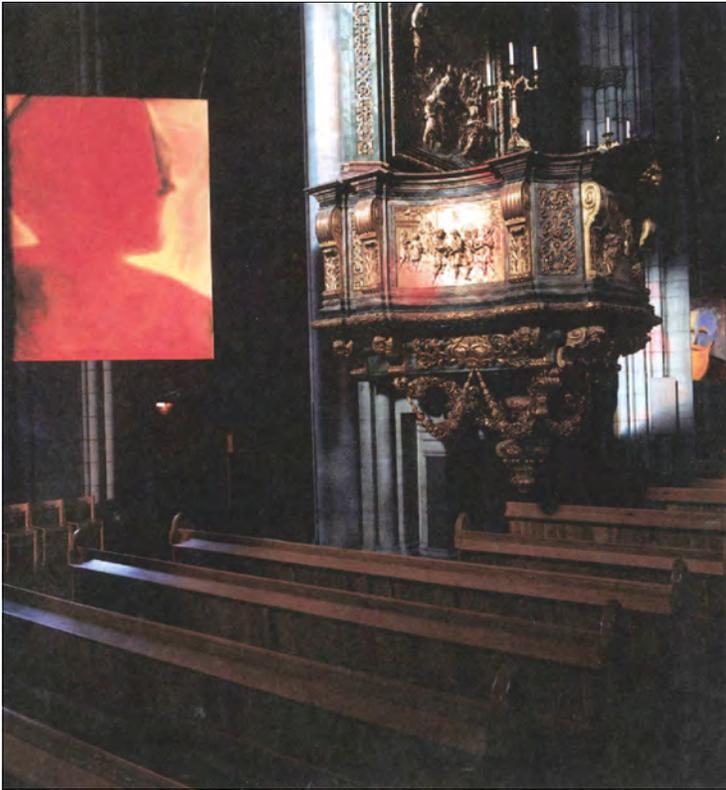


Their eyes meet our eyes and our hearts. Pictures floating in the gothic space of the cathedral, in a light that seems to make them come alive. "Apostles and Paul" have come to New York City's Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine.

"Apostles" is an art exhibition of the twelve apostles and Paul, interpreted by the Swedish artist Michel Östlund. Is now on display in the cathedral nave, hung between the pillars in a most surprising and breathtaking way. Suspended from the ceiling by nearly transparent wire, the pictures seem to float in the gothic space that is the Cathedral. Their giant faces are impossible to ignore—more than six feet tall and four feet wide. Flooded in stagelight, each apostle emerges as a bright beacon of color. Shadow and darkness frame each solitary face, adding to it the worldly and darker thoughts of our time. As you walk up the aisle, passing the faces of the apostles, their presence seems to follow your steps. They urge you to sit for a while in their air of tranquility to listen to their stories, to reflect on your life and God.



Apostles Michel Östlund
On display at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine,
New York City

Why the Apostles?

The idea for painting the apostles came to Michel Östlund thirteen years ago as he was picking up his 83-year-old great aunt from a hospital in Stockholm. "I had promised to take her on a long rider through the city for the very special reason...[She] had been blind for six years and now, with the help of the medical profession, had regained her sight," writes Östlund in the exhibition companion book. "Naturally, our conversation in the car circled around what it is like to be able to see again. But also, on how many people there are who never see, never perceive, even though they can." This led the conversation on to the question of the artist's role

as an eye-opener, someone who gives a key to the observer and, in the long run, to the subject—in this case, of the apostles themselves. As Östlund's aunt started to describe the character of each apostle to him, images began to evolve in his mind, each of them making a very strong impression. "Before the trip was over," Östlund writes, "I had decided to paint the apostles."

The Personality of the Paintings

Östlund based each painting on the apostle's personality, as described in literature, but also creating each face to portray different human characteristics. Thomas appears doubtful; Philip, longingful; John, loving; Simon, rebellious; and Andrew, seeking. "What fascinates me is that their message—two thousand years later—is still alive

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elisabeth Svalin is a Swedish author who has worked closely with artist Michel Östlund.

