

ZOOM PRESENTATION – Artist-in-Residence January 3, 2021

Thank-you for the invitation to present today, and thank you for joining in! The Bethel Adult Education committee asked me to talk about how my faith is expressed through my art, and to relate those ideas to the upcoming tree series which will begin next Sunday.

The relationship between faith and art, or art and religion is in itself an entire field of multidisciplinary study that includes methodologies such as art history, cultural history, comparative religion, theology, history of religion, and so on.

Today I would like to take you on a journey with me to explore ideas around faith and art, travelling from the general to the specific, towards my personal art/faith journey and culminating in the tree project. We will take a bit of a long way around because the question really is a big question.

Artistic experience is an integral part of our present collective human existence. There is no exact linguistic equivalent to a musical composition, a painting, or a dance movement. Just try to evoke the feeling generated by listening to the Hallelujah Chorus using only words! At times, we need the arts to express our most profound human experiences. In cultures around the world, life's most important events - weddings, funerals, birthdays, religious holidays, and community occasions are observed and celebrated through the arts (even the COVID pandemic can't stop us from finding ways). The arts provide unique avenues to perception and expression, contributing to our understanding of the world, and of ourselves. The arts can deepen our empathy with others by considering diverse views and possibilities, and bring meaning and a greater range of emotional responses to our lives.

The arts also use metaphor and symbol to communicate ideas more profoundly than they would be if simply expressed literally. Consider the difference between the verbal statement: Lincoln freed the slaves, and a statue of Lincoln holding an axe in the air ready to sever the chains of an African slave who is holding the chain between his shackled wrists over a rock. This artistic metaphor is much more powerful than simply stating that Lincoln freed the slaves!

The arts can even evoke the quality of numinous – numinous is defined as having a strong spiritual quality, indicating or suggesting the presence of divinity. Beauty can do that, and for the soul, beauty is the quality in things that invites absorption and contemplation, that lures the heart into profound imagination.

Visual images can have the power to evoke the human capacity to feel. This connection between art and feeling is related to aesthetics, derived from the Greek “to be sensitive”, or “coming to know through the senses”. Conversely, an anaesthetic prohibits the human ability to have feeling. For the Hindus, for example, the tenet of the indivisibility of art and religion has to do with the aesthetic merging into the spiritual.

The arts in general have played a significant role in human life, transmitting culture across time and place, and often serving as the only record of past civilizations.

First, let's take a very cursory look at how art and religion have been linked throughout history. From prehistory to the 16th century Reformation, art was one of the most effective ways to express religious beliefs.

Consider the cave paintings in the Paleolithic period at Lascaux (c 14,000 – 10,000 BCE) – they seem to have served as religious sanctuaries where fertility and hunting rituals were performed.



Consider the huge rocks at Stonehenge and other circular megaliths that seem to certainly have had some ritualistic religious purpose.



Consider the religious belief in the afterlife expressed in many cultures of the past, such as Egypt not only in the pyramids but in sarcophagi like that of king Tut.



Temples, churches, and mosques were symbolic dwelling places of gods and served to relate worshippers to their deity.



Greek Parthenon

Gothic cathedral



Islamic mosque

Hindu temple

The list can go on with paintings and sculptures depicting gods and goddesses or narratives of sacred stories, thereby making their images accessible.

For Indigenous cultures around the world it would be hard to separate art from religion. Consider African masks used in ritual or ceremony, or the North American Aboriginal dance ceremonies with elaborately designed clothing of feathers and beads.



During the middle ages in Western Europe, art often served an educational function. One important way of communicating bible stories and legends of the saints to a largely illiterate population was through illuminated manuscripts created before the invention of the printing press.



Bible stories were also communicated through the sculptures, paintings and stained glass windows in churches and cathedrals. Consider the well-known Sistine Chapel with paintings by Michelangelo, or the last supper painting by Leonardo da Vinci.



This tradition continues in many Catholic churches today. When Gary and I lived in LaBroquerie we attended a funeral at St. Joachim catholic church and it was filled with paintings and sculptures.



