

Paintings portray priest's pilgrimage

Willy Thorn/CNS

WASHINGTON — "There is nothing more dull and boring than a straight line," according to Benedictine Father Jerome Tupa.

The same goes for bland colors, judging by the 50 or so paintings on display at Washington's Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, in an exhibit titled "The Road to Rome: A Modern Pilgrimage," which runs through May 7, 2003.

Inspired by pilgrims of old, Father Tupa embarked on a six-week, 30-stop trip through the Italian countryside in the summer of 1999. The idea, he said, was to go to various Italian cultural and spiritual centers, praying, painting and drawing at each.

Some of the spots "are from the medieval pilgrims' route," said Father Tupa, who talked at the exhibit's opening and in an interview with Catholic News Service.

Returning to Collegeville, Minn., where he teaches French at St. John's University, he produced, from the sketches and watercolors, dozens of huge oil paintings, which generally are between 3 and 4 feet tall and 4 and 5 feet wide.

The paintings show vivid buildings and cityscapes: Florence's Duomo, Padua's Onion Domes, the Basilica of St. Francis and the Tiber River's Roman waterfront. If people appear, it is as minor details.

"Somehow they don't fit," he said. "The dynamic of the building

itself becomes so alive, to put a person in it beside it would almost detract from the vitality of the building.

"It has to do with our history ... so dynamic and alive in these structures," he said. "These buildings have stood a test of time that goes beyond any one of us. Despite the long history of destruction ... these places are alive. You can still see the roots and so much of the life."

The buildings, by and large, become like rubber in the artist's hands, who skews perspective and shuns alignment in a way best described as a marked dispassion for the straight line. By "bending over towers" and tilting domes, he said, he can portray huge objects intimately; a lone object jutting from the skyline requires a distant perspective, resulting in, "too much sky, it'd be too ... male," he said.

What leaps out immediately is Father Tupa's bold and vibrant palate. The browns and grays of brick and mortar are replaced by bright reds, oranges and yellows. Deep black shadows become muted purples and cool blues.

Father Tupa always has had a passion for art, which was "a terrible, abysmal failure" in college.

"I was 20 years old and didn't have vision of what art was," he said, because growing up in North Dakota he didn't have access to it.

Realizing "something deeper was not being answered," he entered the monastery. In the Benedictine



Ruder Finn/CNS

The modern works of Benedictine Father Jerome Tupa explore historical pilgrim places of Italy. His "Assisi: The Basilica of Saint Francis" is among the paintings on display in "The Road to Rome: A Modern Pilgrimage" at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington through May 7, 2003.

community, everyone contributes through their work, he said. When he expressed an interest in art to the abbot, Father Tupa said he was told, "Brother, we have enough

artists."

So he went to Paris to study French literature, something "totally outside the realm of art," he said, "and yet, it was a tremendous opportunity to see life in Paris and look at art, to see how so many great artists lived in the past and visit the great museums of the world.

"Since I was doing a thesis, I had no relations other than with tables, chairs and books," he said, "so I did a series on tables and chairs" as an outlet, "a counterbalance to the precise work of the thesis."

That reinvigorated his love of art, which he has reinvested in "finding new iconography and new religious imagery."

Father Tupa plans on doing another pilgrimage, perhaps to India, he said, because the multiculturalism rooted in the nation's Hindu, Muslim and Christian histories "might be really interesting."

"Art and religion — one informs the other. Religion is part of the psyche that lots of people don't work with, and I put that part in something very secular — art — and use it to express joy, freedom and life."

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