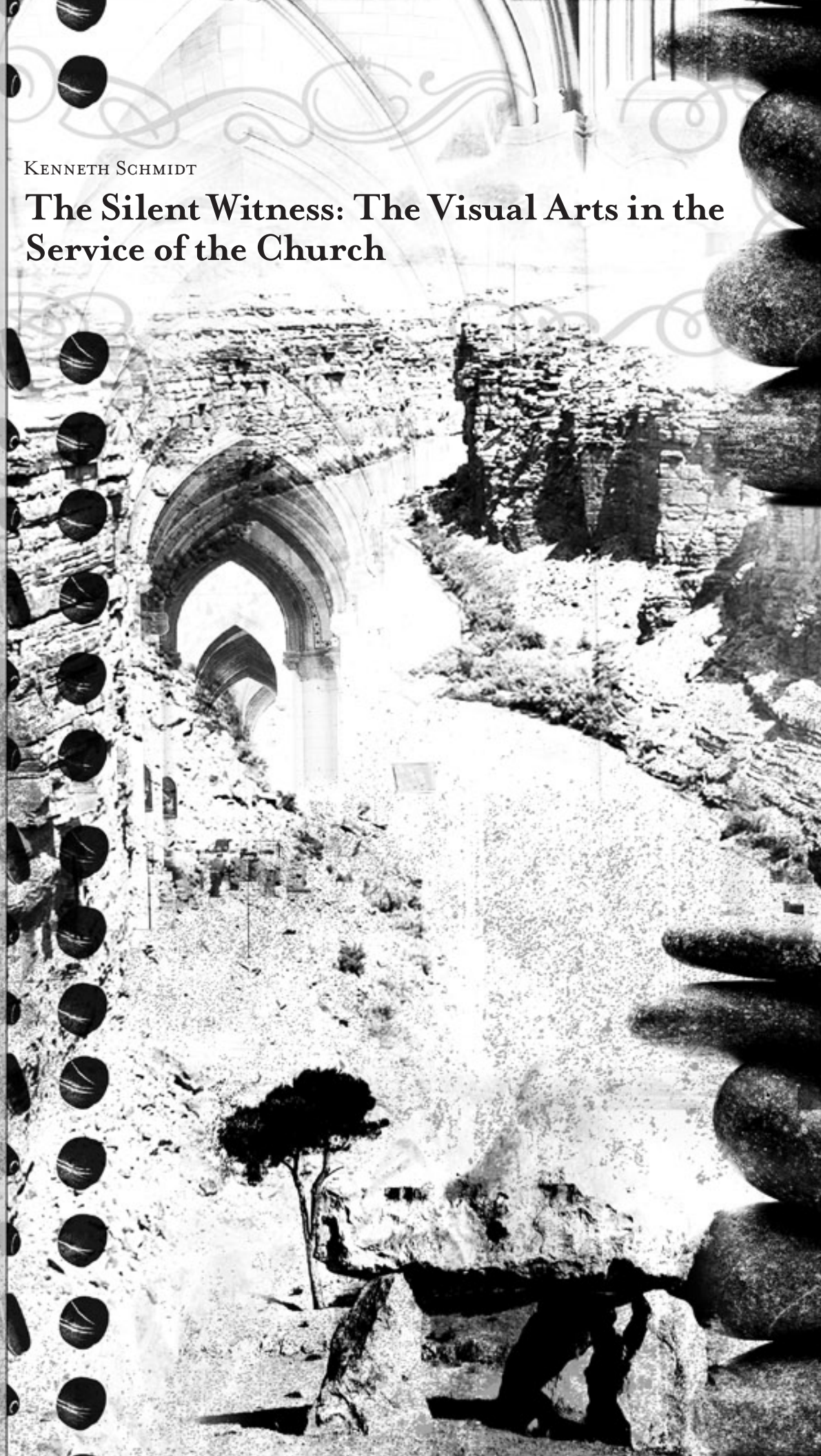


KENNETH SCHMIDT

The Silent Witness: The Visual Arts in the Service of the Church



Questions of aesthetic taste and the role of the visual arts in worship are not questions that stir up theological debate. The preference for various styles of art, or what kind of art to have in the church, whether the style of a stained glass window, or the design and placement of banners, is not a matter of systematic investigation. On the other hand, it cannot be said that no one cares about these topics. Rather, they often give rise to public disagreement, contention and division. There is no lack of "experts" when it comes to the arts and how they serve the church. Ultimately, the old adage, "I may not know much about art, but I know what I like," turns indifference into conflict.