That was a very fast walk through some of the art - religion connections from pre-history to the 16th century Reformation. But what makes visual art religious other than the obvious illustrations

of a biblical narrative? There are levels of closeness and distance in the relationship between art and religion. For example,

When art is used solely to illustrate religious narrative, it is subject to the authority of religion and some might call this visual propaganda.

There can be a relationship of mutuality between art and religion – a symbiotic union of inspired nurture.

Or, there might be a completely unified relationship between art and religion so that their individual identities become so completely blended into a single entity, it is impossible to discern what is art from what is religion. Again, this is thought to be the case in many Indigenous cultures.

Or, there might be a separatist relationship, as art and religion each operates independent of and without regard for the other, as in an iconoclastic religious environment (more on this later), or a totally secular non-religious culture.

This brings us to a discussion of iconography. In the religious context, an icon is an image (painting or sculpture) of Jesus or another holy figure, venerated and used as an aid to devotion. The widespread use of Christian iconography only began as Christianity increasingly spread among the gentiles after it was legalized by Constantine in 312 in what became the Eastern Christian (Byzantine) empire. But there were iconoclastic periods in history – iconoclasm literally meant the war on icons.

The war on icons has generally been motivated theologically by an Old Covenant interpretation of the Ten Commandments, which forbade the making and worshiping of "graven images" in Exodus 20:4. The 8th and 9th century iconoclasts in Eastern Christianity followed this biblical injunction, forbidding images of holy figures, including Christ, the Virgin and saints. They thought that depicting these in human form would lead to idolatry – worshipping the image or statue itself rather than what it represented. It was permissible to represent designs, patterns, or animal and vegetable forms, but not human figures. Traditional explanations for Byzantine iconoclasm have sometimes focused on the importance of Islamic prohibitions against images influencing Byzantine thought.



Byzantine (Eastern Christian) church with only patterns/designs.

After the iconoclast period, Byzantine art became rich with imagery again, especially mosaics, and it became indisputably difficult to decipher without some study of Christian theology. Such was the case, as we have seen, with the medieval and Renaissance period as well.



But the Reformation brought a new wave of iconoclasm with the Protestants. Taken to the extreme, the use of icons could border upon idolatry. But the iconoclastic attitude rejected imagery altogether such as in Zen Buddhism, Judaism, and most protestant churches. In fact, one of the “protests” of the protestant reformation was against the decadent iconography of the Catholic church and fear of worshiping the graven image. I say “most protestants” because Martin Luther himself was not against use of images/icons. He argued “If it is not a sin, but a good, to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes? As we know, the Mennonite belief system began during the Reformation. But the Mennonites of the Reformation were radical, and they were vehemently iconoclastic. And for centuries to come, Mennonites have maintained at best a skeptical, and at worst a condemning attitude toward the visual arts. I am old enough to have experienced some of this earlier in my life. More on that later.

To recap: The authoritative preference then, in most of the protestant west, has been for the primacy of the text – the word over the image. Religions like Hinduism and Eastern Christianity which favor the primacy of the image are differentiated as sacramental, creative, and intuitive in linguistic and cultural attitudes, from those religions such as Protestant Christianity and Judaism, preferring the primacy of the word and labeled as legalistic and pragmatic, and rational in language and cultural reception. And a domination of the written word results in the incorporation of art simply as illustration for the narrative, even though most of us are now literate verbally, but perhaps need some help with visual literacy.

So for most of Western Protestant Christianity since the Reformation, visual art and religion went separate ways. The church had been the great patron of the arts, but now patronage would shift to merchants, royalty and later, subjects of everyday life became of interest such as still-life, landscape painting, and pastoral scenes. Here is a very fast and very general walk through what happened to art outside of the church since the Reformation.



Diego Velasquez – Las Meninas (ladies in waiting) mid-1600s; Rachel Ruysch, basket of flowers 1700s, Jean Francois Millet, The Gleaners, 1800s

Then, with the invention of the camera around 1840, the role of art in the secular world also changed. Realistic and representational imagery was no longer needed since the camera could do

that. This led to an explosion of new styles and new ways of seeing, from impressionism's emphasis on light and the fleeting moment,



Monet's haystack series – 1890s

to Cubism in which a subject is painted from many viewpoints at once,



Georges Braque violin and candlestick 1910

To Expressionism in which the artist could turn inward and express emotion in visual form using the expressive possibilities of color



Kandinsky Composition VII 1913

Today, expressionism is broadly used to describe both abstract and representational images in which forms and colors are exaggerated to emphasize their essence or feeling, such as in the paintings of Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh used arbitrary color, slightly distorted forms, and active brush strokes that made his subjects slither with energy.



