

ARTIST John August

and His Images of Francis of Assisi

Two new images of St. Francis by this California artist have recently landed in the spotlight. The artist's gift? Finding the sacred in the ordinary.

By Jack Wintz, O.F.M.

IN JULY, Los Angeles artist John August Swanson completed the extraordinary, multicolored silk-screen print of *Francis and the Wolf* you see on this month's cover and in the photo to your right.

The silk-screen process enables an artist like Swanson to make prints—or serigraphs, as they are called—so full of color and texture that they nearly “sing” with beauty and vibrancy!

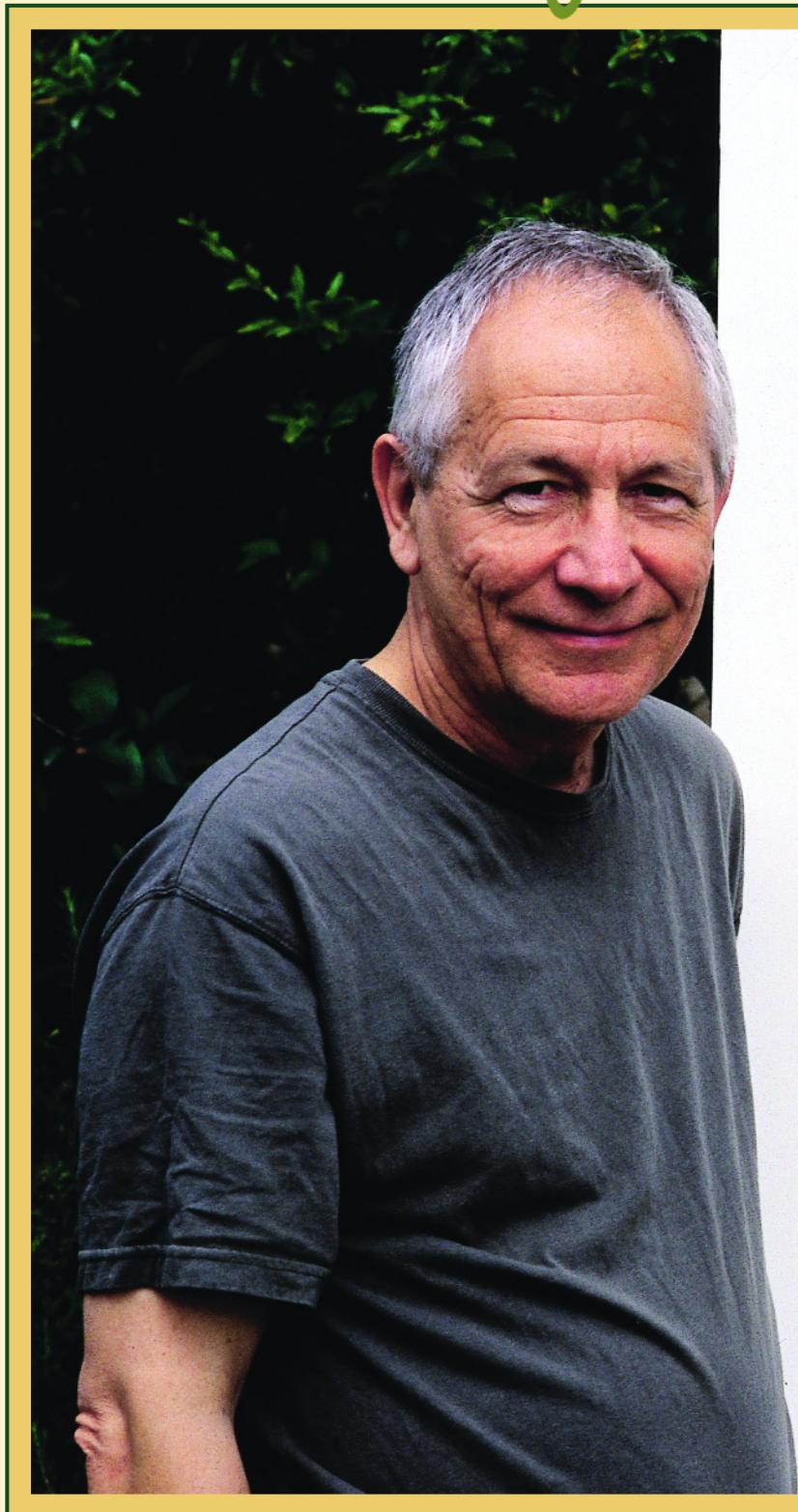
In late June, *St. Anthony Messenger* spent a weekend with Swanson in Los Angeles. It was my good fortune to witness the 39th color run of *Francis and the Wolf* at Aurora Serigraphics, the fine-arts print studio in Van Nuys, California, where Swanson does his silk-screening with master printers James and Sandi Butterfield.

