

To see more clearly: looking at our art

A resource for churches in the Diocese of Sussex and beyond

There is a rich tradition of art in churches in Sussex - from the mediaeval frescos at St. John the Baptist, Clayton, to twentieth-century works commissioned by Dean Hussey at Chichester Cathedral, to contemporary commissions such as Maggi Hambling's *The Resurrection Spirit* at St. Dunstan's Mayfield (2013). Our art is a wonderful resource for helping us to understand and reflect upon matters of faith.

We can also draw on the rich history of religious art in museum and gallery collections in Sussex, and further afield - whether by visiting these collections, or viewing images online or in books.

These notes and questions are intended to encourage individuals and groups to engage in a contemplative way with works of art in churches and elsewhere. It suggests a series of questions to prompt reflection and/or discussion of different types of works of art.

As we begin the Year of the Bible in the Diocese of Chichester this Advent, our art can provide a powerful focus for reflection on biblical narratives. Within these pages, you will find some specific guidance for looking at biblical art, as well as for other types of art you might encounter in a religious context.

No expert knowledge is needed to appreciate art - just an openness to look and to ask questions. Through spending time looking at the art in our churches, we can not only see it more clearly, but also in doing so, as St. Richard prays, know Jesus Christ more clearly.

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Introduction

Christianity's relationship with images has been a complex matter over the centuries. Many of our churches bear the marks of images having been removed or defaced during the Reformation in the sixteenth century and by the Puritans in the seventeenth century over concerns that images risked becoming objects of idolatry, distracting the viewer from worship of God himself.

At an earlier time in Christian history, in the Byzantine church (Eastern Christendom, with its centre in present-day Istanbul), a controversy raged during the eighth and ninth centuries over the use of icons. The 'Iconoclastic Controversy' concluded in 843 with the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy', which saw the restoration of images in the Byzantine church (this event is commemorated in the Orthodox church on the first Sunday of Lent). From this controversy, some beautiful theology arose which continues to provide a grounding for the use of images in a Christian context.

One of the reasons that the 'iconophiles' in this debate cited to justify the use of images in Christianity was the Incarnation: in Jesus, the invisible God became visible and therefore *seeing* as a means of encountering the divine can be rooted in God's manifestation in Jesus Christ. In an era when literacy was not the norm, church leaders also argued that images could function as 'books for the illiterate': visual means of telling stories from the Bible. Thus, although the Ten Commandments prohibit 'graven images', the Byzantines concluded that when viewed in an appropriate way, images could be an *aid to* rather than a *distraction from* devotion to God.

In the twenty-first century, we are constantly surrounded by images of many kinds: in the news, online, in photographs on the phone that many of us carry in our pockets. Indeed, we live in such a visually-intensive world that we might often find that images become 'white noise', and we do not really pause to really look. The same can happen in our churches - we can become so familiar with the stained glass, the carvings, the silverware and so on, that we do not really take time to notice what is depicted there.

The most important resource we can bring to the rich and varied visual heritage available to us is not art historical knowledge or theological expertise; it is time. Time to look and to reflect, whether individually, or sharing this experience in a group. The scriptural reading practice of *Lectio Divina* can provide a helpful model: here, a biblical passage is read, reflected upon, read again with a fuller understanding of the passage, and so on, with the reader being mindful of reading in the presence of Christ. The practice can be undertaken by an individual, or as a form of group prayer. We can apply similar principles to viewing art which represents stories from the bible or other religious themes: look, reflect, look again.

In the following pages, you will find a series of questions that can be used to facilitate a group discussion of this kind. The questions are categorised according to different types of art. They have been developed through my own experience of leading such group discussions about art in Chichester Cathedral as part of my work as Bishop Otter Scholar in the Diocese of Chichester in 2016.

In each session I selected two works of art to look at, spending about ten minutes in front of each one; we then sat down together in a quiet room nearby to discuss our experience and impressions. I provided some basic information about the works of art, and in some cases a relevant Bible passage. I also made images of the works we had looked available during the discussion. Sometimes there were obvious connections between the two works selected (such as two works of the same subject), which provided a theme for discussion, and in other cases sometimes surprising points of dialogue between works emerged. The maximum group size (including myself) was ten in order to allow all participants an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. The participants included members of the Cathedral and other local churches, as well as local people with an interest in art.