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Michel Östlund lives in Uppsala, Sweden. Over the last decade, he has worked closely with the Church of Sweden in an effort to open up church rooms to the public, emphasizing their importance to Swedish heritage and culture. For the jubilee of Saint Brigitta, he created an exhibition of portraits and glass art that has reached all the way to the Pope in Rome. In his latest projects, Michel Östlund experiments with blending different disciplines into an interesting whole, where paintings, music, dance, film, theatre and architecture interact with each other.

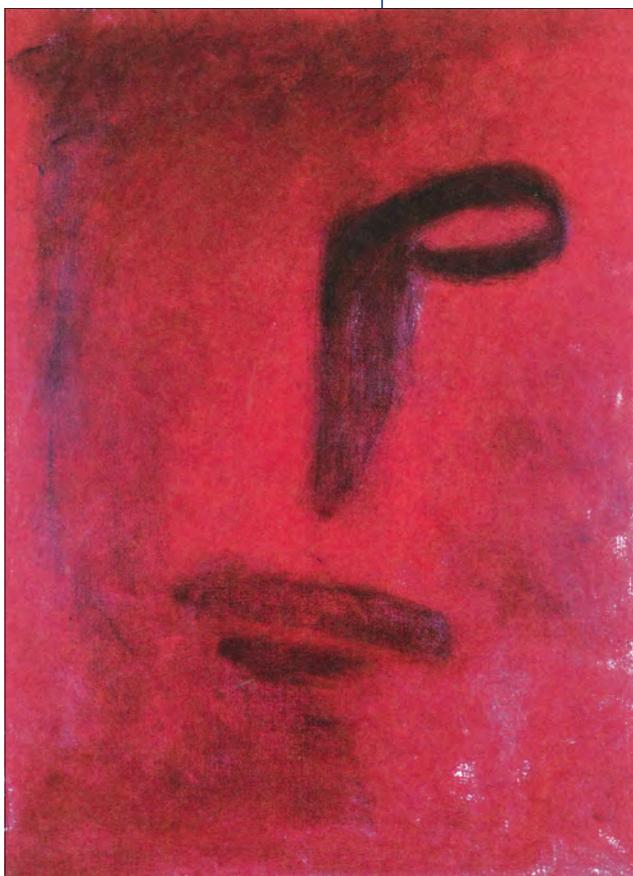
as the basis for many of our values. The challenge today has been to use the portraits to open up eyes to something I do not see myself,” Östlund writes. A single color, whether rich blue, gold or crimson, dominates each painting, and each face is painted abstractly, not always revealing a complete face. But the abstract nature of the exhibition does not mean the show is inaccessible. Each painting carries with it an unavoidable feeling, be in contemplative or repentant. Though the artist uses a bright color palette, there is undoubtedly a melancholy sense of loneliness or sadness present in each painting. And yet each portrait also emanates a sense of peace, a fold in the flow of time, as if the apostles themselves are waiting for what is to come or contemplating things passed.

An Exhibition for all Senses

To accompany the paintings and to give the viewer an experience of all senses, the exhibition also consists of a book and music. In the book, short stories accompany each of the apostles, making a dialogue with the painting and the reader. The stories dwell upon the character of each apostle, trying to find the inner seed of each man’s personality. “Doubt,” “Skinless,” “Prayer,” and “Penance” are titles that connect with different apostles.

