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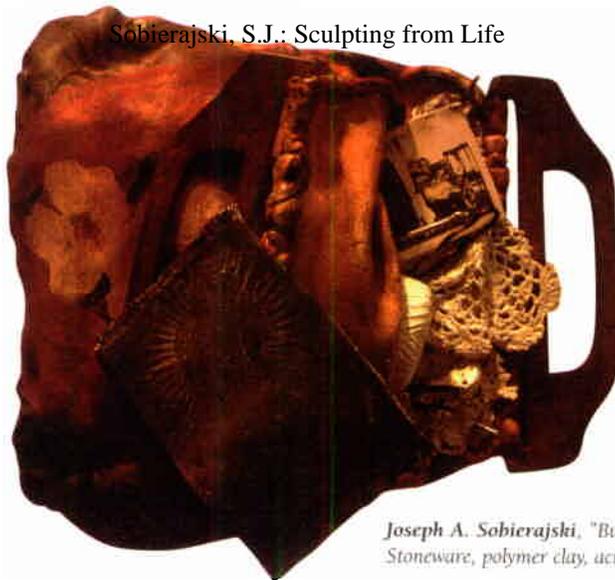
Sculpting from Life

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Joseph A. Sobierajski, "Bushia"
Stoneware, polymer clay, acrylic color, oil stains

Sculpting from Life

JOSEPH A. SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

As an undergraduate at Loyola College in Maryland, some thirty-odd years ago, I found that, with the exception of literature, the arts were virtually absent from the curriculum of the College. It was not until my senior year that a few selected students were allowed to go next door to the College of Notre Dame to take a course in Art History. Those two semesters of the *Survey of Western Art*, taught by a professor with enthusiasm and love for her subject, opened up for me the excitement of the creative process, and eventually led me not only to continue the study of art history, but also to become involved in studio work, particularly in sculpture and print making.

Formal, academic study of the history of art, combined with the training of the studio, has determined the form and to some degree the content of my work as it has developed over the years. What I study and teach about the great movements and masters of the past and what I make when working in the studio are very much interdependent.

Of all the periods of art history, it is seventeenth-century Baroque art that most influences me, inspires me, challenges me, and comforts me. Yet I am not at all sure that that connection would be obvious to a viewer of my art. Like the major and minor artists of the seventeenth century, I am interested in "realism"—in a kind of verisimilitude that expects that the images in a work of art will "look like" the real-world objects they are supposed to mimic. While my initial impulse as a

student may have been to follow the lead of the times and value the abstract and the non-representational, I have time and time again been drawn to the re-creation of some material reality. I suppose that my current work in clay might suggest a Dutch Baroque influence since it does deal with "objects" arranged in what might be called a still-life, and since, like a Dutch still-life, it has a content and meaning that goes beyond the material representation. Unlike the usual still-life, however, my work is sculptural. As such it is equally influenced by seventeenth-century Italian sculpture, particularly the work of Bernini. To be sure I do not deal with the human figure as Bernini did (nor would I claim that my work in any way approximates his insight and skill), but the attention to surfaces and textures that helped to create and to communicate the spiritual impact of his work certainly influences my own. My work is not "religious" in the usual sense, although religious imagery does appear. The work does have, or is intended to have, a spiritual component or meaning, however. That spiritual component is for me not only a result of what I see in Baroque art, but also more importantly a result of my own experience of Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises, and the spirituality that results from trying to live those exercises every day, from trying to be attentive to God's presence and graces in daily, ordinary life.

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Joseph A. Sobierajski, "June 4, 1997"
Stoneware, polymer clay, oil stains, acrylics

To my own great surprise, my current work has become very personal and subjective. It is all related to memories, to personal memories of people, events, and even feelings, as those memories are triggered by or connected with certain significant objects from my past. This current work is, I believe, a result of my father's death in June 1997, when I found myself flooded with memories, not only of my father, but of other family members and friends, living and dead, and of experiences that involved them. While this work certainly allowed me to deal in a creative, visual way with my own loss and grief, it is not meant to communicate either loss or grief. These works are works of thanksgiving that speak, for me, of the joy and the happiness found in the ordinariness of most of our lives. The memories, the objects, the images are mine, and as such they are subjective. Memorial cards, baseball caps, hidden faces in a tapestry, combine with other objects to create memories of people and times, allowing me to relive, to better appreciate, and to communicate God's love and grace in my life. But as personal as these memories may be, I believe there also is something in them that is more universal, something that allows those who have similar memories of people, events, and feelings to appreciate and identify not only with the works but also with the spirit of thankfulness that is the reason for their being.

Teaching has been for me an important part of who I am as a Jesuit and as a maker of art. As I was inspired by those art history courses in my senior year of college, I do believe that simply making art a presence in the lives of young men and women today can be inspiring. Loyola students no longer need to go next door to study and practice fine arts. In fact, the College has

recently added a one-course fine arts requirement to its core curriculum. I have no illusions. I realize that most students take my art history courses to fulfill a requirement. But if only a few students come to realize not only the beauty of what men and women can create in paint, stone or other materials, and also come to even the vaguest realization of the impulse that inspires such art, then art history has succeeded in opening a door to the creativity of God mirrored in the human, which might otherwise have remained closed.

I currently teach a studio class in clay. As an art material, clay seems the least intimidating to students. There seems to be something primal and direct about it that makes working in it very different from working with other sculptural materials, or with pencil or brush. The mud that is clay seems to offer a freedom to work without thinking about success or failure while at the same time it prompts students to learn quickly the possibilities and limitations of the material and the techniques that work best. If the study of art history allows for the understanding and appreciation of the creative process in another, studio courses allow for the actual experience of that process which images in some small way God's own creative force. It is both a manual and an intellectual process, involving problem solving and rational choices. As the process develops, it also demands the revelation of self in and through the objects that are made. I do not mean to say that clay or studio art in general are a means of personal therapy, although they can be that. What I do mean is that as one learns more and more about working with a specific medium, the conscious emphasis moves from technique to content, and the content always includes something subjective that teaches the maker more and more about self, about the world, about God.

The tradition of the visual arts in the Society of Jesus before the suppression in which Jesuits so often take legitimate pride was somehow either lost or hidden after the Society's restoration. Such at least seems to have been the case at our American schools. Happily, most Jesuit institutions today seem to be rediscovering the importance of the arts as a legitimate academic discipline. In the process they may also discover that the study and practice of the arts are important ways through which students may gain insight into the Creator's goodness—an important discovery, especially as the Catholic, Jesuit, and religious identity of those institutions is rightly questioned.