

Janet McKenzie

A Sacred Artist's Life of Creative Activism

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I first saw Janet McKenzie's artwork when I was a graduate student studying religion and art at Yale Divinity School. The *National Catholic Reporter* issued a full-color supplement of the results from an art competition titled *Jesus 2000: Jesus for the Third Millennium*. The initial call was for submissions of original artwork meant to answer the question, "What would Jesus Christ look like in the year 2000?" More than one thousand artists from around the globe submitted over sixteen hundred images. The supplement included the top sixty images, depicting Jesus in a variety of ways from realistic to abstract, and traditional to contemporary. The winning image, Janet McKenzie's *Jesus of the People*, appeared on the cover. I was captivated by this dark-skinned, clean-shaven Jesus who gazed at the viewer with a gentle countenance. I was even more intrigued when I learned that the model for the image was an African American woman. This essay explores the artistic development of Janet McKenzie and how her art propelled her to international fame. By following the contours of McKenzie's life and career, we will see how art, particularly sacred art, can speak to social tensions of a particular time, and how a painting can become iconic when underlying themes resonate long after the particular historical moment has passed.

The Early Years

Janet McKenzie was born in Brooklyn, New York, and her parents were of European descent, predominantly Scandinavian and Scottish. She and her sister were raised in and around New York City. Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, her role models were her mother and her immigrant grandmother. As a young adult, she experienced deep tragedy when she lost both her parents and her grandmother in one year. McKenzie was only 23 years old when her mother died of cancer. “My mother and grandmother were so inspiring to me—accepting and kind and really contributed to putting me on this path. My mother died at a very early age, and she died only two weeks apart from her mother. They were very close in life and in death. In many respects, I carry on my work hopefully to speak for them, and for myself” (Larson 2006). McKenzie said she felt helpless witnessing her mother’s suffering and death, and she came to realize how many women cannot speak for a variety of reasons, including early death. Today she feels all women’s journeys are interwoven and linked together. Inspired by her maternal lineage, McKenzie committed her talent as an artist to produce emotionally honest and accessible images of strong and empowering women. “As a woman I did not get to share my adult life with my mother. But on the other hand, losing her then really helped me commit to imagery of women” (Stoddard 2002).

McKenzie studied art at the Fashion Institute of Technology and the Art Students League, both in New York City. It was at the Art Students League where her artistic abilities blossomed. The League supported her studies with the Merit and Arnold Blanch Memorial full scholarship award. McKenzie continued to stand out among her peers when she became the youngest recipient at the time to receive the Edward McDowell Traveling Scholarship. With this prestigious award, McKenzie was able to travel and study art in Europe for a year. “I bought a car in England, took it right over to the continent, drove 10,000 miles and looked at as much art as I possibly could” (Stoddard 2002). Upon her return, McKenzie was invited by the League to present her first solo show (Sacred Art Gallery n.d.). Since completing her studies, McKenzie has always supported herself as an artist. Her commitment to her art has been fueled by mission and purpose. She felt driven by a calling that was larger than a personal desire to create. However, her sense of purpose intensified the more she gave dignity and voice to diverse women through her art.

As her life unfolded, her other purpose and commitment became the care and love of her son, Simeon. McKenzie raised Simeon as a single mother. When he was young, McKenzie left New York and settled in Vermont. When asked why she chose Vermont, she said, “I wanted to start a new life. I wanted to get away from New York, and find a different place to live, a place I was unfamiliar with. I wanted, if I

could, to leave some of that sadness behind and provide my son with a fresh start, if that was possible” (Stoddard 2002). Simeon, who today is in his forties, admires his mother for staying committed to her art while supporting them. “Now that I am older, I understand how difficult it was for my mother to raise me, because she is self-employed and being an artist, there is a lot of uncertainty with where the next paycheck would come from” (Stoddard 2002). McKenzie concurs, “We were often below the poverty line. Every minute of it was worth it, but it was tremendously challenging” (Stoddard 2002). Today mother and son remain close, and Simeon is one of her greatest supporters. He creates and maintains his mother’s website and helps to share her art with the world. He even poses for her paintings. He also goes on tour with his mother to help with art exhibitions. McKenzie is proud of her son and the man he has become. In an email to the author on November 10, 2019, McKenzie stated, “Simeon works a full-time job for a non-profit in Burlington, VT, helping first time business owners start a business. Many are New Americans, and many are low income Vermonters. He is kind and gives his expertise and heart to others. His love for my art and me is behind his involvement with my work and his presence is needed on many levels, more than I can say.”

McKenzie thought the move to Vermont would be temporary, but it became her permanent residence. Initially, she and her son lived in Burlington. Next, they headed north—so far north that Simeon attended school across the border in New York State. Finally, when her son was in college, she purchased a home in Island Pond. “I moved to Vermont many years ago in order to start a new life, for my art, for my son and for myself. I came to Island Pond and there was a house. I went to an auction and I purchased this house in the Northeast Kingdom, expecting to stay one or two years and now I’ve been here twenty (laughs) ... I am incredibly grateful to have this beautiful salmon-colored house that provides a wonderful place to live and a very private perfect space for me to create in” (Blackwell 2017). The term “kingdom” creates an almost mythic aura about where McKenzie lives, but the term actually refers to three counties in the northeast section of the state. However, it does have special significance for McKenzie. She feels called to this remote area that fosters her creativity and spirituality. The media describes McKenzie as living a hermit-like existence, and she does not disagree. “My life is somewhat monastic, and it completely supports this work that I do, which is prayer” (Blackwell 2017).

