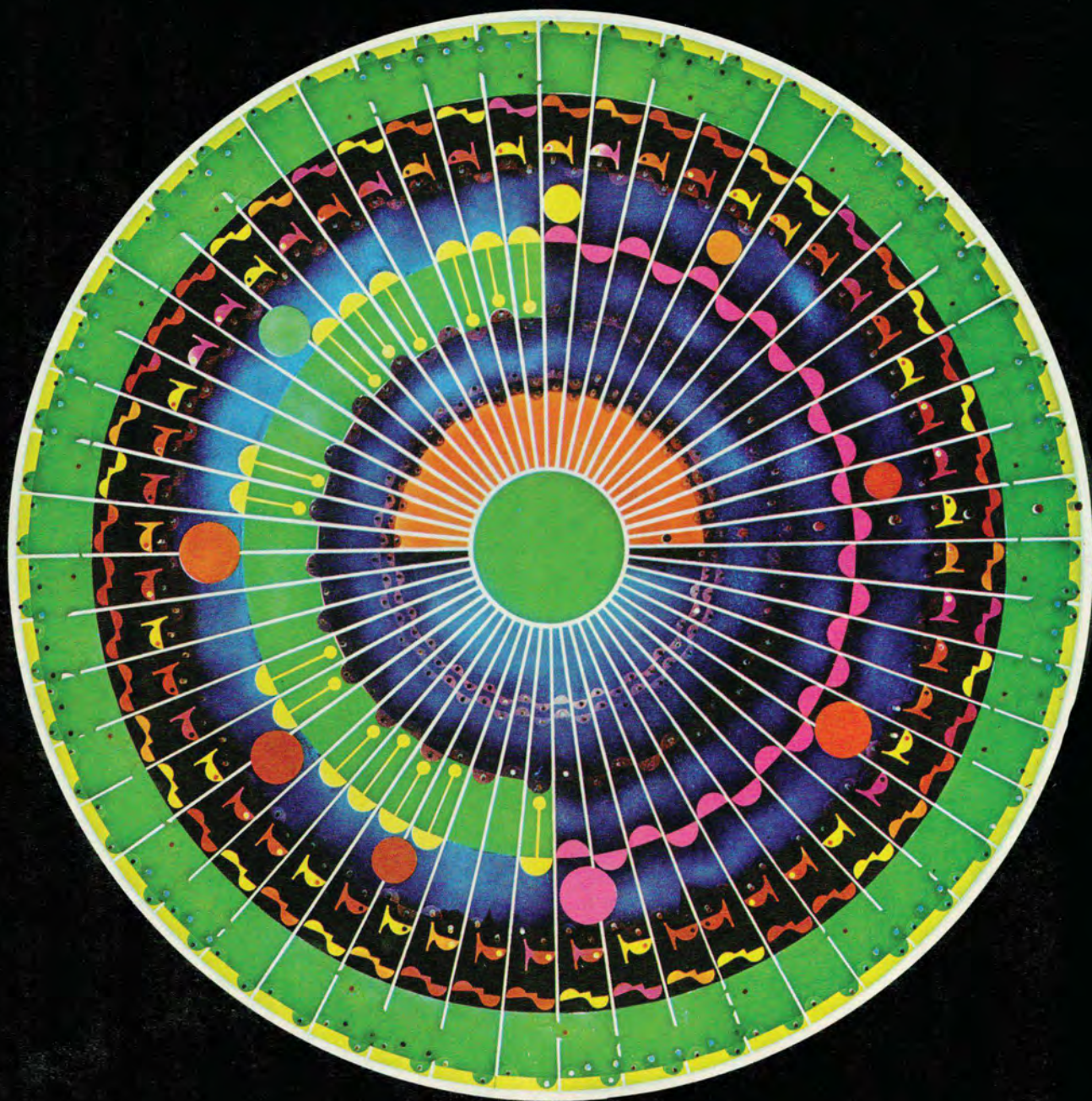


SISTER GIOTTO MOOTS: Dynamo of the Desert

BY MARY CARROLL NELSON



Creation Calendar, 1972, acrylic on Plexiglas, diameter 5' 3". Collection Sagrada. This calendar begins on December 25th, the first day of the liturgical calendar. Each ring represents a day of creation according to the Old Testament, beginning with light in the center.

SISTER GIOTTO MOOTS is a liberated nun who lives in Albuquerque. Though it may sound like a contradiction in terms, many nuns are liberated nowadays. They doff the habit and join the community—not the religious community alone, but the larger community of society as a whole. Nuns may not be identifiable at a glance. Sister Giotto is one of those who is upon occasion dressed as a nun and at other times is not.

