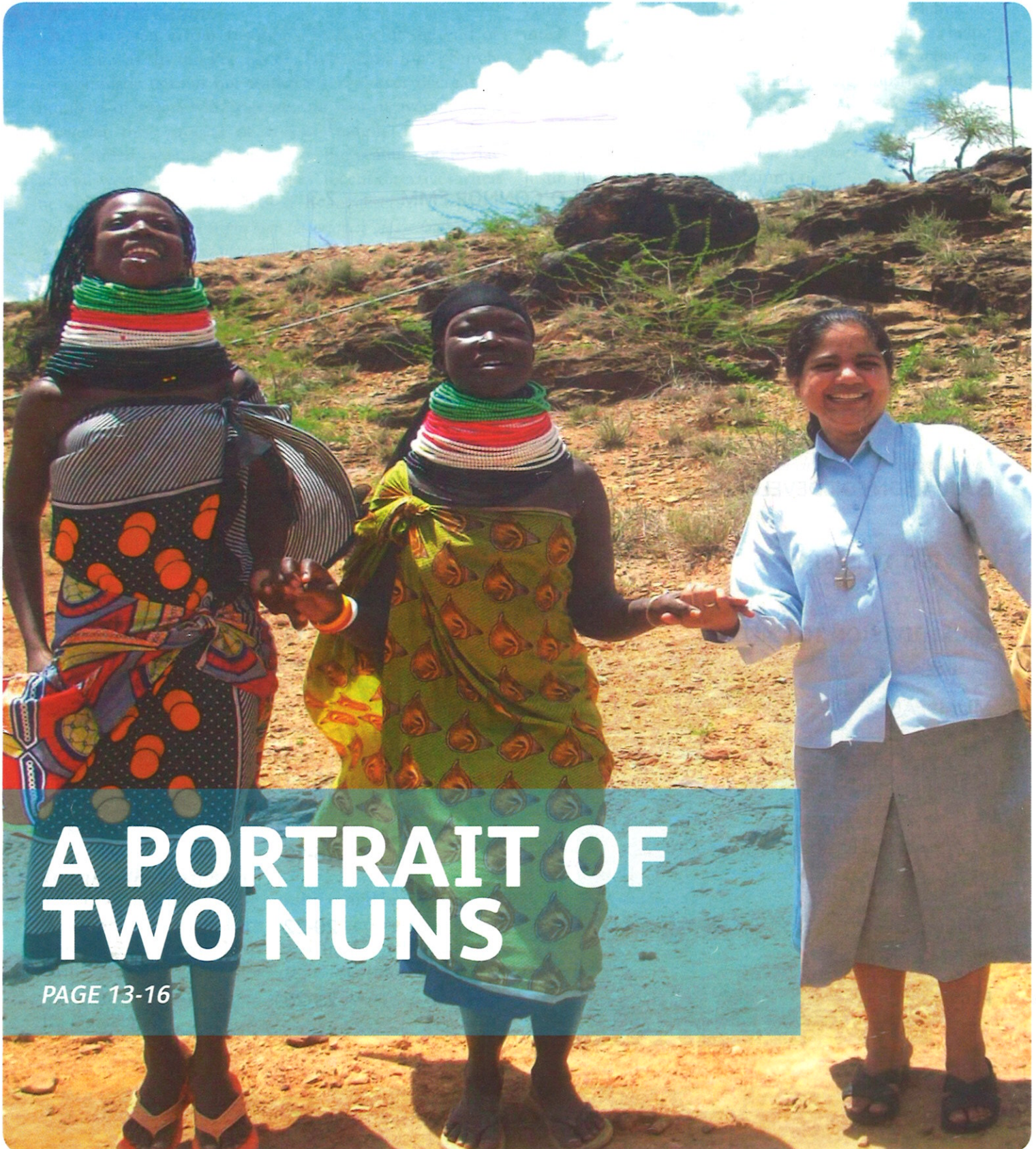


The World is Our Home

Franciscan Missionaries of Mary



A PORTRAIT OF TWO NUNS

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A PORTRAIT OF TWO NUNS

The 'two nuns' are Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. Winnie Smith from Scotland now in her late eighties who entered the Institute in Cold Ash, Berkshire, in 1954; and Ethel de Silva from Sri Lanka who entered the Institute in Columbo in 1960. Ethel, who is now early 70's, was missioned to the Province of Ireland Malta and UK in 2009 when she had retired from a long career teaching in Nursery Schools in Sri Lanka.

