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Figure study, ca. 1957, red chalk on paper, 24" x 18"

Christian icons. She was aware of trends in contemporary art, but she sought direction for her own work through faith.

At each juncture on her artistic and spiritual path, she found the appropriate artistic expression to share her understandings with the world. She prepared the ground by knowing art

history, studio practices, contemporary art forms, and the tradition of writing icons, so that she was ready to deploy them when called upon. In many ways this preparation was the same that her artist colleagues undertook—college art courses, a Master of Fine Arts degree, study of other artists' work, and constant studio practice and experimentation. But while it is easy to separate her work into large areas according to career phase and medium, a simple chronology might obscure the larger point that her art was an attempt to blend secular relationships and activities with spiritual principles.

The biggest example of her willingness to change artistic direction with spiritual guidance came in 1990, when she took formal instruction in "writing" traditional icons, creating over eighty of them in the last eighteen years of her life.



Mary Helen McGough (Sister Mary Charles) drawing after Berta Hummel (Sister Maria Innocentia, 1909–46), 1944, crayon and pencil on paper. Collection of Pat O'Brien

BEGINNINGS

When she was twelve, Mary Helen McGough's aunt introduced her to a collection of Hummel figurines, and she drew them. As the earliest known works by her, Sister Mary Charles's Hummel drawings presage a career-long preoccupation with children and adolescents as subjects. They appear in every phase of her art. She depicts them playing, making music, dancing, creating art, and frequently by themselves in dream-like

reverie. And of course, there is the ever-present mother and child theme and her ubiquitous images of innocent curiosity and tenderness.