Artist's Christ is king of the poor, the hungry, the homeless

by Joseph Young
Visitor Staff Writer


Those words appear in the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon tacked to the outside wall of a tiny studio in the Benedicta Arts Center at the College of St. Benedict. Inside the two-by-foured plasterboard walls, sculptor Joseph O'Connell kneels at the base of a larger-than-life limestone slab, gripping mallet and chisel. His echoey chink-chink-chinking lends an eerie, syncopated percussion to the smooth classic jazz that fills the space.

It's the heartbeat of a fine art alive and well and far from dead... Calvin to the contrary.

O'Connell, an artist in residence at St. Ben's, is in the fourth year of a sculpture in progress, a project commissioned by Christ the King Catholic Community in Las Vegas.

The project, which O'Connell hopes to complete by this summer, will stand in the community's courtyard. It is a triptych depicting Christ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on the center block, and figures symbolizing the homeless, poor, hungry and imprisoned of St. Benedict's Gospel on the outer blocks.

"They wanted to represent Christ the King, but they didn't want a regal, enthroned Christ," O'Connell explained. "Their parish has a tremendous mission to help the poor of the Las Vegas community," he added, "and they wanted a work that symbolized Matthew's Gospel message of responsibility to those people."

O'Connell chiseled the text into the right hand block: "I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me... just as you did for the least of my family you did for me."

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What does O'Connell say when he makes mistakes?

"You don't make mistakes," he said. "You just change the design."

O'Connell was dissatisfied, for example, with a Somalian girl about the right hand block, changing its expression. After abandoning that pesky center block for a time to work on the other two, O'Connell has returned to work on it.

But suffering for art's sake is perhaps an occupational hazard for sculptors. As O'Connell chisels away, wearing a respirator on his face, bandages on his left hand and forearm (He has a touch of tendinitis, he explained), limestone chips fall where they may and dust billows and collects on his blue jeans, boots, navy sweatshirt and quasi-tie.

"If I didn't wear glasses I'd have to wear goggles," he said, "or else blink each time, like the ancients had to."

O'Connell collects the debris in five-gallon pails, each holding 55 pounds of limestone dust and chips.

"There have been 77 buckets so far," O'Connell said, pointing to a tally on the wall, like a prisoner marks the days of his sentence. The limestone is recycled in a nearby garden.

But these two ton-plus of discards are a mere drop in the bucket, so to speak, compared to the 25,000-pound weight of the entire sculpture.

Besides limestone, which is relatively soft, but grainy, O'Connell sculpts granite, marble, wood, forged iron and "whatever I can work with," he said. Before breaking out his mallets and various tools, point and flat chisels, O'Connell makes "working sketches" of his visions and often makes guiding marks on the stone before and during sculpting.

The gallery of figures in O'Connell's two flanking limestone panels are separated and grouped in rectilinear compartments. Does this technique have a name?

"Comic strip, perhaps," O'Connell chuckled. "Maybe that's all I am — a cartoonist."

But, he deals in a comedy genre. And his is a fine art that is indeed seen, liked and understood and is relevant to today's culture. Calvin was wrong about that.
Clockwise, from top left:

- Joseph O'Connell works in the Benedicta Arts Center at the College of St. Benedict on a sculpture commissioned by Christ the King Catholic Community in Las Vegas.
- O'Connell resurrected a sketch he made in 1948 when planning figures for the Christ the King sculpture. The sketch is part of an exhibit entitled, "A Sculpture in Progress: Working Drawings and Photographs" at the Benedicta Arts Center Gallery.
- An almost gargoylike trio is among the groups of poor and hungry people incorporated into the Christ the King triptych. O'Connell notes that all of the figures are "in progress" and may be changed before the project is complete.
- Three limestone slabs, totaling 13 tons, were shipped to the College of St. Benedict from a quarry in Bedford, Indiana. O'Connell, working here on the center figure which represents Christ entering Jerusalem on a donkey, has already chipped away more than a ton. The completed sculpture will occupy an area about 12-by-16 feet.
- The artist's tools include chisels, pencils and markers.
- The Gospel of Matthew is O'Connell's inspiration for the Christ the King sculpture. (SCV Photos by Dianne Nordquist)