

CHAPTER printed in
ART AND SOUL FLOSSIE PEITSCH
MACMILLAN ART PRESS, 2006
(Copies of the book available from Flossie upon request)

ART AS VISUAL THEOLOGY

By Pat Negri, S.S.S.

Patrick Negri was born in 1935. At the age of 16 he entered the Blessed Sacrament Congregation and was ordained to the priesthood in 1960. In 1990, he earned his doctorate in theology at Berkeley, CA, with a thesis entitled: *Signs of Being: the Religious Significance of the Art of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko*. He is a practicing artist and has a keen interest in young emerging artists.

Ed note: Patrick Negri succumbed to cancer several years after he wrote this article.

Illus. The images mentioned are HAUSTAFELN aprons.



“God does not exist,” said Paul Tillich. That sounds like the statement of an atheist. But Tillich, philosopher and theologian, was not an atheist. In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich argues that God is “being itself

beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him.”¹

Living in an age - much like our own - when the ancient formulas of belief failed to evoke a positive response from the general populace, Tillich tried to express

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I* (University of Chicago Press, 1967) p.205. Emphasis added.

his faith in the all-pervading presence of God in words more likely to appeal to a secularized culture. He stated:

Since the split between a faith unacceptable to culture and a culture unacceptable to faith was not possible for me, the only alternative was to attempt to interpret the symbols of faith through expressions of our culture.²

Fortunately, for artists like Flossie Peitsch struggling with issues of art and religion, he chose the visual arts as an area of special research. "Modern art," he declared "is not propaganda, but revelation."³

Behind this conviction lay an initial encounter with a work of art that was not modern. It was a painting by Sandro Botticelli, called *Madonna with Singing Angels* (c.1477) which he saw for the first time while on leave from the army during World War I. It was an ecstatic encounter which he called "a revelation." The experience formed the basis of his systematic study of art and theology. Later, he rejected much of the art of the Renaissance because of what he called its "beautifying naturalism" and concentrated, more intently, on art with a "northern sensibility" such as the Isenheim Altarpiece (c. 1515) by Matthias Grunewald. Art of this kind, he felt, brought the viewer to a consideration of what is of ultimate concern. "Pictures, poems, and music can become objects of theology," he wrote, "not from the point of view of their aesthetic form, but from the point of view of their power of expressing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately, in and through their aesthetic form."⁴

Whatever art Tillich looked at, he judged on the basis of its ability to break through the surface reality of things to the depths beneath. He expected contemporary artists to question the meaning of human existence. By doing this – by "breaking the mirror of life" as Franz Marc put it - they were in touch with the divine being "beyond essence and existence" whom Tillich called the Ground of Being. The artists of the twentieth century most likely to do this, he suggested, were the German Expressionists, but it was not limited to them. He was convinced that all the great works of art in human history had this expressive characteristic and so he could say:

It is indeed possible to see in a still-life of Cezanne, an animal painting by Marc, a landscape of Schmidt-Rotluff, or an erotic painting of Nolde, the immediate revelation of an absolute reality in these relative things; the depth content of the world, experienced in the artist's ecstasy, shines through these things, they have become sacred objects.⁵

² S.T. III, p. 5.

³ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952) p. 147.

⁴ S.T. I, p. 21

⁵ *Paul Tillich on Art and Architecture*, edited by John and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987) p. 54.

Artists of the twenty-first century may have some difficulty with the seriousness of Tillich's approach, but artists worth their salt *are* trying to come to grips with a reality beyond the banal. They would understand, I am sure, the words of a contemporary of Tillich, the Jesuit anthropologist, Teilhard de Chardin: "Throughout my whole life, during every minute of it, the world has been gradually lighting up and blazing before my eyes until it has come to surround me, entirely lit up from within."⁶

Flossie Peitsch searches in her work for a reality of this kind. The simplest things like aprons, for example, are used in the "Nave" section of her installation to investigate her place in the order of things, pointing to the community to which she belongs, both familial and ecclesial, with its innumerable ties and connections, its demands and its call to service. Family relationships, experiences of alienation as an immigrant to Australia, the search for a place to call home, her dealing with the sadness of her mother's death in a country thousands of kilometers away are all part of her creative endeavor in sculpture and poetry.

Peitsch's unique installations frequently reference her position as an artist within a church community. This community, historically, has narrowly regarded art as theology for the illiterate or as an aid to devotional life or evangelism, not as revelation of God in its own right. It is no wonder she should find kinship with Paul Tillich who said:

...the arts open up a dimension of reality which is otherwise hidden, and they open up our own being for receiving the reality...only the arts can do this: science, philosophy, moral action and religious devotion cannot. The artist brings to our senses and through them to our whole being, something of the depth of our world and us, something of the mystery of being.⁷

⁶ Cited by Annie Dillard in *For the Time Being* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) p. 11.

⁷ Cited by Wilhelm and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976) p. 280.