

Catholic

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Sacred Art

EPIPHANIES OF BEAUTY

DAVID BRINKER

Artists may be the most underappreciated theologians and interpreters of Scripture. Picture an event from the Bible—perhaps the Nativity or David challenging Goliath or St. Paul’s conversion experience—whatever your mind’s eye paints has likely been shaped by an artist’s imagination. Art helps to fill in the gaps in the biblical narratives, bringing sparsely detailed stories to life in vivid detail.

Faith Shapes Art and Art Shapes Faith

From the earliest days of the Church, artistic expression has served as a dynamic means of conveying, interpreting, and experiencing the Catholic faith. As St. John Paul II observed in his Letter to Artists in 1999:

Art has a unique capacity to take one or other facet of the [Gospel] message and translate it into colors, shapes, and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look or listen. It does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery (12).

Madonna and Child from The Life of Christ Altarpiece (1994–95) by Frederick J. Brown. Oil and mixed media on canvas. From the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Saint Louis University, a gift of the Enid & Crosby Kemper Foundation and UMB Bank. Photo by Kevin Lowder. Used with permission.



“A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”

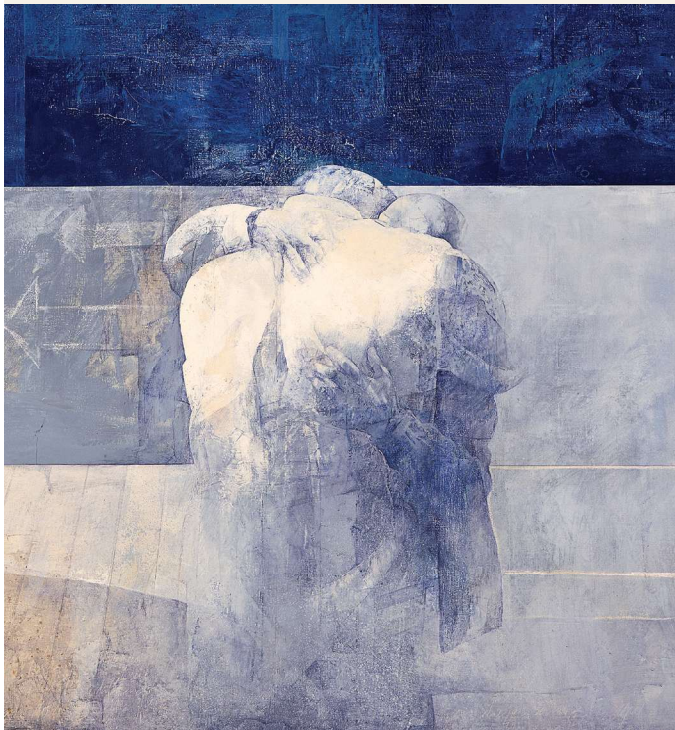
Endymion, John Keats, 1818

In considering visual art, remember that early Christian catacomb art helped shape and support the believers' common identity. In later centuries, religious artwork commissioned for public spaces reflected and reinforced Christianity's newfound influence. Depictions of the crucifixion have evolved over time, reflecting a shifting emphasis on Christ's divinity or his humanity. Images of Mary and the saints present examples of living an authentic Christian life. Stained glass windows serve as a sort of catechism in light, immersing worshipers in beauty and enhancing their understanding of the faith.

Just Look Around

We can encounter religious imagery in many settings. Our churches are sacred spaces for religious art. As is evident in the many styles of architecture and art found in churches across time and geography, those creating religious art interact dynamically with the artistic styles and media of the prevailing culture. As the US Bishops observe in *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*:

Throughout the history of the Church, a dynamic tension has existed between the continuity of traditional artistic expression and the need to articulate the faith in ways proper to each age and to diverse cultures. In every age the Church has attempted to engage the best contemporary artists and architects to design places of worship that have sheltered the assembly and disclosed the presence of the living God (141).



Many masterworks of Christian art, originally created for churches, are now housed in museums. Printed reproductions of these works abound. The internet makes it easy to find high-quality images and experience virtual visits to museums throughout the world. While there is no substitute for experiencing a work of art in person, the ready availability of images makes religious art broadly accessible.

