

Multi-Story Buildings: Cultural Memory Layered in Visual Retellings of Jesus's Story
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The cliché “a picture is worth a thousand words” originated in the advertising industry, which has done its best to exploit the idea.¹ Around the world, many young people could, on seeing the Nike swoosh, articulate the names of star athletes that have worn Nike products, their own and their friends’ “just do it” stories, the memory of walking cool in new Nike kicks, and the questions about where and by whom Nikes are made.

Teachers see this phenomenon and conclude that while learners have some facility with the interpretation of written texts, they are much more comfortable interpreting visual texts.² Can the religious educator exploit this comfort with the visual? Does a facility for deriving meaning from advertising images transfer to the reading of religious images? In a field where the Word reigns supreme, do visual texts offer any educational advantages over verbal texts? This paper answers, “Yes” to all three questions. It considers educational ends for which visual learning might have advantages over verbal learning, identifies how the learner’s well-formed skills in interpreting advertising images can be coached to apply in the realm of religious images, and finally, using an example from my own teaching, offers suggestions for educators wishing to become visual coaches for their learners.

When this paper was conceived, the intent was simply to report on an art-based teaching strategy I had created to support a particular lesson in a scripture class.³ Preliminary research, however, showed that my example of image use in the Bible classroom was just one more entry in a growing body of such efforts. For example, in 2005, the Society of Biblical Literature published a collection of pedagogical strategies by scripture scholars.⁴ At least twelve percent of the teaching approaches described in the book involve activities with visual elements such as paintings and films.⁵ If nothing else, this fact reflects an instinct that the contemporary visual

¹ Wikipedia. (2006). “A picture is worth a thousand words.” St. Petersburg, FL: Wikimedia Foundation. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_picture_is_worth_a_thousand_words [cited September 1, 2006]. Citing Stevenson, Burton. (1948). *The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Familiar Phrases*. New York: Macmillan. p. 2611.

² For example, “College students have some familiarity with interpreting written texts from high school English classes. But after years of watching TV, movies, and music videos, most college students are more comfortable with visual media than written texts.” Julia Lambert Fogg, “Visual Exegesis: An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation” in Mark Roncase and Patrick Gray, editors. *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005

³ During the Annual Meeting presentation, I will use this presentation to illustrate the process of using the multi-story buildings in teaching strategies. The presentation will focus on the four images at the end of the paper.

⁴ Mark Roncase and Patrick Gray, editors. *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005

⁵ See chapters 1, 2, 7, 23, 26, 36, 42, 44, 45, 58, 96, 136, 168, 177, 183, 206, 208, 209, 212, 253, 258, and 260.

literacy cultivated by the popular media can be co-opted for teaching scripture. The paper offers some guidance on how to maximize the effectiveness of visual texts in the religion classroom.

The Multi-Storied Building of a Visual Image

In the work of Christian art, the artist retells some element of the Christian Story/Vision.⁶⁷ In the retelling, the artist is reconstructing the specific part of the Christian Story/Vision being retold so that the artist's intended audience can understand the Christian Story/Vision in an idiom that speaks to that audience. Thus, if an artist is retelling the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the artist is going to make it accessible to a particular audience: Marc Chagall made crucifixions emphasizing the Jewishness of Jesus and including images from the pogroms of the late 1930s, Mirko instead made crucifixions reflecting the chaos of the riots of the late 1960s. Regardless of what we think of the artist's interpretation of the Christian Story/Vision, we can see that at the very least, every painting of the crucifixion tells at least two stories, the crucifixion story and the story of the community for whom the artist was painting.⁸

A third story told in a painting of the Christian Story/Vision is the artist's personal story. For Christian artists, this is the story of their own discipleship journey, their own grappling with faith and doubt. For someone like Chagall, it is the story of a Jew encountering Christianity through the actions of the "Christians" of the National Socialist Party. The artist is more than a neutral conduit for the Christian Story/Vision. The artist's personal story or beliefs about spiritual growth are also evident in the artwork.⁹

Is a fourth story to be uncovered in the work of art? That depends on how one understands the role of inspiration in the creation of an artwork. If artwork is inspired, what is the source of that animation? If the Holy Spirit is the source, then the story of the Holy Spirit's action will also be evident in the art. If an evil spirit is the source, then the story of that evil spirit will be evident.