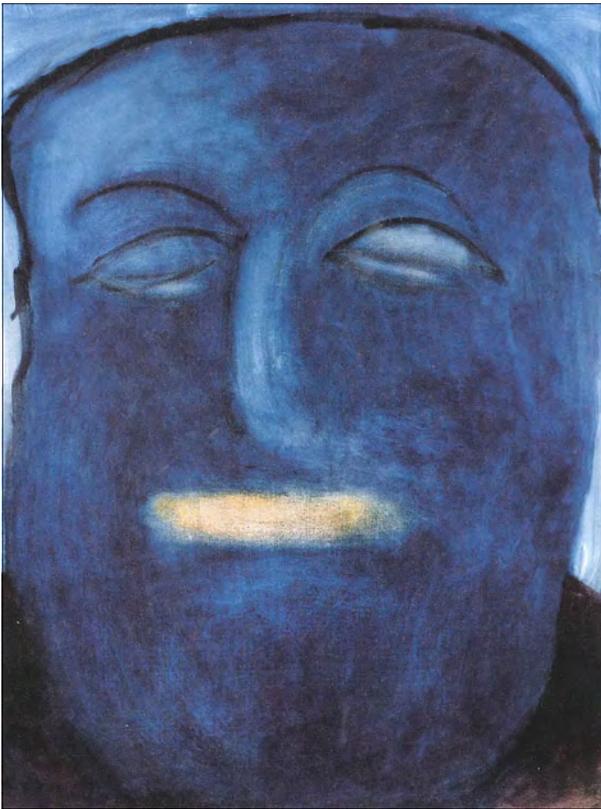
Alone with memories and shadows on an island in the sea. The nightly breeze brings with it a scent of sorrow and excruciating pain. The pen is dipped in running fire from hell and the letters it forms burn the fall of the universe onto the brittle surface of the parchment. The stars fall and perish, the water vaporizes with understanding into a dusky mist. Once a beardless youth with a long life ahead of him. Filled with far more suffering than he could have ever imaged. More death, more evil—and more miracles than one person can contain. A life full of longing for love, to experience it, spread it, see it shared by humans, and continue to seek for it. A life of attending to Mary, sharing the sorrow between the mother and the follower and also sharing the love for the dead one. Wonder at the resurrection at times when the light of the heart is capable of lifting everyday worries and losses. Steadfastly by Christ’s side, as a child, as a young man, as an adult. Closest to him on the last night, at his bosom when the meal was distributed. Always defending him as a brother in danger. Beloved, he claims he is, the most beloved of them all who followed Jesus. If he indeed was the one who wrote the gospel, was it love that guided his pen in Ephesus and painted Christ’s portrait in words? Was that what gave him the power to drive the friend’s thoughts further and deeper, tapping on the experiences of a lifetime, and which burned forth tales far beyond belief and knowledge, on the island in the sea? Was it love that wrote his gospel?

Another important part of the exhibition is music as a way to give the visitors a mix of sensations that hits both eye and ear. The hosting churches have given concerts with music either newly composed or arranged on the subject of the apostles. At St. John the Divine, eight apostles had new music composed for them for flute, organ and choir. The exhibition is now on a tour to include Minneapolis, Chicago and New York in the U.S., and cathedrals in Scandinavia.

