

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra and today I'm joined by Dr. Vanessa R. Corcoran, a medieval historian and an advising dean at Georgetown University, to discuss depictions of the Virgin Mary and how they reflect medieval society. And I have to say, I feel like no other woman has been the subject of so much artwork. But I also don't know that I've ever looked that closely, because they're so common that, at least for me, I tend to overlook them.

VC: Right. So you have the Virgin Mary, Jesus's mother, the most painted woman in history, the most written about woman in history. But in the Bible there are only four passages in which she speaks. And from less than 200 words, we have this very complex Jewish woman reused and as within the Catholic faith, but Mary also has her own chapter in the Quran, we have a pop star named after her and it's really hard to imagine a world without Mary. Yet the woman herself is someone that we know not a lot about, at least in the traditional sense. And so when I was in graduate school, I was really intrigued by, how are these small fragments able to produce so many diverse, colorful representations of her? So what I usually do when I am talking about Mary, I talk about these four passages to start off with. So three come from the Gospel of Luke and one comes from the Gospel of John. The first is the Annunciation, where the angel Gabriel appears to her and announces to her that she will bear the son of God and she accepts. This is sometimes referred to as the Fiat. The Annunciation image is one of the most common depictions of Mary. The second is the Magnificat, where Mary and her cousin Elizabeth meet. And this is sometimes referred to as the Visitation and the greeting between the two of them is the origin of the Hail Mary or Ave Maria prayer. The third happens not during the Nativity, but once Jesus is a little bit older and is lost in the temple and Mary and Joseph are looking for him. And Jesus says "why wouldn't you look for me here? I'm in my father's home."

AT: So wait, wait, wait – she's not mentioned in the birth of Jesus scene?

VC: Nope. So she is obviously listed as being there, but the Nativity – not only just referred to a lot in Scripture but is the foundation for one of the most popular holidays in the world – is merely a presence, a passive, serene presence. But there's no text associated with Mary at the birth. Neither for Joseph either.

AT: Yeah, but she was a much more active participant, I think we can all agree, in that situation.

VC: Right, yes. Now to get too far ahead is, this is a problem for some people. This is saying, what would she say in this instrumental moment? But that gets to be a post-biblical explanation. So all of the beginning of Jesus's life, we know she's there. No words are present. We have angels singing, we have records of that and the shepherds and things like that but no Mary in speech, as I refer to it. And then there's a lot of gaps of Jesus's life. And we flash forward to the wedding at Cana. So this is the Gospel of John. And they have run out of wine and Mary approaches Jesus and says, "they have no wine." And he is frustrated and he says, "woman, it is not my time yet," and she goes to a waiter and says, "do whatever he tells you." And ultimately, this is the first public miracle of Jesus, the changing the water into wine, and later medieval sources really do credit Mary more in this for this prodding, that it's at her urging that Jesus begins his public ministry. And that's it: one, two, three, four. So of course we have the crucifixion of Jesus, the Passion of Christ and the resurrection, we know Mary is there, but again at the brutal, torturous death of her son, there's no textual speech associated with it, nor at the resurrection. And some medieval theologians say that this is because Mary, from the beginning, understood all of the events that would take place and so she's not speaking at the crucifixion because she knows eventually he's going to rise from the dead.

She's also listed as being present when the Holy Spirit descends upon all the apostles, and we actually have a lot of images of Mary in the middle, amongst all the apostles, which I think is really important. There are many titles attributed to Mary: queen of heaven, mother of mercy. But one that I really like is *magistra apostolorum*: teacher of the apostles. Because the idea is that Mary has had more knowledge of Jesus's ministry than they

have and it is her role to help guide them in understanding than what the early church is supposed to look like. But that's it. So we have these four passages and that has been enough to provide a framework for imagining what Mary looks like, behaves. But for early Christians, that also wasn't enough. So we have these post-biblical texts, these apocryphal sources that were written shortly after the canonical Gospels, but are not part of the canon yet. They still influence a lot of church teaching and church practices. So this is actually where we learn about Mary's parents. They're not named in the Bible, but they're named in these early Christian sources. And her parents have a feast day. So even though they, again they're not canon, but they still inform a lot of church practices. And these sources say "hey, let's take actually a closer look and imagine what Mary's life happened before Gabriel appeared to her." And so they provide us with early accounts of what Mary's life looked like, what her parents' life looked like, what she looked like and how she acted as a child. What happens before the Annunciation takes place.

AT: So wait how much of this do we think is accurate versus how much is basically fanfic?

