

Ann Burt

The Icons of the Poor

Retablo art is a form of devotional painting that originated in Mexico. The paintings, created by untrained artists, were often primitive depictions of Our Lady, Jesus, or the saints.

It was on a trip to Albuquerque, New Mexico, that Ann first encountered these visual reminders of the faith. Coming from the East coast, she was struck by the omnipresence of the faith.

She began collecting retablos as a hobby, simply because the rustic little paintings with their depictions of Mary and the saints delighted and edified her. To her, each retablo told a story, like an icon.

A Humble Connection

The connection between a faith and art was something that she had not yet made in her own personal life. She had never created works of art that reflected her Catholic faith.

The retablos were the answer to her prayer.

"It was like a puzzle fitting together," she said. "I've always had a connection to particular saints, and the retablos were a way to share that devotion."

September 2009, she began making her first retablos, starting with her favorite saint: Joan of Arc. Before painting, she does extensive research on the saint's life.

"I have pages and pages of their story. In order to paint them, you have to really know them, because the retablo tells a story in one image, like an icon," she said.

The image of Joan of Arc, for example, is packed with symbolism, depicting the flag that she carried into battle, her coat of arms, the names of the voices that she heard (St Margaret, St Michael, St Catherine). She's holding her sword, and is flanked by angels representing the voices.



"The story of the saint is on the back in the hope that whoever gets it will be drawn into the holiness, qualities, and godliness of this person. My hope is that the devotion will spark more curiosity and help people go further into the faith," she said.

Finding Her Niche

Figuring out how to use one's talents at the service of the faith is often a trial-and-error process. In most cases, we learn by doing, and it's by correcting our mistakes that we find the right way forward. For Ann, the process was no different.

When she first started painting retablos, she mimicked the style she saw out West, deliberately aiming for the primitive art style of the original untrained artists. But it didn't go over very well on the East coast.

"People didn't get it," she said, noting that some commented that it looked like a kid had painted them. Ann realized that the primitive retablo style, which fit so well in the southwest's culture of simple, heartfelt faith, did not have the same resonance outside of its natural context.

So she decided to adopt a more realistic style, one more true to her own talents and inclinations as a trained artist. Success followed almost immediately.

For Ann Burt, art is a vehicle to express and share her faith with others. But there is no limit to the talents that Our Lord has sprinkled among the members of his Church, no limit to the many creative ways we can bring the faith to life for other people.

