

PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

Sisters of Providence Mother Joseph • Providence Health & Services

A change of habit

Brian Drischell



Srs. Ellen Elizabeth Kelly and Margaret Hamel meet with Hollywood costume designer Edith Head to discuss proposals for modified habit, ca. 1965

One particularly unique piece held at the Archives that piqued my interest recently is a drawing for a new habit design by renowned Hollywood costume designer Edith Head. This original drawing depicts an austere, but elegant design commissioned by the Sisters of Providence in 1964. This was done in anticipation of the adoption of a modified habit that would replace the traditional habit worn since the founding of the religious community in 1843. Other congregations of sisters had already begun to make the transition to a modified habit in the 1950s to better accommodate the changing needs of modern life, not only in a practical sense, but to also better integrate themselves into the communities they served. The Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life issued by the Second Vatican Council helped to clear the way for wider changes to the habits of women religious.

But why did the SPs turn to Edith Head, by all accounts one of the most well-known designers in the world? By 1964 Head had been nominated for 22 Academy awards and won 7 in the Best Costume Design category (she went on to garner a total of 35 nominations and 8 wins over her career, the most in history for any woman). Head designed costumes for such notable films as: *The Lady Eve* (1941); *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); *Roman Holiday* (1953); *White Christmas* (1954); *Rear Window* (1954); *The Ten Commandments* (1956); *Vertigo* (1958); and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961).

continued on p. 2

All the news that's fit to print

Arabella Matthews

Founded in 1885, Missoula's Sacred Heart Academy was an early and influential ministry of the Sisters of Providence in the Mountain West, and until 1924, Missoula was the seat of the Provincial Administration for St. Ignatius Province (it afterward moved to Spokane). The records of Sacred Heart Academy contain many issues of the student newspaper, the *Cone-Let*. The paper, a member of the Quill and Scroll Society and the National Scholastic Press Association, ran from 1926 until the academy merged with Loyola Academy in 1974 and won multiple awards during that time. The paper included news on the comings and goings of the students, faculty student photographs, and memories from the year. But the monthly *Cone-Let* was preceded by two other weekly papers: the *Kap-Ka*, beginning in 1932, and the *Academy Weekly*, in 1894.

continued on p. 3

Providence in Art

Jessica Long

Although many people miss the previous Legacy Room exhibit, *The Cabin Era*, the new and colorful exhibit will surely cheer them up! The items now on display at the Mother Joseph Administrative Center are part of a first-of-its-kind art exhibit by Providence Archives. *Providence in Art* briefly spotlights a few deceased Sister of Providence artists, both professional and amateur, who exercised their talents and expressed their creativity, and faith, through a variety of media and styles.

Artistic talent is not hard to find among the Sisters of Providence. In the early years of the community, creativity often manifested through necessity while ministering in areas with limited resources. Foundress Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart (1823-1902) excelled at this, transforming a simple candle box into a gorgeous tabernacle for a temporary altar. Creating beautiful objects was also a means to generate income for the early sisters. For over 100 years the community ran a wax workshop molding candles and wax figures of the infant Jesus for Christmas nativity scenes. An estimated 30,000 figures were individually crafted and painted for chapels across Canada and the United States by just a handful of sisters. The 1902 *Circulars of the Superior General*

continued on p. 2

Change of habit

continued from p. 1

How was it that Edith Head originally came to the attention of the sisters? It seems that a number of factors were involved. The chairperson of the Committee for the Study of the Religious Habit for Sacred Heart Province was Sr. Ellen Elizabeth Kelly, who felt strongly that a designer needed to be brought in to help with the redesign. It was her boldness that led her to blindly approach actress Ann Blyth, who attended Mass daily at St. Charles Church in North Hollywood, for a recommendation. Blyth suggested Head, whom she had worked with on *The Buster Keaton Story* (1957). Once a design had been created, it would require seamstresses to sew the pattern. As luck would have it, Sr. Ellen Elizabeth was close friends with the Parvin sisters, seamstresses employed by the Western Costume Company, with whom Head had an existing relationship. All the pieces had now fallen into place.



Habit design proposal by Edith Head

The question is, could a Hollywood luminary such as Edith Head be able to understand the delicate nature of reconfiguring a garment that holds so much cultural, personal and spiritual significance for the sisters? If only we could be a fly on the wall to hear some of the discussions about potential modifications. Luckily, an interview between Sr. Ellen Elizabeth and Sr. Margaret Hamel with Edith Head was recorded and later published in the May 1964 issue of *Caritas*. In it, we can hear some of Head's own thoughts regarding the habit design. She expresses great regard for the beauty and simplicity of the traditional habit, but also understands the desire for an update: "... I do realize in these changing times of ours with the necessity for more comfort, more activity, more flexibility, that possibly a small minor change could be worked out that would in no way destroy the beauty of your habit." Head also notes some of the deeply rooted cultural aspects of the habit: "I should think that the people with whom you work must find a great deal of comfort and reassurance in the beauty and peacefulness of the look of your habits. If we get what I call a busy design, or a design that looks unhappy or unrelaxed, or that hasn't that lovely quietness and beauty of your costume, you are going to lose a lot of the

integral part of the usefulness of the way you look." Head was well known for consulting closely with the actors and actresses she designed for, a practice many earlier costume designers had not used. No doubt this gave her some insight into the psychology of how clothes make one feel and how delicate the habit redesign could be for the congregation.

