Visual Art in Christian Religious Education
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Abstract

Through an engaging interaction between the theories presented here, the art/y/fact.Xn mobile app, and four artistic representations of the Hospitality of Abraham in Genesis 18, the theories undergirding how art can be used in Christian religious education contexts will come to life. The theories point toward four learning encounters: one with the content and teachings of the Christian tradition, the viewer’s autobiographical encounter that feeds their own discipleship, an encounter with the artist’s community and the communities that have seen the work since it was created, and a spiritually rich encounter with God. Yet, for all of these, another encounter seems still possible.

I encountered some modern Christian artworks at the Vatican Museums in May 1987 that dramatically altered my worldview. Until that day, religion was a field of inquiry like any other; it was a two-dimensional thing outside of myself that I could study. That day, Christianity became a three-dimensional world I could (had to) inhabit.

A decade later I began a doctoral program to try to show religious educators how to facilitate such an encounter with art for others. The dissertation highlighted four learning outcomes art could mediate. In hindsight though, none of these four intended learning outcomes actually gets at the religious (or perhaps simply, sacred) experience I know to be possible in the encounter with an artwork. The four learning outcomes/processes serve as good reasons to include visual art in a religious education program. This would at least insure that some art is being put before people thus offering at least the potential for the kind of encounter I will try to describe at the end.

In the language of education, the learning outcomes can be articulated as follows:

- understanding the elements of the (Christian) tradition reflected in the artwork based on reading/encountering the artwork as a visual text
- applying the artwork to one’s own life as a mirror though which to question and encounter oneself
- questioning (analyzing) the artwork to encounter the community behind the artist/image
- synthesizing the potential divine elements/moments of the art into an encounter with God though the artwork.
The initiating impetus for this paper was an invitation by two colleagues to participate in a panel on art and religious education for an REA Annual Meeting. We agreed that we would present our various approaches to or perspectives on art, encounter, and religious education in dialogue with the story/artworks of the hospitality of Abraham from Genesis 18:1-15. It is an apt story for exploring the religious potential of the encounter with art.¹

When the three men are near Abraham, he sees them, runs toward them, greets them reverently, invites them to dwell a while, refreshes them with water, and prepares and serves them the best he and Sarah have. The men receive his offerings and if they were ordinary men, it seems that the event could end there. Opinions differ as to whether the guests were the Trinity, God and two of God’s attending angels, or simply messengers but it is agreed that they were at least messengers (angels) from God. As such, they eventually offer the divine gift of a child to Abraham and Sarah. At first, Abraham and Sarah are not open to the possibility of the gift of the visitors, Sarah even laughs. But in time, the gift of the visitors emerges fully into their lives.

I am going to use the structure of this story to loosely frame the four learning outcomes articulated above as a hospitality practice that can be undertaken in response to the work of art. In other words, I am going to argue that the four learning outcomes are hospitable ways to encounter a work of art. Poor art education in recent decades has left many religious educators without the confidence to read visual images or facilitate any encounter between a viewer and a piece of visual art. This is the root of my claim that artworks are “strangers” to most Western viewers today. I will also argue at the end that some artworks offer encounters/gifts that the viewer may not initially recognize, accept, or understand.

To keep the presentation from being too abstract I will demonstrate the four learning outcomes with four artworks that depict the story of Abraham’s hospitality as interpreted at four times and places.

¹ The Quran also recounts the story but with far less detail (Quran 51:24-27) and because there is so little figurative art in Islamic art history, the artistic examples here will be drawn from Christian and Jewish artists.
2017 Rebekah Bane above with table closed; below with table open. Bible, ink, paper dolls, origami.
A 14\textsuperscript{th} century Greek icon by an unknown iconographer. Tempera and gold on wood.
1610-1612 Ludovico Carracci. Oil on canvas.
Seeing and Approaching (Strange) Art

Genesis tells of Abraham's moment of first recognition of someone or something strange followed by an eagerness to run toward and encounter the stranger. While I wish this were the common phenomenon upon seeing strange artworks, it is not. I once assumed that viewers would be eager to approach and get to know artworks but I discovered that many people do not know how to approach strange art or sometimes any art.