⁶ This fact was honored by religious educators for centuries. For example, the friars who first brought Christianity to New Spain used images to teach the faith to indigenous people. See Serge Gruzinski. (1993). *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th -18th Centuries*. Cambridge: Polity Press. It was relegated to history for many years but theologians are now retrieving the value of image analysis to the full understanding of the verbal texts of the Church's past. See for example, Robin Margaret Jensen. (2000). *Understanding Early Christian Art*. London: Routledge.

⁷ The paper presumes the historical, present, and futural dimensions of Story/Vision as articulated by Thomas H. Groome. (1991). *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education & Pastoral Ministry*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco. p. 147.

⁸ The parallels between art and the community's manifestation of its religious commitments has been explored in numerous books recently including, Richard Viladesau. 2000. *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric*. New York: Paulist Press and Jaroslav Pelikan. 1997. *The Illustrated Jesus through the Centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁹ For an English language description of a Tridentine theory of spiritual growth through images see, Pamela M. Jones. (1995). "Art Theory as Ideology: Gabriele Paleotti's Hierarchical Notion of Painting's Universality and Reception." In *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America 1450-1650*. Edited by Claire Farago. New Haven: Yale University Press.

These four are the main stories found in a work of art. Sub-stories are also being told. In the crucifixion example, the artwork retells some part of a scriptural story, a doctrinal story, a liturgical story, a Christological story, and so on.

That multiple stories are built into a work of visual art should come as no surprise, after all, the same can be said for any verbal work as well. The four gospels are good examples of retellings of the Christian Story/Vision that also reflect the stories of four communities, the discipleship or faith stories of four evangelists,¹⁰ and the stories of four inspirational actions of the Holy Spirit. Different interpretive lenses allow the reader to mine a gospel for any of these four stories.

Although both visual and verbal texts are multi-storied, differences between visual and verbal texts suggest different learning goals can be served by each. Verbal texts are linear, one word follows another and the meaning of the whole requires that one begin at the beginning and follow the line of thought to the end, whether reading or hearing the text. That linearity makes reviewing one section of the verbal text or comparing two or more sections of the verbal text a time-intensive process. Visual texts on the other hand are multi-dimensional and even those with a linear aspect (e.g., film) contain many more signifiers than verbal texts in any given time interval. Because of this multi-dimensionality, interpreting the whole is a quicker process, reviewing a detail, in itself and in comparison to the whole, is easier and quicker, and

Verbal texts are better suited than visual texts to the representation or signification of some aspects of life (e.g., dialogue and ratiocination) but less well suited to the representation or signification of other aspects (e.g., facial expressions and complex interactions among people).

Finally, the very comfort that learners have interpreting the visual can make a lesson take hold more deeply than a lesson related to a verbal text. Someone who is not comfortable reading a verbal text but is very comfortable reading a visual text is going to have more confidence in their analysis of a visual text and is thus more likely to integrate its meaning into their overall sense of the world than they would their shakier interpretation of a verbal text.

Transferable, Not-Transferable & Teachable Image-Reading Skills

While the advertising industry controls much of the image dissemination in the developed world today, basic elements of visual images have remained constant over millennia much as a basic English sentence still contains a subject and a predicate even though styles of English writing and speaking have changed dramatically over the course of the last few hundred years. Most people pick up the basics of visual interpretation as they are exposed to things seen beginning in their cradles. These elements can be named and are generally transferable from one type of object (e.g., advertising images) to another (e.g., religious images).

Visual idioms are less consistent across eras and cultures so comprehension of the meanings of symbols in the everyday world of advertising images sometimes transfers to the

¹⁰ An example of a recent book grounded in this perspective on the gospels is Robin Griffith-Jones. (2000) *The Four Witnesses: The Rebel, the Rabbi, the Chronicler, and the Mystic*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

world of religious images and sometimes does not. An ability to identify the meaning of facial expressions is transferable; the ability to identify the meaning of a curved form that is thick in the center and tapers to points at both ends is not transferable: familiarity with the meaning of the Nike swoosh would not transfer into familiarity with the meaning of the crescent moon under the feet of Mary in a Queen of Heaven image.

