

## **Women—Liturgical and Religious Art**

### **Ade Bethune, Ansgar Holmberg, CSJ, Lucinda Naylor**

Ade Bethune, whose career began in the late 1920s and early 1930s, found herself rebelling against the artistic conventions of the time that she was learning in art school. She took a dim view of the religious art she saw around her, finding it too sentimental, decorative, and overly concerned with its artistic self-importance to the sacrifice of any spiritual meaning. Instead she was influenced by more traditional ideas of religious art—images were a way to instruct illiterate viewers in God's and Christ's love for them, and how saints spread that love in the world. As such, her work is more bound by the visual conventions of the early Church than the other two artists.

Her early work creating images for *The Catholic Worker* newspaper, which required strong graphic design in black and white, reinforced her natural affinity for clean, simple lines and shapes. Always devoutly religious, her association with Catholic Worker founders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin began her education in the use of religious images and symbols to support Catholic theology and liturgy.

Ansgar Holmberg, CSJ, studied with Ade Bethune, but her own work moves in a different direction. Her color-saturated works are more reminiscent of folk art than more conventional religious images. She does not create for a liturgical purpose; rather, her art results from her own spiritual journey and life changes. Her interpretations of themes are not fixed in the manner of icons, but ever changing through time. About her *O Antiphons*, she says she would do things differently today—she no longer agrees with the ideas she brought to their creation.

Occasionally, however, an educational purpose sneaks into her work. Her depiction of the Gospel of John was created to help her make sense of Bruno Barnhart's book *The Good Wine*. She knew she could only understand his interpretation of the text if she drew it, adding personal touches such as her cat appearing in one corner. What began as a means for personal reflection has gained new life as a teaching tool, as she uses the piece to help others understand the Gospel's message.

Lucinda Naylor, who, while always religious, had left the Church by the time she was in art school, was gradually drawn back to the Church through her study of egg tempera painting. In her case the medium led to the subject matter. By studying the works of medieval tempera masters such as Fra Angelico, she became interested in the religious stories the tempera paintings depicted. Her early works had a spirituality that was abstractly religious. Later the religious subject matter of her work became more overt, depicting Biblical narratives and stories of the saints.

While her tempera paintings illustrate traditional religious themes, there is a personal quality to them as well. The story of St. Roache tells of the plague-stricken monk being miraculously fed by a dog and saved; Naylor's version prominently features her own dog Joop. She also feels free to imagine alternative outcomes to traditional stories. The

narrative of Lazarus and the rich man becomes richer through her rendition, which allows them to meet. The intimate quality of her paintings allows for personal reflections on the part of viewers as well, drawing them in to contemplate the scenes being depicted.

While each of these women brought a different perspective to their creation of religious art, they have one thing in common. Not content for their art to be displayed and used solely in church buildings or museum galleries, each has searched for a way to broaden the reach of her art by applying it to everyday objects. From Ade Bethune's cross-stitch patterns and the objects for home use she designed for the Terra Sancta Guild, to book covers and note cards featuring Ansgar Holmberg's pictures, to the use of Lucinda Naylor's images on weekly bulletin covers for the Basilica of St. Mary, these artists have found a way to illustrate the Word of God for ordinary people.