
Summer 10-12-2015

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Recommended Citation

Elder, Mark C.M. (2015) "The Epiphany of Yvaral's St. Vincent Portrait," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol32/iss2/4>

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The Epiphany of Yvaral's St. Vincent Portrait

BRO. MARK ELDER, C.M.



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Portrait of Saint Vincent de Paul (1988), 10th arrondissement, Paris, France. Mural by Jean-Pierre Vasarely, better known as Yvaral.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

We are DePaul 1, mural, Thomas P. Levan Center, DePaul University, dedicated in 1998.

Courtesy DePaul University Office of Mission and Values



We are DePaul 2, mural, McCabe Residential Hall, DePaul University, dedicated in 2001.

Image Collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



I was a high school teacher when I took the Vincentian Heritage Tour in 1988. It was then that I first saw the *Portrait of Saint Vincent de Paul* by Jean-Pierre Vasarely, known as Yvaral. As interesting as it was to me then, I assumed it was only a flat computer print-out. But it did make an impression, as brief as this first visit was for me. It stood nearly sixty feet tall, at the back wall of an apartment building that used to be part of the original site for the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission, Saint-Lazare.

As I look back now I can see how intrigued I was by it. But it would be another twelve years before I had the chance to see it again. When I returned to Paris in 2000, I was by then an accomplished visual artist teaching at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. In Chicago, I have my own pieces of public art and my own large-scale mural of St. Vincent's portrait displayed at the university. This portrait was first done in 1998 for the university's centennial, and was completed again in 2001 at a separate location. The mural features the likenesses of DePaul faculty, staff, and students combined to make up an overall image of the saint.

I know well how much seeing Yvaral's piece influenced me in creating this mural. But it turned out to be the start of another journey that began when I re-visited Yvaral's mural in 2000. A true epiphany indeed!

This second visit was done to satisfy my curiosity and to make sure that my 1988 memory was real. Before the visit, I had assumed that Yvaral's rendering was a flat image. When I saw the mural again, it looked as I remembered. Then as I walked down the street, I looked up and noticed that all the tones of the mural became more pronounced and darker. How did this happen? I walked back up the street and the mural returned to its original tone.



Detail of *The Mandatum* mural illustrating the interplay of light and shadow.

Courtesy Michael Vasilko, Lead Architect

Portrait of Vincent de Paul. Engraving by Nicolas Pitau, after the painting by Simon François de Tours.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



To me, this seemed impossible, and so I walked back-and-forth twice more. Still amazed, I decided to walk right up to the mural itself to see if there was something that could tell me how this happened. It was then that I saw how the image was forged by light and light alone, truly an amazing discovery. I vowed then that I had to learn how this was done. Luckily, I had six weeks left in my sabbatical program in Paris.

After some research, and help from historian John R. Rybolt, C.M., I made contact with Yvaral and he was gracious enough to invite me to his studio. The meeting was a very exciting ninety minutes for me, a fellow artist. Carla Bertana, the translator at my sabbatical program, was kind enough to go with me to help translate. Carla recalled that her head was moving back and forth trying to keep up with our enthusiastic dialogue.

The conversation turned to what both of us did that was similar, since each of us had created mural portraits of the saint. I asked Yvaral how much he knew about St. Vincent the man. Unfortunately he did not know much, but he was grateful to learn more about him and his place in history. It seems that Yvaral was directed more in what would be appropriate for the park setting of the old Saint-Lazare site than about the subject itself, Vincent. So how did that direction come about?

The *Portrait of St. Vincent de Paul* was commissioned in 1985 by the local government of the 10th arrondissement in Paris. By this time Yvaral had completed a number of portraits in public locations featuring aluminum surfaces, each with perpendicular fins that projected shadows which provided the viewer a recognizable image or portrait. These portraits featured *The Mona Lisa* for the Louvre Museum and *Charles de Gaulle* among others. The installed portraits were light in weight and could be mounted on any good-sized exterior wall. Being aluminum they would also stand up well against inclement weather.

It has to be assumed that Yvaral was referencing Nicolas Pitau's engraved portrait of Simon François de Tours' painting when he composed his aluminum shadow-piece of St. Vincent, an image easily found in the public domain. There is much in Yvaral's rendering that reminds an informed viewer of Pitau, and indirectly of Simon François. The viewer might reach this conclusion by looking at the coloring and positioning of the figure in



Fondation Vasarely, Aix-en-Provence, France.

*Courtesy Pierre Vasarely, Président, Fondation Vasarely
www.fondationvasarely.org*



the two compositions, both Pitau's and Yvaral's. There are many similarities, but Yvaral's overall depiction of the figure is a post-modern abstraction. It is this abstraction that makes us contemplate St. Vincent in a new way.