In mid-July, Swanson informed me that the *Francis and the Wolf* serigraph was finished—on the 48th color run of the silk-screen press. This means that, all in all, Swanson had to draw 48 separate stencils, mix 48 different inks and oversee 48 color printings of 225 separate silk-screen prints—all in close collaboration with his master printers. The result is a feast for the eyes.

Such a process requires a tremendous investment of love, patience and time on the part of the artist. John August Swanson has that kind of love and patience. He has dedicated more than seven months of his life to producing this serigraph.

The Meaning of *Francis and the Wolf*

There is a special vision or meaning that shimmers forth from this work of art. Swanson says he



Swanson



Artist John Swanson stands alongside the 39th color run of his serigraph *Francis and the Wolf* outside his Los Angeles home. The finished work took 48 color runs in all.

PHOTO BY JACK WINTZ, O.F.W.

is trying to recapture what “Francis taught us a long time ago when he spoke to the wolf, treated him with kindness and welcomed him.”

Swanson believes that we cannot really be at peace in our world unless, like St. Francis, “we embrace ‘the wolf,’ which is a symbol of our shadow—or the part of ourselves or of our society that we deny. The fear of our shadow is destructive,” says Swanson, “until we see, speak and accept that fear.”

Swanson’s serigraph is based on the famous story of St. Francis making peace with a wolf that had terrorized the Italian village of Gubbio. The wolf had attacked and even killed some of the townspeople, including children. Through the intervention of Francis, the vicious killings ceased and the wolf and townspeople made peace with each other.

The story certainly has significance for our day, as we deal with violence and terrorism from individuals and groups who act fiercely and hatefully toward brothers and sisters at home and abroad. Such experiences force us to face our inner shadow and raw human impulses like fear, hatred, violence and revenge.

When, as an artist, he was dealing with the story of Francis and the wolf, Swanson says, “I had to go into my own psyche. I see art as a way to bring healing to the fearful things within me that I’m afraid to confront and would rather walk away from than try to understand or see in the light of forgiveness.”

As we look at John Swanson’s *Francis and the Wolf*, we see the saint taking a posture of humility, peaceful reconciliation and utter vulnerability. Francis sits humbly on the earth before the wolf, his bare feet totally unprotected and only inches away from the wolf’s sharp teeth. Francis seems, moreover, to experience a mystic communion with all brother and sister creatures, as well as with their Creator.

I had with me a copy of Murray Bodo’s book *Francis: The Journey and the Dream*, in which the Franciscan author describes St. Francis’ meeting with the wolf. I read the passage to Swanson, asking if it conveyed some-

thing similar to what his serigraph is saying.

The passage reads: “Francis felt sympathy for the wolf. There was something of the wolf in all of nature, that ravenous hunger, that restless pursuit, that baring of fangs, so symbolic of what was wild and violent in all of us....Everyone feared wolves and disliked them, and he saw in the eyes of wolves a fear, a hunted look, an anger and hostility that wanted to devour everything in sight in order to avenge their own hurt and alienation. Wolves, after all, were like people. If you feared them and ostracized them,...they eventually turned into what you were afraid they were anyway.”

After hearing the words, Swanson simply nodded, smiled gently and suggested that I include the passage in this article.

Another Swanson Painting Gets Special Exposure Today

Three years ago, John Swanson did another popular painting—the colorful acrylic *Francis of Assisi* (seen below). In this painting, the saint stands before a mountain-like cluster of huge rocks and gazes in awe at the landscape before him—a landscape filled with lovely trees, wild animals and birds. In the distance, amidst rolling hills, stand a church and two towns with the golden sun overhead sending out rays



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN AUGUST SWANSON

In John Swanson’s 1999 acrylic painting *Francis of Assisi* (above), the saint marvels at the beauty of creation and at the glory of God he sees all around him.

of glory. Bordering this central painting of St. Francis are 24 miniature paintings depicting the saint's life.

A new book about St. Francis features all these images painted by Swanson, with the central image of Francis on the book's jacket. The book, entitled *Saint Francis*, was just released by Orbis Press. The text by Marie Dennis is based on the art of John August Swanson. (The book is reviewed on page 55.)

