

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 18, 2008 at 6:36pm

Art and Spirituality: In the name of the mother

by Rich Heffern



Mother and Daughter 1981

Crows gather in cottonwoods by the Rio Grande River, down from the nearby Sandia Mountains that tower a mile above the city of Albuquerque. A community-operated irrigation canal, or acequia, threads its way from the riverbanks where the crows chatter into a neighborhood of low adobe abodes. As the sun rises, a slight, gray-haired woman emerges onto the worn plank porch of her house and pours half a glass of water out onto the sandy soil, lifts the cup to the sun, then drinks the rest of it.

Craighead, 72, has spent her life exploring in art the human-divine relationship, particularly in images of God as the Great Mother. Her published work -- books of her art with accompanying text by the artist --

includes *The Litany of the Great River* (Paulist Press), *The Mother's Songs: Images of God the Mother* (Paulist Press), *Sacred Marriage: The Wisdom of the Song of Songs* (Continuum) and *Meinrad Craighead: Crow Mother and Dog God*. The latter is a 340-page retrospective published in 2003 by Pomegranate Communications. She has been the subject of a number of documentaries filmed by Italian, British and U.S. television.

Her work portrays in vivid color both an active visual dialogue with God and a keen sense of the brooding, watching, beckoning power she finds in the land around her, in the sky above, the earth below, in the animals, in our dreams.



One critic called her art “vast landscapes of

interconnectedness.” Another wrote: “Her detailed pieces teem with images and concepts from Catholic spirituality and ancient mythologies, blended in visceral lunges or relentless flows. All art for Meinrad is prayer, a continual supplication for vision.”

Religious art portrays in tangible form the awe, wonder and mystery of our human encounter with the divine. Within this realm some artists stand out: in music, composer Arvo Pärt. In poetry, Rainer Maria Rilke and Gerard Manley Hopkins. In Craighead's work in the visual arts, nature, myth and the Catholic spiritual tradition all mix in a body of work that is enigmatic, illuminating and deeply nourishing, especially for women.

NCR spent a day with her in mid-June at her home here.

The walls of the studio that stands behind her house are fitted with several altars, on which stand kachina figures and pottery decorated with elaborate abstract designs from the nearby Native American pueblos, statues of saints, a jar stuffed with hawk feathers. Photos of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Carl Jung stand by portraits of dogs, both alive and dead, before which burning candles flicker. A Navajo rug hangs on the back wall. A note below an elegant drawing of a crow reminds her of the two principles of thermodynamics: energy is neither created nor destroyed but merely changes form; things fall apart. A big yellow dog sleeps next to the wood stove at the studio's center.

Other altars can be found in her house, in her bedroom, and on the grounds, one built on the site where a crow died shortly after Craighead moved in, all filled with art that honors the divine.

Her great-great-uncle was a saintly German Benedictine hermit-monk, Meinrad Eügster, revered in Switzerland in the early 1900s. She took her name from him. On her father's side her ancestors include members of the Chickasaw tribe.



As a young girl, Craighead was always drawing.

Christened Charlene, she was the first of three sisters born to a Catholic family in Arkansas. Growing up there and in Chicago during the Depression, she made do with sidewalks and scraps of paper, sketching incidents from the plots of radio serials. “I was ecstatic when my father gave me a tray containing three sticks of charcoal, then later a drawing table. By the time I was a teenager I spent hours drawing every day.”

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Her Catholic upbringing, she said, nourished her imagination through its ritual and ceremonies, its candles, incense, psalms and litanies. “From the beginning, I had a safe container in which to dream, inside the arms of my mother and my grandmother and then out into the imagery of the Catholic church.”

For her, Catholic schools didn’t so much impart knowledge as they conveyed beauty. “Friday afternoons we would put away our books and draw, make images then put them up on the board on Mondays. It was an ideal way to grow as an artist.”



