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'A soul on fire': Faith enriches sculptor's work

Patrick Birge depicts diverse religious traditions

By RENÉE LaREAU
Washington

It is an unseasonably warm winter day in Washington, and sunlight pours through the art studio window at Wesley Theological Seminary, making the tiny jewels in Patrick Birge's hands sparkle. He thoughtfully fingers clear plastic vials of amethysts and citrine crystals one by one, like a chef selecting spices for an important recipe. On a wooden table behind him, a towering St. George figure, captured in bronze and terra cotta, slays a dragon. A few feet away, resting on a foam egg crate, a white porcelain St. Francis sculpture lies peacefully, a lithe form that reaches and twists gracefully, arms extended upward toward something unseen.

Perhaps it is the presence of religious images, or perhaps it is Birge's contemplative countenance, but somehow, the composite effect is that a cluttered art studio feels like a small, intimate chapel. This soft-spoken 35-year-old, a sculptor in residence at Wesley's Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion, is discussing his artistic influences. One expects him to speak of Michelangelo, Rodin, the ancient Greeks -- or perhaps some obscure prodigies unknown to those outside the art world. But Birge is speaking of spiritual writers, mystics whose faith traditions are as varied and colorful as the gemstones Birge uses in his sculptures. He mentions not only Thomas Merton and Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths, but also Buddhists, Hindus and the Jewish mystics.

"I suppose I'm not like other artists in that I didn't really study other artists," Birge says with a gentle smile.

Birge, who teaches sculpture to seminary students at Wesley, a Methodist seminary, is unlike fellow artists in other ways as well. A Catholic artist, he creates sculptures that depict not only Catholic figures and sensibilities, but many of the world's major faith traditions. He has sculpted a Muslim Madonna, a Buddhist Quan Yin, a Hindu Nataraj, and has recently been commissioned by Georgetown University's Jewish Student Association to create a Hanukkah menorah inspired by kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism.

Birge has master's degrees in systematic theology and fine arts from Washington Theological Union and George Washington University. For him, depicting other religious traditions in art is an outgrowth of his Catholicism, and it flows naturally from living in cosmopolitan Washington.

"I'm not interested in exploring only Catholic themes because I don't live in an only Catholic world," said Birge, a native of Colorado and Greensboro, N.C. "There's no way to have a purely Catholic art form unless it is derivative of another time period. We're living in a time of globalization, a time of convergence of religion, cultures and civilization. There's no way to live in that mix and not be changed. In a Catholic parish near where I live, a priest counted 80 different cultures in the surrounding neighborhood."

For Birge, whose work is displayed at Catholic parishes, seminaries and abbeys as well as the Kennedy Center and private collections from Michigan to California, Catholicism provides a backdrop by which to explore other faith traditions.

“I’m always trying to match up what I know to be true with what I discover,” he said. “I try to see things through others’ eyes, to actually empathize with them, walk in their shoes, and then come back enriched by the experience. Actors talk about this experience all the time when they get into character.”

It is this kind of artistic exploration, according to Birge’s admirers, that not only gives rise to provocative art, but also sets the stage for vital interreligious dialogue.

Rabbi Harold White, senior Jewish chaplain at Georgetown University, has, in conjunction with the Jewish Student Association, commissioned Birge to create the Hanukkah menorah that will be housed on Georgetown’s campus.

“That a Catholic artist has designed a piece of Jewish ceremonial art epitomizes the idea that art transcends any sectarianism,” White said. “Art is a medium by which we create the unity in diversity. In terms of interfaith relations, what could be more effective than this?”

The varied influences on Birge’s work often manifest themselves in subtle ways. In his sculpture of St. George, Birge used a whirling dervish posture for the saint’s stance to communicate his connection with the divine, while the inspiration for the statue itself came from Birge’s visits to Italian churches named after St. George in Venice and Rome.

Birge, who spent a year studying in Rome as an undergraduate student in sculpture at the University of Notre Dame, found himself drawn to churches named after the fourth-century saint.

“We used to pray at different churches every morning as a Lenten practice,” Birge said, “and at times I felt the great love that came from so many people having been there and having prayed there. Looking back, though I was not conscious of it at the time, I remember St. George kind of following me around.”

Birge’s sculptures, which most often portray different incarnations of the human figure, capture a sense of perpetual motion and dance, entire bodies gracefully twisted into human spirals.

“A spiral shape creates an energy that makes the viewer want to walk around the sculpture,” he said. For Birge, his use of spirals stems not only from artistic sensibilities, but also from spiritual and biological roots.

“Just about every mystical tradition talks about the spiral as a spiritual metaphor,” he said. “And our biological DNA is that shape.”

Birge’s figures are often hollow and open on one side, exposing an interior done in gold leaf. The hollowness of his human figures, says Birge, is rooted in a Marian image from Thomas Merton’s *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

“Merton compared Mary to a clean window that was free of any impediment to the light coming through that window,” Birge said. “She was empty of an ego, free of the limitations of the ego, and that allowed her to let Christ be born through her.” Merton’s description of Mary in *New Seeds* crystallized an idea that soon became the center of Birge’s sculpture. “It has been the driving force of my work ever since,” he said. “Mary is a model for all of us to empty ourselves so that we can be filled with God’s light.”

Though he thrives on his time in his two studios, and he enjoys teaching sculpture and drawing at Wesley Theological Seminary and Northern Virginia Community College, Birge, who lives with his younger brother on Washington's north side, said that the unpredictable nature of a professional art career presents it challenges.

“The vocation of an artist is something you always have to choose again and again, and it is hard, especially with each new experience of failure,” he said. “And the income can be either feast or famine.”

In terms of Birge's sculpture itself, however, it is always a feast for the eyes, a feast that both nourishes and stretches the religious imagination. Birge himself, with his quiet, good-natured and deeply spiritual persona, stimulates the imagination by his presence, somehow evoking a sense of the sacred even in an eclectic, paint-and-clay-spattered art studio. Perhaps that is because he feels the presence of God there himself.

“For me, the studio is a place of worship,” he said. “It's where I discover God more than in any other place.”

Birge's sense of the sacred is something that hasn't gone unnoticed by those who know him. Each person describes it in their own terms, as is the case with Georgetown's Rabbi White.

“Elie Wiesel wrote a book called *Souls on Fire*,” White said. “And that's how I look at Patrick: He is a soul on fire.”

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Related Web site

The Artwork of Patrick Birge

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