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## Forum on Marian Art

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## FORUM ON MARIAN ART

*The following are excerpts from a concluding discussion in which those who made presentations were invited to participate in a round table. To begin the discussion, several questions were posed to the panelists.*

### **Barbe Awalt:**

The first question deals with the relation between Marian art and spirituality. I will frame my answer in the context of the New Mexican *santos* and *santeros*, the field which I know best. There is great interest in the *santos* of New Mexico; that is why my husband and I started the periodical *Tradición Revista*. The publicity is helping them to be discovered. They are bought by prestigious galleries, collectors, and those motivated by religious devotion. Some who buy *santos* might not be interested in something more explicitly doctrinal or liturgical. The interest is not limited to Christians.

Why are the *santos* so popular? It may be that they represent some underlying spiritual current. People who have not been to church for many years and have abandoned the religion of their childhood still feel attracted towards the *santos* and are attached to them. Many who have left organized religion still want to have some reminder of the spiritual in their homes and the *santos* serve this purpose. We find that the *santos* reach out and have an ecumenical appeal.

The artists of New Mexico are not independently wealthy, and they always have an eye on the market. One of the things that Charlie Carrillo tells the aspiring *santeros* is that no one will buy an image which shocks—for example, one covered with blood. People hesitate to hang such images in their homes. Perhaps galleries might buy them. People do like images of the Madonna, the angels, the Holy Family—images which reinforce their own values. Thus, the *santero* must pro-

duce something which provides comfort and reassurance. I have found that many like to present a Marian *santa* as a gift; it is something they wish to share with others.

Does Marian art keep up with Marian theology? I don't think the artists themselves are aware of developments in Marian theology. They find themselves within a tradition—trying to relate, maintain, and continue a story of the tradition. In Mexican art, there is a tradition of more than 400 years, so the tradition is very important. The artists draw upon the tradition, and there is no concern to incorporate new aspects into the art. The *santeros* of New Mexico try to present the traditional Christian message, but in a little different way.

One of the speakers asked whether one must be a believing Christian in order to make good Christian art, or whether one must be a practicing Catholic in order to produce Catholic art. Some *santeros*, like Charlie Carrillo, are devout Catholics and that is known by those who purchase their art. Recently, in the Spanish Market, some Mormon artists have displayed their work. What is important is that the artist knows the story, either from his/her own religious background or from a conscious effort to learn the tradition. In the Spanish Market, one is expected to observe the religious tradition; art is criticized if it is not within the tradition. We even have "policemen" whose job it is to assure that all the art at the Spanish Market is within the tradition and that extraneous elements are not introduced.

### **Paul Rhetts:**

In religious art, there are two possibilities: the contemporary art, which tries to interpret the world of today, and the traditional art, which copies art that is 200- or 400-years old, with only slight innovations. The art of New Mexican *santeros* has remained the same for four-hundred years. Whether the art is pleasing or provocative never really enters the artist's mind. The artist is trying to convey a message, tell a story. In New Mexico, there are forty-two different Marian titles with explanatory stories.

Mexican devotional art is essentially a home tradition. Families use this art as a focus for their gathering and their expressions of faith. In New Mexico, art is an important way of

maintaining the faith. Contemporary developments in theology play no role in the production and the perpetuation of Mexican devotional art. Mexican devotional art might be considered a slice of "time arrestment"—displaying the same images and style for the past 400 years.

**Fr. Terence Dempsey, S.J.:**

In my presentation, I tried to show that there are artists who are in dialogue with the past, but who are not slavishly reproducing the past. Though the word "copyist" may be pejorative, it does have a point. The artists who are really dialoguing with the contemporary world are those who are in contact with the past but yet are trying to express that tradition in a contemporary way.

In the current [Mariological Society of America-sponsored] exhibition of Marian arts, it would have been good to establish different categories. There are many large pieces of a liturgical nature—best displayed in a church or place of worship. There are devotional pieces—some are of deeply religious nature; others are playful or amusing. That is why it is so difficult to say which is the best of all the works exhibited.