McKenzie’s turn toward creating sacred art came after she was already successful as a professional artist. For two decades, she painted images of female figures and traveled across the US for exhibitions and gallery events. In the mid-1990s, McKenzie’s art began to change. Just as her mother and grandmother inspired her early career, family connections inspired a new chapter in her artistry. “I realized that my nephew, a mixed race African-American of nine or ten living in

Los Angeles, would never be able to recognize himself in my work,” said McKenzie (Kleinert 2018). She decided to make a racially inclusive statement with her art and began to add children and symbols to her paintings of female figures.

It was also around that time that McKenzie’s desire to express more sacred themes in her art emerged. She traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1994, at a time when she felt an impasse in her work that was making her unhappy. “I had a longing for something not in concrete form. I guess in some sense I confronted it. The result was a transformational experience. I realized what I wanted was a more spiritual expression and I wanted so much to use the image of Madonna and child, but I did not feel I had a right to. I was not Catholic, and I felt it was bad form to do it” (Stoddard 2002). McKenzie had been raised Episcopalian and always felt her art had a spiritual path but did not feel she should paint an image so identifiably Catholic. It was when she returned to Vermont and was approached by a local Catholic priest to create art for the chapel of St. James Greater Parish Church in Island Pond that her first overtly religious painting was produced. “It was really when Fr. Richard Fowler put his arm around me and said ‘you have a calling and you have to follow it. God wants you to do this.’ He set me free and all these doors opened” (Stoddard 2002). The invitation by the priest broadened her sense of where her art belonged and showed her how her art could contribute to others in new ways. His invitation and openness also showed her that she could be connected to different traditions in new ways.

Jesus 2000

McKenzie did not see the announcement for the *Jesus 2000* art competition. It was a friend who saw the announcement and sent her the information. The art competition was sponsored by the *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR), a widely read Catholic newspaper in the United States. *NCR* was founded by an American Catholic journalist who wanted to bring professional journalism standards to Catholic news reporting. It is a member of the Catholic Press Association and has won excellence awards for national news reporting from this organization six times between 2008 and 2014. *NCR* editor Michael J. Farrell was involved with the *Jesus 2000* project from the start. He had the original vision for the art competition and oversaw its development.

McKenzie was not sure she wanted to enter the *Jesus 2000* art competition. “I never had an interest or a calling to paint Jesus. But when a friend sent me an announcement, it really got me thinking about this. Could I? Would I? Should I?” (Blackwell 2017). The invitation to present Jesus as he might look today is what caught McKenzie’s imagination. The competition instructions presented artists

with a simple question, “What would Jesus Christ look like in the year 2000?” McKenzie’s answer was to paint an image that was honest for herself. “I was trying to create a painting that was uncompromising in terms of my commitments as an artist and as a woman. I wanted to pay homage to groups that have been left out and under-celebrated in His image” (Stoddard 2002).

She only had three weeks to paint and submit the image. “I used a model, a friend of mine. I felt she was the perfect inspiration for the painting” (Stoddard 2002). Maria was a young African American woman from her neighborhood in Vermont. It was Maria’s face that came into McKenzie’s mind when she contemplated painting an image of Jesus for the *NCR* competition. “Her intentions are pure. She celebrates life. It allowed me to bring us, as women, into an image of Jesus. All my life I have had to fit myself into sacred imagery, iconic imagery of Jesus where I do not know where I belong” (Stoddard 2002). The more she thought about it, it made sense, not as a controversial statement, but rather as a statement about who is included in Jesus Christ, “to incorporate, once and for all, women, who had been so neglected and left out, into this image of Jesus” (Kleinert 2018). The way that the painting emerged felt like it had a life of its own. “The painting simply came through me,” she said. “I feel as though I am only a vehicle for its existence” (Kleinert 2018). When the painting was complete, McKenzie herself felt transformed by the work. “My journey with this painting has been nothing short of life altering. *Jesus of the People* is dark and modeled by a woman because people of color and women have traditionally been under-represented or left out of iconic imagery of Christ” (McKenzie n.d.). McKenzie’s goal was not to win the competition. “This was not a contest for me. This was about creating a work of art. If nothing else, I thought I would create a painting that my nephew could see himself in and probably just send him a print of it down the line, and I would be completely satisfied” (Leith n.d.).



Jesus of the People, courtesy of Janet McKenzie.

The *NCR Jesus 2000* art competition generated an overwhelming international response and was a huge success. 1,678 images of Jesus were submitted by 1,004 artists from nineteen countries on six continents. While most of the images were paintings, submissions also included photography, sculpture, and mixed media. A panel of three judges were invited to review all the images and select the top ten. Judge Pattie Wigand Sporrang said, “Over the two days we spent pouring through the art, the images ranged from traditional depictions of a man with a beard, light brown hair and blue eyes, to super heroes with bulging muscles, to a many-eared figure in a leather coat, hanging out on a city corner among street people. Some pictures were abstractions—light on water, light in the sky, raging fire. Others were variations on a role—preacher Christ, homeless Christ, cradled Christ, Christ holding planet earth” (Farrell 1999, 15). Judge Sherry Best also noted certain overriding themes:

[M]any of the images incorporated symbols and physical features of multiple cultures. Some representations were specifically Native American, African, Haitian, Latino or Asian ... A theme less pervasive but seen often enough for comment was “Jesus as clown.” This is not the same as the

“Laughing Jesus,” a theme that became popular 20 or 30 years ago ... These [clown images] seemed to emphasize the role of Christ as the bearer of glad news, but in a sad situation. The scapegoat references within these images gave Jesus a sense of poignancy. (Farrell 1999, 8)

Judge Cory Stafford focused on the purpose of the project. “This competition was not primarily looking for the most skill in controlling the medium; it was more about expanding on existing notions or transforming them or taking them to an entirely new level and showing us something we had never seen in 2,000 years of contemplating the godhead as it appeared to us on earth” (Farrell 1999, 19). Publisher Fox felt that the response was “the collective cry of longing of so many” (Farrell 1999, 10). He said something new was accomplished through the multiplicity of images. “The lesson I have learned is that no one face of Jesus suffices anymore; it never did once the original Jesus left us ... Two millennia after the incarnation, the human family sees Jesus in tens of thousands of ways. We are witnessing an explosion of human consciousness as we contemplate Jesus ... as Christianity breaks out of its traditional Western template and becomes a truly global religion” (Farrell 1999, back page).