Critical interpretation skills as they would be applied to visual images have generally not been acquired by the media consuming public but these are skill that can be taught.

Transferable Skills

Visual elements, which can be isolated “to train our eye to see,” are line, shape and form, space, texture, value and light, color, and time.¹¹ We start teaching color, texture, shape and form to infants (respectively by talking about the red outfit, the fuzzy pajamas, the ball and the block, and the circle and the triangle), we continue these lessons and add line as we teach early toddlers (e.g., *Pat the Bunny* and *Harold’s Purple Crayon*), and finally teach the concepts of space (cozy and big), value and light (night and day, sunny and rainy days), and time (not now) to full-fledged toddlers. These distinctions are so habitual that we are not even aware we are noticing them when encountering a visual object.

As we get older, we develop nuanced eyes, able to recognize organizing principles in visual objects. Even if we might not be able to develop a list of such principles, when prompted, we can usually say whether an image uses that principle or not. These organizing principles include repetition, variety, rhythm, balance, compositional unity, emphasis, economy, proportion, and relation to the environment.¹² Sometimes principles such as these are easier to identify in an image when considered with an opposite:

balance	--	instability	neutrality	--	accent
symmetry	--	asymmetry	transparency	--	opacity
regularity	--	irregularity	consistency	--	variation
simplicity	--	complexity	accuracy	--	distortion
unity	--	fragmentation	flatness	--	depth
economy	--	intricacy	singularity	--	juxtaposition
understatement	--	exaggeration	sequentiality	--	randomness
predictability	--	spontaneity	sharpness	--	diffusion
activeness	--	stasis	repetition	--	episodicity
subtlety	--	boldness			

Attention to these basics can lead learners to identify more complex elements of the images that are significant to the lesson. How to spark such attention will be discussed in the coaching section below.

Not-Transferable Skills

¹¹ Paul Zelanski and Mary Pat Fisher. (1994). *The Art of Seeing*. 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc. pp. 67, 67-178.

¹² Ibid. pp. 179-208.

I likened the transferable basics of visual literacy to the elements of sentence structure in English grammar. Another metaphor is apt here. English sentences can be strung together in an infinite variety. The products of such stringing are as different as a poem is from the technical specifications manual for a nuclear missile. Likewise, the visual elements listed above can be pulled together in an infinite variety. The resultant artworks can have different content, form (form as akin to genre here rather than form as meaning a two-dimensional geometric form), process, and mood.¹³

Content in Christian images is specific to the Christian Story/Vision. Learners unfamiliar with the Christian Story/Vision may not recognize the content and thus may be unable to determine whether it is an accurate representation of that aspect of the Christian Story/Vision or whether the artist has changed the details. *Form* in the context of Christian art refers to the type of religious image, for example narrative (telling a story), iconic (mediating the encounter between viewer and the divine), abstract (expressive of a concept), or liturgical (functioning in a liturgical context). *Process* here refers to the process the artist undertook to make the piece. It includes references to such broad issues as whether the work is done with oil paints on canvas or with carved stone, or to the process undertaken within a medium, for example, oil paint can be applied with bold, broad, quick strokes or with delicate, fine, measured strokes. *Mood* the general affect generated by the work, its atmosphere. This is the most likely of these four elements to be transferable. It is often the holistic result of the various elements identified in the section on Transferable Skills above.

Process is the least significant of these to the religious education context, though it can offer a clue as to the artist's story. Form is significant for more advanced learners but is not necessary for general learners. Most religious educators will be able to bring enough content knowledge to a learning situation to serve the needs of general learners, either in the form of their own knowledge but also by bringing a Bible, doctrinal texts, and/or a dictionary of Christian symbols.

Teachable Skills

Because most people in the Western world (and increasingly people in the developing world) are formed in their image interpretation skills by advertising images, television, and the internet and because these purveyors of images have little interest in cultivating critical interpretation abilities in these people, few people do possess such skills, at least at an advanced level.

