

# Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 47 *The Spiritual Exercises as Foundation for  
Jesuit Higher Education*

Article 5

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March 2015

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### Recommended Citation

Lucas, Thomas S.J. (2015) "The Spiritual Exercises and Art," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 47, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol47/iss1/5>

# The Spiritual Exercises and Art

By Thomas Lucas, S.J.

*“Dateline: Paris, 1686. In the Jesuit college on the rue St. Jacques, rehearsals for the August ballet and play are in full swing. Onstage, Hercules slays monsters. Offstage, a killer is on the loose. And the Siamese ambassadors, on their way to see Louis XIV, are coming to the college show. Charles, the young Jesuit rhetoric teacher – and ballet producer – trying to do his job, keep his vows, and stop the murders, falls into the net of the first Paris police chief.”*

**S**o begins the teaser for Judith Rock’s 2010 novel *The Rhetoric of Death*. In this delightful historical whodunit and the three brisk page-turners that follow it, Rock, a dance historian by training, evokes the rich tradition of theater, dance, the arts, and intrigue at the Jesuit Collège Louis-le-Grand in 17th-century Paris. Young Charles du Luc introduces the modern reader to the long line of Jesuit artists and their colleagues – composers, dance masters, scene painters, and artist-architects – who used to and continue to use and teach the arts in our educational institutions.

Although Ignatius Loyola didn’t have an artistic bone in his body, he bequeathed to the Jesuit order and its

institutions a sensibility, an appreciation for the revelatory power of the imagination that was a breakthrough in the Western spiritual tradition. Unlike so many earlier spiritual writers who warned against fantasy or the use of images, Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises* encourages retreatants actively to use their imaginations as well as their intellects. While a few of the exercises are analytic or content-driven, the most important are exercises of the imagination: “contemplations” of the life of Jesus wherein the retreatants enter into the scene with eyes and ears and heart open. They begin with a visual composition “made by imagining the place.” And each day ends with an application of the senses: “to see the persons with the imaginative sense of sight...to hear what they say or could say, to smell and to taste...to touch with the sense of touch...always seeking to

derive some profit from this” (SpEx 122-126). Ignatius thus connects the spiritual realm to the concrete world of the retreatant’s own sensory experience with all its symbolic and metaphorical furnishings. In short, those making the exercises are taught to trust their imaginative experience. No stranger himself to the uncharted and sometimes confusing places to which such trust can lead the untrained, Ignatius moreover laid out a simple yet effective check-

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valve mechanism for the overactive imagination in his rules for discernment.

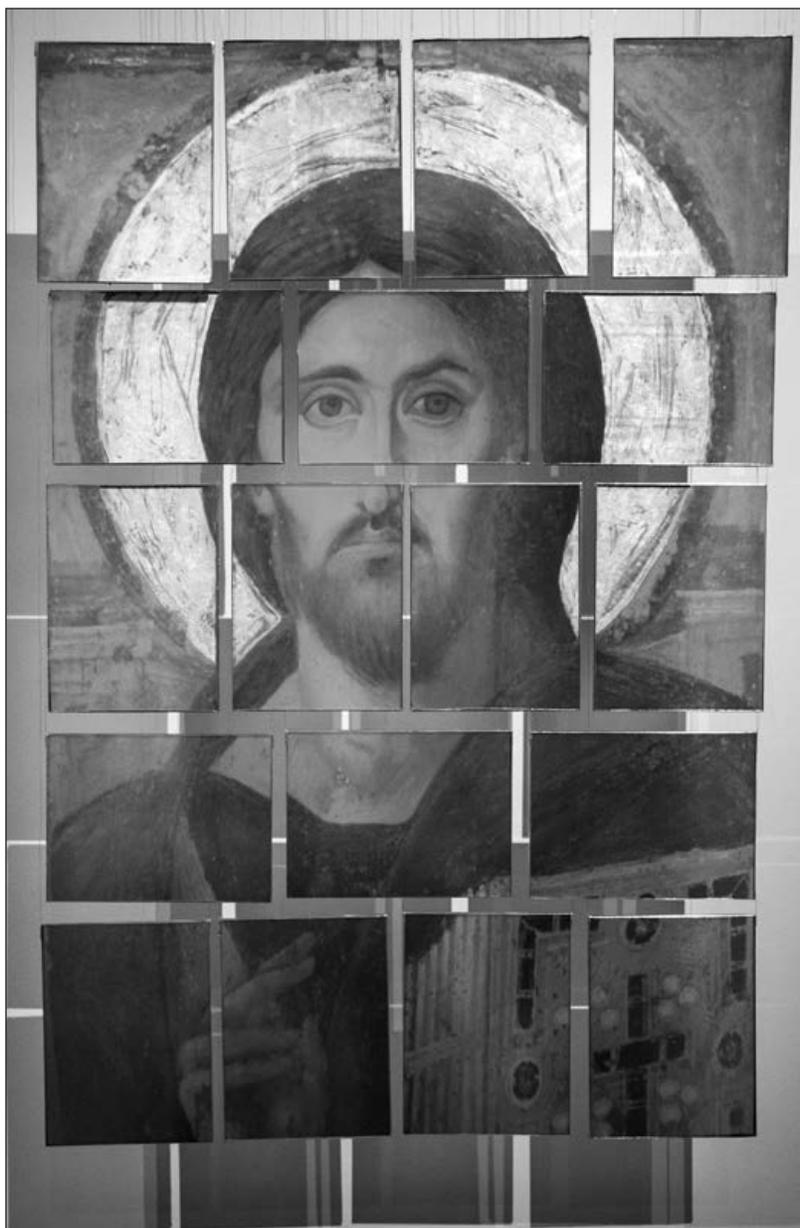
Less than a decade after the opening of the first Jesuit college for lay students at Messina in 1548, *Fabulae Eruditiae* (learned, if somewhat fractured fairytales) were being performed there. Even before Ignatius's death in 1556, full-scale plays were being performed with his blessing at Rome's flagship Collegio Romano and at the Jesuit college at Ingolstadt, Bavaria.