In the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art in St. Louis, we find that people frequently think that all religious art is liturgical or church art. The museum has some liturgical art, but it is not a liturgical art museum. Liturgical art is commissioned by churches and religious communities. But there are others artists—religious artists—who are producing their own art without any commission from a church or a religious ecclesial community. That is significant. They are, in a sense, taking a chance, going out on a limb. They are working without any commission or patronage from either the art world or the church community.

The art world, unfortunately, is generally hostile to religious art, although they might tolerate it in a playful but not serious way. Some artists do not wish their work to be labeled "religious art," for fear that their reputation in the art world will be jeopardized.

Artists are also concerned that their work be shown in the best environment possible. Before displaying their work, they

ask, "Who else is represented in your museum?" They must trust that the museum will display their work in a favorable way.

I had not thought much about the question of Marian art and spirituality previous to this conference. However, I think that James Rosen is an artist whose work has a spiritual resonance. His work has a certain iconic quality, although you would never confuse it with a Byzantine or Orthodox icon. In one of his works, the image of the Virgin Mary is veiled behind foiled layers. In order to fully experience this art, we have to slow down and quiet ourselves. At one time, I had in my office eight works by James Rosen. After a difficult day, when I went into my office and turned on the lights, the experience of the Communion of Saints surrounding me was a very comforting feeling, one which brought great peace. Steven Heilmer's work has a sense of spirituality, as he presents Mary in new and original ways. In one representation, she is the "rock of ages" embracing Jesus, the "cornerstone." Mary is present from the Annunciation to the Resurrection, and this is a very unusual way of portraying her presence. Such a concept could not be presented in a photographic way. Metaphor must be used.

Can Marian art, should Marian art be pleasing or provocative? Most artists would not find it difficult to produce something which is provocative or shocking to some people. Sometimes we consider a work provocative simply because we are not familiar with it. Generally speaking, when people say "I know what I like," what they are really saying is "I like what I know." There is quite a difference between the two. Artists are presenting us with new ways of seeing reality. The history of art shows that the style of religious art in the West has not been static. There has been an evolution of styles in Christian art—from the early Roman to the Medieval, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque. Each period tries to understand the religious mysteries in visual terms which are appropriate for the time.

Steve Heilmer's *Nativity* is copied from the door of St. Michael's in Hildesheim, Germany. This church has the first great bronze doors since antiquity, and the Nativity scenes are portrayed on three panels. We had pictures of them displayed in the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art. A man from Switzerland who came to view Heilmer's work said, "This has

already been done, it's a copy." But the artist copied it in an extraordinary manner, in a new medium. He never claimed that his work was entirely original. Art always dialogues with the past, but, at the same time, it shows the imprint of the individual artist.

There is a big difference between liturgical art and more private or devotional art. For instance, in the current exhibit at our museum, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt's *May Altar* is not something to put in a church, but it's a wonderful work of art—a celebration of childlike wonder, with rich memories of the past. It has a certain ethnic and cultural appeal, but it is also acceptable in the market. What I find interesting about contemporary religious art is that many artists have moved beyond satire and irony, and have entered into religious engagement. Artists, like Frederick Brown for instance, use different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to produce an image of Mary who is truly a universal Mary. In Frederick Brown's *Mary*, there are oceanic influences and sub-Saharan influences. At Berkeley, there is a wonderful Vietnamese artist, Dinh Q. Le, who combines images of Jesus and the Buddha. One picture contains a photograph of the head of Christ; the large photograph is cut into little strips and woven together. Between the strips, you see the people of Vietnam, fleeing during one of the many evacuations of Saigon. The head of Christ is emerging amid all these pictures of people, and then the two halves of the head of Buddha are coming together. Similarly, he has an image of Mary—*The Pietà*—which I saw recently in Portland, Oregon. He combined a classical portrait from the Netherlands of the *Pietà* with pictures of Vietnamese women trying to save their children during one of the evacuations. The whole continent of Asia has yet to enter our religious consciousness. As world-consciousness increases, we combine images of our own Western past with those of other cultures as a way of speaking about the universality of the Christian message.

