



Tampa Bay Skeptics

REPORT ONLINE

A Special Interest Group of

cfi TAMPA BAY
CENTER FOR INQUIRY

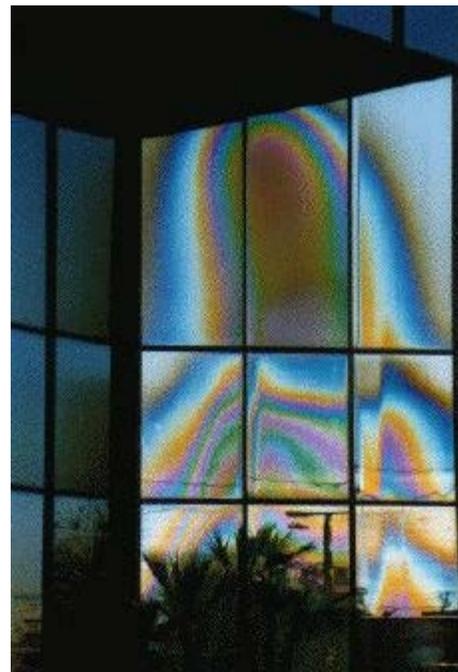
Selected articles from
VOL. 9 NO. 4 SPRING 1997

Photo by Guss Wilder III

Tampa Bay's Christmas 1996 "Virgin Mary Apparition"

by Gary P. Posner

This past December 17, a customer entering the Seminole Finance Corporation building in Clearwater mentioned to employees that she had just seen something extraordinary on the south wall's exterior reflective-glass windows. Shortly thereafter, she telephoned Ch. 10 with her report and, by that night and for days to come, all the Tampa Bay-area newscasts would lead with the story. And it was not long before AP, CNN, ABC's *World News Tonight*, the *Today Show*, *American Journal*, and other media had spread the word such that, by the new year, several hundred thousand visitors, some from other continents, would have occasion to witness in person our startling Christmastime apparition of the Virgin Mary.



Inquiries from the local news media began streaming in to TBS the following day, and I was interviewed by:

- Mark Douglas -- Ch. 8 (quoted me on that day's noon news)
- John Grayson -- 970 WFLA (substitute host who interviewed me on the *Mark Larson Show*)
- Kathryn Bursch -- Ch. 44 (my opinion was noted on that night's news)
- Juli Hilliard -- *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (quoted me in her front-page article of December 19)
- Alan McBride -- Florida's News Network (interview distributed to radio stations throughout Florida)

Based upon the TV and newspaper images that I had seen, in these initial interviews I offered the opinion that the "apparition," a strikingly colorful, 30-foot-tall likeness of the classic paintings of the

hooded Madonna (in outline only), appeared likely the work of an artist, as opposed to an entirely natural phenomenon or a genuine "miracle." Boy, did I turn out to be wrong!

By the time fellow Tampa Bay Skeptics member Guss Wilder III (who served as our photographer) arrived at the scene that night for our first on-site inspection, traffic along the adjacent six-lane U.S. 19 corridor was being brought to a full halt by several policemen manning a hastily created pedestrian crossing. The building's parking lot was flooded with sightseers, who would have had nothing to see were it not for the floodlights of three TV vans (of the seven present) being directed at the nine window panes comprising the three-story glass wall. But once Wilder knew where to look and what the image was supposed to look like, its resemblance to the Madonna was actually quite evident even under unfavorable lighting conditions.

But I can attest firsthand that "Mary's" beauty is infinitely more breathtaking in the light of day. Although lacking any facial or other internal detail, from a distance she appears to have perhaps been hand-painted in a rainbow of iridescent hues. Her head/hood occupy the top row of three panes and her neckline/shoulders the middle row, with her hands (whether empty or full) overlapping the middle and lower rows. (Believers have been overheard debating whether Mary's hands are folded in prayer, or holding the infant Jesus.)

Any religious pilgrim, reporter, or casual visitor need only to walk around the building to note that the "Mary apparition" is hardly the only such colorful image present. Indeed, iridescent staining of a similar nature is apparent around its circumference wherever exposed reflective glass was used, and is particularly vivid where vegetation and sprinkler heads are in close proximity to the glass. Along the low hedges, the stains appear to hover just above their tops; where the palms grow high, the stains follow. Guss even overheard such comments as, "That one looks like a lady" and "That looks like an Indian."

