News
Arts and Media



Srs. Betty Leon and Monica Stuhlreyer view artwork on display at the Prison Creative Arts Project's exhibition at the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary's Motherhouse Gallery. (Courtesy of Kameryn Gannon/IHM Sisters)



by Julian Tiburcio

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

April 8, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Soap, toilet paper and graham crackers are just a few unconventional materials incarcerated artists used to create some of the artworks displayed at the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Motherhouse Gallery in Monroe, Michigan, between last September and October.

From fun, bright and hopeful pieces to others reflecting on the experience of incarceration, all the artwork featured was created by people imprisoned at correctional facilities around Michigan using whatever materials they had access to.

"Some of it was very deeply spiritual, which certainly spoke to the sisters, but I think in the end what really came through was what really good artists they were," said archivist Jennifer Meacham.



Donated artwork from the Prison Creative Arts Project’s archives were on exhibition at the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary’s Motherhouse Gallery in Monroe, Michigan, from Sept. 8 to Oct. 17, 2025. (Courtesy of Kameryn Gannon/IHM Sisters)

The exhibit was created by the University of Michigan's Prison Creative Arts Project, a nonprofit that holds creative arts workshops and courses in Michigan prisons. It also sources and curates art from incarcerated artists for exhibits like this one. Artists who, for whatever reason, can't keep their artwork or send it to a loved one, donate it to the project to be shown and sold at local galleries throughout the state. Because the Michigan Department of Corrections limits when the artists can earn money from their artwork sales to just once a year during the Prison Creative Arts Project's annual exhibition, the proceeds from pieces sold at smaller traveling exhibits go back into supporting the program instead.

For the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary's gallery committee, deciding to host this exhibit in their space was a no-brainer. After coming across an old flyer about a previous Prison Creative Arts Project exhibit held in 2016, the committee decided to invite them back. Including exhibits highlighting the history of the congregation, the gallery typically hosts about six exhibits each year with the goal of showcasing local, up-and-coming artists from throughout Michigan, including those from underrepresented groups.



Srs. Betty Leon, Monica Stuhlreyer. and Judith Bonini view artwork on display at the Prison Creative Arts Project's exhibition at the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary's Motherhouse Gallery. (Courtesy of Kameryn Gannon/IHM Sisters)

"It gives a space for an aspiring artist or an artist that's just up and coming to showcase their work and to get their feet wet, so to speak — but it's also, more importantly, an enrichment opportunity for the sisters and residents here to have a space and to be exposed to art," said Calley Duffey, communications director for the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

While the congregation's ministry has historically been in education, some sisters have also been active in prison ministry, having spent decades as prison chaplains or connecting with incarcerated penpals in their retirement.



Sr. Alice Baker stands in front of the door to Friends of Returning Citizens, a nonprofit that assists formerly incarcerated people with clothing, toiletries, public transportation, housing referrals and more. (Courtesy of IHM Sisters)

Sr. Alice Baker, spent 45 years as an elementary school teacher. The 90-year-old now volunteers with the Detroit-based nonprofit Friends of Returning Citizens, a program of the Detroit Catholic Pastoral Alliance which supports people being released from the city's prisons. Beyond prison ministry alone, she said her involvement in other social justice efforts like Pax Christi is only a natural extension of her educational ministry as a sister.

"I didn't really look to doing any of the volunteer work that I do now, but because I'm an educator, I've read about it," she said. She explained that she uses many of the skills she gained over decades in the classroom to help fundraise and raise awareness for Friends of Returning Citizens.

Although Baker's prison ministry doesn't involve art, she said she appreciated the Prison Creative Arts Project exhibit and thought it was "wonderful."

"All of those things I know help to educate all of us, especially because I believe that the incarceration in our country is very wrong, and I feel it's very unfair," she said.

Advertisement

In her time on the gallery committee, Meacham said there's been a strong sense of appreciation for the value of art and creativity among many other sisters too.

"A lot of creative IHM Sisters have a very strong sense that everybody has the right to be creative and to express themselves, and that there's a lot of good that can come from art," she said. "There's a lot of healing that can come from art."



Sr. Ann Wisda, left, and Mattie Levy, community engagement coordinator for Prison Creative Arts Project, interact at the exhibition's opening reception. (Courtesy of Kameryn Gannon/IHM Sisters)

Creating and exhibiting art is one of few ways people in prison get to express themselves and connect with the outside world according to Mattie Levy, community engagement coordinator for the Prison Creative Arts Project.

"We get a lot of just how people are using art as healing, right, and how they're sort of grateful for the opportunity to be able to showcase their artwork and get their work out there," she said. "There's a lot of aspirations about using art as a career option when they come home."

Prison Creative Arts Project's 30th annual exhibition was to open at the University of Michigan on March 17 and run through March 31, featuring 872 works from 613 artists incarcerated around Michigan, including those who've donated their art to small exhibits like September's exhibit at the sisters' gallery. Levy said her team always selects at least one piece from every artist they've accepted donations from

to be included in the annual exhibition, where they get to keep the profits from selling their art.