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Henry Setter: An Artist's Meditation on Song of Songs

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HENRY SETTER

AN ARTIST'S MEDITATION ON THE

SONG of SONGS

THE SEASONS OF LOVE



WE WILL FOLLOW YOU EAGERLY

EXHIBIT GUIDE

This guide was written by Fr. Johann Roten, S.M.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

HENRY SETTER

(1929–2009)

While recuperating from surgery in 1973, Setter illustrated the Song of Songs in a total of 78 ink drawings, combining image and biblical text. If the calligraphed scripture text follows the rich and measured line of Gothic classics, the illustrations in turn reveal some of the spontaneous freedom and loving irreverence of the 1970s. Setter's drawings are joyfully down-to-earth. They are a tribute to love and love's power, an artistic rendering of what moves and matures the world – a conviction dear to Teilhard de Chardin, the guru of Setter's younger years.



A native of Cincinnati, Setter received his education at Purcell High School and the University of Dayton. He obtained a MA in fine arts from the University of Georgia. He was a teacher of drawing, sculpture and art history at the University of West Georgia from 1977–2000.

Setter had executed numerous art commissions in the United States and in Europe. His watercolors, mosaics and sculptures are found in public collections and private homes. His wood block prints and sculptures have received awards in juried exhibitions. One of his wooden sculptures, entitled “Seat of Wisdom,” is part of this exhibit.

ABOUT THE EXHIBIT

SONG of SONGS

Official and Popular

The *Song of Songs* is a canonical (official) book of Holy Scripture. It is one of the biblical books most commented upon.

The Song of Songs

This book contains the song of *all* songs. The title expresses a superlative. This song is the song *par excellence*, a love song, *the* love song. The love celebrated in this book is the archetypal force which determines human life and all of creation. It is the love which goes like a red thread through all the books of the Bible.

The Song of Solomon

Called also *Song of Solomon*, or *Canticle of Canticles*, the *Song of Songs* has been attributed to King Solomon, known for his outstanding wisdom. He is the male character mentioned in the Song. The feminine counterpart, the bride, is called *Shulamit* (7:1).

Love – a “many splendored thing”

The allegorical character of the *Song of Songs* has led to the interpretation of the many facets of love. It describes human love between a man and a woman, including its erotic dimension. However, from the beginning, the book was read as an allegory between Yahwe and Israel. The Christian reading saw Christ as the groom and in the bride his Church or the individual soul.

The Marian Significance

Rupert of Deutz (1075–c. 1129) was the first writer to identify the bride of the *Song of Songs* with the Virgin Mary. She is exalted by her Son and the angels. “What they praise,” says Rupert, “is your simplicity, purity, innocence, doctrine, modesty, humility, integrity of mind and body...” (In Cant. 4, 1–6, CCL 26, 69–70)

The Marian Passages

Marian interpretations of the *Song of Songs* concentrate on chapters 2 (verses 1-14) and 4 (4:6–7; 9; 12–15). Chapter 2 expresses the desire and devotion of the “Lily of the Valley” for her bridegroom, and his love for her. The coming of the bridegroom is a symbol of new life and resurrection. In chapter 4, Jesus, the lover, proclaims Mary’s immaculate beauty (verses 6–7). Mary’s loving response (verse 9) fills the heart of her lover with joy. Her whole being is turned toward God as expressed in the metaphors of the “garden locked” and the “fountain sealed.”

The Actors, the Cast

Bride and bridegroom are the main actors of the *Song of Songs*. The whole book consists of a dialogue between these two actors. There is a third party in the cast, the *Daughters of Jerusalem*. They form the choir echoing and amplifying the sentiments of the two lovers.

The Flow and Cadence of Love

The *Song of Songs* does not present us with a set narrative structure. Its organization follows the flow and cadence of the dialogue between the two lovers: its language of endearment and yearning, the ever inventive repetitions, and the declarations of mutual admiration and devotion.

The exhibit follows the language of love.

THE SEASONS OF LOVE

This exhibit is based on 40 of Setter's illustrations of the *Song of Songs*. It follows the movement of love as expressed in the book, from *Love's Desire* to *True Love and Life Together*. The 10 segments describe the progressive maturing of love, when *eros* becomes *agape*. Flower becomes fruit symbolized in the description of the *seasons*.

1. LOVE'S DESIRE (I, 1-4)

The bride gives voice to love's desire. Love is more delightful than wine; it is a spreading perfume. Love draws her and brings her to the king's chambers. The daughters of Jerusalem exult and follow the bride.

2. LOVE'S BOAST (I, 5-6)

The bride boasts of her beauty, a lovely and dark beauty. Dark because close to nature (sun) and close to God (sheltered in his mystery).

3. LOVE'S INQUIRY (I, 7-8)

Dialogue between bride and bridegroom in a pastoral setting. The bride inquires where her lover pastures his flock. He shows her the way.

4. LOVE'S VISION (I, 9-11)

The bridegroom compares the beauty of his bride to the Pharaoh's chariot, to its rich and majestic appeal and grace. He will cover his beloved with gold and silver.

5. LOVE'S UNION (I, 12-17)

Bride and bridegroom proclaim their love for each other with

metaphors taken from nature (myrrh, cluster of henna, eyes like doves). Their home is made of cedars and cypresses.

6. LOVE'S DELIGHT (II, 1-17)

Bride and bridegroom find highest delight in belonging to each other. Expressing their love with endearing words, they call each other "lily among thorns," and "apple tree among the trees of woods."

7. THE BRIDEGROOM'S REGAL STATE (III, 6-11)

The lover is compared to and portrayed as King Solomon. The daughters of Jerusalem come forth to pay homage and admiration to the king.

8. THE CHARMS OF THE BELOVED (IV, 1-11)

Again the bridegroom sings the beauty of the beloved; and more beautiful is her love than beauty. Here eyes are compared to doves, the cheek is like the half of a pomegranate, the neck like David's tower. The beloved has ravished the heart of the bridegroom.

9. THE GARDEN OF LOVE (IV, 12 - V, 8)

The garden is a metaphor of love's fulfillment. Enclosed, sealed – the garden is filled with choice fruits and a well of water fresh from Lebanon. The bridegroom has come to his garden, and the daughters of Jerusalem invite the lovers: "Eat, friends, drink! Drink freely of love!"

10. TRUE LOVE AND LIFE TOGETHER (VIII, 6-7; VIII, 13-14)

True love is stronger than death, a seal on one's heart. No floods will sweep it away. You who live in the garden of love, let your voice be heard. Such is the wisdom and urgent advice of the *Song of Songs*.

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