

Pastor of one flock, painter of another



Father Paul Plante



If you glanced at the walls of the Rangeley Outdoor Sporting Heritage Museum this summer, you would have seen 1361 eyes gazing back at you. They belonged to cedar waxwings, goldfinches, loons, mallards, owls, woodpeckers and other birds of Maine, all drawn by the hand of Father Paul Plante, pastor of Our Lady of the Lakes, Oquossoc, and accomplished artist.

"I feel that the eyes of birds, along with the eyes of fish, have a very special place in art," he says. "I think there is a connection with a living being through the eye."

Each eye and each bird is captured in a 4 1/2" x 4 1/2" oil pastel painting. The work is abstract, the view so close and penetrating that it may take you a moment to realize what it is that has drawn you in.

"Birds are very fleeting and furtive, and you can't usually get close to them," says Father Plante. "When you have the eye of a bird staring at you, it's like, this is an unusual experience."

The birds' eyes are surrounded by a palette of colors: in some cases subtle shades that appear as black and white, in others, hues so vivid and varied that even an artist would not have thought of combining them had God not originally done so.

Just as in nature, no two of Father Plante's birds are exactly alike.

"The size of the eye would vary, the sheen, you name it," he says.

The uniqueness of each, as well as their complementarity, was evident at the Oquossoc show, which Father Plante laid out so that families of birds would remain together. Owls were perched next to other owls. Ducks were nestled next to other ducks.

"It's almost like a family portrait: the children, the grandparents, the aunts and uncles. This is a large family, and though they're all different, they fit together. That was a conviction of mine, and it works, I think, beautifully in this exhibit."

Despite the large number of paintings that were displayed in the "Birds of Maine" show, they represent just a small portion of Father

Plante's body of work.

"This is just birds of Maine. I've done tropical birds. I have two full series of over 300 birds of Africa; 300 birds of South Africa, more than 300; and 300 birds of East Africa," he says. "I think the birds come from my youth. I always was fascinated by nature: birds, butterflies, wildflowers, insects, you name it."

Many of which he has painted. His studio, a converted upstairs bedroom in the Oquossoc rectory, contains neatly stacked boxes full of paintings of everything from insects to irises and turtles to tropical fish. He is working on the latter now.

"They're out of this world. Nobody would think of putting those kinds of colors together. Nobody would think of that kind of linear stuff and stripes through eyes. They're just beautiful."

One of Father Plante's first series focused on fruit, especially plums. He estimates that he painted thousands of them.

"For me, the reflection, the light, especially on the plums, ended up being this fascination with something that you look at, and even though you're looking at the same thing, it's always different. I think that became the trademark of what I do -- that sometimes it's not very different, but it is still always different," he says.

"It was just, for me, that if you learn how to look, how to really see, you're going to see something new every time you look at it. And that, to me, is a very precious discovery, and I discovered it through my art."

Art has been part of Father Plante's life since he was a child. He credits an Ursuline Sister, one of his teachers at St. Ignatius School in Sanford, for encouraging his gift.

"She used to ask my parents' permission to keep me after school to do some of these creative things, which I loved," he says.

He recalls his father's pride in one of his early projects. "It was paint on glass with sort of foil in the back that Sister had guided me to do. And, oh, my father, we could not remove that from the kitchen until he died, because it was like, 'Paul did that when he was seven years old.'"

Father Plante says he never considered becoming an artist rather than a priest because he didn't think painting was something he would relish as a full-time profession.

Still, art has always been his companion, which is why, when he was age 44, he decided to take classes at the



Maine College of Art in Portland.

"It was sort of like, 'This is something that I've done all along. It's time to see if I could make it a little more professional.'"

He remained in full-time ministry while taking courses, first serving in Lewiston and then as a parochial vicar at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, where he was transferred so he could fit in the necessary studio time to earn his Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting.

"It was sort of something that meant a lot to me, giving myself the chance to get some guidance and to experiment also, because in art school you just don't do what you like to do," he says.

His work originally included landscapes, but it wasn't long before he settled on the more abstract. Ironically, some of the first birds he painted had no eyes at all.

His work was a success from the start.

"At my senior show, I had a series of birds, 100 birds in four groups of five, in four different frames, all of which sold, which is kind of strange," he says. "Right from my senior show at the art school, I was invited into a gallery, and from there, we had multiple shows both in galleries as well as museums."

They have included galleries in Bangor, Belfast, Brunswick, Kennebunkport,



Portland and Stonington, as well as Boston, New York City, and Santa Monica, CA. His work has been featured at the Colby College Museum of Art, at the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, and at museums in Jackson and Biloxi, Mississippi, among

others. His birds have even been displayed at the United States Embassy in Gambia, sent there at the request of then Ambassador Pamela White, an Auburn native.

"I've been really very fortunate to be able to have the opportunities that I've had all along," he says. "For someone who is not a full-time, professional artist, I've been very lucky."

Father Plante tries to paint every day. It takes him about a half hour to complete one work. He says once he starts painting, his concentration is such that the cup of coffee or tea he brought with him usually remains untouched until it is cold. He only paints by natural light so the summer months tend to be his most productive.

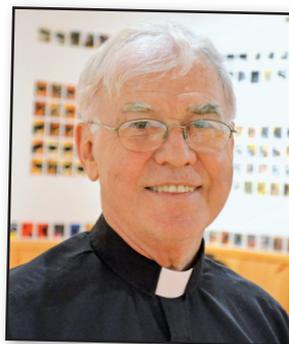
His painting, he says, is most often preceded by prayer.

"I've often set the atmosphere either with the breviary or psalms, especially the psalms. The psalms are my favorite prayer," he says. "I think it's more creating an atmosphere of peace, of quiet, a solitude that isn't empty, hopefully."

When he paints, he does so in silence. In fact, you won't find a television set or a radio in the rectory.

"In silence, we can sort of live a life of communication with God and others. I find that very precious."

He says he feels that both art and nature are stepping stones into the realm of religion.



"I connect art very closely to religion. There is a mystery in art. You wonder what it is that incites you to do it and what it is in it that is something beyond just a skill." – Father Paul Plante

"I always felt that art is very close to the spiritual," he says. "I've had people...tell me they really feel that my art is very spiritual, and I always appreciate that."

He also points to the centuries-old connection between the arts and

the Catholic Church.

"Whether it be architecture, statuary, painting, music especially, I don't think you can imagine

our religion developing without art being a part of it. And so, I connect art very closely to religion. There is a mystery in art. You wonder what it is that incites you to do it and what it is



in it that is something beyond just a skill."

Father Plante says he is content with the balance he has found between his artistry and his ministry. Whether he is serving a flock or painting one, he takes both to heart.

"I'm satisfied with what God has guided me to do."