In the end, the sisters did not adopt Head's design for a modified habit. Perhaps her reverence for the original habit prevented her from going far enough to satisfy the needs of the sisters. Regardless, the Committee for the Study of the Religious Habit gave much consideration to the process, which included representatives from each province who could solicit feedback from the congregation and provide input to the committee. In the summer of 1966, the final two designs were submitted to Rome for approval, and one was chosen. It's unclear whether a single person came up with the final design or if it was done by committee. An official announcement was made in August and the changeover commenced as soon as sisters could sew their new habits, with a target date for complete changeover of January 1, 1967. And even though Edith Head's design was not chosen, it's an interesting piece of Sisters of Providence history. ♡

Providence in art

continued from p. 1

explained that art was time consuming, requiring study and constant practice, so the number of sisters devoted to such creative pursuits was restricted. In those early days, painting and drawing were also perceived as a distraction from rules of simplicity. An exception was made for teaching, particularly that of linear drawing and proportions which were seen as practical skills for working class children.

As religious community practices shifted over the years, modern sisters began embracing art for art's sake. Some sisters still channel their creativity through their teaching ministries, but for others it is simply a hobby enjoyed since childhood or perhaps picked up in retirement. A few sisters have truly embraced their artistic spirit by pursuing formal art degrees, engaging in the professional art world, and even showing their art in fairs and exhibitions.

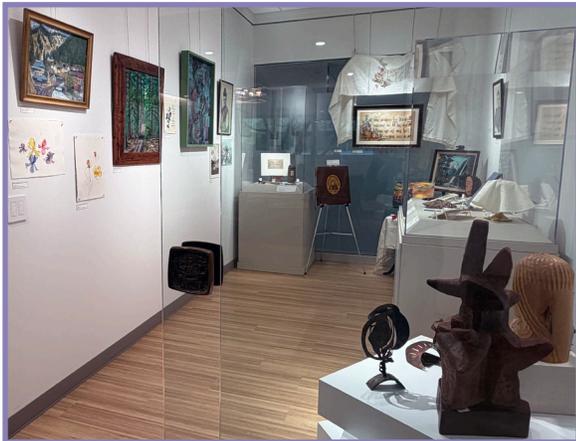
Over time, sisters' art pieces have made their way to the Archives. Some sisters, like Ann Ellen Bailey, were prolific artists, resulting in a large collection of ceramic jars, jewelry, block prints, and numerous tools. Others, like Mary Carmel Huls or Wilma Fitzgerald, are represented by just a few or perhaps only one piece of art. And of course, there are also sister artists whose creative endeavors have not been preserved, such as Joseph Amable. Selecting artwork from so many of these talented women for *Providence in Art* was no easy task. In the exhibition, visitors will see bright paintings on canvas, paper, and textiles, plus interesting abstract sculptures, an assortment of tools, lovely hand-made cards, and even award ribbons, from 21 different artists!

continued on p. 3

Providence in art

continued from p. 2

One sister featured in *Providence in Art*, Bernard of Jesus, was truly an artist at heart. Her work, often modern and abstract in style, spanned several media, including paintings and sculpture in bronze, copper, charred wood, dyed concrete, glass, and ceramic, several of which can be seen in the exhibit. She stated in a 1963 interview that “Studying a work of art is like reading the artist’s diary. Art is an expression of the artist’s soul and intellect.” She believed, as many artists do, that art “makes life satisfactory, rich, and full.”



To experience the richness yourself, please stop by to check out *Providence in Art* and don’t forget to pick up the accompanying exhibit booklet to learn more about each sister artist. ♡

All the news that's fit to print

continued from p. 1

The *Academy Weekly* was masterminded by Bertha Mitchell, a boarding student at the Academy from 1888 to 1894. Her papers, which were donated separately, mostly contain correspondence with Sisters of Providence at the school, including Sister Alexis, Sister Donat, and Sister Aristide. They also contain what were likely the only two issues of the *Academy Weekly*. The price was 5 pins (likely actual pins, or a long-lost inside joke!). Some articles are earnest stories on the leisure time of the students—such as an account of a sleigh ride around town, ending in a visit to the house of a Mrs. Cyr (the mother of a student), where the girls played the organ and sat around a fire.

Other articles are jesting in tone. One piece relates the story of a mountain lion which escaped captivity in town and came straight to the Academy: “He went in the recreation room and seriously injured several of the girls and scared Miss Briggs out her skin, so if anyone should come across some skin, just hand it to Miss Briggs, because she will have so much trouble judgment day looking for it.”