Seeing an artwork is a process of taking in color, shape, form, texture, line, space, and tone. Such visual elements are the “grammar and syntax” of art. Design elements of perspective, proportion, composition, rhythm, light, and time are the more sophisticated elements of style that are akin to paragraph and essay structure. Small children in the West learn to make some sense of these through picture books but for the most part, Western education has not included this grammar in its basic curriculum. The language and formalism of art has largely been left to experts in recent decades so the average educated person assumes that he or she lacks the skills to interpret an artwork. This self-understanding interferes with any potential eagerness to meet the stranger.

While these could be considered the basic elements of visual reading, to suggest that one must start there is akin to saying that poetry and drama can be understood only
by the verbally literate and history belies this belief. Appreciation of spoken poetry doesn’t require the ability to read. If it did, the Bible wouldn’t be full of poetry.

On the assumption that viewers could bypass visual grammar, syntax, and style and eagerly approach religious art because of their (basic) familiarity with the stories of a religious tradition, I created a mobile app called art/y/fact.Xn that could be carried into a museum or church on one’s phone. The app is no longer available on the Apple platform (only on Android) but its basic approach to reading, interpreting, applying, and analyzing artworks of the story of Abraham’s hospitality will be used in this paper to demonstrate the art as a tool for religious education.

The art/y/fact.Xn app offers a ramp to help the viewer run toward strange art. In the case of artworks depicting the hospitality of Abraham, it suggests that viewers look at each such artwork for these details:

- Abraham’s respect for or treatment of the three visitors
- Sarah’s attitude toward the visitors
- Whether Sarah was hidden from the visitors but they heard the laughter anyway
- Whether the visitors looked alike or different
- The physical appearance of the visitors (wings, age, authority, etc.)

In the four works we are considering here, the details are as follows:

Table 1: Details of the Four Depictions of Abraham’s Hospitality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bane</th>
<th>Icon</th>
<th>Carracci</th>
<th>Chagall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abraham’s respect for or treatment of the three visitors</td>
<td>Reserved; apart; facing the viewer, not the visitors; disconnected except by gold pattern;</td>
<td>Bowing; offering a dish to the center visitor; engaged;</td>
<td>Engaged with one visitor; hands/arms crossed in front of solar plexus; expression of astonishment and doubt?</td>
<td>Apart; facing the viewer, not the visitors; head cocked away from visitors and toward Sarah; hands near each other in front of lower torso;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah’s attitude toward the visitors</td>
<td>Apart (further away than Abraham); reserved; disconnected except by thinner gold</td>
<td>Engaged; offering a bowl of something; hands covered; same size/distance</td>
<td>Distant; looking from the tent in the background; not part of the action;</td>
<td>Only half of Sarah visible in the scene; handing bowl to Abraham; engaged with him, not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether Sarah was hidden from the visitors but they heard the laughter anyway</td>
<td>Pattern.</td>
<td>as Abraham</td>
<td>visitors;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not hidden; close enough to be heard.</td>
<td>Not hidden; close enough to be heard; positioned slightly higher than the visitors and Abraham.</td>
<td>Partially hidden; behind the three visitors so not in sight line; maybe close enough to be heard.</td>
<td>Like half a person so in that sense hidden; close enough to be heard.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Whether the visitors looked alike or different | Different. One all white with one origami design; two have some similarities and differences in color and pattern and with an origami design different from the first, but alike each other. | Alike in hair, clothes, halos, age; all extending a hand over the table in blessing; | Alike in age; different in clothing, hair; center and left engaged with each other, right with Abraham; | Alike in age, hair; different in clothes; different in wing colors; another set of angels in a bubble off to the upper right; |

| The physical appearance of the visitors (wings, age, authority, etc.) | The visitors are winged; the white one seems to be more authoritative than the others in position (higher/center) and color; facing viewers; engagement can't be read; | Wings and halos; red garments; the center one seems to be most authoritative because of position; bodies are turned toward viewers; engagement is with the table more than A. S, or viewers; | No wings or halos; different clothes, hair styles; beautiful young men; bodies in open postures toward viewers but not facing viewers; two engaged with each other, one with Abraham; | Wings and at least hints of halos; engaged with things more than with each other or Abraham; two have their backs to us; two have white wings, one has gold ones; |

So it is easy to see that while these four artworks depict the same story and the same characters, their details clearly distinguish them from each other. But so far, we have only a list of details that doesn't help one make sense of the images, their
similarities, or their differences. After running toward the strangers, Abraham offers respect. What does that mean with regard to an artwork?

