Artists’ Archives: Saving the Heritage of Vatican II

by Melody Layton McMahon

A growing trend in the art world is to support artists by creating artists’ archives. These are places where not only art but the stuff of art-making, the preliminary drawings, sketches, plans, papers, ephemera, of artists is saved so that researchers can know how art came to be. I became aware of the need of artists’ archives before I arrived at CTU as a librarian through a friend who was involved in the Artists’ Archive of the Western Reserve (AAWR). I learned that much art and almost all documentation of art and artist was not saved when artists died.

“The AAWR is a ‘living’ archive—they endeavor to reach out to artists before their death, because they know that cultural heritage can be lost when art is abandoned, mishandled, or dispersed after an artist’s death.”¹ This is something archivists understand and are trying to resolve by being proactive with artists and others whose archives are important to save. According to Heather Gendron, librarian at UNC’s Sloane Art Library,

Artists’ archives are a challenge for any archive: Artists’ archives present unusual challenges for long-term preservation. In addition to paper documents and computer files, they may contain actual works of art, as well as materials that blur the line between art and archive, such as illustrated letters, sketchbooks, photographs, and video, even brushes and paint. These archives are either misunderstood or can be difficult to manage, which means few libraries and even fewer museums actively seek them out. They tend to fall through the cracks.²

When I started learning about the archive at Catholic Theological Union, I realized that we had an opportunity to do much the same thing as these artists’ archives on a scale and with a focus that fit the mission of the archive at CTU. We already had some organizational archives of liturgical reform groups. We were offered a couple of very interesting archives of liturgical artists whose work grew out of the reforms of Vatican II and its insistence on “vernacular” art.

¹ See Artist Archives of the Western Reserve—History, http://www.artistsarchives.org/about/.

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Currently we are working with the liturgical artist John Buscemi to archive his work from start to finish—papers requesting his work, his initial plans and drawings, ephemeral material used to design, blueprints, photographs of work in progress and final work, material related to the dedications of his work, and more. Buscemi's work is interesting because it ranges from small liturgical objects to small chapels to entire church buildings, and even to a Papal Mass held in a cornfield in Des Moines, Iowa. For this work there are many newspaper accounts of the collaborative work that was done by artisans who used his designs to create the setting for the mass. His work includes the award-winning Santa Maria de La Paz Church in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which was featured in *Architectural Digest*.

An interview with Buscemi was published in *U.S. Catholic* in 1992. Throughout the interview, Buscemi advocated for how people needed to be educated—how the liturgical renewal was fueled by people learning more about early liturgical practices. He said,

> It does feel good to go into a lot of old churches, but in some ways that's an exercise in pretend because we don't have the worldview that built those churches...To go back and actually build nostalgic churches is not faithful to our time—it's building clichés. It's saying that we haven't done our work to find out what our own expressions show. To build a Gothic church today is not to wrestle with the revolutionary concepts that the people in those times did—those buildings were a radical break from what had come before.

Buscemi's archive provides a way to study what has gone into creating these new expressions that are part of our current churches.

Archivists are trained to leave documents in the arrangements used by the person whose archive they are acquiring and the CTU archive is fortunate that Buscemi had a fairly straightforward arrangement by project in chronological order. His work in making the transition has been mostly to identify items that were not filed properly and to tag or note large files of digital photographs so searchers can find the photographs by project. Researchers will be able to follow one particular project from the initial creative spark to the final object or space. Or they will be able to research a particular type of object, say, baptismal fonts, and come to a better understanding of how liturgical artists took the understanding of baptism in the Vatican II documents and made the font into a real, living part of a parish church.

According to Lisa Gonzalez, the librarian in charge of the CTU Archive,

> the importance of collecting contemporary materials needs to be stressed—people often think of archives as collecting someone's papers after they die, or when you come across someone's papers in some attic somewhere. Collecting more contemporary materials is helpful not only for those who are interested in current events, but for those who are writing contemporary history. We may not think of how important archival materials related to liturgical renewal are because people may think we are still in the midst of the renewal, and that there is no need for historical reflection yet, or people think (or hope) that liturgical renewal is passé, and not really worthy of study.

Yet, if these works are not collected now, they will likely be destroyed before an archivist can make arrangements to save them. Relatives who inherit such material will likely have no idea that it is valuable, or that it could be used for serious research.

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In the *U.S. Catholic* interview, Buscemi noted, “This is a unique time. It’s premature for anyone to say what is the definitive form of church architecture. We’re not going to know for a hundred years.” Yet, if these archives are not saved and made accessible, we will likely never know. The history that will have gone into the creation of the churches born of liturgical renewal following Vatican II will have been lost.

Why is this important to readers of *NTR*? You are the ones who can help to save these archives. If you are a designer or artist, seek out an archive (often within libraries) that will accept your archive while you are still living. Make sure this information is included in your will (if you do not move it to the archive while you are alive). If you are an archive manager, actively seek to acquire the collections of “the stuff” of artists and designers, and let the world know that you have these materials for study. There are many things to consider in acquiring these collections, but for now, the important thing is to see that they are saved so that we do not lose a great part of our Catholic liturgical heritage.

Buscemi said, “We’re like Israelites wandering in the desert. It’s a time of transition, growth, and exploration, and we need to be faithful to our age.” In order for students of liturgy to know if we have been faithful to our age, we need to have the material for study. Now we are in the age of amassing this material before it is too late!

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