

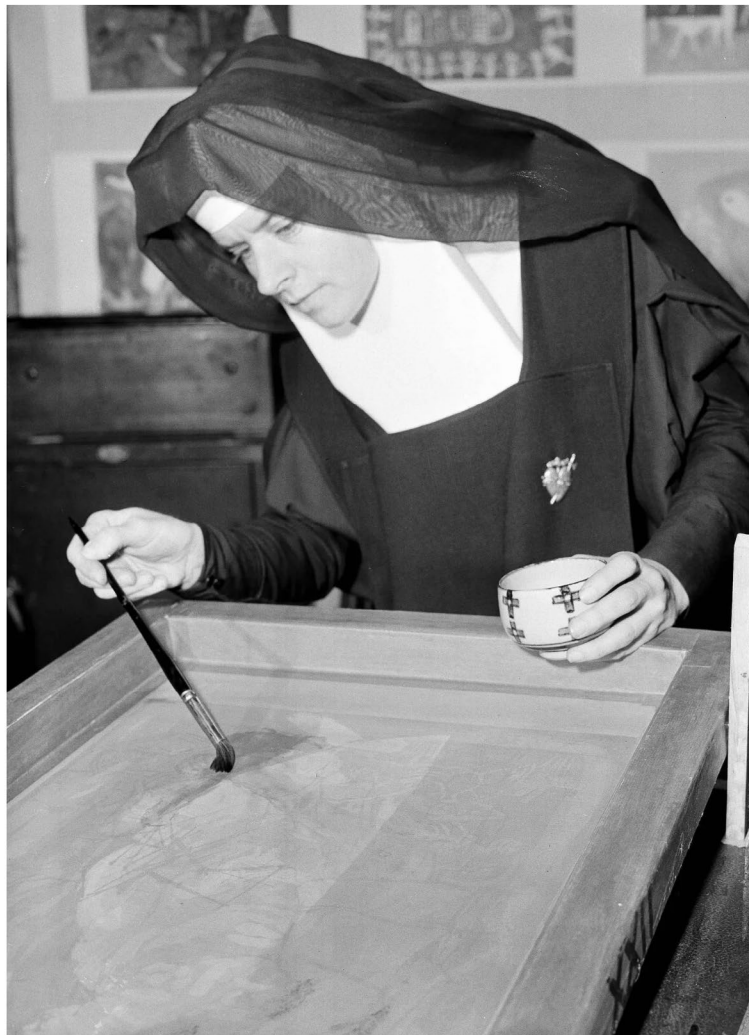
Forbes

'60s 'Pop-Art Nun' Corita Kent Honored With New Los Angeles Center

The allure of a Catholic nun creating striking graphic silkscreens that embodied the 1960s peace and love ethos was irresistible. In 1967, Corita Kent made the cover of Newsweek Magazine.

