

Sermon: “Graven Images: Art Show Sunday”

Rev. Stephen Milton

October 18, 2020

Good morning. Welcome to a special worship service. Normally this weekend would have been our annual art show fundraiser. The whole church would fill up with art that people could look at and buy. This was always a really fun weekend, and a great way to raise money for the church and some charities we care about. But this year, because of the pandemic, we can't have lots of people inside the church. So, to honour the art show, we are devoting today's entire worship service to art. We have filled the sanctuary with art from inside the church, some of it originally purchased at the art show. We'll be hearing stories about the art, and I will be talking about the connection between spirituality and art in a series of mini sermons, instead of one longer one.



Sermon #1: How Can Christians Have Sacred Art?

It may seem obvious that Christians like us love art, but it wasn't always so. When Christianity first began, they did not enjoy art the way we do now. Part of the reason was the commandment against creating images of God, or anything that God had created. The Jews had taken this very seriously. Their synagogues did not have paintings of bible stories or any pictures of God. And at first, it appears that the Christians followed suit. But we know that by the 300s, Christians started painting scenes from the Bible, including images of Jesus.¹ What changed? Weren't those graven images?

Jesus is the key to why we Christians have art. Over the years, Christians came to see Jesus as God in human form. That meant that if you asked, what is God like, the answer was that God is like Jesus. Jesus is the image of God, like a living, breathing painting of God. Now, that didn't mean that they thought that God had arms and legs and a beard. They didn't go that far. But they did say that if you want to know what God is like, get to know Jesus, who, like a painting, is a representation of God.²

That reasoning meant that if God could be portrayed by Jesus, then there was no reason not to make images of Bible stories, and everything else that God has created. So Christians embraced religious art in a way the Jews did not. Churches filled up with paintings of Bible scenes, people put them on their walls at home, and wore them as jewelry. By the Middle Ages, cathedrals were full of statues of saints, and stained glass depicting bible scenes.

¹ Robin Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 9.

² <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/religionqanda/2015/06/does-the-bibles-ban-on-graven-images-forbid-art-in-church/>



Here's an image from Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. Cathedrals were packed with statues and stained glass depicting saints and events from the Bible. It was like walking into the Christian story.

But, back in the early 1500s, some Christians thought the Catholics had gone way too far. In 1517, Martin Luther started the Protestant Revolution, and one of his demands was that all religious art be taken out of churches. Luther feared that common people were worshipping the statues of saints and Bible figures, and that was against the commandment that forbade graven images. So the Protestants ripped all religious art out of their churches, and some of them even created massive bonfires in the streets where they burnt it all.³ Churches became spare, usually with just a cross on the wall.

Later, Luther would clarify that he thought religious art was ok in homes, just not in churches. But most protestants at the time decided that no religious art was allowed, anywhere. And that created a big problem for the artists of Protestant Europe. They had made a good living creating paintings and statues for churches. Now all that work had dried up.⁴ So what could they do?

Many of them started using their skills to create paintings that wouldn't get them in trouble with the Protestants. So, in France and Holland, artists started painting portraits of regular people. They weren't the first to do this, Leonardo had done the same with Mona Lisa. But they did it in much greater volume. They painted merchants, and the life of regular people. Here's an example of a country dance by Brueghel the Elder:

³ Robin Jensen, *The Cross*, 187.

⁴ E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, p. 283. ff



This was new – everyday life had not been a subject of much art before the Protestant revolution. Now, normal people could appear in paintings. They also created a new fashion out of painting landscapes.



These landscapes were revolutionary in many ways, including their ability to be hyper realistic. Centuries before the camera was invented, Protestant artists produced a new kind of window on the natural world that had been rare before this.

So, when you walk through an art gallery, or visit our art show, you can thank the Protestant revolution for all those landscapes, portraits and nature paintings you see. The Protestants unintentionally made secular art a big thing.

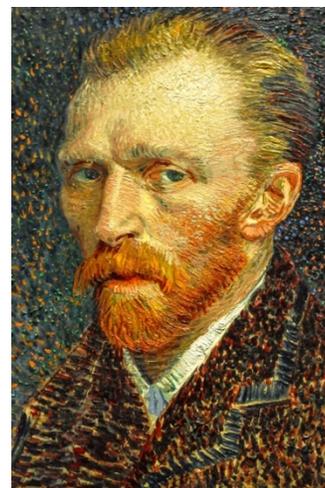
Sermon #2: “Starry, Starry Night”

When people come to the art show, one of the most popular categories of painting are landscapes and nature. Paintings of rocks, trees and lakes, or animals. These can be small scenes, or really big ones. In the sanctuary we have this painting by Doug Elliot. He was the organist here for many years, and also a skilled painter. His painting shows a sugar shack, where maple sap is boiled down into maple syrup. There are several of Doug’s paintings at the church. Like most artists, Doug wasn’t trying to provide an image that looked like a photograph. Instead, he wanted to give us an impression of what it felt like to be there that day. He conveys emotion with his use of colour and light. This isn’t a painting of a moment in time, it is a painting of a moment in time as felt by the artist. He wants to give us an impression of the scene, not a photograph of it.