VC: Close fanfic. First-generation fanfic. (laughter) Close enough that it, again, it still influences church teaching and a lot of church practices. So there are two apocryphal sources that really provide us with the framework of Mary's life. One is called the proto gospel of James and one is the pseudo gospel of Matthew, which is a sixth century text. So again, we've got centuries' distance between these sources. But authors in the Middle Ages then keep reusing and reusing these stories and holding them up as central texts in addition to the Bible. Again, if we go back to the Nativity scene for example, there's no mention of animals present in the Nativity story in the Bible. It's not until this sixth century text. Logically, you could say, yes of course, you were talking about a major scene that implies the presence of animals. But they're not formally listed until the sixth century. You can't imagine a Nativity image without them, right? But what I really enjoy about looking at these apocryphal sources is they start to insert more of a voice for Mary and we get to see more of what her marriage to Joseph looks like. And this really begins a long tradition of efforts to amplify Mary's voice within the Christian narrative and showing ways in which she is essential to the story of the church.

AT: So something that I feel like has come up a couple times in different episodes is that, as we know, one of the major issues with telling women's stories is the lack of documentation that we have, which the fact that as you've said less than 200 words out of the entire Bible are attributed to her. And what that means is not just that it's harder to tell women's stories accurately, and of course you've got the fact that this is a religious text which also adds that layer of, how truthful is this? But that lack of documentation also means that people with different motivations can take that woman's life and put whatever lens they want to put on it. So you are much easier to use as a cipher if there's nothing disproving that interpretation of your life.

VC: Absolutely, and one thing that's interesting is the kinds of sources that I work with regularly are medieval miracle collections. So these are compilations, usually at particular shrines. So we think of Lourdes or Guadalupe or Fatima, and there's lots of these in medieval Europe as well, where pilgrims go to these churches seeking some sort of intercession, in my work in turning to Mary for intercession and seeking, maybe healing from illness, maybe dealing with poverty, family crises, famine, natural disasters. And upon Mary's intercession, there are these scribes present who are collecting stories from people. "Oh, I was healed from leprosy after I prayed to Mary." "My son almost drowned, but I prayed for Mary's intercession and he was saved." So they're compiled in these different Marian stories and it's almost like a two-way window. You can read these sources to learn about the people who sought Mary's intercession. But we also have how they describe Mary. And in reading these sources, this is what I found really compelling about reading them, is they describe Mary as a powerful, active, sometimes forceful, maybe even aggressive intercessor. And within some of these miracle collections or miracula, there are also images. And while you may usually think of Mary praying serenely during the Annunciation or looking fondly over the baby Jesus, there are ones that depict

Mary clubbing the devil. And it doesn't just happen once. We have a whole series of these depictions of Mary punching the devil, debating the devil, ripping a charter up in his face. And all of this runs so counter to that demure Virgin Mary that we usually think of, but framing her as a skilled warrior. She was invoked in battle. There are many battles in the Middle Ages in which generals are appealing to Mary for intercession and this is how we get the feast day of Our Lady of Victory, because of a 16th century battle in which Mary intervened in a battle with Muslims in 1571. And so we have an actual warrior. I talked earlier about these different attributes associated to Mary, mother of mercy, queen of heaven. There's one that is used, particularly in 15th century England that has largely fallen out of fashion, but we have queen of heaven and we have empress of hell. So literally showing that Mary's power spans all kingdoms: heaven, earth and even hell.

AT: Okay, I think we need to go back to Mary punching the devil in the face, because I know for a fact that you find that way more fun to talk about than the little hint that you just gave us. So why is she punching the devil in the face? What's going on there? Because obviously this is not in the Bible. (laughter)