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By R. Daniel Foster



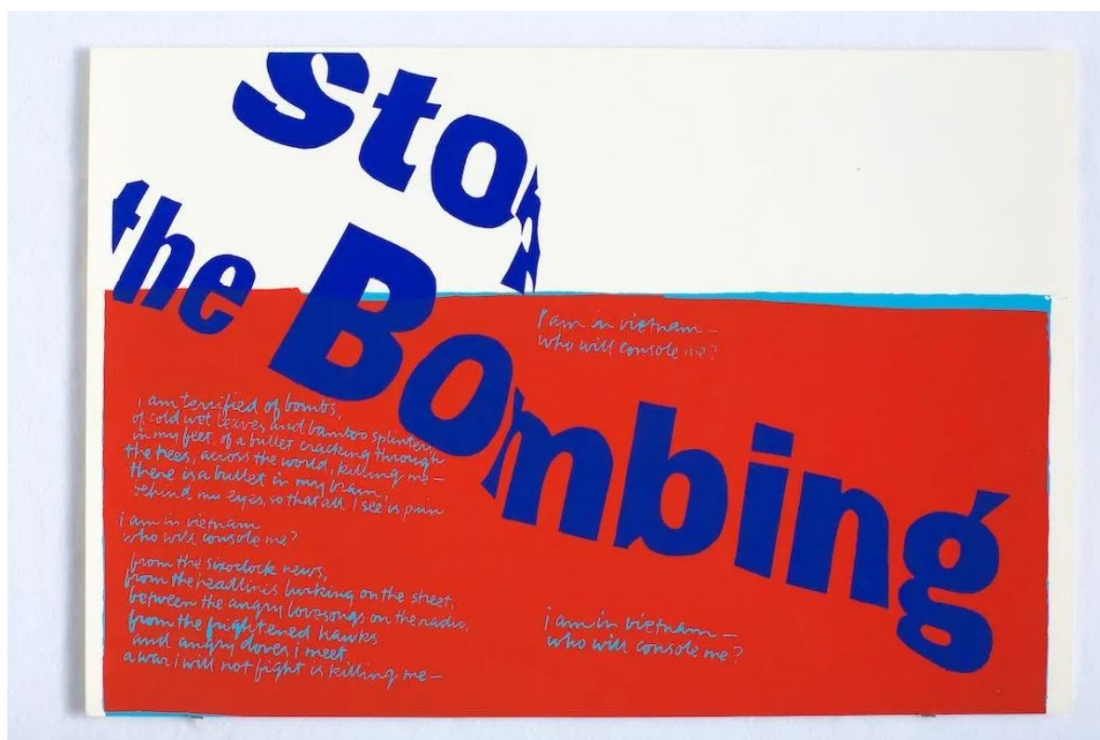
Preparing a silk screen, sister Mary Corita paints a mixture of glue, water, glycerine and vinegar over areas of a picture to be printed, Feb. 10, 1958. (AP Photo/Ellis R. Bosworth)
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Artist Corita Kent never met Andy Warhol, but she should have. Although their approaches diverged, both were central figures in the 1960s Pop Art movement. Warhol's mass production techniques, riffs on commercial images and ironic takes on consumer culture intersected with art created by Kent, a Catholic nun who took the name Sister Mary Corita.

Kent didn't merely respond to Warhol's work, "but was an artist informing the movement in her own right," says Anastasia James, a leading Warhol scholar and Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's director of galleries and public art. In her way, Kent countered one of Warhol's themes—cult celebrity worship—with her own ideas of social justice, activism, spirituality and optimism.

Instead of creating iconic works based on Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, Kent chose Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King, John F. Kennedy and Cesar Chavez—pairing the greats with punchy graphics and activist text.

The prospect of a Catholic nun creating bold graphic silkscreens espousing the era's peace and love ethos proved irresistible. Kent's notoriety grew, landing her on the cover of Newsweek in 1967.



Corita Kent, "stop the bombing," 1967, serigraph, 18 x 23 in.
IMAGE COURTESY OF CORITA ART CENTER, LOS ANGELES, CORITA.ORG

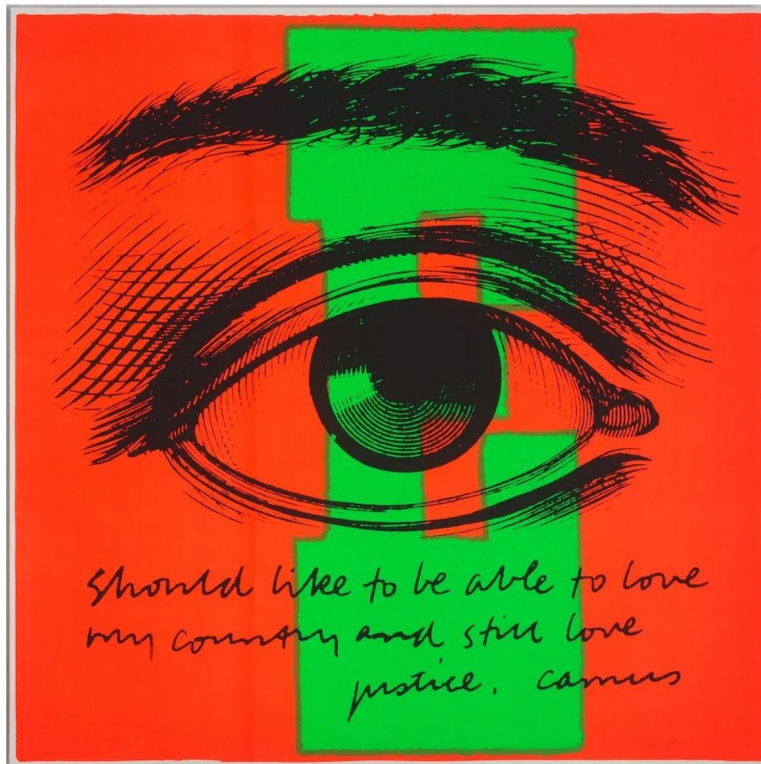
Los Angeles Female Artists Remain Vastly Underrepresented