Choosing the winner from the top ten was left to celebrity judge Sr. Wendy Beckett. Beckett was well known for hosting television art programs on the BBC and PBS and for publishing books that popularized famous masterworks found in museums and other settings. Beckett said she struggled to select one image because the images were so personal and varied. She said that even among the top ten, five images were her first choice at some point during her deliberations. She noted that choosing an abstract image might have been easier but felt the issue of *Jesus 2000* called for something more specific. Beckett also humbly admitted that her judgment could only be subjective. “For myself, I have no image. I cannot even begin to visualize the Jesus in whom and through whom I live. But the very act of trying to envisage him is deeply fruitful. Every artist will have come closer to him in the effort, a prize far more important than worldly success. Every viewer will understand our Lord more deeply as he or she thinks of what this image could be and responds to what the artists have made visible” (Farrell 1999, 7). Beckett’s statement does not suggest a lack of faith, but rather a faith so all-encompassing that no one image could describe it. Even without a personal image herself, Beckett sees imagining Jesus in new ways as a contemplative practice, drawing both artist and viewer into a deeper faith journey.

In the end, Beckett chose *Jesus of the People* by Janet McKenzie as the winner of the competition. Beckett writes, “This is a haunting image of peasant Jesus—dark, thick-lipped, looking out on us with ineffable dignity, with sadness but with confidence. Over his white robe he draws the darkness of our lack of love, holding

it to himself, prepared to transform all sorrows if we will let him. A symbolic sheaf of wheat is to the right (readable also as a lance), and on the left a symbolic Eucharistic host. This seems to me a totally surrendered Lord who draws us into holy sacrifice” (Farrell 1999, 7). Right below Beckett’s statement on the same page of the *NCR* supplement, McKenzie offers a different explanation of the symbols. “Jesus stands holding his robes, one hand near his heart, and looks at us—and to us. He is flanked by three symbols, the yin-yang symbol representing perfect balance, the halo conveying Jesus’ holiness and the feather symbolizing transcendent knowledge. The feather also refers to Native American and the Great Spirit” (Farrell 1999, 7).

Interestingly, where McKenzie painted Eastern and earth-based symbols along with the Christian halo, Beckett saw traditional Christian iconography. For McKenzie, the difference in interpretation does not bother her. In an email to the author on November 10, 2019, she said that Beckett’s commentary, “touches my heart completely because the essence of the painting absolutely reached her” (Janet McKenzie, email message to author, November 10, 2019). McKenzie speaks of painting so people can connect emotionally with the soul of the image. While the artist and the celebrity art judge interpreted the symbols differently, perhaps this demonstrates how sacred art becomes iconic—when the imagery connects to something deeper through the frame of reference of the viewer.

McKenzie’s choice of model for the painting drew the most comment. McKenzie always intended to paint Jesus as a man, but a female model expanded how the image developed. “The feminine aspect is served by the fact that although Jesus was designed as a man with a masculine presence, the model was in fact a woman. The essence of the work is simply that Jesus is all of us ... I would like to think that *Jesus of the People* might contribute in a small way to reminding us to love” (Farrell 1999, 7). McKenzie’s skill as an artist accomplished what might be considered an impossible task. At first glance, the image does not challenge an assumption about the maleness of Jesus. However, once the viewer knows the model for the painting was female, it is possible to see femaleness in the image too. Jesus is clean-shaven, wrapped in a cloak, with cropped black hair, and wearing a crown of thorns. His look is serene. “It’s a total acceptance of his fate, and that’s what the painting is about—acceptance,” she said. “I want to remind people of the importance of loving one another. I hope people are able to go to the essence of the work, which is kindness and peace” (Kleinert 2018). This is the Jesus McKenzie sees and wants to show us.

Becoming a Prophet

McKenzie was fifty-one when she won the competition. As the winner, she received \$2,000 plus a major publicity campaign. She was informed by a phone call. “Michael Farrell, the editor, called me and I somehow knew. I inhaled and he said in his lovely Irish accent, ‘no no no you must let me finish.’ So he told me. My painting had been selected and could I come to New York to be on the *Today Show* tomorrow with the painting on a plane? And I said no, I will drive it to the city. So that’s what we did” (Larson, 2006).

Her first appearance on national television changed Janet McKenzie’s life forever. After the *Today Show* appearance, she was no longer a relatively unknown artist living a quiet existence in upstate Vermont. Now she was an internationally recognized artist who dared to paint Jesus in a new way. She was asking viewers to recognize that people of color and women are underrepresented in depictions of the godhead. She painted Jesus as male, but including a woman of color as inspiration for the image was a way to express the fullness of humanity through a single image of Jesus. The reclusive artist had become prophetic, speaking into the tensions of the times. Through her painting, she exposed blind spots about who is included in Jesus Christ. “Visual art provides concrete form to abstract ideas and helps other people see those ideas in a real form so they can say, ‘oh yes, I get it now’” (Leith n.d.).

