

Different Cultures Share Visions of Christ's Birth

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Every year, the international communities ministered to by the School Sisters of St. Francis are honored at the sisters' Alfons Gallery in a poignant way by viewing the birth of Christ through the artistic lens of each individual culture.

Since 2013, the annual "Creche Culture" exhibition has afforded attendees a display of Nativity creches that hail from Latin America, India, Tanzania and Europe — all sites of international SSSF mission locations.

But this year, the exhibition, now open and running through Jan. 7, offers a new perspective on artistic representations of the Nativity by including the stitcheries of Sr. Helena Steffensmeier, a renowned artist and School Sister of St. Francis who passed away in 1997.

Five of Sr. Steffensmeier's large individual stitched works are on display to complement the creches that are usually the basis of the exhibition. An additional series of eight smaller stitcheries by Sr. Steffensmeier, entitled "The Life of Christ," are also featured, as well as three of her versions of the Holy Family in wood and clay.

The "Creche Culture" exhibition was the brainchild of current Alfons Gallery director and curator Valerie Christell when she first began in that role five years ago.

"I just thought that it would be perfect: the sisters have all these beautiful pieces, and they truly represent what the School Sisters are all about," she said.

"Art lives in the tradition of the School Sisters of St. Francis as exhibited in the creche exhibition," said School Sister of St. Francis Sr. Laureen Haben. "The cultures of the world show their creative way of praising God."



▲ Alfons Gallery is hosting its annual "Creche Culture" exhibition through Jan. 7. (Pete Fenelon photo)

One sister in particular, Sr. Jane McKenzie, donated her own collection of more than 100 creches to the School Sisters' existing collection to get the exhibition started. During the first year of the exhibition, these were displayed alongside photographs of the University of Dayton's creche collection at its Marian

Library in Dayton, Ohio. Usually, more than 200 creches are on display for the exhibition.

The inclusion of Sr. Steffensmeier's work in this year's exhibition was a natural extension from the year-long centennial celebrations of the sisters' St. Joseph Chapel. To mark the occasion,

at the beginning of 2017, many of Sr. Steffensmeier's stitcheries were placed alongside other School Sisters' artwork for permanent display throughout the St. Joseph Center's corridors.

"It seemed appropriate that this year's creche exhibition set Sr. Helena's Christmas-related stitcheries as the foundation," said Christell.

Sixty creches from the sisters' collection were selected to accompany Sr. Steffensmeier's stitcheries in this year's exhibition.

Sr. Steffensmeier was born in St. Paul, Iowa, in 1900, and traveled to Milwaukee to join the School Sisters in 1917. She taught at Catholic schools in Iowa, Illinois and Nebraska, obtaining a master's degree at De Paul University as well as undergoing artistic training at the Chicago Art Institute and the Catholic University of America.

Her artistic career really began while she was serving in Chicago as a companion to a sister who was under the tutelage of the Viennese sculptor Emil Zettler. Sr. Steffensmaier would go on to become an accomplished artist who created in a variety of media, including wood, stone, fiber, oil, watercolor and clay, even after she lost her sight in 1993. She worked at Alverno College from 1950-80, eventually becoming the head of the art department as well as artist-in-residence. Many of her works are still housed at the university.

The exhibit is open from noon to 3 p.m. each Wednesday through Friday, as well as on Sundays, through Jan. 7 at the Alfons Gallery, 1501 S. Layton Blvd., Milwaukee. Holiday items and more are available for sale in the Cultural Shop. Call 414-385-5273 for more information.