

SISTER MARY
CHARLES
MCGOUGH:
ENGAGEMENT
AND
TRANSCENDENCE

Peter Spooner

“Creating art in any form is a way to bring harmony, balance, and healing into a world that is often chaotic and dissonant. As a monastic woman artist, I try each day to accept this awesome two-fold challenge—to help save the world a bit through beauty and to glorify God through the work of my heart and hands” (“The Arts”).



Untitled (*Sister in Habit*),
1956, ink on paper, 17½" x 11"
St. Scholastica Monastery

Sister Mary Charles McGough entered Duluth’s St. Scholastica Monastery just prior to the Second Vatican Council. Her life story is inextricably linked to the Monastery and the way her art developed is tied to this watershed period in the history of the Catholic Church.

This essay is the first attempt to account for the entire body of Sister Mary Charles’s art. It

asks how we are to regard her handiwork, and it results from a study of her known artwork and writings, a review of archive sources at St. Scholastica Monastery, and journalistic accounts. Equally important were interviews with many people whose lives she touched

as a teacher and community activist. The account introduces the public to the ideas driving her art and focuses on a few individual works. Prolific, hard-working, and well-read, she created artwork and design in many media, but graced us mainly with large numbers of woodcut prints and traditional Christian icons.

Some might be tempted to categorize Sister Mary Charles’s work by its focus on either religious or secular themes. Indeed, there are religious subjects and secular subjects; she created some works for churches, others for private parties. But all of her artistic output alludes to themes of quietness and contemplation, reverence for nature, fellow humans, and the arts as a preeminent form of human and spiritual communication. When we examine her early lithograph of a girl and bird next to *The Vision (St. Francis)* woodcut, we see the same reverent theme. The intensity of gazes in her first *Our Lady of Korsun* icon and in her 1972 woodcut print *Someday* both invite quiet and contemplation.