

MARY KATSILOMETES

A face for social justice

BY JANE SALISBURY ■ CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In Mary Katsilometes' small studio at the back of her house in Westmoreland, a wooden icon leans against the wall. It is unfinished, and I find Mary studying it, as she puzzles over a technical problem: In the story of the paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof for Jesus Christ to heal him, how can she show the figures outside and above the house, as well as the people inside?

This icon is one in a triptych of "Christ the Healer" to be installed soon in the chapel of the Catholic Medical Association in Washington, D.C. Mary is an iconographer, one who "writes" icons; sacred depictions of

the lives of the Christian apostles and saints, the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ.

She grew up on a sheep ranch in Idaho, the child of a Greek immigrant father and a Danish Catholic mother. The influences of the Greek and the Roman church inform her work of writing icons for prayer and veneration in churches, chapels and private homes. "I can

teach anyone to write an icon," she tells me. A person of joy, with bright brown eyes and a ready smile, Mary tends to downplay any difficulties in her life, including the broken shoulder from which she is recovering.

Surrounded by her tools, wood, paper and paint, we sit down to talk about her work, and explaining what an icon is.

Mary Katsilometes: Sacred art is ubiquitous across all cultures and generations and people. It is sacred in that it is tied to a religion and a belief in God. In Christianity, we believe that our God has a human face. In the gospel of John it is written that God became man and that man, Jesus, is at the same time the word of God. That is the theology of the icon. This is part of the reason that we say that icons are "written," not painted.

Because of that human face, our God can be depicted. Because he can be depicted, the Mother of God and the Saints can be depicted. And we [Christians] are all trying to base our own images on the image of Christ. It's the Gospel in written form. This idea was codified in the church in the 8th century; the icon was recognized as being on par with the Scripture, that is, the Gospel written in paint and egg on wood, natural materials, in the same way that a book is written on paper and ink or whatever. The icon IS the gospel.

Iconographers do have to be good artists. If an image does not work on the aesthetic level, it will not work on the spiritual level. If it can't be prayed with, it is not a good icon.

Jane Salisbury: How does one learn to be an iconographer?

M.K.: I tell my students: "If they want to learn iconography, stand in front of the icon for 10 years and let it teach you."

It's like Japanese calligraphy. You have to do it for a long time. It really was 10 years before I started getting good. The technical issues are really spiritual ones. "Put your ear on the icon and ask it what it needs from you," I tell them. "You don't need to be the one to tell the icon — it is the image of God and it can tell you."

J.S.: How do you explain the power of an icon?

M.K.: Icons are acts of social justice. There have been terrible events, for example, the war in Iraq or the atrocities carried out in Latin America by people trained at the School of the Americas. I know someone in Juneau who carried an icon to a protest against the war in Iraq. He was pushed up to the front of the march with the icon, because he was carrying the face of God, the Prince of Peace, showing that God stands with us in all tragedies. The icon is a real presence, what has been called a "third reality."

There was a time in my life when I asked myself, shouldn't I be out in the forefront marching? A friend to whom I asked this question answered, "No, you are doing acts of peace and justice by writing the icon itself. It is an act of peace and justice because it is grounded in Jesus."

All artists, writers, painters, theater people are doing this; engagement with beauty truly does save the world. But here is an interesting dichotomy: you can have a really bad person doing great art and a really good person doing bad art. If it is simply art, it doesn't matter if the artist is doing bad things. But in iconography it does matter because it shows in the faces.

J.S.: What do you think that really means, that beauty will save the world?

M.K.: Beauty will save the world because it appeals and comforts and stands against the profane. If we don't have images of beauty to stand against the profane, we are lost. All the world is entitled to the beautiful. It causes us to reflect on a world full of goodness. When I was a child, the nuns told us to be careful what we let in; I think that's part of what they were saying.

J.S.: You work on some very large icons, using a cherry picker and scaffolding to put you



St. Kateri Tekawitha, an icon created by Mary Katsilometes, features the tunic and leggings of the Algonquin people, surrounded by elements of earth, plants and water. The icon hangs in the church at the St. Paul Mission in La Conner, Wash., on the Swinomish Reservation.

NOTHING
makes me **MORE**
HOPEFUL

than discovering
another human being to admire.

— ALICE WALKER



Mary
Katsilometes

"The icon
is supposed
to stop you
dead in your
tracks."

Writer Jane Salisbury works in outreach for Multnomah County Library, and has lived in Portland for 30 years.

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