

Exhibit Guide



SYMBOLS of GRACE

EMBLEMS OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

How does the art of emblems visualize Mary's Immaculate Conception? What is the artistic origin of this iconographic expression? What are the meanings and messages of emblems?

Celebrating the Immaculate Conception

On December 8, 1854, Blessed Pius IX declared as a dogma of faith that the Blessed Virgin Mary, from the moment of her conception, was by a singular grace of God never subject to any stain of original sin. This privilege, given to the one who would become the Mother of the Redeemer, is termed her Immaculate Conception.

The Art of Emblems

In an article in *The Dictionary of Art*, Jochem Becker explains: “The emblem book was an artistic genre that flourished in Europe particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries, though it continued beyond this. An emblem requires intellectual effort and results in the communication of a moral lesson.”

Emblems generally consist of three parts:

1. A pictorial representation (*pictura*) →
2. A short, often classical motto (*inscriptio*)
3. The explanation of the link between the *pictura* and *inscriptio*, usually a Bible verse (*subscriptio*)

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“I will protect this city and I will save it.” (2 Kings 19:34)



The moment she is conceived, the Mother of God, a beautiful city, is protected by grace as by a lofty bulwark.

Book Illustrations

Twenty-seven of the emblems selected for this exhibit are from a book by the Benedictine Joseph Zoller (d. 1750), a monk of the monastery of Sts. Udalricus and Afra, near Augsburg, Germany. This work, entitled *Conceptus Chronographicus de Concepta Sacra Deipara*, was published at Augsburg in 1712. It consists of 100 copperplate engravings all centered on the Immaculate Conception. Each of the emblems is interpreted in seven steps: Sacred Scripture, authority (quotations from ecclesiastical writers), ratio (reasonableness of the belief), an example from history, the symbol (the emblematic picture itself), an example from antiquity, and finally, an anagram. They are rendered here in a simplified presentation.

The seven emblems making up the rest of the exhibit are from the work of a Belgian Augustinian, Johann Leenheer. Printed in 1681 (no place of publication indicated), the small book bears the title *Virgo Maria Mystica Sub Solis Imagine Emblematica Expressa*. The seven emblems are all involved with the sun. The text accompanying each emblem is a short poem given in both Latin and Dutch.

The first emblem shown (I Alone Am the Exception) is taken from *Theatrum Gloriam Sanctorum* by Casimiro Fuesslin (1728), and serves as leitmotif for the whole exhibit.

Symbols of Grace

Symbols have a suggestive power. They suggest a mystery which they cannot explain. At the same time, they intimate that there is more than what meets the eye. Thus, the symbol assumes the role of facilitator and acts, at the same time, as the guardian of the mystery it conveys. It plays hide-and-seek with the reader or viewer. The symbol represents a truth greater than its visual or auditive form and expression. Being a cipher, it transcends the sign but participates in its role as signifier.

The Immaculate Conception is a mystery of grace. God has showered his love on the young woman of Galilee he wanted to be the Mother of his Son by making her “gracious,” an expression of grace. Grace refers to gratuity, graciousness, and generosity. It is a gratuitous act of the God-of-Love ennobling the human person, making her gracious,

transforming her into a being modeled by generosity. Mary, the Immaculate Conception, is an expression of grace. She is permeated by grace.

The many symbols used to represent Mary's grace are taken from various orders of creation, from earth and sea, not least from daily life and cultural traditions. Many examples are taken from the animal reign, for example, swan, eagle, rooster, and salamander. But the variety of symbols is without end. Mary is compared to the palm tree, the sun, the pyramid, the mirror, the lyre, and the letter B. She is the enclosed garden, the fortified city, and the book without a flaw.

The Meaning of Symbols

What are these symbols telling us about the Immaculate Conception? Without using the language of dogmatics and its attempt at doctrinal precision, they highlight a rich gamut of theological characteristics of Mary's Immaculate Conception:

- Mary, like a fortified city, is surrounded and protected by grace.
- She is unharmed by sin; she represents the original concept or idea of human reality, untouched and unadulterated (swan, salamander, sun, vessel).
- The Immaculate Conception represents the exception to the unfortunate rule. All other human beings are subject to treason and rejection of God.
- The most prominent symbol of Mary's graciousness is that of light, radiance, and splendor. She is not light of her own, but she reflects the splendor of God like an untainted and spotless mirror.
- The Immaculate Conception is a living announcement of glad tidings, that of Christ's birth. She is in all second to Christ: She announces, seeks, and follows him all the way to the Cross. Her being resonates with the person and work of Christ.
- The Immaculate Conception is a symbol of victory, not her own, but that of the Cross and grace.
- She is a model of strength, stronger than the lion, repelling evil and the allurements of a world without God. She is without fear for there is nothing that will separate her from God.
- Mary's Immaculate Conception is no human perfection. Her purity is sweetness, the fragrance of her gracious holiness a cause of joy for God and human beings.



