

Meinrad Craighead: Praying With Images



'Meinrad Craighead's visionary paintings give us forms of prayer we need now, prayers drawn up out of the wildness of the world... they are marvelous to behold.'

China Galland



Meinrad Craighead, one of the foremost women artists and mystics of today, makes visionary images and writings that document her personal quest to seek the face of the Great Mother; for over 50 years she has shared this personal pilgrimage through her dreamlike and powerful images with simplicity and honesty.

Meinrad's story begins in 1936 in North Little Rock, Arkansas, born Charlene Marie Craighead into a secure, loving family who were doing their best to survive the depression. This close family life, especially her female forbears, has been a touchstone for her art and

spirituality in her contemplations of the greater cycles and mysteries of life: "I draw and paint from my own myth of personal origin. Each painting I make begins from some deep source where my mother and grandmother, and all my foremothers, still live; it is as if the line moved from pen or brush coils back to the original Matrix."

Her grandmother, or Memaw as she called her, was a powerful storyteller and it was in her lap that Meinrad began to visualise the stories that were to become her dreamlike paintings.

The ritual and ceremony of her Catholic upbringing also gave

Above: 'Feeding Crow Mother'

1994 : Ink on scratchboard
30 x 40 cm
(12 x 18 inches)

Left: Meinrad feeds her altar fire
(Photo Julie Felix)

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nourishment to her imagination. “I think, from the beginning, I had a safe container in which to dream, inside the arms of my mother and my grandmother and then out into the safe container of the imagery of the Catholic Church.” The young Meinrad responded deeply to mystical ritual and this affinity has led her across cultures and now embraces many shamanic spiritual perspectives.

FACE OF THE MOTHER

At age seven she had a vision, an experience of God the Mother that was to set her on a life quest. Lying in her grandmother’s garden in the shade of blue hydrangea bushes with her dog, she became

*Left: ‘Sibyl Hangs Her Wash’
1990 : ink on scratchboard
40 x 30 cm (16 x 12 inches)*

*Below: ‘Vessel’
1983 : Ink on scratchboard
35 x 40 cm (10 x 16 inches)*

transfixed by the dog’s gaze and experienced in his eyes a boundless depth and mystery “as unattainable as the night sky” and at the same time heard “a rush of water” deep within her. “I listened to the sound of the water inside and I understood; ‘this is God...’ Soon after this I came upon a photograph in a book - it was a statue of a woman. The recognition was immediate and certain: I knew this was the woman I had heard in the water and whose face I had sought with the dog’s eyes. This discovery brought a sense of well-being and gratitude which has never diminished.” That woman was the Mother God, the Divine Matrix.

COMMUNION WITH THE LAND

Keeping her visionary experiences private and having gained a Master’s Degree in Fine Art, Meinrad emerged as an accomplished artist and her teaching brought her to New Mexico: “the land that matched my interior landscape. The door separating inside and outside opened. The images my eyes saw meshed with the images I carried inside my body.”

Then she moved to Europe to teach and received a Fulbright scholarship to study ancient Catalan art at Montserrat. There,



her home for some months was a tiny bell tower where she immersed herself in making a series of large charcoal drawings of her response to the sacred mountain of Montserrat.

"I worked standing at a table before the room's single long window, the charcoal drawing flat before me. My eyes shifted continually from the unfolding charcoal imagery to the imagery beyond the window... Hawks, ravens, and magpies by day hunted the mountain, owls by night, as I slept in my narrow monastic cot"

Each drawing was "a stroke by stroke journey through the unknown; a laying this in, wiping that out, all the time watching for the image to take shape and lead you into its very specific story. The image begins to give itself to you; you follow it, you serve it. Hence the kinship of making and prayer manifests, with each evoking and shaping the other, relating images that walk right out of the emptiness that has contained them."

Her personal choices of direction have echoed that process of quiet discovery and revelation, a path that next led her to take vows in 1972 as a Benedictine nun at Stanbrook Abbey, Malvern, England, where she became Sister Meinrad. She remained at Stanbrook for 14 years, working in a tiny studio provided for her there, producing books and posters for the Abbey and developing a powerful mastery of scratchboard [scrapboard].

This medium - a compressed chalk layer on card over which black ink has been laid - gives an ideal surface in which the black surface is scratched and scaped away to reveal the white beneath. This offers a real 'uncovering' process for her imagery, and working with it Meinrad was able to explore deeper and deeper into her mystical connection with the nature of the Cosmos and the mysteries revealed through her own life experiences.

Images of the Earth Mother were emerging that were uncompromising and often stark. She depicted raw female power and essence, weaving together her deep love of the natural world, of branches and roots and seeds, of Cosmic winds and the primal roar of a Creation that has teeth and

blood and bones, is dispassionate and deeply maternal. Meinrad was still seeking the face of the Mother of her childhood vision.