Saved by Corita Kent

John Swanson's life story reveals a great deal about his artistic vision and interests. He was born in 1938 in Los Angeles to a Mexican mother and a Swedish father. Both were immigrants who found their way to Los Angeles.

Swanson attributes his knack for storytelling to his mother's side of the family, as well as his love for the Mexican muralists and the bright colors of Latin American art. His mother, Maria Magdalena Velasquez Swanson, spent the first 18 years of her life amidst the mountains of northern Mexico in the state of Chihuahua. Magdalena (or "Maggie") is still very much alive at 93. The weekend I interviewed John, he invited me to accompany his mother and him to Sunday Mass at St. Rita's Parish in Sierra Madre, California, near Pasadena.

Afterward, I learned from his mother that she is an avid reader on a wide variety of subjects and a devotee of St. Anthony of Padua. John has one older sister, Olga, who lives with their mother.

John derived his interest in Swedish folk art, as well as his love for the circus, from his father, a fruit and vegetable vendor. John's father and mother were separated when he was a child.

For many years, John was not sure what to do with his life. He took courses at Loyola University and UCLA but dropped out. He had various jobs over the years, including one in a paint factory.

A constant thread in Swanson's life has been a keen interest in social action on behalf of the poor. In the 1960s, for example, he became very involved with the Young Christian Workers.

From them he received a solid spiritual formation and a commitment to Catholic social teaching. Swanson has been a longtime supporter of Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers' movement and many other causes.

Swanson didn't really find his artistic avocation until he was 30 years old. Hounded by a sense of failure and weary of searching and drifting without clear goals, he decided to take an evening class on lettering and design from Sister Corita Kent at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. Corita Kent (1918-1986) was a highly respected artist of that era and famous for her colorful silk screens. Her art had a powerful spiritual impact on Swanson.

him discover his own artistic path and voice.

Swanson's Art Embraces All Life

John Swanson's interest is by no means restricted to St. Francis or even to religious topics. As an artist, Swanson works in many media and on a wide variety of subjects. He has a special interest in the circus and in clowns, as well as in concerts, opera and social celebrations of all kinds. Yes, Swanson has done major works on biblical stories, but he is quick to point out that the biblical story "is only a starting point." He wants viewers to look for "universal meanings" in his work.

Swanson often focuses on everyday



PHOTO BY JACK WINTZ, O.F.M.

John Swanson stands with his mother, Magdalena, a native of Mexico, after attending Sunday Mass last June at St. Rita's Parish in Sierra Madre, California.

"Corita saved my life," Swanson says. "She became a mentor and helped me find the door that had been closed in my life. She opened me to art and ideas. She made me feel important and helped me find healing." Swanson helped Kent with some of her serigraphs and soon found himself intrigued with the silk-screen process. He credits Corita Kent with helping

existence, like walks in the country or visits to the library, the train station or the bakery. His narrative is usually direct and easy to understand. His vision is positive, optimistic and spiritually profound.

The art of John Swanson is displayed in many prominent universities and institutions. It has also found its way into some of the world's most presti-

gious art collections, such as the Vatican Museum, Washington, D.C.'s National Museum of American Art, London's Tate Gallery and the Art Institute of Chicago.

How Swanson Views St. Francis

Swanson explains the genesis of the painting that recently appeared on the *Saint Francis* book jacket. "In 1973, while visiting the Frick Collection in New York City, I saw a painting that showed St. Francis in ecstasy. It was by Giovanni Bellini, done in the late 1470s. [The painting can be seen at www.frick.org.]

"The Bellini painting was powerful," adds Swanson. "It marked the beginning of my artistic interest in Francis of Assisi. The boldness and grandeur of this picture had such a startling impact on me that 10 years later when I was about to begin a lithograph of St. Francis—the forerunner of this St. Francis painting—I had to return to New York to see the painting again.

"Again, I stood there before the painting, reflecting on it for a long time. For me the painting conveyed a moment of sacredness and grandeur," Swanson recalls. Of one thing he was sure: "I wanted to get a sense of wonder into my own painting."

Unquestionably, Swanson's painting (see page 32), which shows Francis gazing out at the world of creation, conveys that sense of wonder. And that same feeling of mystery and awe emanates from much of Swanson's art.