Three elements of critical visual interpretation are particularly important for visual learners in the religious education context. An awareness of the influence of one's own prejudices and presuppositions on the interpretation of a visual text serves two ends, it creates a more open disposition to the visual text itself and it begins to identify the elements of faith one might look for in the interpreting the artist's faith story in the image.¹⁴ An ability to compare a

¹³ Rod Taylor (1992). *The Visual Arts in Education: Completing the Circle*. London: The Falmer Press, p. 67-88.

¹⁴ Some suggestions for becoming a self-aware 'reader' of visual images, see Margaret Miles (1985) *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

visual text to a related verbal text makes possible a more comprehensive appropriation of that aspect of the Christian Story/Vision being presented in the visual image.¹⁵ Finally, awareness that social, political, ecclesiological, and economic factors influenced any community that ever created images can guide the viewer in asking questions that uncover the community's story in the artwork.

Coaching Learners in the Interpretation of Christian Art

The first step is to identify the concept to be taught using visual images. One way to go about this is to reflect on the concepts that are particularly challenging for learners. In several contexts I have found that learners seem to have trouble with 1) the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, 2) the significance of the details not included in a scripture story, 3) the import of the community situatedness of the four gospels, 4) the nuances in the moral lessons of the parables, and 5) recognizing that as interpreters they bring prejudices to a visual text. The first two are primarily concerned with the content of the Christian Story/Vision, the third involves both the Christian Story/Vision and the community's story, the fourth the Christian Story/Vision and the artist's personal story, and the fifth the Christian Story/Vision, the community's story and the artist's story.

In choosing art that will serve one's learning objectives, one would do well to be guided by the three principles: choosing art that is obvious enough for your audience's literacy levels; art that reflects the Christian Story/Vision in a way that is well linked to the lesson, and art whose lessons are easily 'seen' with a little subtle coaching. The latter is especially important if, in order to acquire new learning, learners have to unlearn a lesson acquired in childhood. In the examples above, I would use 1) a wide variety of images of Jesus in any story to explore the divinity and humanity of Jesus, 2) images of the story of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac for what is not addressed,¹⁶ 3) four crucifixions from four very different times and places for the significance of the four communities retelling Jesus's, story in the four gospels, 4) I use a variety of images of the Good Samaritan story for the moral nuances in parables,¹⁷ and 5) twenty or thirty images of Adam and Eve to highlight for learners that they have preconceptions race, the serpent, and God. When preparing to use images, these ones or any others, in an educational context one must spend time with them asking questions, digging for meaning, before one engages the learners. Certain technologies (e.g., PowerPoint) allow one to crop out and enlarge certain details of an image, this can be a useful tool in tailoring an image to the learning.

¹⁵ Michael Quenot (1997), in an introduction to his exploration of the Orthodox theology of the Resurrection as found in icons, offers a simplification of the relationship between word and image, "For every noun there is a corresponding image or symbol. To each of the words "apple," "pastry," "lion," "war," "famine," there corresponds one or even several visual elements. Conversely, the sight of a town burned and bloodied by a slew of armed men evokes the word "war." Thus a two way relation exists between the word and the image, between conceptualization and visualization. Within this dialectic one must avoid underestimating one in favor of the other, even though the image possesses unimaginable power (5).

¹⁶ Sandy Gravett, in "Genesis 22: Artists' Renderings" uses art for the same end. See her description of the exercise in Roncase and Gray, 2005.

¹⁷ Philip A. Quanbeck II proposes an exercise with images of the Prodigal Son story in "Narrative Criticism: Interpreting the Parable of the Prodigal Son." In Roncase and Gray, 2005.

Finally, when inviting the learners to find meaning in the image, two factors are of vital importance, asking questions and inducing them to look longer than they might be naturally inclined. The questions that will guide the viewers take into account the visual and design elements above along in dialogue with the learning objectives. So, if the ultimate goal is to teach about the community's story, one would start with questions about those visual elements that are unique to a particular community's image and gradually ask questions that lead to more complex analyses. For example, one might use the following sequence:

What do you notice about the way the artist painted the figure of Jesus?
What might these features symbolize or represent?
Do these features make the Jesus figure look more divine (spiritual) or more human?
Why might a community focus on those aspects of Jesus?
If a community wanted to be reminded of that aspect of Jesus, what might have been going on in the community?