Upon closer scrutiny, the streaks of shimmering color appear to be fashioned from grainy, crusted buildups of debris. The business' owner, Michael G. Krizmanich, says that he contracted to have the windows cleaned when he purchased the building one year earlier, but that the "Madonna" stains, which were present even then, proved too stubborn for removal. In the lower-right of the nine "Madonna" panes is a circular area where someone had made a moderate inroad in scraping away the staining, even if with great difficulty and a displeasing, scratchy result.

As for the precise mechanism of the stain deposits and coloration, the *St. Petersburg Times* quoted local chemist Charles Roberts' view that the "rainbow" effect is due to water deposits and weathering combining to create a chemical reaction, such as is commonly seen in old bottles. Roberts, with 40 years of experience analyzing glass, added that a broken sprinkler head could have contributed to the higher areas of stain. (Guss informs me that it is common practice when transplanting mature palms to extend a temporary sprinkler to the growing top to keep it moist until the tree takes root.) On *American Journal*, Stephen Hughes of the National Glass Association, interviewed by Ch. 8's Mark Douglas, offered that such stains, caused by the sprinklers' mineral residue accumulating in the glass' somewhat porous coating layer, are not at all uncommon.

In fact, [a somewhat similar image](#) is hiding behind a cluster of tall trees adjacent to the building's west wall. Its gracefully swooping head/hood, like "Mary's," mimics the shape of the palm that largely obscures it. And this "western" image has been interpreted by some as the apparition of an "Eastern"

religious icon -- the Buddha.

Question: If the window stains are the result of natural processes related to the proximity of vegetation and water, how was "Mary" created in the absence of a 30-foot-tall palm tree adjacent to her windows? Answer: She wasn't! Within a few days of the story breaking, the *Times* published a [Florida Department of Transportation photograph](#) clearly showing the image to be present in 1994! Well, "clearly" may not be the best choice of words, since palm trees, one almost exactly "Mary's" height (and since removed), partially obscure the otherwise easily recognizable image. Pat Johnson (a self-described "good Catholic boy") from City Glass & Mirror produced similar iridescent images for Ch. 44 by mixing oil and water on glass, and suggested that the oil in "Mary's" case may have come from the palms. Guss noted something else interesting, and perhaps pertinent -- Mary's next-door neighbor, directly facing her side of the building, happens to be a car wash with open bays. Perhaps the overspray of suds and wax represents another contributor to the coloration effect.

It didn't take long for the throngs of faithful to turn a ledge along the building's south wall into an altar, leaving behind candles, flowers, fruit, beads, and other offerings to the holy mother, as well as handwritten expressions of faith and pleadings for healing. More than \$30,000 has been collected in a lockbox, and is being donated to a local children's hospital. While there always seems to be a steady stream of faithful coming and going, groups of worshipers stop to pray and sing. The building's owner, who stated on TV his view that the phenomenon is "a blessing and celebration of Christ's birth and a special blessing to His mother," has no plans to restrict the use of his parking lot as a shrine. Just off the building's grounds, vendors hawk "Mary apparition" T-shirts, photos, and other souvenirs.

A team of Clearwater officials, dubbed the "Miracle Management Task Force," is thrashing through the attendant public safety issues. The city has spent over \$40,000 so far for crowd control (one night, Guss counted 18 police vehicles, including a mobile command center), and a new traffic signal is being installed to ease the police's burden. Police have also had to douse a small fire at the "altar," and several people (including one officer) have suffered minor burns from candles. But the city has at least found one way to save a few dollars -- the row of eight portable toilets is being removed.

Reporter Mark Douglas told me that the *Today Show* had been prepared to interview him one morning during its coverage of the story. However, when he was asked by the producer if he believed in the "miracle," he answered "No," and was then advised that the show would instead find someone with a more "positive" viewpoint. This was probably the morning that *Today* instead interviewed the building's owner, Mr. Krizmanich.

And despite the Catholic diocese's cautionary admonitions, local clergy's expressions of downright skepticism, and its own TV staff's reporting that the naturally produced stain has actually been present for years, Ch. 28 proceeded to run the following 30-second spot multiple times per day throughout the holiday season -- including during its newscasts. (Note: U.S. 19 in Clearwater is the northern extension of St. Petersburg's 34th Street):

[Narrator]: It's our own "Miracle on 34th Street." Just before Christmas, a vision of Virgin Mary appeared in Tampa Bay.