In the mid-1980s a committee from 10th arrondissement, the site of the original motherhouse, sought public art for a location overlooking a park at the junction of Boulevard Magenta and rue du Faubourg St. Denis. After some research, Yvaral proposed installing a portrait featuring St. Vincent. This would recognize Vincent's place in French history and Saint-Lazare's importance to their neighborhood. The local government approved the proposal, and by early 1988 the aluminum shadow-mural of St. Vincent was installed at 105 rue du Faubourg St. Denis. But what is of most interest is how an artist like Yvaral developed his own unique approach to portraiture. How did he come to be such a highly respected artist?

Yvaral was widely known in the contemporary art world not only for his own work, but also for being the second son of Victor Vasarely, the Op Art star from the 1960s highly regarded in art history. Although Jean-Pierre's family name was Vasarely, he used the anagram 'Yvaral' when he came of age as a professional artist in the early 1960s. This anagram was a combination of 'Yves' and 'Aral,' a nickname supplied from his father. Yvaral did not want any confusion with, nor influence gained from, his family name had it been used. Jean-Pierre wanted his own name, a name that his family had used amongst themselves since he was a child, a name that gave him his own professional identity. So Yvaral became that professional name. But if one takes a look at Victor Vasarely's work in comparison to Yvaral's, there is no doubt as to how influential Victor was to Yvaral's artistic life.

Victor Vasarely (1906-1997), born in Pecs, Hungary, started out as a medical student. By 1930 he had given up medicine to pursue graphic art at the Muhely (Budapest Bauhaus), then later devoted himself to painting full time. He was also involved with graphic and creative work for advertising firms like Draeger, Havas, and the printing company Devambeze. In 1930 he moved to Paris with his wife Claire Spinner (Yvaral's mother, 1909-1990).

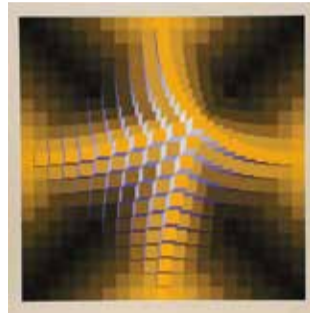
The Vasarelys lived in inexpensive hotels as Victor developed his art. Victor was



Victor Vasarely, *Tupa* (1972).

Tapestry measuring 562x506 cm, located at the Fondation Vasarely.

Courtesy Pierre Vasarely, Président, Fondation Vasarely
www.fondationvasarely.org



Several works by Yvaral: *Structure Ambigüe V.E.B.* (1970), acrylic on canvas; *Untitled 2*, (1965), silkscreen.

Public Domain Images



fascinated with abstract art, especially compositions that contained hard-edged patterns that featured interplay with organic forms. He experimented with the transparency of Plexiglas, and started asking bigger questions like, “Why should paintings be confined to just two dimensions?” Many of these compositions of the late forties and early fifties were strictly in black and white. It was in these explorations that he developed a desire to create abstract art that was accessible and attractive to all viewers, whether they had a background in art or not.

In 1955, at the Denise René Gallery, Vasarely was included in a popular exhibition called *Le Mouvement*. It was this show that put Victor on the map in the art world. When he combined this success with a more restricted high-key color palate, he developed his version of what art historians refer to as ‘Op Art.’

By 1965 Victor was internationally known as a very successful painter. His place in art history was solidified when he was invited to New York to take part in William C. Sietz’s *The Responsive Eye* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. There he showed with other great Op Art founders like Bridget Riley and Richard Anuszkiewicz, along with Minimalists like Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella. The show was very popular with the general public, although critics in general dismissed the work as parlor tricks that fooled the eye.

Op Art (or later Kinetic Art), works in this way. Black and white patterns are pushed around to create a dynamic, or undulating, figure/ground relationship that keeps the eye moving. The tighter the patterns, the more the eye moves. Add bright color to the pure geometric shapes and your eyes will move quite a bit, till they hurt. Then, as you turn

away, an after-image from the piece becomes quite vivid. This is very animated art, and Victor Vasarely was one of its founders. Parlor trick or not, Vasarely became an established and respected name in the art world.