Look, then Look Again

Just as there are many places to encounter religious art, there are many ways to experience it. While one could simply appreciate a work for its aesthetic qualities, religious art can serve as a threshold to prayer. Art in a liturgical setting invites both individual and communal responses, often embodied in ritual action. Outside the worship environment, one can employ more personal forms of devotion, such as *visio divina*, a visual analog to the ancient monastic practice of *lectio divina*. *Visio divina* employs a method of “slow looking,” allowing details of an artwork to draw our attention as we gradually absorb the whole piece and become aware of connections to our lives and needs as they surface. Another example is the imaginative prayer practiced in Ignatian spirituality, which encourages us to richly immerse ourselves in a Gospel story and see, hear, and feel what is going on in the scene. Both *visio divina* and Ignatian contemplation involve receptivity to insights from the Spirit and conclude with an expression of gratitude for graces received.

By and large, the artworks selected for these meditative practices were created primarily for private devotion or in houses of worship. Many talented artists today continue to produce exceptional religious imagery following the patterns of the past. Yet there are also contemporary artists who engage with religious themes in their work in ways that may strike viewers as unusual, puzzling, or even unsettling.

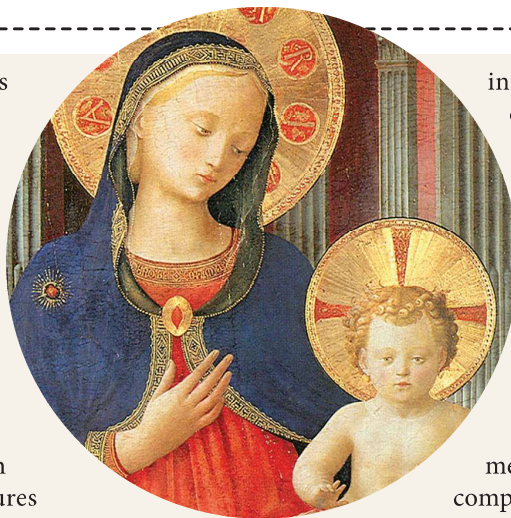
As may happen when you view contemporary art in general, you may feel lost at sea looking at modern religious art, especially if the pieces lack an explanation from the artist about what is going on. But if we approach an encounter as less about “getting” the art and more about “conversing” with it, we can open ourselves to experiencing the piece with our whole person: our bodily senses, our emotions and memories, our intellect and our spirit.

Let's Look Together

Let's consider a work from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (MOCRA) at Saint Louis University in St. Louis. *Madonna and Child* is one of five paintings that comprise the *Life of Christ Altarpiece* by Frederick J. Brown (1945–2012). Brown's other four subjects are baptism, the descent from the cross, the resurrection, and the descent into hell.

Even without knowing the painting's title, the familiar pairing of a woman robed in blue holding a young boy in her arms would indicate we are seeing an image of Mary and Jesus. Yet there is much about this image that differs from what we are accustomed to seeing. Our eyes might be drawn to the unfinished quality of the work—the fingers and toes are barely suggested, and the pencil under-drawing shows through in places. The artist is not aiming for an illusion of reality. The young boy's features reveal a strangely mature face, not that of a child. The woman's face is even more striking, with its flat planes of color and impassive expression. At the same time, we might note how the woman's arms encircle the child, who places a hand on her arm, perhaps in a gesture of reassurance. The painting thus conveys a tension between intimacy and distance. Continuing, we might observe the vibrant colors—blues ranging from clear cerulean to impenetrable navy, golden yellow in the halos and highlights on the faces, greens and reds, bone whites and heavy black outlines. The patterned geometric background suggests a landscape stretching behind the chair on which the woman sits.

We may become aware of associations coming to mind. For instance, the woman's face might remind us of ceremonial masks or ancient Egyptian funerary masks. The background patterning might evoke colorful fabrics. We might find the colors reassuring, energizing, even cheery. We might note the emotional resonances. Perhaps the woman's



inscrutable expression causes us to think of the conflicting emotions involved in caring for somebody who is dependent on us. Although her eyes seem to be downcast or even closed, the blue paint at the seams of her eyes glistens as if damp with tears, belying her seeming impassivity. The unfinished quality of the work may leave us uneasy, wishing for something more definite and resolved.

