Jan Oliver-Schultz: Rediscovering Mary

University of Dayton. Marian Library

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Rediscovering Mary

Jan Oliver-Schultz
But it is more than that. It is about the personal journey of Jan herself. It is about the quest of oneself, the retrieval of one's past, and the exploration of a new and bright future. All of this comes together, takes color and form, in the many facets of Mary's life, her beauty and compassion. Nothing is left out, neither her joy nor her suffering; neither the portrait of her in the Bible nor the vibrant tradition of Nuestra Señora of the Southwest.

What is this rediscovery of Mary all about? Where did it lead Jan?

It’s about walking forward in faith. It’s about learning to have a compassionate heart. It’s about being at peace. It’s about nurturing life. It’s about learning and growing and helping others. It’s about God’s love!
Here is Jan Oliver-Schutz's journey in her own words, a journey which led to the painted festival in praise of Our Lady donated by the artist to the Marian Library in 2009. This treasured gift has been admired by many visitors to the University of Dayton campus. These paintings convey a joyful message: a new look at Mary, and a new look at life in her presence.

IN SEARCH OF MARY

I moved to Southern Colorado in 2003. Although Pueblo, Colorado sits on the Colorado side of the state line, this town – seated in a high desert plain just east of the snow capped Sangre De Cristo (Blood of Christ) mountain range, is more a part of New Mexican culture than the rest of Colorado.

In fact, my home, which sits on a bluff above the Arkansas River, is truly on the Mexico side of what once was the United States-Mexican border. Here, there is a blend of peoples: Mexican, Native American, and Northern Europeans including
Italian, Polish, Czech, and Russian – all called “Anglos” here in the Southwest. After almost 200 years of living in community, many of the faces cannot be readily identified as “this or that” and for the most part we celebrate each and every culture with equal joy.

At the confluence of three rivers, the Santa Fe Trail once ran through town, later mining, and then the railroad and steel industry made this town a melting pot of people who came with dreams of making a better life for themselves and their families. Still, although they come from many places, many now share in blended traditions that reflect elements of Hispanic, Anglo, and Pueblo Indian culture.

Out in dusty fields, old adobes return to the earth, hornos (outside adobe ovens used to bake bread) are still used and the Chili Harvest and Festival is the center of all things Pueblo. Mass is heavily attended on Sunday.

Here, most folks are not rich in terms on monetary values, but rather many share in a different kind of wealth: faith. Although not all attend church, in the background of all things is faith and everywhere you see Mary.

DOWN A DUSTY ROAD

In dusty yards amongst sagebrush and cactus, I saw her standing surrounded by plastic flowers in special shrines. On candles, her image glowed back at me. On flags that read “Viva Guadalupe,” her image waved at me. I did not understand. Who was this image of a woman looking back at me? What did she represent to those who pressed her image in every corner of their lives? I wondered. I was curious. Quietly, sweetly, she called out to my soul. I only knew of the Mary who gave birth in a manger and the Mary at the cross.
But there had not been much said about her in my childhood church, nor in the Assembly of God I attended as a teen, or in my conservative, Baptist, one-room high school. She was a good woman for sure, but not the essential presence of a woman these people knew.

I wonder, if I was told the whole story. Certainly throughout history – at least in my life day to day – I knew women didn’t always get the credit they deserved. I began to study. What had I missed? Was there more to this story? Why was she so beloved to so many?

A LONG WALK HOME

As I think back about where this journey began, I suppose it began in many places, really. In my childhood home, where I marveled each Christmas at the manger scene that my mother unwrapped and displayed each year with the greatest of care. I spent hours arranging and then rearranging the little animals, the Wise Men, picking up and admiring Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus.

Later, Mary came to life in the luminous stained glass windows of my Grandmother’s church and also in the delicate folk art paintings that decorate the walls and ceilings of the “Painted Churches” of central Texas. From the time when I was small, images of Mary and the Holy Family crept into my imagination and took hold of my heart. Sometimes in my life they were ignored, allowed to gather dust, and put on a back shelf of my mind. But like family heirlooms, I always knew they were there. Later, after I met my husband, we began to travel all over the Southwest and through Latin America. In trips to Costa Rica and Mexico, we explored dusty roads, old churches, and cemeteries. We rode buses down roads not always suitable for vehicles, and sought out my constant
photographic obsession: statues of Mary and of angels.

STARTING TO PAINT

I started to paint one night several years ago. Of my first three paintings, the first was a painting of a house with windows swung wide open, wind blowing the curtains, the sun rising boldly behind it. Symbolic of the passion I felt within, this painting represented the opening that was being created in me to begin to paint. The second painting was symbolic of Christ’s crucifixion, a scarecrow alone in a field. Finally, my third painting was my first painting of Mary. She peered out at me with deeply serene eyes carrying the Christ Child upon her back. Her gaze gave me confidence that “I can do this” – that she wanted me to do this, and so I entered the painting in a contest. I won first prize. Years later, I continue to paint Mary. Now my painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe smiles gently back at me on the cover of a magazine of Spanish Colonial art and so many others have found a special place in the homes of devoted collectors. I was thrilled to be invited by the Marian Library to paint 30 new works (the majority of Mary) for an exhibition in 2009. My excitement was tangible yet mixed with a little anxiety. It was to be a large and very focused assignment with great spiritual significance for me. I asked myself: How can I paint these new paintings of Mary such that each will be a new gift to the world? How will I show something new I have learned from her and yet present her in such a way as to honor tradition? I wondered, am I worthy? I wanted so much to honor her. I would find the answers to these and many more questions as I painted.
Created for the exhibit:

Jan Oliver-Schultz
The Fairest of All
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