

Ed Lantzer: The Work of a Witness

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Ed Lantzer is a 76 year-old self-taught artist who has dedicated his life to a single creation. *My Father's Love* is a testament of divine redemption that unfolds over a series of thirty 4'x8' marquetry panels. Thousands of small, diamond-shaped pieces of wood are perfectly fitted to create intricate tessellations of revelatory beauty, giving form to narrative scenes from the Gospels and symbolic designs. The results are an all-encompassing theological vision. An inspired work of faith, Lantzer has also created a masterpiece of vernacular art.

In addition to the sheer size and scope of his creation, the viewer is immediately struck by the way in which Lantzer transforms the decorative technique of marquetry into an entirely original form of artistic expression. More than 150 varieties of wood have been precisely cut into small diamonds with 30 and 60-degree angles. Lantzer's system allows for greater creative possibilities than marquetry based on 45-degree angles in that the pieces may be used either horizontally or vertically. While more complex, this approach allows Lantzer to consider the placement, coloring, and grain of each piece in a way that makes possible a remarkable variety of visual effects. As the viewer moves before the panels, shifts in light and angle change the imagery before one's eyes. What appears to be a flat surface suddenly comes to life with the illusion of depth. Words and images emerge unexpectedly as the light catches the patterns of wood grain from a particular angle. At moments, the panels appear almost holographic. Because Lantzer uses no varnishes or stains, the natural wood surfaces possess a soft translucent quality. The images seem to appear at a threshold between the physical and the immaterial.

The figures and scenes that emerge from the wood patterns are mesmerizing. Familiar events from the Gospels appear with an unexpected freshness, as if encountered for the first time. The precise demands of the marquetry technique appear to present no challenge to Lantzer's vision. His figures are vividly engaged and symbolically resplendent. As in the work of the great narrative artists of the past, their poses and gestures describe both the outward event and its underlying meaning. This is dramatically evidenced in the Last Supper, which Lantzer presents as a timeless moment of revelation. The disciples are shown with their individual symbolic attributes, suggesting that with Christ's announcement each of the twelve receives his future destiny and true identity. This includes Judas as well, who appears with his back to the viewer, clothed in an intricately patterned garment. A closer look, however, reveals the pattern is fragmented and incoherent. Rather than the simple embodiment of treachery and evil, Lantzer presents Judas as playing a role in the divine order that is beyond human understanding.

While most of the scenes in the panels fit within conventional Christian theology, there is a fascinating exception. Eve's "birth" from Adam's rib found in Genesis becomes a depiction of the spiritual awakening of the human race. Lantzer shows Eve rising from the side of the sleeping Adam, her arms extended as if to embrace heaven itself rather than the apple at the periphery of the image. Eve's rising figure is contained within two luminous triangles joined at their bases. This symbolic form isolates the figure from the events of the narrative through a kind of sacred framing—similar to the use of the mandorla found in Medieval art. Believing that the feminine is undervalued, Lantzer reverses the traditional association of the female being earthbound and material and the male as transcending and spiritual.

Lantzer regards numbers and geometric shapes as intrinsically numinous and recognizes congruence among geometric symbolism, sacred numerology and Biblical narrative, all of which are connected in his work. In a sequence of panels based on the Nativity of Christ, a progression of five "stars" marks the narrative that is unfolding below them. Beginning with the triangle, symbolic of the Holy Trinity, the stars grow more complex, concluding with the seven-pointed star of perfection. Even the wooden diamonds of the marquetry can be seen as the symbolic mustard seeds of the entire work. Their shape incorporates both the triangle and the quadrangle (symbolically associated with the rational world of human constructs) thus embodying the unity of the temporal with the eternal, the human with the divine.

The panels are inherently a work of art, a fact easily overlooked because they don't fall into a familiar category. In the contemporary art world, Lantzer seemingly fits all the criteria of an Outsider artist—a reclusive, self-taught creator sustained by a personal vision rather than public recognition, unaffected by mainstream culture. For such artists, creativity is often an obsessive pursuit of an alternate reality, private and often inscrutable. This is what often makes their work so fascinating and compelling. Yet Lantzer's art is compelling for an entirely different reason. Rather than retreat into his imagination, he bears witness to a living reality he finds in centuries old cultural beliefs. Lantzer's knowledge of biblical scripture, history and language is encyclopedic, reflecting a lifetime of study. His thinking is lucid and systematic. It is complex for the simple reason that it is all encompassing. His goal is nothing less than to show through mathematics, narrative, and exquisite craftsmanship the intricate magnitude of Divine Love that animates and imbues all creation.

