

**Visions of Black
Madonnas**
Large Print Labels

Jesus's mother Mary appears as a Black woman throughout the Christian visual tradition. This show examines two examples, connected by an encounter between a legendary artist and a 400-year-old object at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

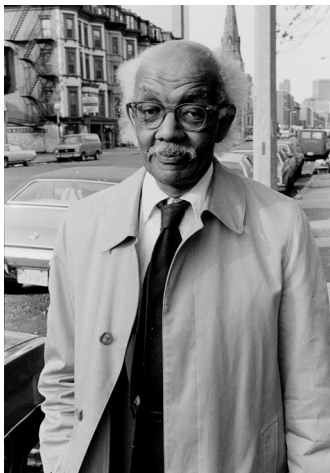
The Gardner's **Black Glass Madonna** (1570–91) was made for Archduke Ferdinand II of Innsbruck, Austria. Created by artists working in his personal glass workshop, it depicts a miracle-working wooden statue called the Madonna of Loreto. Ferdinand was one of many Catholic monarchs of the period who were devoted to worshiping this dark-skinned image of the Virgin.

American artist, devout Episcopalian, and lifelong Bostonian Allan Rohan Crite routinely visited the **Black Glass Madonna** in the Museum's Veronese Room on the third floor. For him, this spiritual woman and child was a sign of inclusion and multicultural histories. In his own Black Madonna images, which he made throughout his career, he glorified Black history and Black motherhood, affirming African American humanity in a racist world.

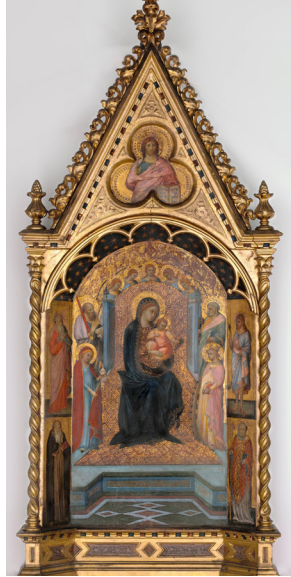
You can find Crite's art in all three of the Museum's exhibition spaces. **Allan Rohan Crite: Urban Glory** in the Hostetter Gallery shows work from across his 70-year career that honored and created community in his changing Boston neighborhood, while painter Robert T. Freeman makes a tribute to him on the Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade. We hope these shows inspire those who knew Mr. Crite and those learning about him for the first time.



Innsbruck Court Glassworks, **Black Glass Madonna**, 1570–91, in the Veronese Room, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Photo: Sean Dungan



Allan Rohan Crite on Columbus Avenue, 18 April 1981. Photograph by Aukram Burton



Bartolomeo Bulgarini
(Italian, active Siena, by
1337–died 1378)

**The Virgin and Child
Enthroned with Saints
and Angels**

1355-60

Gold and tempera on
panel

Isabella Stewart Gardner
Museum, Boston

This light-skinned Madonna from the Gardner Museum collection shares a composition with our **Black Glass Madonna**. The Virgin Mary holds the infant Christ in the center. Angels and saints surround them like attendants in a royal court, while an adult Jesus appears at the top of the composition.

Sparkling with gold leaf, this small-scale deluxe devotional image was intended for the use of a single person. The painted images are set within an ornate box called a tabernacle. It suggests one way the **Black Glass Madonna**, missing its original frame, may have been presented when it was first made.

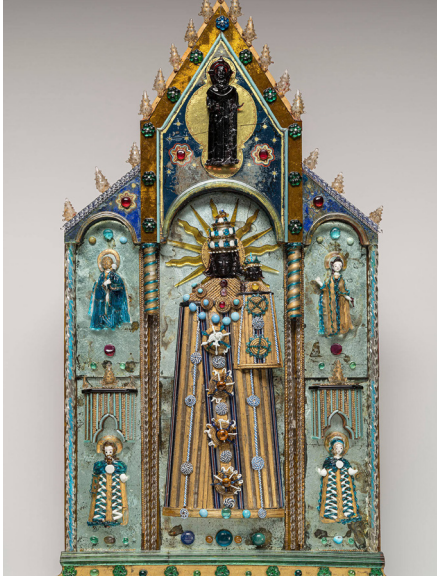
Skilled Venetian artists made our **Black Glass Madonna** with a proprietary method, using a torch to melt, manipulate, and press glass rods and tubes. The Venetian Republic granted Archduke Ferdinand II special permission to employ these artisans.

