

He gives everything he has to his art

Dana Greene | May. 11, 2009



"The Great Catch" is a serigraph by John August Swanson, one of the works on exhibit at Emory University in Atlanta.

Los Angeles artist John August Swanson describes his art as "my most social act." Artistic activity and life combine in him to form a ministry he has practiced for more than four decades.

The 71-year-old Swanson recently celebrated the installation of 44 of his vibrant, detailed paintings and prints at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, the largest permanent exhibition of his work in the United States.

Jan Love, dean of this Methodist theology school, was attracted to Swanson's work not only for its beauty but for its power to express the global reach of Christian experience.

These works now hang in the school's newly constructed 65,000-square foot theology building, the locus of learning for Candler's diverse and international student body, in which more than 30 Christian denominations, including Catholics, are represented.



The first 30 years of Swanson's life were not predictive of what would follow.

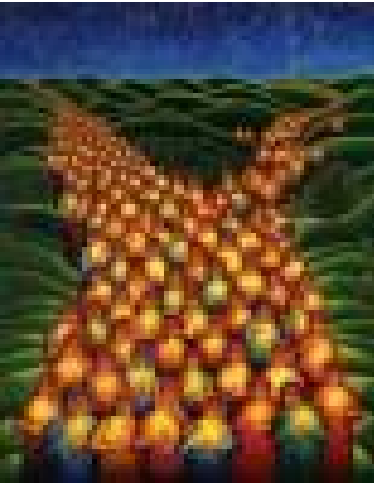
He was born to immigrant parents, a Mexican mother and a Swedish father. His mother, a garment worker, came to the United States when she was 18. His father, a vegetable vendor, was mostly absent from the family, and Swanson and his older sister were raised by his mother.

Swanson attended college, but soon dropped out to take on a variety of odd jobs. His early hardscrabble life and his affiliation with the Young Christian Workers in the 1960s brought him to a lifelong commitment to Catholic social teaching. Drifting and without direction until age 30, Swanson finally enrolled in an art class offered by Sr. Corita Kent at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. That experience was formative, linking his social justice and spirituality commitments to a craft. It was with Kent's guidance that he was introduced to the technique of serigraph, or silk-screen art, and was given the encouragement to explore his artistic talent.

Swanson is quick to say that he did not set out to produce religious art. Rather, he found that when he gave everything he had to his art, the end result was art that contained the sacred.

When describing his artistic motivation, Swanson quotes art critic Sr. Wendy Beckett: "True art," she writes, "comes from so deep in the psyche that it almost forces itself out. The images come not from the artists, but through them ... so it is not a question of faith or desire, which many contemporaries have, but one of necessity." For Swanson, this necessity is fed by what he calls the "hungry eye," which gathers and takes in all kinds of stimuli.

He claims to have been influenced by his Mexican heritage, the rituals of his Catholic faith, the difficult lives of workers, and political and civic traditions -- the marches of the United Farm Workers and civil rights advocates. The humble, lowly and quotidian provide images for his work. These combine with eclectic, wide-ranging artistic influences to shape his vision. The folk art of both Mexico and Sweden; the Mexican muralists, especially Diego Rivera; medieval tapestries, Byzantine mosaics and Russian icons, stained-glass cathedral windows and Islamic miniatures -- all these inspired him and can be identified in his highly personal art.



Swanson refers to his work as narrative art. Most of it focuses on biblical themes.

His point is not to illustrate these themes, but to narrate them, to pull the viewer into the story in order to revivify its power. In this sense his work is a social act meant to engage and empower the viewer. Swanson believes that each person is part of an "infinite succession of compassion and courage." His art situates his viewers within that succession, enabling them to draw energy and renewal from their shared human condition. Swanson considers himself one who holds up the values of the community and retells its important stories in order to give it strength and comfort as it confronts contemporary social issues.

Swanson's vibrant use of color and intricate design attract viewers, luring them to pay attention to his prints and examine the stories told therein, stories that may need to be enlivened in one's imagination. From the Old Testament Swanson offers the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Elijah, Ruth, Joseph, Jonah, Noah, Daniel and David. From the New Testament he portrays the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Presentation and the stories of the prodigal son, the loaves and fishes, the wedding feast at Cana and the raising of Lazarus. Many of his works include stories within stories. "Francis of Assisi" is bordered by 24 miniatures, scenes from the saint's life. "Ecclesiastes," which appeared on the cover of Sr. Joan Chittister's book *There Is a Season*, contains almost 100 miniatures depicting the seasons of life, biblical images and natural symbols.

In all of Swanson's work the locus is the ordinary, the emphasis communal. Motifs are repeated again and again: rivers and mountains, sun and moon, sea and clouds, and especially star-filled skies. Angels rejoice; the people process; birds and animals delight; heaven and earth meet in harmony.

Although the Candler collection at Emory is heavily weighted toward biblical themes, there are other works in which the sacred and the secular, the extraordinary and the ordinary conjoin. St. Francis is surrounded by animals and birds of every kind. Processions, liturgical and civic, become acts of devotion. Clowns are portrayed as messengers of hope and wonder confronting all the foibles of the human condition. They live on the edge, take risks, are fearless and homeless. They know human weakness and laugh at it.

Swanson has worked in the media of oil, watercolor and acrylic, but his principal medium is colored ink on silk screen, which results in a serigraph. The creation of a serigraph involves drawing a stencil on Mylar film and transferring the stencil to a silk screen for printing. Each color necessitates its own stencil.

Since Swanson uses between 40 to 60 colors for each serigraph, the process is laborious, involving the laying of color on color with great precision. Swanson's most elaborate print, "Procession," now a part of the Vatican's collection of modern religious art, required 89 stencils and took a year to complete. When discussing the process of making art, its purpose and content, Swanson never fails to point out the need for patience and discipline.

He explains that images remain in his mind for decades; they germinate slowly, are nurtured by experience and finally are born into the world through a long, complex technical process that demands constancy and hard work.

Swanson lives modestly, sharing the proceeds of his work with those who have less.

Initially he sold his work locally at street fairs. In his later years it has received considerable visibility and recognition. His pieces hang in Washington's National Air and Space Museum, National Museum of American History and National Museum of American Art, in Baltimore's Museum of Art, in New York's Brooklyn Museum and in the Art Institute of Chicago. His work appears in retreat centers, churches and monasteries, and in the collections of more than 16 colleges and universities, including Harvard, Notre Dame and now Emory. His prints are in London's Tate Gallery and Victoria and Albert Museum, and in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris.

For the students at the Candler School of Theology at Emory, Swanson's artwork offers parallels to their own study of theology. He says that images come to him as gift; he does not consciously work to bring them forth.

Swanson likes to quote historian Howard Zinn when explaining his intent as an artist. "What we choose to emphasize in [our] complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places ... where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act." Swanson's work attempts to do that: to give energy to act. In this regard, his art is his "most social act." It is directed toward others.

Dana Greene is dean emerita of Oxford College at Emory University in Atlanta.

Related Web site

The Art of John August Swanson
www.johnaugustswanson.com

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