Artistically, Yvaral was his father's son. In 1960, he and other artists of the time (Julio Le Parc, Francois Morellet, Francisco Sobrino, Horacio Garcia Rossi, and Joel Stein) founded the artistic group GRAV (*Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel*). The purpose of the group — which eventually split in 1968 — was to create a visual abstract language made up of simple geometric forms accessible to anyone. By 1975, Yvaral began describing his work as “Numeric,” so-called because he used algorithms to compose and format recognizable images and portraits into abstract art, while keeping the original image recognizable. From this point forward, Yvaral pioneered the use of computers with art. Yet, in the end, all of his studio work was hand-rendered, an incredible accomplishment.

During my visit with Yvaral, I was unable to ask whose portrait he used for the portrait of Vincent, whether it stemmed from Simon François, Pitau, or someone else. We can assume that he referred to these artists because he created similar fin-like compositions with other classical portraits such as the *Mona Lisa*, Simon Bolivar, Amadeus Mozart, Marilyn Monroe, and Blaise Pascal. He did show me the bristol board maquette that was the small-scale model of the St. Vincent mural. It amazed me to see how this technique was able to clearly convey an image purely through shadows. Even though there were no tones at all in the completely white maquette, Vincent's image could easily be seen.

The secret lay in Yvaral's numeric handling of the perpendicular fins that protruded at right angles from the supporting wall. The farther the fin came out, the darker the surrounding area became. But how did he make the fins? Yvaral helpfully told me what kind of aluminum was used, and how light it was on the wall. There was no need for support beams or any extraneous braces to support the wall. Exactly how he worked that out was a trade secret. I asked point-blank if there was a way to emulate his technique, his numeric approach to art. He asked if I knew about Chuck Close and his approach to the grid in portrait making. I assured him that I did, and he then encouraged me to explore the world of the grid for myself, and to make my own way through it. I took this as an invitation and returned to DePaul to do just that — explore the world of the grid.

I had also planned to invite Yvaral to DePaul University, perhaps to give a lecture and show his work, but sadly it was not to be as he suddenly died after suffering a heart attack in 2002. He was 68 years old.

After returning I had the perfect project in mind for this “new” technique. Catholic Charities of Chicago had invited me to create a mural for their building facing the Kennedy Expressway downtown. Convincing people at Catholic Charities of my approach was not difficult. The unique nature of the technique, and the fact that it would be done here for the first time in the United States was enough. Supporters and donors were not hard to find. The project, however, was facing handicaps: the primary one being our lack of practical experience in building a “shadow mural” out of aluminum. The French, and



Portrait of the Virgin, and detail of its Miraculous Medal composition.

Courtesy of the author



Maquettes composing St. Vincent's likeness as seen from readable angle, and straight-on.

Courtesy of the author

Yvaral, possessed the knowledge but were unwilling to share; even though Yvaral had been invited to collaborate on the project before he passed away.

The group behind our project was made up of excellent problem solvers and generous donors, in particular Dietrich Gross of Jupiter Aluminum. Mr. Gross, familiar with Yvaral's work in Europe, was excited to donate all the aluminum for the project. Also, Michael Vasilko donated his services as the lead architect. The rest of the group was composed of engineers and contractors. As the lead artist it was decided early on that after I rendered an effective design others in the group would be brought in to complete the large task of building the piece.

I gave myself the job of learning Yvaral's approach through making my own "numeric" portrait pieces. This started in the late fall of 2001 with the completion of *Portrait of the Virgin*. This piece features vinyl appliques of the Miraculous Medal in five angles, which are the five tones of the portrait. The work was instrumental in my research for the Catholic Charities piece. It gave me the necessary confidence to approach this commission logically, taking that next step to create a portrait utilizing the fin technique. I then made maquettes of St. Vincent's likeness using black construction paper and balsa wood as a background. In the group of illustrations above you can see how this works. On the left is the maquette as the viewer sees it at the intended readable angle. On the right is the same maquette seen straight-on. From this angle you see pure shadows, and these shadows still make the image recognizable. The rest of the composition, known as *The Mandatum*, followed this formula. This included the portrait of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, and the figures of Jesus and the



The Mandatum (2003), mural, original location; and study of shadow detail of St. Vincent.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online; Michael Vasilko, Lead Architect



Detail of *The Mandatum* mural; Reinstallation of *The Mandatum* mural (2014), Holy Family Villa, Lemont, Illinois.

Courtesy Michael Vasilko

apostles at the Last Supper. The maquettes produced a reality that no drawing could, and each planning session in which they were present to be seen buoyed the dedicated efforts of the planning group and donors.

By summer of 2003 *The Mandatum* was ready to be installed. We had overcome our lack of experience with shadow murals, but in so doing made the overall weight of the mural much heavier. At 152 feet long and 22 feet tall, the mural featured aluminum plating at 5/8 inches thick and aluminum fins at 1/4 inch. The plates came in at a hefty 700 pounds each. It is no wonder that a foundation for the mural had to be built, since the wall of the building would otherwise be pulled away. On 4 September 2003, *The Mandatum* was unveiled and a picture of it made the front page of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The piece lived up to expectations, winning an award for innovative construction techniques.

