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Recently, at dinner with some Quad Cities politicians and lobbyists, I was asked to name the "best" local artists. Feeling put on the spot, I waxed regal about the subjectivity of art and how critical acclaim and commercial success are but two measures of artistic achievement. I then spouted off the names of several well-known contemporary artists, including Leslie Bell, Michael Blaser, Ralph Iaccarino, and Paul Norton.

Ironically, a few days later, I found they were all students and/or colleagues of world-renowned artist Father Edward M. Catich, a 40-year St. Ambrose faculty member (until his death in 1979) and founder of the school's art department. As I researched this article on the newly remodeled Catich Gallery and an exhibit of his works, *The Art of the Improviser*, I realized that Catich was, and perhaps still is, one of our most versatile and famous artists.

"He was a lot more well-known than anyone around here ever knew," said Bob O'Hare, a Quad Cities artist and one of Catich's students and colleagues. "He was unassuming for all his knowledge, and his humanitarian works were kept a big secret."

Even now, 25 years after Catich's death, much of his artwork remains a secret because it is, quite literally, still in the closet.

Five thousand of Catich's sketches, calligraphic inscriptions, incised slates, drawings, and illustrations have been sitting in storage for the past thirty-something years. As a writer and arts advocate, I found this situation infinitely more interesting than a simple gallery review. The whole scenario seemed contrary to Catich's lifelong mission of making art relevant and accessible to everyone.

My quest for knowledge began at the Galvin Fine Arts Center, where the absence of an exterior or lobby sign identifying the Catich Gallery further supports the contention that the artistic and humanitarian contributions of one of the Quad Cities' finest artists have been grossly underexposed. This is especially disheartening considering that Catich's initial foray into art was as a sign painter. Plus, the gallery seemed so small – roughly 600 square feet tucked away in the northeast corner of the building.

Above the gallery door hangs a sign more befitting the artist, and as I approached the gallery, I could eerily sense his presence. The walls and display cases lining the hallway held a variety of tremendously impressive student art, ranging from freshman exploratory projects to master theses. Most of these students weren't even born during Catich's lifetime, yet their artwork contained identifiable traces of his genius. Classical, detailed, and visually appealing, the works exemplified the Catich legacy – that artistic talents must be explored, challenged, and expressed so that they can enrich others.

"Father Catich continues to characterize the teachings in this department," said Leslie Bell, St. Ambrose art professor and curator of the current exhibit. "He believed in teaching the basic principles governing art, decried the fact that any bold walls existed between fine and applied art, and advocated freedom in artistic expression. He was a tireless champion of making art accessible and relevant to the masses."

Catich is often credited with saying that "art is not freedom from discipline, but disciplined freedom," and Bell (who studied under Catich in the 1960s) fondly recalls how Catich mentored him: The professor kicked Bell out of school and told him to return when he was able to control his bohemian lifestyle and get serious about his art.

Bell returned eventually, as a stronger and more respectful artist. He pays tribute to Catich through the present exhibit, a diverse collection of 36 pieces: modernistic watercolors (the centerpieces of the show), commercial ink and scratchboard drawings (reflecting the issues of the time), and pencil drawings (biblical studies of Samson and David).

The exhibit barely touches on the magnitude of Catich's contributions to art and society, but it works as an introduction. Bell borrowed the show's title from a recording by Ornette Coleman, creator of free jazz, and the phrase highlights Catich's strength at improvising with a limited set of themes, shapes, and variations – similar to how a musician plays with tones, patterns, and repetitions. More importantly, the exhibit and newly remodeled gallery represent a giant first step in making Catich's art accessible to a wider audience.

"Father Catich's life and art are world-renowned, but there are still many who have yet to experience his philosophy and religious iconography," said Kristin Quinn, professor and chair of the St. Ambrose Department of Art. Quinn is "queen bee" of the Catich revitalization efforts and inherited the project from Ann Freeberg, a 30-year faculty member and arts enthusiast. Freeberg recognized the importance of preserving and elevating Catich's status – beyond the confines of St. Ambrose University and the Quad Cities.

Freeberg's philosophies as a sociologist were similar to Catich's – that art carried a message to help others and that with hard work and focus, anything can become a reality. With her help, the university began acquiring Catich's substantial art collection, most of which had been bequeathed to John Schmits, a St. Ambrose professor and close Catich colleague. But when Freeberg died in 2002, the project was beset with funding and staffing problems.

Quinn and Bell have diligently continued Freeberg's mission and this past year received a $35,000 grant from Riverboat Development Authority to preserve, digitize, restore, and provide

access (through the Web) to Catich's collection of 5,000 artworks.

"Digitally cataloging the collection will preserve the integrity of the artwork and make it available to a larger audience for viewing and research," Quinn said. She admits the job is big, but with Bell's assistance and the support of the university, she is determined to propagate the Catich legacy. With additional funding and an aggressive work-study program, Quinn hopes the cataloging will be completed before 2006, when a 100th birthday celebration for Catich is planned.

While his accomplishments as a priest, scholar, artist, and teacher won't neccesarily make Catich a candidate for sainthood, at least these preservation efforts will make the collection available to art collectors, enthusiasts, and scholars worldwide. Hopefully it will contribute to putting St. Ambrose and the Quad Cities on the map in the art world and give Catich a celebrity status akin to Bix Beiderbecke's.

For all his worldliness, Catich was guided by an unrelenting desire to seek the truth. His generosity was never-ending, and his research and art were often challenged and controversial. He believed that the medium was the message and, despite his international stature, he remained humble.

