



## A Brief History of Herman's *Magnificat* Paintings

John Skillen, director of the Studio for Art, Faith & History in Orvieto

The two large Marian triptychs by Bruce Herman featured in *Magnificat* – and intended finally for installation in a monastery in Orvieto, Italy – are the product of long labor by the artist, to be sure. But they are not the result of private choices made by an autonomous artist working independently in his studio on a work dreamed up *ex nihilo*, without any knowledge about where the paintings might end up, who would see them, and who might buy them – these being the de-contextualized conditions generally assumed for art-making during the recent period of modernism.

As Herman would agree, these paintings have a direct relation to twenty years of conversations about the impending loss and possible recuperation of two dimensions of tradition: traditions of meaning and traditions of making.

“...of course, tradition means transmission rather than conservation...It is in this sense that we can say that transmission is equivalent to translation,” writes Hans-Georg Gadamer. When objects once valued by a community are taken out of circulation and museum-ized,

their tradition is eclipsed and in effect dies. A tradition is kept alive through repeated return to its sources and through acts of reinterpretation which are never mere repetitions. A tradition is renewed when something from the past is seen as timely or relevant by someone or by some community -- still timely enough to warrant the effort of translating it into contemporary language. And as the translator knows, this rendering contemporary of some lesson from the past, some word, some visual pattern or emotional sequence, sensed as newly needful, will itself modify contemporary language.

I have been fortunate to be a part of conversations about such issues with Bruce and other of our colleagues and friends – often in unlikely settings such as Wednesday morning breakfasts at various local diners. One institutional result of these conversations was the creation of an arts-oriented undergraduate semester program in Orvieto (which I have administered since 1998). We sought a setting in which a generation of largely a-historical post-culture young people could experience something of a traditional community in which the elements of art, faith, family, and civic life still cohered, and then to play with reshaping the vestiges of that tradition into new configurations fitted for their own time.

Our intent was to recreate something on the order of the Renaissance *bottega*. We imagined a workshop environment that brought together skilled professionals in the arts and humanities to experiment with new ways of recuperating traditional texts, genres, media and styles; in a pedagogical mode that brought younger artists into the *sacra conversazione* of the tradition; and in a manner answerable to the audiences which these activities were intended to serve.

By 2002, Bruce had redrafted a conventional studio art course into a setting for launching the “Mary project” in Orvieto. The unconventional character of this course shows up in the syllabus:

*COURSE DESCRIPTION:*

*This course will acquaint the student with the working methods, imagery, and aesthetic philosophy of the teacher. Students will work alongside of the professor as assistants on a common project, and will be given the privilege and responsibility of acting as collaborators learning and working in an apprenticeship atmosphere.*

*Unlike a (now) conventional academic college art classroom, the bottega is a workshop – with all the rigor and expectations associated. That is, students will work hard for hours and days at a time, sometimes engaged in menial tasks associated with the common project, other times engaged at a deep, principled level with the substance of the project – a mural in eight parts. They will be drawn into the process of selecting the iconographic program (images, subject matter, scenes, theological symbolism, etc.) and executing the daily work associated with the mural. Division of labor and daily tasks will be assigned by the workshop leader and/or his delegates.*

*Just as in a Renaissance bottega, where the master considered the talents and abilities and levels of skill of each member of the workshop, so we will seek to adjust the components of the project to the various verbal and visual interests and training of the members.*

*REQUIREMENTS:*

- *A humble and diligent attitude (perhaps more essential than artistic talent)*
- *Daily work ethic – and a humility about tasks and personal involvement*
- *Daily writing and sketching*
- *Work on assigned tasks from studio clean-up to figure painting*

But while the design of the course may have been ours freely to plan, we had no unilateral control in selecting the *in situ* location for the completed “commission” – at that point envisioned as a linked series of eight large panels each dealing with a particular episode in Mary’s life.

Here must be introduced one of the protagonists in the story: the formidable personality of Suor Giovanna Galli, mother superior of the convent which hosted the Gordon College program during its first several years.

Suor Giovanna gave a reluctant go-ahead allowing us to imagine installing the finished project along the walls of what the nuns still termed the *palestra* or gymnasium – a former cloistered chapel.

