

Looking for Catholic art? Fundamentalist Bob Jones University has it

by [David Gibson](#)

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GREENVILLE, S.C. (RNS) Walking across the tidy campus of Bob Jones University, there's no obvious sign this bastion of Christian fundamentalism is also home to one of the nation's largest collections of Renaissance and Baroque religious art from the heart of Catholic Europe.

It's all the more surprising since the school's old-time Protestant leaders have for years taught that Catholicism is a "cult" and even the "Mother of Harlots."

"You go into that gallery and its big, amazing paintings are really staggering, and you know you can't buy altarpieces like that anymore," said David Steel, curator of European art at the North Carolina Museum of Art and a longtime fan of the BJU collection. "They're just not on the market."

Edgar Peters Bowron, who oversees European art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, agreed.

"It's one of the best collections in the Southeast generally, and certainly in terms of Italian painting from the Renaissance through the Baroque, it is one of premier collections of Italian paintings in America, without contradiction," he said.

Just as surprising as the collection itself, however, is that the man who started it 60

years ago was Bob Jones Jr., the school's second president and the son of the university's namesake.

The younger Jones was not only a purveyor of fine painting but also of the hoariest anti-Catholic tropes, calling the church of Rome "a satanic counterfeit," for example, and "drunk with the blood of the saints."

Yet the younger Jones, who retired in 1971 and died in 1997, so loved the arts that he was able to put these Old Master works in a category that superseded sectarian divisions. Like theologians centuries ago, Jones viewed the artworks as "mute preachers" that could instruct viewers about the Bible, the first and final arbiter of Christian fundamentalist faith.

"He really thought that paintings can reach people and talk to people in ways that that reading books cannot," said Steel, who knew "Dr. Bob," as everyone called him.

Providence, or market conditions, or both, were also kind to Jones. When he took over as president just after World War II, there was a lot of European art on the market, and "sophisticated" collectors viewed Renaissance and Baroque religious pieces as little more than artistic schlock.

"This style was just anathema," Bowron said, and for years the major dealers and famous collectors "didn't touch this stuff."

Jones convinced the university's board to allot him \$30,000 a year to buy religious art. He canvassed Europe, establishing ties to sympathetic dealers and leaning on the advice of experts who knew quality and what Jones wanted.

And, Steel recalled, "he was a great bargainer. He loved the deal."

Paintings that were already going at fire-sale prices often were procured for just a few hundred dollars. By the 1970s, BJU had amassed a collection of some 400 works that covers the 14th to the 19th centuries, with a few stellar Dutch and English pieces among the predominantly Italian Renaissance and Baroque works.

Today, tastes have shifted, and now the pieces are worth hundreds of thousands each; several would easily fetch more than a million dollars. Not that BJU is looking to sell.

"If you are going to have a strong university you need a strong collection of art," says Erin R. Jones, director of the BJU Museum and Gallery and wife of the current BJU president, Stephen Jones, who is grandson to Bob Jones Jr.

But outside of places like Harvard, Princeton and Yale, no university has a collection like BJU, and high demand and prohibitive prices mean even the wealthiest museum would be able to assemble such a collection today.

Moreover, no university uses their collection the way BJU does.

"It is really a teaching collection in the truest sense of the word," Steel said. "It is completely integrated into the life of the university."

But when the university promotes a fundamentalist, decidedly non-Catholic version of Christianity, how do crucifixes, altarpieces and coronations of the Virgin Mary fit into the picture?

During a recent tour, Erin Jones gracefully demurred on any doctrinal pronouncements, and instead pointed to what motivated her husband's grandfather to start the collection in the first place: communicating Bible stories to BJU students while teaching them to appreciate great art.

"As one of God's creations, we are created with a love and a desire to create," she said. "So these works mirror our God-given gift to create."

The collection has a top-notch curator, John Nolan, and the gallery follows the best practices in conservation and restoration. It also regularly works with other museums, lending works for shows like the Rembrandt exhibit on "The Face of Christ," now at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

"She has really brought that museum into the modern era," said Steel.