

A Museum About the Bible Aims to Be Taken Seriously

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By RANDY KENNEDY

In most taxonomies of religion in America, the intersection of 61st Street and Broadway on the Upper West Side is not considered Bible country.

So in 1997, when Ena Heller, fresh out of graduate school, started an art gallery there inside the headquarters of the American Bible Society, dedicated to works inspired by the Bible, "most of my colleagues thought I was crazy," she recalled.

"If you're opening a museum in New York City based on the Bible, and you don't have a permanent collection — well, you're probably not going to last very long," she said. "To be perfectly honest, I thought we wouldn't last more than a couple of years."

But its shows were respected and well attended, and tomorrow the gallery will open in an enlarged and

Facing a problem created by the polarization over religion in America.

much more ambitious form as the Museum of Biblical Art, which describes itself as the nation's first scholarly museum devoted to art and the Bible. Within the next five years, it will also become independent of the Bible Society, a 189-year-old non-denominational ministry group that has distributed more than six billion Bibles (including the first ones made for American soldiers and the ones carried by Pony Express riders).

As she threaded her way one recent morning through the dusty construction zone that will become the museum's 2,700-square-foot main gallery, Ms. Heller said that, despite this move toward independence, it had not been easy to convince scholars, curators and art lovers that this was intended to be a serious museum, not a glorified Sunday school or covert outpost of the religious right.

Getting that point across is especially difficult now, she said, because of the country's increasing polarization over religion. This means that she has to try to overcome the suspi-

cions of many in the secular world — particularly in New York — while simultaneously fending off the embrace of some Christian and conservative groups that would like to cast the museum in a proselytizing role.

"It just seems like there's no middle ground right now," she said.

Anne Edgar, a publicist for the museum, said that promoting it has sometimes meant negotiating a cultural minefield. The museum had opportunities to advertise on Christian-themed radio programs that would have reached many potential museumgoers. "But then in at least one or two cases we looked at the programming of those channels and we realized that it worried us," Ms. Edgar said, declining to name the channels. "It was because so much of the programming that is Christian, at least in some markets, tends to be very politically active in a way that we didn't want to be aligned with, because that's just not what we're about."

"Just having the world 'Bible' in the name says to many people that we're a conservative, right-wing group," she added, "and that could not be further from the case."

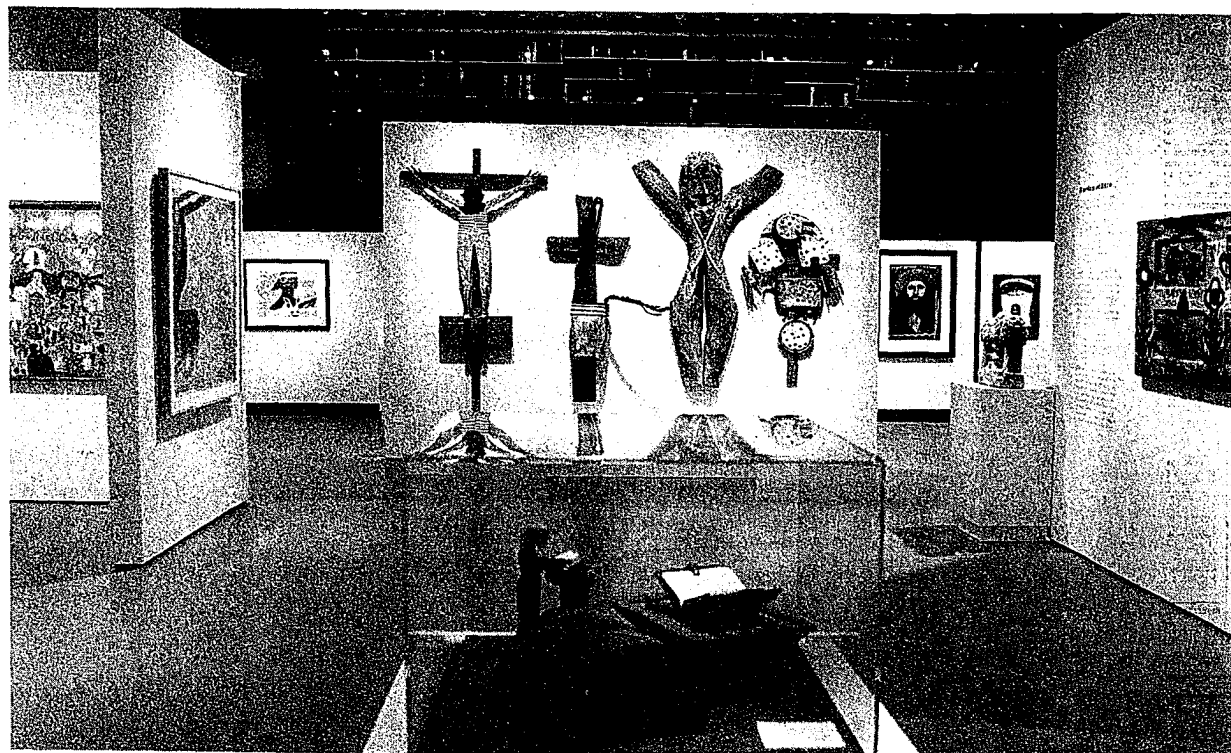
The museum, which receives support from well-known philanthropies like the Henry Luce Foundation, has also been contacted by religious organizations offering to promote it to their congregations and members. The museum is open to this, but only up to a point. "Once or twice a group said, 'We would really welcome you being a ministry partner,'" she recalled.