The room has a complicated history. As indicated by its architectural form, the chapel was designed as mirror image of the main church of the monastery, sharing a common altar wall. The feature is not unusual in convents of cloistered orders: the altar, typically perforated, allowed the “religious” inside and the laity coming to the monastery from outside to participate in a common liturgy. Photographs taken early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century show an ornately decorated space. But by the middle of the last century, when the sisters inhabiting *Istituto San Lodovico* were no longer cloistered but engaged in active mission as teachers in the high school sponsored by their order, the chapel was stripped and transformed into a gymnasium, with sprung wood flooring installed over the marble pavement. When we arrived, the climbing apparatus still lined the drab walls, but the high school had been closed for some years, and the convent pre-school used the space only now and then for recreation activities and pageants. With funding from the generous parents of a student, Gordon College made the appeal to refurbish the hall and return it to its original status as a place of worship, albeit minimally furnished, and designed to accommodate a variety of ecumenical activities. Bruce’s paintings were to serve as murals in this semi-sacred space.

The students in Herman’s *bottega* worked long and hard, laying down coat over coat of traditional hand-prepared gesso on the wood panels, sanding them to silken smoothness. This work literally took weeks. Additionally, Bruce introduced several of the students to traditional water-gilding, a painstaking process of laying down fragile squares of gold and silver leaf (most of which would eventually appear only palimpsest-like, if at all, under multiple over-layers of paint). Bruce’s skilled young assistant Truitt Seitz sketched in possibilities on some of the panels, most of which faced erasure, again by over-painting by Bruce. Local folk were brought in for photo sessions as potential models for all the figures -- arousing the suspicions of the mother superior, uncomfortable having strangers inside the inner sanctum of the convent. Sergio Riccetti – a distinguished elderly gentleman with a majestic gray beard, honored in town for his forty years as the “Lord Mayor” in the Corpus Christi procession – was one of the three Magi; the carpenter Luis as the carpenter Joseph; Anna Lardani and her daughter Elisa as the Elisabeth and Mary of the Visitation, and so forth.

At the conclusion of Professor Herman’s month-long “Mary Mural Bottega” – proud of our students’ hard work and cooperative spirits, with Bruce’s labors bringing several panels not to completion but to a level of figuration and complexity sufficient for a private viewing – we invited the nuns’ participation in a joint service of vespers, Marian in its singing and devotion, with the incomplete paintings displayed on the walls of their intended permanent location.

Catching us completely off guard, we could see the steam of anger rising from Suor Giovanna as she beheld the paintings for the first time. We staggered through the service. Afterwards,

Giovanna commanded Bruce's and my presence in her office. There she erupted in rage at the insult we had just forced upon her by impudently obliging her and her community to pay their devotion to the Virgin – patron saint of their order – *via* paintings in which the figures were clearly recognizable as local people, and many, moreover, from the charismatic-renewal community whose behavior was an embarrassment (at least from the perspective of Suor Giovanna's theological and devotional convictions). We didn't know what to say. I felt mortified at my lapse of imagination in not having anticipated such a reaction. But I was also angry at Suor Giovanna for her inability at least to recognize wholesomeness of motives, to acknowledge the innocence of the students caught in the crossfire, to appreciate that her Protestant American guests were at least trying to open up to the Virgin and her role in salvation history. And I was terrified by the distinct possibility that she would kick us (and the program) out the front door and lock it behind us.

The ironies of the situation were not lost upon us. Here we were, re-visiting Renaissance practices such as the use of identifiable contemporary figures in the ancient narratives order to foster reflection on the “typological” parallels between contemporary and biblical times and places and people – only to find ourselves more historically Catholic in our artistic strategies than these Catholic nuns. And while feeling that our initial foray into Renaissance-style commissioned murals had blown up in our faces, we had to remind ourselves that problems with patrons, offenses delivered and received were the very stuff of that era's patronage process. (An example might be the fact that Masaccio's frescoed portraits of the Brancacci family were probably chipped away when the family was exiled from Florence.) We had unwittingly recreated Renaissance conditions a little too vividly for our own good!

In the end, we weathered the immediate storm. But the moment impressed upon me and the College authorities that we should not expect to find in San Lodovico, under Suor Giovanna's authoritarian leadership, either a blank canvas or a blank check for our own experimentations in recuperating the tradition of sacred art in contemporary modes.

The project got placed on the back burner for a couple of years – partly as a result of the impasse with Suor Giovanna, and partly due to Herman's return to the States. (But of course the *Cappella di San Brizio* in the Orvieto Duomo stood idle, scaffolding in place, for fifty years between Fra Angelico's abortive beginning and Luca Signorelli's completion of one of the most stupendous Last Judgments in history – or so I consoled myself.)

By 2005, the Gordon program – now defined as a *Studio for Art, Faith & History* – had expanded the scope of its activities, collaborating, for instance, with the town authorities and the Catholic bishop in creating an annual *Festival of Art and Faith* to be inserted into the event most pivotal for the town's identity: the late-spring holy-day of Corpus Christi. That year we organized a cycle of the medieval mystery plays, and an international conference on the “eucharistic and eschatological” themes of the Duomo's decorative programme, and the town hosted a major show of Herman's work, entitled *Il Corpo Spezzato* (the Body Broken) in its suite of large public galleries in the *Palazzo dei Sette*.

