

Sandra Bowden: The Tip Of An International Artistic Iceberg

by Russ Allen

Anyone entering Saint Christopher’s Episcopal Church in Chatham is met by a display of original art in the “Gallery at Saint Christopher’s,” created in 2014 to utilize the hallways and staircases in the buildings. The gallery’s creator and curator of its changing exhibitions is a visual artist with an international reputation as a religious artist. Chatham resident Sandra Bowden is like an iceberg whose tip appears above the surface of the water, hiding an artistic presence most recently on display at the Vatican and in Barga, Italy.

Bowden was raised in a small farming town in central New Hampshire where the little white church had been built by her mother’s family, and a life of faith was at the center of its existence. She was taught to “memorize the Bible, to believe it, and to love it,” Bowden said. “I have rich memories of these people and their beliefs, and they laid the foundation for my life as an adult and as an artist.”

Her first year of higher education at Berkshire Christian College in Haverhill was spent studying theology and the Old Testament, after which she learned Hebrew, first with a tutor and then at Empire College, part of the State University of New York system, from which she earned her bachelor’s degree. She also attended the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston in the early 1960s. A perpetual student who does not consider herself a scholar, she has focused on the connections to the past of geology, archaeology, music history, the history of art, and “the visual history of the church, exploring how to express its glory in contemporary form.”

Bowden has a long list of accomplish-



Sandra Bowden, center, her husband Bob, and U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican Callista Gingrich at the opening of the “Signs of the Sacred” exhibition. COURTESY PHOTO

ments; her list of awards, writings, and lectures runs to eight pages and is available on her website, www.sandrabowden.com.

Bowden came to live in Chatham by accident. “My husband Bob was attending a conference in Harwich Port in the late 1960s while I rented a small cottage,” she says. “One day I went exploring and happened upon Harding’s Beach and fell in love with it.” In 1984 the Bowdens bought their current home and her private studio.

Last September an exhibition of Bowden’s art opened at the Mount Tabor Ecumenical Centre for Art and Spirituality in Barga, Italy. Founded by Orleans’ Community of Jesus, Mount Tabor Centre is an international organization facilitating ecumenical dialogue through the exhibitions of contemporary

sacred art. Of this display Bowden writes, “Reflections of Glory...my most recent work...highlights several gilded encaustic panels that recall many iconic paintings from art history. Their distinct shapes identify the historic work, but because of their solid gold surface, allow the viewer to delight in the radiance of each panel, while drawing on memory and imagination to fill in the forms.” The exhibit, which included gilded panels that replicate in shape historic altarpieces as well as several multi-panel installations including “40 Days and 40 Nights,” ended in December.

“The Signs of the Sacred—The Imprints of the Real: Twentieth-century Graphic Arts in the Contemporary Art Collection of the Vatican Museums” opened in Vatican

City on Dec. 10. Bowden’s collagraph “Do This In Remembrance Of Me” is among 150 prints chosen from some 4,000 in the Vatican collection for inclusion. Another of her collagraphs, “It Is Finished,” is illustrated in the exhibit’s catalog with comments on her unique techniques. The Bowdens were invited to attend the opening of the exhibition along with United States Ambassador Callista Gingrich.

In a similar vein is Bowden’s involvement with “Christians in the Visual Arts.” With a vision of “Serious Art. Serious Faith,” CIVA’s “mission is best expressed in three primary and longstanding commitments: Called to Creative Work, devoted to the Church, Present in Culture,” according to its website. Bowden writes on its website: “CIVA has been one of the most important forces in the development of my artistic career. I have been stimulated by the discussions and enriched by artists and art historians in the organization. The friendships and camaraderie have encouraged me constantly to push and develop my calling to the highest level possible.”

Bowden has been interpreting Scripture and her own spiritual journey for over 40 years. “My Christian faith has been the driving force behind my art,” she writes. “I look at the making of a piece of art as a... conversation with God. My ideas come out of my theology and thoughts about God. I am a theologian who translates those interpretations into visual form.”

The same seems to be true whether Bowden is creating a work of art that will be displayed at the Vatican or arranging an exhibition at the Gallery at Saint Christopher’s.