McKenzie felt she was pointing a way towards a more inclusive future with a healing image, but that was not the first response when it appeared on national television. McKenzie was shocked by the negative reaction and hateful response to the painting after the *Today Show* appearance (McKenzie n.d.). The reactions were extreme. “It received world-wide enormous publicity. And the response, initially, was absolutely horrific. People hated it. They were angry. They called me up, told me to read the Bible, hung up on me. ... My mail was separated at this little local post office for fear of letter bombs ... I’ve been shocked at the response of something that should be ordinary. We should expect to see all people celebrated in sacred art, all races” (Blackwell 2017). Shortly after her painting won, McKenzie received approximately 300 email messages condemning the picture and its artist. The harassment was constant and included demands for her to stop painting.

While the dark skin Jesus ignited the ire of some, when people found out McKenzie had used an African American woman as a model, the hate mail increased (Wicai 2000). She even received death threats. For McKenzie, it was overwhelming. In a 2006 interview on Vermont public television, McKenzie read one of the letters. “How dare you. It’s not enough that the Catholic Church continues to feed thousands of people the lies they represent but you are now attempting to make Jesus into a woman. You can do as you wish, but I warn you

now, hell is not a nice place. These actions are mentioned time and time again in the Bible and people go to hell for them” (Larson 2006).

The situation became even more dangerous when the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) targeted McKenzie and her painting. The WBC is a Kansas-based religious group known for inflammatory hate speech against LGBT people, other religions, US soldiers, and politicians (Mikulan 2009). They are famous for conducting anti-gay protests across the US, picketing at military funerals, and stomping on the American flag while yelling “thank God for dead soldiers,” and “God hates America” (Westboro n.d.). The WBC wrote an angry letter connecting McKenzie’s painting to Vermont’s Civil Union Bill that was under consideration at the time. They sent copies to Senators Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders, as well as to Governor Howard Dean. It is still possible to view some of the hate-filled blogs against McKenzie and the Vermont Civil Union Bill with titles such as “Vermont is the Antichrist Bethlehem” (SocMen 2002). The FBI became alerted when the WBC planned to protest in front of McKenzie’s home. One protest was even organized and publicized, but a severe snowstorm prevented the protest from taking place. McKenzie wonders if the snowstorm was divine intervention at some level when she says, “God provides, I guess” (Larson 2006).

That did not stop the harassment. Because of the ongoing and varied threats, McKenzie took precautions with the painting. She added a Plexiglass cover to the original *Jesus of the People* painting during the first few exhibitions. “There hasn’t been one aspect of this painting that hasn’t been ripped up and thrown back. Every aspect, including race, the clothes and all the colors used,” she said. “The most universal remark I received was that Jesus didn’t look like that. Jesus was Jewish. That was the thread that bound those comments together,” said McKenzie. “But then there were people who commented that Jesus was from Northern Africa. Yes. Certainly. And [Scripture-based references] ‘his hair was like wool’ and ‘his feet were burnished brass.’ But everybody said something” (Black 2000). Eventually, the wave of adverse reactions subsided. However, even now, almost twenty years later, she reports that it has never completely stopped.

McKenzie has become more reflective and philosophical about the onslaught of criticism. “First, it was a total surprise and a shock. Second, it saddened me, initially, because the negative responses came first. And they were really mean, to say the least. This really disappointed me because I thought we had evolved beyond that level of viciousness and hate. But then the positive support began pouring in and really overwhelmed the negative. This painting is really about grace and love. I trust that the message of the painting will speak, and I stand behind the painting” (Stoddard 2002). McKenzie understood that familiarity with images of Jesus as White was underneath many of the reactions. “All of us need to see ourselves celebrated in such imagery. On the other side of things, I have come to notice that

people have an attachment to Jesus staying White because it is a familiar image. This does not mean to replace those that have come before it. This is in addition to, this is an inclusive image meant to include us, those of us left out of this imagery because we all need to see ourselves celebrated in the image of Jesus” (Larson 2006). To McKenzie’s credit, she responded to the harassment and threats with understanding in an early interview. “Initially I was very saddened, but now I feel differently because I know change comes hard and as an artist, I feel it’s my job to lead people” (Wicai 2000).

Positive Reaction

In the end, the people who embraced and stood up for the work far outnumbered the detractors, and this group has only grown over time. McKenzie’s supporters have carried *Jesus of the People* forward into the world through museum exhibitions, documentaries, and film. They have written about it in books and magazines from South Africa to Iceland, Vietnam, Australia, and Russia. Prints are all over the world; the image has appeared in Bibles. “The rallying and support has been phenomenal,” McKenzie said (Wicai 2000). During the first year, there was a steady demand for radio, television, and newspaper interviews. As well, her work appeared in exhibitions in different cities across the country. The first exhibition at Pace University in Manhattan included thirty-five entries. That number grew to forty-four at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and sixty-three at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville (Wicai 2000).

What began as a creative and innovative way to engage the new millennium had become a cultural phenomenon. Because the exhibits continued to grow in size and popularity, the editor of *National Catholic Reporter*, Thomas Roberts, described the exhibition tour “like a painting chain letter ... People just want it that badly” (Wicai 2000). There were traditional portrayals and innovative images, including a street person, a modern-day carpenter, and even a TV news anchor. There were images of Jesus sitting in a diner and as a prisoner waiting to be executed.

