

FOLKART

LORD IS MY SHEPHERD I SHALL
WANT. HE MAKE TIME TO
WITH GREEN PASTURES. HE
LEAD ME BESIDE THE ST
WATERS. HE RESTORE TO MY SO
LEAD ME IN THE PATHS
OF RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR HIS NAME'S
SAKE. YEA THOUGH I WALK THROUGH
THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF
DEATH I WILL FEAR NO EVIL FOR
THOU ART WITH ME. THY ROD AND
STAFF THEY COMFORT ME. THY
HANDS ARE STAYED BEFORE ME
AND THY PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES
THOU HAST ANOINTED MY HEAD WITH
OIL. THY CUP RUNNETH OVER. SURLE
Y AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME
ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE. AND I WILL
ABIDE IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOR E

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Alexander
Bogardy,
c. late 1970s

Alexander BOGARDY SINGULAR PURSUITS

By
Margaret Parsons and Marsha Orgeron

Alexander Bogardy (1901–1992) spent most of his life in a small apartment in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, D.C.—his final address before moving to a city home, where he died in 1992. His visionary, religious oil paintings and copious portfolios, filled with intricate pencil drawings about hairstyling and makeup, were made within a block of the U.S. Capitol and the Library of Congress and date principally from the early 1960s through the late 1970s.

Those two decades of prolific painting for Alex Bogardy correspond to a rather brief cycle in a long life that embraced a variety of vocations. A quick check of Bogardy's remarkable range offers a kind of profile of his personality and milieu. In the 1920s he was a music student at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore; in the 1930s, a prizefighter who entered the ring more than eighty times as The Baltimore Kid; in the 1940s he studied mechanical engineering at George Washington University and got a job at the Washington Navy Yard; and in the 1950s, when he developed arthritis and was advised to retire and work with his hands, he studied hairdressing and hair coloring at the Clairol Institute. After taking several courses in cosmetology, Bogardy became consumed with the idea that he could help ordinary people improve their hair color and style, as well as their general facial appearance. This inspired him to invent an unusual hair curler he called the Bogy Clip (a design he claimed to have protected with a patent), and compose a manual entitled *The Hair and Its Social Importance*, which he published himself in 1962. His interest in painting was sparked by an extension course in oil painting that he took at Catholic University in Washington. Presumably to supplement his pension, Bogardy also did custodial work throughout the 1960s and 1970s at several Washington hotels. By the late 1970s, after his painting career had ended, Bogardy took up flamenco and the castanets and, until he became infirm, turned his life over to performing

THE SCHOOL OF
COSMETOLOGY
Alexander Bogardy
Washington, D.C.
c. 1966
Oil on artist board
24 × 18"
Private collection



LEE EWING



**JESUS FIRST READING
THE SCRIPTURES**
c. 1970
Oil on artist board
18 × 24"
Private collection

LEE EWING

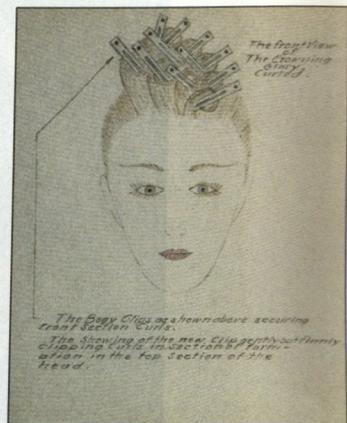
with castanets in amateur variety shows—or for anyone who would watch him.

At every stage of this remarkable career trajectory, Alex Bogardy collected clippings about himself, gathered mostly from neighborhood newspapers. These were displayed prominently and symmetrically on the walls of his apartment, along with his framed certificates and photographs; or, they were assembled into scrapbooks and tabletop arrangements. His entire life was documented in this way. The authors' research during the summer and fall of 2001 turned up approximately one hundred extant paintings and colored-pencil drawings—sketches Bogardy had apparently rendered for a handbook on female beauty and the proper application of cosmetics. This manual, if he had been able to publish it, would most likely have served as a companion volume to *The Hair and Its Social Importance*. There is ample evidence, however, that Bogardy created other paintings beyond those the authors were able to locate, especially portraits and religious paintings presented to friends and private individuals within his neighborhood network. The whereabouts of these pieces, however, is undocumented, as the artist never sold any of his work.

