

The Spirit & the brush

Artist develops spiritual paintings, liturgical art

By Renée St. Martin Wizeman

For many of us, our spiritual development begins slowly, often without our realization that the tentative steps we take today will be momentous in our faith journey.

For St. Mary Catholic Community parishioner Linda McCray, the past three years have marked an amazing journey into the heart of her spirituality and her art. And this journey began with those tentative steps.

Already an accomplished painter and commercial artist, McCray would soon enter the graduate program at the University of Montana-Missoula to earn a Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Drawing. It was about this time that her interest in spiritual painting took form.

"The first departure point came when a friend asked me what I was painting these days. For some reason the words a Heaven and Earth Series popped out of my mouth. These words sparked a chain of new concepts," she explained in a recent interview.

PAINTINGS, PROCESS EVOLVE

In the three years she has spent working toward her degree, McCray has created over 65 spiritual paintings, from her first series entitled Peace to recent paintings featured in Rebirth, an art show currently at Holy Family+Pope John XXIII Parish in Missoula.

"At first, I was thinking more about the painting itself, and now it's evolved where I'm thinking more about the spirituality I'm painting," McCray said.

A little over a year ago, one of her art history professors, Dr. H. Rafael Chacón, invited her to show her art in the University Congregational Church in Missoula. This sparked her interest in liturgical art. "I was deeply moved by the way the church environment completed my paintings. This was the beginning of my desire to create visible forms of invisible grace to serve communities of faith," she said.

Her current show at Holy Family+Pope John XXIII Parish began April 15 and will continue through Aug.

15. The art show symbolically relates to the Easter season. McCray said it was fascinating to see which paintings Father Ed Hislop, pastor of the church and curator of the show, chose, as well as how he displayed them.

In her thesis, McCray explained her ambition for viewers: "My view is from the Roman Catholic perspective, but it is my goal to bring universal spirituality to light. I use Catholic language to talk about primary concepts because that is my language. My paintings have specific religious meaning to me. However, I hope that they lend themselves to universal spiritual interpretations."

ABSTRACT ART, ABSTRACT ELEMENTS

McCray's use of different materials and techniques are important components of her spiritual painting. "I use abstraction and symbolism for my translation. For example, light and dark are abstract elements abounding with symbolism. More often than not, I apply paint by other means than the brush. I feel more connected with the painting when I am laying my hands on it."

"I use abstract elements, process and materials symbolically. The triptych format has a long-standing tradition of symbolizing the Trinity. The Catholic tradition is rich with color symbolism. I paint with pure colors in areas to symbolize purity. I use the process of applying stains of paint to symbolize sin, as the latter are often referred to as stains on the soul," she explained. She has also incorporated plaster to create rough texture, to symbolize rugged dark times, and sand from Jerusalem, transforming her paintings into "relics."

McCray emphasized the historical role and importance of art in teaching the Christian story. "I very much believe in what Pope John Paul II had to say about art - 'Art has a unique capacity to take one or another facet of the message and translate it into colors, shapes and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look or listen.'"¹

MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

She hopes to eventually create site-specific liturgical art. "In commercial work, you identify others' needs; I hope to take that experience into working with communities of faith, in terms of what their mission is, what their goals are, what would mean the most to them, and mix that with Scripture, theology and reflections to create art especially for them."

McCray would like to loan her paintings out to different churches at Easter. "It's very rewarding to see them in churches," she noted.

FAITH JOURNEY CONTINUES

While creating works to inspire others in their spiritual development, McCray has also fostered her own development.

"For as long as I can remember, I have had a strong belief in God. On a very personal level, I devote the beginning of my painting time to reading and prayer. The study of religious and spiritual art, Catholicism and other world religions has enriched my spiritual life. For me the quietness of painting is meditative. My reflections are deeper when I slow down and paint. It is no wonder that there has been a connection between the spiritual and art throughout history."

"It's been a faith journey. The two parts of my life I'd like to spend more time on are faith and art. This has given me more time to spend on my spirituality because it is so integrated in the painting."

More information on Linda McCray's art is available on her Web site MontanaDesignsUnlimited.com

The Rebirth art show will be on display at Holy Family+Pope John XXIII Parish in Missoula through Aug. 15.

¹ *Pope John Paul II, Letter of His Holiness to Artists, Vatican, April 4, 1999.*



Upper left: These three paintings hang behind the sacred oils at Holy Family+Pope John XXIII Parish in Missoula. From left, they are titled *To Form Anew XIX*, *To Form Anew XVI*, and *Parting*.

Upper right: the artist, Linda McCray.

Above: *Light from Light* is a triptych measuring 6 feet wide by 9.5 feet deep. The painting has blessed palms to symbolize resurrection and a ray of light to symbolize grace. McCray's canvases are waved wood panels, with rough edges. "I hope these complicated edges slow down the viewer's eyes and invite deeper contemplation. The ragged edges convey a sense that they are a part of something much larger. They also create a cloud-like shape that I find reminiscent of several biblical references to God's appearing in a cloud."



Above: This painting, *Rebirth*, is on display over the baptismal font at Holy Family+Pope John XXIII Parish in Missoula. Pastor and show curator Father Ed Hislop commented "Artwork is integral, not incidental, to worship." (Linda McCray photos)