

From Minnesota to Italy: Rare fresco project spotlights biblical women

The project, Women of Faith Frescoes, is quietly taking shape inside a Minneapolis office building before the work moves to Italy this summer.

By Jean Hopfensperger (<https://www.startribune.com/jean-hopfensperger/6370511/>) Star Tribune |

MARCH 6, 2021 — 5:36PM

[Mark Balma](https://markbalma.com) (<https://markbalma.com>) stood atop a 20-foot-high platform, paintbrush in hand, highlighting the faces of Eve and Adam on a colorful fresco — the first of 10 by the Minnesota-born artist and several collaborators that are destined to cover the walls of a church outside Rome.

The paintings are the heart of an unusual project that brings to life the contributions of women in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, using the ancient art of fresco to portray the women in contemporary ways. The project, [Women of Faith Frescoes](https://womenoffaithfrescoes.com), (<https://womenoffaithfrescoes.com>) is quietly taking shape inside a Minneapolis office building before the work moves to Italy this summer.

"This kind of project hasn't been done before," said Balma, a fresco and portrait artist who has worked in Italy for decades. "Yes, there's been frescoes with women, but never where they were all brought together into a cohesive story. I thought that would be a wonderful addition to the art of fresco, and to art in the church."

The project represents an international collaboration among women artists in both countries, with supporters ranging from Italian Bishop Giuseppe Piemontese to Minneapolis Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman and Minnesota entrepreneur and philanthropist Billy Weisman.

Managing the project is the Rev. Barry Joseph McElroy, an American-born priest who has served in Italy for more than 30 years, including as pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Terni where the frescoes will be installed.

McElroy said he reached out to Balma two years ago when Immaculate Conception was being restored and seeking a major work of art. They came up with the broad idea of spotlighting women in scripture, he said, a concept that was refined by collaborator and Italian theologian Lillia Sebastiani. Piemontese, the bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, approved the plan, said McElroy.

"The feedback [in Italy] has been surprise, disbelief," McElroy said. "Those who understand the scope and magnitude are enthusiastic about its realization."

The project is unprecedented, he said. It focuses not just on women in scripture, but women important in three faiths that are rooted in the patriarch Abraham. And it's being done in the ancient art of fresco.

Said McElroy: "It's perfect for Italy at this time."

Studying art with a master

[Balma](https://markbalma.com) (<https://markbalma.com>), 63, is a classically trained artist who moved from Minneapolis to Italy after high school to study portraiture and fresco with Italian master Pietro Annigoni. He has lived and worked in Assisi for decades, creating art for churches and religious institutions.



Mark Balma worked on a Fresco of Eve and Adam, the first of three panels that will be permanently installed at the Church of the



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In Minneapolis, Mark Balma worked on a fresco of Eve and Adam, the first of three panels celebrating women in scripture that will be

In the U.S., his portraits — including those of five U.S. presidents — are hung in museums, presidential libraries, public buildings and private collections. His work in Minnesota includes frescoes for the Cathedral of St. Paul and for the University of St. Thomas' Minneapolis campus.

These days Balma can be found in Uptown, creating images of Eve and Adam on a 15- by 20-foot frame in the otherwise vacant second floor of the MoZaic East building, whose owner, Stuart Ackerberg, offered space for the fresco.

Dozens of paint jars with labels such as "Rosso" and "Blu Prussia" line tables below Balma. Brilliant colors burst from the fresco in which Eve, with Adam standing behind her, looks ahead as the creation story unfolds, the universe exploding around them.

Balma lowered himself from the painting platform and walked to a table to look at an architectural drawing. "This is where the first three panels will go," he said, pointing to the inside of the church. "Adam and Eve. Then Hagar in the desert. Then Sarah, Isaac and Abraham."

Those three frescoes will be painted in Minnesota, Balma said. The others will be painted in Italy — figures such as Ruth and Naomi, Mary the mother of Jesus, and a final panel of Mary Magdalene with Jesus at his resurrection.

The women will be portrayed in their roles in scripture. That context has been guided by an interfaith group of advisers and meetings with parish leaders, diocesan representatives, theologians and community members.

Balma said he was excited to bring a depth of character to them. Looking up at the fresco of Eve and Adam, he said he couldn't help but believe that God had made them to be strong individuals.

"These were the first two humans created," he said. "I tried to give them a fullness of character, to make them come alive."

The prospect of displaying powerful depictions of women of faith is exciting to Zimmerman, senior rabbi at Temple Israel in Minneapolis. Balma consulted her, and other women, as he researched his subjects and their historical context. Weisman, a member of her congregation, had suggested the two meet.

"The idea of having a sacred space with women surrounding you, it speaks to me as a very powerful spiritual presence," Zimmerman said.

Nadia Mohamed, a professor of world religions at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, also is being consulted. She met Balma more than a year ago, when he presented the concept to an interfaith group she belongs to. It's part of his outreach effort in Minnesota to build project interest and support.

Last week Mohamed met with Balma to view the first fresco and drawings of others. She left excited about the project's potential to educate people about the shared roots of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

"This is a unique way to present interfaith connections," said Mohamed, who plans to tell her friends in Italy about the project. "If you go back in history, we all come from one family."

Phase two in Italy

Two women artists, Kansas City art professor Jessie Fisher and Twin Cities-based muralist Erin Sayer, are expected to join Balma this spring. Their work on the project was delayed, he said, because of COVID-19 restrictions and scheduling.

Fisher, who worked with Balma on the St. Thomas frescoes, said she's thrilled to participate in the project. Two other women artists will join Balma in Italy.

"Women have always been strong and present [in scripture], but they haven't been at the forefront in religious imagery," Fisher said. "These are images that will be permanently part of the church architecture. To be able to portray a positive group of images that can help create conversation is an honor."

COVID restrictions have thwarted fundraising. Though the project has affiliated with the global [Charities Aid Foundation of America \(https://womenoffaithfrescoes.com\)](https://womenoffaithfrescoes.com), a fiscal agent facilitating tax-deductible donations, it's essentially invisible for now — a grand cross-cultural endeavor being launched behind walls during a pandemic.

If all goes as planned, that will change soon. Balma expects the three Minnesota frescoes to be completed by June, when they will be flown to Italy and installed at Immaculate Conception.

The frescoes, which will stretch up to the church ceiling, are expected to spark interest and support from church members and visitors. The remaining seven will be installed in the next two years.

"We hope that as they go up in the church, it becomes a center for discussion and interfaith dialogue," Balma said. "That was the concept from the beginning. Along with beautifying the church, it had to have substance that would inspire. Everyone felt this was a good time to do it."

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