

Paintbrush Prophet's View of Jesus Stirs Hearts

Stephen Sawyer's portraits of Jesus are becoming popular among Christians who want to use art to evangelize.



[] Stephen Sawyer's provocative portraits of Jesus get people talking. Images of Christ sporting a "Father" heart tattoo and in the boxing ring have made secular media headlines and prompted debate for the way they overturn many traditional representations of the Savior.

Sawyer's Art for God work is popular with a growing body of Christians who want to use it to share their faith with others, he said. "They want art on their walls to match their heart; they don't care about it matching their couch anymore. To be part of that is precious."

Graham Cooke, an international speaker based in the U.K., has described Sawyer's painting as "prophecy with a paintbrush, preaching by canvas, divine inspiration through art."

Though reproductions of his paintings are available in some stores in North America and overseas, Sawyer is looking to broaden his reach to traditional Christian retail stores, some of which have been cautious about his offerings.

"I don't know what Jesus looked like," he said. "I know what He feels like in my heart." Critics are "very stuck on what they think is the correct version of what a Jewish man might have looked like 2,000 years ago," he added.

"But I'm not painting the historical Jesus. That's already been done. What I am focusing on is the One that we claim is alive and well today. Would He wear blue jeans? Of course He would. Do you think He might hop on a motorcycle and take it for a spin? Probably."

Licensing options

With the support of his wife and children, Sawyer for years displayed and sold posters, prints, puzzles and T-shirts of his art at conferences and festivals, intriguing a filmmaker enough to make the 2006 documentary, *Sawyerville*, about the family enterprise.

Sawyer exhibited at the International Christian Retail Show in July, for the first time. Since then he has signed several distribution deals, as well as a three-year contract with Marian Heath Greeting Cards.

Sawyer launched Art for God after working as a scenic artist in movies and television that included a brief stint on the first "Star Wars" movie. He works from a studio in Versailles, Ky., supplementing the business with personal portrait commissions. He also travels widely to speak about his work at churches and events.

Sawyer made the front page of *The New York Times* for his Undeclared boxer portrait that the newspaper dubbed "The Macho Messiah." It showed Jesus in the corner of a boxing ring, holding a pair of gloves with the word "Mercy" on them. No Appointment Necessary had Jesus bearing an arm tattooed with a cross, a heart and "Father."

In 2006 Sawyer finished his most-talked-about piece to date. Calvary portrays a drug addict injecting an arm that has been offered in place of his own by Jesus, who is reaching around from behind the man to embrace him.

"I can't begin to tell you how many prints we have sold," he said. "It has become our number one seller. It's just everywhere; I don't know how many biker groups have it thumb tacked to the garage wall, or someone has hung it in their office."

The flood of testimonies prompted by the painting has led to a book, due to be published soon, telling the story of the picture and including some of the stories of people whose lives have been impacted.

Taking risks

The Calvary picture is one of the most popular of Sawyer's art that is available at Grace Place Bookstore at Grace Fellowship of Georgetown, Ky., according to Allison Jones, one of the ministry leaders.

"There have been several people who have been addicted to drugs (who) buy that picture and say it has just changed them," she said. People at the church are drawn to Sawyer's work because his Jesus is "likeable and real. ... I like the fact that Stephen takes risks with his artwork. ... It's a different way of seeing Him."

Customers of Deborah Cassel, who deals exclusively in portraits of Christ at her Jesus 4 You Art Gallery in Roanoke, Va., and online, appreciate Sawyer's ethnic representation of Jesus, she said. "They really like that and his realism. He is very much in touch with the Spirit and what people are looking for."

In 2004 Sawyer launched a competition to support other artists starting out. He funds the event and cash prizes himself, and has expanded the categories to include not only paintings and drawings but also ceramics, jewelry, sculpture, music and digital media.

His personal reward from the competition has been learning that several prizewinners have subsequently been contacted by card companies interested in using their work, he said.

"I remember several years ago in my own life how important it was to have someone come along and really give me a word of encouragement; it's very important never to underestimate the power of a kind word. Just the thought that somebody likes what you are doing. —**Andy Butcher, Christian Retailing**