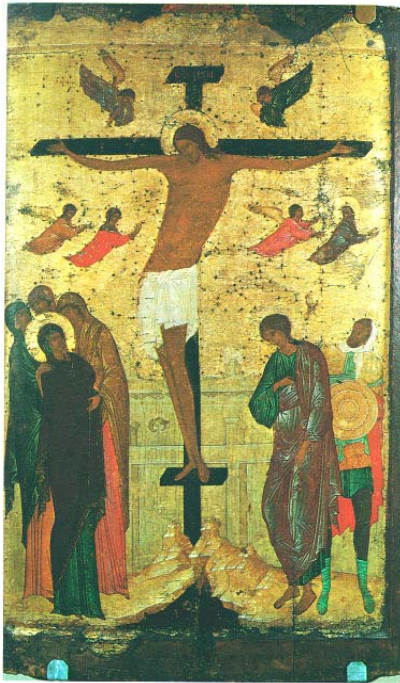
If the educator wants to provide answers to the peripheral questions or to break an impasse he or she may contribute but in my experience, learners in the developed world will talk about what they see.

Every work of Christian art is multi-storied, containing a part of the Christian Story/Vision, a part of the story of the Christian community, a part of the artist's faith story, and perhaps a bit of the Holy Spirit's story. Working with the visual literacy skills that develop naturally in our culture and augmenting them as needed, these artworks can become efficient teaching tools for complex concepts that would require a lot of time and ink if they were to be taught using verbal texts. Educators can easily learn the coaching skills necessary to facilitate both the ongoing acquisition of visual literacy skills and the religious lessons the Christian art can facilitate.

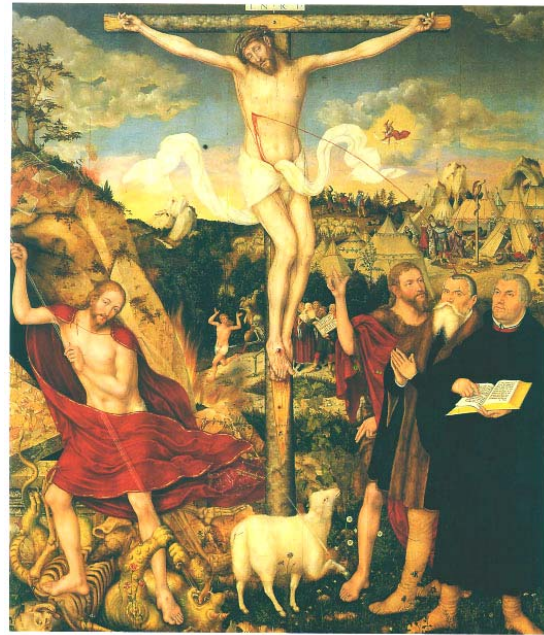
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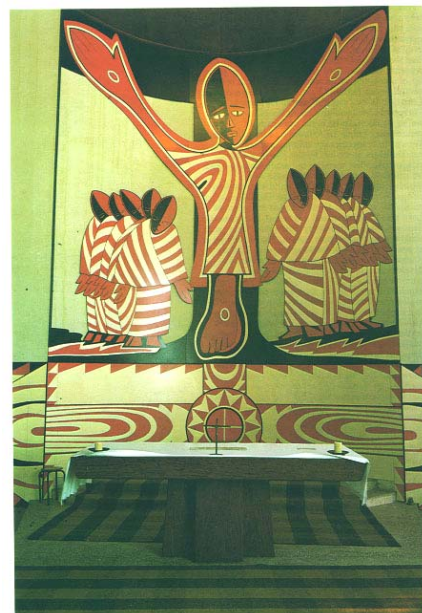
Icon of Crucifixion
School of Master Dionisi
Circa 1500. Moscow.



Die Erlösung
Lucas Cranach the Younger
1555. Munich.



Crucifixion
Mirko
1968. United States



Crucifixion fresco Liberman College
Englebert Mveng
Late 20th C. Cameroon