The 20th and current century have witnessed a strained if not tenuous relationship between the church and the visual arts. Yet, in the secular world the visual arts are enjoying increased popularity and use. We are living in a time when the visual arts and visual media are all around us. The average individual encounters thousands of images every day on television, Web sites, magazines, billboards and in a whole host of other venues. The power of various visual media is obvious to the secular world. Great care and planning go into advertising and design as the messages and ideas of culture are given form. Even images that are broadcast quickly via satellite are selected and edited with care.

The visual arts are also enjoying increased attention as artifacts of our culture. Museum construction and attendance are at an all time high. We live in a visual culture, yet take images for granted. And even though it may be "... virtually inconceivable that the Jesus of the New Testament would ever have driven people out of the temple on account of their having decorated it in bad taste ..." (Brown, p. 4), we nevertheless cannot deny the importance, and perhaps even the power of the visual arts in connections with the written and spoken word.


This article focuses on the visual arts and how they serve the church. I have used the word *silent witness* in my title because the visual arts are just that. They are silent. Any dialogue that is generated by the work of art comes from the response of the viewer. The work of art provides a setting for thinking and reflection through an involved encounter with the object. In this way, the art object has the potential to give birth, or serve as a "mid-wife" for reflecting on the truths of Scripture.

The Visual Arts: Their Special Role

The arts are a gift from God. They appeal to our senses and to our intellect. We turn to the arts when it is difficult to communicate with words or when we need to communicate beyond words. Sometimes we are at a loss for words. Consider those times when you might have sensed the presence of the Spirit in a worship service, or witnessed the birth of your child, or heard that your child has suddenly been taken away. Or how about standing at the death bed of your mother, hearing her recite the 23rd Psalm three times while holding the pastor's hand, and then closing her eyes in the eternal rest of her Savior.

Intense and engaging human experiences are celebrated and expressed through the visual arts. Let me cite an example from Scripture that illustrates my point; it may even help explain a possible role for the visual arts in the church. This example is the crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land by the people of Israel. Imagine them standing on the shore, waiting for the signal to cross. What an exciting day it must have been! Undoubtedly there was singing, storytelling and a good dose of anticipation as the priests carrying the ark of the covenant stepped into the river. As soon as the priests' feet touched the water, the water from upstream stopped, and the people crossed over on dry land.

DR. KENNETH SCHMIDT IS A MEMBER OF THE STAFF OF CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, AUSTIN, TEXAS.



As the story unfolds, God had more instructions for Joshua:

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight. So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord" (Joshua 4:1-7b, NIV).

The stones in this account functioned as art objects. They had a real and physical presence. They involved human action, and they were certainly out of the ordinary, evoking the question, "What do these stones mean?" The context and unusual nature of the stones set up the opportunity to talk about God's love and action in the movement of the children of Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The stones were also large. They would last more than a generation. And it was probably a miracle that the men could even pick them up. It was an unusual event. Just plain old stones brought up on shore and arranged as some sort of memorial. They were an occasion of art.

It is natural for us to turn to the arts to express our reactions to the human experience. We dance, we sing, we create images. We use the arts, and at the same time we share not only the artifact itself, but also the story, and a deep awareness of the experience. When we use the visual arts in the church, we have the opportunity to share not only the artifact itself, but our story, and a deep awareness of God's mystery, love and plan in our life.

Joshua Taylor (1975) considers this special connection between seeing, thinking and knowing:

To look at a work of art is to think. Some people might not call it that—we often limit the word *thinking* to a somewhat pragmatic exercise by which we rationalize various desires, feelings and other uncalled-for promptings of the brain—but in any case, looking at a work of art is a distinctive use of the mind (p. 7).