We turned to local glass artist Caterina Urrata Weintraub to understand how the Venetian glass artists made this intricate object. Touch the oversized examples below to explore the textures.

Black Madonnas in Europe

While most Christian images in Europe show the Virgin Mary with light skin, several notable examples in painting and sculpture depict her with dark skin. They are commonly called Black Madonnas. No single factor accounts for each one, and scholars still debate the extent to which race played a role. Some artists may have intentionally made this choice to reflect Mary's origin in the eastern Mediterranean region, commonly known as the Holy Land. Other Madonnas may have been so old and revered for their miracle-working power that their skin darkened over time from prayerful touch and smoke from candle offerings.

In Europe, several Black Madonnas believed to work miracles are important pilgrimage sites. Famous examples include the Madonna of Częstochowa near Krakow, Poland, and the Madonna of Loreto in Italy. Devotees—like Archduke Ferdinand—believe that the Madonna of Loreto miraculously flew from Nazareth in present-day Israel to Loreto, along with Mary's house, which is now enshrined in a basilica.



Innsbruck Court
Glassworks (active
Innsbruck, Austria,
1570–1591)

Black Glass Madonna
1570-91

Lampworked and pressed
glass on wood mount
Isabella Stewart Gardner
Museum, Boston

This Black Madonna wears robes of gold and a gem-encrusted crown, all rendered with cutting-edge glasswork techniques developed in Venice. She is a miniature version of the miracle-working wooden statue in northeast Italy called the Madonna of Loreto. Archduke Ferdinand II had a special devotion to the Loreto statue. He even donated 943 panels of wood from his land to help build her a new church.

This remarkable glass statue celebrated Ferdinand's devotion to the Loreto sculpture and possibly commemorated his own gift. While their identities remain unknown today, each of the four saints on either side of the Madonna would have had a specific meaning for the archduke.



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
Untitled (Madonna and Child)

1984

Hand-colored and gilded
multilith print

Private Collection

Allan Rohan Crite had a deep interest in history and believed in the interconnectedness of all people, while celebrating their differences. The mother and child pairs on either side of the central figure reflect this idea: they are from different places and maybe even different times, but their mirrored poses underscore their shared connection and the importance of motherhood across cultures. Crite pairs this inventive approach with traditional elements of Madonna and Child imagery: their seated position and halos and the use of gold leaf.

Crite made this work in a series depicting the Madonna and Child across different cultures from West Africa to Southeast Asia to North America

Allan Rohan Crite's Black Madonnas

Throughout his long career, Boston artist Allan Rohan Crite frequently depicted holy figures, including the Madonna and Child, as Black. Crite was a devout Episcopalian and frequently depicted religious subjects, often creating art for worship. His images of Black Madonnas glorified his community, centered his Black neighbors in a sacred Christian history, and affirmed the interconnected humanity of all people. In the words of professor Ted Landsmark, a close friend of Crite's, "People see themselves in Allan's work because they **are** in Allan's work."

Crite was at the forefront of a broader movement in the mid-1900s to depict holy figures as Black. While his later images were directly connected to conversations and images of the Black Power movement, he began this work decades earlier.



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)

**Madonna and Child;
4 Evangelists Saints
Luke, Matthew, Mark,
and John; Adam and
Eve**

about 1934

Linoleum block print
hand-colored with marker
and gold leaf

Arts Department, Special
Collections, Boston Public
Library

This is one of the earliest examples of Crite depicting Black holy figures. As with much of his early religious work, he used more traditional artistic styles, clothing, and settings. The arrangement of the figures and his use of flattened imagery and gold leaf are reminiscent of early Italian devotional paintings he would have seen in his visits to the Gardner Museum. But his use of Black figures is rooted in his radical, contemporary desire to tell what he characterized as “the story of man through a Black figure.”