I Alone Am the Exception

(Et Evasi Ego Sola)

This emblem was probably destined to serve as cover plate for a book in honor of the Immaculate Conception. It compares Mary to a book without flaw or imperfection (*liber sine macula*). Mary alone escaped the human condition of sin (... *et evasi ego sola*). Gratefully she presents the book of her origin and of the destiny of her Immaculate Conception (LIC = *Liber Immaculatae Conceptionis*) to her Redeemer. He bears his Cross as sign of victory over sin and death. Jesus appears as the one who reconciles Jews (Ark of the Covenant on the left) and "Greeks" or pagans with his heavenly Father. (See burning city of Troja (Troy) to the right.) As Aeneas escapes the fires of Troja, so Mary has escaped all works of evil. Carrying his father Anchises on his shoulders to safety, Aeneas points to Jesus Christ, who is also called the new Aeneas, bringing lasting peace and new life.

A Fortified City

(Protegit Urbem)

The moment she is conceived, the Mother of God, a beautiful city, is protected by grace as by a lofty bulwark.

"I will protect this city and I will save it." (2 Kings 19:34)



Announcing Good Tidings

(Laeta Reportat)

The rooster is the forerunner of the new day. He announces glad tidings. And so, the celebration of Mary's Immaculate Conception is the happy foretelling of the coming of God's Son.

"This is the Messiah, Jesus, whom I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:3)



Bearer of Light

(Lumina Praefert)

“Lucidia,” the famous “ucello resplendente” or firebird, points the way. The radiance of its wings transforms night into day and leads the traveler on a safe path. And so does Mary. The Blessed Virgin, resplendent in her Immaculate Conception, goes before the wanderer bearing light so that his ways may be pure and safe.

“He spread fire to give the light by night.” (Psalm 105:39)



Befitting the One

(Convenit Uni)

The palm tree, triumphant and glorious, is a fitting symbol of the Mother of God. It befits only the one who is victorious and none other. Similarly, the one who is purified and without stain (Mary) befits the one who is victor over sin and death (Jesus Christ).

“The just shall flourish like the palm tree.” (Psalm 92:13)



Brighter Than Ever

(Clarior Inde)

Contemplate the image of the sun in a spotless mirror. The purer the mirror upon which the sun casts its light, the brighter does the image of the sun radiate. The purer Mary was as the mirror without stain, so much the more brightly did the Son she bore shine within her.

“She is the spotless mirror of the power of God, the image of his goodness.” (Wisdom 7:26)



Dry Amid Waves

(Siccus in Undis)

However high the waters, the swan's feathers are not sodden. Similarly, though surrounded by the waters of sin, Mary, from the very beginning, remained unscathed by evil.

“When you pass through the waters of sin, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown.” (Isaiah 43:2)



Ever Radiant

(Candida Semper)

Within a shell as in a womb lies a pearl, shining bright and pure. The pearl bright and pure is the Virgin Mary whom her mother conceived in grace.

"Having found one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:46)



Fragile but Victorious

(Debile Vincit)

Why are so many earthen vessels ruined? Pour quicksilver into them and they will be shattered. Yet glass it does not harm. Why is every human being brought to ruin? The fault of the first parents is passed on to all. But it does not wound the one conceived without sin.

"He will be a vessel for honorable use, dedicated, beneficial to the master of the house, ready for every good work." (2 Timothy 2:21)



I Shudder at Her Song

(Horreo Cantum)

Plinius mentions in his natural history that the song of a virgin has the power to repel even lions. At the sound of the Virgin Mary's song, the devil, like a roaring lion, trembles and flees.

"He has shut the mouths of the lions and they have not hurt me for I have been found innocent." (Daniel 6:23)



Longing for Water

(Appetit Undas)

When athirst, the deer hastens to the fount of pure and cool waters. So Mary, the pure virgin, seeks longingly for the clear waters of Christ's Passion.

"Like the deer that longs for running streams, so my soul longs for you, my God." (Psalm 42-43:2)



Looking Down on Her Enemies

(Despicit Hostes)

In vain do you look for stains in the sun. And none of your arrows will ever wound her heart. The same may be said of Mary. The arrows of false accusations and the telescopes of blunt curiosity will neither reach nor hurt her.