In early March, Kent's work found a new home at the Corita Art Center in Los Angeles' downtown Arts District. The new space houses a gallery and areas for archives, research, workshops and educational activities. The organization was previously located in Hollywood's Immaculate Heart High School.

New ideas are bursting all around and all this comes into you and is changed by you.
Corita Kent, from her book, "Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit"

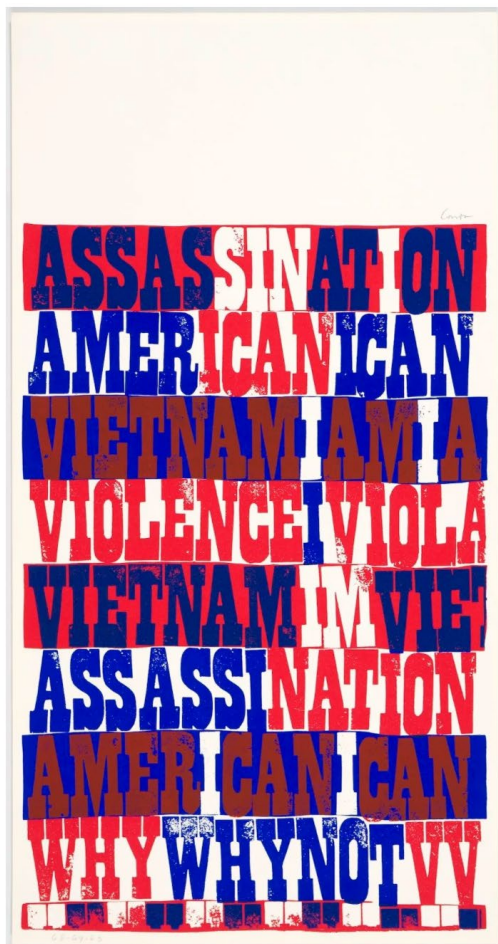
"In a city where female artists remain vastly underrepresented," the Center "stands as a powerful testament to her enduring impact and the necessity of amplifying women's voices in art," says Sheharazad Fleming, Corita Art Center board chair.

The Center's inaugural exhibit, "Heroes and Sheroes," pays homage to inspirational figures such as Kennedy, King, Chavez and others. The 29 prints were created in 1968 and 1969 after Kent took a sabbatical from Immaculate Heart College where she headed the art department. She subsequently left the Immaculate Heart of Mary order and moved to Boston where, in 1986 at age 67, she died of cancer.



Corita Kent, "e eye love", from the circus alphabet series, 1968, serigraph, 22 3/4 x 22 3/4 in.
IMAGE COURTESY OF CORITA ART CENTER, LOS ANGELES, CORITA.ORG

The exhibit's artwork addresses topics of the 1960s era: civil rights, nuclear disarmament and political assassinations. "American Sampler" employs thematic red, white and blue colors set within a line-up of words: "Assassination," "American," "Vietnam," "Violence" and "Why Not." The 19th-century "wanted poster" typeface is broken up graphically to spell out smaller words: "Sin," "Nation" and "I Can," among others.



