

continued from page 64

and presented a proposal to create the fourteen stations of the cross. The arts committee at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Parish miraculously took a chance on a couple of young artists. Somehow they could see our vision.

From May 2001 through the following May, we created fourteen four-foot by two-foot multigure composition bas-reliefs. We collaborated on the design as a whole so that we would have a cohesive set, but we were each responsible for articulating seven in clay. We worked for very little pay, but sometimes when you are young you can get by on enthusiasm. That entire year we spent contemplating the journey of Christ to the tomb, as each image had us concentrating on a particular aspect of the passion. The new church building opened with all fourteen stations in place.

Seven months later and after much deliberation on the part of the arts committee at Our Lady of Mercy, they chose me, a twenty-five-year-old sculptor, to create two over-life-size marble sculptures for niches placed on either side of the altar. Thus began a journey, difficult beyond what I could imagine at the time, that would last the next several years.

I started the first of the year in 2003. The first thing that I did was create a one-third scale model of both the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. Once I completed the model of the Virgin Mary, I sent it to a studio in Baltimore to be roughed out and enlarged in clay. The enlarging process is very physically intensive and I spared myself many hours of labor by sending the work out to a studio specializing in enlargement.

The process took several weeks, so I used the time to move to new quarters. My lease was up at the current studio and the landlord was renovating. After having searched for nearly a year, I found the perfect space for rent just down the street. As soon as I saw the old mechanic's shop, I squealed with delight. This was my dream studio! It had twelve-foot ceilings, a garage door.

It even had an upstairs with an office and a bedroom; I eventually moved into the studio and lived there for two years. Once I was moved in and things were cleaned and painted, I brought the four-hundred pound clay sculpture of the Virgin Mary back from Baltimore to finish the work. The finishing work on the Virgin Mary went on for nearly a year. Using my fingers and wooden tools, I carefully articulated every last detail, from the texture of her garment to her fingernails.

Most people imagine the artist caught up in fits of passion, creating, oblivious to the needs of daily life. We picture the sculptor chipping away in a frenzy of artistic ecstasy. The most exciting part of creating art is indeed the conceptual phase at the beginning. Sometimes there are moments of artistic bliss afterward, but most of the work is just work. It's the daily plugging away that gets a sculpture done, not fits of passion.

The full-scale sculpture of the Virgin Mary was finished early in the spring of 2004. Once the clay was complete, I sent the sculpture back to the same studio that enlarged it. The studio made a latex rubber mold of the sculpture and poured a plaster cast. Compare this process to photography: the clay sculpture is the film

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and the mold is like a negative. The plaster, then, is the print. Once Mary was cast in plaster, I recycled the clay and began work on St. Joseph.

In the world of sculpture, there are sculptors and there are carvers. Sculptors fashion the image in clay and provide a plaster cast, called a carver's model, to a stone carver. This is the traditional way of working and the manner in which the Washington National Cathedral's stone studio



The King's Handmaid

operated. Italian carving studios are filled with plaster casts of many different artists, while the carvers carefully copy the images in stone. In the early summer of 2004, I sent the carver's model of my Virgin Mary to Malcolm Harlow, a stone carver in Virginia who had worked at the Cathedral for many years. We also sent him nine tons of marble, imported from the Carrara Mountains in Italy. Once the stone and plaster were at the studio, Malcolm began the process. He worked for two years, gently chipping away the pieces of Italian marble until he revealed the image I had created of the mother of our savior.

With the Virgin Mary out of the studio, I began work on St. Joseph. Initially, finding imagery for St. Joseph was difficult. He is mentioned a mere seven times in the gospel text. I had to find a way to identify with him. I imagined that his hands looked very much like the hands of my own father, which are calloused and worn, cut and stained from years of hard work. Then I imagined a man with such hands hearing the news that those very hands would soon hold a newborn. What's more, for St. Joseph, that tiny baby would be the Son of God! In my



The artist's daily grind

image, St. Joseph sits in his workshop with his carpenter's angle in one hand dropping into his lap. A hammer and nails on the floor remind us of Christ's passion. Joseph has just heard from the angel in his dream about Jesus, and he stares into his hand: "Me, a father? The Son of God?!"