The combination of spoken and written language with gesture and physical object is synergistic, a very special way of knowing. We might even go so far as to say that an intense engagement with the visual arts is in itself an act of knowing. The visual arts have the power to trigger our ability to comprehend, to understand and remember. These experiences of being human are something our loving God and Savior knows first hand.

The extraordinary gift of God becoming man and living among us is an important visual event that demonstrates God's love for human kind. Our Lord spoke in parables, used metaphor and gave examples that created visual images in the minds of those who heard Him.

The contemporary British painter, David Hockney, claims that you really can't know something without "really seeing it." He also states that in order for us to really see something, we need to draw it. This last point is based on the notion of a slow and careful study of contours, surfaces and forms that inform the artist's knowledge of the subject matter. There is an intensity and engagement in the act of drawing that lead to a high degree of understanding. This engagement intensifies knowledge. Truly seeing something is an intellectual act of knowing. It is analytical, critical and reflective. This is important in all that we encounter visually, but especially important as we design and appoint our worship spaces.

What the Visual Arts Say

Earlier I stated that the visual arts are silent. Well, they are and they aren't. It is also true to say that the visual arts are anything but silent. They have much to tell us about the group of

people who created them. I am reminded of the words of Winston Churchill, "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." Churchill was responding to the destruction of the House of Commons by one of the last bombs of an aerial raid during World War II. Even though he spoke specifically of the architecture, we could also include all the furnishings and artifacts that set the context of the building.

We form opinions and formulate an understanding of a space as we decode our visual encounters with their context. The choices we make as we design and appoint our dwellings or gathering places say something about us. Someone who visits our home will formulate opinions based on what they see. Richard Caemmerer explained it this way:

The instant you step inside someone's living room, you have a sense of what the folks are like who live there. Even if they have had time to get ready for you, your eyes will let you know whether they are casual or formal, wealthy or poor, family-oriented, interested in travel, art, books, junk (1983, p. 35).

There is considerable variety in architectural styles, furnishings and manners of worship that have been adopted by the church. Some churches worship in neo-gothic structures with stained glass windows that are quasi medieval, and others include images from popular culture and utilize modern technology as part of the worship experience. In some cases, projected images become the stained glass windows, instructing the faithful with modern means.

The church in western culture seems to be simultaneously confronting and absorbing the cultures of "high" and "low." Some churches are seeking ways to utilize the services of trained visual artists, others seek to engage the work of artists and aesthetes in their midst or community, while others embrace popular media conventions. Some churches may have an arts committee given the task of planning the use of the visual arts in the worship space and liturgy, while others may add visual items with little oversight.



The Arts and Worship

So, how should we use the visual arts in worship? What architectural and cultural style is appropriate? When are the visual arts an important aid to the preaching and teaching of the Word? The answer to these and other questions comes from the gathering community. Liturgy is the work of the people, and the visual arts should be an authentic expression alongside that work. Not a work in conflict or a distraction, but a work that adds depth to our understanding and helps us to remember the great things which God has done for us.

The church in worship is an ordered community of people who share the language and meaning of the liturgy as a true expression of their response to a loving God. This ordered community is ultimately embodied in its cultural artifacts. The architecture, the visual and ecclesiastical arts, the action of the liturgy and the music tell us something about the group that creates them, while potentially conditioning the quality and depth of the worship experience itself. Ultimately this ordered community gathers together because of God's love and plan of salvation for each of us.

As we consider the architectural space and all that is within it, we should strive to have a unified and authentic visual environment that engages the worshipper. The physical relationship and design of architecture, furnishings, visual art and ecclesiastical accoutrements should be orderly, unified and thoughtful. We do not set the visual arts over or against the Word, but they should work together. We use both languages, the language of words and the language of images and symbol to teach the eternal truths of salvation. In this way, the work of art has the potential to provide insight and intensification as it is coupled with Word and liturgy. This process requires planning and thought.

