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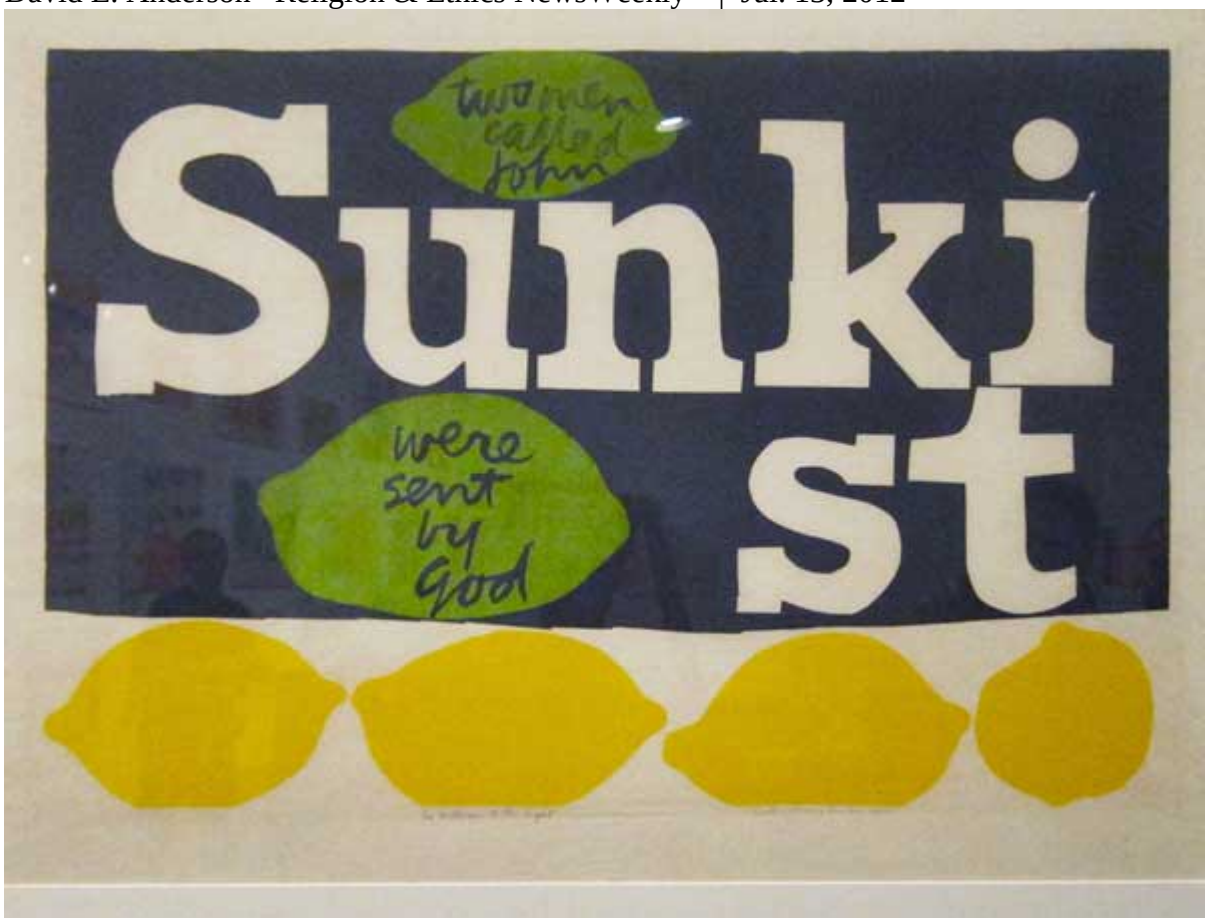
Provocative art put Catholic nun in the middle of 1960s maelstrom

David E. Anderson Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly | Jul. 13, 2012



This print about two Johns, John F. Kennedy and Pope John XXIII, incorporates the logo of the Sunkist citrus-growing company. (RNS/Patti Jette Hanley)

WASHINGTON -- Combining images and words from advertising, pop culture and religion, the bold graphic art of Sr. Mary Corita was as deeply representative of the spirit of the 1960s as it was ubiquitous in church basements, dorm rooms and urban communes of people involved in the struggle for civil rights and the campaign to end the Vietnam War.

In today's visual and graphically dominant popular culture, Corita's work -- her bold typography, vivid colors, the use of ad logos and slogans -- resonates with a new generation, attracted by what has been called "her festive involvement in the world" and her interest in "blurring the lines between art and life."

"Corita's art from the 1960s, which is based in advertising, has this great pop appeal to us today in our media-saturated culture," said Kathryn Wat of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington.

The museum has mounted an exhibition of Corita's work, "R(ad)ical Love: Sister Mary Corita," drawn from the

collection of Fr. Robert Giguere (1917-2003), a member of the Society of St. Sulpice and a friend of Corita's from her time in California. Corita was a member of the Order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles, and her art expressed the changes that were blowing through the church as a result of the reform-minded Second Vatican Council. Corita left the order in 1968.

"She's in the middle of this maelstrom and seeks to make sense of it from her perspective as a nun," Wat said in an interview with the PBS news and public affairs program Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly. "I think that the tenor of the 1960s involved a push-pull with religion."

Many of Corita's works quote from the Bible and from spiritual writers such as the famed anti-war priest, Fr. Daniel Berrigan, and Fr. Maurice Ouellet, a high-profile Catholic priest involved in the Selma-Montgomery civil rights marches in 1965. "But the way that she turns it and twists it by juxtaposing it with secular content and certainly with secular imagery that she's drawing from popular culture is truly unique," Wat said.

Wat cited a work called "Wide Open," in which Corita blends two texts: Psalm 24 ("Open wide ... that the King of glory may enter in") and a Lyndon B. Johnson speech about poverty ("Open wide the exits from poverty to the children of the poor"). Together the words are "a call to action for Christians and voters, drawing a connection between spirituality and specific policy stances," according to a blog about the exhibition on the museum's website. They are "exactly the kind of social reform that Corita sought," the blog reads.

"Corita was looking for words that would be very evocative and that would lead us to a different place," Wat said. "So she would extrapolate those words, those phrases, in some cases, the images, and contextualize them in a way that made them spiritual and engaging."

A print about two Johns, John F. Kennedy and Pope John XXIII, incorporates the logo of the Sunkist citrus-growing company.

"She often used the word 'sun' or an image of the sun to signify a person or an idea she found particularly enlightening or clear-eyed, someone who was a visionary," Wat explained.

Corita, who died in 1986, included in the print the words "Two men called John were sent by God," an allusion to the verse in the Gospel of John about John the Baptist ("There was a man sent by God whose name was John"). She often juxtaposed quotations from JFK and the pope.

While one can see Corita's work in relation to the larger world of pop art that was unfolding at the time, Corita knew that she was distinct within the art world.

"She was interested in it, she engaged with it, but she stayed her own course," Wat said. "She had a certain task that she wished to accomplish through her art, and whether it was fashionable or favored by the art market, she

wasn't so interested in. I would say she had to have been the least naive nun that I can think of for sure."

"Corita was never part of the mainstream, being too radical for the church, too Catholic (and priced too low) for the art world," artists Julie Ault and Martin Beck have written.

Wat said that when people today who feel they are living in dark times look at Corita's art, "we see someone who is creating supercool art that is very hip, but that is filled with a sincere spirit, and I think that's tremendously appealing to all of us, not just art-goers and art-lovers, but all of us."

David E. Anderson writes for Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly.

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