Nevertheless, the highlight of the show was McKenzie’s *Jesus of the People*. In Chicago, police officers and firefighters on their way home from night shifts would stop by to see what they called “the Picture.” One appreciative viewer laid a bunch of lilies beside the painting (McKenzie n.d.). In an interview during the Chicago exhibit, McKenzie said, “It’s on its own path, and I’m trying to keep up with it” (Wicai 2000). During the Chicago exhibit, McKenzie received a commission to create a work for a new chapel at St. Xavier University on the south side of the city. As the popularity of the painting increased, McKenzie became more relaxed. For

the next show in Belleville, where 10,000 people were expected to walk through the exhibit, McKenzie decided to remove the plastic cover over the painting and pay more attention to the positive feedback (Wicai 2000).

Some may question why a White woman painted one of the most celebrated dark-skinned Jesus images. However, the reactions from the African American community have been particularly edifying for McKenzie. “The reaction has been predominantly appreciative ... The greatest exuberance has come from non-Catholics” (Black 2000). *Jet* magazine published the image, and Whoopi Goldberg wanted to purchase the painting. McKenzie turned down the offer because she wanted the painting accessible to everyone instead of in one person’s collection (Larson 2006). Pattie Wigand Sporrang, one of the contest judges, curated the Chicago exhibit. “I had an older woman come in who was dressed to the nines. She was African American. She burst into tears when she saw McKenzie’s painting and said, ‘Honey, I’m an atheist, but that’s my Jesus right there’” (Wicai 2000). In 2002, the National Black Catholic Congress met in Chicago, and McKenzie’s son Simeon accompanied her on the trip. “It was an amazing experience to witness 3,000+ African-American men and women standing, crying, and weeping in front of the painting while it was on the altar. That was something that was extremely moving and something I will never forget” (Larson 2006).

Protestant churches also embraced the image. In 2002, the Reverend Jonathan L. Walton was pastoring a small church in Newark, New Jersey, for a mostly African American and Latino community that was under-resourced. The building had once been a high-steepled Presbyterian Church. As he described it, “All the icons, all the images of Jesus, both in stain glass and on the walls, were all of Michelangelo’s cousin or Jesus looking like a Greek God. So I began searching for different images because it really pained me to see these small African American children come in each Sunday and look up at these images of the divine and of the sacred and not be able to see themselves or their skin color or their pigmentation in any way in any representation of the divine. I thought that was tragic. So it was at that moment that I began searching for different images of Jesus, and I came across that wonderful painting of Janet McKenzie, *Jesus of the People*. At that moment I became captivated with Janet McKenzie and her work” (Blackwell 2017).

The African American models who sit for McKenzie feel the same about her art. Amy Robinson explains the process and how it makes her feel. “Her work reflects the diversity and the celebration of diversity. I am extremely proud every time I am asked to pose for her. She shares with you her vision for the painting. So it is almost like you take on this role of tangibly placing yourself in what she is trying to create. And I love it. I see the essence of me. I see other beautiful women. I know some of the women that Janet uses as models, so it is always nice to feel you are part of their essence as well” (Blackwell 2017).

Jesus of the People has also received positive responses from around the world. Valerie Maysie D'Souza from India wrote about the image in her article, "Jesus of the People—The Role of Art in Theological Reflection": "This was a Jesus for the dark Continents ... while very typical of an African American, it could be a Dalit face, a tribal Indian Face, the marginalized face of society ... This Jesus was definitely one with the poor, the outcasts, and women" (D'Souza 2002, 12).

Even with world-wide fame, McKenzie's original motivation for painting the image remained. She created *Jesus of the People* so that her bi-racial nephew could see himself in an image of the divine. McKenzie says the exhibition she was most proud of that first year was when she learned that two of her paintings, *Jesus of the People* and *Madonna and Child—Boundless Love*, were both displayed at her nephew's locker at school (Black 2000).

Newer Work

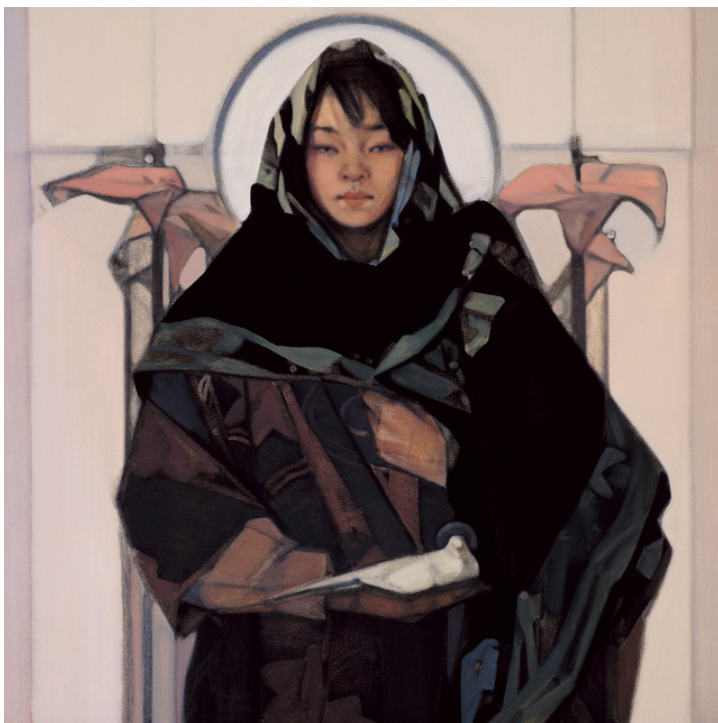
Since the *Jesus 2000* art competition, McKenzie has created an extensive catalog of sacred art paintings. She continues to advocate for racial diversity, and her favorite themes include Madonna and Child and Holy Family. She has painted these iconic images, along with many others from the Bible, as different races, including Asian, Latino, African American, Caucasian, and Native American. Her exhibition paintings have specific characteristics. Her paintings are usually large, often life-sized. Most figures are cloaked and painted with little or no background to give a sense of timelessness. When asked if her style was informed by art deco, McKenzie answered, "I've always worked a little different from other realists. My work has a very strong linear almost geometric approach. I am after strength, connected to the earth but heaven oriented. When people sit for me there is a rising up, a drawing to, and a sense coming through the figure" (Stoddard 2002).