Yet her first real religious experience, at the age of 7, was not in the

church but in nature, with her dog, she said. She had retreated from the heat of a summer day to the shade of some hydrangea bushes. Under the flowers’ blue dome, she found herself gazing into her dog’s eyes. “They were as deep, as bewildering, as unattainable as a night sky,” she said of the eyes, and as she stared

she felt a rush of water coming from deep within her.

“I listened to the sound of water inside, saw a woman’s face, and understood: This is God. Soon after this I came upon a photo in a book of a statue of a woman. The recognition was immediate, certain: I knew this was the woman I’d heard in the water and whose face I had seen in the dog’s eyes. This discovery brought a sense of well-being and gratitude, which has never diminished. Because she was a force living within me, she was more real, more powerful than the remote ‘Father’ I was educated to have faith in.”

She believed in her because she had experienced her, she said. “God the Mother came to me and, as children will do, I kept her a secret. We hid together inside the structures of institutional Catholicism. Through half a lifetime of Catholic liturgies, during school years, in my professional work as an educator, for 14 years in a monastery, she lived at my inmost center, the ground sill of my spirituality.”

Rather than threatening her certainty that the woman was, for her, the truer image of divine Spirit, the Catholic church offered reflections of the feminine deity in Mary as the Great Mother.

As a teen, Craighead fell under the spell of Dorothy Day, she said, even writing to her an impassioned letter asking how she could join up with the Catholic Worker to feed the hungry. “Dorothy kindly answered me saying that my calling was to be an artist and as such I could feed the hungry.”

Seeing in the dark

In 1960, Craighead received a scholarship to study art at the University of Wisconsin. After teaching for two years in Albuquerque, she took a year off to study and then teach art in Florence, Italy. She returned to the United States 21 years later.

In 1966, she entered Benedictine Stanbrook Abbey in England, where for the next 14 years she continued her work, publishing her first book, *The Sign of the Tree*, and becoming the subject of a number of television documentaries.



It wasn't a conflict of ideology that spurred her finally

leaving her contemplative nun's life in 1980. “The same spiritual energies which guided me into the monastery were now calling for me to leave the abbey,” she said. “There was something I was supposed to do that I couldn't do in the monastery. I loved monastic living and, at 44 years old, it would be hard to start a new life but I had to trust my calling. It was only after I left that I began to understand that I was supposed to concentrate on images of God the Mother.”

With a grant from the British Arts Council, Craighead produced her second book, *The Mother's Songs*. This collection of paintings and prose was the first outpouring of her personal vision of God the Mother, who had “guided me as an artist, illuminating my imagination. Eventually she erupted directly into my imagery.”

In 1983 she returned to the United States to set up her studio in New Mexico, where she still lives and works, devoting herself to imaging God as feminine.

“Both art and anthropology show that for hundreds of thousands of years our Paleolithic ancestors venerated female deities,” she said.

The ancient world had strong goddesses -- Isis, Tiamat, Cybele, Demeter. Buddhists honor Kuan Yin and Tara while Hindus revere Kali and Durga. Though the Christian Godhead lacks a strong female aspect, Craighead believes that anyone who has grown up in the womb of the Catholic church is given an early understanding of the sanctity of the Great Mother in Mary, the Mother of God. “In the history of art, she takes over where the early images of the Great Mother were pushed aside.”

Craighead points out the way the church over the centuries has used the energy of the divine feminine symbolically. “The church is called the Mother, the womb, the source.”

Feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Carol Christ and Mary E. Hunt have explored the role of the divine feminine in the history of religion and introduced multigendered language to describe God. Ecofeminists in particular assert that the degradation of nature is related to the oppression of women in our culture, which goes hand in hand with the dearth of female images of the divine.

An image that comes out of the Catholic tradition that particularly inspired and informed Craighead's work is that of the Black Madonna (see related story).

Subjects in her work range from the visions of Catholic mystic St. Hildegard of Bingen, to images of the Rio Grande, scenes from the psalms and the Song of Songs, figures from Greek and Norse mythology, Native American animal and divine spirits, wise grandmothers, angels clicking castanets, otherworldly beings. There are also women giving birth in a variety of ways, self-portraits, menstrual blood, icon-like scenes featuring dogs, crows, flickers, coyotes, magpies, turtles and owls.

