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God Bless America

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God Bless America

The Artist

We frequently identify artists with a specific style or medium and thus are surprised and even confused when a given artist is presenting us with a new face and a different artistic vein. This happens to be the case for John Solowianiuk. When he first exhibited with us in 1997, John was the creator of rare woodcarved icons. He now presents us with a different kind of art. Not only a master woodcarver, he surprises us with acrylic paintings and baffles us with his mastery of the collage technique. The theme common to the artistic variety of this exhibit is the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and John's artistic interpretation of it.

John Solowianiuk was born in Poland in 1945. In 1969, he graduated from The University of Copernicus in Torun, Poland with a Master Degree in Fine Arts (painting major). He was a member of the Polish Society of Fine Arts from 1969 until 1981, when it broke up. He was one of the first three members of the "Solidarity" movement in Hajnowka (Eastern Poland) where he lived and worked. Because of his involvement with "Solidarity" he often suffered - twice he was refused a passport and thus was unable to leave Poland. In 1990, when the political situation changed, he finally had his wish and emigrated to the United States. Since 1980, he has specialized mostly in religious art. He is an expert in iconography. While living in Poland, he collaborated with great architects like professor Grygorowicz and made three *iconostases*. For the Ukrainian Orthodox church in Brunswick, Ohio, he designed and made an *iconostasis* and two sculptures, one inside the church (carved in wood) and one outside etched in black granite. For the Belorussian Autocephalic Church in Cleveland, Ohio he made a crucifix and an icon of the Mother of God of Zyroviy. He has realized many artistic projects not only for the American Orthodox Churches, but also for Lebanese, Catholic (Flint, Michigan), and Byzantine Churches (Pittsburgh, PA). John owns a fine art studio "Solo" and collaborates with the Rock of Ages Kotecki Memorials Company, and does etchings in granite (portraits, religious scenes, etc.). Throughout his career, John has received many honors, prizes, and diplomas. Most important are: the 1993-second prize in woodcarving, Cleveland, OH; 1999 - second prize Mariological Society Exhibition; 2002 - first place in Best of Show Exhibit "Prayerful Art Show."

The 9-11 Triptychs



The central part of this exhibit are the two triptychs rendering Solowianiuk's interpretation of the 9-11 tragedy. Both triptychs are acrylic paintings on canvas, with the exception of the central panel of the smaller triptych, which is a painting on a wooden panel.



The first triptych (see left side) highlights the contrast between the promise and expectation of God's blessing for America and the reality of the 9-11 tragedy and horror. Indeed, the American flag and the motto "God Bless America" are omnipresent, but they constitute only the backdrop of the three panels. The foreground is filled with the crucifixion (central panel). The Franciscan Jesus Christ is hanging on a cross of twisted metal salvaged from the ruins of the WTC. The message focuses on the true meaning of "blessing." God's ultimate blessing lies in his redeeming Passion, Death and Resurrection. Humanity is part of this suffering, both as cause and victim.



It is Mary - symbol of liberation (see Statue of Liberty painted on her vestment) - who points to the Cross and to the hope that rests in Christ's salvific action (lit candle). Sharing in the immense suffering of the WTC victims (her tears), she is first of all Our Lady of compassionate presence and consolation (see top left panel). The bottom panel of the triptych shows Mary in a different but complimentary role. She is not only the Mother of Sorrows but also the helper and intercessor with God. Her folded hands suggest prayer, and the radiance of her halo may symbolize the intensity of her spiritual energy.



The second and smaller triptych (see right side) conveys a more moralizing message. It expresses a warning and pinpoints the prize for true freedom. The central panel shows the cracked Liberty Bell hovering over the burnt-out metal structure of the WTC. It is caught in the (cross) beams of God's watchful eye (symbol of the Trinity also present in the central panel of the first triptych) and of the Tablets of the Law, in the hands of Moses, the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. Liberty has a price. It can be upheld only through "fear of God" and a life according to his precepts and the laws of human nature. The two panels have again a Marian character. As in the first triptych she makes hers the immense pain of the victims. She is draped in the flag, she bears the weight of the attacks in her heart and weeps with the inconsolable (bottom panel). The other panel (see top right side) stresses the incompatibility between freedom and terrorism. Mary's gesture is like a silent prayer addressing both God and humanity. She begs for understanding and help. The message is simple. It is a warning against violence (cracked bell) and human hybris (WTC buildings).

