

Through its homage to the iconographic tradition,
 Paul Soupiset's *James the Less* draws us into the
 artist's personal meditation on the letter of James.

Drawing James

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The letter of James declares that it is written by “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1), but it gives us no further information about who this is. We can gather from the letter’s contents that he must have been an important Christian leader who embraced his Jewish roots. Many scholars identify him as the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:8), who in Christian tradition has been called James the Just. However, the very few extant visual depictions of the author of the letter of James vary, some going with James the Just, but others depicting James the Less (so called from Mark 15:40).¹

Drawing inspiration from this complex visual tradition as well as from the letter of James itself, Paul Soupiset sketched *James the Less* for the cover of this issue of *Christian Reflection*. His image incorporates symbolic elements from several Armenian and Russian Orthodox icons of James the Just, Bishop of Jerusalem, and from El Greco’s *Apostle St. James the Less*, which is the most well-known painting to associate that figure with the epistle of James.

Paul Soupiset has been the creative director and lead designer at Toolbox Studios in San Antonio, Texas, since its inception in 1996. This full-time graphic designer and self-described armchair theologian characterizes his personal artwork, like *James the Less*, as “liturgical sketching.”² Originally he developed this phrase as a working title for a book that would follow the lectionary calendar for a year. He sees liturgical sketching as a way to read the lectionary Scripture texts devotionally and enter into daily dialog with them by creating sketchbook drawings. Although his book project remains on hold until he finds a publisher, this sketchbook practice has become Soupiset’s primary form of art.

The artist prefers to work with the laity and somewhat in the margins because, he says, “That’s where the creative energy and best stories seems to be.” While he hesitates to identify himself as a lay liturgical leader, he does enjoy creating spaces for interactive and participatory worship. He collaborates with friends in creating installations, retreats, seasonal events, and prayer stations. For instance, at an upcoming workshop at Laity Lodge on the Frio River near Leakey, Texas, he will encourage participants to sketch poetry and, hopefully, demystify the craft of an artist.

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Domenikos Theotokopoulos, known as El Greco (1541-1614), APOSTLE St. JAMES THE LESS (1610-1614). Oil on canvas. 43" x 34". Museo del Greco, Toledo, Spain. Photo: © Universal Images Group / Art Resource, NY. Used by Permission.

Soupiset worked out the themes of *James the Less*, both verbally and visually, in a series of notes and drawings on small moleskine sketchbook pages that are illustrated here. His undergraduate study of western art and fascination with all types of iconography fuels what he calls a “sort of a *visio divina*” – personal meditation and contemplation on the key images associated with the letter of James. “My work tries to take these great ancient works and dismantle, reconsider, and recontextualize them,” he writes. “Frequently, I’m taking powerful hegemonic images from my faith’s past and placing them in a new context to dethrone them, to subtly speak truth to power, to

be a small voice offering checks and balances to the institution of Christendom, or to comment on my own ambivalence toward my privilege.”

El Greco's *Apostle St. James the Less* (p. 48) is the primary visual inspiration for Soupiset's sketches of James. Dominikos Theotokopoulos, who became known as El Greco, was born in Crete. He began his artistic career there, but moved on to Venice and Rome and finally settled in Spain in 1576. He was one of the most innovative painters of his generation. When he departed from the Byzantine flatness popular in his native Crete, he had to travel to Italy and Spain to find the patrons who would appreciate his Mannerist style of painting, which featured elongated and exaggerated proportions. El Greco's portrait of James is one of a series of paintings of apostles intended for the Cathedral of Toledo, Spain. Today they are gathered together again in the Museo del Greco, Toledo.³

Paul Soupiset enjoys the intimacy and small-scale of the sketchbook format rather than the fine art that hangs on gallery walls. He was a journalism major with a studio fine art minor when he studied at Baylor University. His courses in drawing, graphic design, and art history shaped his work both personally and professionally, but he never desired to be an exhibiting artist. “When I'm ready for others to see my work, it's often a simple process of handing over a sketchbook,” he explains.

The three-quarter length drawing *James the Less* (on the cover and p. 46) was the first one that Soupiset drew. It has the border motif of a journal entry and is ripped out of a sketchbook. There are clear echoes of the El Greco painting, Orthodox icons, other sources such as Gothic church windows and medieval Gospel books. James is seen in the robes of a cleric; two Greek Orthodox crosses are visible on the vestment. A halo of sainthood is prominent behind his head. His left arm cradles a book, while his right hand is raised with two fingers straightening, quietly approaching a gesture of blessing.

An additional, larger hand extends outward to the viewer in the lower portion of the composition. This open right hand, originating in the El Greco painting, is prominent in all of Soupiset's sketches. In the process of drawing and contemplation, the artist was inspired by James's themes of friendship with God (James 2:23) and the gentleness of wisdom (3:13). He comments, “This process [of liturgical sketching] allows me to approach the text, the story, with an open hand, with contingency, inviting the Spirit to do what the Spirit will, or won't. It's not about the mastery of the texts, but about inspiration, illumination, and contemplating the ancient paths.”

