



Marc Chagall and the Bible —until October 15th 2023

Through attending various arts gatherings over my years with IMAGO I have been able to meet many who are active in the world of faith and the arts. Sandra Bowden was one of those I met and her very fine collection of nearly 60 works by Marc Chagall is now available to a Toronto audience.

The art of Marc Chagall draws the viewer into an imaginative world that steps beyond the limits of a merely realistic account of things. His works are sensual, filled with emotion and they always tell a story. Chagall believes the biblical narrative has a universal significance across cultural and religious differences. He was not very interested in being “modern” and once expressed his wish “to stay wild, untamed...to shout, weep, pray.”

We are pleased to partner with Wycliffe College to host this impressive collection of works. Sandra Bowden is scheduled to do a talk in the gallery space the week of September 11. And on Thursday evenings a guest speaker will reflect on one of the works and the story it tells. For visiting hours and events related to the exhibit go to the Wycliffe website.

wycliffecollege.ca/chagall

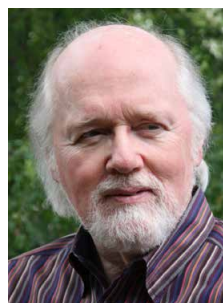
IMAGO at 50+

In the winter issue of the newsletter I expressed the hope that 2023 would see a number of public events in celebration of our milestone anniversary. The Crossings exhibit of 2022, the largest project IMAGO has done was successfully mounted and well received, in our 50th year. Though I had imagined that May and June 2023 would see IMAGO events, that has not happened. Life has been slowed down because the one who over the years has kept us all delighted with the food at IMAGO events, my wife Marion, has been dealing with some health issues. However we have been able to bring the Chagall exhibit to Wycliffe College and there are events in the works for the fall. Two are set and mentioned in this newsletter. Sandra Bowden who owns the Chagall collection will be in Toronto in mid-September and I have invited Irish poet Micheal O'Saidhail to do a reading for us on Wednesday September 20th. There will also be other events that feature IMAGO artists from past and present. We will keep you posted on what is happening on our website and on social media.

Thank you for your patience and for your support of this unique organization.

The Spirit and Pentecost

Recently it was Pentecost Sunday and the Christian calendar is always a good prompt to reflection. Often I think about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the arts. Here I can only take up a thread of this large and important topic.

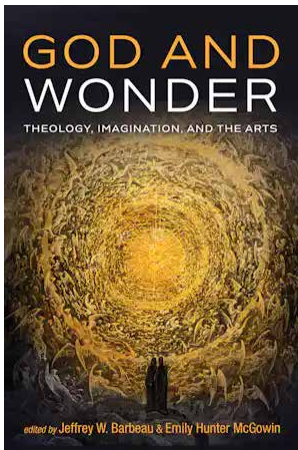


As the time of his departure approached Jesus promised his disciples that he would send a Comforter. Trial, death, resurrection, ascension and then Pentecost. The Spirit's work in the world did not begin at Pentecost but it entered a new phase. The Spirit is referenced in the biblical account of creation and noted in Exodus 35: 30-35 in the story of two artisans appointed to decorate the tabernacle. It is the artist Bezalel who is said to be filled with “Divine Spirit”.

Continued on page 4

Book Notes

For many, summer is a time for reading and I offer here a few titles that will nurture your spirit, provoke your thinking, challenge your practices and provide some reading pleasure. The literature on arts and faith continues to grow and its thoughtfulness deepens over time. And so I encourage you as Augustine was once instructed “Tolle Lege,” Take up and read.



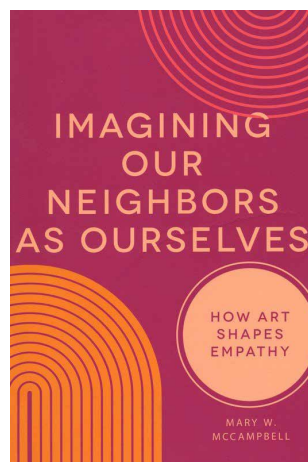
Jeffrey W. Barbeau & Emily Hunter McGowin, eds. *God and Wonder: Theology, Imagination and the Arts*, Cascade Books, 2022. 202 pp

The editors are theology professors at Wheaton College and this collection of essays consists of papers from the final Wheaton Theology conference. For 30 years this conference sustained fruitful discussions of important themes in theology seeking to connect

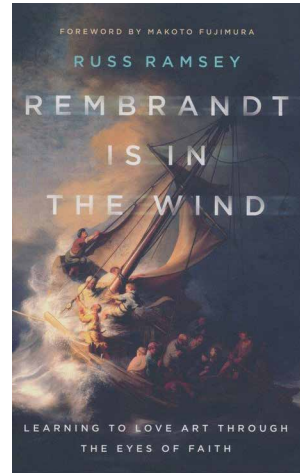
reflection and practice. Believing that the topic of “wonder” would be a fitting conclusion to the work of three decades they have gathered an impressive collection of papers that explore the deeply human inclination to wonder. After McGowin’s opening essay on wonder and theology the book is divided into four sections: Wonder and Method—where imagination is a major theme, Wonder and Creation, Wonder and Wisdom and Wonder and the Church. The arts get favoured attention and there is a freshness in these essays that will inspire the reader as well as deepen a sense of what it means to be human in God’s good world.