A portrait of Two Nuns

Detail "Sisters" by Natalie Holland, oil on canvas

As an artist who paints people and uses 'life' models, I meet many remarkable individuals who visit me in my studio. One perk of my work is that I don't even have to go far to see the world; instead, the world comes to me. So, how do I get my models? Some of them are coming to me through my website because they want their portrait painted, but mostly I source my models from my close environment: friends and friends of the friends. However, now and then I just happen to see interesting people when I am out and about.

I then approach them with a one-sentence artist statement and my business card, and ask them whether they would like to be a model for one of my paintings. That is how I met Winnie, a Franciscan nun who became my muse and my friend. I didn't exactly meet her on the street, but at the art exhibition at Mall Galleries. Being the hub of Federation of British Artists and one of the most prestigious UK galleries, it is splendidly situated in a stately building right at the heart of London. I was attending the opening of the annual exhibition of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters, where I was proud to show my work. Anyone familiar with the art world knows that the people don't come to exhibition openings to see the art. They usually come to support the exhibitors, to chat over a glass of bubbly, meet new artists and collectors — and to network.

**NATALIE
HOLLAND**

My muses, when I first met them at the exhibition at Mall Galleries, London, were different. That's why my attention was instantly attracted by two women who were studying one of the paintings with great attention. In a noisy fully-packed room, they created a pocket of quiet bliss. Also, they weren't exactly your average gallery goers — they were nuns. However, it wasn't that that piqued my curiosity — it was the way they stood together, leaning towards the painting. All I could see at that point were their backs, but their body language told me volumes about the connection between them — and also about their relation to art. I could tell that attending an art exhibition wasn't a random occasion to them. So, I approached them with my request about modelling — and they said 'yes'!

'They' turned out to be Winnie, a tiny ginger lady from Glasgow and Ethel, equally tiny lady from Sri Lanka. Their height and their attire were where the similarity stopped. Winnie turned out to be a bundle of energy, with the gift of the gob (and strong Scottish accent) and a wicked sense of humour. Ethel came across as a gentle soul, a bit shy and soft-spoken. She didn't say a lot, but when she smiled, she could light up a room all by herself. Her smile was one of the kind that unfolds gradually, like a flower before its petals open in full glory.

They would come to my studio every second week to do a sitting for a couple of hours. Although I only paint one model at the time, they would always arrive together. Despite the long journey and their age, they showed up on time and never cancelled a session.

Winnie and Ethel modelling at my studio when it was Winnie's turn to pose, she would sit on a podium and be passionately curious about what I was doing. While Winnie was chatting, Ethel would be right behind me, watching — or studying my working table with all the paints, medium and brushes. It turned out she had painting as her hobby; she loved to paint flowers. However, I was very surprised to learn that she never tried to use oils, so I would demonstrate the benefits of the medium.

She looked very excited, but when I would ask her next time whether she tried it yet, she would just shake her head and smile. One day it finally dawned on me that the reason she never tried was because oils can be expensive, especially those bright colours she wanted to try. With Ethel posing, Winnie would sit in a comfy chair with tea and biscuits, and I would ask her all I wanted about her life as a nun. The year I met her, she was a nun for 60 years. It was to be celebrated with a special Mass, of course, and then they would have a festive dinner where they would get 'the wine and everything' — she giggled.



In my mind, having faith was an understandable thing, but dedicating 60 years to a life of strict routine, scarce resources and obedience was an entirely different matter. I couldn't even begin to comprehend why one would choose a life like that in such a young age. Winnie was 25 when she took the veil.

