

# Episode 156 The Virtual Museum

## **Lynn Cohick**

Hi, I'm Lynn Cohick, Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Director of the Houston Theological Seminary at Houston Christian University in lovely Houston, Texas.

## **Sandra Glahn**

Hi, I'm Dr. Sandra Glahn, Professor of Media Arts and Worship at Dallas Theological Seminary in what today is very hot Dallas, Texas.

## **David Capes**

Dr. Cohick, Dr. Glahn, good to see you both, Lynn and Sandra here on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

## **Lynn Cohick**

Thanks for inviting us David.

## **David Capes**

I'm excited about this project you have been working on. And we're just going to jump right into it because folks have met you Lynn before. And on another occasion, Sandra, we'll figure out a way to get you back on to talk about some of the things you do and love. But I want to talk about this visual museum that you got started. So, it sounds like it started with Sandra.

## **Lynn Cohick**

Oh yes, I'm just here for the ride. And it's been super fun.

## **David Capes**

So, what is this visual museum all about Sandra?

## **Sandra Glahn**

I take a class of students every other year to Italy to study medieval art and spirituality. And I started noticing how much of the visual record of women in the church I had not picked up because I'd only read the written record, which wasn't always that flattering. It would be maybe church councils talking about how we need to shut women down. But the visual record would have a seventh century woman holding a shepherd staff, a crozier. And that was a very common visual thing. Apparently, women shepherd people in the early church's years. And in the super early church, even before we had churches, in the catacombs you would hear about women that were bone collectors. Where part of loving Christianity was providing a decent burial to someone who was martyred for their faith. And someone who cared about them would risk their life going and collecting their head or their hands or whatever mangled parts of the body, to wash them. And because Christianity takes such a high view of physicality that was important to the early church, and I thought that was just really beautiful. And some women lost their lives doing that. Some women were tortured for doing that. Then I would see an example was sixth century Christian woman who are carrying the elements of communion. And in

churches where I've worship, that would have been something that only the elders did. It opened my eyes to the visual record of such things that the written record doesn't do. But there was really no one clearinghouse that I could find that put all those artifacts in one place. I might go to, let's say, the Church of Mary Maggiore. And there might be a book on the art at that church. There might even be a book on the women in Ravenna, but nobody that I could find has taken the women of Mary Maggiore and the women in Ravenna and the women in you know, XYZ place. So that we could see what was the church doing in the ninth century? What was the church doing in the seventh century? And since the church was preliterate throughout history, much of our history has been told in pictures, in mosaics, and frescoes. And so our goal, Dr. Cohick, and Dr. George Kalantzis at Wheaton, and then I'm at DTS, and the three of us are collaborating to create what Lynn has named The Visual Museum. Which is now in beta at [visualmuseum.gallery](http://visualmuseum.gallery), which is we're starting to collect these pictures. And then she has been assigning her master's and doctoral students to do vetted research on these people. We're not just getting somebody's opinion, we're getting really good, solid academic work attached to the project.

### **David Capes**

That sounds really interesting. It strikes me particularly that the visual record is so different from what you get in the written record sometimes.

I think of it as looking at the church's town hall meeting notes and comparing that to the church bulletin. Town hall meeting notes are going to record all the conflict., But the bulletin is going to say who was playing bunco and when there was a youth retreat and who brought casseroles and who we need to pray for, who got a hospital visit. It's a much more accurate record of the day-to-day workings of the church. And I think The Visual Museum does record more of that sort of activity.

### **Lynn Cohick**

One of the things as Sandra and I've teamed up to take a group of students over to Italy we did this earlier this year, was the student reactions. This reaction of, I never knew this, I never saw this. Who is this woman that seemed to play such a role within the church's imagination of her generation and beyond. And I don't even know her. And I come at this from the textual standpoint, looking at the early women martyrs of the church, what women have done, as they helped shape Christianity in the early centuries. And I was just astonished at this visual record that supports the little bit that we have in the text and goes beyond that. And it's Church's history. It's our history. And we really wanted a way for it to be accessible for free. Because as Sandra said, it's hard to find a comprehensive book or access, and oftentimes museums costs money to be part of. To get online to see what they have. And we really wanted this visual museum to be free for the church.