Starry Night 1890 Self portrait 1889

Let's return to the Mennonites and go to the 20th century. Their iconoclasm started to soften in the later 20th century and they have increasingly embraced the visual arts and religious images for their power to reveal truth and beauty. We are starting to see that visual art can enrich spirituality and shape theology in ways that can be as revelatory as written texts.

Are there images that have helped form the collective worldview of Mennonites? One example that comes to mind immediately is the woodcut print of Dirk Willems by Jan Luyken in the *Martyrs Mirror* which has become iconic. By it, generations of Mennonites have taken to heart Jesus' teaching to "turn the other cheek" in a deeply profound way practically unheard of in other Christian traditions. Recently a sculpture of this image was commissioned by the

Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach. Many of us know of the martyrs' stories by way of the visual image rather than the written narrative.



Another area of visual work in the Mennonite realm is women's needlework. This has been a creative and artistic outlet for many Mennonite women, producing for example, doilies, crocheted aprons for serving at church on Sundays, and especially quilts for the Mennonite Central Committee, but until the last few decades I know of very few Mennonite visual artists, male or female.

The Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery has helped to remedy some of that by encouraging the production of visual art among Mennonites and other cultures, often helping to be a bridge between various cultures and traditions. Its original mandate was to be a Mennonite institution that values artists, wanting to learn from them and to see their art . . . Quoting curator Ray Dirks: "To develop a place where artists from all churches and faiths can express themselves in an openly Christian institution, where diversity can be celebrated and embraced, and where artists can bring attention to issues . . ." By the way, in 2017 a tree was planted at the Forks in honor of the 20th anniversary of the gallery, as part of the Lieutenant Governor's Tree Project honoring outstanding contributions of Manitobans. And, a sapling from the Great Oak of the Mennonite Chortitza colony has also been planted on the grounds of CMU. I will be getting to trees eventually.

Art is neither conceived nor executed in a vacuum. It takes work to make meaningful points of contact among our faith, works of art, and the artist.

Now we have a historical context and a cultural/religious context into which I was born in 1962. My personal journey involved trying to figure out what to do with my artistic talent and what purpose my art had (questions whose answers continue to evolve over time).

I loved all the arts right from when I was young, and was very affected by beauty. I was in awe of the stars, but shrank back when a friend, irritated with my reverie, reminded me that they were just balls of gas millions of miles away, end of story. Pragmatic and rational. I loved horses, and other animals, and sunsets and flowers up close, and the way that light shone on objects creating highlights and shadows – especially on faces. I loved color. The visual world was a feast for my eyes. I loved to dance, but was told it was a sin. But David danced, I argued. I was too emotional and open, and was told to be more reserved. I loved music, and was allowed piano lessons but only in the hope that I would someday become church pianist. Later I came across some writing by Patrick Friesen, suggesting that some Mennonites would rather live in unheated caves than risk a little fire getting out of hand. I was a passionate right-brained girl not fitting in to the unheated cave which was the Mennonite home/context in which I started. I think my parents still struggled with the old Mennonite legacy of aversion to art. With the emphasis on simplicity,

sincerity, and humility, art was seen as artificial and pretentious (untrue/dishonest), proud, worldly, not useful, even dangerous and idolatrous. So of course although they would show off my pictures to relatives, they were not too happy when I decided to get my Fine Arts degree. They would have preferred a helping profession, or wife role. Even now, it is rare to see an artist from the Mennonite tradition who has not somehow bundled artistic talent together with a ‘helping profession’ or at least some expression of the community spirit.