Winnie could tell me that, although she came from a large Catholic family that could count one missionary uncle among them, her background wasn't strictly religious. 'I went to Church like everyone else, but I would also go to dances with boyfriends and all' — she laughed. She wanted to follow a different path. She saw herself fortunate to have a loving family and being able to enjoy what she had, so she felt it was her calling to dedicate herself to helping those who were less privileged in life.

Thus she became a Franciscan nun, following the footsteps of the St. Frances of Assisi, who gave up the life of comfort for the life of poverty — and hasn't ever regretted her decision. Her days are a balance between prayer, work and ministry. Each sister has daily work, ministry, domestic duties, study, recreation and personal time, as well as monthly days of prayer and solitude, and all participate in various community events.

However, our studio conversations wasn't only about art. At the age of 70 something, Winnie learned how to use computers, gaining access to a World Wide Web. She is constantly updated on what is going on in the world of politics, current affairs and even social media. I could touch any topic, and she would always have her own take on it — and sometimes her take would be nothing you would expect coming from a nun. Winnie was never unkind, but not always as politically correct as one would think.

To me, the fact that they didn't feel the need to mention their faith, revealed how sincere and deep their faith was. It must be true when they say that the wealthiest people never talk about their money, the strongest don't brag about their strength, and those who truly believe don't feel the need to convince others.

There was just only one occasion on which Winnie mentioned Jesus Christ's name. On our last painting session, they asked if it was OK for them bring the camera so they could take pictures with me and the painting. Naturally, we had loads of fun at this photo shoot, and at some point Winnie asked if she could touch the painting where it was dry. She touched her own painted hands and marvelled how real they looked.

Then she looked at me with a laugh in her eyes, "Dearest Natalie! With talent like yours you could paint anything, couldn't you? Then, tell me, please, why on Earth did you choose to paint us? You need to paint something that people would want to look at — what is it that you saw in

two old nuns that you think is worth looking at? I tell you, you will not be able to sell this painting anytime soon!"

Never a dull moment with my nuns

It wasn't hard to tell her that I've got attracted by how rare their way of life is in our time. How I saw the close human connection between them, that ability to care about each other, the compassion that is fast disappearing from our modern lives. How I thought we are in need of compassion because it becomes quickly replaced by something that is empty of meaning and value; something that consumes us entirely, and we don't even know what that is. As the opposite to that, the life they chose has a meaning that is valuable not only to themselves, but also to others. To me, it had less to do with religion, but a lot to do with being human — and I think that it is important. When it comes to things that are important to me, all I can do as an artist is to compress all that importance in one image. If I am successful, the value of what I saw will be conveyed in such a way that the viewers will see it too.

Winnie listened attentively while I was passionately explaining all that, and suddenly I saw that she had a little tear in a corner of her eye. I was completely taken aback and asked her if she was OK. It was then she firmly took my both hands, and said: 'To our Lord Jesus Christ, all lives are equally valuable — but you, my girl, have a gift to see it.'

Just like that, in one sentence, she pin-pointed the most important reason why I chose to stick to my artistic guns all my life. The value of my work is seeing the value in people that populate my paintings — good, bad and indifferent, warts and all.

Well, if my seeing a value in Winnie's life produced a tear, then her seeing value in mine produced a watershed of running make up. Then, we all laughed and I felt overwhelmed, as I realised: 'She has given me a most precious gift'. For your life to have a meaning it takes only one person who is able to see it and share with you.

And yes, it is important that you will find that value for yourself, and there will be times when you are the only one who sees it. At the end of the day, without anyone ever seeing your masterpiece — and just like in art, your mess can also be declared a masterpiece — is it really worth anything?

The painting, 'Sisters', has been since exhibited at the same gallery where I first saw them, at the annual exhibition of the Royal Society of Oil Painters at Mall Galleries, London.

From the studio to the gallery opening — my tiny ladies always show up.

"Sisters" by Natalie Holland, oil on canvas, 110x100cm

*"There is only one reason
for everything we do."*

This reason is

*The heart
of Christ
beats at the heart
of all reality.*

"This is my Body given for you".

A EUCHARIST *which embraces the whole world."*

Maura O'Connor, fmm

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