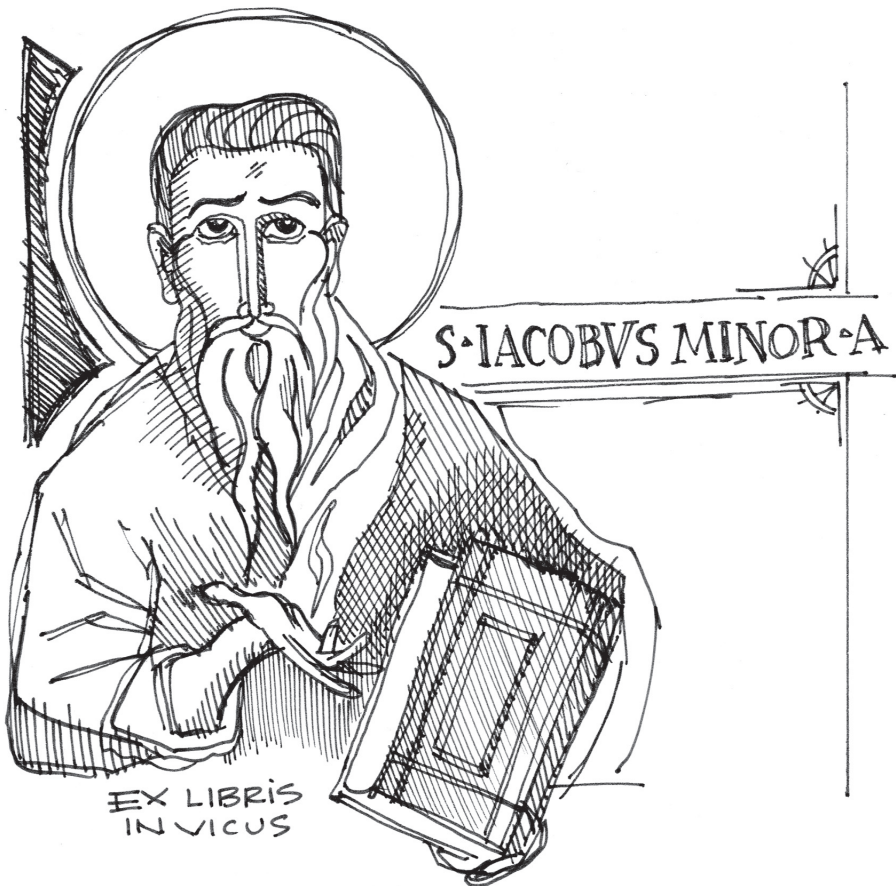
Paul Soupiset offers his work to us with a sincere heart to guide our personal reflection on the figure and emblems taken from the letter of James. The phrase “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:18) influenced the seeds and fruit imagery in the lower left corner of *James the Less* and again in the upper right corner of *The Seed – James the Less* (p. 50). In the latter image, the boat is the artist's medi-



Paul Soupiset (b. 1969), *THE SEED – JAMES THE LESS* (2012). Pen on paper, 4" x 4". Photo: © Paul Soupiset. Used by permission.

tation on the warning, "But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6); the facial features of James – with the exaggerated nose, sunken eyes, and beard – are the closest to El Greco's depiction.

Ex Libris – James the Less (p. 51) is inspired by several Orthodox icons of James the Just and the painted depiction of Gospel writers in the Medieval period of art history. James has the same pensive look as in the first two sketches, but here his visage is flattened as occurs in the icon tradition. Soupiset labeled the saint "S. JAVOBVS MINOR A" after seeing a sculpture with this identification on its base.



Paul Soupiset (b. 1969), *EX LIBRIS – JAMES THE LESS* (2012). Pen on paper. 4" x 4". Photo: © Paul Soupiset. Used by permission.

Words and images interact throughout Soupiset's work. Sometimes a word or phrase from Scripture will inspire part of a drawing and manifest itself like an illuminator's marginalia; other times the emerging image will speak a word to the artist which gets incorporated into the drawing. For instance, while drawing the Bible in *Ex Libris – James the Less*, the phrase "ex libris" (Latin for "out of the books") came to Soupiset's mind, and he added "in vicus" ("into the village") to the phrase to approximate a Jamesian admonition to "get out of the books and into the neighborhood." Soupiset continues, "I think James has a lot to say to any Jesus-follower interested in issues of missional living, justice, restoration, and peacemaking. His take on

the gospel seems to dovetail well with a roll-up-your-sleeves Kingdom-minded theology.”

In the three sketches that he has created to guide our reflection on the letter of James, Paul Soupiset not only shares his knowledge of and homage to the historical visual past, he also offers us, with an open hand if you will, his personal meditation on Scripture. His Christian art is an invitation for us to make time in our busy lives – even a few brief, but meaningful moments – to reflect on the Scriptures and allow them to mold our discipleship. How can we make the time? Soupiset’s answer is to draw in his sketchbooks, mostly during lunch breaks, before going back to his regular job and home to his family.

NOTES

1 I thank David Gowler, The Dr. Lovick Pierce and Bishop George F. Pierce Professor of Religion at Oxford College of Emory University, for sharing with me his research on images of the author of the letter of James.

2 For more information about Paul Soupiset, see soupiset.typepad.com/about.html (accessed March 5, 2012). My quotations from the artist are taken from a personal interview with him via email and phone on February 27, 2012.

3 For the Museo del Greco, see www.spain.info/en/conoce/museo/toledo/casa-museo_de_el_greco.html (accessed March 5, 2012).



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