



# Art of Sharing

## **ESTHER AUGSBURGER SHARES HER FAITH, CONVICTIONS AND IDEAS THROUGH ART**

**EVEN WITH HER ART IN THE HOMES OF FORMER PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER AND THE REV. BILLY GRAHAM, AUGSBURGER FEELS THAT THERE ARE ALWAYS MORE PEOPLE TO REACH THROUGH HER ART.**

*By Angela Morgan ('03)*

Esther Augsburger feels something in her heart and then allows her hands to mold the message through sculpture.

"I don't create to give a meaning to my work. I feel something deep inside for my own sake," says the artist, who earned her Master of Arts degree in sculpture from JMU in 1978.

Augsburger, who also completed art studies in Switzerland, took a leave of absence from her teaching duties at Eastern Mennonite University to complete her master's degree. Though now retired, Augsburger at the time taught painting at EMU and a course on the life and work of Paul Klee at Georgetown University.

And retirement has not slowed down this artist. She still directs the eight-year-old art program that she established at Eastern Mennonite High School, and her original art has been recognized worldwide with much praise and critical acclaim. The humble Augsburger says, "I feel as if it is a gift that God has given me to share with the world."

Augsburger cites many influences on her artwork, including attending a school under British rule in India and moving to America. Her love for creating things began as a child growing up in India. "As a child, I created sculptures out of mud because I didn't have any toys," she explains. From that point on, she has taken an interest in the figurative; and she seldom uses a model for her sculptures. The ideas come from her subconscious.

The mixture of American and Indian cultures is evident in Augsburger's work, and her Christian faith gives her greater insight in her works. She says, "I draw from my faith to help create my pieces."

Many of Augsburger's original pieces have religious themes. "Sometimes teachers and critics have asked me if religion might hinder my creativity," says a bewildered Augsburger. "Why should it? If God created me in his image then I should be able to create. Why should it conflict with my beliefs?"

Augsburger's artwork can be found in collections in eight countries, including Canada, England, Japan, India, Switzerland, New Zealand, Russia and the United States. Her works also reside in some notable owners' private collections. Former President Jimmy Carter, the Rev. Billy Graham, Sen. Mark Hatfield of Oregon and Rep. John Dellenbach of Oregon own Augsburger sculptures. Several colleges, seminaries and universities also exhibit and own Augsburger's work.

Two Augsburger originals, *Love Essence* and *Guns into Plowshares*, have received worldwide recognition.

She created two versions of *Love Essence*, a sculpture of Peter washing Jesus' feet. The sculptures are located at Eastern Mennonite University, a seminary in India, Service Master's headquarters in Chicago and Warner's Christian College in Florida. The piece is special to Augsburger because its message is that anyone can be a "servant." No faces are included in the sculpture; Augsburger says, "I want it to represent anyone washing anyone's feet. Anyone can serve another. Indian

culture also includes the worship of idols, and by not including facial images on this sculpture I avoided it being represented as an idol. It as a symbol to show how others can serve one another in love."

*Guns Into Plowshares*, located in the center of the Judiciary Square in Washington, D.C. and commissioned by the city's Metropolitan Police Department, is another special piece to Augsburger. She worked on it with her son for two and a half years. The sculpture is a 16-foot tall steel plow and has more than 3,000 handguns welded into the sculptural form. The guns were turned into the police department as part of a voluntary surrender program, and holes were torched into the guns' firing mechanisms so they could not be reused. The process was slow since Augsburger took home boxes of guns at a time, and she had to obtain permission to place the sculpture from nine federal and city commissions.

Augsburger says that the sculpture's message is peace. "When we lay down our weapons, then we can have peace," she says.

When not sculpting, Augsburger spends her time helping other artists. She has led the Christian Artists Conference in Eastern Europe for the last nine years. "I get lots of inspiration from others' work at the conference," she says. In 2003, Augsburger led an artist conference in Budapest, Hungary, assisted by Barbara Gautcher of Harrisonburg that included artists from 10 countries. "This conference included both visual and musical artists," says Augsburger. "My partner in these events is Timothy Bentsch, a noted opera singer in Hungary." Bentsch and Augsburger coordinate the artists' conferences, which are geared to bring together Christian artists in Asia and Eastern Europe. InterChurch Inc. and Song for Nations sponsor the events. The purpose of the conferences is to inspire artists to produce their best work and to fellowship and network with other Christian artists.

Augsburger is married to Dr. Myron S. Augsburger, former president of Eastern Mennonite College (now university). During his 15-year tenure as president, he also served as president of the Washington, D.C.-based Council of Christian Colleges. With his wife's help, he established a church on Capitol Hill during the couple's 14 years living in Washington. The couple remains close to EMU faculty, staff and students. In 2001, the university named its new art building the Esther K. Augsburger Art Center; and in 2003, EMU again honored Augsburger as a Distinguished Artist in Residence. The artist has also earned two honorary doctorates -- from Grove City College and Eastern Baptist Seminary in Pennsylvania.

Augsburger never tires of sharing her art gifts with the world. Currently she is working on an eight-foot bronze sculpture that is planned for a park in Pennsylvania. She travels extensively with her husband to serve as a guest lecturer and to lead classes. In the last two years, they each have taught courses in seminaries in India, Ethiopia and Croatia. Augsburger says, "We enjoy relating to other cultures. I feel we learn so much from them."