Larry DeVilbiss, a former student and well-respected artist, vividly remembers first meeting Catich: "I came up from Burlington to look at the campus and the recently built art center. I was wandering on my own when a short, thin, 'old' man came striding up. He was dressed in old work pants and a torn T-shirt. I assumed him to be a custodian. He proceeded to give me a whirlwind tour of the facilities. It was only at the end of my visit that he introduced himself as Father Catich, the head of the art department."

Other stories underscore Catich's principles as well. The son of Serbo-Croatian parents, he was orphaned at the age of 11 and was sent to Mooseheart, an Illinois orphanage where he apprenticed as a sign writer. Catich credits Mooseheart, where he witnessed Christian charity, with instilling in him moral, intellectual, and emotional virtues. In one of his many speeches, Catich stated, "Despite the vicious social handicaps I brought with me, Mooseheart was still able to orient me to good and useful citizenship."

After graduating high school in 1924 and touring the country with a Mooseheart band, Catich became a sign painter in Chicago, where he also attended classes at the Art Institute and played in a band. As the Great Depression set in, Catich came to study at St. Ambrose College. To finance his education, he conducted the college band and continued to play the trumpet, cello, and harmonica.

Finishing his schooling in three years, Catich attended the University of Iowa, where he obtained his Master of Arts. Feeling a "higher calling," Catich went to Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University to study for the priesthood. His special fields of inquiry were paleontology and archaeology, and he became intrigued with the origins of the Roman alphabet. He was ordained by the Catholic Church in 1939 and although he returned to the Quad Cities to minister and teach, he frequently traveled to Europe to pursue this passion.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Catich concentrated on ministering his parish in Atkinson, Illinois, and developing the art department at St. Ambrose. Even after Catich's death, Bell learned, many parishioners still didn't know Catich was a professor. Likewise, most students were unaware of his parish duties. As Bell recalled, "He always had a big presence here. It was almost a dual existence."

Meanwhile, Catich's reputation was growing worldwide. As a founding member and president of the Catholic Art Association, he furthered his mission by trying to introduce sacred art to contemporary Christians in a relevant context. Catich was relentless in his campaign, and his insistence on updating religious art stirred tremendous controversy.

For instance, at the same time his iconic image of a black Christ on the knee of a Latina Mary was displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *Time* magazine was reporting on Catich's notoriety as an anti-traditionalist. Catich was quoted as saying, "We must fashion a Christ who will be no stranger to our time. ... I do not think it vulgar to suggest we give Christ a shave and a haircut." The Vatican was less than enthralled with Catich's crusade to portray "Christ in a T-shirt" and issued him a monitum – a warning from the Pope.

Catich's ideology (and his aversion to sentimentality and over-emotionalism in art) was refreshing to some and embraced by many. Catholic activist Frank Getlein wrote in *Commonwe al* magazine that Catich "impressed ineradicably on my mind that art means something, relates to the outside world in some fashion or other, and that this outside world is not just an excuse for making beautiful brushstrokes."

Words like that must have kept Catich going. When he recognized the struggle for social justice and artistic freedom in 1950s post-war Europe, he recruited students to assemble care packages for artists in need. In response, and totally unsolicited, the artists sent Catich pieces of their art, which he promptly organized into traveling exhibits. Whether it was a repressed European artist, a hungry parishioner, or a student with ragtag shoes, Catich's generosity was endless. He never hesitated to reach into his own pocket to improve the lives of others.

"Everyone who studied with him looked up to him," Bell said. "On campus, he was known as a brilliant, forceful, and demanding teacher," but he was not beyond approach. These same qualities impressed the Los Angeles County Museum, which appointed him staff consultant, and Encyclopedia Brittanica, which commissioned him to design a logo celebrating its bicentennial in the late 1960s.

Donald McDonald, a colleague at the *Catholic Arts Quarterly*, described Catich as "a man of protean talent, boundless energy, and uncompromising adherence to principles – religious, moral, artistic, and professional." Although he might best be described as a practicing humanist, Catich was an international authority on stone incising, stained-glass fabrication, and typography.

It was his research and renderings of the Roman alphabet (in reed, brush, stylus, and stone) that would once again propel him into the international and controversial limelight throughout

the 1970s.

In 1969, nearly 30 years after his first visit to Rome, Catich published *The Origin of the Serif*, based on numerous direct rubbings and castings of the Trajan Inscription. (It is rumored that Catich had to bribe a few people to build a scaffold so he could do his rubbings.) The book was hailed by Philip Hofer of Harvard University as a “work of genius” but was scorned by those in publishing whose theories about how the inscriptions were created were being undermined.

Nonetheless, Catich continued to publish other books from his Catfish Press, located where the Catich Gallery now stands. His development of Petrarch, a semi-formal book hand, once again brought him fleeting international fame. He received the Frederic W. Goudy Award for typography three years before his death.

In time, Catich’s theories have largely become accepted and admired. Adobe Corporation published a Trajan font based on Catich’s original lettering; it is widely used in situations where dignity, balance, and ultimate readability are desired. In 2002, a panel of world experts at an international typography convention in Italy discussed his principles and gave credence to Catich’s theories. And, according to Bell, most of Catich’s students can spot his works “a mile away,” despite the fact that he signed very few of them.

Certainly, all this points to the fact that Catich’s secular and liturgical accomplishments have been grossly underexposed. Maybe now, 25 years after his death, he is finally getting the credit he deserves.

For more information on Catich, visit (http://web.sau.edu/art/catich.htm).