Two quotes readily apply to this painting of Francis of Assisi. One is "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory," from the Roman Missal's eucharistic prayer. The other quote is "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," from Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "God's Grandeur."

Francis' posture in the painting is certainly one of awe before the glory of God's creation. He appears so stunned by its beauty and mystery that he is barely able to lift his hands.

There is a doorway or opening behind Francis that appears to be a cave or maybe a tomb. Swanson sug-



In John Swanson's serigraph *Jester* (2001), a clown-like figure climbs a ladder to see the wonder of the universe.

gests that it could be either—or both. It could be the cave of prayer where Francis found union with God in contemplation—where he faced his shadow, died to his old self and assumed a new glorious life in God. Or, says Swanson, it could "be the tomb by which we enter into the depths and shadows of our own place so as to be called out of ourselves to the place of God's glory."



This detail of John Swanson's 1995 serigraph *A Visit* shows Mary, the Mother of Jesus, feeding the chickens when the Angel Gabriel arrives.

Like Lazarus emerging from his tomb (a theme Swanson has taken up in other paintings), Francis seems alive with a new vision and new life, having been raised and called forth by the healing love of Christ.

The 24 miniature paintings that surround this central image are scenes from the life of Francis, such as Francis' embracing the leper, renouncing worldly goods, preaching to the birds, receiving the stigmata. "I see these events," says Swanson, "as challenges and turning points in Francis' life that helped him make a change of heart and to grow."