As we consider what the painting means or is trying to express, we can compare it to the many images of Mary and Jesus we have seen over the years. This version

of Mary echoes Romanesque sculpture in which the Blessed Virgin sits on a throne with the young Child on her lap, an image known as the *sedes sapientiae* ("seat of wisdom"). The suggestion of tears may call to mind Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows, or the Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary. The golden tones in the halos, Christ's face, and the background of the painting show us we are in a holy presence, and that this child is "God with us."

Frederick J. Brown was well-versed in the religious imagery of the past and frequently incorporated into his work references to his African and Native American ancestry and his experiences as an African American. This information might cause us to reflect on the impact of enculturation, the process by which the Gospel takes root in—and is understood through—many different cultures.

These are just a few examples of the fruits of an extended, intentional time spent with this *Madonna and Child*, and we might feel enriched by this encounter. But as with visio

Seeing Art with New Eyes



When you identify art that draws you in, set aside a time and place to give it your undivided attention. Ideally this would happen in the presence of the actual artwork, but it might be more practical to work with a reproduction.



A popular method of looking at art called Visual Thinking Strategies begins with three questions: "What's going on in this picture?" "What do you see that makes you say that?" and "What more can you find?" The questions encourage us to look closely, without judgment, at the work before us. Also ask, "Are there recognizable figures and objects that tell a story, and what materials, colors, and textures are used?"



Pay attention to your other senses, your emotions, and your thoughts. Does the work elicit a positive or negative response? Do memories or associations emerge?



Gradually begin to ascribe meaning to what you see, drawing on your personal storehouse of knowledge and experience. If available, you might supplement your speculation with biographical information about the artist or interpretive materials about the artwork.



You may be surprised at the insights you gain from this sort of dialogue with an artwork. Indeed, these intellectual exercises may bring about insight into a matter of faith or a passage of Scripture.



But what happens if you take a further step and allow the artwork to be a threshold to prayer and spiritual reflection? We can move beyond intellectual assent or rational understanding to consider the implication for our lives, to note any promptings from the Holy Spirit that are disclosed through the artwork. Does our awareness of others, our sense of connectedness, expand? Do we experience healing or consolation?

divina and Ignatian contemplation, we might go further and consider the work in an attitude of prayer, inviting the Spirit to move us through the work.

What aspect of your reflection remains present with you? Perhaps the ambiguity of the relationship between mother and child nudges you to hold in prayer a challenging relationship in your own life. Perhaps the hints at non-European incarnations of Christianity prompt you to consider how to welcome newly arrived immigrant families in your community or parish, or to celebrate the diversity of God's people.

Finally, we can rest in the Spirit with the artwork, letting go of our thoughts and judgments. This could be a moment to express to God the gratitude we feel for the opportunity to experience the creative work of another person and the intangible gifts we received in the encounter.

Making It Your Own

While our attention has been on visual art, other forms of creative expression can also invite us to an encounter with the holy: music, dance, theater, poetry and literature, architecture, the culinary arts. The mode of our encounters may vary, some more focused on direct sensory experience, others more intellectual, some in community, others more solitary. Lectio divina and visio divina, Ignatian contemplation, models of theological reflection, and the process I outlined could all be adapted or employed to help us slow down and live with intentionality, deep awareness, and gratitude for the creative work of God in our midst.



ECCE HOMO, OIL ON CANVAS. LOUIS CORINTH, 1925 / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

As Pope Francis notes in his June 2023 Address to Artists, in encounters with art, “boundaries become more fluid and the limits of our experience and understanding broaden. Everything seems more open and accessible. We experience the spontaneity of the child filled with imagination and the intuition of the visionary who grasps reality.”

David Brinker was named the director of Saint Louis University's Museum of Contemporary Religious Art in 2019. In addition to his work at MOCRA, David is a professional flutist, published music arranger, and an active pastoral musician.



For aid in practicing visio divina, find online:

- The *Seeing the Word* program (seeingtheword.org). The illuminated *St. John's Bible* is the program's source of images for contemplation.
- Information about imaginative prayer and contemplation in Ignatian spirituality (ignatianspirituality.com). Look for spiritual exercises that invite you to pray with your imagination.

Art's role in liturgical spaces is discussed in:

- The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*).
- The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (22, 325–26).
- Saint John Paul II's Letter to Artists (1999) and Pope Francis' Address to Artists (2023) at Vatican.va.
- *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*.
- Visual Thinking Strategies (vtshome.org).
- Saint Louis University's Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (slu.edu/mocra).

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