Somehow I think I too was looking for a way to make art, while still making it useful and acceptable and **accessible** to the Mennonite world in which I so badly wanted to belong. I knew abstract art would be the least accessible, so I didn’t even consider going there. But I also had a legacy of abuse from home that needed to be dealt with. So some of my large works in art school were charcoal drawings expressing the feelings I had in relation to family and trauma. These images were part of the online MHC Gallery exhibit, *Breaking the Silence*, in March 2020 if you want to know more about it.



Can the attempt to heal from abuse using visual art be an act of faith? Art therapy is a helping profession after all.

I continued to wrestle with deciding what my art should be about and found myself interested in what was local. Artists do tend to paint what is around them so obviously I wasn’t going to choose mountains or oceans. I was also interested in things that might be marginalized, or not given much of a place (and this might have been the influence of my Mennonite background combined with my own feeling of being out of place – not belonging). I knew that art was powerful and it could disturb the comfortable, or comfort the disturbed. Both are important, but at some point I decided I wanted my art to be beautiful and to comfort, and to show viewers a beauty in things the way I saw them. Much of this had to do with light – just the right light can make almost anything beautiful – and this itself is a metaphor for Jesus being the light of the world.



For my Fine arts thesis, some of these ideas came together along with the visual loves of my childhood, in a series of large paintings on the endangered species of Manitoba's tall grass prairie. I wanted to make art for life's sake, not art for art's sake. I was painting light, beauty and calling attention to the endangered tall grass prairie ecosystem.



Small white ladies slipper / western prairie fringed orchid & sphinx moth pollinator

A few years after this, I was attending a church in North Kildonan and was asked to create a large painting for this church. I decided to paint an expressionist stylized dancing tree 10 feet wide to be unveiled to Bach's Brandenburg concerto, as a way of welcoming spring. I was trying to express the energy of life, like van Gogh did, and the small resurrections of spring, and I admit perhaps subconsciously I was subversively trying to bring the joy of dance into the church. This was about 2005, so they were probably quite progressive in welcoming this. Trees in the wind were divinely beautiful to me. And this was before I knew much about them.



Again we can ask the question, how can visual art relate to faith other than the obvious illustrations of a biblical narrative? I started to think about the idea that we are created in God's image. God is creative, so perhaps one of the ways we reflect his image is in that we are creative. Could another connection between faith and art, between art and religion be the reciprocity between image making and meaning making as creative correspondence of humanity with divinity?

Does narrowly trying to define the arts as either “Christian” or “secular” compromise both the artist and the art? St. Paul claims “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” Nothing stands wholly apart from God’s presence regardless of how we may try to define who and what is part of God’s redemptive plan. Art and human creativity come from God. Perhaps artists can glorify God and serve humanity, not by heaping Christian content into their work, but by pursuing the fullness of their talents with their heart, mind and soul. Perhaps Christians can add a line of questioning about art:

Does it resonate with or illuminate some aspect of our faith?

Does it cause us to see in new ways?

Does it challenge our lives, faith, or church?

Does it nourish our heart/minds?

Does it cause us to pick up our cross and follow?

In 2010 I got married and moved to LaBroquerie. We lived there for 7 years, surrounded by farm animals in every direction. I often saw them when the light was golden, low in the sky at dawn or dusk, and I found them to be beautiful. I had admired the paintings of wildlife artists for decades, and began to wonder if farm animals had been given their due – often only appearing in cartoons or folk art. I started to take my camera with me at all times, and sometimes Gary and I would stop in at farms and ask permission to photograph the animals. I created a series of 50 paintings and had an exhibition at the MHC Gallery in March 2015, titled *A Place in the Kingdom* – I had hoped for a place for farm animals in the kingdom of the art world and in the kingdom of what could be thought of as beautiful, a place for me in the Mennonite kingdom, and a place for both in the kingdom of God. I also collected stories from older Mennonites who had grown up on farms about their relationship to their animals and tried to honor the contribution of farm animals and the Mennonite journey of survival. This booklet is on the gallery web site under previous exhibits. Here are some of my favorite paintings from that show:



My great grandfather’s house barn

The feature painting of the show was actually a huge nativity scene, after all my talk about Christian art not necessarily having to be about illuminating biblical text! Nothing wrong with it.