"My reason for wearing a habit," she says, "is that it is a continuous reminder of my vocation. When I go to the Mother House [the headquarters of her order] I'm almost the only one who believes in it." Yet, even when she has on the short, black veil and street-length white dress of the Dominican order, she is likely to be wearing white Roman sandals with thongs up the leg and bare feet. Clearly, she is one of the contemporary nuns.

Going back to the Mother House means leaving Sagrada, an experiment imagined and developed by Sister Giotto. Sagrada is many things: a gallery of religious art, a place to practice communal sharing of meals (although Sister Giotto shares them only during midday; her evening meals are spent with fellow Dominicans living by the rules of their order), a place, above all, for artists to create works of art with a religious theme. Sagrada is also a school offering a two-year program on sacred art with particular stress on symbolism in art history. The lecturer: Sister Giotto Moots.

Sagrada runs an eatery called Joseph's Table where prices are actually donations to the school. The menu includes lox and bagels, loaves and fishes, homemade breads, soups, desserts, fondue, and baked salmon. The cook: Sister Giotto Moots.

Out behind the adobe building in the heart of Albuquerque's Old Town district there is a space where the adjacent building and Sagrada part to allow room for a garden and a chapel recently dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The walls seem to have grown forth from the nucleus of an original storehouse. Its old adobe blends with new adobe bricks made by the artists. The walls have grown slowly, between meals, lectures, and the production of art. The builder: Sister Giotto Moots.

As in some real-life *Lilies of the Fields*, Sagrada was recently blessed by a volunteer carpenter. By word of mouth a man heard of the need for help. On his month off from work in nearby Arizona, he came by to offer his services. In quick order the walls were completed, doors were blocked out in wood frames, and huge vigas (log beams used in adobe archi-

ecture) were laid across the top to form the basis of the roof. Such minor miracles are accepted without fanfare, but gratefully.

A floor of concrete was poured for the chapel at the beginning of the project and is to be covered with a mosaic from doorway to altar, one symbolic *Tree of Life*. The designer: Sister Giotto Moots. A round Plexiglas window was designed to fit into the entry wall. This tondo is a working calendar. The artist: Sister Giotto Moots.

Through all of this, the daily garb of Sister Giotto is frequently blue jeans, workshirt, and boots. Blond hair pulled out of the way, twinkling blue eyes in a well-scrubbed, handsome face, and energy define this jack-of-all trades whose past was spent in a far less workaday service.

Sister Giotto, née Evelyn Moots, grew up in Southside Chicago as the oldest child in a talented family, Catholic and very parochial. One by one, the children in this family attended



the Chicago Art Institute. Evelyn went first. There, among artists, she felt more comfortable than she had in the rah-rah atmosphere of high school. While living at home and paying board, she attended school during the day and worked at the telephone company in the evening and on weekends. Her unusual schedule at work was the only reason she could continue; she feels she owes the company a thank-you letter for the large part it played in her life. She completed the five-year program at the Institute in four years, with extra academic courses at the University of Chicago. Her fellow students were mainly returned veterans from World War II. In their frequent talk sessions these men, seasoned by war and life, put questions to the young Evelyn concerning her religion and her certainties. Despite her completely Catholic education in the local

Dominican school, she needed to read and study in order to answer their sincere questions validly. The more deeply she read, the more she felt that she might have a vocation to be a nun.

It was not a idea she welcomed. In fact, she resisted it at first as not fitting in with her view of herself as an artist. But before her graduation in 1949, she had reconciled the two roles of artist and nun. Although she planned to enter the novitiate, she first used her thriftily saved money for a trip—at her mother's insistence—to Holland, France, and Italy. While in Italy she went to Florence and visited Villa Schifinoia, a Catholic graduate art school founded by the Dominicans, then in its first year. The school later was to figure prominently in her life.

She returned to the States and entered the Dominican Community of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, near Dubuque, Iowa—the Mother House, a large establishment with 1600 members. Sister Giotto spent her first five years as a probationary nun teaching high school in Montana, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. The order then sent her to Villa Schifinoia in Florence to get a master's degree. The other students were not nuns. Some of them were exhibiting in a show, "Americans in Florence," that was concurrent with her master's exhibition at the Villa. The judges for the American artists show saw Sister Giotto's work and asked her to enter the show in the city, which she did.