### **Sandra Glahn**

One of our pleasant surprises has been the gender parity. So, it's not just been to discover women, it's been to see that in the early centuries, women and men are always represented together. You would have a man and a woman at the altar, in a couple of different artifacts, whether it's mosaics, whether it's in the marble. If you would have an arch of the 12 apostles on the inner arch, you would have eight women. So just to see how much the earlier centuries of the church were emphasizing this partnership of men and women.

**David Capes**

When you look at The Virtual Museum, online, you're seeing more than the images. I read yesterday, a number of the stories that are associated with them, and some of the details about the artwork itself. Maybe an art historian has helped you with some of that. Because it's not always self-evident when you're looking at an image what you're looking at, or what the significance of it is. As you said, a woman carrying the elements, that sure seems like a fairly important priestly role, or having the crozier That's like being a bishop. All of these things are pretty important. But they do need a little explanation along the way.

**Sandra Glahn**

They do. And I'm going to let Dr. Cohick talk about that, because it's really been more her students that have addressed that part.

**Lynn Cohick**

And they've been really excited to do so. They've enjoyed digging into the world of art history, the world of theology that so often is demonstrated in what figures are shown to be doing or what they're wearing. And the students have researched as well as scholars. So, we had a symposium several months ago that brought in art historians, and those who understand in even a deeper way, what they're looking at. We've been looking at icons and understanding a little bit more how the icon functioned in the life of the church. I want to stress that as we look at these women from the early centuries, this is the history of all Christians today. This is not Orthodox, or Catholic history. This is church history. This is our history. And that's something I feel is really important for Christians to know today. These are part of the great cloud of witnesses, the global church.

**David Capes**

When you talk about the catacombs that's very early, right, compared to let's say, medieval art, the medieval period.

**Sandra Glahn**

Right. Even when you have Constantine coming along and saying, it's okay to build churches. What you will see in the catacombs typically is the good shepherd or a fish. You're not going to see a cross very much. But then once we get to the fourth century, and the earliest mosaics in a church space, and in the apse, you're going to see Christ as conqueror. And some have said, that's an evolution of Christ. I think we would argue that it's not that Christ evolved, it's that burial space has a very different emphasis. Think about how often we cite Psalm 23 at a funeral, but it's not necessarily something you would cite in a church service every week. And the emphases also change and that's an important part of bringing in some of the art historians to tell us what we're looking at, to help us interpret some of that art. Jonah is very popular. That story is very popular in the catacombs, which is definitely not something you'd typically see on tombstones in Protestant cemeteries today.

**David Capes**

But it's all about resurrection, isn't it? It's all about resurrection. The next trip that you're going to take to take photographs, where's that going to be to? Do you have a spot yet picked out?

**Sandra Glahn**

I have an intern that is headed for Spain. She has only \$500 left to raise of her \$2,800 to do that. She is Latina and very excited to explore her Spanish roots while also getting some photos for us that we are completely lacking. And some of this also involves not necessarily us going but deputizing others to go. And even if someone like you goes to travel somewhere or your average listener. We would love for them to capture some image because we can't provide a list of what is where. We don't even know.

**David Capes**

That list doesn't exist, Sandra?

**Sandra Glahn**

It does not. I didn't know I was going to walk into UK churches and find croziers. I found four different women, carrying croziers. And nothing that I saw was from a list of where I could find women with croziers in the art. I just had to stumble on statues and stained-glass windows.

**David Capes**

Well, I see a lot of traveling in both of your futures.