VC: So medieval theologians thought about Mary in ways different than we do. And they imbued Mary with this incredible power to influence the highest heights and lowest depths of the afterlife. So for example St. Anselm of Canterbury praised Mary's ability to save the condemned from hell, saying "Oh woman marvellously unique and uniquely marvelous through whom the elements are renewed. Hell is redeemed. The demons are trampled underfoot. Humanity is saved. Angels are restored." Another, named Conrad of Saxony, praises Mary's extensive power noting, "You're a wonderful warrior. Every soldier of the evil spirits is put to flight before your face." We have a 13th century pope, Pope Honorius III, who addresses Mary's power against the devil in a sermon on one of her feast days, the Feast of the Assumption, saying "for the demons Blessed Mary was terrible as an army arrayed for battle." And all of this, they framed Mary as this skilled warrior was able to vanquish the devil. And while there are different miracle stories that we can talk about throughout the Middle Ages, there's actually one that is retold again and again. And again, we tell stories, we sort of tweak tweak the ending a little bit. But there's a medieval popular legend of Theophilus. It's a sixth century story and has been reworked countless times. It really provides the basis for the Faust legend. A cleric named Theophilus makes a pact with the devil. It renounces Christ and Mary in a contract written in his own blood. But he ultimately recognizes the error of his ways and seeks Mary's intervention to overturn the agreement. And Mary tears up the contract and saves Theophilus's soul So it's again, it's retold many times and she's not just using her words for condemnation. Sometimes she's also issuing corporal punishments as well. So we have this both in written form and in these images as well. And so there's one 12th century story that I like to tell. This is William of Malmesbury and these stories are also copied out again and again. So this is all pre-printing press, but the fact that authors are copying and rewriting them, they're really able to be transmitted across different areas. So in this one story, Mary is beating the devil with a stick "redoubling her blows and making them sharper with words." And then she says to the devil, "take that and go away. I warn you and order you not to harass my monk anymore. If you dare to do so, you will suffer worse. So these are major threats and if you were to say "guess that saint," Virgin Mary isn't necessarily who comes to mind. You might think of Michael the archangel instead.

AT: So is she the origin of the "not today, Satan" meme? (laughter)

VC: One assignment I enjoy doing in my Mary Through the Ages class is I have students make a Mary meme and it's a really fun way at getting at all of these different complex theological issues and seeing them in meme form at the end of the semester (AT: Excellent.) But then also ways where we look at Mary skillfully debating with the devil. So there's one collection called the Gesta Romanorum, the deeds of the Romans, where Mary commands the devil to release a woman from his clutches, saying "you devil, our most wicked thief." And we have images of this as well and Mary is the commanding figure. She raises her hand as if to dismiss him and

her imposing authority ultimately triumphs. And so it's really interesting again. We're not always looking at Mary acting as the mother of mercy.

AT: Well, do you think that that's reflective of, something that I've noticed throughout women's history is that whether we're talking about politicians or activists or queens, presenting a maternal image justifies what otherwise may be criticized as ambition? So saying that you are allowed to fight for your child and particularly if, as Elizabeth I framed it, "I'm the mother of the nation" or "it's okay if I'm doing this activism." "It's okay if I'm seeking power, because as a mother, you can trust me to use it properly."

VC: Hmm, that's interesting. When we think about different attributes of Mary, her maternity is certainly one that's always touted. But also so is her virginity and we have this parallax of the mother and virgin and theologians spend a lot of time spilling ink trying to figure out, how do you then present this woman with literally impossible standards to imitate. And so there's always a discussion of, what's the difference between to admire and to imitate when there's a literal standard that cannot be upheld by this woman. Yet on Sunday mass we have all of these sermons where Mary is held up as as the model, not just for women to aspire to, within the marriage of Mary and Joseph as well as as the the model marriage.

AT: Something else that may just be my perception because I do feel like I've seen so many of these but my assumption if you told me, "okay there's a medieval painting of Mary" would be the Madonna and child, this very serene woman holding a baby that somehow is never crying, gotta say.

VC: No, there are no wailing Jesus images, at least ones in the time period that I study. However there are some Madonna and child images where Jesus has the instruments of the cross, so the crown of thorns. And Mary sitting there and Mary is sad and there are some where actually there're small tears of Jesus as well. So indicating that they both understand what is to come. Yeah, that's not a realistic image of what a crying baby looks like. It's more like a stoic, stoically crying baby. But yes, there aren't issues of Mary struggling with the diaper bag or trying to do sleep training or or anything like that. And one thing that's actually really interesting is if you track the positioning of Joseph throughout art, in the Middle Ages, he's very old and sometimes he's falling asleep in Nativity scenes. Sometimes he's standing very far away. But it's not always as engaged and then when you get to the Renaissance and the early modern period he starts to look younger and physically much closer, really showing more of involvement within the Holy Family.

AT: I do think it's very telling that there's no acknowledgement of the actual difficulty of motherhood. (VC: Mm-hmm.) and I think that speaks to who was telling this story in terms of both the Bible and the later artists.