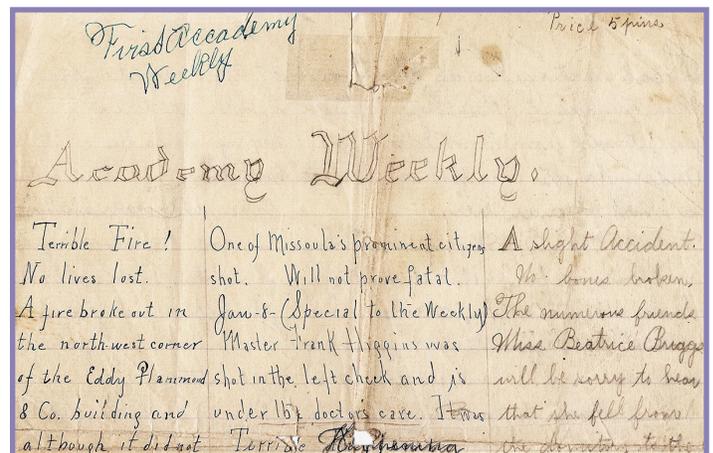
In the “Local Mentions” section of the paper, Bertha suggests “We should have a holiday tonight, don’t say anything. I am going to ask Sister A to let us dance in the schoolroom. I am sure she will not refuse us.” There’s no word on whether or not her plan came to fruition.

The *Kap-Ka*, an offshoot of the *Pine Cone*, the school’s original yearbook, would go on to turn into the award-winning *Cone-Let*. Editor-in-chief Kathryn Deegan, along with a team of reporters, editors, assistants, and typists, all from the journalism class, reported weekly the comings and goings of those at Sacred Heart. One article details the journalism class’s visit to the offices of a local Missoula newspaper.

The final issue’s most thrilling article, “Owl Perches Outside Senior Classroom, Meets Tragic Fate Later” tells the story the unfortunate owl, later struck and killed by a vehicle. Sister M. Lawrence, the science teacher, informed the paper that it was a horned owl with a 35-inch wingspan. “We always knew the senior class was wise,” the column reads, “A recent event proves it.”

The reporters recorded the daily life of Academy students in faithful detail, from the carnival-mixer held by the senior class to welcome the incoming freshman girls, to advertisements for the school Missionary Society and Sodality. The *Kap-Ka* only ran for five issues, until it was supplanted by the monthly *Cone-Let*. The final issue asks the high school to support the journalism class in this enterprise.

These two school papers, published forty years apart, reveal a great deal of information about the daily life of those affiliated with the school, be they students, faculty, or related families. Montana had only become a state in 1889, and between 1894 and 1932, life in Missoula changed profoundly. The University of Montana opened, a paid fire department was established, and the journalism class began to be offered at Sacred Heart Academy. In those years it became a bustling city, complete with streetcars, public swimming pools, and a public library. These school papers are interesting artifacts and clearly show the changes over time as Missoula and Sacred Heart Academy grew. ♡



Issue of Sacred Heart Academy’s “Academy Weekly,” 1894. Headlines include “Terrible Fire! No lives lost,” “One of Missoula’s prominent citizens shot,” and “A Slight Accident, no bones broken.”

Sister spotlight: Paul Gabriel Desilets

Pam Hedquist

Sister Paul Gabriel Desilets (Marie Cecile Gilberte)
Born: Eldest of 8, on 10/20/1914, St. Wencelas, Quebec
Entered Sisters of Providence 8/27/1935; final vows 2/28/1941
Died January 9, 2011, Mount St. Joseph, Spokane, Wash.

Growing up on a family farm of maple trees and beehives, Sister Paul loved eating as much maple syrup and honey as she wanted. She had a joyous childhood full of singing starting at age 3! Besides her love for music, she also enjoyed traveling, riding fast in the family horse drawn buggy on the farm with her father, and serving food to the poor, never refusing anyone.

After her profession, Sister was sent to the west to learn English. Her first mission was working as a companion in dietary at Providence Hospital in Seattle. She completed several courses and workshops over the years to strengthen those skills. Over the next 44 years she ministered in food services at many of the hospitals between the two western provinces. Her favorite years were during 1943-1962 at St. Ignatius Hospital in Colfax, Washington (*pictured above image#PH-SP4345_002*). Sister Paul spent the last 34 years of her life serving her fellow Sisters of Providence at Mount St. Joseph, Spokane. While fifteen of those years were in dietary the later years included roles of beautician and nurse aide. Sister Paul will be remembered for her beautiful smile, warm heart and wonderful sense of humor.



Providence Archives
4800 37th Ave SW
Seattle WA 98126-2793

Manager
Peter Schmid

Senior Archivist
Arabella Matthews

Visual Resources Archivist
Brian Drischell

Artifact Collections Curator
Jessica Long

Assistant Archivist-Technical
Pam Hedquist

Telephone: 206.937.4600
Fax: 206.923.4001
E-mail: archives@providence.org
www.providence.org/phs/archives

Past Forward is published three times annually. Editing and design by Peter Schmid.

Postage