While there is conflicting evidence concerning the precise year in which Alexander Bogardy was born, most of the data supports a birth date of April 20, 1901, in Budapest, Hungary. In his fourth or fifth year, young Alex immigrated to the United States with his parents and two siblings, Angela and Theodore. The family settled in Baltimore. Although in later life Bogardy made frequent refer-

ences to his close relationship with his mother (who lived into her nineties and for whom Bogardy cared when she became infirm), the artist seldom talked about his childhood or young adulthood. There was one exception, however: He was proud of his career as a featherweight prizefighter. Exactly why this fearsomely aggressive sport would have appealed to a diminutive, delicate young man was never clear. Nor was it clear how his parents felt about his boxing. But he gave his mother, at least, a great deal of the credit for encouraging him to study violin at the Peabody Conservatory. Although he never played professionally, Bogardy held his musical training to be one of the seminal influences of his life. There are frequent references to music, especially the violin, in his paintings.

When Alex Bogardy moved with his mother from Baltimore to Washington in the late 1930s, presumably after the death of his father, Capitol Hill was still a sleepy neighborhood of drugstores and lunch counters. While he was a bit of a loner, he was well liked and played a visible role in the society there. He would run small errands for his neighbors, bring them food if they were ill, and pick up their newspapers and mail if they were away. At holidays such as Halloween or Christmas, he often made displays on a small table outside his basement apartment window with neat (and invariably symmetrically aligned) arrangements of knickknacks and candies for passersby to



HAIR CURLER (Bogy Clip)
c. 1963
Pencil and colored pencil on paper
12 × 9" (each)
Private collection

LEE EWING

THE SEARCH
 c. 1969
 Oil on artist board
 18 × 24"
 Private collection



LEE EWING

take. He made much out of the fact that he was Hungarian and frequented Hungarian restaurants and lunch counters in Washington with friends. (He would speak Hungarian with the waiters, and, although he had little money, he left generous tips.)

The artist referred to his small Capitol Hill apartment as The Gallery. It was a showplace of curious arrangements. Nearly every inch of wall space and every surface was decorated with his paintings, certificates, devotional ornaments and “holy cards” (of the sort that devout Catholics might purchase in church gift shops), ornate costume jewelry, bottles, plates, shells, and bric-a-brac he would have purchased for relatively little cash at a Salvation Army store, a church rummage sale, or a local yard sale. He gave away many of these items to his acquaintances, but he always replenished the collection with new finds. Many of the religious cards and objects he acquired were adorned with small plastic pearls or gold and silver medals, which inspired Bogardy’s own work—many of his canvases are opulent assemblages studded with fake glass gemstones and small three-dimensional objects.

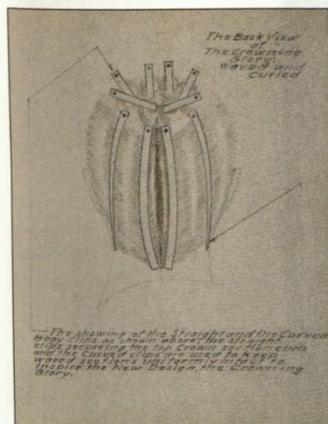
Much of Bogardy’s appeal had to do with his warm greeting and, if you happened to be a female acquaintance, the inevitable kiss on the hand, full of Old World panache. A dominant feature of his apartment was the “beauty station,” a hair dresser’s sink and counter with chair and large

round mirror—standard beauty parlor furniture of the time. This station is where Bogardy administered shampoos, haircuts, perms, and makeovers—the application of pancake, eye shadow, and lipstick. Bestowing “beauty” was virtually a religious ritual for him. Nearly every woman who befriended Alex Bogardy received some form of complimentary beautification at this station.



Alexander Bogardy once remarked, “All my work is done for God.” Religion was at the center of his life. Indeed, it became a wellspring for most of his compositions. His rich canvases have the appearance of votive objects—images of devotion, prayer, or thanksgiving designed to encourage spiritual thoughts in the beholder. His subjects include the Virgin Mary, Christ, angels, saints, and other figures identified with the church. He offered his paintings to several Catholic parishes; while there is no evidence that his paintings were ever accepted for display, Bogardy did provide hand-lettered marquees for two Capitol Hill churches, St. Peter’s and St. Joseph’s. (When the painted signs were replaced with conventional manufactured metal signs, Bogardy took their decision to modernize personally and felt he had been unfairly used by the clergy.)

