

ART / CELEBRITY

## The Life of a Hermit TV Star: Sister Wendy Beckett

by JOSH RETTERER on Jan 4, 2019 • 8:30 am

8 Comments

Saint Stephen’s Day 2018 was marked by the passing of the art historian, TV presenter, and author, Sister Wendy Beckett. I surprised myself when a few unexpected tears leaked out on hearing the news. It wasn’t from her untimely death; she was 88 after all. No, the tears, the more I thought about it, were grateful tears. I was simply thankful that she shared her gifts with the rest of us.



For folks like myself, who didn’t live on the coasts or near major cities, our exposure to art was usually mediated through books and public television.

Sister Wendy was an amateur art historian, which meant she wasn’t burdened with the academic jargon which often accompanies experts in the field ([Matt Milliner](#) is a fine exception to this rule). She showed us that there was room in the art world for enthusiastic amateurs. In her book *Spiritual Letters*, Sister Wendy explains a bit of her philosophy of art appreciation and her passion to broaden it beyond the realm of the elites:

I have always been saddened to find how many people think that the enjoyment of art is an elite pursuit, one for which they are either not educated or not intelligent enough. Of course this is nonsense. We are all born with the capacity to respond to art. Even our remote ancestors in their dark caves created works so beautiful that they have never been surpassed: equaled, yes; surpassed, never.

Many of us were introduced to this South African-born, Oxford-educated nun back in 1997 when PBS ran her series, *The Story of Painting*. It was an ambitious project; ten episodes spanning the history of art, from the cave paintings in Lascaux to the pop art of Andy Warhol. The camera captured her as a sort of kinetic monolith, the edges of Sister Wendy’s black habit rippling dramatically as she walked the museum galleries of the world. Pausing before a Titian or a Rothko, the camera would find her face, sometimes grinning, sometimes pensive, but always eager to discuss what we were both looking at. Her literary education allowed her to critique a work without scrutinizing it to the point of atomization — equally prevented by her respect for the artists and the integrity of their work. She had an uncanny ability to know what assumptions we, the viewers, brought with us to a piece of art. Her gift

### JANUARY PLAYLIST



**“Get Happy”**  
Mbird Jan 19 Playlist  
SMOKING POPE

00:00 00:00

New Window

1. **“Get Happy” — SMOKING POPE 2:00**
2. “Whiskey In The Jar” — THIN ... 5:45
3. “The Size of a Cow” — THE W... 3:13
4. “Holy Wine” — ROBERT FINLEY 3:29
5. “Funkier Than A Mosquito’s ... 2:36
6. “I Gotta Be More (Take Me Hi... 2:46
7. “King of Kings” — SWAMP DOGG 3:46
8. “The Children’s Song” — JOS... 5:26
9. “Scott Street” — PHOEBE BRID... 5:05
10. “We Won’t Be In Your Way A... 3:14
11. “Wednesday Morning Atone... 4:29
12. “Yesterday Once More” — R... 3:59
13. “Changing of the Guards” —... 6:56
14. “Cradle to the Grave” — DAV... 3:32
15. “Me & My Dog” — BOYGENIUS 3:27
16. “True Lies” — ALEX CAMERON 3:53
17. “Magic Lantern Days” — ME... 3:52
18. “This Is the Sea” — THE WAT... 6:30

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was to name those preconceptions and do so without a hint of condescension, and usually with a surprising bit of humor. This served as a sort of pedagogical surfactant, as she knew the shrink wrap of superficiality must be pierced before anything else she said could be heard.



This teaching gift was recognized early on when she studied English literature at Oxford, going on to translate medieval Latin into English. She recalled that JRR Tolkien, who was one of her professors and also the president of her finals board, had asked her to stay on after she graduated in 1953: “For one fleeting moment a fantasy as an academic flashed through my mind.”

But instead of staying in England, she returned to South Africa, where she taught at her convent, and then lectured at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg for a few years. Several grand mal seizures caused by epilepsy necessitated a move back to England, where she had spent her childhood. The Vatican consented to release her from the teaching order of the Sisters of Notre Dame in 1970 and agreed to let her live out her vows as a consecrated virgin, where she continued her religious career as a hermit. Setting up home in a trailer on the grounds of a Carmelite monastery in East Anglia, she was cared for by the sisters there until her passing.