Reverence for the Strange Artwork

Abraham doesn’t yet know who his strange visitors are when he bows down in reverence. I include this moment in an approach to strange (new, unknown) religious art because I assume that a religious artwork contains some of the riches of the religious tradition and is thus deserving of respect for that fact alone. Abraham offers respect to his visitors immediately, trusting that they deserve reverence, but viewers may need scaffolding that helps them find the religious content that merits their respect.

First one has to ask, in an image-ridden age, which artworks are worthy of reverence? All of them? Only the religious ones? And if one is willing to offer reverence to religious artworks only, how does one know which are religious? Eight elements of an image or artwork can be identified to which the adjective ‘religious’ might apply: the content or subject matter, the religious commitments of the artist/maker, the intent of the artist/maker regarding the particular work, the instructions of the patron or commissioner of the artwork, the viewer’s or community’s response to the piece, the technique or process of making or creating the image (e.g., some monks utter a prayer with each brush stroke), the context in which the image was/is presented or used (e.g., liturgical, museum, private), the title or caption of the image/object. For our purposes, we will take it as given that these four artworks depict a scripture story of significance to Judaism, Christianity and Islam and thus qualify as religious images and are thus deserving of some reverence.

But let us take a moment to discern some of the religious meaning of these works. Toward this end, the *art/y/fact Xn* app poses several Christianity-centric questions designed to help the viewer gather the details (as itemized in Table 1) into some coherent meaning.

- Do the three visitors seem to be symbols of the Trinity or the Trinity itself?
- Is Abraham’s example of hospitality meant to be a model for how Christians ought to treat strangers, wanderers in the desert?
- In the artwork, does Abraham seem to know that the visitors are from God?

While I argue that the basic visual reading of the visual and design elements aren’t necessary to glean a religious meaning from an artwork, these intermediate elements are, at least for a meaning related to the goal of teaching the content of the religious tradition. These questions are a version of looking for content, form, process and mood (Taylor 1992, 67-88). At a general level, the four artworks all have the same content; they are all depictions of the story of the Hospitality of Abraham from
Genesis 18:1-8. At a more specific level, each contains content, forms, processes, and moods that the others do not.

*The Three Visitors and the Trinity.* None of the four artworks shared above seems to depict the three visitors as the Trinity itself. While Bane, the iconographer, and Chagall each does something to single out one of the visitors, none does anything with the ages of the visitors to indicate that there might be a father/son relationship between any two of them. (Of course as a Jew Chagall wouldn’t be likely to indicate the Christian Trinity anyway.) The wings are traditional symbols of angels so these three works are at least obvious about the visitors being messengers from God. The fact that Bane presents one all white angel, the iconographer places one in the center and above the other two, and Chagall gives one gold wings at least raises the question about why. Did they want to make one more important? Is one meant to symbolize God? Carracci makes the three visitors beautiful in an innocent-youth sort of way, and beauty was often used to indicate the divine, but that is as close as he comes to indicating the angelic or divine nature of the visitors.

*Abraham as a Model of Hospitality.* In the Bane piece, Abraham is removed and not visibly engaged with the visitors. This seems to be a statement of reserve. The question is whether that is a reaction to the sacredness of the visitors or their strangeness. The iconographer’s Abraham and Sarah are engaged with one of the visitors: they are looking at the visitor and handing him dishes, albeit with deference as indicated by the bowing. Carracci’s Abraham is speaking with one of the visitors but his hands are crossing in front of him raising a question about whether it is okay to protect oneself from the stranger. Chagall’s Abraham is slightly removed from the visitors as if he has stepped aside to let Sarah pass bringing a dish to the table. This raises a question about delegating one’s hospitality to the stranger.

