

reflections

The power of the visual was not lost on Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus explains: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." Nor was it lost on Martin Luther. In his Explanation of the First Article of the Apostles Creed, Luther wrote: "I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them."

Sight is a powerful sense given us by God and used by Him to help us know and understand the world around us. We live in a visual society. The old clichè that "a picture is worth a thousand words" is exploited to the nth degree in popular culture. All kinds of sights, pictures and images vie for our attention. Digital cameras, camera enhanced cell phones and PowerPoint presentations are but a few of the numerous tools that flood our eyes and fill our brain waves with a nearly incomprehensible feast of the visual. However, precious few visuals, unless seen through the eyes of faith, have the goal of helping to extend and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This edition of *Issues* invites us to see with our eyes and through that seeing perceive in new ways the power of the visual arts in assisting God's people with the communication of the precious Good News that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!" Rev. Wetzstein challenges us to synchronize our understanding of resources expended by the church for the visual arts with the core of the church's mission. Dr. Kenneth Schmidt reminds us that we "use the language of words and the language of images and symbols to teach the eternal truths of salvation." And Professors Berkbigler and Creed provide a helpful context for using technology in worship as they suggest that "there is a need for resonance between images and words."

Recently, a Concordia University, Nebraska art student shared with me her reason for studying the visual arts at Concordia. She said: "There's so much more that churches can do visually to minister." How true! I thank God for the gifted, talented faculty, staff and students of Concordia University, Nebraska and for all who work in congregations and communities to help open the eyes of people to see the Savior through their talents and the gift of art.

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Brian L. Friedrich, President

That You Might See with the Eyes of Your Heart

On an early spring evening members of the small rural congregation were continuing their sanctuary refurbishing projects in anticipation of their church's 125th anniversary. Aging pieces of dated yellowed paneling were being painstakingly removed from the walls on either side of the chancel when suddenly to the surprise and delight of the members, two large paintings slowly began to appear. As the last pieces of wood lay on the floor beneath the walls, the members stood almost breathless beneath the paintings: one of Jesus blessing the children and a second of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The paintings, though perhaps less than masterpieces, were handsome, compelling and headlined in German ... "Der Herr ist mein Hirte."

No one present knew when or how the lost paintings were literally "boarded up," but all agreed they were precious discoveries. A local artist renewed the paintings, English banner lines were added, and this prairie revelation became a centerpiece celebrating 125 years of the Savior's blessing.

The story of the lost paintings begs the question, why were they covered up? Were members uncomfortable with the German? Was the congregation unable to pay for necessary refurbishing? Did current trends and tastes trump tradition? None of the members seemed to know, and few if any would hazard a guess. But for whatever reasons, the symbols, the visuals wore out, fell silent and were lost ... almost.

Church visual arts, whether the symbol on a parment, the stained glass in the sanctuary or a painting in the narthex, can quickly and quietly fall into the category of mere decoration, little more than ecclesiastical eye candy. The symbol, once powerful, the colors once arresting, the art once soul-filling, slowly merge into the woodwork or are even concealed by it ... and those who have eyes to see don't, and hungry souls move on unfed.

One contemporary writer suggests that, "Hell is where nothing connects." This confession from the dark side may carry within it some clues as to why visual arts in the church are at times dismissed as too ephemeral or expensive and at other times simply lost. The dynamic that almost alone connects families, communities, schools, nations, churches, is the community narrative, the shared story. But when the story is forgotten, the narrative lost, the history unknown, the shared purpose dissolves and the community disintegrates.

When the story fails to connect the life of the community to its art, the symbol,

the color, the light, the figure, the place, no matter its intrinsic value, is without life, without power, without beauty. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but only if the picture connects to and illuminates the shared narrative which gives unity and purpose. The very essence of the Incarnation is the story of the inexpressible love and beauty Who becomes flesh so that we might truly "See!" "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God," St. Paul writes to the Romans and again to the church at Ephesus, "that you might see with the eyes of your heart." The essence of the Gospel is that the immortal beauty and the eternal story have become one.

The connections are perhaps obvious, but a few reminders or suggestions might be in order. The story implicit in the parment symbol or pulpit design must be imaginatively told again and again not only for the eager young, but also for the almost blind. (This latter will certainly serve the children better than simply leaving them to count ceiling tiles during worship.) The stained glass window and baptismal font must find their connections to the history of the people and the story of Jesus. The altar design and the cross configurations must be offered to God's people regularly so the story can be rehearsed and the connections made. The textures, the materials, the shapes, the placements, the postures, the environments must be celebrated faithfully in the congregation's gatherings so that history can be remembered, meaning restored and purpose renewed.