The Mandatum, unfortunately, had a short life at its original location. In a business move, Catholic Charities sold their building in 2006 and the mural was put into storage. But the exposure it received was the source of many stories, often told to me unwittingly by motorists who had seen it from the Kennedy Expressway. As described earlier, the mural's handicap, its overall weight, did not allow for flexibility and ease of reinstallation. I was left to hope (and pray) that the mural might one day be mounted again to do the job it was made for, evangelization. Fortunately, just such an opportunity arose, and in spring

of 2014 *The Mandatum* was installed once again, this time at Holy Family Villa, a senior living and rehabilitation facility bordering Chicago in Lemont, Illinois.

Yvaral's technique has opened the door to a myriad of ways in which I intend to use visual art as a means to evangelize. Somehow, this reminds me that St. Vincent himself distained the thought of having his portrait done. Legend has it that Vincent's fellow Vincentians secretly invited Simon François to create the portrait that Nicolas Pitau's engraving was based on. I truly believe Yvaral relied upon Pitau's engraving for his work at rue du St. Denis in 1988. I also know that Vincent was submissive to the will of God, and that it certainly felt like the will of God was revealed to me as I walked down this street in Paris and first saw the *Portrait of Saint Vincent de Paul*.

Thus was humility once again exalted. Saint Vincent had shunned glory but it had followed him after death, and three years had scarcely elapsed when his portrait was reproduced in four different styles, and was becoming a household treasure in all parts of the world.¹

It is safe to say we can add at least one more portrait in a style for our time.



¹ Andre Milon, C.M., "St. Vincent de Paul and Portraiture," *Annals of the Congregation of the Mission*, vol.16 (1909), 474.



Portrait of Saint Vincent de Paul (1988), 10th arrondissement, Paris, France. Mural by Jean-Pierre Vasarely, better known as Yvaral.

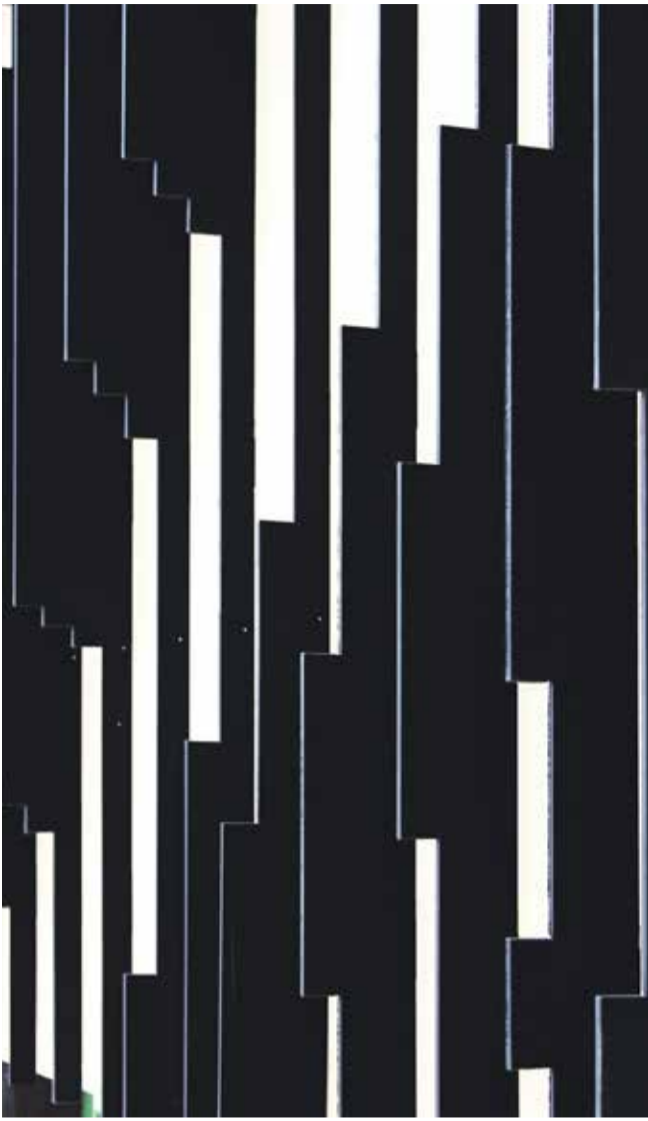
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Courtesy DePaul University Office of Mission and Values

