

Religious art can help us see the divine in the world



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I can't claim to be an expert on art, but I do have opinions on art that I like and art that I don't. When it comes to religious art, my opinions are probably even stronger. I tend to go more in the direction of abstract rather than realistic, but some more realistic religious art intrigues me because I see the culture and community out of which it emerges.

The various religions have throughout history had mixed views of art depicting religious themes. Some considered the commandment not to make graven images to prohibit certain art forms. Judaism is more a religion of the text, but in the Hebrew Scripture the instructions are given for images of angels to be included in the temple. Illustrated Torah scrolls would also include various artistic portrayals, and later Judaism includes examples of art in the synagogue or temple.

Muslim art is more geometrical, and calligraphy is a major art form with frequent use of words from the Qur'an. The depiction of humans or living beings is prohibited in many countries and traditions, but is more accepted in Shi'a communities.

Christian history is a rich source of religious art, from the windows of cathedrals to depictions in paintings and statues. While there have been iconoclastic periods of the destruction of images for fear that it was the image that was being worshiped rather than the invisible God, most Christian communities make heavy use of art to depict biblical stories and events.

In Eastern Orthodoxy, the use of icons is an important part of the tradition and architecture. A good example is Grand Rapids' St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, where this year's Abrahamic Dinner was held. In a book published by the church, it is noted that the discovery of "images depicted on the walls of Roman catacombs, where the first faithful secretly gathered, are some of the first examples of the use of images in Christian life." A few years ago, I attended a conference at St. Nicholas on iconography and learned about the centuries of tradition and rules for making the icons. It was an opening to a fascinating tradition that enhanced my appreciation for this form of art and veneration.

When the controversy over icons emerged centuries ago, Orthodox St. John of Damascus defended the images as not being material objects being worshipped. He wrote, "I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter. ... I venerate it, though not as God.

.... Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. Nothing is despicable which God has made."

The work of contemporary artist John August Swanson has been described as a kind of iconography with Latin American influence, with its bright colors and narrative themes. He works in a variety of media but is best known for his serigraphs, a complex process of multiple silk-screen printing. Each color is printed separately from a stencil prepared by the artist. Some of his serigraphs have over 80 separate printings to form all of the colors. Swanson's work is vibrant in color and intricate in detail. The picture above is just a small detail from his larger work on Psalm 85 representing a call for justice and includes the verses:

"A spiritual life is not about escaping the world and its daily requirements; it's about infusing the world with a vision of the holy and discovering the divine in the earthly task at hand."

Gertrude Mueller Nelson

Kindness and truth shall meet,
Justice and peace shall kiss.
Truth shall spring out of the earth
And justice shall look down from heaven.
(Psalm 85:10-11)

Swanson was the son of two immigrants, one from Sweden and the other from Mexico. He lived a simple life working menial jobs and considered himself a failure. He didn't find his artistic vocation until age 30, when he became a student of Sister Corita Kent, who was well known for her social justice approach to art in the 1960s.

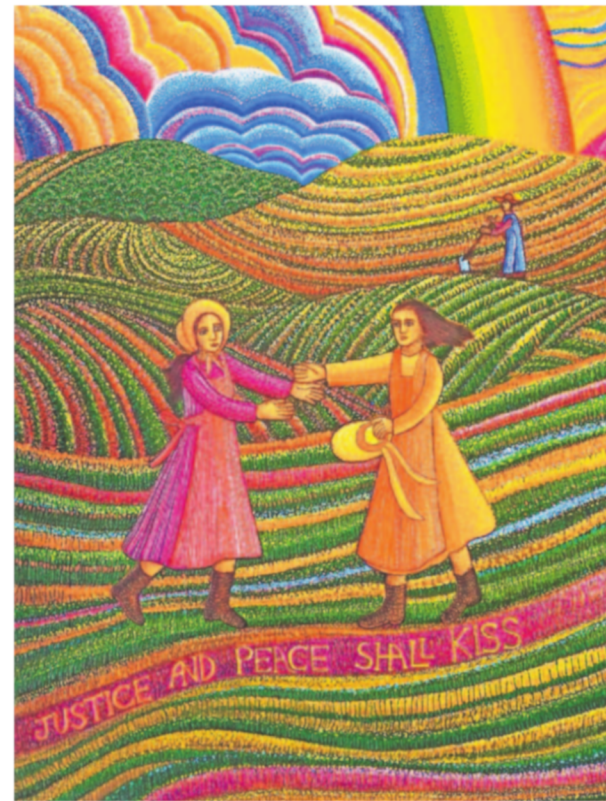
Swanson says of his teacher: "Corita saved my life. She became a mentor helping me find the door that had been closed in my life. She opened me to art and ideas. She helped me find healing." He also credits her for introducing him to the potential of the silk-screen process and helping him integrate his deep faith with a strong sense of social justice.

His work is described as "seeing the sacred in the ordinary," and Swanson lives simply with a commitment to social justice in his art and in his life. Artist-writer Gertrude Mueller Nelson said after seeing Swanson's work: "A spiritual life is not about escaping the world and its daily requirements; it's about infusing the world with a vision of the holy and discovering the divine in the earthly task at hand."

Swanson has visited West Michigan many times, most recently for the opening of an exhibit of his works at the Woodlawn Ministry Center at 3190 Burton St. SE. The exhibit will be open through March 7, when it will move to the Second Reformed Church in Zeeland, where it will be on exhibit through June.

Images of his works are available online at eyekons.com/john_swanson_serigraphs, as well as his website, johnaugustswanson.com.

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This image shows a detail from "Psalm 85," a serigraph by John August Swanson. Submitted