It would be a misreading of Alex Bogardy’s oeuvre, however, to suppose that all of this religious painting focused on iconographic depictions of Jesus or Mary or stories from the Bible. He interjected a lot of personal



information into his art. For example, each figure in *The Prayer Group* corresponds to an actual participant in a prayer group that met each Sunday evening at St. Peter's. Bogardy himself, wearing a brown suit and seated with his back to the viewer, was part of this assembly. One of his female friends (whose hair and nails he often did, presumably for no charge) translated the text of each tiny prayer into Gregg shorthand for the painting.

The Christ figure in the paintings is often a child, particularly a student engaged in learning. *The Search* and *Jesus First Reading the Scriptures*, as well as four paintings not illustrated—*Jesus As a Little Jewish Boy*, *The Graduation*, *The Holy Family Reading the Scriptures*, and *The First Steps of Jesus*—all reflect an intense interest in youthful acquisition of knowledge. Biblical tales provide the basis for many of these subjects, but, beyond that, Bogardy placed a high moral value on educational achievement—hence the many certificates and “diplomas” he scattered about his own apartment.

Bogardy attended Mass every day. For much of the time that he lived on Capitol Hill, going to Mass meant taking a long ride on a city bus to one of Washington's grander Catholic churches. The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in the Brookland neighborhood and the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in downtown Washington were two of his favorite places. Although he also regularly attended church in his own neighborhood, Bogardy appeared to derive gratification from the long bus trek. (Washington's subway system did not open until the late 1970s.) These two majestic churches are celebrated for their dramatic and variegated mosaics, depicting Bible stories, the Virgin, Christ, and the saints. The lower-crypt church of the National Shrine is a likely source for his painting *The Shrine* (not illustrated), while the ornate, multihued marble nave of St. Matthew's (built in 1895) seems to have inspired decorative schemes for a number of his works. Another Washington church that Alex Bogardy admired—he sought occasions to take guests there—was the Franciscan Monastery. Sited in a serene residential corner of the Brookland neighborhood, the 1899 monastery is within walking distance of the more modern Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The monastery's decorative scheme is distinctively Victorian, with colorful marble configurations similar to those of the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle. Its delicate interior decoration, bays, and arcades appear to have been another source of inspiration for the artist.

Surrounding the Franciscan Monastery is a portico and a cloistered garden with grottos and shrines at intervals along a shaded pathway. In the spring, when trees and flowers are beginning to bloom, this garden is quite breathtaking. One of the grottos, the Grotto of Gethsemane, appears to be the basis for Bogardy's painting *The Garden of*

Gethsemane. Interestingly, however, the church depicted in the background is the Church of St. Constantine and Helen, a Greek Orthodox parish in northwest Washington. This church had earlier presented an award to Bogardy for his *Reflections on the Holy Eucharist (Last Supper)*.

The many round arches and arcades of these churches he so regularly attended seem to have suggested pictorial solutions to Bogardy. He often painted arches and bays into his compositions, creating frames within frames that permitted him to show several panoramas at one time. Observe, for example, the round arches in *Jesus First Reading the Scriptures*. The main narrative of this painting is young Jesus reading at a table. But the window—through which we see a lush garden—is a simple arch, a proscenium that allows another drama to unfold. Seated at Mass in a church such as St. Matthew's, an activity Bogardy engaged in each day, the viewer looks through round arches along the side of the nave filled with beautiful narratives based on the scriptures.

Bogardy's painting style shares characteristics with both early-Christian (or Byzantine) and Pre-Raphaelite art. In early-Christian iconography, the figures are flat, frontal, rigid, and frequently floating above the ground. Bogardy's figures have many of the same attributes, particularly his iconic figures. Moreover, his saints and angels have large eyes and large hands, analogous to early-Christian representation. His backgrounds lack one-point perspective, and many are painted a solid color (the blue of the painting *Guardian Angel* is a color found in the mosaics of St. Matthew's and the National Shrine). This use of shallow, pre-Renaissance perspective yielded a number of beautiful, tapestry-like works.