The 1586 version of the *Ratio Studiorum*, the Jesuits' uniform educational code, recognized the dual value of performance for the young as training in poise and memory: "Our students and their parents become wonderfully enthusiastic, and at the same time very attached to our Society when we train the boys to show the result of their study, their acting ability and their ready memory on the stage." From these beginnings, a rich and complex tradition of plays grew up in Jesuit colleges around the world: twice each year, and sometimes more frequently, from Vilnius to Cuzco, from Goa to Manila, the work of the colleges gave way to vast spectacles that filled the courtyards and theaters of the colleges.

Youngsters declaimed bowdlerized Latin and Greek reworkings of ancient classics and Christian stories composed in doggerel verse by overworked scholastics like Charles du Luc. *Intermedes*, dramatic intervals between the recitations, were filled with spirited dance numbers that inspired modern ballet practice, and their *son e lumière* extravaganzas were the 17th- and 18th-century equivalents of Industrial Light and Magic produc-

tions. Fireworks imported from the missions in China, flying students hoisted aloft on ropes and pulleys, and pet dogs pulling chariots filled with allegorical virtues and vices portrayed by little Benoit or Juan Pablo added visual interest. Important court composers like Marc Antoine Charpentier and Jean Baptiste Lully provided the scores; royal ballet masters like Pierre Beauchamps and Jesuit Fr. Joseph Jouvancy provided the choreography. Indeed, Jesuit theorists and historians produced five of the most important early treatises on ballet at the Collège Louis-le-Grand.

This tradition – 150,000 plays performed across the world over the first two centuries of Jesuit education, and countless more since the nineteenth-century restoration of the order after its suppression – was about more than entertainment, fun, and games. Theater, dance, and visual spectacle were not considered as ends in themselves but were seen as useful educational tools that formed morally astute citizens and socially competent persons who could comport themselves in public in a convincing way. They learned to sing and play instruments in church and on the stage. They were given the social tools to become presentable gentlemen, and, in the case of many, the opportunity to rise from their lower middle class origins into higher status. Although what we now call studio arts were not formally taught, applied arts were part of the program: students learned to sketch, construct, and paint *trompe l'oeil* scenery and were given practical lessons in rudimentary engineering so that their confreres flying above the stage on painted clouds would not crash.



"The New Moses" by Thomas Lucas, S.J. A fragmented view of an ancient Sinai icon.

The ribbon surrounding the MGM lion reading *Ars Gratia Artis*, “art for the sake of art,” would have been incomprehensible to Charles du Luc and his fellow professors. That 19th-century formulation, variously attributed to Théophile Gautier, Benjamin Constant, and Edgar Allan Poe, is profoundly at odds with what might be characterized as the “instrumental” view of the function of the arts in the early Jesuit tradition.

