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Passion for creation

Five artists answer God's call to serve with sacred images

By PATRICIA FENING GAYES

In 1999, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to the spiritual artists of the world, addressed to all who are "passionately dedicated to the search for new 'epiphanies' of beauty." In it, he reminded artists of the first creator, who molded and breathed life into the clay that became us.

Spiritual artists breathe life into our spirituality. to gaze at a painting or sculpture and catch the artist's epiphany of beauty is to know the touch of the divine.

"All artists are mystics in some way," said Franciscan Br. Robert Lenz, an artist best known for his contemporary icons. "Our art keeps us in touch with the other world. Through our art, we are expressing what we've seen, so others can also see this vision."

In other words, our spiritual artists are our treasure. The United States is blessed with an abundance of this treasure. These are the stories of some of the nation's finest artistic mystics.



Dan Paulos shows his silhouette titled "Our Lady, Servant."

Dan Paulos

Dan Paulos was born in 1949 to a large Greek-Italian family in Iowa. As a young boy in Catholic school, he became intrigued by the artistic cuttings of his teacher, Dominican Sr. Mary Jean Dorcy. He followed her technique of designing and cutting out silhouettes. At her prodding, Paulos learned the art of serigraphy and began producing hand-pulled serigraphs of her favorite silhouettes, as well as his own. A serigraph is a print made by the silk-screen process.

"Quality religious artists are as scarce as hens' teeth," Dorcy often reminded him. Her persistence drove Paulos to restrict his paper-cuttings to spiritual imagery, concentrating mostly on the healing power of motherhood. "I think the role of the Catholic artist may be, in a quiet way, to convert a person, not so much to Catholicism, but to love of God and his mother," he said.

This devotion to Mary is evident in his many Madonna serigraphs, including several Native American Madonnas. In addition, his favorite saints include Bernadette, Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth Seton. Although much of Paulos' work is serigraphy, he also loves to sculpt, and his sculptures include one of St. Bernadette.

Paulos, who lives in Albuquerque, N.M., says he is married to his career. "I work from when I get up until I go to bed. God has been good to me, and has given me very good projects on which to work." About 90 percent of Dan's original cuttings have been gifts to museums, churches and friends in Ireland, Chile, El Salvador, Germany, France and Canada.

To encourage other spiritual artists, Paulos started the St. Bernadette Institute of Sacred Art in 1993, which maintains a directory of artists who create sacred art, as well as a variety of other services including production of traveling art exhibits and spiritual documentaries.

“Sadly and realistically speaking, most artists of the holy world are forced to work two and even three secular jobs in order to suffice,” Paulos wrote in describing the purpose of the institute. “Still, they find the spiritual and physical stamina to create works of power and beauty -- even through times of mental exhaustion. This is where secular artists can be separated from sacred artists. This is where the graces of the ‘vocation’ enter in. A vocation to the profession of sacred artistry is a direct invitation, a calling: One hears the voice of God beckoning to serve.”



"Our Unique Children" by Sr. Mary Southard

Mary Southard

For Sister of St. Joseph Mary Southard, art has been an integral part of her spiritual journey. “Making art is my way of participating in the Great Work for the healing and unfolding of the world in our time,” she said.

This is an understanding that has grown with her. As a new sister, Southard set about the business of responding to the needs of the world -- educating, justice work, caring for others. As her conditioning taught her, art as something to do after the “work” was done -- not as the work itself.

It was not until she reached a point of burnout in her professional life that she realized that art was in fact her true work, her ministry.

During this period of burnout, she said, “my spiritual director told me to put everything else aside to make at least one painting over the Easter holiday. I began painting with the very dark colors of my soul, which intuited that something was wrong somewhere, and into the darkness burst a great ball of light! Something shifted inside me.”

Soon after, she made a series of paintings for an assignment in a class about the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. As she painted, she said, an image of Jesus took deep roots within her. She referred to a passage in John 12: 24: Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.

“Those paintings were like painting my own journey, from dying to life, giving birth to something new by dying like a seed planted,” she explained. In the late 1970s, Southard began to study the relationship between art and spirituality, “working with images, dreams, prayers, becoming familiar with my symbolic language, painting from my heart,” she said.

