

Transforming the world with pretty pictures

BY LIZ KELLY

Pablo Picasso once said that an artist does not paint in order to ask a question. Instead, the artist paints because he cannot help but share what he has already found.

Painter Dolores Flessner, and others like her, understand that urgent need to share what they have found—both inside themselves and within the framework of their faith.

Flessner was selected as the North American representative to join 16 other artists worldwide in a personal audience with the Pope during the 2000 Jubilee for Artists in Rome. Known primarily for her studies in "equine movement" (polo and Western riding are favorite subjects), Flessner is co-founder of the Catholic organization Artists for a Renewed Society (ARS), based in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the ARS is an ambitious one: to "renew society through art which effectively communicates the true, the good and the beautiful."

Ambitious perhaps, but certainly a message that surrounded Flessner as a child. Her father was a painter, but economic and familial circumstances prevented him from pursuing his craft full-time. When he discovered his daughter's talent, however, he encouraged her to stay home as long as she needed in order to ease the financial burden common to those who pursue the arts.

Flessner's early experience is unusual. She suggests that it is far more common for artists of all varieties, despite possessing talent, to lack the necessary support—emotional, financial and spiritual—to pursue their vocation. In the end, many are left paralyzed by loneliness and economic stress.

Even Flessner, despite the support of her family, pushed aside her art in order to pursue more "practical" things.

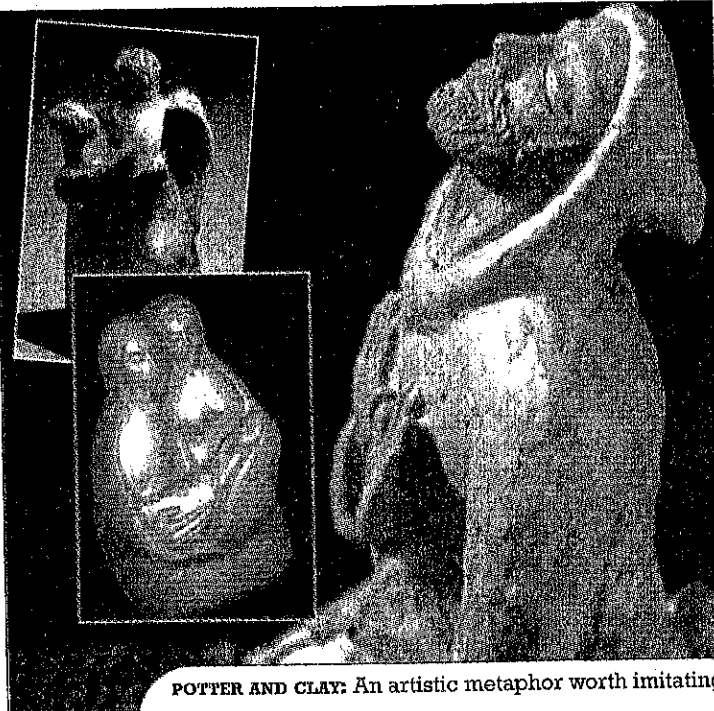
She became very active in the pro-life movement. Ironically, it was her secondary interest in politics that drove her back to her art, and to forming ARS.

"I wondered at first, 'What good are pretty pictures going to do for anyone?'" Flessner told Our Sunday Visitor. "At least working in the pro-life movement was doing some good for someone."

Beauty and truth

But Flessner was continually surprised at the number of spiritual conversations that were opened up through her work, even sketches of polo ponies.

"The key for me," she said, "was when a friend, who was more studied in theology, mentioned, 'Beauty is transcendental, and beauty leads to truth.'" She then began to realize that her desire to



POTTER AND CLAY: An artistic metaphor worth imitating

return to painting had a weightier consequence.

"The problems that I saw and was trying to help solve in politics were much deeper than any political solution could touch," Flessner said. "We need to have good people in politics, but the problems are so deep, they are inculturated, and we have to really start to pay attention to the culture."

Further motivated by the Holy Father's 1999 "Letter to Artists," which calls upon artists of every medium to develop their art in service of humanity, as well as hoping to bridge "the support gap," Flessner and a Washington-area ceramicist, Scott Sullivan, formed what they hope will be the

first of many ARS groups throughout the country, and even the world.

As they prepare to adopt nonprofit status, the core membership of about 25 are poised to begin national projects, including a proposed exhibit on "The Beauty of the Child." They meet in small groups monthly to network and discuss anything from philosophy to art education to handling rejection.

"The very sensitivity that enables you to be a good artist," said Flessner, "also makes you vulnerable to a lack of support." Too often, she added, the result is young artists who may have talent but no real knowledge of their craft, and no understanding for the need of study.

Some young artists thus fall into the mind-set that art is more about the individual rather than about trying to create something beautiful, even if that's through suffering or sorrow.

Like Flessner, Sullivan could not sep-

arate his faith from his artistry.

"The artistic journey is very similar to the prayer journey, the journey to God, the journey of faith," Sullivan told Our Sunday Visitor. "I think most of us see a great separation between art produced today and faith."

He believes that the Church, particularly Pope John Paul II, "is saying to artists, 'Come back, let's unite again. Let's journey together in faith and work together in your artistic expression.'"

Church and art

Historically speaking, the Church has long been a source of both inspiration and support for artists. Significant movements in art history have often been linked to the Church, such as the Renaissance, which some historians suggest was brought about by St. Francis of Assisi's emphasis on "the beauty of creation as a reflection of the glory of God," as well as his "love for the mystery of the Incarnation."

The call is not just to artists, however. ARS also encourages the support and involvement of patrons who wish to support the arts, thereby building credibility for a vocation that is often disregarded as impractical and unnecessary.

"There is power in the image," said Renata Grzan, an ARS member. "It can instantaneously speak to our heart, and that is something the Church has always known, that the Holy Father has always known. He understands that the flourishing of culture is measured by whether or not we can produce good, fine art. I don't think we really harness that power in the best way, so that people can meet the ultimate beauty who is God."

In his "Letter to Artists," the Pope shared the hopes of Dostoyevsky: "Beauty will save the world."

But when? Flessner and the other members of ARS aren't asking that question; they're answering it. They say beauty's time has come. □

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"Beauty is transcendental, and beauty leads to truth."

Art and the Eucharist

"UNION WITH CHRIST IS THE PRIMARY ACTION OF THE EUCHARIST, and unity within the Church flows from this. Similarly, sacred art has a capacity to unite believers and even unbelievers, in admiration and in joy over the beauty that is manifested. This is a unity that transcends language, race, culture and even religious differences."

It has been around the altar and the Eucharist in particular that the Church has grown. The cathedrals, paintings, humble country churches, mosaics and so on, everything converges around the Eucharist.

"Contemplation is common to both Eucharist and Adoration and Mass, so the contemplation of sacred art can lift the heart to love of God and anticipation of heavenly joy."

Just as the Eucharist is Christ made visible and tangible through the form of Bread and Wine, so sacred art makes visible incarnate the inspiration of the artist who contemplates creation. The artist transforms raw materials into intelligible and ordered beauty, just as the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

Dolores Flessner, speaking at "Called to Communion in Christ," a symposium sponsored by Artists for a Renewed Society (ARS) at The Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., April 15, 2000.



THE HOLY FAMILY