

Imagination, revelation and transformation: That is what happens when art participates in religious education

by Francisca Ireland-Verwoerd

In this workshop we will be joined by art (sadly, only in reproduction), listening to its voice and holding its gifts. It will be as if we receive each other as dinner guests at a party – presenter, attendees, and the subject of art in religious education. In each of the movements of the feast we will practice hospitality through openness to new discoveries, generosity toward the subject and each other, being present, and respectfully withholding judgment. It is my conviction that this kind of hospitality in religious education with art, can lead to surprising personal and corporate insights that may leave all of us, and our future students, changed.

Main concepts and practice

The workshop will cover the pedagogy of art as *participant* (instead of tool) in religious education; the practice of ‘conversing’ with art and reflecting on it; the meaning of “art,” “imagination,” “revelation” in the context of religious education; and how they can work towards transformation. Reflecting with art can be practiced in every setting where people are able and willing to pay attention, to hold different concepts in tension, and to learn from each other.

An outline of the interactive workshop

Come on in: *Introduction to each other and to the topic*

The method of introducing ourselves will depend on the number of people present, but some level of acquaintance will be established to facilitate the sharing of insights as a step in personal and communal learning. Although the depth of learning (and transformation) may be limited because of the one-time setting, the experience is important as example of the practice. The topic will be introduced by way of a short lecture, in which terms will be defined, and reference will be made to authors and fields of study that contribute to this pedagogy.

Bon appetite: *Three guided conversations with art*

A set of different questions will be asked of three (projected images of) works of art. Because engaging with art is not a skill that is taught in most educational systems, the guiding questions will help participants to “see,” to pay sustained attention to the art work, to make meaning out of perception, and to connect this meaning to other experiences in their life. Some of the questions will involve embodied engagement (striking a pose, locating a feeling) in order to connect the materiality of art to the physicality of us as conversation participants.

Answering the questions requires the work of the imagination with a cumulative effect taking place when one person’s insight will lead to another person’s new ‘seeing’. The art itself, the embodied information, the imaginative insights and the communal observations are all sources of knowledge. As human beings we are conditioned to draw inferences from and connect information with what we already know. Those direct reflections, personal and communal, will constitute another source of knowledge.

Revelation can occur at the level of new information (“I had never seen that before”), at a deeper level of connecting this particular information with other knowledge (“That reminds me of...,” “Now I understand why...”), and at an even deeper personal level (“That artwork expresses what I feel when...”). When the artworks are religious and/or interpreted religiously,

the spiritual dimension of knowledge and insights can become a powerful revelation that addresses the person and community existentially.

After dinner conversation: *Meta-reflection, thinking about the process*

One of the hardest questions to ask people is “What just happened?” Nevertheless, it is essential for educators to understand the process in order to know why it works, how it works and how to proceed. So we will “chew the cud” and discuss what happened in each of the conversations with art. By dissecting the various steps, new insights arise which will enable the participants not only to gain knowledge, but to reproduce similar practices. Since every art work, every group of students, every setting is different, no lesson plan or book on pedagogy can give sufficient information about this particular way of teaching. Understanding and employing this pedagogy comes from experiencing it and reflecting on that experience. This is at the same time exactly the pedagogy of art participation: experiencing it and reflecting on that experience. The transformational power of this approach lies in the combination of embodied “living through” the information and then relating that knowledge to the person’s own fund of experiences. The process of association or even *bi-sociation*, which happens “when two habitually incompatible frames of reference converge, usually with surprising suddenness, to compose a meaningful unity,”¹ shifts perspectives in ways that can enable changes in thinking and behavior.

Next time at your place: *Drawing conclusions for one’s own practice*

In order for this workshop to be “transformational,” we will reflect at yet another level: how does the experience of the workshop relate to the participants’ own teaching experiences and needs? Allowing time for reflection and articulation of problems and possibilities can solidify important insights. Participants learn from each other by paying attention and being open to the possibility of doing things differently. The communal wisdom of teaching is a rich resource and encouragement when educators develop new approaches to teaching.

Sources grounding the presentation (a tip of the iceberg)

- Baumgarten, Barbara Bennet. *Visual Art as Theology* (1994).
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience* (1934).
- Groome, Thomas. *Sharing Faith* (1991).
- Harris, Maria. *Teaching & Religious Imagination* (1987).
- Holzer, Madeleine Fuchs. *Aesthetic Education, Inquiry and the Imagination* (2007).
- Moore, Mary Elizabeth. *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (2005).
- Stone, Karen. *Image and Spirit: Finding Meaning in Visual Art* (2003).
- Yates, Wilson. “Theology and the Arts after Seventy Years,” *ARTS* 26, 3 (2015).
- Yenawine, Philip. *Visual Thinking Strategies*. (2014).

Take home material

At the end of the workshop a handout will be available with my email address for further questions; a bibliography of books and articles used for this workshop and concerning this topic; and a script of the three guided conversations as a starting point for those who would like to implement this kind of exploration with their own students.

¹ James Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 38.

Guided Art Viewing Scripts

The sentences between the italicized questions provide clarification and information. Be sure to give enough time for people to answer your question before giving new data. Have a few minutes of silence for people to look and formulate (if they choose, write down) their own answer, before allowing the question to be answered out loud. This gives everyone the opportunity to see for themselves, without being influenced by other people's answers. After some quiet moments, though, the sharing of (in)sights can lead to new (in)sights. Both movements are necessary.