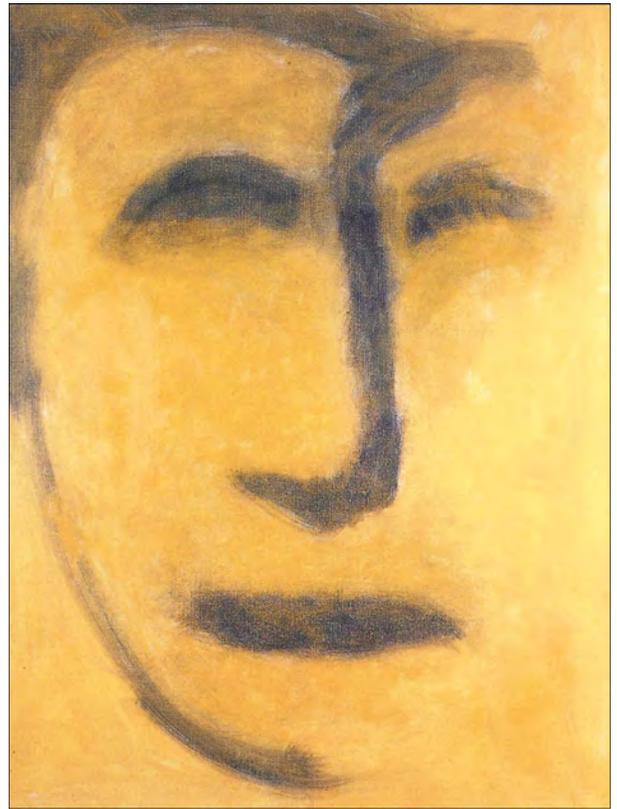


Apostles
John: Light of the Heart
Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 centimeters

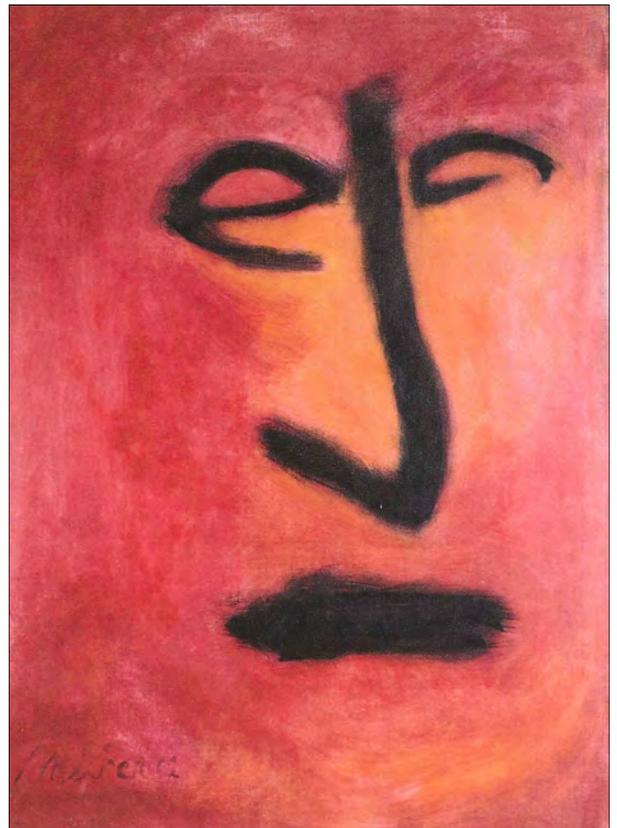
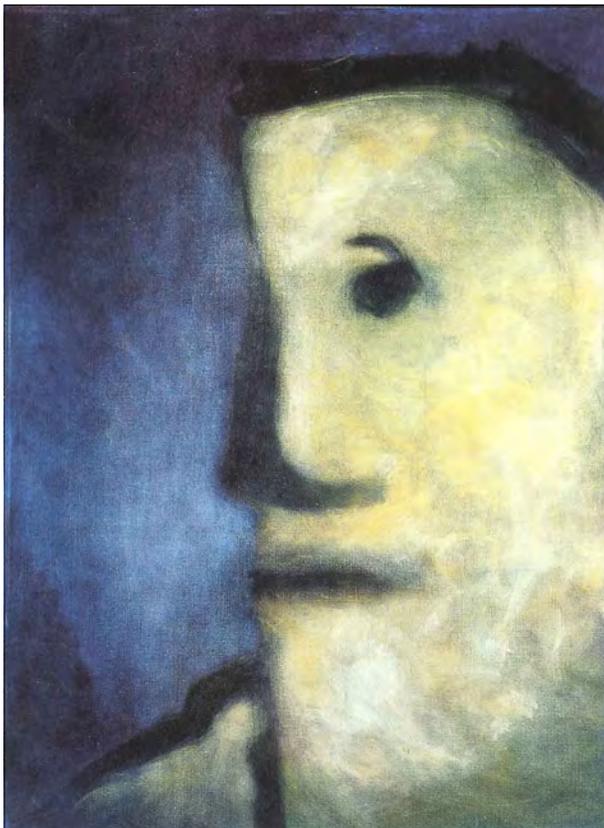
Michel Östlund