McKenzie has also continued to receive commissions outside of religious settings. In 2007, the Breyo Fellowship commissioned McKenzie to create an ongoing body of work titled, "African American Women Celebrated." The series pays homage to women of color and brings together themes long important to the artist: motherhood, iconic women alone, children (the future), and the gift of the elderly. McKenzie was inspired to paint the elderly with the same care and compassion she had shown all her previous art themes (Sacred Art Gallery n.d.).

Jesus of the People also continued to grow in popularity, both for the power of the image and for the controversy it had endured. In the new millennium, gender and sexuality debates in churches were turning to LGBT issues, and scholars were interested in exploring sacred art that had been censored or labeled as blasphemous. Art historian and minister Cherry Kitteridge chose *Jesus of the People*

as the cover for her 2007 book, *Art that Dares: Gay Jesus, Woman Christ and More*. All the artists wrote short essays about what led them to create these images. They also shared their artistic process and how it connected with their identity and faith. *Art That Dares* was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in 2007.

In 2009 Orbis Books published *Holiness and the Feminine Spirit—The Art of Janet McKenzie*. Twenty-seven well-known writers and theologians—all women—wrote reflections for the art. The authors included: Sr. Wendy Beckett, the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, Diana Hayes, Sisters Helen Prejean, Elizabeth Johnson, Joyce Rupp, Ann Patchett, and Joan Chittister. Given complete freedom, each author wrote about a different painting in whatever way it spoke to them (McKenzie n.d.). The image chosen for the cover, entitled *Holy Mother of the East*, was paired in the volume with an extended poem written by Joanna Chan. In the acknowledgment of the book, McKenzie thanks mentors, benefactors, foundations, and art networks for their support. She also adds a special note of gratitude to her models, in particular to her friend “Maria and her children Morrow, Apple, Sophia, and Zephyr [who] appear in many of my paintings, and I am eternally grateful to them” (Perry 2009, ix). Many of the artist’s current pieces illustrate her interest in pulling the viewer “to look inside” by painting some faces with closed eyes. “The eyes are the windows to the soul, you know,” she explained (Black 2000).



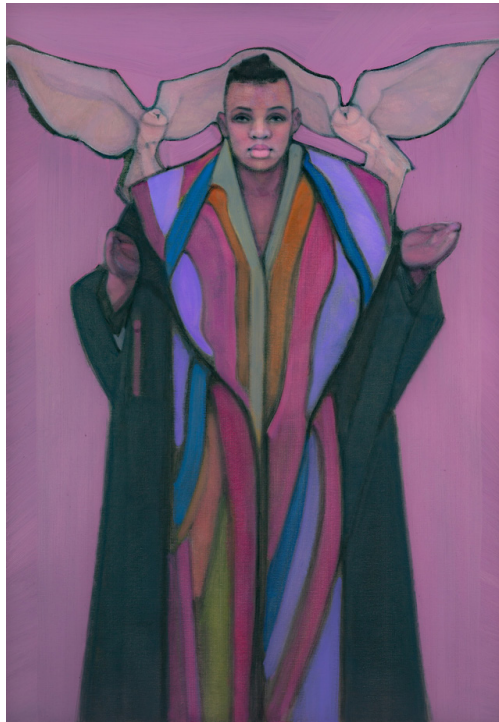
Holy Mother of the East, courtesy of Janet McKenzie.

Naming God was published in Great Britain in 2011. The book featured hymns, prayers, and poems for worship written by the Rev. Dr. Jan Berry along with eleven of McKenzie's paintings, including the cover image. In 2013, Orbis published another book featuring Janet McKenzie's art. *The Way of the Cross: The Path to New Life* is a book-length treatment of the Stations of the Cross written by Joan Chittister. The Stations of the Cross are fifteen images that follow the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, commonly found in Catholic and other churches as locations of prayer and contemplation. Chittister had never done a book-length treatment of the Stations before, but it was McKenzie's paintings that prompted her to agree. *The Way of the Cross*, where McKenzie is artist-as-theologian, won a 2014 Catholic Press Association Book Award. The book was also recognized as a 2014 National Indie Excellence Book Awards finalist.

McKenzie's work continues to inspire social activism as well as prayer. In 2016, a mass shooting took place at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, targeting the LGBTQ community. With forty-nine people killed, it remains the second-most deadly shooting in US history. It is also one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in US history, second only to September 11, 2001 (Swanson 2019). In response, McKenzie

created *A Brave and Quiet Heart*. In an email to the author, she describes the painting:

The subject within *A Brave and Quiet Heart* offers a gesture of possibility while simply looking at the viewer, flanked by doves symbolizing this person's inherent sanctity, something that is so often forgotten or dismissed. The pride flag is interpreted as inextricably part of their essence. My hope is that *A Brave and Quiet Heart* will serve as a visual testament to hope over despair, to love over hate and to the memory of those souls who lost their lives at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, June 12, 2016. (Janet McKenzie, pers. comm., December 3, 2019)



A Brave and Quiet Heart, courtesy of Janet McKenzie.

In 2016, McKenzie was also commissioned by Harvard University to create a work of art for the historical Harvard Memorial Church, located in the oldest section of Harvard's campus. The art commission came after McKenzie had delivered the 2013 William Belden Noble Lecture at the church with *Jesus of the People* exhibited on the altar. The minister who had invited McKenzie in 2013 and championed the 2016 commission was none other than the Reverend Jonathan L.

