



Sacred art in public places

The ACU Art Collection contains more than 1,000 diverse artworks dating from the 13th century to the present day, representing a wide range of disciplines and media.

The collection is organised into four sections: the Modern and Contemporary Art Collection, comprising work by Australian and international artists; the Chapel Collection, holding sacred art used in the service of worship or devotion; the Ceremonial Collection, featuring items such as the Biccherna book, a processional mace and ACU ceremonial robes; and the Historical Collection, which includes botanical specimens, 15th-century chasubles, embroidered vestments, furniture and art-historical items.

Works from the collection are widely displayed across our campuses to provide extensive access to this important asset. With a large proportion of the collection reflecting religious

themes, the placement of these works supports the expression of the university's spiritual values and mission. The artworks are exhibited in both sacred and public spaces, including chapels, libraries, lecture theatres and the vice-chancellery, where visiting dignitaries are reminded of the importance of religious art in study, reflection and academic rigour.

No spiritual work of art from the collection is more prominently displayed than the recently commissioned majestic triptych by Chiara Perinetti Casoni, depicting the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child and accompanied by the Saints Joseph and Mary MacKillop. It is a major feature in Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Chapel on the MacKillop Campus in North Sydney. The impact of sacred art in public spaces can be both obvious and subtle, ranging from the clear religious message reflected in the nature and position of such an iconic item to the refined suggestion of devotion contained in quiet and sometimes unexpected appearances of divine objects. Space responds to and is given meaning through art, and the spirituality conferred by religious works of art promotes a calmness and contemplation within the university and wider community.

Caroline Field
Curator, ACU Art Collection

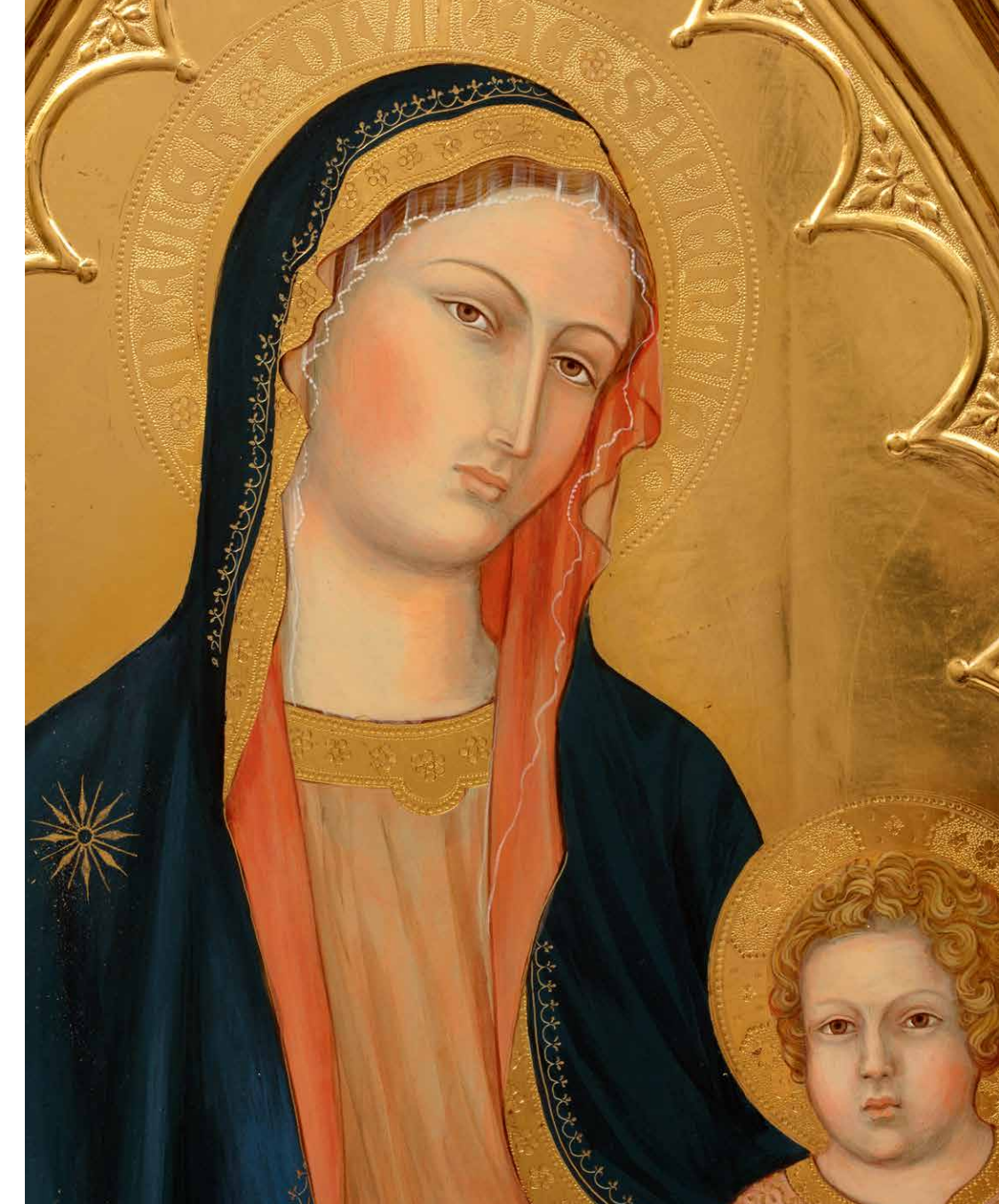
Chiara Perinetti Casoni's triptych installed in the Chapel of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom, alongside stained-glass windows (2013-14) by Australian artist Terrance Plowright