What is the contribution of the *via pulchritudinis* to art? I think Fr. Roten gave a good explanation of that yesterday when he said that, "Few people repudiate beauty, when they sense holiness present." When we speak of beauty in art, we are not referring to something which is exterior and cosmetic; rather,

it is a beauty which reflects the spirit. It is not exclusively a visual experience. Many artists can say that their work is something beautiful, because it is talking about something more than a cosmetic veneer.

**Fr. Nicholas Glisson:**

My purpose in coming to this conference was to speak about devotional art, specifically the art of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marian apparitions. I bring a perspective different from that of Frs. Morris and Dempsey, who are treating what might be called "high art."

The first question deals with the contribution of Marian art to spirituality. We live in a corporeal world, although there's been a tendency to evade or spiritualize it. Art—that is, something made from material creation—is necessary for spirituality. Art communicates a message in a specific medium. When there is an apparition which bears fruit in the lives of those who witnessed it, then a representation of the apparition communicates this message and, through such art, the apparition becomes something real for the believer. And it never should be simply an academic theory. Both popular art—even that of the dashboard statue—and the sublime art of churches and religious galleries are essential for us, if we are going to be truly developed persons, living in the world given by God and in which even God takes delight.

Can Marian art be pleasing, or can it be provocative? The answer: it can be both. Art must please us in a sense of drawing us into it. The art that I have in my home, my chapel or study, must have a certain pleasing quality, if it is something which I must live with day in and day out. But at the same time, there is art which challenges me and may force me to grow. I may react against it; I may be engaged by it; I might not want to look at it all the time, but, nevertheless, it is an important part of my experience—a challenge to continue learning and to grow, until the time when I encounter Christ. So, art must be both pleasing and provocative.

There is much talk about liturgical art. The question is asked whether Marian art can be liturgical. The use of art in churches—liturgical art—must conform to specific regulations. The General

Instruction of the Roman Missal, and (in the United States) the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy's *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* indicate that liturgical art must always point to the act of worship. If it points to itself and to something other than the liturgical action, it is not serving the Christian community. The art and, I might add, the music which we have in our churches must be subservient to the central act of worship.

I come from a family of artists; I am the only one in my family who chose not to be a professional artist. My father and my brother were liturgical artists (perhaps they thought that, as a priest, I might be able to direct commissions their way). One of the principal challenges for them in liturgical art was devising art which did not draw attention to itself but to something other. My brother, who at one time was the head of design of Rambusch in New York, found that it required much time to make this transition. He is now with an art company in New York which makes props for stage productions, and his liturgical training has served him well. Theatrical sets and props have to point to the activity which is occurring center-stage rather than to direct attention to themselves.

There is much more freedom in devotional art. Devotional art can be a personal expression of how I relate to an individual at a specific point in time, a never-to-be repeated moment. It could also be something more enduring or universal. It can be something which has a great personal meaning or meaning for the life of the community.

*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* suggests that images in churches be limited to one representation of a saint. Obviously, churches should not be filled with different images of Mary or even of Christ. But we may also become overly severe. Both the noticeable absence or multiplicity of images should be avoided. One image alone may appear isolated; a multiplicity of images within a worship space diminishes the value of all of them.

Does Marian art keep up with theology? Is there a need for new representations of Mary? I don't know if that is the right way of formulating the question. I think Marian art should reflect theology in some way; Marian art interprets and provides



commentary on the doctrine of the Church. Sometimes, popular Marian art is a comment on the way in which the Church appears to be moving. Some examples were given in my presentation yesterday. And that's good, because sometimes we can become ivory-tower types, developing a religion for the professional, not taking into consideration the needs of the people whom we serve. We have some examples of that in the exhibit of Marian art.