**Lynn Cohick**

Oh, well, we'd love that too. Yes, we hope to go back and to encourage others. And we have already. There have been women who have reached out and it certainly can be men as well. They've reached out and said, I'm travelling across Europe, or I'm heading to Ethiopia, wherever they might be going. And we just ask them, keep your eyes peeled, because this is part of the history that's lost, that we're trying to recover. We would really like to have that material. And on the website, we're providing, and we'll continue to upgrade, a way for people to submit their photos and to be able to, if they don't know the research, identify the person. Or we can help them do that. And then do the research. Because as you mentioned, we don't just put a photo up. We wanted to name the person, if we know and describe what the picture is telling us. Whether there's particular clothing or particular activity that's important. Is that a biblical figure or is that a later saint that's being remembered. So, we can help people. The key is that this is all for free. When people give their photos there, they're doing so with the idea that people can use them for other research or in teaching or in sermons. They're free from the copyright concerns.

**David Capes**

So, if I'm doing a PowerPoint, and I want to demonstrate something about one of these women in the early church, I can just pull that down and download that and use that in my PowerPoint? I don't have to necessarily give you guys credit? I mean, it'd be good to give you guys credit, obviously, and say where I got this from.

**Sandra Glahn**

But you don't have to. It's not always appropriate to have a credit line. Every photo you find on The Visual Museum has a little download button in the lower right hand corner. You can give credit if you want to, but it's not required. And that was part of the challenge. So much has been behind a firewall or required copyright permission. If you're going to give a sermon, and you want to feature women, you

follow that good impulse. But then you run into all these limits. And the average person is not going to that much work. Hopefully now we provide a place where more visual images will be provided as people speak and teach, because it's accessible.

**David Capes**

This is really a fabulous project. You are working on this together and you want to make this available for free. But you can't do all this traveling and web work for nothing. You've got to pay for a lot of things along the way. How was this being paid for? How was it being funded?

**Lynn Cohick**

I appreciate you asking that. David, I thought you were going to say as college professors, we know that you have a lot of money! But no, we would invite donations to be able to help us pay for those magicians. I don't know how else to say it, those that actually do the tech stuff, because I have no idea. I often just can't even turn on my phone. So we have to have those who help us that way. And to organize, we have fabulous volunteers who have created the back end, which is like miles of spreadsheets to be able to keep everything organized. So that the interface when you look at the museum online is just spectacular.

**David Capes**

Yes, so everybody will see the front side. But there's a lot of work done on the back side that nobody ever sees.

**Sandra Glahn**

We have awesome librarians with skills that neither Lynn nor I have.

**David Capes**

So, moving forward, I could see that you would be almost deluged with photos from people who've traveled over to Greece or Israel or Egypt or just various places. Do you have a plan for that?

**Sandra Glahn**

Well, initially we have received a \$50,000 grant that we're about \$30,000 into that helps cover some of this. Again, none of us is getting paid but it has covered some of the actual physical expenses for this. For the symposium we did, we hired a videographer so that all the speakers who gave over the rights to their work, that video can be posted eventually. So yes, it's going to require lots of volunteers. We will continue to seek grant funding. But also, we invite people who are interested to help support the work as well.

**David Capes**

Well, I wish you both well, in this. I think it's a great project, bringing to light these saints from the past, some of whose stories we know very little about. But we need to know the history here much more precisely than we've been able to reconstruct simply from written records.

**Lynn Cohick**

And I think it's important because it's the church's history, although we are spotlighting women, as Sandra mentioned, so often these pictures are of men and women. This is how the church lived in its faithfulness. And I feel it's as important for boys and men as it is for girls and women to appreciate this history. And in the ancient world, like Augustine, for example, he has done a couple of sermons on the martyrs Perpetua and Felicity. These women lived in the life of the early church, both men and women, they were household names. We'd like to bring them back into the household again.

**David Capes**

Yes, that's a great vision.

**Sandra Glahn**

I would love to share briefly two narratives. We had a student of color, who had never seen herself depicted in the art. And she was with us on the Italy trip. And she burst into tears and said, I was here, I was represented. I had another student who roomed with me when we flew up from Dallas to the symposium in Chicago, and we got back to the room. She said, why have I only ever heard of one of these martyrs? Why are these names not known to me? What have we lost in our history? Thank you for helping give it back.

**David Capes**

That's a great motivation, and a great result as well. Sandra, Lynn, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel.

**Lynn Cohick**

Thank you very much.

**Sandra Glahn**

Thanks