When she made the difficult decision to leave the Benedictine Order in 1980 - for she enjoyed the rhythm of prayer and work there - it was to follow her intuition that it was no longer the place for her to be. This act of complete trust that she would be looked after by Spirit was followed by an outpouring of images and words celebrating and exploring the Divine Feminine which were published as 'The Mother's Songs: Images of God the Mother'.

BACK TO RIO GRANDE

But something tugged at her to return to New Mexico, and three years later she returned, again an act of trust: "...I was never not



Above: Meinrad in her studio

Below: 'The Grandmother' (from 'The Litany of the Great River')

1997 : Ink on scratchboard
15 x 30 cm (6 x 12 inches)



So my creative life, making out of myself, is itself an image of God the Mother and her unbroken story of emergence in our lives.



Above: 'Palm Trees'
(from the book: 'The Sign of the Tree')

1978 : scratchboard : 22 x 22 cm (9 x 9 inches)

"The source is a mouth, a hole in the face of creation. From it issues a spring and the tree of life grows at the first point of outpouring.

Away from the central tree, as if along the four major roots, flow the four rivers to the four sacred directions.

All creation must make contact with the four eternal rivers. All drink from one source. All are united and sustained and empowered by the living water."

Below: 'Full Circle - Whirling Mountain'

1992 : Ink on scratchboard
30 x 45 cm (12 x 18 inches)



there, for the spirits of that land clung to me in dreams, in memories, and in the animals sacred to the spirituality of its native peoples.... Over twenty years later I returned to New Mexico, and I went to the Great River to complete the circle of my long journey."

In a small house near the Rio Grande in Albuquerque she was at last immersed in the natural world, close to the animals and the river, the cottonwood trees and her beloved dogs. She connected with the Native people and attended their ceremonies and seasonal celebrations.

"Near the Rio Grande is Kuaua Kiva, a sacred hole in the ground. I climbed down the ladder and sat in the centre of the cool, dark vessel. The walls of this womb are painted. Hares and birds are spitting seed. Clouds and rain fertilize maize and jimson weed. Shafts of lightning flash into pots and are held there. Human handprints chase a trail of deer hooves. Masked dancers, girded with conch shells, spin hoops and rattle gourds. The snakes and eagles bear their messages to me."

BALANCING RITUAL

Now Meinrad still spends much of her time in solitude (though she is very much a part of a strong community of friends and associates), writing, painting, drawing, and praying. She is devoted to Crow Mother and the Black Madonna.

She has always kept deliberately 'low tech', but the

profusion of her images and writings has documented her eventful life, recording and weaving together both interior and outward daily life. It is a story that is quietly extraordinary.

In shamanic journeys and in dreamtime she has met Artemis and Anubis, become Badger and danced with the Great Mother in her kitchen.

Ritual continues to be an anchor point; each morning she rises before dawn, lights a fire and offers smudge outside on her altar. She makes her own form of communion, filling a glass with water and giving half to Mother Earth, then drinking the rest herself. In her studio she prepares by feeding her animal statues and fetishes on her altars with cornmeal, asking for their help and support.

CAULDRON OF IMAGES

The images and words reveal an essentially human, experiential conversation with the sacred that expresses the reality that is humanity, portraying grief, death, birth, the cycles of life, the powers of the plants and animals, and encounters with the elemental forces and spirits that - for her - have always been a breath away. Through her images we are led to thresholds that we know we can also cross between the ordinary and the deepest mystery. Experiencing her work can be life-changing.

Although her images seem vast in scale, in actual fact they are small in physical size; for many years they were limited by practical considerations as to the size of scratchboard available and the size of her studio space.

And constantly she is brought back to the Goddess that she is embodying as a human: "I draw and paint from my own myth of personal origin. Each painting I make begins from some deep source where my mother and grandmother, and all my foremothers, still live; it is as if the line moved from pen or brush coils back to the original Matrix. Sometimes I feel like a cauldron of ripening images where memories turn into faces and emerge from my vessel. So my creative life, making out of myself, is itself an image of God the Mother and her unbroken story of emergence in

our lives."

A TRAIL OF BEAUTY

Meinrad's quest for the Earth Mother takes her wherever that energy leads, with courage, simplicity and reverence, and her images take us with her into that place of raw beauty and sacred conversation.

