

# Mary Jane Miller creates new icons

Mary Jane Miller, former resident of Abingdon, Virginia, who lives in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, has created icons for more than 20 years.

"Iconography came into my life by accident, being invited to do a workshop in Johnson City in 1995. I had no idea the short five-day experience would change my life. Now it is a surprise to me, more than 20 years later, that I return to teach at the Jubilee House Retreat Center in July to the very place I began learning about icons. Traditionally, as with me, the first icon was of St. Michael the Archangel who is said to come to the icon 'writer' with a message. Mine was 'paint and pray,'" she says.

Creating an icon is a combination of art and faith. Icons attempt to portray and bear witness to two realities, the divine and the human, united in an undivided manner. The intent is not to communicate human ideas about humans or spiritual concepts about the truth but rather to ask, "Whose are we?"

Miller is challenged and fascinated with the icons' intrinsic and mystical elements.

"Combining the physical painting and a life of prayer enables us to explore and enter into our relationship with God and His creation. The discipline of iconography allows one to make contact with something deeper than what you're painting. The faces reflect the somber, the challenged and the martyred. I find myself wondering, 'What, besides spiritual awe, are icons trying to tell us about the highest and best experiences of our human condition?' The answers lead us back to our faith and hope as spiritual people," she says.

Byzantine style icons were conceived as a functional visual doorway that permits us to attain a spiritual level of existence. What is represented on an icon in a material form exists in a spiritual essence. For example, an icon of Virgin and Child is designed to channel prayers and veneration to a spiritual realm in which the actual Virgin and Child and Christ exist. The icon enables the viewer to travel between various levels of reality.

"Mind and spirit exist in God as well as in the ancient medium of egg tempera. Icon painting is a slow

process of copying an image that allows us to witness the image and ourselves arise simultaneously in form and beauty. Our minds and spirits cannot help but give meaning to what we can see around us as the image unfolds. The egg tempera technique reveals a marvelous tiny world where we comprehend the unseen and make it visible," she says.

Miller is inspired by women who she says "could be holding the means for how sacred iconography will survive. Two hundred years ago women could not paint icons. Today those who are graced with the desire to paint sacred text have an obligation as prayer practitioners to re-examine how or why women are not mentioned in the great feast days like Pentecost, at the Last Supper, or the Baptism of Christ, etc. It is not God's commandment that they are not heard of in text or seen in sacred image. When the feminine voice and new icon images are ushered into today's church communities, the addition will benefit us all and balance more than just the gender issue.

"Heretics are largely called heretics because they question the authority of our accepted norms. Am I one? During the inquisition one million named heretics were murdered for thinking differently. Hopefully we are past burning witches. Tolerance and open discussion throughout society make change possible; the community of iconographers today is no different. We need to bend the tradition to keep the practice alive and supple and new.

"World leaders have recently published a statement that declares: 'The justification of discrimination against women and girls on grounds of religion or tradition, as if it were prescribed by a Higher Authority, is unacceptable. While I paint I wait for the church 'fathers' to draft a similar statement,'" she says.

Miller works closely with her husband, Valentine Gomez, to create her artwork. She does all the painting, and he embellishes the art with gold, hand-hammered pewter and semi-precious stones.

One of their most recent creations is "The Dialogue," which was installed at The Institute of Interfaith Dialog in Houston, Texas. The work was created for meditation and prayer and especially dialogue to provide another way for people to break free from what divides us.



"Women" by Mary Jane Miller

She is the author of three self-published books including "Icon Painting Revealed," "The Mary Collection" and "In Light of Women." She has been published online and in publications such as Divine Temple Russian Orthodox Journal and Faith and Forum Magazine.

"I have painted for so long and now find writing to be a different dimension, as I try to put into words the love and joy which has manifested in me through the work. Years of dedication to this tradition and struggling with its very tight canons and prescribed discipline have been so

exciting. My personality is sometimes in conflict with what one would expect of the pious, deliberate intentions of one who might live in a religious community.

"I am rebellious, some having called me a neo-iconographer. I have been self-taught with a lot of help from God and large collection of beautiful books. I feel as if something has always been watching me and guiding me. I do not see with my eyes but the presence I sense is clearer than my own reflection," she says.