The Secret at St. Gabriel's

SALEM, OR (January 28, 2010) - In St. Gabriel's Catholic parish in McKinney Texas, near Dallas, in the narthex surrounded by bulletin boards, and a jumble of chairs and tables is a little painting seen by only a few that is getting famous fast. One person at a time is discovering the "Annunciation" by John Collier. This oil painting was created by John in 2000. It was so radical in its approach that even though he liked it very much, Fr. Kelly wasn't quite prepared to place it in the sanctuary, so it has sat quietly in the foyer for several years; but, as everyone knows, the internet can give works of art a life of their own.

The painting depicts the Annunciation when the Angel Gabriel comes to announce the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary, but it sets its scene in our own time, much as has been done since the Renaissance. We are used to seeing Bible stories by 16th century artists set in their own times. So much so that it seems normal to see the Three Kings at the nativity dressed in hose and doublets. John Collier's Annunciation however, shows Mary as a Catholic school girl in the 21st century. She greets Gabriel on the porch of a modern American house.

Here is a sampling of what people are saying online:

"Many Christians are so accustomed to the story of the Annunciation that we take for granted the profundity of it. It's one of the reasons I love this painting by John Collier. It doesn't cater to any preconceptions we have of the Annunciation; it borrows no conventional iconography. Here, Mary is pictured as a young schoolgirl in saddle shoes. She's simply going about her day when destiny steps in and God does amazing things! An angel appears and tells this young maiden that she is going to be a mother, and not just any mother, but the Mother of God!" -- applecidermama.blogspot.com

"I like the natural symbols in the picture. The door that only she can open, the window, the classical design of the architecture hinting that she who is the temple stands by a temple. The lilies and see how she stands on a welcome mat?"--Fr Dwight Longenecker

"The idea of Mary in Oxfords getting what looks to be an angelic floral delivery in the middle of suburbia pleases me no end."--scribalterror.blogs.com

"Put into a very modern setting, the schoolgirl and the archangel's initial encounter looks and feels...well, creepy. But we are able to see here, in terms we understand, a pretty good rendition of the age and immaturity of the girl Mary. (Note the lily in front of her which is just beginning to bloom- a lovely artistic touch!)"--http://thefirstmorning.wordpress.com/2009/11/26/mary-the-girl-a-christmas-journey/

You can discover on-line that Presbyterian, Methodist, and Catholic pastors have all alluded to this painting in their sermons. One Catholic priest writes that he greatly values it as a help to saying his rosary. This Christmas the British Composer Richard Nye was so moved by the painting that he composed a work performed before 1200 people just a few days ago. The composer wrote the artist saying," I think your painting is wonderful. I found it both striking and moving at the same time. It is hard to put into words why, but I wrote the music and adapted the text (I don't usually write words) as a direct response to your picture... the piece was 'staged' in Wimborne as a conversation between Mary and Gabriel in your modern setting - as if your painting had come to life. Both performers had your picture to help them when working on the piece. I have worked on music that responds to art in the past and had in fact, just started a new set of pieces that are to be used at an exhibition. The same month I was asked to write a new work for Christmas - having found your picture, I just stopped what I was doing and began to write Annunciation."

An interview with the artist, John Collier:

Q. You're really known as a sculptor, what made you do this painting?

A.I was asked by Fr. Greg Kelly to paint a series of paintings for St. Gabriel's because paintings can be made for less money than sculptures and as the pieces were to go into a temporary worship space, it seemed more cost effective to make paintings. It is really only one of four works I made for the parish-- all are traditional Bible stories set in contemporary times. In one St. Joseph the carpenter, for instance, wears blue overalls as he stands beside his Foster son Jesus who wears blue Jeans and a wheat shirt.
Q. Why do you think so many folks are commenting on your picture on-line.

A. That's complicated. Much, perhaps even most of contemporary art, the art folks see when they go to a museum, is unlike times past, non-narrative, doesn't want to tell a story, is non-figurative, can't be understood pictorially, is not only non-religious but is suspicious, even denigrating of Christianity. There are a few of us contemporary artists who love these ignored qualities. For me this is a story that I love and artists always want to paint what they love. So, perhaps those who see it find it refreshing to have their interests taken seriously.

Q. How did you feel when the composer Richard Nye contacted you to say he had written a work around your Annunciation?

A. I was flabbergasted. What a touching thing for an artist to see that other artists are also moved by his work, make new works of their own, and the Lord is honored by these new children of his own painting.

I am very happy that my agent John Bergstrom at www.hillstream.com is responding to the interest in this piece and is about to publish signed prints.

Q. I hear Fr. Greg Kelly at St. Gabriels wasn't so sure about where the painting should go?

A. Yes, I know it is very different from what one might expect after seeing other Annunciations but to me it is really very traditional. I am used to seeing Renaissance works where the three kings are dressed to look like 16th century Italian nobles. This is just a modern application of the same idea.

Q. Tell me how you work. Do you sell in Galleries?

A. No, not yet. Virtually all my art is made as a commission. A Pastor of Art Committee member will call me and ask if I am interested in making a piece for their parish. They tell me their ideas and together we come up with a concept that suits the needs of that individual parish.

Q. You are the sculptor of the National Catholic Memorial at Ground Zero in New York City?

Yes, I was very honoured to have had a part in that memorial.

Q. Have you always been a Catholic?

A. No, my wife and I are in RCIA right now. For most of our lives we were Evangelicals in a little denomination called the Free Methodist Church. We love those people and even today, they are among our best friends. Later we became Episcopalian for about fourteen years. During all this time we have felt a nagging in our hearts to investigate the Catholic Church and after a few false starts, we are almost there.

If you would like to see the Annunciation painting and other works by John Collier, please go to WWW.hillstream.com or http://www.hillstream.com/annunciation.html