

## Features

# Holy Cross brother's art reflects seasons of his life

By Teresa A. Parsons

Most of the work Brother Etienne Cooper does somehow reflects the loves and the seasons of his 72 years of life.

The high cheekbones on the faces he sculpts echo the features of his first art professor, a Hungarian exiled in Indiana.

A brooch of his late mother's "glitters from every angle" as the figure of an angel in a tapestry depicting the Annunciation.

His seascapes recall countless hours spent gazing at the Long Island coastline.

The "Miracle Man of Montreal" — his favorite subject of late — is the first member of his congregation, the Brothers of Holy Cross, to be beatified.

Brother Cooper credits decades as an art teacher for the versatility of the media in which he works. As for the characteristics of technique and style that have become his own — they are the product of less tangible influences.

Perhaps it was simply the clutter of accumulated experience that persuaded him to abandon the polished surfaces of his early sculpture and adopt a coarser finish. "I used to try to smooth things down," he said simply. "Now I leave them rough."

Brother Cooper wryly observed that he has spent 65 years searching for his medium. But even now the process is far from finished. "Right now, I'm working on (weaving) wings that aren't wings and on feathers that don't look like feathers," he said, referring to the Annunciation tapestry, which is still in progress.

What has remained consistent in his work is its focus on spiritual themes. "It's because of my life, I suppose," he said. "It's like the psalm that says, 'Give success to the work of our hands! You express Him through your handiwork!'"

Aside from his vocational attraction to religious themes, Brother Cooper has found them to be a rich source of inspiration. "There's so much to draw from in our faith and history," he said. "The ideas keep coming faster than I can work on them."

Time for his art has always been precious to Brother Cooper. For more than 35 years, he has had to balance the rush of ideas with the weight of other responsibilities — mainly teaching.

He began his classroom career in 1941 at an Indiana high school. While earning degrees from Notre Dame University, The Catholic University of America and Lehigh University, Brother Cooper squeezed art studies into summer sessions.

Among the first figures he remembers sculpting is the bust of a Filipino vestment maker, which was exhibited in a show known as the Hoosier Salon. "I did painting, watercolors, and everything else," he recalled.

Over the years, however, the challenge of entering shows and competitions faded. "I haven't done much exhibiting since I came east," he said. "I guess I've proven myself. I'd rather do something that will please me than something to please someone else."

From Indiana, he moved to Illinois, and a year later to Flushing, N.Y., where he spent two years teaching at Holy Cross High School. Between 1957 and 1961, he served as assistant headmaster at the Notre Dame International School in Rome. He then returned to Flushing for four more years before he was appointed principal of Bethlehem High School in Bethlehem, Pa.

After three years, during which he did almost no artwork, Brother Cooper resigned the



Brother Etienne Cooper, CSC, is searching for the means to create an illusion of angels' wings in one of his current projects, a tapestry of the Annunciation. He added weaving to his artistic repertoire in order to strengthen his left hand after it was weakened by a stroke.

principal's post. "It's no job for an art teacher," he recalled.

He then returned to Holy Cross in Flushing for four more years, at which point he asked the provincial for permission to retire. His superior agreed, but asked him first to spend one year substituting for a brother who taught at Cardinal Mooney High School in Rochester. Although he had planned to move to Florida at the end of the year, Brother Cooper decided instead to stay.

For the next three years, he taught crafts to residents of St. Ann's Home/The Heritage. In 1977, a stroke finally forced him to retire from full-time teaching. He refused, however, to give in to the paralysis that crippled his left side. "I said, 'It's not going to get me down, and it never did,'" he recalled.

After recovering sufficiently, Brother Cooper returned to part-time teaching for several years, offering classes at the School of the Holy Childhood and at several senior centers and schools in the city.

Although he recalls with special fondness the eager enthusiasm of a group of students on Hollister Street, he has seldom missed teaching in the years since he quit.

With more time to concentrate on his own work, Brother Cooper has returned again and again to a single subject — Blessed Brother Andre Bessette, (1845-1937), the "Miracle Man

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Blessed Brother Andre Bessette, the first Brother of Holy Cross to be beatified, is among Brother Cooper's most frequent subjects in sculpture and painting.



The retired art teacher regards as his heritage the paintings, sculptures and tapestries he has sent to churches, schools and museums in countries throughout the world.