There is also a relationship, though less pronounced, to Pre-Raphaelite art—a late-Victorian style simulated in

the decorative mosaics of the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle. The medievalized aesthetic and the luminous colors of *Guardian Angel*, for example, evoke this connection.

Rigid symmetry is another attribute of Bogardy's painting. Whether established through architecture, line, color, inscription, balanced arrangement, or all of the above, works such as *The School of Cosmetology* and *The Prayer Group* demonstrate his ingenious methods of achieving equilibrium.

Although he rarely returned to Baltimore after leaving that city in the 1930s, Alexander Bogardy was buried next to his parents in a Baltimore cemetery. His life was full of singular pursuits of multiple passions, and he had the keen ability to merge some of his wildly divergent interests into works of art that celebrate his devotion to both body and spirit. ★

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ASHMAN PHOTO

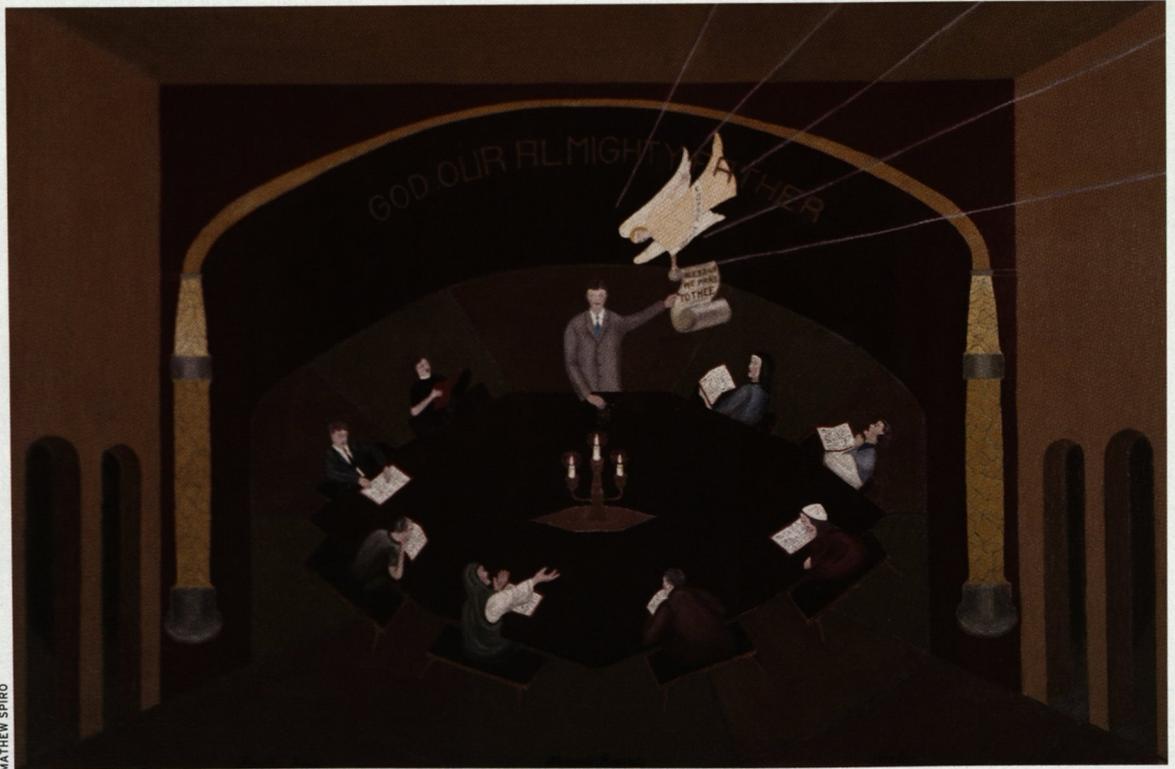
THE HAIR AND ITS SOCIAL IMPORTANCE (detail)
1964
Ink and pencil on paper book cover
9 × 6"
Private collection

REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLY
EUCCHARIST (Last Supper)
c. 1970
Oil on artist board
24 x 36"
Private collection



LEE EWING

THE PRAYER GROUP
c. 1965
Oil on artist board
24 x 36"
Private collection



MATHEW SPIRO