

**Timothy Verdon**

**Mary in European Art**

For two thousand years, Christian civilization has been fascinated by the young woman who, to an angel inviting her to become God's mother, said: "*Ecce ancilla Domini*": "Behold the handmaid of the Lord". In poetry and song, in theological reflection as in devotional practice, the faith-community has not only thought about this girl, identifying with her answer, but has made Mary's words its own in order to insistently call attention to her. Especially in the visual arts – in splendid churches, in countless paintings, in mosaics, sculptures and stained glass, in works of the goldsmith's craft and in textiles – the Christian West has never ceased to set Mary before believers, as if in its turn saying: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord": behold a woman who was free, capable of self-gift, full of joy and open to life.

The first approach to interpreting Mary has always been theological in character, but across the centuries the Church has also sought to understand her as human person, as *woman*. This second, more biographical inquiry is not entirely separable from the first, which it continually intersects, assuming at times more, at times less importance. Both lines of research have the same starting point, in fact: the Gospel, a theological not biographical text which presents Jesus as the Son of God who died and rose to save humankind. In its unfolding, the Gospel provides a complete and homogeneous constellation of biographical data for Jesus, whereas for Mary it offers little more than "crystals of her life, discrete icons", as F. Jesi puts it.

The present short paper explores these parallel vectors of inquiry through analysis of several well-known Marian images.