Walton—the pastor who found *Jesus of the People* to inspire his Latino and African American New Jersey congregation in 2002. During her 2013 visit to Harvard, McKenzie had a moment of reflection. “While waiting to speak, I looked at the painting displayed on the altar and it was emotional. I was reminded not only of the very hard and challenging, and at times joyful, journey I have experienced in response to the painting but more importantly, the long road we still have ahead of us to eradicate racial and gender prejudice and violence” (McKenzie n.d.).

The 2016 Harvard commission was to create a painting for the renovated student and common space on the ground level of the church. McKenzie created *Divine Journey: Companions of Love and Hope* to celebrate many people. A dark-skinned Mary, holding the baby Jesus, is at the center, surrounded by four women of different ethnicities. “If you were to view this painting as perhaps stone, the figures are meant to be unified as a mass. Everything in the painting leads to Mary. Mary is the physicality. Mary is the figure who reaches out to us. She is the bearer of faith and hope. The figures are the companions of love. They are all on the divine journey, just as we all are” (Stoddard 2002). At the unveiling ceremony, Walton celebrated McKenzie’s work for its social justice message:

Janet McKenzie’s art challenges us to reconsider who and what we consider divine. Consider her award-winning and internationally acclaimed *Jesus of the People*. Her interpretation of Jesus pays tribute to two groups traditionally left out of religious iconography: women and people of color. By using real women of color as models for her biblical scenes, McKenzie counters default associations between whiteness and purity, between maleness and divine power. This is the reason why, when considering artwork for the Student Oasis, Janet McKenzie immediately came to mind. (Blackwell 2017)



Divine Journey: Companions of Love and Hope, courtesy of Janet McKenzie.

The following year was significant for gender politics and protest. Just one day after Donald Trump's inauguration as the 45th President of the United States, the historic 2017 Women's March in Washington, DC took place. While the organizers expected 200,000 participants, a half million people showed up with sister marches taking place across the country and around the world. In an email to the author, McKenzie stated that participants brought handmade signs to the event, and at least one group of women from Minnesota mounted a poster of McKenzie's painting as their contribution to the march.

Completing the Circle

By 2019, it had been two decades since McKenzie had received her call to create sacred art in New Mexico, and in the same year she had won the *Jesus 2000* art competition. Now she was called back to the southwest desert, both as an accomplished sacred artist and as a speaker, for the 2019 *Universal Christ Conference* sponsored by the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) located

in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The CAC was created by Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, who saw a need to connect social justice work with contemplation. The *Universal Christ Conference* was held in the Albuquerque Convention Center to accommodate the 2000+ conference attendees.

To prepare for the conference, McKenzie had months of detailed communication with the conference organizers, followed by a 2,400-mile round-trip drive from Vermont to Albuquerque with her son Simeon and his partner, Amy Robinson. In an email to the author on November 13, 2019, she described the experience: “My Toyota Tacoma pickup held us, the exhibition of twenty-four paintings, thousands of prints and greeting cards, and everything we needed to do this conference. We packed the truck with two feet of snow on the ground.” When she arrived at the convention center, a black pipe and drape entrance had been specially constructed as a transitional space from the outside world into the conference. The art was displayed along a darkened corridor with soft lighting on each piece. McKenzie wrote about each work with the hope of creating a personal and quiet experience for each visitor. The interactive space produced this result. McKenzie expressed gratitude. “Seeing people walk the ‘gallery’ slowly, looking at the art and reading the text, after all of the very hard and detailed work up to that point, touched my heart greatly and made it all worthwhile.” McKenzie was particularly moved by the number of men who quietly thanked her in whispers for her painting of Joseph and Jesus. Each man shared his journey with her. Many were raising children alone or had lost a child, devastating their lives. “This painting acknowledges the nurturing and loving side of men, inspired by my father and son. One man was raising seven children after his wife’s death. They came to the conference by themselves seeking peace and answers.”

When it came time for McKenzie to speak onstage, there were 2,300 people in the audience and another 2,800 watching through webcasting. The stage held three large screens overhead.

I am not a public speaker at all, and I was in awe of the professional speakers there. Father Richard Rohr, John Dominic Crossan and Reverend Jacqui Lewis were fabulous. I don’t know what happened or why, but a calm peacefulness came over me and I forgot about the overhead screens and all the people watching. I simply shared the dreadful and threatening reception to *Jesus of the People* and the 20-year journey of this work in the world, serving to remind that all people have a right to see themselves honored within sacred art. The talk gave me the opportunity to thank all those who share my vision of the importance of inclusion and support my work and that nobody does anything all by themselves. (McKenzie, pers. comm., November 13, 2019)

After her talk people lined up, many in tears, to thank McKenzie for her art. She found the experience humbling. The Center for Action and Contemplation purchased one hundred posters and gave them randomly to attendees to carry outside to the vigil held on the Albuquerque Civic Plaza. “Seeing Tim Shriver, President of the Special Olympics, tightly holding *Jesus of the People* with his eyes closed, will stay with me for the rest of my life,” McKenzie said (pers. comm., November 13, 2019). After the vigil, some attendees carried the posters to the NM/Mexico border in support of asylum seekers. Additional attendees purchased posters for other events, which makes McKenzie hopeful. One of the conference participants was the Reverend Monica Whitaker, a priest and co-chair of the Anti-Racism Committee for the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona. In an email to the author on November 10, 2019, she stated: “I was inspired to include Janet McKenzie’s posters in our 2019 Arizona border visit and summit this fall after seeing the posters used during a public witness event at the conference. The images and text reflect the message that we can see the image of God in everyone and everywhere.” Whitaker ordered posters of *Jesus of the People* with the printed message, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Jesus.” For the Arizona summit, she wanted to increase awareness of the important ministries taking place on both sides of the border. The posters were displayed during a bilingual Eucharist celebrated near the border. “McKenzie’s art expresses how divinity is revealed in human beings of all races, ethnicities, and genders, especially those often marginalized by the dominant culture. I thought that participants would appreciate viewing McKenzie’s artwork to help them process emotions and reflect on spiritual insights that can arise when engaging with complex topics such as immigration and humanitarian rights” (Whitaker, pers. comm., November 10, 2019).