The visual arts when connected with the story become for the baptized truly "means of grace." The discovery of the small congregation's art was more than an *Antiques Road Show* connection to a favorite uncle or a long gone great grandfather. The community has been embraced in new ways by the Spirit's story of His people, past, present and future.

Perhaps the 8th century poet sings it best in the hymn to the Holy Spirit, *Veni Creator Spiritus*:

Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire,
Ignite them with celestial fire;
Spirit of God, you have the art
Your gifts, the sev'nfold to impart.

Your blest outpouring from above
Is comfort, life, and fire of love.
Illumine with perpetual light
The dullness of our blinded sight.

The Rev. Howard Patten, Pastor
Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church
Angel Fire, New Mexico



The Eye of the Beholder

Recently, our congregation dedicated a new sanctuary. The cross, altar, pulpit, baptismal font and processional cross were all designed by the Center for Liturgical Art of Concordia University, Nebraska. Two phrases come to mind as I reflect upon our sanctuary and chancel: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and "a cross that says it all." The imagery and symbolism of our new worship space engage all the senses and reinforce the truth that art and architecture are forever wedded. The vibrant colors, signs and symbols draw us inexorably into a spirit of worship. They tie our everyday world together at the core with the God who created the world, sent His Son as Savior, and empowers us today through the Holy Spirit.

Often people divide the world into the sacred and profane, that which relates to God and that which relates to the world. In his book titled *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade disagrees. "The religious person always believes there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but which manifests itself in the world thereby sanctifying it and making it real." Scripture speaks to this reality in the words of Jesus: "Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

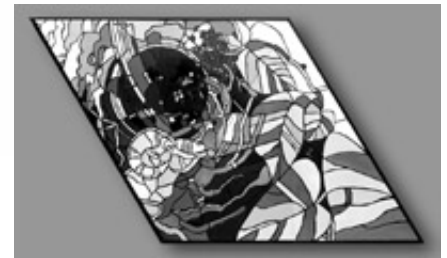
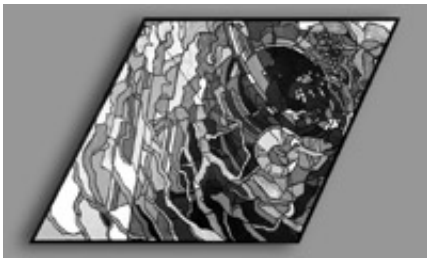
The focal point of the sanctuary is a unique 18-foot-high cross which depicts the entire salvation story. It is actually a cross within a cross—an open-ended Latin cross with a Greek cross at the center, arms extended to the four corners of the earth. Surrounding the center of the cross is gnarled wood, symbolic of sin and all of its darkness. Shining through from the back is a stained glass star reminding us of God the Creator, of God the Promiser to Abraham, of God the Guider of the wisemen, and of Jesus, the Bright and Morning Star.

From the cross, one's eyes move to the altar, seemingly suspended in mid-air, where the theme of outstretched arms is repeated, arms reaching out in prayer and in witness to the world about a crucified Christ, an empty cross, an open tomb, a risen and ruling Lord.

As the sunlight and shadows float across the sanctuary, the reflections from the stainless steel make the cross and its message vibrant and alive. The seasonal parment perched between the legs of the Latin cross sway gently in the breeze, as if moved by the Spirit.

Indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words.

The Rev. David Block, Pastor
Divine Shepherd Lutheran Church
Omaha, Nebraska



What Does Jesus' Body Look Like?

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth...

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord...

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church...

As Christians, we recite creeds every time we gather to worship. They affirm for us that the faith we have as individuals extends outside of ourselves to a vast number of people throughout the world today and even back thousands of years in history. They show us that God is not just some higher power, but we actually know Him and He knows us together as one body, in one common faith, one baptism, and with one Lord Jesus as our head.

How then can visual art in the church work to affirm our common faith in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

In July 2003 my home congregation, Faith Lutheran in Topeka, Kansas, hosted what we called an "art servant event." Rather than traveling to Mexico or some other distant location, we remained in our own community in Topeka. During this week-long event, we gathered 40 volunteers to paint three murals which focused on the Trinity. On Monday morning, these paintings were blank slates; by Saturday morning, they were installed and unveiled for the public. Sound impressive or impossible?

In fact, though, the week was the culmination of a year of planning. In August 2002, my director of Christian education asked me if I would be willing to lead this event by designing the three murals over the course of the next year and then instructing the 40 untrained volunteers to paint them. This was my particular job while many others would be responsible for meals throughout the week, housing, Bible study, music and individual art projects and crafts. The week of service was made possible by the year of planning and prayer, not just by one leader, but by a community of people who shared a common goal and a common faith in the Triune God.