That approach to painting is called impressionism, and it has a spiritual foundation. The impressionist movement started in the 19th century, around the same time as the camera was invented. This new technology provided a mechanical way to provide realistic portrayals of the world. This inspired many artists to look for a new way to paint the world. One of them was Vincent van Gogh.

He was a devout Christian. Born in Holland, he was the son of a Protestant minister. He himself wanted to be ordained, but failed the tests. So he set out to be a painter, with a mission. He wanted to create a new kind of sacred art.

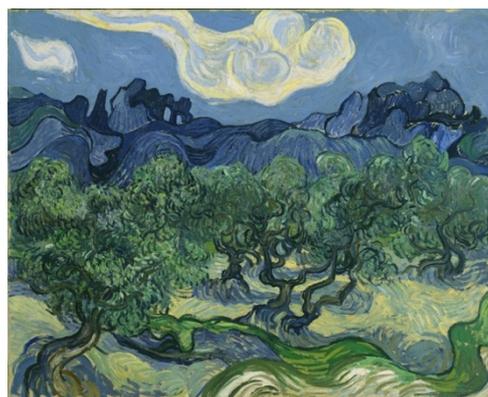
Van Gogh was in dialogue with other artists about this, including Paul Gauguin. They agreed that God's presence in the world should be a focus of their painting, but they disagreed about how to do it. Gauguin had been raised a catholic, so he had no problem with painting religious scenes.



Here's his painting of Christ in the olive garden, the night of his arrest:

When Van Gogh saw this, he freaked out. He castigated Gauguin for doing the same old thing as religious painters had always done.⁵ Spirituality is about what's happening now, Van Gogh declared, not what happened 2000 years ago.

So Van Gogh painted a reply to Gauguin. This is his painting called "Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun." There are no people, no Jesus. Just a kind of ethereal white cloud over the dark olive trees. For Van Gogh, this was a spiritual painting because he sought to convey a spiritual mood through nature. The world is God's canvas, Van Gogh believed, so the painter's job is to help the viewer find God in the world.



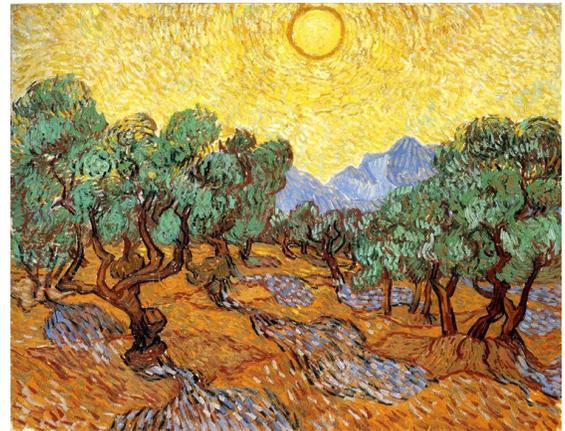
⁵ Rebekah Smick, " 'The Second Book of God': Protestant Mysticism," *Mystic Landscapes*, 74-5.

Van Gogh realized he couldn't just paint the world as it is to reveal God's presence. He would need to convey his own sense of God. So Van Gogh chose exaggerated colours so people wouldn't think they were looking at a photograph. Van Gogh had regular mystical experiences, feeling God's presence all day long. He wrote to his brother Theo, "(I) have a tremendous need for , shall I say the word – for religion- so I go outside at night to paint the stars." ⁶ So he used his paints to show the world as infused by God and experienced by Van Gogh. (Starry Night):



In his hands, a night sky becomes a swirling cosmos that looks alive, like a river in the sky. This isn't a realistic painting, but one where Van Gogh tries to show the spirit of God in the sky, as he felt it.

In this daytime painting, the olive grove is suffused with divine light that radiates out from a deliberately unrealistic sun. Yet, Van Gogh's paintings were not popular in his time. He died of suicide, poor and virtually unknown.