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Fostering art and culture

We often talk about research and teaching at universities in Australia, but there aren't many academies that act as genuine repositories, let alone promoters, of culture and art. However, some universities in our country are taking this seriously, and Australian Catholic University (ACU) is one of them.

Fostering culture through the arts is central to the mission of ACU. We draw on a long and rich legacy of the Catholic Church as a significant patron of the arts. For centuries, the Church has sponsored many of the great artists of the day, including Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who went on to create some of their masterpieces within the walls of the Vatican.

Catholic universities especially foster this culture. If you are trying to reach people about faith, truth and love, and if you are trying to live a life of empathy and impact, art is one of the best ways to express it. As Vice-Chancellor and President of ACU, I have consciously pursued a policy whereby the university provides its diverse communities with opportunities to experience the beauty of art, particularly Catholic art. The ACU Art

Collection includes works that are explicitly Catholic, inferentially Catholic and possibly Catholic, and I see the collection as a major part of our educative role as a university.

It is in keeping with this tradition that ACU commissioned the triptych Holy Virgin Mary of Wisdom and Child with Saints Joseph and Mary MacKillop, the first full-size altar piece created in the medieval Italian Siense style in at least 400 years. In commissioning this piece, we wanted the sensibility of the 14th and 15th century to touch us, and to teach us. The artists of the Siense school didn't just turn their hands to art; they made things with their minds and souls. The result surpasses any possible anticipation of how we hoped it would be. The painting was created by Chiara Perinetti Casoni, an eminent artist based in Siena, Italy, and it is simply extraordinary.

This unique acquisition is an important addition to the ACU Art Collection. The triptych joins a collection of varied and distinctive artworks—all assessed and catalogued to ensure the preservation of our cultural asset, and shared across our eight campuses. Its installation is also a significant milestone in ACU's Arts and Culture Strategy. Promoting arts and culture is a defining characteristic of the world's leading universities and is crucial to their reputation and standing. Our Arts and Culture Strategy reflects ACU's growing maturity as an ambitious and outward-looking university and also works to preserve the Catholic mission and identity of our institution.

ACU's new arts and culture website also reflects our strong commitment to arts and culture, and our ambition to extend and enhance our efforts in the sector.