Corita Kent, "American Sampler," from the Heroes & Sheroes series, 1968-69, serigraph, 22 1/2 x 11 1/2 in.
IMAGE COURTESY OF CORITA ART CENTER, LOS ANGELES, CORITA.ORG

IMMACULATE HEART COLLEGE ART DEPARTMENT RULES

- Rule 1 FIND A PLACE YOU TRUST AND THEN TRY TRUSTING IT FOR A WHILE.
- Rule 2 GENERAL DUTIES OF A STUDENT: PULL EVERYTHING OUT OF YOUR TEACHER. PULL EVERYTHING OUT OF YOUR FELLOW STUDENTS.
- Rule 3 GENERAL DUTIES OF A TEACHER: PULL EVERYTHING OUT OF YOUR STUDENTS.
- Rule 4 CONSIDER EVERYTHING AN EXPERIMENT.
- Rule 5 BE SELF DISCIPLINED. THIS MEANS FINDING SOMEONE WISE OR SMART AND CHOOSING TO FOLLOW THEM. TO BE DISCIPLINED IS TO FOLLOW IN A GOOD WAY. TO BE SELF DISCIPLINED IS TO FOLLOW IN A BETTER WAY.
- Rule 6 NOTHING IS A MISTAKE. THERE'S NO WIN AND NO FAIL. THERE'S ONLY MAKE.
- Rule 7 The only rule is work. IF YOU WORK IT WILL LEAD TO SOMETHING. IT'S THE PEOPLE WHO DO ALL OF THE WORK ALL THE TIME WHO EVENTUALLY CATCH ON TO THINGS.
- Rule 8 DON'T TRY TO CREATE AND ANALYSE AT THE SAME TIME. THEY'RE DIFFERENT PROCESSES.
- Rule 9 BE HAPPY WHENEVER YOU CAN MANAGE IT. ENJOY YOURSELF. IT'S LIGHTER THAN YOU THINK.
- Rule 10 "WE'RE BREAKING ALL OF THE RULES. EVEN OUR OWN RULES. AND HOW DO WE DO THAT? BY LEAVING PLENTY OF ROOM FOR X QUANTITIES." JOHN CAGE
- HELPFUL HINTS: ALWAYS BE AROUND. COME OR GO TO EVERYTHING. ALWAYS GO TO CLASSES. READ ANYTHING YOU CAN GET YOUR HANDS ON. LOOK AT MOVIES CAREFULLY OFTEN. SAVE EVERYTHING-IT MIGHT COME IN HANDY LATER. THERE SHOULD BE NEW RULES NEXT WEEK.

David Mekelburg. Corita Kent's Rules & Hints for Students & Teachers

Kent's 1967 work, "Ten Rules," is headed by the title, "Immaculate Heart College Art Department Rules." It hangs in the Center's lobby. The work, hand-lettered by David Mekelburg, concludes with a wink from the artist: "There should be new rules next week."

Warhol And Kent Rise In Fame Along Tandem Tracks

In the summer of 1962, Kent walked into Los Angeles' Ferus gallery to view Andy Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans." The 32 paintings became a landmark in the artist's career and a symbol of American Pop Art.

"While her visit to Warhol's 'Campbell's Soup Cans' exhibition may be seen as a moment of influence, it is also crucial to position her within the broader West Coast Pop Art movement," says Warhol scholar Anastasia James. "That movement often employed commercial imagery and typography as a means of critique and transformation."



The Corita Center's "Heroes and Sheroes" exhibit.
PHOTO BY MARC WALKER, COURTESY OF CORITA ART CENTER, CORITA.ORG



MOSCOW, RUSSIA | A visitor takes a photo in front of "Campbell's Soup Cans," a 1962 composition by Andy Warhol (1928-1987) on display during an exhibition titled "I, Andy Warhol" at the New Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, Russia on September 24, 2020. (Photo by Sefa Karacan/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)
ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

What's perhaps most fascinating about the brush between the two Pop Art artists is "that Kent saw the show and soon after created 'Wonderbread'—her first work fully embracing Pop aesthetics," James adds. "It underscores how such moments of contact between geographically and conceptually distinct artists can catalyze new directions in artmaking."