*"But God will shoot arrows at them and strike them unawares."
(Psalm 64:8)*



Looks Are Deceitful

(Forma Dolosa)

Oh how often is the outer appearance of apples deceiving. While Eve, unfortunately, trusted in the appearance of the apple, Mary, most pure, drew no evil from the apple.

"Under the apple tree, I awakended you. It was there that your mother conceived you." (Song of Songs 8:5)



Next to the First

(Proxima Primae)

The letter B stands next to A, the first letter of the alphabet, and initiates words such as *benedicta* (blessed) and *bona* (good things). Christ is the Alpha, or the first letter, and Mary comes right after as the second. She is the one creature nearest to God, and she is without stain.

"Rebuke not your neighbor ... nor put him to shame ..." (Sirach 31:31)



None Will Hurt

(Nulla Nocebunt)

Adorned with a crown of young oak leaves, the eagle fearlessly braves Jupiter's ire, lightning and thunder. Similarly, the Virgin receives from her maker the crown of sinlessness. Hence she fears no stain, nor fears any lightning.

"Fear not, for I am with you."
(Isaiah 41:10)



Nothing Save What Is Sweet

(Nil Nisi Dulce)

In a beehive there is nothing save what is sweet. No bitterness is there. The bee knows how to render bitterness sweet. So Mary turns the bitter woes of our first parents into her sweet Ave.

"How great is your sweetness, O Lord!"
(Psalm 31:20)



Of a Same Accord

(Consonat Illa)

Strike a lyre, and then strike a second. They will sound together as though they were one. As Scripture says: "Whoever touches you, touches the apple of my eye" (Zechariah 2:12). Similarly, strike the mother, accusing her of sin. Immediately, the Son, born of her, will strike back. He will not suffer that the "apple of his eye" be touched.

"Whoever touches you, touches the apple of my eye." (Zechariah 2:12)



Of Sweet Smelling Scent

(Fragrat Odore)

Mary, purely conceived, is a fragrant rose, brighter than snow, that fills heaven and earth with her sweet perfume.

“Like the fragrance of a field which the Lord has blessed.” (Genesis 27:27)



Only the Shell

(Non Nisi Cortex)

Only the shell of the green chestnut presents a thorny outer skin. Once the chestnut has matured, the shell falls off and no thorn is left. So too, the Blessed Virgin, though descending from a thorny stem, never knew the thorn of sin.

“All the beauty of the King's daughter is within.” (Psalm 45:14)

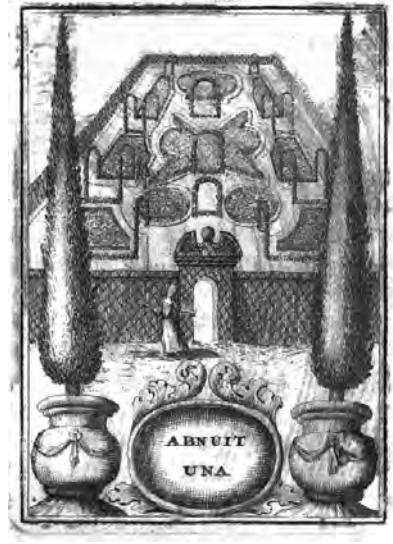


She Alone Refused

(Abnuit Una)

The labyrinth is the symbol of a treacherous and empty world and existence. Looks and beauty are deceptive (Daniel 13:56). With a gesture of her hand, Mary refuses to enter the labyrinth. She is not led astray by the allurements of sin.

"I have not strayed from your commands." (Psalm 119:110)



She Does Not Fear Them

(Non Timet Istos)

The moon does not fear howling dogs, who can bay but do not bite. In safety, she keeps on shining. So too, although some dogs may bark, Mary will not fear them. Beautiful as the moon, she shines on without paling.

"Your moon will not wane." (Isaiah 60:20)



Shining in the Waters

(Ardet in Undis)

In the midst of the waves, the starfish shines. Without stain, Mary, like a star, shines all the more brightly in the midst of the waves of hapless sin.

*"You shall shine with a glorious light."
(Tobit 13:11)*



Steadfast and Secure

(Undique Firma)

A pyramid, battered on all sides by winds, will fall if not thoroughly stable. And so the Immaculate Virgin, when beset by evil from all sides, stands thoroughly firm.

*"He will trust in her and not be put to shame."
(Sirach 15:4)*



Unharmred by Fire

(Non Nocet Ignis)

Leaping into the midst of a flaming pyre, the salamander suffers no harm. Such was the belief of zoologists in antiquity and the middle ages. Similarly, the most pure Mother Mary may be surrounded by the roaring flames of evil, but she does not fear the destructive fire of sin.