A reporter capitalized on the story, called her modern oils "sensational," and referred to her as a "blonde beauty, a nun named Giotto in Florence." He kept the story alive for weeks thereafter, much to the chagrin of the artist and the dean of the school. The Villa was, for the time, surrounded by photographers and reporters. Luckily the experience was outlived, and reporters no longer seem threatening to her.

Her name, Giotto, recalls one of the true luminaries in art history, yet it was a choice based in part on a misconception. Evelyn Moots thought Giotto was the translation for Godfrey or "peace of God," and it was for that meaning primarily that she wanted the name. Secondly, of course, Giotto appealed to her for its connotations to artists. Today it seems a particularly apt name for so innovative a nun.

After earning the Florence master's degree, Sister Giotto both taught and worked on a Master of Fine Arts degree in printmaking at the University of Wisconsin. Her doctoral thesis was an exhibition of woodcuts on the religious theme. Sister Giotto's paintings are of stories from the scriptures. In her woodcuts she draws on New Tes-

tament parables (sermons given by Christ as an allegorical lesson) for subjects. Though she might use a title such as *Seascape* for a painting, the painting is actually of Apostles in a Boat. "I don't necessarily want to title my work religiously, although I feel that way about it," she says.

In her printmaking she is more specifically religious in naming the pieces. One is *All the Hairs on Your Head Are Numbered*, and another complex woodcut, *The Lost Groat*, illustrates the parable of the woman who searches for the lost talent. Printmaking continues to be a sustaining force in Sister Giotto's busy life. Creating woodcuts allows her to live several lives at once. She explains, "In painting you've got to be with it every moment. It requires intense concentration. It's immediate, direct. But in the woodcut, once you've designed it, you can cut it and think of other things."

From 1961 to 1969, Sister Giotto served as the dean of Villa Schifanoia, responsible for creating and continuing a program that would be academically comparable to and acceptable by the standards of U.S. colleges. Despite involvement with the development of other artists, she was able to continue her own art career. It was during this period that she began designing labyrinths, at first rectangular and later circular. Out of the labyrinths grew her round, symbolic calendars. From this came her idea to make them transparent, able to serve as a window.

By choosing materials unavailable before recent times, Sister Giotto asserts the continuing validity of religious art. Her calendar windows are made of Plexiglas and painted with spray cans of fluorescent paint. "To be both mystical and contemporary is a problem I posed for myself," she says.

The calendars are designed for an approximately five-foot-square sheet of Plexiglas, which comes protected with contact paper on both sides. Sister Giotto works out her whole design on the contact paper. In a logical way she cuts the paper and removes the parts to be painted in a given color and then spray paints those areas, treating the contact paper as a stencil. The work is precise and depends on exact planning in the sequence of cutting and spraying colors to avoid creating the wrong combinations where one color is sprayed over another. Holes are drilled in the Plexiglas to hold Plexiglas pegs; the pegs are moved around the calendar as the year progresses. The calendars are either mounted into frames or as windows, using the entire sheet of Plexiglas but revealing only the central round shape of the calendar itself.

In her work, Sister Giotto has evolved step by step, maturing in her command of design, more and more skillful at drawing symbolic connections between form and meaning. Her commitment to her art is serious and professional, but something else has been nagging at her for years: the need to make a creative contribution to other artists' lives.

A germ of an idea began with a scathing remark by a visiting Jewish lecturer at the Edgewood College Experimental School in Madison, Wisconsin. On seeing the fresh illustrative religious work of the primary grade children, the man was pleased, but he noticed that elsewhere in the room were typically commercial, saccharine *Jesus* pictures. "What is the matter with you people?" he yelled, pointing out the wide gap between the genuine work of the children and the stultifying *bought* pictures. From this revelation, through the eyes of an art-conscious man unaffected by the years of conditioning to these commonplace items most Catholics experience, Sister Giotto became aware of the void in religious art both in education and in the art world itself. Where, she wondered, could one go to create religious art that is a valid contemporary expression? Nowhere in the United States was there a truly open center devoted to such a goal.