VC: Although if we're talking about something that transcends time and space and something that's actually much more progressive some ways in the Middle Ages then today, it's the depictions of breastfeeding in art. And it's a whole theme. It's called *Maria lactans* or Mary lactating. All of these images we have of Mary breastfeeding Jesus without public shaming that some women experienced today. And it was viewed that her breast milk was miraculous. And so you actually have some images of Mary expressing milk upon supplicants seeking aid by active by accessing it. And so it's viewed as very powerful and and non-controversial.

AT: That serene image is also very telling to me because one of the things that you're interested in is Mary speaking, but I don't know that I've ever seen a depiction of Mary speaking and I always felt that that was reflective of Christian religions quite often throughout history and today silencing women.

VC: So we do have not only images of Mary speaking but, and this is a common depiction in medieval art, we have text bubbles. So just like in a cartoon where you have the speech but you have it in Gothic script as well.

So that's a whole thing to track. But there's a famous coronation image that I really like of Jesus crowning Mary as queen of heaven and we have text showing what the dialogue looks between them There are a lot of images of Mary as an intercessor. So when when we talk about intercession, Mary is working as an intermediary between people on earth and either Jesus or God. And we have images where Mary is opening up her cloak, her mantle and It almost looks like a Russian doll, all of these images of different medieval people that she is pushing towards them. She's bringing them together, pushing them closer to God but physically doing this movement as well. But there are also all of these different images that follow medieval formal dialogue patterns where you could see her gesticulating and pointing and that are really interesting to see.

AT: So then why am I going to museums where it's literally just a room full of the serene Madonna and child?

VC: Some of it is that the miracle collections aren't produced or aren't widely accessible to the public as other paintings are, but also it wasn't necessarily the images that fit within a traditional narrative of what women look like within the church. So that whole empress of hell narrative that I mentioned falls out of favor not with any specific sanction but in the 15th century. Also perhaps in the lead up to the Protestant Reformation as well. But Mary really reaches her peak in the Middle Ages in terms of power. There are a number of Marian shrines throughout the world today that are still widely visited. But the phenomenon of Mary as this powerful intercessor with texts like the ones I've referred to earlier, we don't see those quite in the same way at the end of the Middle Ages.

AT: I'm also wondering about gatekeepers further down the line in terms of curators and museum directors who are bringing their own biases and particularly in the Victorian era, where a lot of major museums have their roots in the late 1800s and then post-Victorian early 1900s But I would imagine that a lot of the people who were making decisions about what this museum is going to collect would have been more inclined towards that gentle image of her. And then later on, I would imagine future curators and directors saying, "we've already got a bunch of these and we don't necessarily need to diversify the collection in that direction because there's so many other artists of color, women artists." There's other priorities that if you're looking to diversify your collection I could see why this would not necessarily be top amongst them. So I'm just thinking about how what we're shown reflects not just what people created in the first place but also what the gatekeepers then thought you should be seeing.

VC: So I live in Washington DC which is also host to the National Museum for Women in the Arts. And when I was in graduate school, I was fortunate enough to be associated with an exhibit they did there called Picturing Mary: Woman, Mother, Idea, which brought together images of Mary and Jesus from all over the world, from Italy, France. And it was this really extensive curatorial project and it was so exciting to see the widespread interest in this and It depended on people loaning art from from all over the world. So it was never going to be a permanent exhibition, but it's too bad it wasn't going to become a traveling one, because I really liked the thematic way that they broke down these images of Mary. And some included Jesus, some did not. But really looking at these different thematic areas of Mary and trying to get out of that framework of looking at Mary just in this one maternal image and really investigating, these complex ideas about her identity

AT: I do find it interesting that that Madonna and child is so prevalent when. from the four examples that you gave us earlier, I would say that the most active one is the wedding at Cana. And so the fact that what we're actually seeing is a relatively passive because again, as you said, she's not struggling in these images. She's just just chilling with her baby. A very calm, quiet baby. (laughter)

VC: Well, I think that's why again looking at these different medieval devotional sources that do imagine what Mary said. They're also really telling for looking at like passion narratives. So this is a whole genre of sources

that take the story of the Passion, which we have in a biblical text to provide an initial framework, but saying "what did Mary say? What else did Jesus say up on the cross?" But how does Mary at the foot of the cross, also alongside Mary Magdalene, process this torturous death of Jesus and its ensuing aftermath? There are also, again as much as we talk about the serenity of the Madonna and child images, Jesus's mother in many cases looks stoic at the Passion as well, and whereas Mary Magdalene is seen sometimes clutching the cross or more lamenting. But there are also some images of both Marys during the crucifixion wailing, And it's a very powerful thing to see essentially a silent scream. But there is this enormous statue that's probably about the size of my office that has six different women during the deposition of the cross screaming at Jesus's death. And I find that very powerful because it's it's way more dynamic than a lot of the static images we see.