The two triptychs are John Solowianiuk's personal homage to the victims of the terrorist attacks of 9-11.

The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments are a fitting complement to the two triptychs. They stress human dignity, respect and justice, and the "Golden Rule" of interpersonal relationships. Above all, they point to the source of human life and dignity, "I am the Lord, your God" (the first panel). The eleven panels are made in collage technique using fabric instead of paper. As for all abstract art, these panels are subject to interpretation within the context of the thematic defined by the artist. Thus, colors and form are the principal vehicles of his message. Intense blues and yellows characterize our relationship with God and its various expressions (see panels 1-5). Torn and twisted shapes indicate disorderly and destructive relationships. Bland and lifeless colors highlight the "culture of death" as expressions in murder, adultery, stealing and lying. The Decalogue is the foundation for justice and peace among people. Keeping the commandments we will be able to avoid all forms of violence.



*I am the Lord
your God*



*You shall have no other gods before
me*



*You shall not make
for yourself an idol*



*You shall not misuse the name of the
Lord*



Remember the Sabbath



*Honor your father
and your mother*



You shall not murder



*You shall not
commit adultery*



You shall not steal



*You shall not give
false testimony*



*You shall not covet
your neighbor's house*

Three Woodcarved Icons

The third part of the exhibit consists of three icons of Mary, Mother of God. Woodcarved icons are one, maybe the most important trademark of John Solowianiuk art.

John Solowianiuk started carving wood at a young age, making animals and toys to trade with playmates. He pursued art in the medium of oil painting, not applying his wood carving talents until 1980 when he was commissioned to paint icons and carve the *iconostasis* (altar screen) for Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in his hometown of Hajnowka, Poland. Although asked only to paint the icons, Mr. Solowianiuk decided to carve one. That first icon started a new career for Mr. Solowianiuk, who revived the Eastern European tradition dating from the twelfth century and established himself as one of the best icon carvers in Europe. Mr. Solowianiuk's tools include a variety of knives, chisels and files. He works in bass wood, dyeing and gilding the carved icons, sometimes leaving unstained areas, revealing the natural beauty of the wood.

Each one of these three icons highlights a special relationship of Jesus and Mary with this world. The icon of Mary called by the artist *Mother of God Coptica* is based on the original icon displayed in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cleveland, Ohio. This icon is reputed to be a "Weeping Madonna," shedding tears over pain and evil in this world, while holding on her lap and offering to the world her Son and Redeemer.

The icon called *Mother of God of Dayton* commemorates the Dayton Peace Accords (1995). If *Maria Coptica* is a *Basilissa* (empress) type of icon, the *Dayton Madonna* in turn belongs to the *Tenderness Madonnas*. Holding tenderly her son with one hand, Mary holds in her other hand a bunch of pansies of different colors, symbolizing the parties present at the peace talks. Her gesture suggests unity among all parties and peace to all people of good will. The peace idea is again stressed in the gesture of the child Jesus who sends forth the dove into a world menaced by a nuclear arsenal (right) and atomic wasteland (left).

The third icon, entitled *Adoration 2*, shows Jesus leaning down from his mother's arm and reaching out to the circular object in the lower right corner representing the Blue Planet Earth. In fact, his gesture may be interpreted as a gesture of blessing. The gesture of affection and blessing of the child Jesus is intensified through the vertical beam descending from Heaven and reaching our planet.

In all three icons we find a counter-balance to the horrors of September 11, 2001. The love of God for this earth and people is both affectionate and of healing quality.



The Adoration 2



Coptic Mother of God



Mother of God of Dayton

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