



EDWARD M. CATICH: ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS, GLASS

*A Selection of Works from
St. Ambrose University*



FIGGE ART MUSEUM
MARCH 17 – MAY 13, 2007

EDWARD M. CATICH

Drawing almost exclusively from the Catich Collection at St. Ambrose University (where the priest-artist-teacher founded the art department and taught for many years) the Figge Art Museum pays tribute to an artistic genius nearly one hundred years after his birth. This exhibition follows *Drawing a Path: Edward Catich—From Sketch to Art* (Catich Gallery, St. Ambrose, October 6–December 1, 2006). The earlier exhibition, curated by artist Kristin Quinn, showed the relationship between Catich's sketches and his art. Here the intention is to show Father's surprising variety of skills, recurring themes and his puckish sense of humor.

The art of Edward M. Catich (1906-1979) is not mysterious or hard to understand. It is straightforward and deceptively simple in form and production. It is also innovative. His carving of letters and figures into slate was innovative. His depiction of Christ and other religious figures as every day people was, in its

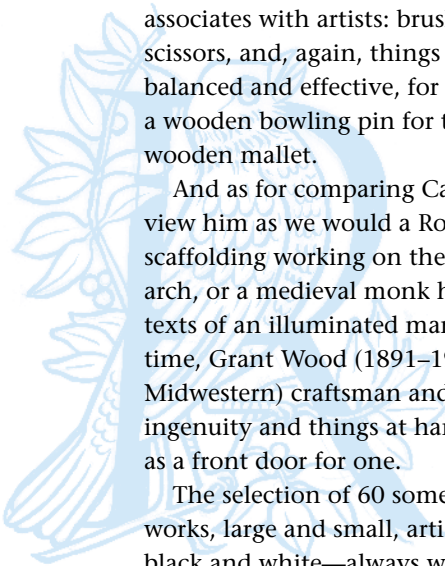
time, innovative and controversial. His inquiry into how letters came to be shaped was brilliant.

How do you tell the story of an artist and his work?

One way is to select works by date—when they were made. Or to group them by genre, subject matter or theme—landscape, Mother and Child, nature. Still another, how they were made and in what materials. Finally, you might compare them to the art of others working at the same time and place—mid-twentieth century America—or of another time, such as Ancient Roman or Medieval—comparisons Edward Catich's work invites.

This exhibition is organized by subject matter, and within groupings, by how the objects are made. It is hard to organize Catich works by date because he did not date (or even sign) most of his work. Worthy subjects for this prolific, vital man are: making art, playing music and sports, helping others, beauty in nature, faith and family. The materials he thought





worthy were rock, paper, glass, metal and things at hand. His tools were virtually all the tools that one associates with artists: brush, pen, chisel, the humble scissors, and, again, things at hand. Finding it more balanced and effective, for a time he substituted a wooden bowling pin for the carver's traditional wooden mallet.

And as for comparing Catich to others, we might view him as we would a Roman Imperial carver atop scaffolding working on the inscription of a triumphal arch, or a medieval monk hunched over the Biblical texts of an illuminated manuscript, or closer to our time, Grant Wood (1891–1942), another joyful (and Midwestern) craftsman and teacher who also used ingenuity and things at hand in his art—a coffin lid as a front door for one.

The selection of 60 some objects is a panoply of works, large and small, artistic markings in color or black and white—always with some reference to the real world, inspired by the spiritual world, and usually with an emphasis on the artistic element to which this consummate artist responded most, the artistic element of line.

There are the unique stone carvings.

These fine grained, slim but weather impervious plaques (some are rescued schoolhouse blackboard fragments) bear figures or letters that are first laid out in paint then expertly carved with a ½ inch carbon alloy tipped chisel (always at a 30 degree angle for reflectivity) painted in color or gilded (with 23 ½ karat gold leaf). Catich slates serve as Stations of the Cross, such as the set (one of eleven made) which hangs in the newly renovated Christ the King Chapel at St. Ambrose, or, as signage, announcing place names (both church-related and secular) throughout Iowa and Illinois, and in states ranging from California to Massachusetts. Smaller Catich tablets made as gifts or sold as art spell out entire alphabets, bear Latin inscriptions or amuse with original Catich quips.