AT: That is one of the what I would say contradictory aspects of Christianity throughout history is that women are very present and active in the Bible. And yet most Christian religions have power structures throughout the centuries and often still today that actively keep women out of leadership roles and also actively work to minimize or shift the narrative on, someone like Mary Magdalene I would say is probably the best example where she has very much been presented as a slut, I'm gonna say. I really don't know that there's any other word that you can describe how she's been presented. But my understanding is that she was actually a wealthy woman who was basically a benefactor, several of these women were essentially benefactors financially supporting Jesus and the other disciples to do this work in the first place. So not only are they not having that basis for slut-shaming, which shouldn't be a basis even if you are a bit freer with your favors, shall we say. But these are actually women who had a position of power, who were enabling this work to even happen because you got to eat and Jesus can't be making loaves and fishes every day. I assume. I don't know.

VC: So it's interesting that when you talk about Mary Magdalene because Mary Magdalene is also the first witness to the resurrection. And like I said earlier about Mary being referred to as *magistra apostolorum*, teacher of the apostles Mary Magdalene is referred to as *apostola apostolorum*, apostle of the apostles. And in being the first witness to the resurrection, women being the first witness to the resurrection and spreading that news then to Peter, Mary Magdalene begins to be used as a preacher. And there are all these sermons that frame her not as a sex worker or as you said with slut-shaming, but as a preacher spreading Jesus's ministry. And so you have these two women present at the birth of Christ and at the resurrection. The entire narrative collapses if you remove women from the story and that's its own kettle of fish to discuss. But Mary Magdalene, just like the Virgin Mary, is a complicated woman and there are three different Marys within the Bible that ultimately Pope Gregory I in the 6th century states "this is the same woman." So it's not saying, if we look at the Bible, it doesn't say Mary Magdalene, Mary Magdalene in the clearest way that we now commonly associate with, but there's this 6th century homily in which Pope Gregory says that they're all one and the same. So we're really depending on that framework for understanding who this woman was. And again this is a later man's interpretation of scripture. But it might not even wholly represent one woman's story. And we're talking also about just women in the Bible in general and misattributed and most attributed, I would argue the Virgin Mary is one of the most famous women in the world and I spoke earlier about the 200 words attributed to her. No woman in the New Testament speaks that much. A scholar did an extensive study on women's speech within the Bible and the top 10 chattiest women all come from the Old Testament. Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary are more well known, more well represented and depicted but in terms of textual evidence, they're not in the top 10. We see Judith, we also have a lot of unnamed women in the Bible too, and unnamed men as well. But in terms of who gets to speak and who's well represented, they're not even in the big list.

AT: This could just be my interpretation but do you think that trying to claim all these Marys were actually the same person can be interpreted, obviously we don't know exactly what was in his head, but to me that feels like a way to minimize women's presence by trying to make all of these seem like "oh that was just one person as opposed to several people being present." It's got very "only woman in the room" vibes to me.

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VC: It makes her much more complex as well when you have these different attributes, the prostitute, the woman washing Jesus' feet and the woman who has an exorcism. I think that also in some ways makes it easier for her to be ultimately a punchline in many ways today or reduced to one particular attribute.

AT: I had a previous conversation with Grace Beattie, who has her own podcast about wicked women and one of the things we were talking about is Jezebel versus Judith and how a woman's sexuality, if you are on the right side, if you are on the side of the victors who tell history, then you are exalted for using your femininity and sexuality in that way like Judith. Versus if you're on the wrong side like Jezebel then your name becomes an insult in itself. Now coming back to that question of women speaking and how that is received, shall we say, you've also correlated that power of women speaking to what we see today where we still see people in positions of power often trying to silence others, particularly I would say when women are speaking up for themselves, for other women, for other marginalized populations