At around the same time, she made a calendar as a Christmas gift for her brother, with a picture hand-painted for each month and a message handwritten for each day. Thus was the seed planted that eventually became the Ministry of the Arts, a full-time project of 35 sisters and lay persons, as well as numerous volunteers. The Ministry of the Arts uses Southard’s paintings and sculpture, as well as works from a growing number of other artists, for a wide array of gift items sold through their catalog and gift shop in LaGrange, Ill.

In the early 1980s, reading works by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, she began to realize that as participants in the magnificent, evolutionary process of the universe, “it is our nature to be creative beings,” she said.

“Self-expression is the primary sacrament of the universe. The universe is God’s self-expression, and we are part of that,” Southard said. “This worldview rediscovers the divine at the heart of creation and within each being.”

In an adult spirituality class at Loyola University and in a retreat she offers on painting as a way of praying, Southard shares her passion that “we remember who we are -- humans, deeply and lavishly loved by our creator.”

Len Sroka

Len Sroka, photo-illustrator and poet, has been “a working stiff all my life. With a wife and four children, I had to make a living,” he said. Throughout his 40-year career with Kodak in Rochester, N.Y., and with



A photo meditation created by Len Sroka

other corporations, he also has pursued his own version of spiritual art - using photography.

“I started off as a writer, then discovered the camera, then the darkroom, then the computer,” Sroka said. His art uses layer upon layer of images or fractions of images, employing special effects. Sroka usually combines these pictures with meditations, either his own writing or quotes of others.

His most recent book is *Henri Nouwen Illuminated*, a combination of Sroka’s contemporary and powerful images with Nouwen’s forceful words. “Henri Nouwen is a sort of spiritual older brother to me,” Sroka said. “I have everything of his and have read and reread it all. Suddenly, I had a need to visualize it.”

Sroka maintains a Web site, *Seescapes*, which contains 13 “vision quests,” featuring a spiritual writer’s reflections along with images by Sroka that easily draw the reader into the insights. He also offers four e-books that can be previewed on the Web site and then purchased for a nominal fee. In these books, Sroka writes haiku poetry to accompany his images, which in some cases superimpose a face onto an inanimate object, personifying nature. Each book is quite different -- one quoting the Psalms, another using Karl Rahner’s wisdom. “Karl Rahner’s ideas are fantastic, but his sentences are as long as paragraphs. That is how I started using haiku. It’s nice and short, and gets you started into a reflection.”

His gentle way of sharing his faith is evident in his work. Each image is an invitation to spiritual exploration. “When I am reading, sometimes words just pop out of the black and white, and I know they won’t stay on the page. I have to visualize them,” Sroka said.

During his last years at Kodak, he developed an interest in visually relating science to spirituality, and he collected stock photography from government and public domain sources, particularly on astronomy and Earth sciences.

With several hundred thousand photographs at hand and 10 books roughed in, Sroka said, “I’m set for the next 20 years, if I am able to hang in there that long. It is great to be able to respond to what the Lord is calling me to and then be able to leave it in his hands.”



"Corona Blessed Mother, 2005," an oil painting on linen by Pat Benincasa

Pat Benincasa

As a product of an Italian Catholic family, Pat Benincasa grew up in the midst of crucifixes, saints and many trips to Mass. But it was not until about five years ago that her spirituality embedded itself in her art.

“It never occurred to me that my art would be together with my faith. I was a secular artist for decades, and was doing very well,” Benincasa said. “I have never wanted to be defined as one particular type of artist. After painting for years, I felt it was time for a change. I got rid of every paintbrush and canvas in my studio, and moved to glass.” She started with panels of glass, and realized she did not want to be limited to two dimensions in her art. She began to create three-dimensional stained glass, the first one being the seven-ton “The Falling Water Skylight” in St. Paul’s Minnesota Judicial Building.