But there is more.

Catich was a master calligrapher and hands-on maker of printed books, including his own. He operated his own printing press under the name Catfish Press. Rebellious against lettering designed by mechanical precision, he believed that evidence of one's hand in lettering would be one of the last



remaining indicators of individuality in our computer age. He created his own fonts—Petrarch and Catfish. As a teacher and illustrator, he showed he could be as deft with the paint brush and other tools as he was with the chisel and the stylus—demonstrating how to draw anatomy with medical textbook precision, to capture watercolor translucence in rendering things from nature, and to produce the vivid clarity and directness of a woodcut with scratchboard.

And more.

There is the whimsy of his organic, and at times gymnastic, alphabets in pen and ink, the devotional aspect of a glittering mosaic, an oil or a gouache, the jewel-like precision of a silver chalice (accompanied by a Catich composed and printed testimonial). Even the actual cast Father made of an inscription from the Trajan column in Rome—an early relic of the priest-artist's ambitious and courageous investigation into Ancient Roman lettering—are all gathered here.

Edward Catich was not only a man who made letters but a man *of* letters, a sought-after speaker and published scholar on the history behind letters. He was an artist of his time, firmly embedded in twentieth-century American art, which could be both modern and romantic, leaning towards abstraction but also founded in realism. Notice the simplicity and musicality of a Catich calligraphic line on slate or in ink, or the flattening of shape and reduction of form in a group of Catich abstracted buildings in *Stone City*, (1933). There is no question that the maker of these works was a man of (and aware of) the art of his time as well as his antecedents. And, as with the palm over palm game, “Rock, Paper, Scissors”, it is hard to know which of Catich's art forms comes out on top.

—*Elisabeth Foxley Leach*





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Fred M. Catich '33

CATICH “STANDS AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD’S BEST.” —Philip Hofer

EDWARD M. CATICH (1906-1979)



Edward Catich, ca. 1970, teaching at St. Ambrose University, Davenport, Iowa.

in Iowa City and then went to Rome to study for the priesthood; while there he also studied archaeology and paleography. Ordained in 1938, Catich began teaching at St. Ambrose, created the art department, and taught for the next 40 years. From his collegiate home, Father Catich launched a career parallel to his teaching—as a leader in liturgical art (once serving as the head of the Catholic Art Association), producer of hundreds of classical incised carvings (as signage or as works of art held in museum collections all over the country), printer and inventor of fonts (producing by hand his own treatises the art of lettering) calligrapher, scholar and illustrator of national renown. Called a

Edward M. Catich was born the third of 6 children in Butte, Montana. His Croatia father, a copper miner, died young as did his mother; at age 11, he and his three brothers were taken in by the Loyal Order of the Moose, Mooseheart, in Aurora, Illinois. After high school, the future priest-artist-teacher-scholar sought outlets for his interest in music and art in Chicago, playing in bands, studying art at the Institute, and making a living as a writer of signs. Committed to learning, Catich arrived at St. Ambrose College in 1931, worked as the leader of the school band, graduated in 1934, received a masters degree in art at the state university

“genius” by his peers, Catich stands tall with Davenport’s other twentieth century genius in the arts, another musician, Bix Biederbeck. As with his scratchboards, this exhibition manages only to scratch the surface of Catich’s life and art.



Edward Catich, Stained glass window (with shadows of standing figures), St. Mary’s, Storm Lake, Iowa.



Edward Catich, Slate inscription for St. Paul the Apostle Church, Davenport, Iowa.

This exhibition sponsored in part by Scott County Regional Authority.



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225 West Second Street • Davenport, IA 52801

IMAGES: *Madonna with Blonde Hair and Christ Child*, n.d., glass on concrete mosaic, collection of St. Ambrose University. *Lobster Slate*, n.d., incised and painted slate, collection of Linda Kelty. *Face Image of Jesus*, n.d., stained and painted glass, collection of Bob O’Hare. *Stone City*, 1933, watercolor on paper, collection of St. Ambrose University. Photographs on back cover courtesy of St. Ambrose University.