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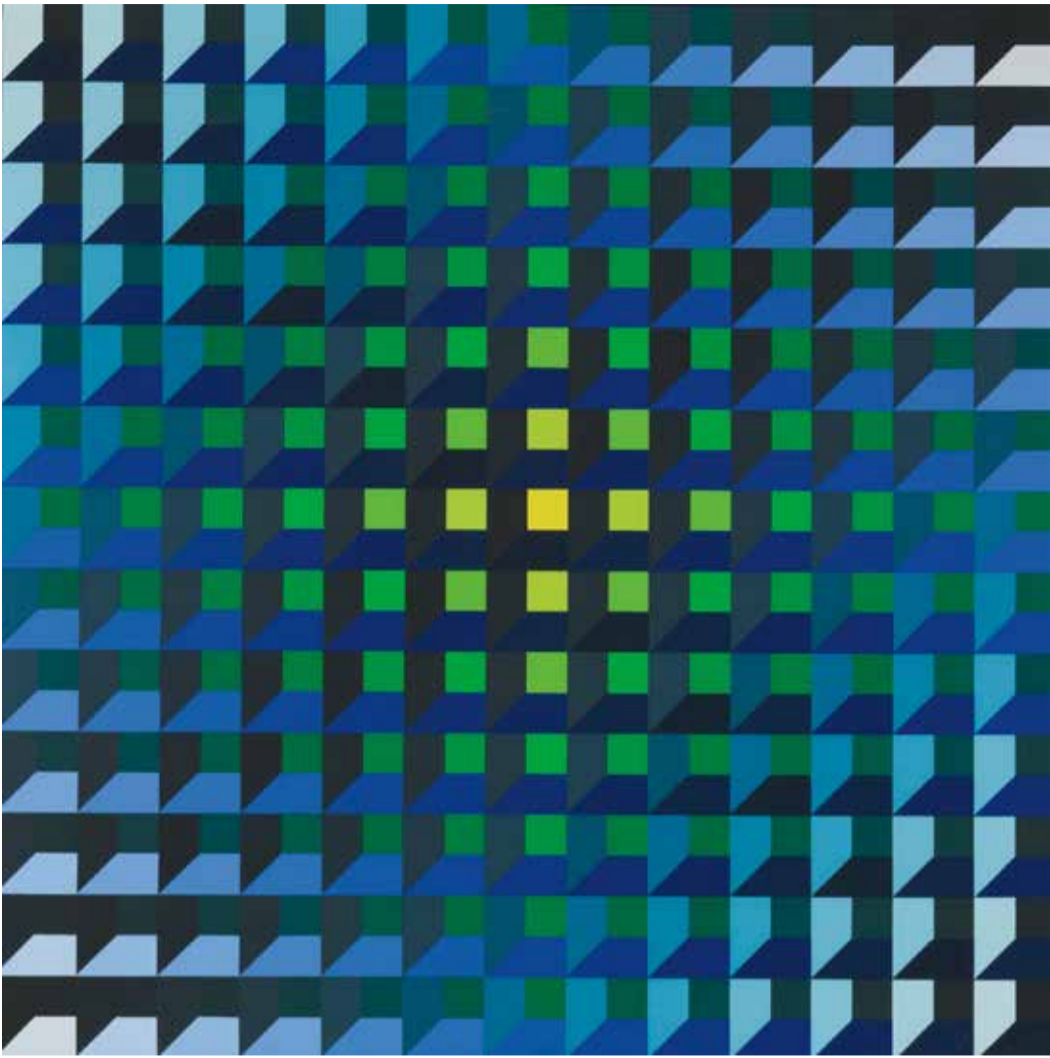