There are several ways to enlarge a sculpture. With St. Joseph, I had the sculpture roughed out by another artist at my studio, just as I had roughed out and enlarged sculptures for Jay

Carpenter when I worked as his assistant. Many sculptors will enlist the help of assistants to save time and energy. The making of a sculpture on a large scale is very physically intensive. For me, as a woman with fibromyalgia, a muscle disease that causes a lot of pain and fatigue, enlisting the help of others is an act of survival. My assistant built an armature by welding steel pipe together and incorporating thick aluminum wire for the arms and legs. Then I had a model come to the

studio so the sculpture could be articulated as a full-scale nude. We did this for the sake of accuracy; Jay Carpenter warned me that if I didn't do it this way, the sculpture would end up looking like a pile of laundry with a head!

Once the nude was complete, I added more clay for the drapery and worked on the details. Meanwhile, I met a charming fellow who would later become my husband. His Persian features, pensive brow, strong nose, and graceful hands were perfect for St. Joseph. I had found my muse. The work was enjoyable while I did his portrait, but the sculpture had to

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be finished before our wedding. The constant pressure of a looming deadline was just about enough to squelch my artistic spirit. By this time, I had already lost much of the joy I'd felt while working on "The King's Handmaiden."

During the difficulties of creating two larger-than-life-sized marble sculptures, I wrote a prayer for the studio.

Dear Father in Heaven, Creator of everything! You have imbued me with certain gifts and I pray that Your Spirit guide my hands as I finish the work You have set me out to do. I pray that You bless my time in the studio; fill me with energy; and give me peace. As your messenger Gabriel told the Virgin Mary, "Nothing is impossible with God," let that ring in my heart as I feel that I am up against an impossible task. Bless me with Your Presence, O God, and let others experience Your Spirit in my work. In the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, Amen.

Truly, nothing is impossible with God. I finished the clay sculpture just

in time for our wedding in October 2005! Since the carver in Virginia was working on the sculpture of the Virgin Mary, I sent the plaster of St. Joseph to a carving studio in Pietrasanta, Italy. Then in September the following year, my husband and I took the trip of a lifetime. We flew to Rome and made our way north to Pietrasanta to meet the carvers and oversee some of the finishing work on the sculpture. While we were in Italy, I wept at the feet of Michelangelo's Pietà, marvelled at the sight of his David, and was humbled to be a part of such a tradition.

Once the sculptures were finished at the respective carving studios, the next task at hand was to deliver them to the church. It is no small feat to transport and set two and a half tons of marble! I hired a crew, and plenty of volunteers came out to Berryville also to help move the Blessed Virgin out of the studio and onto a truck. It took us half a day to load the truck and the rest of the week to figure out how to get the sculpture onto its niche. Once we had the logistics resolved, installing St. Joseph was a snap. It was importing the marble sculpture from Italy that proved to be the challenge. But now, after nearly five years, the sculptures are complete. All we have left to do is celebrate.

When I was a child, I thought that art was superfluous in the church: mere decoration, a distraction from worship. Besides, why spend tens of thousands on marble sculptures when the money could be given to the poor? I held this view until I grew into an adult and began to understand the power of images. More importantly, I realized that by supporting me in my vocation as a sculptor, Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Parish was doing much, much more than purchasing several sculptures to decorate the interior of their spacious new church.

I often have asked myself about what it means to worship the living God. When most of us think of "worship," we envision pews full of Lutherans, hymnals open, singing along to an

organ. What then for those of us without voices, those of us who struggle to find the right pitch, to keep pace with the rhythm? Can we worship God with our hands deep in clay, or with chisel to stone? Is this sacrifice a pleasing aroma wafting into the heavens?

While Malcolm was busy carving the stone, I would visit his studio periodically. He gave me updates on his progress at the French bakery and café in town. While enjoying freshly baked pieces of quiche and coffee, he would tell me about people who had visited the studio. He told me about the FedEx driver who sat in the driveway outside of the studio, weeping as she beheld the sculpture. The following day she brought her mother to see it. Another woman carries with her a photograph of the sculpture wherever she goes, inspired by Mary's act of faith. St. Francis said that "we ought to

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preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." We usually understand this to mean that our actions should proclaim the gospel, but is it possible that images also can preach the good news?

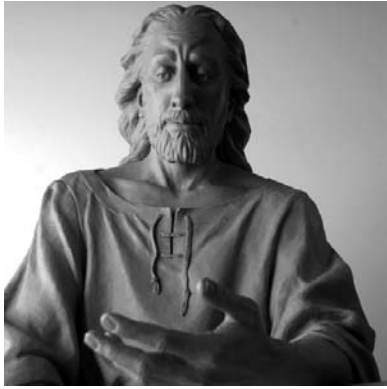
For the people who visit Our Lady of Mercy, the sculptures teach. The stations of the cross illustrate the passion. They don't merely retell an historical event but attempt to uncover some of its deeper spiritual truths. The Virgin Mary is celebrated as the mother of God but also as a woman whose act of faith changed the world. Her husband, Joseph, stands as a reminder to fathers and husbands of the important role that God has for them.