*Abraham’s Knowledge of the Visitors’ Identity.* Taking as a given that the visitors symbolize the sacred in some way, we can explore when he knew that and whether his hospitable actions were toward strangers or toward the sacred. Commentators on Genesis disagree about when Abraham becomes aware of the identity of his guests. Artists sometimes play with time in their depiction of a story so the Biblical when might become even more obscure in an artwork. Neither Bane, the iconographer, nor Chagall are clear about whether Abraham knows, even though they are making that sacredness obvious to the viewer. That ambiguity seems to bring the question to life for the viewers. The awareness of the visitors’ sacredness an a concomitant awe do seem to be dawning on Carracci’s Abraham but it doesn’t make him more open to their strangeness, at least not at first.

These questions and explorations can then lead to more. Questions about Sarah in each of these scenes abound. While these reflections offer an example of this intermediate (content, form, process and mood) version of visual reading, we could go on for pages digging deeper into these questions about religious meaning as well as diving deeper into an advanced reading of these images. An advanced reading would have us pay more attention to visual interpretation with questions into the
art worlds in which each artist was working, the artistic influences on each artist, the formal elements of their works, etc. (see e.g., Berger 2000 and Davey 1998). We could pay more attention to a scriptural hermeneutics and compare the artworks to various commentaries on the passage, from various Christian and Jewish traditions. We could dig into the hermeneutics of religious education (Groome 1991) (Where do we bring critical consciousness to the idea of welcoming all strangers? What is the risk of such open welcoming?) and how that relates to art (Illman and Smith 2013). In other words, we could place these artworks in deeper dialogue with scriptural interpretation, theologies, ethics, traditions, doctrines, creeds, ethics, liturgies, rituals, and histories thereby making the abstractions of such texts concrete.

Inviting the (Strange) Artwork to Dwell a While

After greeting the visitors with reverence, Abraham invites the strangers to dwell a while. With an artwork, this means looking a while. I’ve watched many people in art museums look at a painting for 5-8 seconds, spend 30 seconds reading the informational plaque next to the painting, then glance back at the painting before moving on to the next artwork. I have also watched far fewer people take up a position before an artwork and stay there for 20 minutes or more. These latter museum-goers are inviting the artwork to dwell with them.

This idea of dwelling with an artwork (or artworks) is a way of teaching Christian discipleship. One way to approach discipleship is to dwell with Jesus Christ, as the scriptures have described him (and his forebears), through prayer, and as countless artists, poets, theologians, musicians, and preachers have interpreted those scriptures and prayers throughout history. Music and art are the easiest ways to integrate these interpretations into daily life as reading theology, poetry, or sermons takes time. Here we will confine our consideration to the use of visual art for dwelling with Christ and such saints as Abraham.

Margaret Miles (1985) encouraged viewers to surround themselves with images that delight them. Similarly, in the late 16th century, a Bolognese bishop claimed that the experience of delight in an artwork is a tool for Christian growth. (Paleotti 1582). Paleotti identifies sensual, rational, and spiritual delight as all being possible in response to an artwork but encourages especially attention to spiritual delight. Other emotions are also possible as responses to artworks; attention to any emotional response can lead the viewer to self-awareness.

Another approach to discipleship is the imitation of Christ. Mimesis or imitation is another basic human response to what is seen. The idea of imitation or mimesis is ancient. In the last century or so, it is not without problems and detractors but human beings still imitate what they see. Schweiker (1990) digests the philosophical debates and reconstructs mimesis in such a way that he hopes will
encompass three trajectories so that mimesis will "serve us in understanding world, our experience of time, and the ambiguity of selfhood" (35).

In a more secular vein, Pinar’s (1995) autobiographical curriculum approach dovetails well with the self-reflection recommended by most of the foundational voices in practical theology. Putting one’s lived experience in dialogue with the theological tradition as reflected in the artworks is the basic practice.

The art/y/fact.Xn app offers reflective questions that call upon the autobiographical approach to self awareness.

- What does it take to have the inner wherewithal to welcome strangers? What is it about Abraham in this artwork that indicates that he has what it takes to welcome the stranger in faith rather than turn the stranger away out of fear?
- Sarah laughed in disbelief at the words of the stranger. Does the artwork’s depiction of Sarah offer any wisdom for remaining open to the message the stranger brings?