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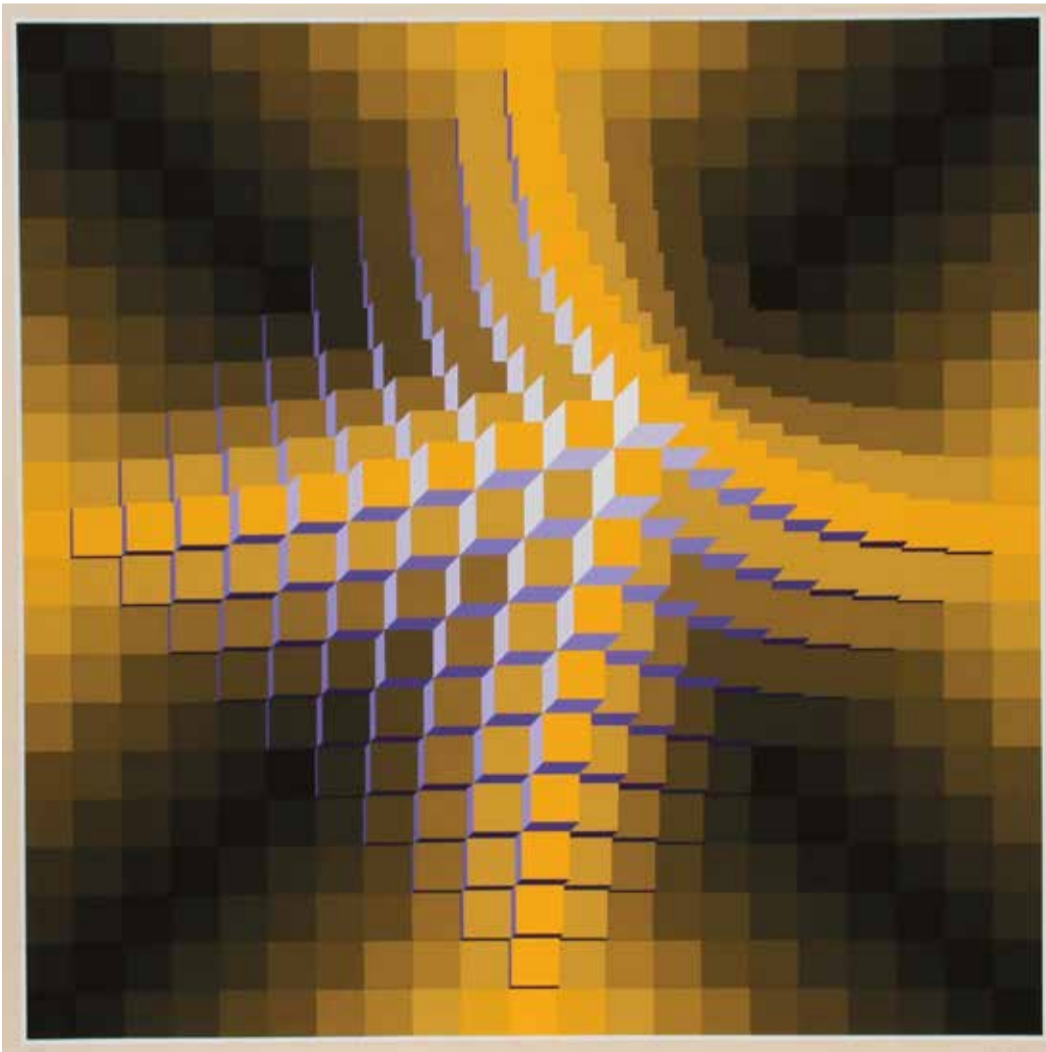
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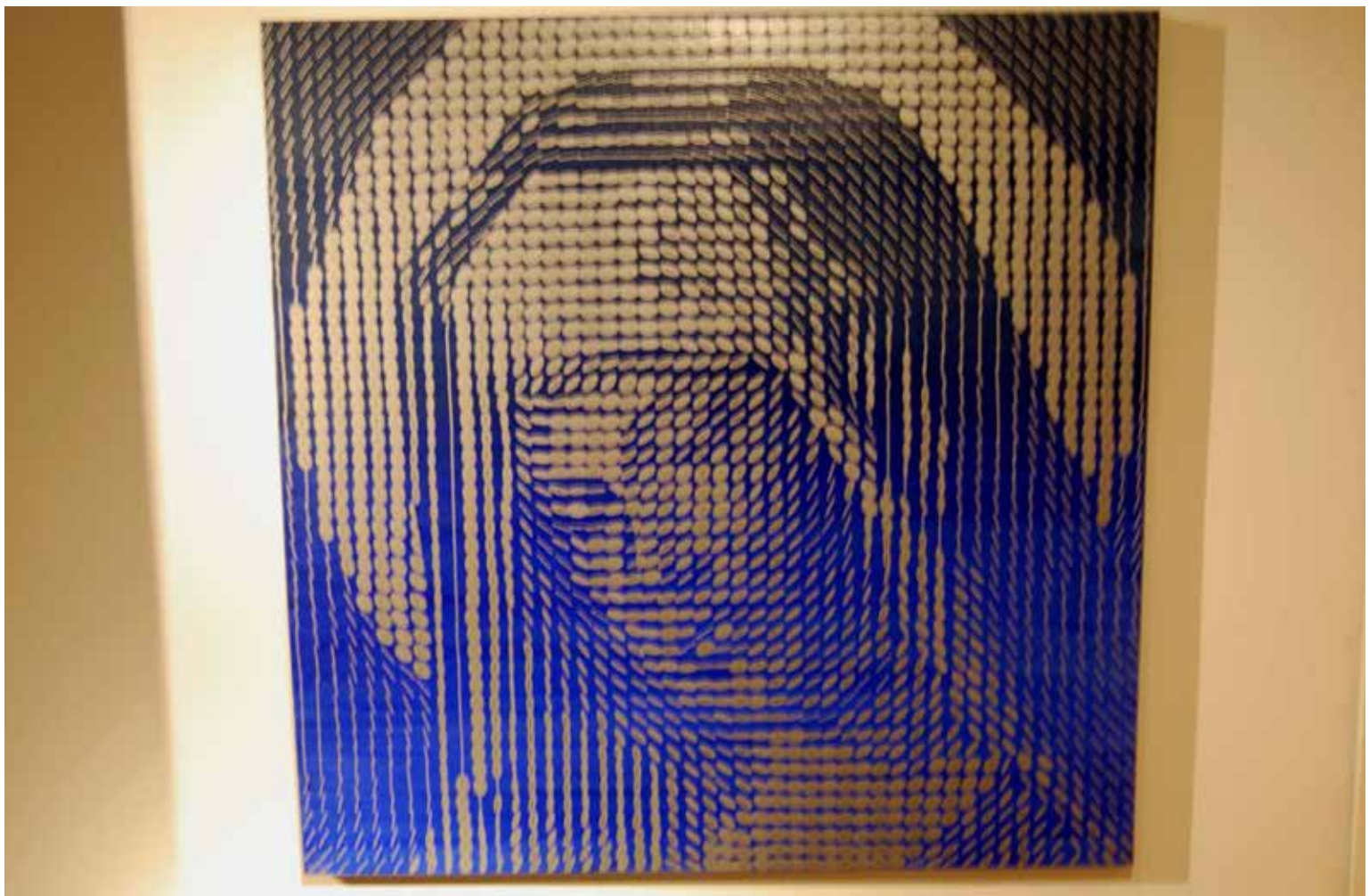