One of her most memorable images, “The Sound of the Rio Grande,” depicts an elderly woman with braided hair playing a cello on a moonlit night with a coyote yipping beside her and water rushing beneath her.

Beside the feminine divine, animals are a key element in her art. “They see in the dark,” she said. “That's seeing into mystery, and that leap into the dark is the realm of creativity, so animals are sacred emissaries of divine messages. They are other, manifestly magic, splendid in their beauty, terrifying in their physical power, dangerous, yet giving.

“Looking into the animals' eyes, the ancient artists, like those who painted 10,000 years ago in the caves of southern France, saw into the divine. Watching the animals, they learned of the beauty of God's immanent presence. In all animal epiphanies, God is the teacher. Animals are guides into the underworld of prayer and sleep.

“Philosopher Gaston Bachelard called them the ‘origin of the human imagination.’ ”

Her work is also influenced by the Native American art of her beloved Southwest and by the landscape there. “When I came to New Mexico in 1960, I found the land that matched my interior landscape.”



She studied the Native American art she found there. “What moved them

to fashion their magnificent abstract designs? Their art and religions were a great mystery I took with me to Europe and kept with me in the monastery, especially the spirit called Crow Mother, who comes from the Hopi tradition.”

The techniques she has used include charcoal sketches and scratchboard abraded with steel wool or sandpaper on which paints are introduced and layered. The physical effort of that technique over time finally wore out her shoulder. She was forced to move to watercolors for a time, then to painting with acrylics.

She continues the principles of a monastic life. “I still identify with some of the vows I took as a nun, that of poverty for example. My understanding of poverty is not to have what you don’t need, so I live a simple life. I’m still following my commitment to obedience, heeding the same spirit that drove me into and out of a monastery, that drives me in my creative vocation.”

Fertile emptiness

Craighead has done workshops and retreats with women in recent years, using images for prayer and healing. She sees spirituality and her artwork as seamless.

“The artist is one who needs to behold, then lets that beholding enter her, lets it inhabit her and then moves it back out into the world. What artists express are the mysteries they have pondered inside them. Artists live a spirituality of epiphanies. Our work too is sexual: the work of conception, gestation and birth.”



Craighead said she spent one whole summer as a child digging a hole in

her backyard. “Finally I found I couldn’t get out, and had to borrow a ladder from my grandpa. Summer looms before a child as a time of emptiness, yet within that emptiness children always find an amazing world of creativity,” she said. “The experience that that emptiness is full of fertility is a basic human religious experience. Everything comes from that.”

“Meinrad’s work perfectly links the ecology movement, Catholic incarnational spirituality and the ascetic life,” said artist and Mercy Sr. Donna Ryan. “We readily acknowledge Catholic women novelists like Mary Gordon, Anne Rice or Flannery O’Connor but have neglected visual artists like Meinrad.”

Virginia Beane Rutter, who uses Craighead’s art in her psychotherapy practice with women, wrote:

“The great gift of Meinrad’s work to women is that it speaks directly to the heart and soul, the innermost place of the feminine interior garden, the wellspring of life. ... The Great Mother presides over the thresholds of life and death. ... The Black Madonna lends the gravitas of earth and sorrowful energy, and St. Hildegard inspires with her fiery visions of God. Crow Mother broods over aspects of them all. Through them, Meinrad devotes her life to creating and worshiping at the fountainhead, the source.”

Craighead’s mother recalled to her once that she was always burbling and humming as a young child but then stopped when she began to draw.

“She was not quite right. The humming stayed inside, the watery sounds collected around the place in my soul where imagery was to gather and focus in memories, in paintings. It was water that first told me I was an artist, and I believed the water.”

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National Catholic Reporter July 25, 2008

Source URL (retrieved on 08/16/2017 - 21:42): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/art-and-spirituality-name-mother>

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