Michel Östlund
Apostles
Above: Matthew: Penance
Below: Thomas: Doubt
Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 centimeters

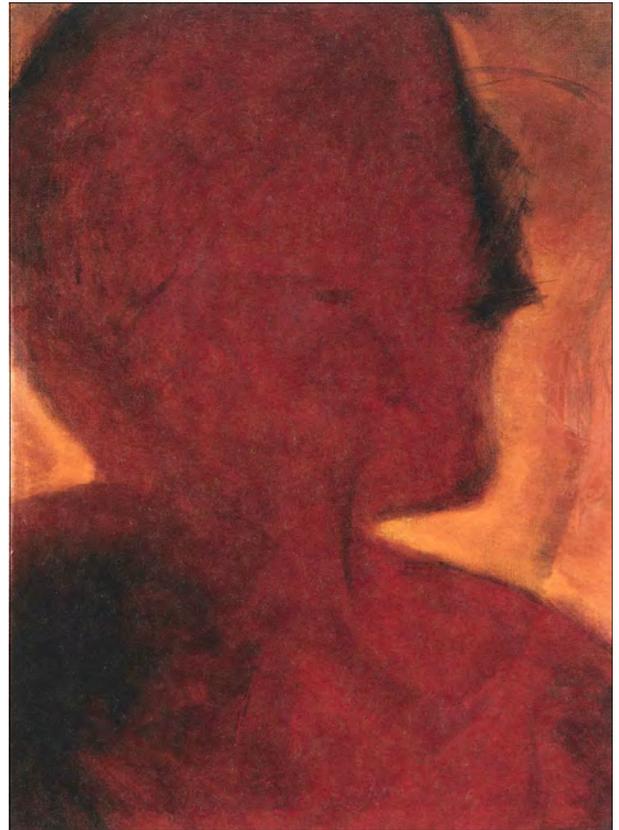


Michel Östlund
Apostles
Above: Bartholomew: Skinless
Below: James, Son of Alphaeus: Prayer
Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 centimeters

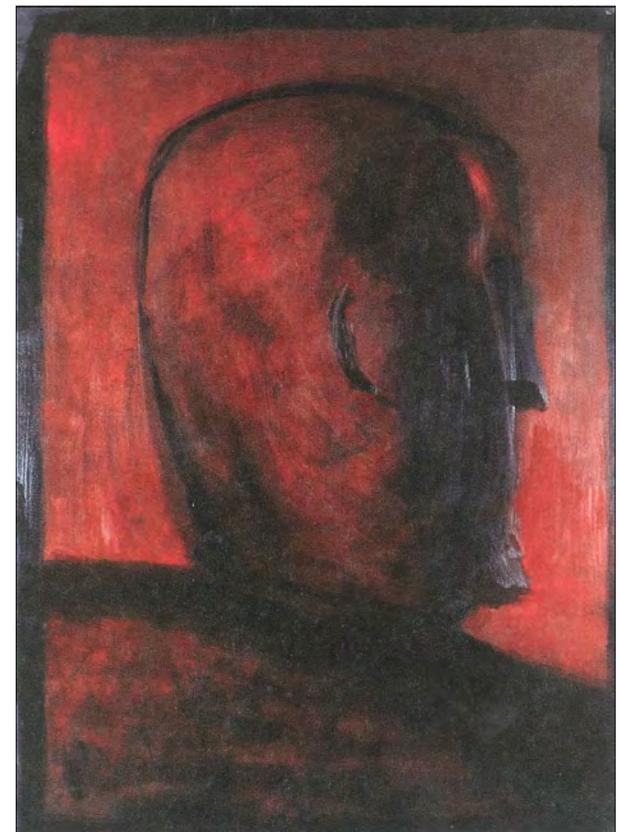
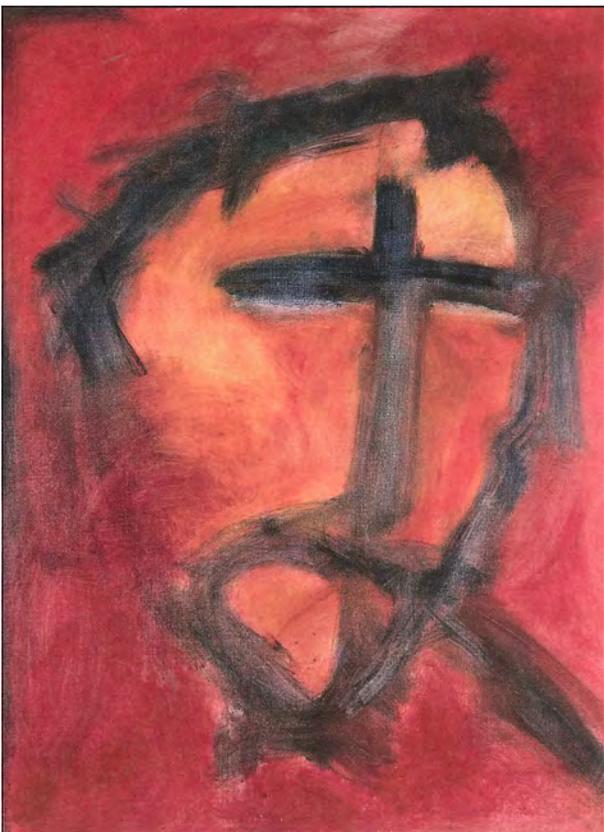