The final question here is on the relation of the *via pulchritudinis* to Marian theology. Allow me to give you a type of personal reflection on this issue. Last month, I spent a week at the Marian Library at the University of Dayton; it was a good experience for me. I must honestly say that my devotion to Mary has not been very significant during the time of my priesthood. My less-than-enthusiastic attitude towards Marian devotion may be a reaction to some people who, while I was pastor of a small parish in Florida, wanted to force certain types of devotion on me and the parish. The controversy took some nasty turns; some wished me to violate Church directives on certain issues. Obviously, the Virgin Mary herself was not involved in this controversy, but some of Mary's followers and the tactics they use do not advance their cause. That is personal reaction. Before coming here, I had some apprehension that perhaps I might encounter the same tactics that I experienced earlier in my ministry. I wondered if this group of mariologists was open to different approaches. But, happy to say, I was warmly received here and am happy to see what Marian theology is all about.

You could ask the question, what is the role of Mary in my life? What is the role of Mary in the Church? Allow me to turn that question around and say, what would my life be like if there were no Marian devotion? What would the Church be like if there were not the presence of Mary in the Church? I'm afraid that, since we are still patriarchal, the Church would be very much orientated to justice without love, that we would be interested in making our point and disregarding the views of others, that we would be lacking in the sentiment and the warmth which is very much a part of Catholicism. Mary gives

us all of these qualities. She reflects the Gospel in terms of the warmth, the love, the felicitude, and the sentiment which are necessary for our persons—as humans, as Christians. So at a basic level, I would have to say that my understanding of my relation with Mary has been deeply influenced over the course of the last couple days by my participation in this event.

I believe that one way in which the Church reflects beauty is through the presence of the Virgin Mary. The Church should be a warm, loving, caring institution for the members. Unfortunately, on some issues, and in the name of justice, some people become very angry. It's understandable to be angry in the cause of justice, but I think Mary is the one who can temper that anger which is sometimes present in parts of the Church.

**Fr. Michael Morris, O.P.:**

We need art because we need images. Art can be comforting; art can be challenging. Art can be intellectually stimulating or emotionally cathartic. You cannot limit art to any one type or style of human response: it is universal.

Does Marian art have to keep up with Marian theology? No matter how avant garde an artist may be, some of those insights have been expressed before. One of the questions which I thought might arise here was an appropriate representation for the currently much-discussed possible definition of Mary as Coredemptrix. Is there a representation in art which might picture this title? I think of the representation from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century France known as *Vierge Ouvrante*. These were sculpted images of the pregnant Mary, with panels which opened out, in the form of a triptych. Within the statue were all the figures of salvation history. This image might be an appropriate way to represent that doctrine.

My criteria for judging the current art exhibit would be to choose which pieces I would want to display in the church where I worship or my residence and office. Contrary to what was said previously about *santeros* who thought that images with blood might be unmarketable, I admit that I love bloody images. I purchased an image of a Christ on a crucifix with much blood on it, and I put it in my office in Berkeley. It is

drawing many reactions. My tastes are perhaps different. I like a certain realism in the images of the Savior and holy people. But people have different perceptions of images, and different ways of judging their acceptability.

A related question deals with the context of art. I love Mexican art. I think it beautifully expresses the outlook of a region, but I wonder whether it travels well. How would a Mexican *santo* look in a Gothic or Tudor structure? So the question arises whether art which may have great regional or ethnic attraction can also be universal, that is, have qualities which make it appealing to all.

A related question is the question of style and variety of art. In the current exhibit, we have liturgical art and devotional art. In the latter category, there is the elitist type which attracts academic and museum types, but there is also "Archie Bunker," popular type of art. When these different types of art are put together to compare and judge, it is, in a way, similar to comparing grand opera with vaudeville. To be catholic (universal), art should have some rational appeal, but also some sentimental or emotional appeal. There should be art to satisfy the educated and also those who have not received a formal education. Catholic art should be catholic.

As an art historian, I am aware of the biases of art historians. They make a division between good and bad art. This has been the history of the arts up to the present day. Now, there's a new development in art history: no longer are we speaking of good and bad art, high or low art. Now we begin with the image and ask what type of power does this image impart. David Morgan, of Valparaiso University, focused an entire book on Warner Sallman's image of Christ, one widely reproduced and differently perceived in various Protestant churches. To some, it is considered religious kitsch and an embarrassment to the church. Colleen McDannel has done something similar for Catholic devotional art. Despite the objections of the elite, little religious objects—like glowing crucifixes and dashboard religious statues—convey messages and appeal to some tastes.