The other day I was picking up the original plaster sculpture of the Virgin Mary that I'd placed in a show at the Washington Theological Union, a Catholic seminary. Another show was coming down that day, too, and I was lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the



work before the artist packed it up. I walked past a painting that grabbed me and took me in. It was an image of Christ being adored by four other figures in the painting. The central figure was easily recognizable as Christ, but was he on the cross, depicted as the mother hen with her brood, or being reflected as Moses holding up his staff in the desert? The painting showed all these things at once! That image said more to me about the nature of Christ as the Word of God than any written word could have communicated. Getting lost in that work of art, I stepped an inch closer to the divine. It brought me to a place of adoration. *This* is the sort of art I seek to make and the sort of art that the church needs to have available for people to see and to understand. This is not artwork that merely decorates halls and offices. It is artwork desperately needed in the church: a vehicle of truth. LF

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A LUTHERAN SCULPTOR OF MARY

Sarah Hempel Irani

The image came to me rather unexpectedly. I was on an airplane midway between Oslo and Reykjavik, on my way home after spending two glorious weeks visiting a friend in Norway. Waiting for me at home were the usual what-am-I-going-to-do-with-my-life decisions that come with being a senior in college. I sobbed for nearly an hour during my flight. I called out to God silently, crying out for comfort, but what I really needed was some direction. God gave me then a vision of a sculpture that I had to make. I pulled out a pen and sketched out the image on an overturned piece of stationary. I drew an image of a woman, shown from the waist up. Her head and eyes turned dramatically to one side as her body twisted in the opposite direction. The visual effect was that of a spiral. This was an image of a woman heeding the call of God, even as her body turns from Him.

My sculpture professor and mentor at Hillsdale College, Anthony Frudakis, advised me not to talk too much about a work of art until it is finished. He told me that talking about it steals the energy that needs to be devoted to creating the work itself. So I sealed my lips and went to work. I built an armature out of steel pipe from the hardware store, aluminum wire, gutter guard, and some duct tape. When this “skeleton” was complete, I added the clay. The sort of clay I use is an oil-based plastiline that never hardens and never dries out but needs to be warmed and worked with the hands to be pliable. I found a few students to model for me, and the sculpture became a composite of several different women. I came to the studio joyfully, in three-hour increments several days a week. In just a few months I was finished.

Another art professor pointed out that the sculpture looked like an “annunciation.” I was not exactly sure what an “annunciation” was, so I flipped through my copy of Janson’s *History of Art*. Sure enough, in the medieval and Renaissance pages there appeared painting after painting, sculpture after sculpture of the Virgin Mary receiving word from the angel Gabriel. She was usually shown with her body turning away from the angel but with her eyes gazing

directly at him. The gesture communicates the spirit’s willingness to say “yes” to God over against the fleshly resistance of the body.

This was a deep moment of revelation for me. The sculpture was already called “The King’s Handmaiden,” named when I received the vision, before I even started applying the clay. Finally I understood my own sculpture! As Mary said:

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His name. And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation. (Luke 1:46)

At this moment, I felt as if I had had my own annunciation of sorts; the Lord was calling me to be a sculptor. This was also the moment that I began to identify with Mary. God was asking her to do something very, very difficult and painful, much more so than anything I could imagine. But the Lord calls different people to different tasks. What I saw in her response—“Be it unto me as you have said”—was the very response that I wanted to have when God called me to do His will.

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Now that I knew my vocation, I jumped in with two feet. I moved to Maryland after graduation to take a job as a studio assistant for Jay Hall Carpenter, former artist-in-residence at the Washington National Cathedral. I worked in his studio enlarging and roughing in sculptures, pouring plaster casts, cleaning tools, recycling clay, and delivering pieces to galleries and sites. For about a year I soaked up every drip of sculptor’s wisdom I could before I headed off on my own.

As providence would have it, a fellow in my Irish set dancing troupe was an arts consultant who had volunteered to pull together a crew of artists and designers to fill his parish’s new building with sculpture, stained glass, banners, and vestments. I teamed up with another young sculptor

Continued on page 61