

CHCC Arts Conference Interview with Wayne Forte

1. Historically what has been the relationship between art and the Church?

The early church was very cautious in its use of images. Christ could only be portrayed in certain ways (first as the Pantocrator or Creator of the universe regally seated and reigning over the Earth; then as the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb over his shoulders). Picturing Christ crucified was considered shameful and not allowed.

In the 2nd to 4th centuries, especially after Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the empire, art was used to tell the story of salvation to a largely illiterate population. Manuscripts were illuminated (illustration of the text) and mosaic murals of the Old and New Testaments covered the walls of the Basilicas. Art served the important functions of instructing and inspiring the congregation.

By the Renaissance, the Church had become by far the leading patron of the arts. In fact, many artists who were more interested in the pagan aesthetics of Greece and Rome were employed by the Pope and bishops. They vied with each other to create increasingly more opulent and sophisticated interiors which were more a witness to their own power than God's Kingdom or the piety of Christ. This obviously led to many abuses.

When Martin Luther and the Protestant reformers succeeded in purging the Church of its many abuses which had accumulated over the centuries, art was also thrown out like the proverbial baby with the bath-water. Their short-sighted and reactionary attitude unfortunately had the effect of shutting the doors of the Church to artists who in turn used their energies and talents to serve the world, the flesh and the devil rather than the Kingdom of God.

2. What is the attitude of the Church today towards art?

After almost five centuries of estrangement between art and the Reformation Church (and almost as long with the Catholic Church) some pastors, clergy and missionaries, theologians and lay members are once again carefully looking to art for help with their mission of spreading the Gospel and causing it to be planted deeply in the believer's heart.

The church is turning to filmmakers to help dramatize the Gospel and use these films as a missionary tool. A few churches have taken tentative steps in the use of liturgical art to visually enrich the weekly service. And a small remnant of Christian artists have organized loosely to discuss and exhibit their faith-based works.

3. What is the future of art in the Church?

Art is just a tool, given to man by God. Whether it is used for good or bad depends on the user. It can of course be a powerful tool which the church has, over the centuries ultimately abused and relinquished. The challenge for today's church is to reacquaint itself with the art world, find the right relationship balance and maintain it.

The challenge for the clergy is to become familiar with this tool that God has provided and use it effectively for the purpose of communicating the Gospel to a world which is hungry for truth and spirituality - yet weary of outmoded forms and suspicious of people who package religion and sell it for their own gain.

The challenge for the Christian artist is finding new forms, fresh symbols and images with which he can speak to new generations brought up on MTV and Andy Warhol (the cross is now used as a trendy fashion accessory), then to persist in humbly serving and advocating for art in their congregations.

The challenge for the lay believer is to take back the use and the appreciation of art, once relinquished to the world, for the Kingdom of God. This will entail the cultivation of an open mind and the support and encouragement of artistically creative members of the body, sometimes withholding judgement until the "shock of the new" wears off a bit.

4. Wayne, as a fine artist how has your work been influenced by your faith ?

Yes, most definitely. After coming to the Lord at age 29 I wanted to paint the biblical narratives so I spent the next 10 years trying to gain a technical mastery of the figure. Now that I feel comfortable rendering the figure I am striving to tell the Biblical narratives in a new, personal and visually compelling way that will catch the eye and hopefully the heart of a post-modern generation. I am also striving to acknowledge God's Lordship in my work by relinquishing the need for constant control and seeking more diligently His point of view.

5. What has been your personal experience with the struggle to bring art back to the church?"

It has been a long and sometimes difficult process yet one with many rewards and surprises. Two key ingredients for the artist are persistence and humility. I embrace rejection as God's way of saying "start again from a new perspective."

I have learned to value a liaison person who can act as an intercessor between me, the hand, and the pastoral staff, the head. This frees me to maintain my integrity as a fine artist and allows the pastor to express his feelings and reservations freely. The best liaison person will have a heart for the arts and a head for administration.