Craving the Company of Beauty

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In his book *Pictures and Texts*, James Elkins reports this reaction by Robin Parks to a work by J. S. Bach. Parks went on to explain that her tears in response to certain artworks had “something to do with loneliness…a kind of craving for the company of beauty.” Others, I suppose, might say a craving for God. … A theologian, Kimberly Vlachno, working from the stories in Elkins’ book, writes in her 2005 article “Spirit Standing Still,” about art that so moved people that it evoked tears. Vlachno describes these encounters as sacramental—an encounter with the holy through the mediation of physical materials.” Vlachno identifies beauty “with existence itself, with God and with the perceptible presence of being in the midst of a full range of human life,” a spectrum that embraces glory as well as suffering. Vlachno maintains that, when all superficialities and distractions are removed, we discover “the sacred presence of God,” and therein resides true beauty.

Might this affective connection between the beholder and artwork, so powerful as to elicit tears, also have the power to help us gain greater insights into ourselves, the people and world around us, and ultimately God? And could this affective experience influence our attitudes and behavior? Vlachno believes so. The late theologian William Spohn likewise recognized the power of images to influence our motivations, through what he referred to as “judgments of affectivity” (as opposed to “judgments of rationality”). In a 1984 seminar at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, Spohn stated:

> When we are talking about discernment, we are talking about judgments of affectivity. They are based on the model of what is fitting, what is harmonious, what is somehow appropriate between who I am and what I am to do.

While Spohn refers to images that occur in our minds, I believe the physical, material, and artistic creation by artists can also be major stimuli for our imaginations.

In the commendable volume *The Jesus and the Arts*, Karen Bailey suggests that from the earliest years of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius and his contemporaries realized the power of imagery in the service of prayer: images engage the imagination to stimulate an affective, experiential encounter with the life of Jesus and other religious figures, thus giving the viewer an affective way of entering into devotion. Bailey points out that even though Ignatius was a visionary, he would often use physical images to help him in his prayerful state.

Ignatius of Loyola assembled a small collection of devotional pictures in his rooms in Rome, including a painting of

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the Holy Family, which survives today, to assist him with his prayers and meditations, a practice that would be fol-
lowed by many of his successors.

In the post-Suppression Society, the connection to the
to the arts was weakened, particularly in the case of the
Society in the United States. Most of the American-born
men who entered the Society after its restoration in 1814
were given no introduction to the visual arts, with the
result that these otherwise well-educated men tended to
regard the visual arts as decorative, superfluous, and
without essential value. The neglect of the arts in
American Jesuit secondary and college level schools con-
tinued through the first half of the twentieth century. The
late Maurice B. McNamme, S.J., conducted a survey in
1944 of U.S. Jesuit educational institutions, finding that
none offered courses in art appreciation or studio art.

However, thirty-five years later McNamme conducted
another survey and found—encouragingly—that every
U.S. Jesuit university, college, and high school had at
least one offering in art or art appreciation, and a num-
ber of institutions had full-fledged art departments.

Presently, of the 26 U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities,
25 have designated spaces for galleries and museums.

Many have made use of previously existing structures. A
number have incorporated a gallery space in a fine and
performing arts facility, and several have constructed
buildings expressly intended for the display of art.

These galleries and museums are first and foremost
for the education of students, but they have a larger
reach as well. Most of our Jesuit galleries and museums
actively engage with the cultural life of the cities in
which they are located, for instance exhibiting the works
of local artists. They thus serve as ambassadors for
the school to the civic and cultural life of the community.

Furthermore, several museums have achieved a national
and international reach through the quality of their exhi-
bitions. All of this fol-
lows in the tradition of the early society
that John O’Malley
describes in The
Jesuits and the Arts:

"The schools gave the
Jesuits an engage-
ment with general cul-
ture and the arts utterly different from that of any religious
order up to that time [the mid-16th century]."

If, as Bailey states, “the Jesuits considered the visual

A Society that found God in all things could...
include non-Christian literature.
arts to be key to the affirmation of the Catholic faith,” we
might ask if we are justified in displaying art that is not
explicitly Catholic in its subjects and symbols. In the
beginning of the Society’s educational apostolate, there
was a recognition that non-Christian classical literature
could serve as a valid source of edification for students.
As O’Malley explains, it was thought that if the ancient
literary works were
properly taught, they “would render
the student a better
human being,
and infused especially
with an ideal of
service to the common good, in imitation of the great
heroes of antiquity.”

A Society that found God in all things recognized
that it could draw expansively upon a body of thought
and expression that included appropriate Catholic
thinking but also non-Christian literature—all of which exempli-
cfied the great human themes and could help students
achieve an understanding of “what is fitting, what is hon-
orous, what is somehow appropriate between who I
am and what I am to do.”