The *Universal Christ Conference* brought McKenzie even more invitations to exhibit her art and speak. One exhibition at St. Paul’s Ivy Church in Charlottesville, Virginia included a well-attended conversation with Jimmy Wright, President of the Jefferson Scholars Foundation, about the importance of seeing everyone as created equally in God’s likeness. In 2019, McKenzie also engaged the topic of children separated from their parents at the border with a solo exhibition titled *Radical Courage and the Feminine Spirit—the Art of Janet McKenzie* at the Sheen Center for Thought and Culture in New York City. In an email message to the author on November 13, 2019, McKenzie described the event. “This intimate exhibition was inspired into existence by the violent and racially divisive times we are living through. The iconic individual, mothers with and without their children, and the Blessed Mother are presented as reflections of hope and healing justice.”

McKenzie chose to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of winning the *Jesus 2000* art competition in her home state. The First Methodist Church of Burlington set up *Jesus of the People* and some of McKenzie’s other works for viewing and

meditation. In an email to the author on November 10, 2019, she stated that she was pleased that the exhibition also included talks and an interfaith panel that invited responses to the painting from the perspective of social injustice, both in society at large and in the Vermont community (Janet McKenzie, pers. comm., November 10, 2019). McKenzie continues to live in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. “It speaks to my soul and inspires my work. I am grateful for the acquisitions and commissions I receive and execute in this undisturbed part of the world ... I live and work in isolation, but I am far from alone” (McKenzie n.d.).

Conclusion

As McKenzie enters her seventh decade of life and her third decade as creator and steward of *Jesus of the People*, she continues to advocate the message she has expressed throughout her career. “My paintings reflect hope for greater acceptance among all of us, for seeing with honest eyes, having an open mind and a willing heart. My work celebrates our inherent similarities rather than our differences because what lies beyond skin and gender, within the depth of our universal soul, is more alike than we’ll ever know” (McKenzie n.d.). McKenzie’s medium of painting allows her to show this advocacy by presenting us with prophetic images. Her paintings teach more than preach. They propel the viewer through a self-reflective examination of their thoughts and emotions. Her use of painting rather than words to express theological truths compels viewers to reflect on their internal, religious imagery, whether they want to or not.

While writing this essay, I had opportunities to share the image of *Jesus of the People* with a variety of people who had never seen it before, and I heard a wide range of comments. Some people were inspired, and others wanted to hear more about the artist and the painting. Thankfully I did not encounter the hostile responses that McKenzie had endured, but I did hear responses that “Jesus did not look that way.” It was telling that people made these comments as statements of fact instead of personal statements of preference or familiarity. Internal sacred images can become so entrenched that they become unexamined touchstones for many people’s faiths. As the Reverend Jonathan L. Walton eloquently pointed out, the most famous Jesus images often look more like the painter than any possible historical Jesus.

Janet McKenzie’s art continues to teach us to see the sacred in new ways. We need more studies examining the critical role artists serve to advance and develop theologies. We are living in a visual age. Sacred artists need to be recognized and understood not just for the art they produce, but also for the ideas and theologies they express and explore. Sacred artists like Janet McKenzie invite us to probe

deeper into our concepts of God. No one image can tell the whole story of Jesus, as the collection of 1,678 images submitted for the *Jesus 2000* art competition demonstrates. Varied images can help us to grasp a more complete understanding of who Jesus Christ is for all Christians. McKenzie is clear that art, created with the right intent, can be a transformative message. “I think art that comes from the heart with sincerity, that’s the art that creates positive change” (Leith n.d.). McKenzie’s art points us in the right direction.

McKenzie created *Jesus of the People* as an image that would speak to the world in the new millennium. The tensions around race and gender that informed her work in the year 2000 are still with us today. In his 2019 article, “Black Jesus Matters,” Fr. John Christmann (2019) writes, “McKenzie brings us back to the essential reality of the incarnation and realization that Christian art is bereft without the full expression of humanity.” McKenzie’s goal is for everyone to see themselves reflected in sacred imagery. Her art is iconic because it connects to something deeper in all of us. “The painting is about the surface because as a visual artist I have to work with those limitations, but the essence of the painting is how you feel when you look at it. It is what goes on within” (Larson 2006). When asked why she continues to paint mostly women, her answer is personal, and it connects to her early motivations for becoming an artist. “A visitor to an exhibit told me that my paintings of women remind her to stand up a little straighter—a statement that invariably resonates and inspires” (McKenzie n.d.).

The history of *Jesus of the People* shows that, while McKenzie’s art may threaten some people, many others are inspired, and it is this core community she wants to serve. This sentiment is reflected in her preference for where she would like *Jesus of the People* to be permanently installed. “I would like *Jesus of the People* to end up in a small chapel within a large church in an African American community in a large city with a lot of access for people. That is my dream for it. I think it belongs around the people for whom it has the most relevance and importance. I think I am called to be an artist and I think it is my gift to the world” (Larson 2006).

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