The question which no one seems to be studying is why religious art known as kitsch is most popular in devotional circles. You don't see a Caravaggio or Murillo among the "crying

Madonnas" which exude tears. Why could not devotional objects also center on some of the more classical works of art? One possible answer is that classical art has layers of interpretation, whereas the kitsch has an immediate emotional response. One must acquire a taste for some art, or must be gradually introduced to it. Some intellectuals reject as beyond-the-pale art which evokes an immediate "gut" response. Yet those same intellectuals weep when they see the eyes of a baby seal that is destined to be destroyed. The sentimentality which they eschew in the intellectual world is found in another area. That may be the reason that a "low" type of art is so popular a way to convey supernatural occurrences. It doesn't have to be looked at and studied and digested, as some type of high art is.

**Fr. Dempsey:**

I was reminded of a quotation from the art historian Art Shapiro who asks, "Why is it that some people are well-informed and celebrate advances in one field—science, literature, technology—and yet their views in another field are quite elementary and uninformed?" That "other field" is frequently art. One of the things we have tried to do at the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art in St. Louis is to provide explanations for every work of art. To come in and look at modern art is an intimidating experience for many; they are not sure they are going to recognize anything. What can I say or feel about something I don't understand, which I would put to the trash rather than exhibit in a museum? We try to meet people where they are. We're not trying to be an elitist group.

We have lost the common visual vocabulary that was formerly part of our culture. Not only are we a multi-cultural society, but, as Catholics, we cannot even presume that people raised in the Catholic tradition know a great deal about Catholicism. We must admit that there are many individuals—nominally Catholics, nominally Protestants, nominally Jewish—who do not know much about their own religious tradition. At the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, we are trying to show how some of artistic vocabulary terms can be used in new

ways. We had an Islamic artist named Seyed Alavi who labeled as religious art a lead bowl, filled with honey, with the title "*Noli me tangere*." That was all: a lead bowl—beautiful shape—filled with honey. People came in and wondered aloud, "How is this religious art, this bowl of honey on the altar?" We asked, "What does lead suggest?" A base material. "And what do you think about honey—what does Scripture say about honey?" Paradise is the land of milk and honey. The artist was showing the embrace of heaven and earth. With this explanation, the art was no longer an intellectual puzzle, but something people could understand and retain as a message.

Frequently, there is a lack of familiarity with the vocabulary. And within Catholicism, there are many different levels and understandings—some very superficial. In our museum, we have students and staff who greet people as they come in, try to explain some things. Most of the time, people leave rather a little happier than when they came in—leave as friends. But I do believe it is the task of the religious museums to educate. I don't favor the attitude evident at some museums which present an intellectual puzzle that the visitor is expected to solve.

### **Barbe Awalt:**

One of the things we have discovered is that Native Americans and Hispanics are not frequenting museums, despite the fact that we have world-class museums in Taos and Albuquerque and Santa Fe. These museums have excellent exhibits of Indian and Hispanic American culture, very well done. But the people whose art is being exhibited will not go in, because, frankly, they're intimidated by art in a museum. They might be able to understand the kitsch and other phenomena in their own culture; however, when they see a museum, they think they must ask themselves, "How should I understand this?" Frequently, they don't understand it, and so they feel substandard or they feel inferior. Museums and exhibit sites must understand that if they want people to understand the art, they must seek to become more user-friendly.

In response to Fr. Morris' question (whether New Mexican *santos* could be seen in another context): Individual pieces

would not travel well, but we have found that a whole group or show of them do make an impact—even in such a foreign atmosphere as New York City.

**Fr. Dempsey:**

I believe it is also incumbent upon the person making the art to be the teacher, to instruct. Something is missing when another person must intervene to explain to us how we are to understand a work of art. If the artist and the art do not do it, we're going to lose people.