While O’Malley is discussing literary works, I would
assert that the same can be said of visual arts that may
not be explicitly Christian in content but can
nevertheless delight, challenge, disturb, move, or lift our
spirits, and can cause our imagination to resonate with
larger meanings.

Allow me to describe encounters with three works of
art that have been displayed at the museum I direct, the
Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (MOCRA) at
Saint Louis University. As an interfaith museum of con-
temporary art that engages the religious and spiritual
dimensions, MOCRA is founded on the conviction of the
value of art at the service of a Jesuit education.

Members of the Saint Louis University Theological
Studies faculty often bring their classes to MOCRA to
explore topics in a way that engages the imagination dif-
ferently from books or lectures. For instance, one profes-
sor regularly uses one work in the museum as a focus for
her classes on the theology of death and suffering; a mas-
sive triptych by American artist Michael Tracy entitled 13th,
12th, 11th Stations of the Cross for Latin America: La Pasión. This visceral abstract work, executed in the 1980s,
pays homage to the poor, the powerless, and the victims
of violence in Latin America. The physicality of this piece
is unnerving, its rough, acrylic paint surface embedded with
ribs, clumps of glass, human hair, and blood. When stu-
dents are asked what their response is to the work before
even its title has been disclosed, or any meaning ascribed
to it, typical responses are that it is depressing, that it is
intimidating, or that there is a lot of pain associated with
it—all good answers.

As we discuss the work, including an explanation of
the devotion of the Stations of the Cross, and situate it in the context of Central American death squads and the Disappeared Ones—the students get it. Those who have studied Liberation Theology or have participated in protests trips to the School of the Americas in Georgia make connections and share them with the group. Others recognize that the relevance of the triptych is not limited to Latin America, that it also speaks about violent urban American neighborhoods, and places like Darfur and Iraq.

But the class ultimately moves beyond the political sphere into the realm of Paschal Mystery, by calling the students’ attention to the gold paint applied across the whole surface of the painting, gold that draws on traditional iconography of the divine and becomes a symbol of God’s identification with the victims of violence. The hope of resurrection that lies beyond the lift station is a hope we bring also to human situations of death and suffering.

A second encounter with art work involves a population beyond the SLU community. Earlier this summer, I gave a tour of MO CRA to a group of high school students participating in the Upward Bound summer enrichment program. Many of these young people, all from disadvantaged backgrounds, had never been in a museum of any sort. Among the works we discussed was Mother and Child, a silkscreen print by African-American artist Romare Bearden. Basing his work on the twentieth-century icon of The Virgin of Vladimir, Bearden transferred a faint image of the famous icon onto a sheet of paper and then “Africanized” the facial features (see photo page 32).

I passed around photographs of the Virgin of Vladimir icon for the students to compare with the Bearden work, then asked this largely African-American group of students what would attract an African-American artist born in North Carolina and raised in the Baptist tradition, to an icon nearly 1,600 years old from another part of the world and a markedly different expression of Christian faith? The students were quiet for a moment, then one student spoke up by saying that both images were about a mother doing all she could to safeguard her child. Another student said the work built bridges to other times. Through this conversation with a work of art, the common human theme of the vigilant and tender mother had even greater impact on these students because this was an image of Mary and Jesus expressed in a cultural context with which they could identify.

The third work may be more surprising than the latter two. Andy Warhol’s Silver Clouds. In 2006, MO CRA gave this 40-year old installation piece its largest-ever presentation, as 54 of Warhol’s large silver mylar pillow-shaped balloons drifted through MO CRA’s spacious nave gallery. The entire gallery was in a state of slow motion, Moreover, this was an interactive exhibit. Visitors played with the Clouds; they stretched out on the floor and let the Clouds brush by and surround them, they even meditated in the midst of the gallery. One mother, helping to chaperone a grade-school group, asked what an exhibition like this was doing in a religious art museum. In response I asked her to spend a few minutes with the Silver Clouds, and then I would join her. When we spoke again, she said, “I can’t explain it, but I get it. I feel lifted out of the ordinary. I feel my spirit fly, I feel connected to everyone else in the gallery, and I feel a profound sense of joy and inner peace.”

The arts can serve as effective portals to experiences that might otherwise remain only theoretical for many people. They are a potent means of finding God in all things, from丝毫不st century subjects such as Bearden’s Mother and Child, to the overwhelming power of Michael Tracy’s abstract work about suffering on a vast scale, to the sublime joy of Andy Warhol’s Silver Clouds. This Jesuit university and college visual arts programs are in a position to carry on a tradition dating back to the first Jesuit schools and adapt it for our times. In doing so they are tapping into what Juan Montana Arboles, SJ, writing in The Jesuits and the Arts feels that Ignatius himself recognized: "Ignatius must have understood intuitively that if he wished to capture the whole person he needed to make use of the power of the fine arts."