Dwelling with the artworks above invites a different discipleship pathway for every viewer. This is where some of the subjectivity in response to an artwork is most evident. Delight and other emotional responses may emerge from the whole or any part of the artworks above. What delights me in Chagall’s surrealism may irritate someone else while the beautiful maleness of Carracci’s visitors may be a source delight to my neighbor and irritate me. Exploring my delight and irritation uncovers those elements of my past formation that may need to be enhanced or overcome.

The practice of imitation of a particular image of Jesus Christ or a saintly figure like Abraham is a choice but the motivation to undertake such a practice is as subjective as delight.

By offering concrete questions for self-reflection, Pinar’s (1995) autobiographical curriculum may offer the most useful approach for formal religious education contexts. Using the app questions designed for this purpose, we can explore the process.

*What Does It Take to Welcome the Stranger?* Bane suggests that Abraham and Sarah are maintaining some sort of serenity while also keeping some distance from these strangers. The iconographer on the other hand has Abraham and Sarah in very close proximity to the strangers, fully open to whatever the strangers might offer, good or bad. Carracci’s Abraham has been fully open but is now putting up some kind of barrier apparently as the visitor is telling Abraham that Sarah will bear a child. This is more than Abraham was prepared for. Chagall’s Abraham seems to be ambivalent yet. Sarah is walking toward the visitors but Abraham is at some remove and seems still to be exercising some caution, as if he will act quickly to protect Sarah if trouble should arise. Each viewer committed to discipleship has to ask him or herself these
questions. The artworks suggest that throughout history the story has been interpreted different ways. Practical theological reflection would encourage the viewers to try different practices until they find the one that works best in their context.

*Openness to the Stranger’s Message?* Genesis says that Sarah laughed when she heard that she would bear a child. Bane’s Sarah seems demure, almost as if she would be polite to the strangers on hearing such a statement whether or not she believed them but might laugh in private. The iconographer’s Sarah is close enough to hear and be heard but would probably take such a statement as gentle ribbing from these guys she is serving and not treat it seriously. Carracci’s Sarah is peeking out from the flap of the tent. If he has depicted the moment where the stranger is telling Abraham about the child, she might be looking out because she has heard, but this woman is quite removed, far away from any message they might share. That distance would have her laughing about the silliness of men. Chagall’s Sarah is in a giving mode, not a receiving mode. She would be taken aback by hearing such a thing, then like the iconographer’s Sarah would likely take it as gentle ribbing and shift back into service mode.

**Refreshing the Strange Artwork**

This is probably the biggest stretch in the metaphor linking Abraham’s treatment of the visitors with the religious reception of artworks. Abraham offered his guests water to cleanse their feet, to soothe their road-weariness. The art of an era reveals the perspectives, priorities, and actions of the people of that era. Not surprisingly, parallels can be drawn between paradigm changes in art and paradigm changes in philosophy and theology; artistic approaches to symbols and styles in Christian art can be seen to change as theological understandings of Christianity change; and the political, social, and economic life circumstances of the people are reflected in their sacred art.\(^2\) The idea of refreshing the artwork is about rinsing the dust off that

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\(^2\) A fuller attention to these concepts would include attention to Richard Viladesau’s (2000) combining the work of Jose Ortega y Gasset on the changes in art since Giotto (1300’s) and the work of Hans Kung on paradigm changes in theology and philosophy; Jaroslav Pelikan’s (1997) identification of eighteen understandings of Jesus that have waxed and waned through time (vii); Finaldi’s (2000) seven models, some of which overlap with Pelikan’s (5); and Helen de Borchgrave’s (2000) accounting for the social, political, and economic lives of Christian communities as they inform and are revealed in the art and theology. Recent theologies arising out of the Hispanic American Christian community have acknowledged not only the unique character of that community but also that that character is reflected in the aesthetic of the community (Garcia-Rivera 1999; Goizueta 1995). And it would include examination of the artworks that have been powerful interlocutors in such community struggles as overcoming Apartheid in South Africa (DeGruchy 2001) and feeding the Arab Spring in North Africa (Jamshidi 2013).
artwork, reviving both the artist’s community and the people that have received the artwork so that the present viewer and that viewer’s community can engage in broader encounter (Jensen and Vrudney 2009).