VC: Absolutely. You can go through the Supreme Court and you can track who speaks more, who gets interrupted more and it falls across gender lines pretty clearly and who gets to keep talking without interruption too. The idea of reclaiming my time comes from being cut off. This was something I was thinking about a lot in February 2017 during confirmation hearings for Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell silenced Senator Elizabeth Warren for reading a letter from the late Coretta Scott King. And he infamously defended his actions by insisting she was warned, she was given an explanation, nevertheless she persisted. And this instantly turned into a rallying cry of resistance and the hashtag #shepersisted trended and against it were placed images of female pioneers such as Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman and in one case even Princess Leia. So I was very surprised to then see as this hashtag was trending images of Mary punching the devil and again turning into a meme that included this quote as well. This was also the case, the MeToo movement was growing during this time. Women were breaking their silences about sexual assault and harassment. When Professor Christine Blasey Ford had testified in September 2018 about her allegations of sexual assault against Brett Kavanaugh, she was giving a voice to the voiceless and galvanizing the national movement and on the day of her testimony calls made to the national sexual assault hotline rose 147%. And one consequence of the MeToo movement is the recovery and sharing of stories that have thus far gone untold or not believed. So recovering the voices of women in medieval society is not easy as these sources are primarily authored by educated male members, who often represented the upper echelons of medieval society. There are not a lot of women-authored texts, they only comprise a small percentage of the stories that I'm telling today. But we still have sadly a similar gender gap in today's media landscape. Amid these large gaps in women's representation in historical documents, we have to listen to these texts and we also have to observe the silences as well and what's been omitted to understand how medieval women were expected to speak and behave. But when we can recover those whispers from the past, we can better appreciate the complex and multifaceted roles that women occupied even when these were positions imposed upon them.

AT: So why does this matter today in terms of, obviously this was centuries ago and hopefully we've come some distance, I wouldn't say we've come far enough from the kind of things we're talking about but why should this matter to your students, for example?

VC: So as a medieval historian I find myself often arguing for relevance or answering the "so what, this is things that happened centuries ago, how does this matter?" To think a little bit more broadly I also teach a lot about the medieval plague and for a long time that was met with a lot of skepticism from students. And reactions about people responding to different accusations of what caused this plague to spread. People blamed Jews for spreading the plague in the Middle Ages. Some were flagellants who whipped themselves

and said that this was God's wrath for us. And once the COVID pandemic happened in 2020, there was a lot more understanding from students about the medieval reactions because we were watching society have similar reactions. Mark Twain had said that "history doesn't repeat itself but it often rhymes" and we were living through a rhyming moment. But you also, for the sake of the Virgin Mary, you can't escape her in our world today. A Hail Mary is a phrase in sports or in any sort of long attempt. Beyonce did a maternity photo shoot looking very similar to the Virgin Mary. The 2018 Met Gala on Heavenly Bodies and the Catholic Imagination used a lot of Madonna images. And just like you can't tell the story of Jesus without women present, you can't understand church history without understanding who Mary was, her role in Jesus's ministry and how people from early Christianity through today seek to connect to this woman. She's everywhere, she's in literature, she's in art, she's in music. The pilgrimage shrines that are some of the largest places of both pilgrimage and tourism are ones associated with Mary - Guadalupe, Lourdes, Fatima, La Vang in Vietnam, all over the world. You can go to a place and find a depiction of Mary and when you recognize the integral role that she plays in our societal framework, you have to keep asking more questions about her.

AT: So apart from obviously there is a vested interest on the part of any Christian institution, so like you mentioned Vietnam, I would guess that there were missionaries involved in that one. And particularly in early Christianity there would have been value in appropriating any divine female presence that may have already existed in those spaces and saying, "okay this is Mary now." But apart from the religious aspect, what are other factors that you see as contributing to just the sheer volume of representations that we have of Mary? Because as you said, she is everywhere

VC: Approachability. Everyone has a mother and I think it is that maternal connection that people can relate to, and seeking out that comfort and care is biological. And I think there are other aspects of Mary that are certainly important. But I think from an innate perspective, I think that's what drives people is to seek that sort of maternal care. There is an artist named John Henry who created a photo series called Stranger Fruit. And it is depictions of Black women and their children, often in Madonna and child images. And it was created in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. And it shows women holding not just young children but in some cases teenagers or older children in very similar Madonna-esque positions but in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and issues with police brutality. And it was really stunning to see that and to look at that again as a continuation of some of these ideas. We can look at an image of a woman holding her son and see connections to the Virgin Mary because it is so prevalent. The Pieta image of Michelangelo that's in St Peter's, we can see images very similarly in these modern photograph series of Black women holding their children, concerned that they too will be subject to police brutality. As we're talking, we're watching the famine crisis in Gaza increasingly get worse. And there have been a couple of very haunting photos of women holding their starving children. And I can't look at that and not see the Madonna and child replica. And I think that's what some of the photographers are hoping, is that an image like that is going to move people to compassion, to advocacy, to do something about it, because it resonates so deeply within us.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember: well-behaved women rarely make history.