During the event week, we painted in three pre-assigned work groups, each with its own leader. Each of the leaders was a student, a friend of mine from the Concordia University, Nebraska Art Department. They were responsible for maintaining the quality of the work and the cohesiveness of the group. As their teams mixed a whole spectrum of colors from red, yellow, blue, black and white latex house paint, it was vitally important that the group members communicated with one another so that the colors on a particular mural meshed into one image.

As we worked together on this project, the murals became not just my own statement of faith, but the volunteers who painted them truly did take ownership of the statement. In our painting during the week, we became as a choir that strove to blend our voices into one song with many harmonies. This came about not only by our painting with one another, but also as we discussed the significance and meaning of the murals as we individually saw them. This came about also as we shared meals, played games and had fellowship. As we spent this week together, we grew as one body, a body of believers in Jesus.

I believe that this servant event of 2003 only scratched the surface of possibilities in regard to visualizing our common faith. This is a concept that can be utilized more often and in a wide variety of contexts. It could be done over the period of a year's Sunday morning Bible studies, or it could be done in an intense week-long or weekend project. I share this particular experience in the hope that it will catch on among many other communities of believers around the United States and even around the world. I have seen the benefits that we experienced as a result of this event, and I hope that other communities can experience that same joy.

So what does Jesus' body look like? Jesus' body is seen in the product of art and also in the way that art is created. Just as artists strive to depict what Jesus' earthly body looked like, that body can be seen when believers in Jesus unite around a common goal and a common creed. Of course, this unity cannot be accomplished apart from the work of the Holy Spirit to bind us together in love and obedience to God the Father and to create faith in Jesus' death and resurrection for us. But through the work of the Holy Spirit, we truly become members of Jesus' body and make his body visible to the world.

If you are interested in more information pertaining to the 2003 project or how to organize an art servant event for your own church, please contact me at Karl.Fay@cune.org or Mark Anschutz at the Center for Liturgical Art, Concordia University, Nebraska.

Karl Fay

Student, Concordia Seminary
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A Return to Old Models?

At first glance, Great St. Martin's in Cologne, built nearly a thousand years ago, has little in common with the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin, built in 1961. The former is one of Cologne's twelve magnificent Romanesque churches, the latter a minimalist structure of concrete, with small windows of blue glass that from the outside are unimposing and, to some, even unattractive. Yet both are notable in how their architecture causes those inside to shift their attention from themselves to a point beyond themselves. The massive stone walls and echoing footsteps of Great St. Martin's suggest the eternity of God, and the inescapable sense of awe that pervades the place forces those present to confront a larger reality. Inside the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, the blue-green light streaming through the portholes—yes, the resemblance is unmistakable—bathes churchgoers in undersea beauty, exuding a deep peace of a kind sadly denied the German nation throughout too much of the 20th century.

Once it was taken for granted that a church's architecture would point those present to God. But several decades ago a new trend emerged, with churches built that directed the attention of those inside to each other. This was done for a reason; namely, a theology that emphasized the community as the body of Christ, with God as immanent, or present among us, rather than transcendent and perhaps unapproachable. This architectural theology became widely known among Lutherans through E. A. Sovik's *Architecture for Worship* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1973). Sovik, a professor of architecture at St. Olaf College (now retired), believed that the Reformation was a failure from an architectural standpoint because it retained the architecture of the medieval church rather than returning to the New Testament house church as a model. Churches, wrote Sovik, should be houses for the people of God rather than houses of God; not liturgical centers, but meeting places. They should be able to be used for various purposes, not just for services.

Churches of his design feature a flexible configuration without a single focal point and without a division of nave and chancel. The eucharistic table (not "altar," a term to which he objects) is set among the people, and it may be portable. Chairs are used instead of pews. Images such as paintings and sculptures are deemphasized, and even the cross is preferably found only atop the processional standard. Flowers and plants are recommended in order to "make the whole room a place of celebration." Sovik calls such a structure a

"centrum" or "non-church." The prototypes he suggests for the centrum are the Japanese tea room, because it emphasizes human interaction, and the living and dining rooms in modern homes.

Sovik's philosophy of church architecture has come under fire in recent years among some Roman Catholics. Leading the charge are two professors of architecture at the University of Notre Dame, Thomas Gordon Smith and Duncan Stroik. They believe that the "church as living room" model takes away a sense of the sacred and promotes worship as entertainment. Their own church designs reflect a return to classical models of architecture.

Among Lutherans who think about church architecture, Sovik's theology still seems to be dominant, although fewer people today are familiar with Sovik's name. It will be interesting to see whether the ideas of new classicists such as Smith and Stroik will find their way into Lutheran circles and, if they do, how Lutherans will respond.

Dr. Joseph Herl

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