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-- Photos by W.M. Hughes

William Schickel

Frugal Splendor

Artist William Schickel pursues simplicity in his life and work

By MARGOT PATTERSON

The interior of the Grailville Oratory is spare; the wood beams in the converted barn crisscross a space as soaring as a cathedral. A simple wooden altar comprised of alternating strips of mahogany and white pine stands under a square light well. Dedicated in 1962, three years before the end of the Second Vatican Council, the oratory is one of the first churches in the United States with an altar placed so the priest faces the people.

Today the Grailville Oratory is still in use, still a striking blend of simplicity and grandeur, of earthiness and luminosity. An old concrete sewer pipe with small fish painted on it serves as a holy water font. The alternating wood strips of the altar, said to represent how Christ binds the many elements of the world into unity, echoes the simplicity of the wood floor and beams. Designed by artist William Schickel, the oratory expresses what Mr. Schickel says is the aim of his work. "Frugal splendor" is how he sums up his aesthetic.

The Grailville barn is one of five barns Mr. Schickel converted in the course of an eclectic career as a painter, sculptor, stained glass artist, liturgical and architectural designer. In turning the 1813 dairy barn into a place of prayer, Mr. Schickel said he was inspired by the beauty of the American barn and the barn's role in the Christian story.



Interior of the Grailville Oratory

In a talk he gave on the American barn, he wrote of Jesus coming to dwell on earth in a building constructed for the shelter of animals. "The barn at its best is an integration of splendor and humility that is ... expressive of the most fundamental Christian outlook."



"Crucifixion," acrylic on paper

Forty-five years after his renovation of the Grailville Oratory, Mr. Schickel is still pursuing his vision of splendor and simplicity. Much in the artist's work is an obvious testament to his Christian faith, but the self-described "ardent Catholic" shies away from the term "Catholic artist."

"My religion is the path that my life follows. It guides me," he said. "I think of myself as an artist and I think of myself as a Catholic, but I don't think of myself as a Catholic artist. If I was a mechanic, I wouldn't say I was a Catholic mechanic."

Named after his grandfather, William Schickel, an architect who designed more than a hundred buildings in Manhattan, including the Century Building, Manhattanville College and St. Ignatius Loyola Church on 84th Street, the younger William Schickel was early on drawn to both art and religion. At the University of Notre Dame, he was influenced by Frank O'Malley, a dynamic English professor, and the philosopher Yves Simon.

Both were Thomists, and through them, Schickel became familiar with the work of French philosophers Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson. Maritain's *book Art and Scholasticism* was particularly influential.

"That book shaped my life," the 88-year-old Schickel says today. What Maritain communicated, Mr. Schickel said, was that art is an integral part of life, a metaphysical expression of reality rather than a word.

"It's not something you listen to. It's something you behold. From the point of view of an artist, his philosophy is the best there is," said Mr. Schickel, who will receive the American Jacques Maritain Association's lifetime achievement award this October.

A simple life

At Notre Dame, Mr. Schickel encountered the work of Emil Frei Jr., a stained glass artist based in St. Louis. Active in the liturgical renewal movement, Mr. Frei was influenced by the Bauhaus movement and wanted to make the ancient craft of stained glass play a vital role in modern art.

Mr. Schickel wrote to Mr. Frei to ask if he could apprentice under him. During the apprenticeship that followed, Mr. Schickel met and fell in love with Mr. Frei's 16-year-old daughter, Mary.

The couple married two years later. Drawn by Mary's involvement in the Grail, a Catholic laywoman's movement, the Schickels made their home in Loveland, Ohio, where the Grail operated a 300-acre farm called Grailville, the site of the dairy barn that would later become the Grailville Oratory. In Loveland, the Schickels raised a family of 11 children while practicing subsistence agriculture and William Schickel his art.

"We never really worked at being affluent," said Mr. Schickel, who milked cows for 28 years. "We worked at being what we were supposed to be."



"Last Supper," acrylic on paper

Grailville was a center of liturgical renewal in the late 1940s through the '60s. But though the ideals of Vatican II were important in the renovation of the oratory and in much of the subsequent work Mr. Schickel undertook as a designer, Mr. Schickel has remained aloof from the culture wars that have divided Catholics.

"I have not affiliated myself with one side or another. I just do my work as an artist. I don't believe in being attached to one side or another," he said.

Greg Wolfe, editor of *Image*, a journal of art and religion, wrote a book about the artist called *Sacred Passion: The Art of William Schickel*. As someone who has spent his life trying to understand the estrangement between contemporary art and religion, and Catholicism in particular, Mr. Wolfe said he was attracted to Mr. Schickel as a subject because the latter was both "resolutely of the moment and at the same time deeply devout."

"In particular, I thought Bill's work synthesized the great artistic breakthroughs of modernism and brought them into the world of liturgical art," Mr. Wolfe said.

He cited the renovation of the monastery church and cloister at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky as a case in point. Commended by Thomas Merton as a "splendid job," Mr. Schickel's minimalist renovation stripped the church of its faux Gothic appearance and returned the church to something closer to the spirit of Cistercian architecture, achieving a simplicity and honesty in its use of materials that Mr. Wolfe said was modernism at its best.

In designing sacred spaces, Mr. Schickel has worked not only with Catholics but also Episcopalians, Methodists and Lutherans. The interfaith chapel he created at Miami Valley Hospital in Dayton, Ohio, presented a different set of challenges -- how to



"The Totem of Salvation" at the Mercy Center for Health and Wellness in Cincinnati

create a chapel that could be used by different religious faiths, could accommodate the wide variety of experiences of those in or visiting a hospital and yet transcend the insipidness that afflicts many interfaith places of worship.