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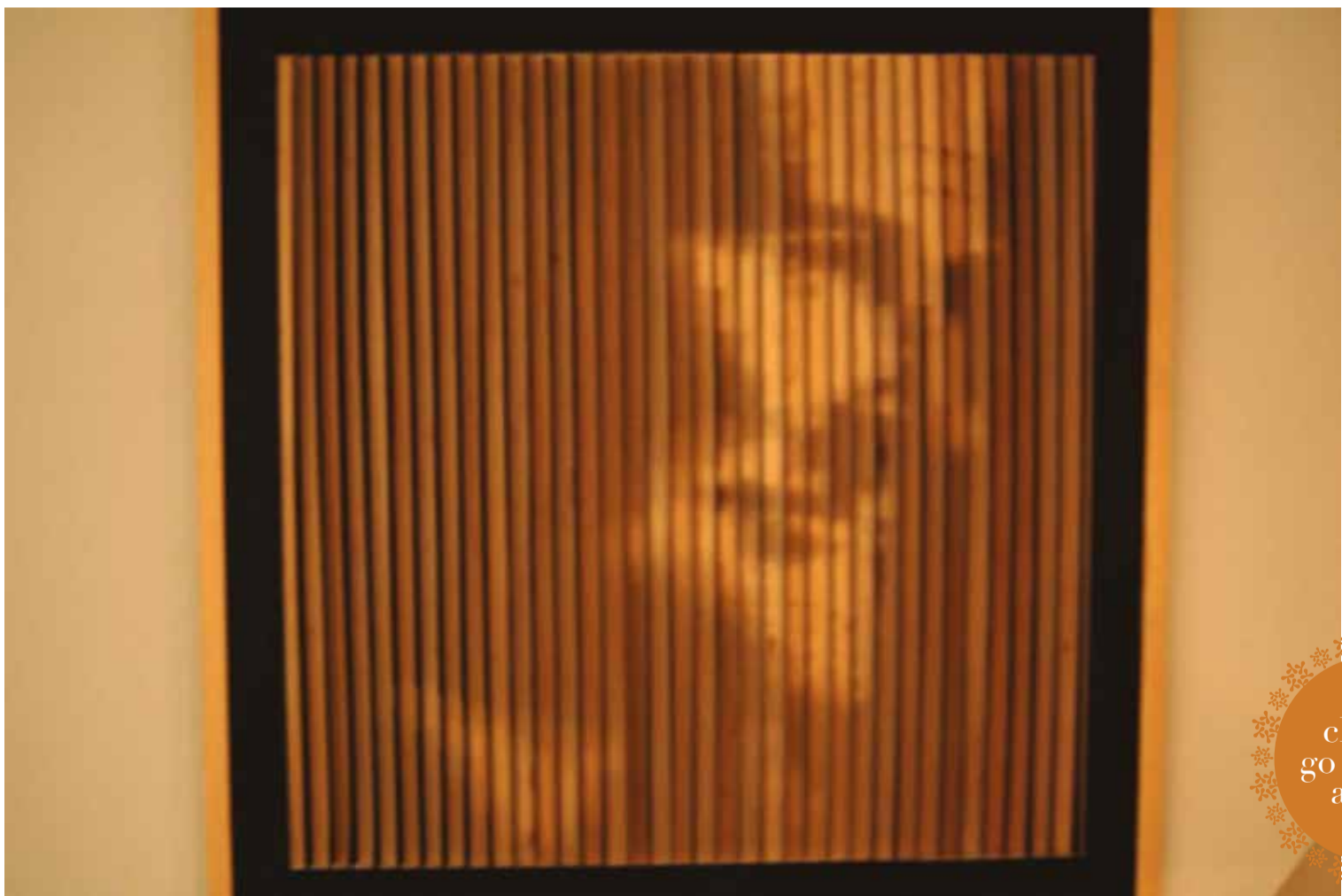




