

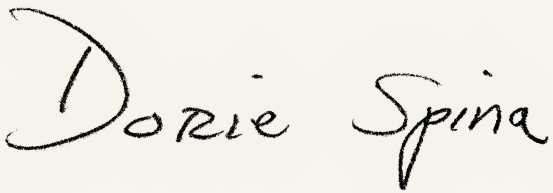
Dorie

she made beauty and released it



Dolores Marie Spina (née Amatuzio)

1929-1981


Dorie Spina

At Dorie Spina's funeral in May 1981, her cousin, Fr. Paul Valente, processed into a crowded St. Joseph's University Heights Church in Buffalo to celebrate the Mass. Dorie had helped shape the beauty of that sanctuary for years. She had designed banners and altar cloths, arranged flowers and natural materials, and transformed the church for seasons and celebrations with an artist's eye.

As Fr. Paul reached the altar, he noticed a single red rose placed precisely in its center.

He knew Dorie hated symmetry.

So, before beginning the Mass, he quietly picked up the rose, moved it to one side, and said, "Dorie would want it that way."

There may be no better introduction to her.

Dorie Spina (née Amatuzio), 1929–1981, was an artist by training and temperament, although art was only one of the ways her creativity found its way into the world. She earned bachelor's and master's degrees in art education from Buffalo State College and taught art in area schools, first as a full-time teacher and later as a substitute while raising her family. She painted in watercolor and pastel, drew portraits, worked in pen and ink, painted everyday objects, designed in fabric and mosaic, decorated spaces, and taught others to see. But she never built what might conventionally be called an artistic career. She never had a solo exhibition. Indeed, there were long stretches when she scarcely painted at all.

Life intervened, as life does. Her husband, Joe, worked hard and long hours. There were children to raise, students to teach, a home to care for, parish life, friendships, and the countless unseen responsibilities that fill an ordinary family life. In a household where others almost always came first, Dorie's own painting frequently waited its turn.

But the artist never did.

Happy Day, Chincoteague Island, 1973

Art seems to have been less an activity for Dorie than a way of inhabiting the world. She noticed composition. Color mattered. Placement mattered. Light mattered. The relationship of one object to another mattered. Even the fact that a flower should not sit squarely in the center mattered.

Her daughter, Corinne, remembers her as sophisticated and original - thin, elegant and artistic in the way she dressed, moved, stood and sat. She adored Katharine Hepburn and, as a girl, wanted to be Esther Williams. She was not fussy or ornamental. Her taste leaned modern, clean and unexpected. Even her handwriting had its own visual vocabulary.

Dorie painted what she saw,
but more importantly, what she felt
in what she saw.

The surviving artwork is similarly difficult to confine to one style. There are delicate watercolors and bold ones, landscapes and buildings, portrait studies, abstractions, pastels, painted trays and a remarkable round cocktail table covered in a multicolored mosaic dominated by a wonderfully modern, Picasso-like guitar.

This self-portrait, probably painted in 1957-58, perhaps 1959, makes that modernist affection unmistakable. It is not simply a likeness. The elongated body, compressed space, blue tonal world and fractured, searching face show a young artist trying on a visual language she admired - and making it her own.

Self-portrait, c. 1957-59

One painting now owned by her nephew Larry began with a German plum tree in a neighbor's yard. When she sent him the watercolor for his new home in Colorado, she enclosed a handwritten note.

German Plum Tree, 1977

The words matter. She was not merely rendering a tree. She was trying to catch a day - the heat, the stillness, the intensity of sunlight striking red leaves. That is the language of an artist.

And then, almost immediately, the artist disappears behind the aunt. She tells Larry that she has marked a margin for the mat, admits she does not know what color mat or frame he should use, and suggests that his framer decide. Then, with perfect Dorie abruptness: "I love the pizza pan!"
The exclamation points are themselves unmistakably hers. They convey something that the paintings alone cannot: enthusiasm, warmth, delight, and an eagerness to share.

Someone would ask, and she would make.

Her sister once asked her to paint something for a nephew’s new house, and she did. Friends who had moved repeatedly asked her to draw or paint the succession of houses in which they had lived, and she did that too, even though such straightforward architectural renderings offered her relatively little artistic excitement.