Is this all very serious and earnest? Look into her pictures and you will find a sensual and celebratory world where you may find a nun dancing in the garden; or Artemis sleeping under a blanket, her feet sticking out and her boots in a heap beside her; or a bespectacled Meinrad sits calmly at her desk drawing, her dogs sprawled at her feet, while inspiration pours out of the mouth of a giant spirit figure towering above her. Or you find Sibyl is



Left: Meinrad holds two badger claws in her studio

Below-left: 'Yellow Woman In Turquoise Mountain'
2000 : Watercolour
30 x 15 cm (12 x 9 inches)

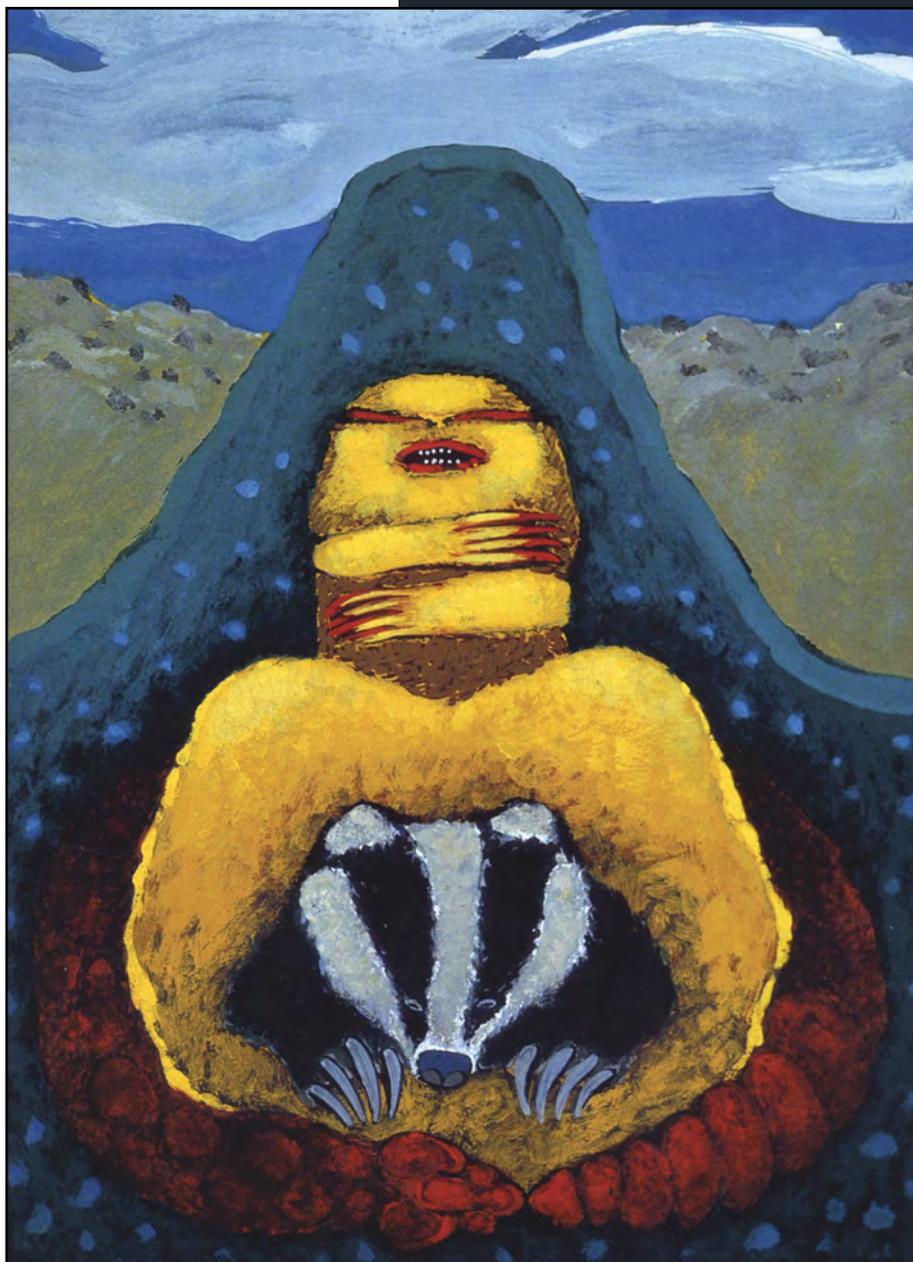
After receiving badger identity, Meinrad was instructed to make offerings at Tsootzil - 'Turquoise Mountain' (Mount Taylor) near Albuquerque - by the Nicaraguan shaman she had worked with.

At the peak is a rugged, deep, rock-strewn pit from which, according to legend, Yellow Woman calls forth all the animal spirits. It is strewn with prayer sticks and offerings.

*"In this deep place of blessing
I plant my own prayer stick
and scatter my own turquoise
tokens of thanksgiving"*

Sacred Hoop wishes to thank Amy Kellum and the Meinrad Craighead Documentary Project for their help with this article. www.meinradcraighead.com
www.meinradproject.org

See the review of a DVD and a book by Meinrad Craighead in this issue of Hoop.



Above: Meinrad enjoys a statue in her yard

Below: walking in the land that surrounds her studio