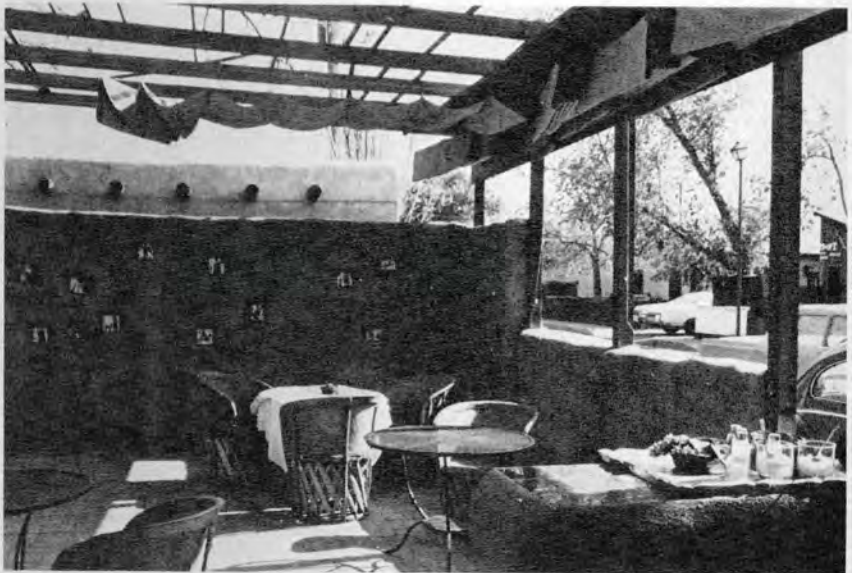
Immediately Sister Giotto visualized all the Catholic schools throughout the country blighted by vapid religious illustrations and suffering from a lack of opportunity for genuine artistic expression. Within her own future she could not see an opportunity to change the situation. Under her vow of obedience she could only serve as a teacher where she was sent by the order.

Though the time was not yet ripe for her to become active in forming an art center, there was a drastic change in the role of women, nuns included, soon after her experience. The Catholic Church has been swept by the wave of new thinking since Vatican II, the worldwide gathering of church leadership held under the auspices of Pope John in 1963. Since then nuns have taken increasingly individualistic paths while still maintaining their commitment to the religious life. Sister Giotto had continued to contemplate the need for a religious art center and had come to believe it was not only up to her to bring one about but also possible for her to do so.

Sister Giotto felt drawn to New Mexico as a site for a center. She already was familiar with the Southwest from visits to her family, most of whom had moved to New Mexico. However, it was not the connection with family that drew her to choose



Left: View into the chapel—still to be completed when this photo was taken—from outside. The round hole was subsequently filled with Sister Giotto's Plexiglas window, seen on the first page of this article. Below: Another view of the chapel at Sagrada in progress. Bottom: Joseph's Table at Sagrada. This is the front court. Notice the adobe wall that forms a side. The small squares are tiles of the Santos and were made especially for Sagrada.



the area; it was, rather, a whole group of factors: there is a historical religious art of the Spanish Catholic, a living tradition; along the Rio Grande Valley there is the ambience of myth and the religiously inspired art of the Indian; there is a contemporary art center fed by schools, galleries and history. More than these, New Mexico offers a spiritual atmosphere encouraged, perhaps, by the wide space and brilliant light. People see a connection between the high desert and mountains of New Mexico and the terrain of the Holy Land. The Organ Mountains near Las Cruces, New Mexico, have been described as the closest geographically to Mt. Sinai of any in the world. Sister Giotto was aware of these subtle attractions in the area, though she was still serving in Florence, Italy.

For four years at Villa Schifinoia, Sister Giotto's assistant was Sister Meinrad, a graphic artist. Sister Meinrad had served in New Mexico and had set up the art department at the University of Albuquerque, formerly St. Joseph's College, and had taught at the University of New Mexico. She has also assisted at the Newman Center (a center for Catholic students found on non-secular campuses) at the New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. She frequently mentioned the creative approach to liturgy and community of the priest at the Las Cruces Newman Center, Father Blase Schauer.

When Sister Giotto decided the time had come to present the idea of a religious art center to her superiors at the Mother House, she came home from Europe. Sister Meinrad, meanwhile, entered a contemplative house and promised to pray for the success of Sister Giotto's venture and to continue her own art production. (Today her woodcuts are available at Sagrada.)

When she came home from Europe in the late '60s, Sister Giotto presented her proposal to the leaders of her order. Once the proposal was accepted, the idea became the responsibility of the order, and Sister Giotto was charged with carrying it out. She had one assurance when she started out for New Mexico: she would not be allowed to starve. But the rest was up to her.

So, without funds but with a goal, a marketable ability as artist and teacher, an impressive resume, and sheer grit, Sister Giotto arrived in Albuquerque. She lived at Nazareth Hospital with the nuns who run it while she worked on her own art in the garage of her mother's house. For six months she couldn't get her project off the ground, but then she explained her plans to the priest at the