



*Early Sketch of
Christ of
Theosis Chapel*

THE ICONS OF THEOSIS CHAPEL: PART II

By Nancy Rebal

A Personal Statement from the Artist ...

I have always lived by looking at the world and responding with my hand. The question for me has always been: 'What does this have to say that hasn't been said already?' And, 'What is there about being a woman and being an authentic artist?' Over the decades, I have defined myself as an American woman whose art is witness to relationship. In retrospect, my paintings and drawings have been my own personal opera.

I have done a great deal of liturgical artwork, in which I have considered myself the hands of the collective vision, drawing on my hand skills, love of art history, and my own happy spiritual upbringing in western Christianity. The icons for CCH are the last of many years of commissions that I had committed myself to.

It seems that here my separate artistic roles have merged. It is a pivotal year in which I am stepping up to do only my very best work. As always, it is hindsight that makes the path clear.

Tim being my brother meant this was a very important commission for me. I have been the witness of his spiritual questing for my whole life. He has always cut a path with me following along, always a similar but separate route, being a woman, and an artist. He and I see the same and respond in different languages.


We talked about the appropriate renditions of the images to model from. We knew that we wanted to acknowledge the relationship to St. Benedict's Monastery through Our Lady of Snowmass. For me there was only one Christ image that called me, as it had for years, the *Sinai Christ*.

I have been working on these two icons in fits and starts for the past year, finally touching brush to paint in the late summer. With other commissions fulfilled, I could isolate myself and focus. Tim and Barb were visiting, and we held hands as he made a blessing over the beautiful white gessoed icon panels. He tells me that I said 'wow' when I opened my eyes.

I don't know exactly what I felt, but it was certainly committing myself to do something intimidating, and not only because of the purity of the panels. It had to do with 'taking on' the *Sinai Christ*.

Finally to the painting of the icons. It helped me to get an eloquent go-ahead through an email discussion with a friend, Anne Marie, who is a professor, medievalist, icon authority, and a Friend (a Quaker). Her enthusiasm that I, as a modern painter, not a monk, 'take on' the *Sinai Christ* gave me what I needed. A clean charge from one whom I trusted.

The Christ and the Virgin were of very different visual languages. The Christ being a gem among icons, I started here and brought the Virgin into conversation with it stylistically. I would work on one and then the other as drying periods became necessary, or one called to me more than the other. Days would pass working on Christ's eyes on a full-time schedule. The expression is everything, and this one is complex. This must be what ineffable looks like.

I used tinier and tinier brushes (size 00000) as the layers built. I got a sense of the skull giving structure, and then felt the life warming in the skin. As the person emerged and began to look back at me, it became a bit disorienting. Having a personal face-touching relationship with the face of Christness is intimidating. I would use the word awesome if it hadn't lost its awe. The expressions kept changing moods to me as we worked. I sometimes felt sternness, kindness, protectiveness, expectation, and sometimes he seemed a little amused at me. I will admit that I sometimes realized I was talking to him as we worked. I often found myself humming my childhood comfort hymn 'Jesus loves me.' There was no difficulty in this painting. It simply took great attention and time. The realism in the face contrasts with the iconic hands, as in the model, somehow intensifying the power in the Face. 

Nancy Rebal is the artist of the icons of Theosis Chapel.



*Early Sketch of
Our Lady of Snowmass
of the Hills*