The pattern began early. While Dorie was in college, her mother discovered that she was unusually skilled at painting china and asked her to decorate an entire service—dinner plates, dessert plates, cups and saucers—for an aunt. The result was so beautiful that other aunts wanted sets. And so Dorie painted more. And more. Hundreds of pieces.

She hated it.

Not because she resented giving. Quite the opposite. But repetition ran against her artistic nature. Dorie wanted to respond to what she saw and felt, to make something new, to solve a visual problem. Painting the same pattern endlessly onto china was almost the antithesis of that impulse.

Still, she did it.



Hand-painted china, c. 1946–47

That tension-between the desire to create freely and the instinct to give generously-runs through her life.

At St. Joseph's Church, her vision expanded far beyond framed artwork. She sewed simple, beautiful runners for the church's strikingly modern slab altar. She redesigned spaces in the rectory. She brought rocks, boulders, dirt, flowers, cloth and other natural materials into the sanctuary to create environments for worship. From the church's high vaulted ceilings she suspended enormous fabric hangings of her own design, incorporating felt lettering and imagery for ordinary seasons and special celebrations. She could imagine at scale. She could look at an empty church and see what might be there.

Banner for St. Joseph's University Heights Church

"*She just had an eye for what worked.*"

That may be the simplest description of artistic judgment.

Dorie possessed ability enough that, when she returned to painting classes during one period of her adult life, a respected instructor told her that if she had painted continuously, she might have become well known. The observation is poignant, but perhaps also beside the point. Dorie did not paint continuously. She lived continuously. And her creative gifts flowed into whatever life placed before her: students, children, parish, friends, weddings, houses, gifts, rooms, tables, celebrations.

She was also wonderfully human. She loved to laugh. She was a notoriously inconsistent speller, and her family joked that she simply arranged troublesome words in ways that were more pleasing to the eye.

Mosaic cocktail table, c. 1957–58

During a period when money was tight, she became fascinated by baking contests advertised in women's magazines. She would invent, for example, the perfect health-food cookie and become utterly convinced that this time she was going to win. She never did. She remained optimistic anyway.

Those stories matter because Dorie's generosity can otherwise make her sound impossibly solemn. She was not. The woman who gave so much of herself also laughed, dreamed, experimented, became enthusiastic, used too many exclamation points, and had strong opinions about where a rose belonged.

She was also deeply faithful. When leukemia entered her life in October 1980, it moved terribly fast. Dorie died the following May at only fifty-one. During those months, she developed a special devotion to Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American-born saint, and welcomed priests, religious sisters and laypeople who brought her Communion. Even as she became very sick, those closest to her remember no self-pity.

A beautiful red cardinal also began visiting the backyard while she sat at the kitchen table over morning coffee. In the decades since her death, the appearance of a cardinal has carried a simple meaning for her family: Mom is nearby.



Ocracoke Island Lighthouse, 1975

The response to her death revealed how far her quiet life had reached. There were three days of visitation, with friends and family coming from near and far, and a funeral in a large church filled with people. Yet perhaps the more enduring evidence is scattered much farther afield.

Dorie’s art lives today in homes in Dayton, Buffalo, Washington, Colorado Springs, Lockport and undoubtedly places her family can no longer trace. Paintings were given away, inherited, handed down and carried from house to house. The china sets must have dispersed across generations. House portraits hang in homes whose current owners may know little about the woman who drew them. Some of Dorie’s creations are surely being enjoyed today by people who never knew her name.

There is something both sad and affirming in that.

She made beauty and released it.

For this exhibition, members of her family have temporarily gathered some of those works back together. Paintings that have spent decades in separate homes are sharing a room again, perhaps for the first and only time. They have come home not from museums or collections, but from the walls of people who treasure them.

Dorie would almost certainly have been mortified by the attention.

Which is part of why this exhibition feels so right.

She never asked for recognition. She rarely asked for anything. Her attention was directed outward—to her family, her students, her church, her friends, to the next person who needed something made beautiful.

Some artists build collections.

Dorie built relationships.

Her art became part of them.

And now, more than four decades after her death, the works she scattered so generously have come together long enough to introduce their maker to people who never had the good fortune to know her.

Look closely at them.

Notice the color. The light. The freedom. The refusal to make everything too orderly.

And if something seems just slightly off-center, leave it there.

Dorie would want it that way.