

*In the Hand of the Holy Spirit: The Visionary Art of J. B. Murray.* Mary G. Padgelek. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2000, pp. 96, includes black and white photographs, 12 color plates, footnotes and bibliography. Reviewed by K. D. Kragen.

Mary Padgelek is an artist and professor of art in the Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia. The very first line of this delightful little book sets the tone of Padgelek's fascinating look into the artistic phenomenon of J. B. Murray: "In his early seventies, J. B. Murray (1908-1988), an African-American man from rural Georgia who could neither write nor read, suddenly began to write, paint, and draw flowing yet often erratic abstractions" (p. 1). Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), in her last years, was reputed to have been miraculously granted by God the ability to read and write. Padgelek is not implying such a miraculous gift of literacy in the case of Murray, yet she never discounts the phenomenological or miraculous possibilities.

Before age seventy, Murray, always a gentle, devout Christian, showed little inclination toward art. But, from 1978-1988, he changed from a private, shy man to an artist with a calling from God. Over ten years he produced between 1500 and 2000 paintings and "untold number of pages filled with mysterious script" (p. 10). At first those in his local church were skeptical, but as time passed the small congregation rallied around Murray, accepting both his integrity and his "calling" as of God.

While critics typically characterize Murray by the common categories of "Afro-Atlantic artist," "outsider artist," or "American self-taught, folk artist," Padgelek avoids such appellations in favor of a less "reductionist," more sympathetic art-critical analysis: "Murray's expression emanated from his unconscious, revealing a state between dream and reality. His imagery emerged not solely from his intellect operating on external reality, but arose out of dreams and visions.... To Murray, spiritual appearances provided such an intensity as to offer the primary motivation for the last ten years of his life" (p. 2). Beyond the form of his art, Padgelek "seeks to unveil the symbols, impetus, and meaning of the work of J. B. Murray, who created his work through the inspiration of his perceptions of eternity." Murray believed his art "offered a redemptive metaphor for spiritual healing, regeneration, and ultimate salvation" (p. 3).

Not only does Padgelek discuss Murray, his family, and the surrounding community of Mitchel, Georgia, but she expands her historical analysis to White Southern and African-American Evangelical Christianity generally, drawing on the scholarship of George Marsden and Timothy Weber. There is almost a haunting character to the work of J. B. Murray, and it is marvelously captured by Padgelek's unique contribution to the study of artistic vision, aesthetic creativity and the relationship between faith and art.

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