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)

**Untitled (Madonna of
Transportation—with
John the Baptist)**

about 1987

Multilith print

Private collection

Crite made this work late in his career. It incorporates elements he had been building on for decades: Black holy figures, West African dress that signaled racial pride for many Black Americans, and Boston locations. The work combines the sacred with the everyday, the local with the global.

Crite designed and printed thousands of church bulletins—booklets personalized by congregations for weekly worship and news. He printed around 1,200 a week in his home for distribution to many parishes in Boston and across the country. Black Madonnas were a recurring subject. This selection of bulletins shows the range of Crite's artistic styles, methods, and global art historical influences over a nearly 40-year span. They document a diverse and changing Boston: Crite even taught himself Spanish to communicate with new neighbors in the South End and create bulletins for their churches.



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
**Untitled (Madonna
and Child with women
and children gathered
around)**
about 1950
Offset color lithograph
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
**Untitled (Madonna and
Child with city and rural
background)**

1956

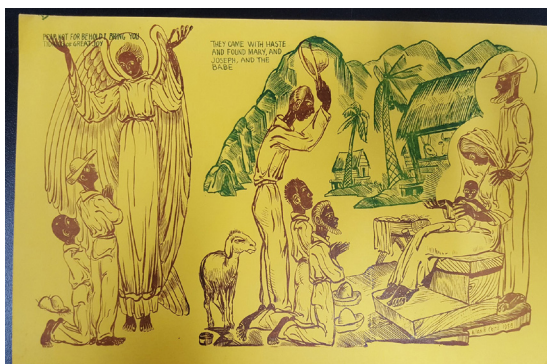
Offset color lithograph
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
**Our Lady of Harvard
Square**

about 1958

Offset color lithograph
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
**Untitled (Holy family
and angel scenes)**

1958

Offset color lithograph
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
Untitled (Madonna and Child)

1961

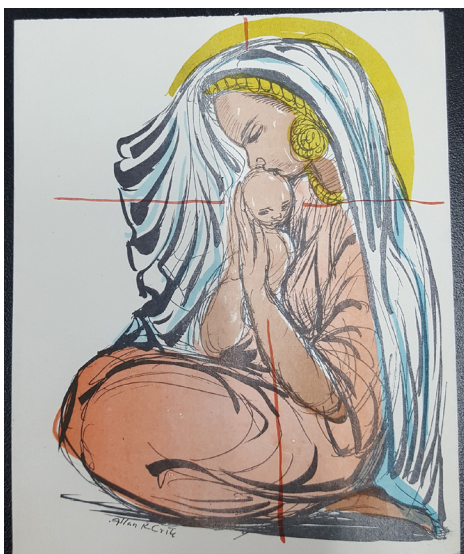
Offset color lithograph
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
Our Lady of the Migrant Workers

1961

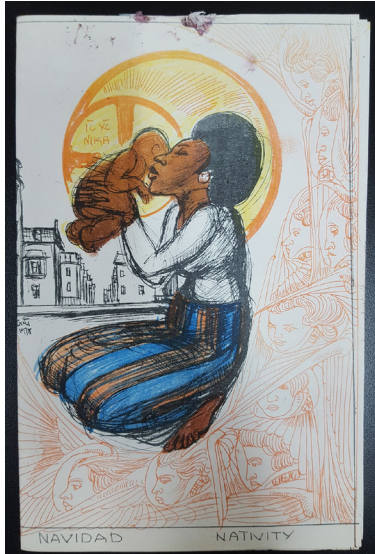
Offset color lithograph
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
Untitled (Madonna and Child)

about 1970

Offset color lithograph
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
Navidad / Nativity
1978
Colored multilith print
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
**1st Sunday after
Christmas / Primera
Domín[ica de] Navidad**
1979
Colored multilith print
Private Collection



Allan Rohan Crite
(American, 1910–2007)
**1st Sunday after
Christmas / Domingo
Después**
about 1986
Multilith print
Private Collection