

San Antonio artist Cletus Behlmann spread joy and color through his numerous paintings



Richard A. Marini, Staff writer

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Behlmann's work appears in many different media -- even coffee mugs.
Sam Owens/Staff photographer

The late artist Brother Cletus Behlmann could find inspiration almost anywhere, even in the sun shining through a thick, glass-brick wall in his doctor's waiting room.

"He said he saw these wonderful patterns in the glass," said Abbie Cotrell, a longtime friend Behlmann's. "And so he made maybe six, very abstract paintings using the colors as inspiration."

Behlmann, known to most as "Brother Cletus," was a Marianist brother as well as a prolific and beloved artist whose works hang in many private collections and public buildings across San Antonio. Since his death in 2016, Behlmann's art has increased dramatically in value as his brightly colored, deceptively simply yet joyous art gains new admirers.

"Brother Cletus was a pop expressionist," said Brian St. John, chairman of the department of art and art education at St. Mary's University, where Behlmann was associated during his years in San Antonio. "He selected his imagery and use of color from his imagination, rendering it in a highly naturalized yet recognizable way."

Behlmann's work often included secular images such as birds and smiling suns, as well as familiar San Antonio iconography like the missions and the city skyline. But just as often it reflected religious themes: doves, the sacraments and the Virgin Mary, the central figure of Marianist life.



Cletus Behlmann was legendary for both his productivity and his generosity. He often donated his art for nonprofits to use as fundraisers.
Sam Owens/Staff photographer

“I think his religion carried him throughout his art,” said Cotrell, a retired educator.



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Abbie Cotrell, a longtime friend of Brother Cletus Behlmann sits in front of a large painting of his that hangs in her home.
Sam Owens/Staff photographer

Since his death, prices for Behlmann’s art have risen dramatically, according to officials at Vogt Auction Galleries on Blanco Road.

“Paintings that sold in the low \$1,000s when I started working here six months ago are now selling in the \$4,000s,” said Natalie Curran, the fine art specialist at Vogt.



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Cletus Behlmann, known to most as "Brother Cletus," was a Marianist brother and a prolific and beloved artist. His work, like this textile piece, hangs in many private collections and public buildings across San Antonio.

Sam Owens/Staff photographer

Despite the commonly held belief that the price of an artist's work jumps upon the artist's death, this isn't necessarily the case, she said.

"There's usually a little bump after someone dies, but that'll soon peter out and prices will return to normal. What's happening with Brother Cletus is wildly exciting and unusual."

Raised on a farm in the small Missouri town of Florissant near St. Louis, Behlmann graduated from St. Mary's University in 1956 and took his vows as a Marianist brother in 1958.

After teaching in Victoria, El Paso and St. Louis and receiving permission from the Society of Mary to pursue art as his vocation, he studied at the Chicago Institute of Art and Washington University. In 1977, he moved to San Antonio.

There was hardly a medium in which Behlmann didn't work. He used acrylics, watercolors and occasionally oils and painted on virtually any surface, including canvas, handmade paper, wooden boards and fabric. Skilled as a carpenter, he also crafted and decorated altars, tables, chairs and other furniture as well as sculptures, both figurative and abstract. He even built and decorated his own casket.



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An original painting by Brother Cletus Behlmann is displayed in Abbie and Charlie Cotrell's San Antonio home.
Sam Owens/Staff photographer



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Cletus Behlmann worked in a variety of media. This textile piece hangs in the home of Abbie and Charlie Cotrell.
Sam Owens/Staff photographer



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A drawing made by Brother Cletus Behlmann is displayed in the stairwell at Abbie and Charlie Cotrell's San Antonio home.

Sam Owens/Staff photographer



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Sam Owens/Staff photographer



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Abbie and Charlie Cotrell sit in front of large painting by Cletus Behlmann. They were long-time friends and collectors of the artists, known by most as Brother Cletus.

Sam Owens/Staff photographer



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Raised on a farm in a small Missouri town near St. Louis, and educated in Catholic schools, Cletus Behlmann graduated from St. Mary's University in 1956 and took his vows as a Marianist brother in 1958.

Behlmann was legendary for both his productivity and his generosity.

"I was watching him in his off-campus studio one day," said St. John. "He was bent over this large table and was working on eight to 10 different pieces all at once."

Once, he went to the art gallery Cotrell owned in Waring to do painting demonstrations for visitors. Before the doors opened, he created what she described as "this amazing, gorgeous floral" in only about five minutes.

"It was like the paint was coming out of his fingers," she said, adding with a laugh. "When he was done, he looked at me and said, 'Don't ever tell anyone how long it took me to paint this.'"

And while his art was exhibited in galleries throughout the United States, Behlmann often donated pieces to just about any worthy cause that asked. A small autobiography he wrote lists two dozen charities that raised funds by selling his works, from the American Heart Association and the San Antonio Food Bank to the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

"One painting of the missions sold for \$20,000 at a Central Catholic High School fundraiser," Cotrell said. "He also designed a mural for the walls of the Prospects Courtyard, where residents sleep at Haven for Hope, to make it more welcoming."

Behlmann often donated works to KLRN-TV's annual fundraiser, setting up an easel in the studio and painting works the station later sold. That's where he and Laredo banker Glen Jackson first met.

"The first time you shook his hand, it felt like you'd been his friend for 40 years," said Jackson, who owns eight of Brother Cletus' paintings. "He blew me away with his talent and his generosity."

After Behlmann learned that Jackson was an amateur chef, he sent him two watercolors of San Pasqual, the patron saint of cooks and kitchens, as birthday presents.

Marianist brothers must take a vow of poverty and so all the profits from the sales of his painting went back to the order. So in order to fund the painting trips he took everywhere from Big Bend to China, he'd throw what he called a "travel party," charging friends \$100 to attend and then bringing them each back a painting he'd make while he was gone.

He painted all the time, say those who knew him. Cotrell recalled how, during his final days, she visited him at the facility where he was being cared for on the St. Mary's campus. And although he was weak and increasingly frail there, beside him in bed, was a canvas and his paints.

rmarini@express-news.net | Twitter: @RichardMarini



Written By
Richard A. Marini

Richard A. Marini is a features reporter for the San Antonio Express-News where he's previously been an editor and columnist. The Association of Food Journalists once awarded him Best Food Columnist. He has freelanced for American Archaeology, Cooking Light and many other publications. Reader's Digest once sent him to Alaska for a week. He came back.



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