For example, the most popular style of architecture for a church seems to be the Gothic style. Why do so many people appreciate this as an ideal spiritual space for worship? Did Christian architecture reach its zenith in the Middle Ages? No, I think not. Rather, Gothic architecture was an honest

expression of a people at a particular time and place. It embodied mystery, commanded awe and created a unified context for worship. But more importantly, it conveyed the values of the community itself. The building and everything in it were about quality and integrity. The ecclesiastical art was an authentic expression of the people and the time, and it was appropriate. The materials were natural and often times costly. The composition of the building seems musical, and the whole program of architecture and furnishings created a sense of mystery. Our respect for Gothic churches is a longing for an authentic and engaging space that is appointed with appropriate art and supports worship.

Any attempt to copy the past is little more than a "confession that the religious life of the church has lost its capacity for creative self-expression" (Nathan, p. 70). As much as we may want to admire the spiritual qualities of Gothic architecture, the fact remains: we are not Gothic. Nor do most people realize how the Gothic cathedral functioned.

The church was an expression of the community. The structure and visual art of the church communicated the message of the Gospel, but the church also served as a center for learning and even provided a setting for entertainment. Saints, prophets and scenes from the Scripture were combined with depictions of beasts, gargoyles and even humorous figures. The church also provided a stage for liturgical drama, and parish churches were used for community events including dancing, games, festivals and fairs. The Gothic cathedral was a cultural center for the community (Nathan, p. 71).

A Challenge to Leaders

The challenge is to bring the visual arts and Christian faith closer together. There is a pressing need for the creation of authentic art which connects with liturgy and Word without trivializing the message of the Gospel or the integrity of the work of art. There is a need to train pastors, teachers and lay leaders in the visual arts, and equip them for ministry that includes the visual arts. Pastors and Christian leaders should network with artists and art

educators in their community to find ways to connect the visual arts with the church. Some leaders may want to learn more about the visual arts and might enroll in art courses at local colleges and universities.

One more thing: think back to the Joshua account. The “stones of remembrance” were just that. They were stones. Art does not have to have a religious subject matter to function in the church. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that we should be able to look at most any art and use it as an opportunity to witness. The power is not in the art object itself but comes from the heart as we look, ponder and think.

I suspect most people do not have this type of engagement with the visual arts, but it nevertheless remains an important possibility for the church. We need Christian artists, pastors and lay leaders who can see the potential of this connection and model it for the community. Dean W. Nadasdy addresses this topic by affirming the potential interaction of word, image and object:

Liturgy is word and event, word and narrative, word and imagination. Or if left to its words alone, never broken open, never visualized; liturgy can be heard and spoken, but never seen. It will be less evocative than, this imageless liturgy of words, less engaging to the young, less real. To place the liturgy in its aesthetic, biblical and often narrative context maximizes its impact and enhances its memorability. Here the preacher becomes teacher, interpreter, and once again, artist (p. 199).

The visual arts have the potential to serve the church in a meaningful way. Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, summarizes these ideas in this portion of his poem, *Autumn Inaugural*:

There will always be those who reject ceremony, who claim that resolution requires no fanfare, those who demand the spirit stay fixed like a desert saint, fed only on faith, to worship in no temple but the weather.

He goes on to say:

... symbols betray us. They are always more or less than what is really meant. But shall there be no processions by torchlight because we are weak?

And finally:

Praise to the rituals that celebrate change, old robes worn for new beginnings, solemn protocol where the mutable soul, surrounded by ancient experience grows young in the imagination’s white dress.

Because it is not the rituals we honor but our trust in what they signify, these rites that honor us as witness—whether to watch lovers swear loyalty in a careless world or a newborn washed with water and oil.

References

- Brown, Frank Burch. *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Caemmerer, Richard R. Jr. *Visual Art in the Life of the Church*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983.
- Gioia, Dana. “Autumn Inaugural” in *The Hudson Review*, Spring 2003.
- Nathan, Walter L. *Art and the Message of the Church*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961.
- Perkins, David N. *The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art*. Santa Monica: The Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1994.
- Taylor, Joshua C. *To See Is to Think: Looking at American Art*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975.
- Nadasdy, Dean W. in *Liturgical Preaching*. Paul J. Grime and Dean W. Nadasdy, ed. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001.