[Woman spectator]: Mary is here, and she picked Clearwater, and she picked it for a reason.

[Narrator]: Thousands of people came from miles around to see it with their own eyes. Some came to pray. Some came to be touched. Some came to be healed. But most came to believe.

[Fades to stations's motto]: Working hard to be your favorite. 28 Tampa Bay News -- WFTS

When I called 28 News Managing Editor David Mays to ask why he was airing a promo whose misinformation only served to inflame the very passions that Catholic officials, and his own reporters, were attempting to defuse, he rejected my "interpretation." After offering me an "apology" for my "upset," he then asked what I would like him to do. I would have hoped that he might have figured that out without having to pose the question. Needless to say, the spot continued to air.

And the faithful, and curious, continue to flock to the side of a Clearwater loan office to contemplate, if not a wondrous apparition of Mother Mary, at least a wonderfully enticing manifestation of Mother Nature.

[Notes: A version of this report appears in the Spring 1997 issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine. For later updates on this story, [see these listings](#).]

Book Review

by Terry A. Smiljanich

FROM LUCY TO LANGUAGE. By Donald Johanson and Blake Edgar. Principal photography by David Brill. Simon & Schuster. 272 pages. \$50.

Mention the word "evolution" and you are certain to generate conversation and controversy. What causes this continued resistance to a central scientific principle that is overwhelmingly supported by consistent evidence from biology and other sciences? Surely people are not getting worked up about the evolution of molluscs over the years?

No, it has always been and will continue to be human evolution that many people outside the scientific community find difficult to accept. Humans are special, aren't they, immune from the mechanical processes of other species? We could not share common ancestors with apes, for then, how could we be in league with the angels?

Charles Darwin knew that human evolution would pose the greatest obstacle to the acceptance of his theories, and he devoted his second book, *The Descent of Man*, to this topic. He argued that humans could claim no past exemption from the inexorable forces of natural selection, and he boldly predicted that, given our obvious affinity with apes, our remote ancestors probably came out of Africa.

He was dead right. In 1924, Raymond Dart examined a fossil skull of an ape-like creature excavated from a quarry in Taung, South Africa, and announced the discovery of a pre-human species, *Australopithecus africanus* ("southern ape of Africa"). Subsequent evidence showed this skull of an

immature primate to be more than two million years old. The "Taung child" became just the first in a cascading series of discoveries of pre-human fossils from Africa, particularly in the Rift Valley of central East Africa, where rips in the Earth's crust revealed long-buried bones. Louis Leakey and his remarkable family uncovered evidence of a variety of pre-human species, termed "missing links" by the press and "hominids" by the scientists, all pointing to the evolution of humans stretching over three million years in Africa.

One of the most dramatic discoveries in this burgeoning field of paleoanthropology was made by Donald Johanson in 1974 in the Afar region of Ethiopia, where he discovered a relatively complete skeleton of a female hominid. Named "Lucy" after a Beatles song, she turned out to be slightly over three million years old. Although ape-like in appearance, with a small brain and protruding face, she walked upright on her legs, immediately distinguishing herself from other primates and earning her a separate species designation, *Australopithecus afarensis*.

Now, the discoverer of "Lucy" has collaborated on the best book yet about the pre-history of humans. *From Lucy to Language*, by Johanson and science writer Blake Edgar, is a comprehensive survey of what we know about human evolution and our remote ancestors. Although scientifically precise in its detail, it is accessible to all readers willing to share in the excitement of scientific investigation, a subject too much ignored in our current MTV culture. One can only marvel at the ingenuity and technical prowess of investigators who can read pages of details in these ancient bones.

Exactly how we evolved over the past five million years (the time when the molecular evidence indicates pre-humans parted ways with pre-apes) is, of course, not known. Indeed, a good part of paleoanthropology is taken up with healthy controversy, explored fully in this book. Donald Johanson and Richard Leakey, for example, continue to disagree over the role played by "Lucy" in our past, and the naming of some ancestral species is still disputed. Pseudoscientific "creationists" see weakness and uncertainty in such controversies, but such disputes in fact emphasize the ongoing human endeavor that science has always been. Dogmatism is a vice of pseudoscience, not science.