In my own defense, I was actually calling attention to one who has not been given enough credit. Most nativity scenes show Jesus either lying in a manger, or being held by Mary. Here, we see Joseph holding him – and it is titled “The Commitment”, honoring Joseph’s commitment to be a father. The dorsal stripe on the donkey in the foreground forms a cross, foreshadowing not only Jesus riding on a donkey, but his death on the cross. And I subverted hierarchies by putting the animals in the foreground, and the wealthier wise men in the background. This painting was donated to CMU last year.

A couple of years ago, a new exhibit was started by Burl Horniachuk called *Faith in Form*, intended to be an annual event. It was held at the Douglas Mennonite Church and I was invited to bring some of my paintings. I chose the theme of the horse. I quoted Job 39: “Do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane? Do you make it leap like a locust, striking terror with its proud snorting? It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength . . . it laughs at fear, afraid of nothing . . . in frenzied excitement it eats up the ground.”



The average race-horse is 1,000 pounds

- Coming out of the starting gate, the horse will get to 40 mph in six strides
- A horse inhales and exhales once every stride. It completes 2½ breathing cycles a second.
- At full gallop, the horse takes in five gallons of air per second. From that air it extracts one quart of oxygen through its lungs.
- From rest to top speed, a horse’s heart-rate increases by a factor of 10, a man’s by only four.

“So the horse that walks around, eats grass, looks at the view and gives every appearance of tranquility was, in fact, designed by God to explode.”

-- Dr. George Pratt

I can't watch Secretariat gallop without crying at the majestic power of God's wonderful creation.

Were these horse paintings "Christian" art?

Do they resonate with or illuminate some aspect of our faith?

Do they cause us to see in new ways?

Do they nourish our heart/minds?

That brings us to my Artist-in-Residence time here at Bethel. The quilt speaks for itself. The Hymnal painting has been described – and you can see how it was a departure from my usual work, and so the process was very good for me.

Now, on to Trees -- - why did I choose trees?

My challenge now will be to talk about this without giving too much of the project away ahead of time. I won't show you my tree paintings ahead of time.

And before I continue, I'd like to forewarn you that at the end, I will give you an opportunity to share your own experience or connection with a tree, or a forest. For example: before my nephew passed away from cancer, the Children's Wish Foundation got him a set of maple drums. So we planted a maple tree by his grave.

Quite often trees mark the spot, and as it turns out, nearly every major character and every major theological event in the Bible has a tree marking the spot. In fact, other than people, trees are mentioned more than any other creature in the Bible, and Christianity is the only religion that weaves trees from one end of its sacred text to the other.

But how do I do a six-week series on trees? Again, I sent up prayers for help! Do I come up with the topics and then create corresponding paintings, or do I paint to illustrate other peoples' ideas? It was a "what comes first", chicken or the egg question, and I was told I should be both the chicken and the egg. So I wrote six essays on trees which hopefully will translate into six sermons, and created paintings to help express three of them. But first, I did a lot of research.

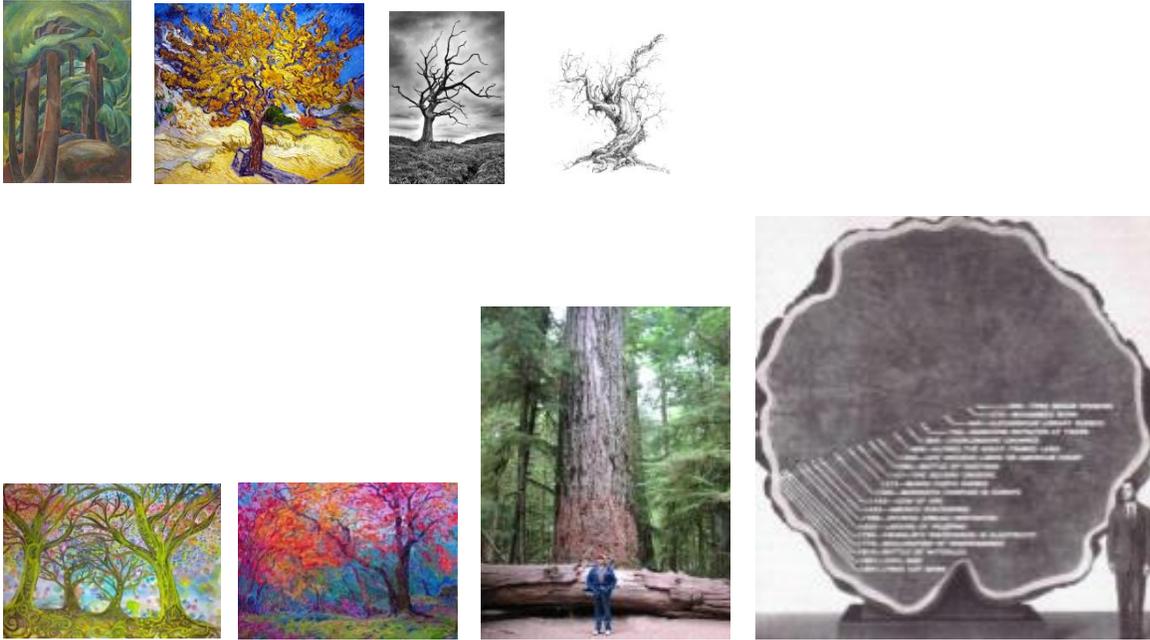
I found many online articles, and several books, which are now in the church library:



Trees are providers – they are used to make houses, furniture, musical instruments, they shelter animals, provide oxygen, shade, fruit, fuel, and the list could go on. Jesus died on a tree. And trees appear all over art, poetry and literature. Trees can fill all our senses – the smell of cedar, the sound of rustling poplar leaves, the taste of fruit, the touch of bark texture, and visually they can be stunningly beautiful.

Trees lend themselves to so many metaphors because they somehow resonate with our human emotions and even our physicality – they stand tall, they dance and “clap their hands”, they droop in sadness, they can represent old age (being the oldest living creatures on earth), they

gather us around them, they symbolize life. Think of all the artists who painted the soul of trees from the heart (Emily Carr, Vincent van Gogh, etc). They didn't paint a literal representation, but rather an expression of the tree's personality – personhood if you will.”



And many poets have written about them:

When I Am Among the Trees by Mary Oliver

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself, in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world, but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves and call out, “Stay awhile.”
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, “It’s simple,” they say,
“and you too have come into the world to do this,
to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.”

Trees appear everywhere in art, poetry, literature, especially the Bible, and we haven't even started talking about what science has to say about them.

Did you know that one of the oldest trees is a bristlecone pine in California at 4851 years old?

In Canada, a yellow cedar in BC measured 1835 years old.

Then there are clonal tree whose roots “sucker” and create colonies – one of which is a quaking aspen grove in Utah which has lived for 80,000 years. And they say that the Assiniboine forest aspens may all be one tree that suckered. Fascinating!



Did you know that trees are nature’s greatest connectors and communicate with each other through a subterranean network of roots connected to each other through a system of fungal filaments. Through it, nutrients are shared, sick trees are supported and nourished, messages of danger are emitted, and so on. A forest is an ecosystem that moderates temperature, stores water and generates a great deal of humidity, bring rain inland.

There is so much more to say about the science of trees because it is truly incredible, but again, I don’t want to give too much away.

Both the beauty and poetry of trees, and the science of trees evoke in me awe, wonder, and worship of their creator.

I hope that the upcoming series will bless you heart, mind, and soul as we take a closer look at these earthly companions. I am thankful for Bethel’s openness to the possibilities of mutual enrichment between faith and art. To truly see a tree, or any being beyond ourselves, requires a special kind of regard which invites contemplating the difference between objectifying and subjectifying the universe. I will end with William Blake: “The tree which moves some to tears of joy, is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way . . . so a man is, so he sees.” And that is my attempt to respond to the very big question of how my faith is connected to my art. I hope I was able to make some sense of it!

And now . . . I would like to invite your responses, questions, or stories about your connection with trees. Let me kick start that with a quick story about my husband Gary. He used to run, cycle, and ski in the Grand Beach trails. One day he said that he literally saw colorful energy around the trees, almost like an aura, and he felt very much at one with creation that day, and close to God.

I think Kathy also has a story about a tree in Pinawa?

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