Enthusiastic early on about the reforms of Vatican II, Mr. Schickel is untroubled by Pope Benedict's XVI's decision this summer to broaden permission for celebration of the Latin Mass in parishes.

"I think it's a normal accommodation over time to a fairly radical change," he said.

For Mr. Schickel, Catholicism is a religion in constant evolution.

"The tradition of the Catholic church is one of change from the very beginning," he said. "The so-called traditionalist doesn't realize that. The whole evolution of our faith is one of change. I accept that as the nature of our faith. Some people are troubled by it."

An unfettered vision

Though his art and aesthetics have been shaped by his Christian faith, Mr. Schickel isn't bound by traditional iconography. One of the symbols he's frequently worked with is the totem. At the Mercy Center for Health and Wellness in Cincinnati, he created a 35-foot high totem that stands in the entry to the health and fitness center. Each block of Indiana limestone weighs about four tons. A menorah is represented on the bottom block. On the blocks above are stories from the New Testament, including Jesus among the elders and the parable of the sower of seeds, images of baptism and the Eucharist, and on the top stone a representation of the Final Coming.

The totem at the Mercy Healthplex is one of half a dozen Mr. Schickel has created. "I've found that if you're trying to tell an ancient story in a contemporary way, the totem works very well," he said.

Schickel's son Joe, who runs the William Schickel Gallery in Loveland, said his father had been attacked for making totems by conservative Catholics suspicious of his work.

"Dad took a lot of heat from one side of the culture war for using a totem. The art people don't trust him because he's religious and the religious people don't trust him because he's modern," he said.

The combination of faith and modernism is evident in a series of paintings illustrating the Book of Genesis, which Mr. Schickel did in the last year. These and other works were on display this summer at the William Schickel Gallery in Loveland and will be shown again at the gallery Nov. 2 through the end of the year. The paintings inspired by the Genesis story take a sometimes-whimsical approach to material that since Michelangelo is more often associated with grandeur and grandiosity than with playfulness or humor. A canvas painted entirely in blue titled "The Fifth Day" shows birds flying above a school of fish. Another painting illustrates God's creation of land on Day 3 as two patches of brown against a blue sea. Here and elsewhere, Mr. Schickel chooses to depict the creation in terms of its most basic elements rather than its dizzying diversity. The paintings function as maps or hieroglyphs of creation.



"The Fifth Day," acrylic on paper

Mr. Schickel has spoken of the influence of jazz on his work, and an arresting image suggestive of that is a crucifixion in purple depicting Jesus in an irregular scrawl of lines. "The Last Supper," painted in 1976, and one of the most riveting of the paintings in the gallery, shows Clarence Rivers, the first African-American to become a priest in the Cincinnati archdiocese and a pioneering liturgist and musician, as Jesus. The artist used the faces of neighbors in Loveland to depict the other apostles.

For all the inspiration William Schickel has clearly drawn from his faith, Joe Schickel believes his father's reputation

as an artist has been hurt by his Catholicism.

“I guess I really feel that Dad’s great downfall was that he was a Catholic. If he was Jewish, he would be in the Metropolitan Museum. My point is that some religion groups do take an interest in cultural life and often Catholics do not,” Joe Schickel said.

Lately, William Schickel has been working on subjects likely to offend both the left and the right. A series of paintings on abortion as genocide will set many liberals’ teeth on edge. Another painting of a lynched man, done in 2006, reflects the influence of an article by theologian James H. Cone in which the author identifies the cross with the lynching tree in America. And Mr. Schickel is writing a book about his wife, Mary, who died at Eastertime.

“We were madly in love for 60 years,” he said.

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Related Web site

William Schickel Gallery

www.williamschickelgallery.com

A vibrant partnership

Bill Schickel's life as well as his art holds interest, partly for what seems a remarkable marriage. He and his wife, Mary, had 11 children, all of whom are practicing Catholics, according to Mr. Schickel's son, Joe, and daughter, Joy.

At age 32, married, with three young children, William Schickel was diagnosed with lymphoma and given two months to live. His wife's research located Dr. Max Gerson, an expatriate German doctor who put Mr. Schickel on a special diet. Fifty years later, William Schickel credits his recovery from cancer to a miraculous confluence of forces that include his wife, Dr. Gerson, and St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, to whom both Schickels had a special devotion.

In 1966, Mr. Schickel renovated a half-finished basilica in St. Charles, Mo., into an austere, modernist shrine to the saint, a French nun who brought the Society of the Sacred Heart to the United States in 1818.

Greg Wolfe, editor of *Image*, calls the marriage of Mary and William Schickel “a real partnership.”

“I think they are a wonderful example of the vibrance of much pre-Vatican II spiritual life in the United States. Mary's involvement with the Grail movement and Grailville paralleled his interest in contemporary Catholic thinking about the arts.”

Long before interest in ecology and nature became fashionable, the Schickels were taking part in an agrarian movement, living on the land, enthusiastically participating in the innovative liturgies held at Grailville, immersing themselves in the writings of such prominent Catholics as Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day.

While people imagine a woman with 11 children as harried, William Schickel said the best word for his wife of 60 years was “serene.” His children echoed that word in describing Mary Schickel.

“She was amazingly, amid all the hectic stuff, serene and bright,” Joe Schickel said.

“They were two remarkably matched souls. They were very complementary in different ways,” he said of his parents.

While William and Mary Schickel refused to be pegged as either liberal or conservative Catholics, their daughter, Joy, said the younger generation of Schickels run the gamut, from liberal Catholics to neoconservatives to members of Opus Dei.

“Within my generation and their children, I see a wide range in how people choose to practice their faith,” she said.

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