From the very beginning, the Jesuits used the arts for persuasion. They built grand and beautiful churches and imposing college buildings, recruited artists to join the order, and employed a stable of some of the best lay musicians, architects, and artists of the early modern and baroque periods. Gian Lorenzo Bernini was a close friend of Jesuit General Gian Paolo Oliva, and Carlo Maderno designed the basilica of St. Ignatius at Loyola in Spain. Rubens was a devout member of Jesuit sodalities. Yet it would be a serious mistake to consider the Society’s interest in the arts as a mere aesthetic oddity or concern for making the *bella figura*. The arts were seen as means to an end, never an end in themselves: concrete, visible, audible ways to come into contact with the invisible and inaudible realm of spirit.

The 1814 restoration of the Society of Jesus and its schools after the trauma of the suppression (1773-1814) saw the Jesuits return shell-shocked survivors of PTSS. In the half-century leading up to the suppression, the order’s schools had become locked into traditions and habits of mind that made it difficult if not impossible for them to adapt to the times with the same agility that marked the early years of Jesuit education. With the restoration, old customs were revived, old styles of pedagogy were resurrected, old artistic styles that looked backwards and not to the present were embraced anew. Novelty was eschewed at all costs, and with it a kind of benign philistinism came to rule in the Jesuits’ approach to the arts. Nothing too beautiful, nothing too lavish, nothing too daring was allowed. Following the fortress mentality of the institutional Church in the aftermath of the French Revolution and throughout the 19th and into the mid 20th centuries, caution was the watchword. For all practical purposes, no great art was inspired by or came out of Jesuit institutions, with the exception of the brilliant and tortured verse of English Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins. His work was unappreciated and unpublished during his short and painful life. Summarizing the attitudes of the age he wrote sadly, “Brilliance does not suit us.”

So where does that leave us, in the second decade of the 21st century? Our institutions, both universities and colleges, have adopted modern curricula and have forgone the antique classical rigors of the *Ratio Studiorum*. While theater and music survived the suppression, the visual arts are a fairly recent addition to the offerings in many of our schools. Clearly, the notion that art is and must be instrumental is not generally accepted in the culture at large and in our art departments. The arts, visual and performing, are often the first target when budget cuts loom on the horizon. The less benign philistinism of our present age often enough consid-

ers the arts as charming if irrelevant and unprofitable remnants of bygone times.

Toward the end of his life and in the midst of much doubt and depression, Hopkins grappled with this same question in his sonnet “To what serves mortal beauty.” His answer could be the beginning of a discussion for us as educators in the Jesuit humanistic tradition:

TO what serves mortal beauty ' – dangerous; does set danc-  
ing blood – the O-seal-that-so ' feature, flung prouder form  
Than Purcell tune lets tread to? ' See: it does this: keeps warm  
Men’s wits to the things that are; ' what good means – where a glance  
Master more may than gaze, ' gaze out of countenance. 5  
Those lovely lads once, wet-fresh ' windfalls of war’s storm,  
How then should Gregory, a father, ' have gleanèd else from swarm-  
ed Rome? But God to a nation ' dealt that day’s dear chance.  
To man, that needs would worship ' block or barren stone,  
Our law says: Love what are ' love’s worthiest, were all known; 10  
World’s loveliest – men’s selves. Self ' flashes off frame and face.  
What do then? how meet beauty? ' Merely meet it; own,  
Home at heart, heaven’s sweet gift; ' then leave, let that alone.  
Yea, wish that though, wish all, ' God’s better beauty, grace.

“See: it does this: keeps warm/men’s wits to the things that are, what good means...” Hopkins reminds us that beauty, as expressed in art or in the elegance of a quadratic equation or a DNA helix or the sunrise, opens the heart to the deepest levels of our human experience: to ask the profound questions about meaning, value, goodness, dignity, and, ultimately, hope.

The multicultural milieu of the 21st century is, of course, radically different from that of baroque Europe or 19th-century England’s “Commonwealth of Christendom.” Our formerly all-male, mostly Catholic institutions now serve diverse and transcultural populations. As art historian Hans Belting characterizes it, in former times art served religion; in these modern days, at least in major capitals, the “religion of art” – *ars gratia artis* – erects museums that overshadow and strive to displace the cathedrals of old.

While our culture and our institutions have moved beyond the understanding that art must ever and always be instrumental, art continues to remind us that ultimate questions need to be asked. University arts programs have the advantage of being able to present those questions in a bewildering variety of non-linear, postdidactic, pebble-in-the-shoe ways.

For those who are believers, beyond that reminder is the hope of “God’s better beauty, grace;” for all, art challenges us with questions that can serve as antidotes to the paralyzing cynicism of “whatever.” As Hopkins insists, this is dangerous business, countercultural in the extreme. “Merely meet it; own/Home at heart, heaven’s sweet gift; then leave, let that alone.” The answers, art teaches us, are not what matters. The questions do. ■