



SM/C

Straightforward in subject, her prints were popular with a broad audience, and as multiples they were affordable and collected widely. Their main subjects were children at play, adolescents making art, portraits, and various Christian and Jewish stories—in other words, people in relationship to each other, to nature, to art, to their religious faith. Not coincidentally most of her woodcut prints were made during the busy years of the Barn program (1968-83) when she was surrounded by children.

Skillfully drawn and graphically bold, her one-color woodcuts convey riches of emotion and movement with just a few well-placed marks. The woodcut block is, after all, a low relief carving, and years of carving relief sculptures of religious figures from wood had trained her arms and hands to “draw” accurately with a chisel and knife. It is interesting to note that Sister Mary Charles did not feel herself a naturally gifted painter, preferring the rugged three-dimensionality of sculpture and carving.

With the exception of images of children playing, Sister Mary Charles’s figures are still and pensive. Lost in reverie, their eyes are cast downward, and their thoughts, we assume, directed inward. In their stillness they have something in common with the saints in her earliest works and with the stilled gazes of her later religious icons. She portrayed all her adolescents in melancholy attitude, poignant beyond their years. *Threshold* is a stunning example of the subject. One

of the largest woodcut prints she made, it features a girl of some 15 years, pausing, brush in hand, staring distractedly off to one side. As the title implies, the young girl is pondering her future, the act of painting providing the needed quiet and focus for such reverie.

As her work with woodcuts came to a close in the late 1980s, Sister Mary Charles undertook a major collaboration, illustrating *The Rule of St. Benedict* for her Monastery. Written by St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–547) the *Rule* provided the Order’s guiding principles still used by Benedictines worldwide. Sister Mary Charles’s collaborator in creating this original version of the *Rule* was Meridith Schifsky, an accomplished calligrapher and one of Sister Mary Charles’s students.

## ICONS

At age sixty-five Sister Mary Charles undertook formal training in the creation of traditional religious icons, and between 1990 and 2006 created more than eighty icons for churches and patrons all over the country. This was the culmination of a lifetime of making and teaching art. It is no small irony that, unlike the fame and artistic honors accompanying success in the world, the creation of icons requires humility, anonymity of authorship, and reliance on a higher power.

In this later stage of her career, circumstances and not a little serendipity brought Gary Erickson into Sister Mary Charles’s life. He became her student, studio