

Silver Linings Jesus

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

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If you look closely, Jesus makes an important cameo appearance in the [American Film Institute's best movie of 2012, *Silver Linings Playbook*](#). Most of our attention goes to the bipolar Pat (dreamy [Bradley Cooper](#)) and the grieving Tiffany (sultry Oscar winner [Jennifer Lawrence](#)). They jog, bicker, fanatically root for the Eagles, and dance in the most eyebrow-raising of ways.

But one constant amid the family chaos is a framed image of Jesus. You've probably seen this one before. It is [Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*](#), that white, blue-eyed, long-haired Jesus who looks into the distance. Since first marketed in the 1940s, it has become the most reproduced depiction of Jesus on the globe.

In *Silver Linings Playbook*, Jesus resides on a wall in the family room, a common phenomenon that [art historian David Morgan](#) found when he examined placements of Jesus in 1950s and '60s America. In [one critical scene](#) near the end (warning: explicit language), the family explodes over a recent Eagles loss. Jesus watches. Unmoved and unmoving, unchanged and unchanging, his calm stands against their confusion.

In our real world, however, change in Jesus imagery has been the norm. Very few Americans think Jesus looked like the Warner Sallman painting, and they have taken to many others. We have many different visual Christ figures:

- Mormons have the artistic renderings of [Del Parsons](#) and John Scott.
- Rastafarians have a [black, dreadlocked Jesus](#) with a ripped physique.
- Catholics have the [Sacred Heart](#) (which often appears very similar to Sallman's *Head of Christ*)
- [CNN has its "forensic science" Jesus](#) that they trot out around Christmas and Easter

So many people imagine Jesus differently that another Hollywood blockbuster, *Talladega Nights*, featured a family prayer that devolved into a rambunctious and hilarious debate over which Jesus they “say grace to.”

The most popular image to join the fray recently emerged in the 1990s from artist Janet McKenzie. Her [Jesus of the People](#) (1999) won the *National Catholic Reporter's* “Jesus 2000” competition and has even been featured on the celebrity gossip show [TMZ](#). McKenzie’s Jesus is ambiguous in terms of both race and gender, with dark skin, thick lips, a broad nose and a feather in the background. The model for this Jesus was a woman, and McKenzie has displayed it with her collection titled “African American Women Celebrated.” It is hard to imagine McKenzie’s Jesus being any more different from Sallman’s.

In the last few months, [McKenzie released a new set of Jesus paintings](#). These follow the Stations of the Cross and display Jesus in several moving family moments. There is *Jesus Meets His Mother*, where the two press their heads together as parents often do with their children. In another, Jesus stands with a baby and the weeping women of Jerusalem. All with closed eyes and bowed heads, they seem to show reverence for one another. Several of the depictions feature Jesus alone, but in all of them, Jesus’s eyes are closed. It is hard to deny the beauty and power of McKenzie’s art.

Her new artwork is [featured in a new small book](#) with meditations from religious author Joan Chittister. According to Chittister, during “those dark, lonely moments” of life we can look to McKenzie’s paintings and connect with Jesus and the people. Maybe, perhaps, when our prized NFL teams lose, like the Eagles in *Silver Linings Playbook*.

But even within this book, Jesus is an unstable symbol. There is discord not only between the text and the images, but also within the text. Chittister, for instance, refers to Jesus as “He,” while McKenzie uses “he.” That difference may seem slight, but I remember my stepmother vigorously capitalizing all references to God and Jesus in books she purchased. And Jesus as a “man” is questionable in McKenzie’s artistic touches and is an issue feminist theologians have wrangled with for decades. Both the capitalization and the masculine identifier build uncertainty into these approaches to Jesus.

Is there a silver lining in this chaotic realm of Jesus representation? I think there is: given the vastness of human diversity, it is extraordinarily difficult (if not impossible)

to construct a Jesus that is not replete with complication. One image will be matched by another, leaving some viewers connected and others confused. But perhaps the diversity of imagery is the silver lining. The biblical gospel narratives do not offer a single Jesus. They present multiple, varying, complicated, and at times convoluted Christ characters. Heck, even Jesus had a litany of names for himself. This “Son of God” most often called himself the “son of man.” Well, which is it?

If the Bible doesn't have one Jesus, then maybe it is right that our visual culture doesn't either.

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