A chance interview with a television crew at an art exhibit in Norfolk launched her public career. Impressing them with her off-the-cuff comments, the BBC soon gave Sister Wendy her own tv series. This nun who lived in a trailer, studying art history through books, exhibition catalogs, and art reproductions on postcards (like the ones you find in museum gift shops), was now traveling the world’s museums, and appearing regularly on millions of televisions screens internationally. This incongruity made her a bit of a media darling in the



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1990s, but her personal and circumstantial humility was not a gimmick. We catch a glimpse of this in her 1997 interview with Charlie Rose:

CR: Sister Wendy Beckett has stood before some of the world's great masterpieces. She has captured the imagination of millions. *The New York Times* recently wrote, "She is fast on her way to becoming the most unlikely and famous art critic in the history of television." Her enthusiasm for art is matched only by her passion for God. She spent most of the past three decades in seclusion at a monastery. Her most recent series is *The Story of Painting*. She traces the history of Western art from prehistoric cave drawings to 20th-century Pop Art. I am very pleased to have her on this program and to take note, as I read that introduction, that she was waving her hand like this to say to me she would like to demur from the fact that she's becoming the most famous art critic because of her work on television. We've admired you from afar.

WB: Well, that's very valuable admiration because it comes from somebody with a very good mind and a very good eye, I know. No, what I would like to demur at — from — was something about "her knowledge for art is only matched by her passion for God." Well, my passion for God is enormous. And the art is relatively small.

### Sister Wendy Beckett Interview on Charlie Rose



Sister Wendy's openness to art and what it reveals about us, and about God, incorporated a low anthropology. We see that here in her commentary in *The Story of Painting*, on the artist, Hieronymus Bosch:

Eccentric and secret genius that he was, Bosch not only moved the heart, but scandalized it into full awareness. The sinister and monstrous things that he brought forth are the hidden creatures of our inward self-love: he externalizes the ugliness within, and so his misshapen demons have an effect beyond curiosity. We feel a hateful kinship with them. The Ship of Fools is not about other people. It is about us.

In this age of deconstructing one's faith, Sister Wendy also had some remarkably provocative, and to my mind, accurate thoughts on the subject in her book *Sister Wendy on Prayer*:

Sometimes I blush for those who think themselves Christian, and yet the God they worship is cruel, suspicious, punitive and watchful. Who could love such a God? If that is your idea of God, you are obliged by all the rules of morality and common sense to become an atheist. I have the greatest admiration for atheists, because by definition they have rejected a false "God." The true God, if you have the privilege of knowing Him, you cannot reject. Anybody who truly understands what God is cannot but believe and love. There are no lapsed Catholics, no lapsed Christians, but there are very many, far too many, who thought they were Catholics, or Christians, but did not have the good fortune to be taught the truth about God. They looked at this hideous image and said that if it was true, they refused to believe. Too few move on to the next stage and wonder if, in fact, their image of God is not true, or to the stage beyond when they realize that, in actuality, it is not true. If they could accept that the picture they have of God is wrong from the start, it would bring them to search for the truth.

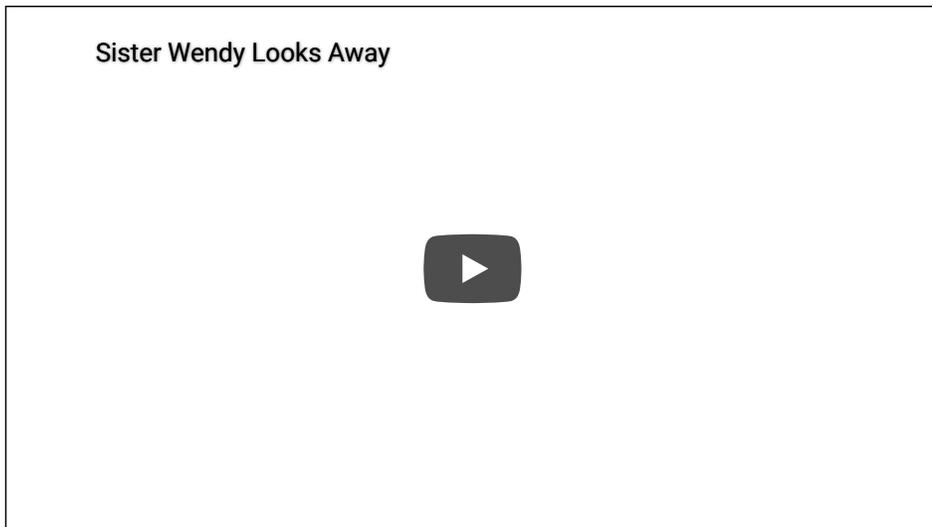
Reading a bit further in her book on prayer, I happened across this little gem. She almost sounds as if she was channeling Robert Farrar Capon here:

What has art to do with prayer? Speaking absolutely, nothing. Prayer has to do with God, ever present, ever loving, and with you yourself, as present and receptive of His love as you are able. Nothing else at all, the state of your health, your state of mind, even your state of goodness, is important.

Thinking about the life of this grace-infused hermit, it is obvious that it was that same grace that gave her the freedom to explore the gifts and opportunities given to her. I can't help but think that chance encounter with that BBC camera crew wasn't chance after all. This particular Midwesterner from flyover country thanks God for that, and for her.

*Bonus material:*

Sister Wendy's signature move.



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