Professor Greg Craven
ACU Vice-Chancellor and President

Triptych of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom



Triptych of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom

In 2016, the university commissioned this triptych by Italian artist Chiara Perinetti Casoni. It was installed in the Chapel of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom at the North Sydney Campus and blessed on 13 June 2019.

At its top is the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, surrounded by three seraphim. This echoes frames of early Renaissance master Taddeo di Bartolo, in whose tradition Casoni has followed. The Spirit is, above all, creating, sustaining, redeeming, inspiring. He is the source of that Wisdom of which Mary is mother and seat. The seraphim surrounding the dove are three of nine flame-winged angels who appear in the work. Four attend the Madonna and Child, two adoring and two kneeling, as if supplicants modelling the posture for the congregation. As if in a sung litany, they proclaim the Virgin, '*Mater Divinae Sapientiae*'; to which we all respond, '*Ora pro nobis*' (Mother of divine wisdom, pray for us).

On the side panels are Joseph and Mary MacKillop, patron saints of the Josephite order. Of Joseph's many titles, the one for which St Joseph is named in his halo, is 'husband of Mary', thus protector of the Holy Family. He is dressed in purple, which in Christian iconography represents royalty – through Joseph, Jesus is joined to the royal line of David – and penance, as both Joseph and Jesus embrace poverty and celibacy.

Joseph is holding a staff, perhaps a pilgrim's walking staff, for he brought the Holy Family to Bethlehem, to Egypt, to Nazareth, and to and from Jerusalem. There is more to this traditional symbol for Joseph. In the biblical *Book of Numbers* it is a sign of his being chosen from the Levitical (priestly) line, and in the *Golden Legend* it is a sign of his being chosen, though already an elderly widow, to be the young Mary's spouse. Joseph has his hand on heart, as if pledging himself to the Holy Family's care. According to Scripture and tradition, he is just, chaste, prudent, strong, obedient, faithful, patient, hard-working... always true to his pledge.



Chiara Perinetti Casoni

Born 1961, Italy

Holy Virgin Mary of Wisdom and Child with Saints Joseph and Mary MacKillop, 2018

poplar wood, 24-carat gold leaf

H 188 x W 132.5 cm

Commissioned 2016

On the opposite panel is Mary MacKillop, the first canonised saint of Australia and patron of Catholic schools and school teachers. She looks out to us, drawing us into the work. She is dressed in the habit of her order, and the blue emblem goes back to the founding of the Sisters of St Joseph in 1866. It combines the letters A and M from 'Ave Maria', with three little Js in honour of Jesus, Joseph and John the Baptist. Mary MacKillop's halo, hand cross and Rosary crucifix point to her name in religion and the call to Christians to take up their cross and follow Christ. In her other hand is the scroll of a teacher of wisdom and rule-giver to her congregation.

A Madonna and Child fill the central panel. On the halo and the *cartiglio*, the Madonna is praised as 'Mother' or 'seat' of divine wisdom. Under this title she is patron of Catholic universities. So too, Mary is mother of the one who is divine wisdom incarnate, but also a divinely wise mother. There is a star on her right shoulder, symbol of another ancient title, *Stella Maris*. This honours Mary's long-pondered wisdom and the compass she is to devoted seamen and, indeed, scholars. She holds the Scriptures in her right hand and the Christ Child in her left: both are the Word.

Mary is dressed in glorious lapis lazuli blue over a red robe, colours associated with royalty in the ancient world and her official colours by the early Renaissance. On one reading, the blue comes from the *Book of Numbers*, where it is associated with a blue girdle of obedience and purity, and with the blue covering over the Ark of the Covenant and Table of the Presence. Red is associated with love and passion, devotion and sacrifice.

At the centre of the triptych is the Christ Child. He is Wisdom incarnate. He points to the Holy Scriptures, for He is the Word made flesh and inspiration of the sacred page. With the other hand He holds a crystalline orb, for He is Christ the King whose 'kingdom come' in our Christian worship and contemplation, theology and action.

Most Reverend Anthony Fisher OP