"As a publicist, that's never happened to me before," she said, laughing.

"I feel like we've forgone advertising opportunities that would have made a lot of sense in terms of demographics," she added.

Ms. Heller said that the mission of the museum — especially in a city like New York, where the Metropolitan Museum of Art has rooms full of world-famous examples of Bible-inspired art, especially from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance — is to help viewers reconnect this kind of art to its religious roots and functions.

"Museums shy away from discussing religion," she has written, in explaining the museum's purpose. "And because of that, visitors sometimes don't get the whole picture of how an object was valued in its day. Obviously, the aesthetic dimension is



Photographs by Ruby Washington/The New York Times



hugely important. But the part played by faith and ritual usage shouldn't be ignored."

The gallery staged exhibitions that tended toward the conservative, she said, including ones focusing on the history of the Holy Land, 20th-century Guatemalan and Peruvian folk art, Russian Orthodox icons, African-

American Bible-themed quilts and stained glass.

But in becoming a museum and seeking accreditation from the American Association of Museums, it will begin more wide-ranging explorations of religion and art. Its first show, "Coming Home: Self-Taught Artists, the Bible and the American

The Museum of Biblical Art opens tomorrow at Broadway and 61st Street. Its executive director, Ena Heller, left, has written that "museums shy away from discussing religion," leaving viewers without a sense of the roles played by faith and ritual in Bible-inspired art.

Southern," will include works by 73 Southern artists, many of whom identify themselves as street preachers or missionaries and many of whose works focus on apocalyptic images from the Book of Revelation. (At the Art Museum of the University of Memphis, where the show originated in 2004, the organizer was prevented from using biblical quotations on the walls because school officials were concerned that it would violate school rules governing public speech and religion.)

In August, the museum will mount its first exhibition of contemporary artists whose work addresses Judeo-Christian themes. Envisioned as the first in a series of triennial shows, in which artists will be chosen by a jury of scholars, the exhibition will include some art that examines biblical influence and iconography from a decidedly modernist viewpoint. The Bulgarian artist Houben Tcherkelov, for example, rendered an image of John the Baptist's severed head in glitter paint on decorative wallpa-

per, and David E. Levine placed images of Christ on Wheaties cereal boxes.

Ms. Heller, 41, who was raised in Romania in a mostly nonreligious family, said she was fully aware of the public sensitivities surrounding religious themes. Asked whether, for example, a show of contemporary art might include such confrontational works as Andres Serrano's infamous photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine or Chris Burden's piece showing the artist crucified on the trunk of a Volkswagen, she said she would not rule it out, but added, "I wouldn't do something provocative just to be provocative."

More than anything else, she says, she wants to consign to the past scenes like one several years ago when Smithsonian curators visited her gallery during the installation of a traveling exhibition.

"They all looked around once they got inside," she said, "and they said, 'Oh, you're a real museum!' Well, yes, we are."