Abraham already knew something about his stranger visitors in the sense that he knew what would refresh those walking through the wilderness. It is a bit harder for us. We might know something about an artwork based on when and where it was created but we might have to ask questions to learn more.

An active viewer is going to engage in dialogue with the community through the visual art. The overarching question through which this process unfolds is addressed to the community though the artwork, ”Please, tell me, who are you?” Since that question can be a bit overbroad and intrusive, a hierarchy of sub-questions can be asked. The simplest questions are the who, what, when, where, why, and how questions that we learn to ask in grammar school. Next, the viewer might ask questions that emerge from the most obvious features of the painting, followed by questions based on the knowledge the viewer brings to the encounter. Finally, religious questions should be asked. These are the questions that touch the ultimate questions any community faces: sin, suffering, death, salvation, creation, and love. That hierarchy being noted, it doesn’t have to be systematically followed. There is a wealth of information about community in any painting.

In looking for the answers to these questions, two sets of ‘lenses,’ artistic lenses such as content (Perkins 1994; Kreitler & Kreitler 1972), symbol (Gardner 1994), and style (Gombrich 1995) and cultural lenses such as politics, economics, and society (Viladesau 2000) help focus the examination.

Details of how these lenses are relevant will have to await another forum. The art/y/fact.Xn app subsumes many of these lenses into two questions related to this scripture story.

- Welcoming the stranger is a spiritual practice that goes in and out of favor from place to place and generation to generation. What was the local attitude toward strangers (migrants, refugees, settlers, etc.) in the artist’s place and time? Might the artwork offer a response to, or affirmation of, that practice?
- Does the artwork depict the three visitors as being so obviously related to God that they would be recognizable, or does it make the question of whether the visitors are important more ambiguous?

Some examples will help.

*Local Attitude to Strangers in the Artist’s Time and Place? Artist’s response?* The oldest of these works is the icon from 14th century Byzantium. It continues a several-hundred year adherence to the traditional iconographic form of the area. Is that an example of maintaining the old ways in spite of the Western European
invasion of Byzantium during the Crusades, which saw Christian fighting Christian? Carracci’s Bologna was rebuilding after the plague had taken a sixth of the population in the late 1500s. Attractive young men, who could contribute to the economy and the marriageable population, would certainly be seen as having been sent from God. Notice the contrast between the healthy fresh young men and the more scarred Abraham. Chagall’s work was done as Europe rebuilt in the wake of the Second World War (and its refugee crises) and as the Soviets made trusting the stranger very dangerous for Eastern Europeans. While I might see the fiery red color as a foreshadowing of Moses and the Burning Bush, Chagall may have meant something different by the red. Might he have been saying welcome the stranger regardless of the risk? It is harder from our current perspective to bring critical consciousness to 2017 Los Angeles and Bane’s piece. She uses a traditional Japanese art form, in a city with a century-old history of immigration from Japan, at a time when immigration into the United States from the South is being challenged.

*Are the Visitors Obviously from God? Or Are their Origins Ambiguous? One's first response to this question might be that if the visitors are from God, then of course one would welcome them but notice the shift in Carracci’s Abraham when the visitor seems to be telling him that Sarah will have a child. This seems to be when Abraham sees their Godliness and his arms go up across his chest. But his hospitality was unrestrained previously when they were simply men. Bologna needs new men; men are welcome. The new awesome-ness of Godly messengers raises the kind of fear that others in scripture demonstrate in God’s presence. If these guys are from God, did we do enough? Is there trouble on the horizon? The wings on the visitors in the other three works are obvious signs that they are messengers from God and theoretically, if we can see the wings, Abraham and Sarah could see the wings. That said, we could look at the details of the visitors and see whether they look like the economic migrants, refugees, or invaders common to the artists’ times and discern who the artists equates the visitors with the popular people or the unpopular people.*

**Offering One’s Best to the Sacred Stranger**

The final movement of Abraham’s welcoming these visitors is his offering his best to them. This is the deepest faith statement in the story. He gives them the best of what he has regardless of when Abraham recognizes that the visitors are of God. What does that mean to the viewer encountering a work of religious art? What can the viewer offer when they see the sacred in an artwork? Throughout most of Christian history, two threads have consistently been presented about at least recognizing divine inspiration in an artwork: the notion of the icon and Beauty as a transcendental quality of God. The response suggested has consistently been surrender and prayer.