Partly as a means of re-focusing his attention on the “Mary mural project,” Bruce offered to hold a week-long *Studio Aperto* (open studio) in the large atrium of the *Palazzo*. While he worked afresh on the unfinished panels, set up around the atrium, visitors were welcomed to watch the artist at work, and even to interrupt him with questions about the process, the

subject matter, the project as a whole. Groups of tourists, school children, and students of the college program visited almost daily during the *Studio Aperto*, including a surprise visit by the Bishop – who mischievously surprised the artist from behind with a bear hug during his work!

At the end of the week, the mayor's Assessor of Culture, *Dottoressa* Teresa Urbani, spoke at a reception in the artist's honor.

Dr. Urbani said something that counterbalanced Suor Giovanna's discouraging word that we had somehow barged in like insensitive Americans and violated the very tradition that we had supposedly come to learn from. Said Urbani: "You have given our tradition back to us." The context of her remark was clear: for many (mainly secularized post-Christian) folk in Orvieto and in Italy in general, there is an honest appreciation of, and pride in, the riches and excellence of their artistic heritage. But that tradition has become museum-ized. Modern-day people seldom look to the treasured masterworks of the Renaissance for any light these might shed on their own predicaments. But by reconfiguring these scenes, painting them through a mastery of methods and media both old and new, and by revivifying "typology" (bringing people of our own time into the settings), Herman was recasting their own tradition in a new light. Without corniness or sentimentality, stepping down out of the loft studio and allowing a contemporary audience openly to participate, Bruce played his part in restoring immediacy to these stories from once-sacred scripture, recovering the Jewish girl Miriam (theotokos) as one of us. Like the muralists of the Italian tradition, Herman was attempting to recover, in his contemporary images of Mary, our own potentiality as ordinary people to whom angels might appear and who might just be honored enough by a Divine Lover to be given free choices on which whole histories depend.

After the exhibition in Orvieto, a patron came forward, generous beyond hope (and as theologically and artistically astute a patron as any Fra Angelico could have hoped for). Thanks to their generosity the panels were shipped back to Herman's studio in the States, where the artist worked non-stop for two years to complete the work. The final form of the work changed considerably from a set of separate narrative panels to the two large altarpiece triptychs displayed in the touring exhibition and this catalogue.

In the past year, I have overseen a move of the *Studio for Art, Faith and History* to another convent, in a sufficient state of ruination to allow us more scope – more blank walls – for our task of "giving back" a fractured and fragmented sacred art tradition to our contemporaries.

Ironically, the planned location for Herman's two Marian triptychs in our new location, monastery *San Paolo*, is exactly the same as in *Istituto San Lodovico*: the chapel originally designed for the cloistered "religious," set in inverse symmetry to the main church open to the laity.

When installed in monastery *San Paolo*, Herman's paintings can do their work amidst a living community, prompting meditation, inspiring devotion, guiding the liturgical work of the gathered company of worshippers, and arousing an inspirational desire among young apprentices to pursue disciplined training in their craft.

Herman's triptychs in fact represent a "translation" of Marian pictorial tradition for each of the two audiences which the *Studio for Art, Faith & History* seeks to bring together in "sacred conversation."

On the one hand, the cultural-soil of Gordon College's evangelical Protestantism includes the general reluctance of the Reformation (at least until recently) to give Jesus' earthly mother too much stage time. On the other side, the high profile of the Blessed Virgin in Roman Catholic devotion and theology has fostered a strongly-cast codification of the episodes of Mary's life and the range of meanings drawn from these episodes. The fifteen Marian mysteries – the five Joyous (Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, Finding in the Temple), the five Dolorous, the five Glorious – are so deeply habituated in devout Catholic piety as to become a rhythm of breathing, an inner set of symmetries that give geometric meter and harmony to the narrative of her life and identity. They keep aspects of Mary central to Catholic consciousness. But at the same time this codification keeps other possibilities un-actualized. One might think, for example, of her proactive assertiveness (as we might say nowadays) demonstrated at the Wedding at Cana (less of a "Be it unto me according to thy word" than a "Do it unto you according to His word") which seems to suit awkwardly with a view of obedience as passive introversion and reserve that is the strong note of hundreds of Annunciations.

But the "traditions of meaning" in which Herman's triptychs operate is the focus of Dr. Rachel Hostetter Smith's essay. My task has been to locate the paintings in "traditions of making."