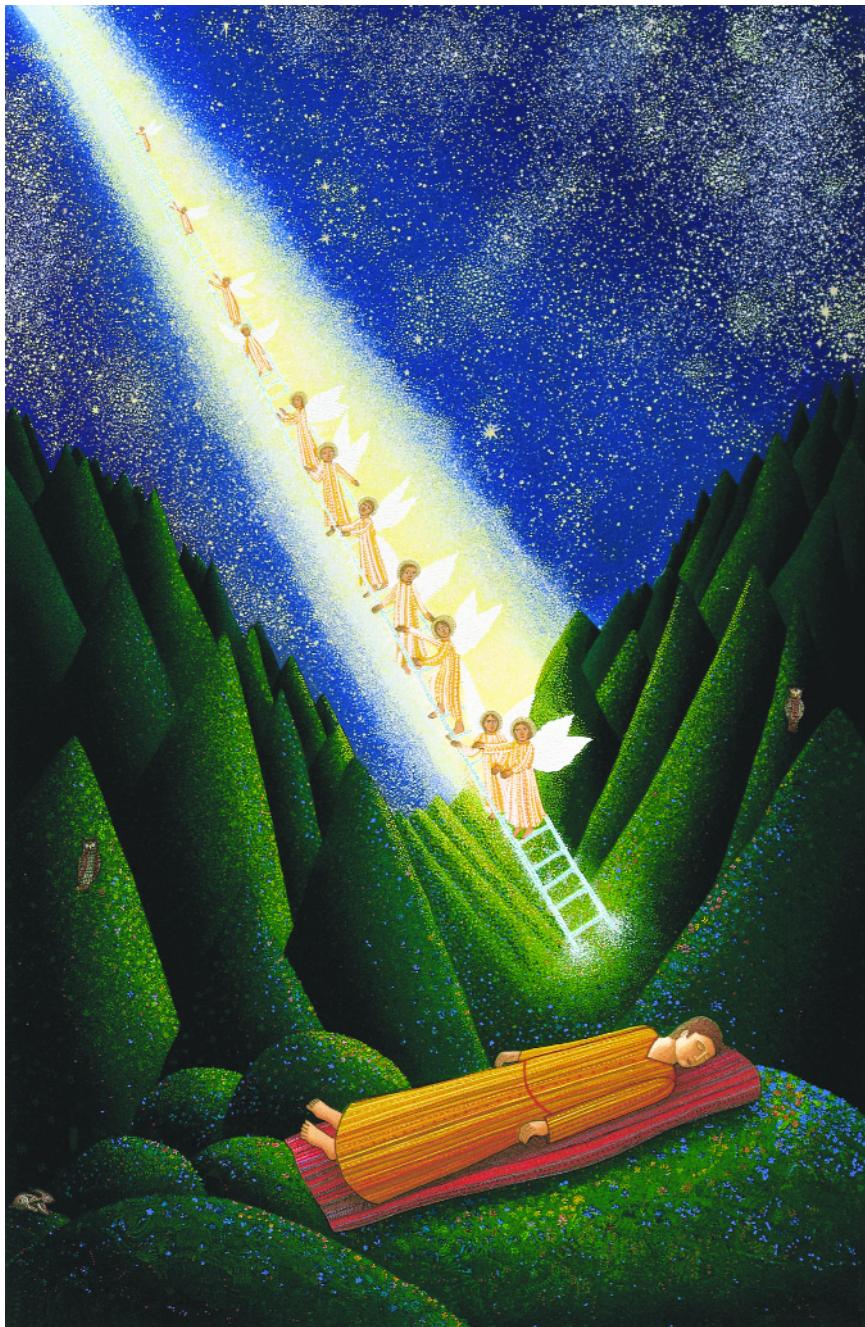
Rounding Out the Portrait

The whole range of John August Swanson's art cannot be covered in a short article. But two other works by Swanson help us round out the picture and reveal a lot about the artist's personal and spiritual vision.

A Visit (1995). This serigraph by Swanson focuses on the moment of the Incarnation, when the angel of God visited Mary to announce the dawn of the world's salvation. But in this artistic rendition, Mary is not center stage or even rapt in prayer, as she is usually portrayed in paintings of the Annunciation. Almost lost in the lower right-hand corner of this complex, tapestry-like composition, Mary is feeding the chickens. (See photo at left.)

In Swanson's view, Mary was not a woman of the leisure class. "Very likely," he tells *St. Anthony Messenger*, "Mary was a very poor person of her day. She was probably illiterate and had to work hard to help her family survive. She may not have always had abundant time for prayer." Mary's wide-eyed, thoughtful demeanor as she feeds the chickens, however, suggests that she is prayerfully open to God's presence—and special visitation.

Scattered throughout the picture are 25 scenes of people doing their ordinary tasks: baking bread, watering the animals, caring for the sick and elderly. Interwoven among these vignettes are 27 biblical scenes. The meaning of the Incarnation is being borne out in this



In Swanson's serigraph *Dream of Jacob*, Jacob "sees" angels moving between heaven and earth.

tapestry of everyday life: Those going about their daily tasks in loving service of the community have God living within them.

As writer-artist Gertrude Mueller Nelson has commented regarding *A Visit*, "A spiritual life is not about escaping the world and its daily requirements, it's about infusing the world with a vision of the holy [and] discovering the divine in the earthly task at hand."

As the artist himself suggests, "Find-

ing the sacred in the ordinary is what *A Visit* is all about."

Jester (2001, opposite page, top). This serigraph also merits special attention. It ties in well with Swanson's "sense of the wonder" and gift for "finding the sacred in the ordinary."

In this work, a clown-like figure, a jester, rises from his sleep and climbs a ladder to gaze through a high window into an amazing star-studded night sky. To use Swanson's own words, "The jester climbs the ladder to identify with

the wonder of the universe."

But the scene is more richly complex than this. In 1986, Swanson had done a serigraph entitled *Dream of Jacob*. In this work, the biblical figure is lying asleep on the ground amidst lofty mountains. Starting not far from the sleeping Jacob's head and extending high into the starry heavens is a glowing ladder with many angels ascending and descending.

As Swanson himself points out, there is a connection between the jester's ladder and the ladder of Jacob's dream. That makes sense. For are not clowns, dreamers, artists, mystics and people of imagination keenly attuned to the constant interaction between heaven and earth, the sacred and the ordinary, God and humankind?

In Swanson's mind, St. Francis, too, belongs on this list, especially with the jesters and clowns. Says Swanson: "Francis fits well into this company of holy fools referred to by St. Paul when he writes that God chooses 'the foolish of the world to shame the wise and...the weak of the world to shame the strong'" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Finally, one might rightly see the jester as Swanson himself. For, through his art, John August Swanson opens windows for us so that we might regain the sense of wonder we enjoyed as children. As adults living in our everyday, self-absorbed and low-ceiling world, we too often forget that we are part of an immense universe, filled with mystery and the majesty of God.

Swanson's gift is to put us back in touch with that vast mystery and sacredness. A

John Swanson's paintings and serigraphs may also be found on his Web site at www.johnaugustswanson.com. Posters and notecards of Swanson's work are available from and also benefit The National Association of Hispanic Elderly, 234 East Colorado Blvd., Suite 300, Pasadena, CA 91101 (626-564-1988).

Jack Wintz, O.F.M., is contributing editor of this publication. This summer, Father Jack marked 30 years with the magazine, including the last three years as editor.