Experience one – show the painting “Abraham” (1949) by Barnett Newman.

[This is an exercise about seeing and how what we see is influenced by knowledge we gain about the painting, era, painter, etc.]

- *Has anyone ever seen this painting before?*
- *In one word, what is your first impression?*

Description: size [6' 10 3/4" x 34 1/2"], how it hangs, black w black stripe and white around the stripe.

- *Any reaction?*

This painting was painted by a Jew.

- *Do you see anything differently or more?*

This painting was painted by a Jew in 1949.

- *Do you see anything differently or more?*

The painter eventually called this painting *Abraham*.

- *Do you see anything differently or more?*

Abraham is also the name of the artist's father. Abraham died in 1947.

- *Do you see anything differently or more?*

The name of the painter is Barnett Newman, an important figure in abstract expressionism and color field painting.

- *Do you see anything differently or more?*

Experience two – show the painting “Noli Me Tangere” (1961) by Graham Sutherland

[This exercise takes the participants deeper into the experience of ‘seeing’ at different levels. We are so used to observe-and-evaluate almost at the same moment that we need to learn to keep seeing while keeping judgments and conclusions temporarily at bay. This means that the process of meaning-making is also delayed. In the course of gaining more visual information, more opportunities are created for additional meaning.]

- *Has anyone ever seen this painting before?*
- *What do you see? Figures, colors, lines, light/shadows.*
- *Sutherland used a lot of geometric patterns. What do you see?*
- *What is the movement in the painting? Lots of 'up and down'*
- *What do you think it is about?*
- *With one word, what does the attitude of the man portray?*
- *And with one word, what does the attitude of the woman portray?*
- *This is a scene from the Bible – which story could it be?*
- *[Read John 20:10-18]. How do you see this story in the painting?*
- *What does the painting portray differently from the Bible passage?*
- *If you were the painter, what would you have added or left out of the painting?*
- *Let's act it out. First, let's kneel like the woman is kneeling. How does this relate to the one word for the woman's posture? If it feels different, then why? Release the posture.*
- *What did you notice while you were imitating this pose – did anything strike you?*
- *Second, using your chair, stand just like the man is standing. How does this relate to the one word for the man's posture? If it feels different, then why? Release the posture.*
- *What did you notice while you were imitating this pose – did anything strike you?*
- *Do you understand this Bible passage differently now that we have studied this painting?*
- *Any spiritual insights?*

Experience three – show the painting “Last Supper” (1978) by Harald Duwe.

[The religious significance of this painting only slowly unfolds with more information and more ‘seeing’. This offers opportunity for reflections on theological concepts in a different mode than a lecture on systematic theology.]

- *Has anyone ever seen this painting before?*
- *What do you see? Figures, objects, foreground-background, colors.*
- *Where does the light come from?*
- *Is there movement in the painting?*
- *Let's look for the classic elements of aesthetics: balance, harmony and unity. How does the painter reach this goal?*
- *What would you have done differently to reach balance, harmony and unity?*
- *What are the objects on the table?*
- *Few of the men have facial expressions, but their hands are very expressive. What kind of emotions do their hands express?*

The painter is Harald Duwe, from West Germany, who lived from 1926-1984. He painted in a way he himself called ‘engaged realism’ – a branch of German critical realism. This engagement and realism can be seen in the painting: the people are

painted with almost painful reality. Their position and posture around the table invites us in. Duwe's other paintings of groups have the same 'flavor' of people and arrangement.

The painting was painted in 1978. Let me give you some words and images to give an impression of the situation in Europe at the time: energy crisis, Baader-Meinhof kidnappings and murders, massacre at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. Europe just had the Yom Kippur war, followed by the Camp David peace treaty. Soweto uprising, Pol Pot's horror regime in Cambodia. Environmental issues, rise of feminism, rapid societal change. Bell-bottoms, Saturday Night Fever, side-burns, and Farrah Fawcett. In art and architecture: geometric designs, "postmodernity," and early deconstructionism. Lava lamps and platform shoes. In theology: secularization, liberation theology and feminist theology; "the morning after" of "God is dead," so now what?

In this climate, Duwe and eleven friends were on a walk when they discussed the possibility of portraying religious themes in modern art. This painting is Duwe's reaction to that discussion. It is called "Last Supper."

- *What do you see now?*
- *What could be the significance of the hand gestures and postures now?*

We see Duwe's realism here: he painted not "modern man" or abstract beings, but real people in relationship with each other and with God. His realism extends to Christ, and specifically Christ sacrificed. Christ is dead – but for whom is the empty chair? Who are these people still expecting to come?

This painting is also a parable of the murders that happen every day. Another side of Duwe's realism is that he painted himself in the painting, literally. He is the one who holds the spoon.

This painting has no explicit Judas: we are all Judas and the West has cut up Christ's body, just like this.

- *What theological implications or questions or concepts can you see in this painting?*
- *Do any of the postures resonate with you? Who would you be?*
- *Invite students to recreate the arrangement of people. What do you feel?*
- *Can this painting be helpful in reflection on theological issues?*