The 8th and 9th century icon controversies provoked a number of theological interpretations on the ontology of an icon, including its sharing a “form” with its
prototype: Jesus or the saint depicted (e.g., Schoenborn 1994). Because they share
the same form, the icon serves as a doorway or window to the eternal presence of
Jesus Christ or the saint. Here though the idea is that, at that door or window,
viewers are presenting themselves to Jesus Christ or the saint. It is less about any
notion that viewers can see into the Eternal Realm. At that window, the viewer is
visible to God, naked before God, so prayer is the only reasonable response in the
moment.

In the Western Church, a different understanding of the ontology of the work of art
developed. Because of how the conciliar icon decrees were translated in the West
and because of the illiteracy of the Christian population in the Western Church, art
was understood as being about education and decoration. In this context, Beauty as
a transcendental quality of God is another way of understanding that God can be
encountered in the interaction with an artwork. For centuries in the West, Beauty
was Godly. But as the art world’s self-understanding changed after the Baroque era,
as the Enlightenment developed, and into the 20th century, Beauty became
problematic. Today the word “beauty” is often applied in quite shallow or superficial
contexts. Arguments about Beauty are deep and ongoing. But even before the
contemporary arguments, the appropriate human response to Beauty as Godly has
been unclear. Protestant Reformers in the 16th century saw Catholic devotions to
artworks as idolatrous, directed at the object, not at the Eternal God.

These ideas present a more challenging problem for religious education. The
learners are to be invited to honest and open prayer but depending on the age level,
this may not occur. What is genuine prayer today? The art/y/fact.Xn app dealt with
this by offering users audio meditations to choose from based on their initial
impression of an artwork. One was about opening oneself to the message, another
was about beauty, a third was about imagining oneself as a character in the story,
etc.

On the one hand, if one accepts as true that an icon is a window to the Eternal
Realm, then one will automatically pray before an icon but this is not a commonly
held belief outside of Eastern Church traditions. And where does icon practice lead
to idolatrous practice?

On the other hand, if there is a hint of God somewhere in the world, an inspiration, a
flash of beauty, in an artwork or otherwise, what response is there but to praise
God? But even saying this suggests that even if a piece of art is lame, or uninspiring,
if it has religious content, then it should be honored with the best of one’s prayerful
heart and that seems forced or false.

Look at the artworks above, do any move you to authentic prayer?

The Potential Gift in the Artwork
Nothing that Abraham and Sarah did for the guests could have prepared them for the announcement that Sarah was going to have a child. It is both unrelated to anything they did and out of proportion to anything Abraham and Sarah gave the visitors. It was absurd. Sarah laughed it was so absurd.

Thirty years after my moving encounter in the Vatican Museums, I still struggle to describe what happened to me that day in 1987, what a collection of 20th century religious art did to me. I could go on for pages and pages about the religious education potential of all of the hospitable processes identified above. I could cite researchers and authors diving deeper into all of the concepts I introduced above. And I would argue that there is good religious learning in the above analyses of all four depictions of Abraham’s three visitors. But none of the research, none of the writing touches the power of the experiences I have had encountering art.

A Rothko painting in Chicago provokes unspeakable joy in me and I don’t do any of the analyses described above. I don’t do anything. I just stand there and joy occurs. One bronze Pentecost at the Vatican causes me an irreconcilable combination of hope for the potential of the Church and grief at the reality of the Church. This too occurs without any of the analysis or interpretation that I described above.

And this has happened to me with other artworks in other places. I want to make this experience accessible to others but because I don’t do anything to provoke it, I don’t know how. All of the research and writing might support religious educators putting art in front of people, but is that enough? I feel called to do more but still powerless compared to the power of the art.

Bibliography