You can adapt this model to suit your own needs. For example, you may choose to have the discussion in-situ, or you may want to have a session looking at famous works of art via a projector. You can also consider whether you want to structure the session as a form of group prayer - in which case you might start with a prayer, such as the prayer of St. Richard - or as a contemplative discussion that might appeal to participants from beyond your church community. You might also find some of these questions helpful for using art as an aid to contemplation individually.

Questions for Reflection

Narrative scenes

When looking at scenes from the Bible and the lives of Saints, it may be helpful to read the story(ies) represented. You could even read more than one translation and think about how different interpretations of the Hebrew and Greek text are mirrored in the variety of ways in which artists represent a narrative. Some works illustrate a narrative very closely; elsewhere, artists may incorporate a personal interpretation of a story — for instance, by adding in additional details, or setting the scene in a contemporary setting.

What is happening in the scene?

Who is represented? There may be figures we cannot identify; do you think the artist wanted to keep us guessing; why might s/he do so?

How are the figures interacting with each other? what do their gestures and facial expressions tell us?

Has the artist been faithful to the narrative being represented, or innovative in his/her interpretation? What is the effect of this approach?

Does this artwork speak to you? What emotions does it stir up? Does it remind you of events in your own life, contemporary society, or historic events? Do you feel included in this scene, or inspired by it?

Individual figures

Portraits, icons and other representations of individual figures can express a range of ideas about their subjects. These questions may also be helpful for thinking about subjects with more than one person but are very formalised - such as depictions of the Madonna and Child.

Who is represented here? How do we know?

Are other important symbols or motifs included (e.g. details in the scenery; objects held by the subject)? What do these tell us?

Is the subject represented at a specific time in his/her life? what effect does this have?

What do the facial expression and gestures of the figure convey?

Is the figure engaging with you, the viewer? How do you respond to this figure?

Symbolic works

Some works of art are neither representational (of a narrative or individual), nor entirely abstract, but contain one or more recognisable symbols or motifs. An example is the John Piper tapestry in Chichester Cathedral, which is based on symbols of the Trinity, the four elements (earth, air, fire and water), and the Evangelists.

What symbol(s) has the artist depicted?

Are the colours important (e.g. red may remind us of blood, green of new life)?

Does the artwork (or one or more of the symbols) remind you of anything — in your own life, or the Bible, for example?

What is the meaning(s) of this artwork?

How does the artwork make you feel?

Abstract works

Some works have little or no representational content and yet are able to convey and inspire a range of meanings and responses.

Does this artwork remind you of anything?

Are the style and/or material(s) important?

How does this artwork make you feel?

What do you think this artwork means?

Are the colours, shapes, material and size important?

General questions

These are questions which may be relevant to any artwork.

Do we need information about an artwork in order to understand it?

What is the title of the artwork? Is this the artist's title? How does the title affect how we read the work?

Who created this artwork? How does knowledge of the artist — or lack of such knowledge — affect how we read it?

Can an artwork carry more than one meaning — at different times in history, and/or for different viewers — or is its meaning prescribed by the artist?

What colours and materials has the artist used? Do you think these carry specific meanings?

Do these evoke particular associations or emotions for you, as a viewer?

When was this work created? Does the age of the artwork affect how you view it? Is knowledge of the historic context important to understand the work?

Further Resources

Bishop Otter Scholar Blog. <https://bishopotter scholar.wordpress.com/discussion-group/>

On the 'Discussion Group' page, you will find reports on the discussion groups held during my work as Bishop Otter Scholar.

The Church of England, 'Vocations in Art' resources. <https://www.churchofengland.org/clergy-office-holders/vocation/vocations-sunday/vocations-in-art.aspx>

A collection of resources from the Church of England exploring representations of vocations (in the broad sense that God calls everyone) in art.

Slow Art Day. <http://www.slowartday.com/>

A secular initiative to encourage participants to spend time looking at art slowly, which embodies many of the same principles suggested in these pages. You could run a Slow Art Day event in your local church; the Slow Art Day team provide helpful guidance to hosts.