In the late 1940s, Kent learned screen printing while completing her graduate studies at the University of Southern California, "becoming proficient in the medium well before Warhol, who did not begin working with the technique until March–April 1962, after completing his hand-painted 'Campbell's Soup Cans,'" James says. The two artists' fame rose in tandem during the early to mid 1960s.

In 2015, Pittsburgh's Andy Warhol Museum mounted the first full-scale survey of Kent's work, spanning more than 30 years: "Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent." "Her images remain iconic symbols that address the larger questions and concerns of that turbulent time and continue to influence many artists today," reads a statement on the Andy Warhol Museum website.



Corita Kent, 1970.
COURTESY OF THE CORITA ART CENTER, LOS ANGELES, CORITA.ORG

A Kent Design Becomes The World's Largest Copyrighted Artwork

Born Frances Elizabeth Kent in Fort Dodge, Iowa, Kent moved to Los Angeles with her family when she was a toddler. At age 18, she entered the Hollywood-based Immaculate Heart of Mary religious order, and later headed the Immaculate Heart College art department in Los Angeles' Los Feliz neighborhood. The department became a center of liberal and creative thought imbued with a 1960s activist aesthetic, keyed to pressing societal woes.



Corita Kent in her studio, 1965.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE CORITA ART CENTER, LOS ANGELES, CORITA.ORG.

After learning silkscreening in the late 1940s, Kent soon took first name, “Corita,” as her professional signature. Her early creations were based on medieval religious art she studied while earning her master’s degree at the University of Southern California.

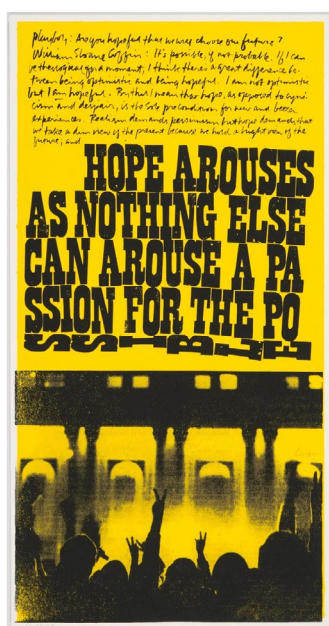
Her 1951 work, “The Lord Is With Thee,” is of a crowned Virgin Mary surrounded by angels, kings, shepherds and saints. Its Byzantine look is punched with vivid colors and hints of Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes and paint drips. In 1952, the painting won first prize in the Los Angeles County Museum’s print competition, and also a prize at the California State Fair

In 1971, the Boston Gas Company commissioned Kent to paint one of its enormous gas tanks; the rainbow-splashed design became the world’s largest copyrighted artwork, according to the Corita Art Center.

In 1985, the U.S. Postal Service issued a rainbow-themed “Love” stamp designed by Kent, the fourth in a series of such stamps—and the most popular, with sales of 700 million, according to the U.S. Postal Service.



"Rainbow Swash" by artist Corita Kent, painted in 1971 on a 140 foot tall LNG storage tank in Boston. (Photo by Paul Marotta/Getty Images)
GETTY IMAGES



Corita Kent, "A passion for the possible," from the Heroes & Sheres series, 1968-69.
SILVERSTEIN, 23 x 32 in.
IMAGE COURTESY OF CORITA ART CENTER, LOS ANGELES, CORITA.ORG

The Corita Art Center is the largest and most comprehensive collection of Kent’s art, with over 30,000 artworks and archival materials. Kent’s work is also in numerous collections: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Library of Congress, Hammer Museum, Brooklyn Art Museum, Harvard Art Museum and others.

The Corita Art Center is open to the public via reservations on Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. It also hosts guided group visits.