In addition to reviewing the fossil evidence itself, Johanson and Edgar explore a full panoply of issues, including theories of human migration out of Africa, what we know of our ancestors' society, customs, and culture, and an examination of Neanderthal Man (a "cousin" rather than an ancestor). Many will be distressed to learn that cannibalism is a part of our past, and that pre-humans were not noble hunters stalking the African savanna, but could well have been scavengers cleaning up the mess left over by lions and hyenas. Still, there is something stirring about the story of a primate whose brain evolved rapidly in the past million years, and whose stone tools have become surgical instruments and space shuttles.

But the main reason this book stands apart from other books about our prehistory is its second half, "Encountering the Evidence." Here are assembled almost 100 pages of full-scale photographs of the most important hominid finds of the last two centuries, with detailed discussions of each. The large size of the book, which looks like a "coffee table book," is dictated by these photographs, each lovingly revealing in excruciating detail the seminal fossils of our past. Photographed against silky black backgrounds, the fossil skulls of *Australopithecus afarensis*, *Homo habilis* ("handy man," known for his crude stone tools), and the other species leading up to *Homo sapiens* (us) all seem to take on a three-dimensional quality. This is as close as most of us will ever come to "touching" the actual fossils of individuals who lived 100,000 generations ago.

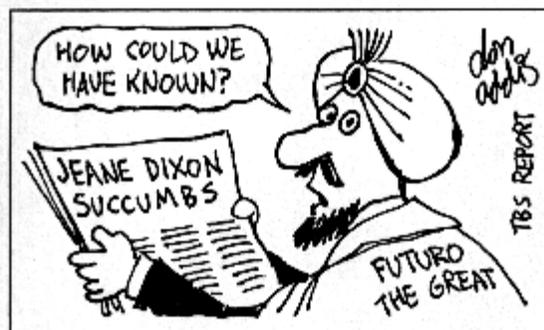
Put your hand over the handprint of an artist who drew on cave walls more than 27,000 years ago, place your foot over the footprint of a "Lucy" striding across volcanic ash more than three million years ago, stare into the eyes of a young boy who died 1.6 million years ago, and you will never see yourself in quite the same way again.

Creationists often argue that there are no transitional fossils to support the facts of evolution. They obviously haven't taken the time to review the evidence presented in this book. One cannot look from page to page of slowly evolving jaws, teeth, and brain cases and fail to see how humans are intimately connected with the rest of nature in the continuous story of evolution -- perhaps the greatest scientific discovery of all time.

Science does not have all the answers, but it asks the right questions, and shows us that our arrogance is sadly misplaced.

[Note: This review appeared in the January 26 *Tampa Tribune*.]

Snippets



Each new year, CSICOP publishes a Press Release detailing the failures of the nation's tabloid "psychics" during the prior year. A typically dismal record in 1996 appears to be ushering in another, as apparently none of the nation's seers predicted the death of perhaps the most famous of the lot -- Jeane Dixon -- who succumbed to an apparent heart attack on January 25.

(*St. Petersburg Times*, Jan. 26 & 27)

The Discovery Channel plans to begin airing a weekly half-hour newscast devoted solely to science. Produced by ABC-TV News, this will be the only prime-time program of its type. Watch closely for it beginning in April, in case the show disappears into the black hole of low ratings.

(*St. Petersburg Times*, Oct. 10)

"In the Middle Ages, priests were medicine men. Now, at the end of the 20th century, it seems that doctors are discovering religion." So began an article about a meeting at Harvard Medical School on Spirituality and Healing in Medicine. "Ninety-nine percent of the [family] physicians surveyed recognize that belief can heal," said Dr. Herbert Benson, author and researcher at Harvard's Mind-Body Medical Institute. Even the relative skeptic in the bunch, Dr. Dale Matthews of Georgetown University's School of Medicine, who noted that "people with a strong religious commitment are less likely to . . . engage in [unhealthful] behavior," regularly prays with his patients. If this trend continues, I wonder how long it will be before doctors' office hours are restricted to Sunday mornings.

(Knight-Ridder via *Tampa Tribune*, Dec. 16)

Letters to the Editor / Readers' Forum

Editor:

Received the latest issue of your newsletter. Wanted to let you know that it *was* Channel 10 -- my story, actually -- that revealed the recent Wesley Chapel "Weeping Icon" claims to be false (see p. 3 last issue).

Lisa Foronda
WTSP-TV 10 News

Return to [TBS Report Online](#)

Copyright (c) 1997 by Tampa Bay Skeptics.