Michel Östlund
Apostles
Above: Judas Iskariot: The Seed
Below: Judas Taddaeus: The Master's Image
Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 centimeters

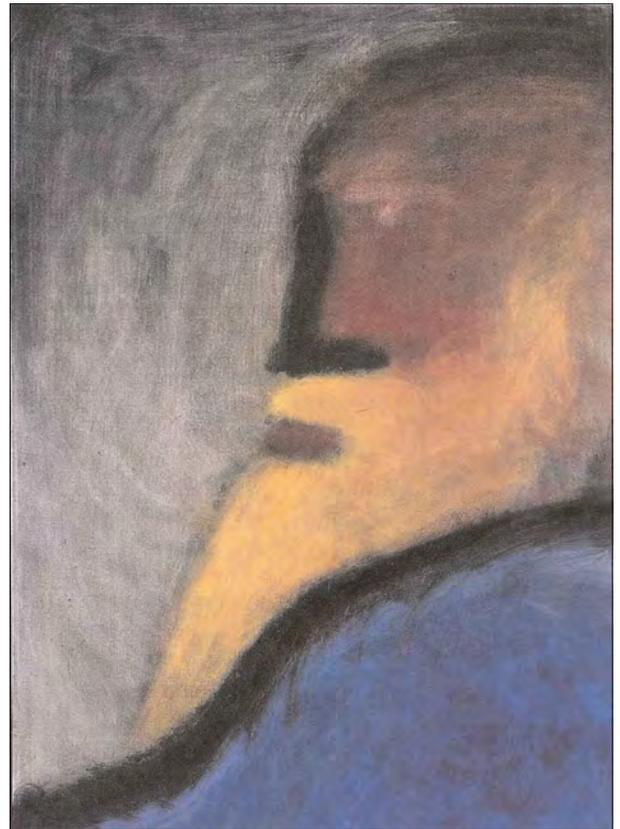


Michel Östlund
Apostles
Above: Philip: Longing
Below: Simon the Zealot: the Rebel
Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 centimeters





Michel Östlund
Apostles
Above: James, Son of Zebedee: The Chalice
Below: Andrew: the Seeker
Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 centimeters



Michel Östlund
Apostles
Above: Peter: Power
Below: Paul: The Wisdom of the Madman
Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 centimeters