“When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you.” (Isaiah 43:2)



Vain Ardor

(Fervor Inanis)

Sisyphus, why are you vainly trying to roll a great stone up that steep incline? Similarly, we may ask: Why are you saying that Mary fell and is stained with some fault? Unless you cease, you will fall and thus be all the more disheartened.

“A stone falls back upon him who rolls it.” (Proverbs 26:27)



Victorious in the Cross

(In Cruce Victrix)

I shall no longer sing the ballads
of Homer and Virgil. Instead I will
sing the crusade of the maiden.
For armed by the Cross, she is
victorious in the Cross. Giving
virginal birth, she remained
victorious over sin and is without
stain.

*"God forbid that I should glory save
in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."
(Galatians 6:14)*



Warding Off the Enemy

(Pellitur Illa)

Only one of the ships is unimpaired.
The other is knocked off and looks
battered. It is a pirate ship and
stands for the forces of evil. The
unimpaired ship is destined to
repel them. Similarly, Lucifer, who
lays hold on countless souls, is
repelled by Mary.

*"You remember them no more;
they are cut off from your care."
(Psalm 88:6)*



Your Staff Is My Guide

(Dux Mihi Virga)

Scarce has the shepherd shown the rod to the beloved sheep than it follows at once. Scarce has the most pure Virgin seen the rod of the Cross than she follows at once.

*"I was like a trusting lamb."
(Jeremiah 12:19)*



The Virgin Mary Compared to the Sun

The following seven emblems are selected from the 1681 *Virgo Maria Mystica Sub Solis Imagine Emblematica Expressa* by Johann Leenheer. Based on the “great proximity between the sun and woman” (St. Bernard), Mary is venerated as the “Woman clothed with the Sun” (Rev. 12:1), which is a symbol of her plenitude of grace and Immaculate Conception.

Comparing Mary to the sun, the author highlights successively:

- Mary's holiness (Sol Formosissimus)
- Her noble and illustrious descent (Laeti Cum Lumine Solis)
- Her beauty (Exoritur Fulgetque Simul)
- The joy of her birth (Sol Est Altissimus)
- Her virginal integrity (Manent Illaesa)
- Her sinlessness (Maculam Non Contrahit Ullam)
- The Virgin Birth (Omni Sine Labe)

Most Beautiful Is the Sun

(Sol Formosissimus)

But so is Mary: All beautiful, all fair, all delightful, all glorious are you. No stain has darkened you; you are clothed with all loveliness, enriched with all holiness. Holy in body you surpass all virtues. You surpass all women in bodily beauty, and all angelic spirits in excellence of holiness. (St. Augustine, *Sermo de Incarn. Christi*)



Rejoicing in the Light of the Sun

(Laeti Cum Lumine Solis)

As the light of the sun rejoices all of God's creatures, so does the birth of Mary.

O happy day, O day of delight, when there was given to the world so great an advocate. O day to be celebrated with all joy, when we received so great a gift. (St. Thomas of Villanova. Conc. 3 de Nat. Virg.)



Rising the Sun Shines Forth

(Exoritur Fulgetque Simul)

Similarly, Mary came forth as the bright and rosy dawn. For without original sin she was born in her mother's womb. (Paraph. of St. Bernard, Sermo 4. Super Salve)



The Sun Is Highest in the Skies

(Sol Est Altissimus)

Similarly, the Virgin Mary was of a most noble and illustrious descent as was fitting for the one who would be the Mother of God. (St. Thomas of Villanova, *De Nativ. Virg. Concept.* 2)



They Remain Unharmd

(Manent Illaesa)

The rays of the sun run unharmd through the panes of glass. Thus, we may say with St. Bernard: "Just as a star sends forth its rays without any corruption, so too without any injury to her integrity did the Virgin bring forth the Son." (Hom. 2 Super Mis.)



Untainted Forever

(Maculam Non Contrahit Ullam)

Shining forth the pure light of the sun remains untainted. Similarly, Mary, in all purity, brought forth for us both God and man. (St. Bernard, *Sermo de B.M.*)



Without Any Stain

(Omni Sine Labe)

The light of the sun is pure gold and free of all darkness and stain. Likewise, Mary's whole being is of pure gold. It was not fitting that the Sanctuary of God, the House of Wisdom, the Shrine of the Holy Spirit, the Vessel of heavenly Manna should have within it any stain. (St. Thomas of Villanova, *Conc. 1, de Nat. Virg.*)



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