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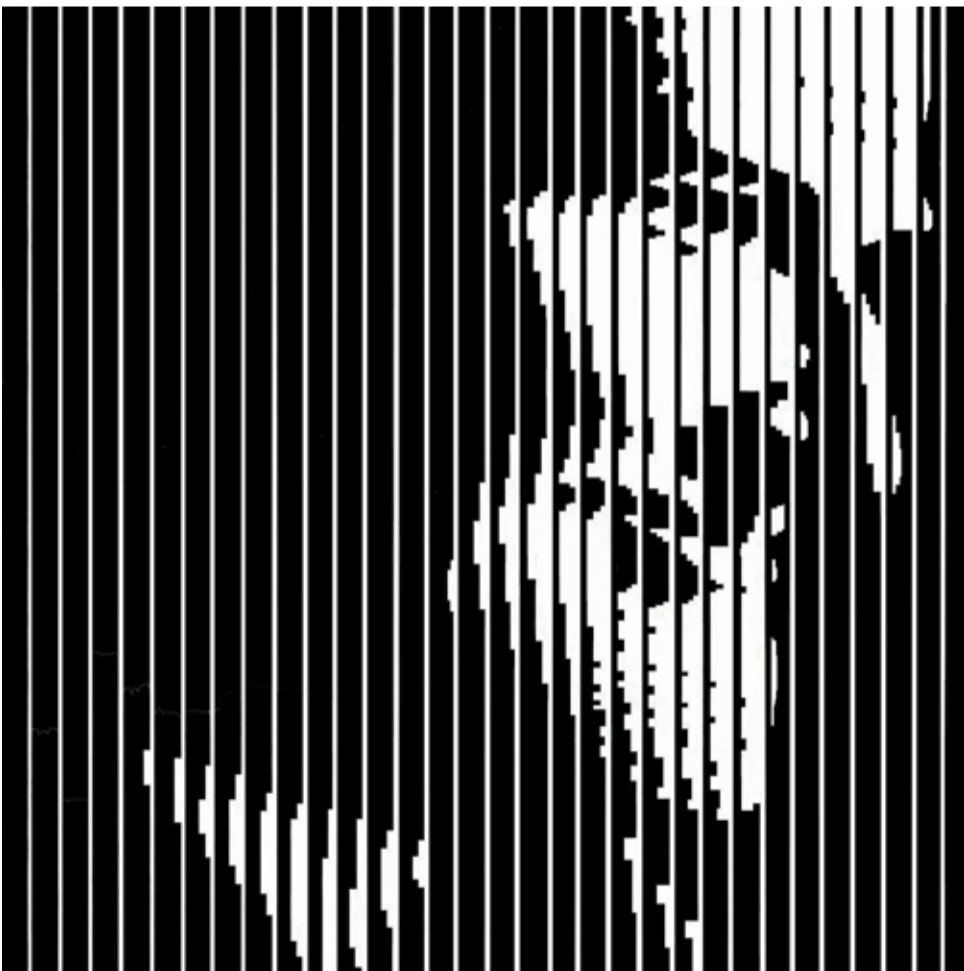
Courtesy of the author





Maquettes composing St. Vincent's likeness as seen from readable angle, and straight-on.

Courtesy of the author



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