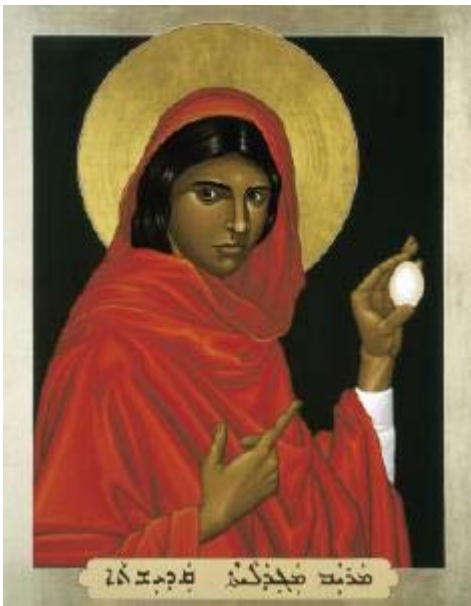
It was working with glass and light that merged her faith with her art. “The light dislodged something in me, showed me that something was missing, that there was an emptiness in me like the emptiness reflected in the glass,” Benincasa said. She left a tenured job as an art teacher to become an artist in residence at a Catholic high school, at the same time shifting her art to sacred topics.

“Talking faith is one thing, but living it is something else,” she said, and she admits that the transition was somewhat scary. “Now Noah -- here’s a guy with faith. God tells him to leave his friends, build an ark, the guy just does it. That’s the proof in the pudding. He left everything he knew and put himself in God’s hands.” Not surprisingly, her next three-dimensional stained glass sculpture was “Noah Window,” on display at her studio in St. Paul.

Benincasa grew up loving the saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary. “They were always in trouble, it seems, and I could relate to that. I was always in trouble -- just had ants in my pants,” she said. “Often, saints don’t want to do things, but they do. It amazes me, their trust in Jesus, their trust in God. We need these saints.” She exhaustively researches a saint before painting.

She has a vast array of wood-sculpted crucifixes, and she also created the three-dimensional “Redemption Window,” with a stained glass cross perched on top of limestone boulders at Hill-Murray Chapel in Maplewood, Minn.

“I have been blessed with abundance since I have begun to work with sacred art. Living by faith, making art by faith, turns you inside out. By going to sacred art, I had carte blanche to utilize any material that best embodies Spirit,” said Benincasa. “It’s like a duet. You do your part, and all of heaven does their part.”



An icon of Mary Magdalene by
Br. Robert Lentz

Robert Lentz

Life has not always been simple for this Franciscan friar. “If you are an artist, you have a burning need to express your art. The art is at the core of my prayer and my entire spiritual life. It is impossible to leave it behind,” Robert Lentz explained. “It would be like ripping being a woman or a man out of you.”

And yet, as a 17-year-old lay brother, this was the situation Lentz faced. Born in 1946 in rural Colorado to a family that had emigrated from czarist Russia, Lentz had engaged in the visual arts from earliest childhood. He joined the Cincinnati Province of the Franciscans, but at that time, the order did not recognize art as a ministry. He explored other religious orders, looking for a home, and finally became a hermit, following the rule of the Secular Franciscans, creating his art in the world.

“Two years ago, the man who became our provincial saw a place in our order for an artist, and I rejoined” Lentz said. “I have been a Franciscan all my life. Now, as an old man, it is my joy once again to wear the habit and be in vows as a friar.”

Lentz’s innovative icons are known throughout the world. He is a member of the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, currently stationed at All Saints Church in Houston, while creating 15 large images that will fill the reredos behind the altar. He also writes and teaches workshops on art and spirituality throughout the country. His day begins and ends with several hours of contemplative prayer.

His icons reflect his experiences among the poor in this country and Latin America, as well as revealing his Franciscan and Russian roots. They are filled with bright colors and often depict contemporary subjects. While always striving to remain true to the essence of Byzantine iconography, he also tries to speak to the church of the 21st century.

“Pope Benedict XVI said that ‘the only effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely: the saints the church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb,’ ” said the Franciscan friar. “God draws us to himself through beauty. The church has always used beauty in her effort to present the divine mysteries. There must, then, be room for artists in the church and in our religious orders.”

[Patricia Fening Gayes is a freelance journalist and poet.](#)

Related Web sites

Dan Paulos
www.nmia.com/~paulos

Pat Benincasa
www.patbenincasa-art.com

Ministry of the Arts
www.motagifts.com

Trinity Stores (for the art of Robert Lentz)
www.trinitystores.com

Seescapes
seescapes.com

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