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Symbolist of the Sacred

Now a resident of Puerto Rico,
Waterford’s Vonn Hartung gives shape to powerful religious imagery

By LISA MCGINLEY, Day Arts Writer

In a secular century, when “icon” means a bright little computer cartoon to click with a mouse, Vonn Hartung’s art talks with the vocabulary of allegory.

Across the sanctuary of Santa Rosa de Lima Church in his adopted hometown of Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, Hartung is just finishing an 80-foot mural.



Mural by AVonnHartung at Parroquia Santa Rosa de Lima, BarrioAmelia SJ Puerto Rico

Jesus crucified looks upward to a resurrection decked with thornless roses. On his right the good thief’s cross is empty because he has already gone to heaven; on the other side is the crucifix of the thief who

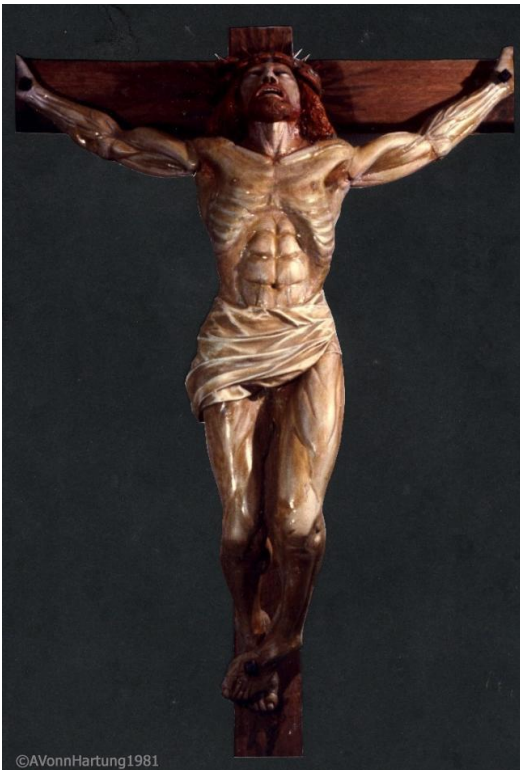
scoffed, with an assault rifle as the crosspiece. Noah's ark navigates an environmental deluge of pollution, and parrots of endangered species roost in the Tree of Life.

Hartung, who has lived in Puerto Rico since marrying his wife, Patty, in 1984, came home to Waterford last month for a reunion with his high school classmates, who knew him as "Joe." At age 56 he is about to have his first exhibition, yet he has been an artist all his life.

Hundreds of people see his work in churches and chapels every week. They know what his symbols are saying; he speaks their language.

"The church was my art museum," says Hartung, recalling his childhood parish of St. Joseph in New London in the ornate days of the 1950s.

Although he is currently painting partially abstract, stream-of-consciousness oils with more obscure symbols, for 20 years Hartung has been interpreting mysteries of faith with graphic literalism.



["Agony of Crucifixion"](#) wood sculpture by AVonnHartung for St.

John's Catholic Church (Montville, Connecticut)

A life-sized woodcarving of Christ on the crucifix, based on a doctor's detailed description of how a crucified man would die, used to hang in St. John's Church in Montville. Some parishioners, says Hartung, found it too graphic to contemplate.

Religious art a lifelong theme for area native now living in Puerto Rico

The power of one of his carvings, a tabernacle door, came home to him in the comments of a priest who opens the door every day during Mass at a boys' home in Puerto Rico. The bas-relief carving, "He is Risen," depicts the hillside of Jerusalem where Christ was buried. The rising sun shows it to be Easter morning and three women portraying hope, unity and joy walk down the path. The grave is empty. Hartung

sculpted it out to serve as the handle of the door, and every time the priest opens the tabernacle, he must put his hand into the tomb.



[“He is Risen”](#)

wood sculpture high relief by AVonnHartung for Casa de Niños Manuel Fernandez Juncos (Miramar SJ, Puerto Rico)

“I’m into the Mass, you know,” the priest told Hartung. “But every morning after I go through it, as soon as I put my hand into the tomb, I get goose bumps all over. I wake up.” “It’s another level,” says Hartung, “that really works.”

In Guaynabo, Hartung works full time on his sculpting and painting, including non-religious commissioned portraits and serigraphs—original prints—of rural Puerto Rican landscapes and people.

He holds a Bachelor’s degree from the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, but he says he didn’t paint in the five years after he graduated because “I kept thinking of other artists,” instead of his own vision.

The soft-spoken, sandaled, bespectacled artist is also an activist, starting with the peace movement in the ‘60’s and followed by anti-nuclear activities. In Puerto Rico, he serves on the Commission of Justice, Peace and Ecology, which added ecology to its mission at his urging. That’s not to say he attends every meeting, in spite of his commitment. “After a while you get meeting-itis. I’d go home and not sleep. So I painted these pictures instead of praying or going to meetings. “I figured, God has given me this talent and...the consciousness that goes along with it. What I need to do is what all these other people at the meetings can’t do—paint.”

Hartung’s artistic heroes are Michelangelo, Harry Rodvugin and his late father, Arthur J. Hartung Sr. He took the first name Vonn after his grandfather, but he was formally named after his father, who painted exactly one painting in his entire life, on the back of a kitchen table cloth. The family framed the image of a ship under sail and it still hangs, badly cracked from the deteriorating oil cloth, over the mantel at the Waterford home of Hartung’s mother, Phyllis.

Mrs. Hartung was responsible, long ago, for her son's introduction to Rodvugin when the older painter was living and working at the Lighthouse Inn in New London. "My mother was a waitress at the Lighthouse Inn, and I was sent to the office at Waterford High School for drawing three nude ladies. They were highly symbolic, not pornographic in any way," says Hartung. "I don't know if I got suspended or not—I got suspended a lot—but my mother was so upset she brought them to Harry. He said the problem was with the person who saw them that way. He took me under his wing, and has always been one of my two great influences."

As Hartung's work, including a newly completed head of Christ and another of a sleeping woman, begins to incorporate more abstract symbols, the connection to Rodvugin's busily crammed canvases is clear. Hartung himself is excited about opening himself to subconscious thoughts and "really getting in touch with the mystery."

It seems natural that Hartung would feel as he does about Michelangelo, the Renaissance man who painted the Last Judgment and sculpted David, Moses and the dead Jesus in the arms of his mother. "I pray to Michelangelo," says Hartung. "He's a saint."