Van Gogh's legacy grew in the years after his death. His work inspired generations of painters after him, including many at our art show. Like him, they seek to convey what they feel on canvas, sharing their spiritual experiences with the world- to reveal that point where human consciousness meets the sacred energy which sustains the world.

⁶ Mystic Landscapes, 87.

Sermon #3: “Picasso and the African Spirits”

Many artists have no interest in spirituality, and find little use for the church. Pablo Picasso was like that. He was raised in Catholic Spain, but rejected its teachings and morality as boring and stultifying.

A gifted artist even as a child, he did what all aspiring painters do and travelled to Paris.



By 1903, he was living in dire poverty, painting working class people and prostitutes in shades of blue. He sought to convey the hardships they and he were enduring in poverty. But he was dissatisfied. No one was buying his paintings, and he felt everything he did was too conventional. He was never going to say anything new by copying old European ideas of art.

His breakthrough came in 1906 when he became aware of African art. Some of his friends were collecting it. Picasso became fascinated with African masks from Sub-Saharan Africa. He visited a museum collection over and over again. What caught his interest was how the masks presented the human face and body. They didn't look real, but angular and distorted.

Picasso later said that what excited him was that these masks were not decorative but were tools for capturing spiritual forces. People wore them to invite ancestral spirits into them, or to ward them off. The masks were useful, not pretty. They were meant to invoke the world of the spirits, not this one.⁷

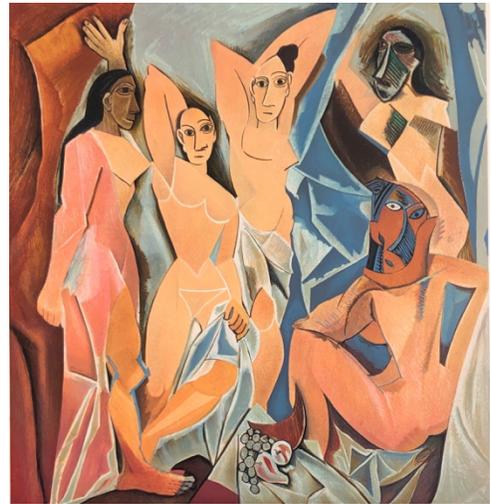


To Picasso, this was revolutionary. He later declared that these masks showed him what art is for. To create a bridge between the world and the human mind.

⁷ https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aima/hd_aima.htm

Drawing on the spiritual power of the masks, Picasso created a painting that truly revolutionized art. After a year's work, he produced *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

The painting depicts a group of prostitutes in Barcelona's red light district.⁸ They are nude, and facing the viewer, as though looking at their next customer. But unlike European nudes, these women are not meant to look pretty. Their faces and bodies are angular, like the masks. In fact, two of the faces look just like African masks.⁹



Even Picasso's friends hated this painting. It took twenty years before he could sell it.¹⁰ But this is the start of what is now called cubism. Paintings that break up people and objects into separate parts, spread out at different angles.

These are not pretty paintings, and they are not meant to be. After the initial shock, other painters started to experiment with this new way of looking at the world. Picasso goes further in his next paintings, breaking the world into pieces, in the hopes of seeing below the surface, to find and display the shapes that make up the visible world.

This is the start of modern abstract art. It spreads all over the West. Lawren Harris of the Group of Seven takes it to the arctic, where he paints the north as a series of shapes.



And here in our sanctuary, a place where we meet to see God, our stained glass is composed of abstract shapes, as though looking for the divine code beneath reality.



This whole experiment was inspired by the spiritual traditions of Africa. Picasso didn't really know much about African religion, he just took what he liked and ran. An all-too typical strategy in the West.

⁸ H.W. Janson, *History of Art*, 2d ed., 652.

⁹ Robin Blake, *Essential Modern Art* (Bath 2001), 94.

¹⁰ 1925: <http://www.music.mcgill.ca/~cmckay/papers/miscellaneous/HistoryDemoiselles.pdf>

So today, we will try to redress that imbalance a bit. Our art show often features African art from Zimbabwe, imported by William Suk, John's son. In our hallway lies a beautiful sculpture of a praying woman by Chimofombo. We asked William to get in touch with Chimofombu to help us understand what the sculpture means, and how it came about. Here's what he has to say:

(Chimofombo's video plays).

So, the spiritual journey continues, and there is no end in sight. As long as there are sensitive people who feel the presence of God, there will be art expressing that relationship. It will change as we change as people, as our lives change, as the world changes. Art is truly a window into our souls, and in some hands, a doorway to the Spirit. May it always be so.

Amen.

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