellum pages of unique manuscripts laboriously produced for religious and royal elites to printed books designed to please the eyes of a much wider and heterogeneous readership.

A dramatic glass curtain wall in the Main Gallery opens onto the library stacks holding the Rare Scripture Collection. "Just as we are making these precious volumes always visible to the public through a transparent wall so we aim to open the collection to scholars and explore an array of topics in future exhibitions," says Dr. Heller.

Sponsorship

The Museum of Biblical Art has been founded with the generous support of the American Bible Society (ABS), one of the nation's oldest Christian organizations. The 189-year-old ABS is providing one-time funds for the design and construction of the new museum's facility and annual support for general operations for the first five years.

Additional founding support for MOBIA's general operations, exhibitions, and educational programs has been provided by The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc.; the Samuel H. Kress Foundation; MOBIA's founding members; and other generous private and anonymous donors.

A Contemporary Design

A \$3 million building program endows MOBIA with 30% more space for exhibitions and programming than had its predecessor organization, The Gallery

at the American Bible Society, an educational arm of the ABS. Elements of the new institution include a dedicated education center, a second gallery for ongoing exhibitions drawn from the Rare Scriptures collection, and new mechanical systems for air handling, security and fire detection and suppression.

The current redesign is phase 1 of a 2-phased program slated for completion in 2006 and designed by the four-year-old G & L Architects of New York. Principals Randall Goya and Sara Lopercolo headed the Selldorf Architects design team on New York's much admired Neue Galerie. Last spring, *New York Magazine* cited G & L as one of ten "new garde" architects in the city to watch.

History

MOBIA has evolved from the exhibitions and programs of The Gallery at the American Bible Society, which occupied MOBIA's present exhibition space at Broadway and 61st Street from 1998 to fall 2004. The Gallery organized a number of notable exhibitions, including *In Search of Mary Magdalene: Images and Traditions* (2002) and *Icons or Portraits? Images of Jesus and Mary from the Collection of Michael Hall* (2002), as well as an influential three-year research project and publication sponsored by The Henry Luce Foundation entitled *Reluctant Partners: Art and Religion in Dialogue*.

General Information

The Museum of Biblical Art fosters understanding and appreciation of art inspired by the Bible and its legacy through the centuries by highlighting the connection between art and religion in the Jewish and Christian traditions. In its exhibitions and educational programs, MOBIA examines the many ways in which the messages, stories and symbols of the Bible have influenced art and visual culture over the millennia up to the present day. The ecumenical institution offers tours, lectures, concerts, panel discussions and other events for the general public and scholars, as well as special programs for school children and families.

Admission to the museum is free. Hours are Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm; Thursday, 10 am to 8 pm; and Monday, closed. To reach the museum by subway, visitors may take the 1,9,B,D,C,A to 59th Street, Columbus Circle; or by bus, the M7, M104, M11 to 61st Street and Broadway. For more information, the public may call (212) 408-1500 or visit www.mobia.org.

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