Mary W. McCampbell, *Imagining Our Neighbours as Ourselves: How Art Shapes Empathy*, Fortress Press, 2022. 193 pp

“Hate is a failure of imagination” so begins the Introduction of this engaging work drawing on the writing of Graham Green. The author offers an insightful discussion of links between art and the empathetic spirit. Her primary resources are literature and film that take us on a fascinating journey through narratives familiar and unfamiliar. McCampbell is clear about her conviction that “narrative” is a key feature of a path toward empathy. Story stretches the imagination and invites us to look beyond our own restricted worlds to discern alternatives that have the capacity to enrich our lives redirect our practices and offer healing and hope in our



relationships with others. In addition to the rich store of literature past and present, biblical stories show up in the text with the goal of nudging us toward the two great commandments and affirming the theological claim that we all bear the “image of God.” Though art is no magic-bullet to the creation of empathy, a life well exposed to meaningful narratives is likely to possess an empathic spirit.



Russ Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art Through the Eyes of Faith*, Zondervan, 2022. 210 pp

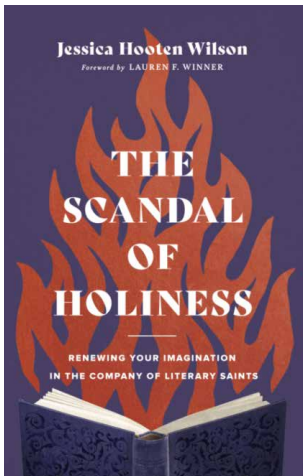
The opening chapter of this fine book offers a brief reflection on goodness, truth and beauty with special attention to beauty. These transcendentals as they are known, have recently been getting a lot of attention as we seem to have lost our way regarding all three. Each of the nine chapters

that follow focuses on an artist and their work. The author is a gifted story-teller and we learn not only about the works of art but about the life of the artist. The artist Caravaggio (1571-1610) provokes a discussion on the sacred and profane and the coming together of corruption and grace. Many of his paintings depict biblical stories of transformation while his personal life was deeply conflicted and self indulgent. The discussion of Van Gogh as “the striving artist” is informative and reminds us that this artist sold only one painting in his life time and yet has become one of the worlds most celebrated artists.

The book’s title is inspired by a Rembrandt painting; *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. This painting was one of thirteen works stolen in 1990 from the Isabel Stewart Gardener Museum in Boston. The author tells the sad story of that heist and to date none of the works have been recovered. In the boat there are fourteen men, Jesus and the twelve disciples and Rembrandt has included himself, the one looking out at those who view the painting.

Other artists discussed include: African-American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner who took up biblical themes and is an artist with great sensitivity to life, 17th century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer known as the painter of light, Edward Hopper whose work is without sentimentality and who captures a stillness unusual among artists, and Lilius Trotter an artist who was profoundly gifted and befriended by art critic John Ruskin yet chose the life of a missionary to Algeria.

This book is an easy and engaging read, of interest to those who have knowledge of art and accessible to those who are just beginning to discover art. Written by a “Pastor” one might hope it would inspire others in church leadership to give more attention to visual art as a valuable resource for the faith journey.



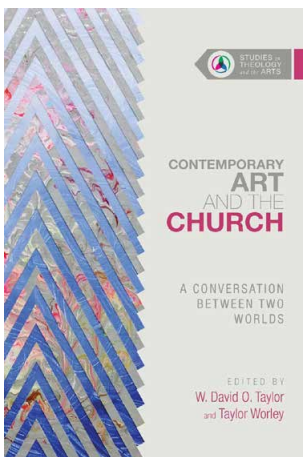
Jessica Hooten Wilson,
The Scandal of Holiness:
Renewing your
Imagination in the
Company of Literary
Saints, Brazos Press, 2022.
208 pp

The invitation of good literature is to surrender ourselves to a story, to step away from daily routines and enter another world where we can encounter characters, some of whom become good friends. Our imaginations are

formed by the stories we read and the narratives we choose to live in. Literature has the capacity to mirror back to us who we are as well as open possibilities for who we might become.

In this book you will meet authors who are familiar; Flannery O'Connor, C.S. Lewis, Toni Morrison or E. Wiesel, and some less familiar; Zora Neale Hurston, Sigrid Undset, or Eugene Vodolazkin. Each is considered for the way in which their writing may prompt the reader toward holiness.

There is much in this book that has a prophetic edge, challenging the status quo, such as the chapter titled "Liberating Prophets" or another on "Creation Care as a Holy Calling." At the end of each chapter is a "devotional" quote from one of the authors, a biblical passage, some questions for reflection a few works for further reading. Wilson draws insights found in the stories she discusses and puts them to work in real life situations.



W. David O. Taylor and Taylor Worley, eds.
Contemporary Art and the Church: A Conversation between Two Worlds, IVP
2017, 229 pp

This is an excellent collection of presentations given at a CIVA conference which I was privileged to attend. I include it here as one fine example of the high calibre work that CIVA sought to encourage and promote. The two worlds

of church and contemporary art have been distant from one another. This book and much that has happened subsequently suggests that the gap is beginning to close and clearly the conversations needs to continue. The essays contained in this volume could serve to generate some of those conversations. There are four sections in the book, covering "starting points", theology, worship and culture.



Fruits of the Spirit: Art from the Heart —National Gallery of London UK

For some time now there have been signs that the barriers between religion and art are coming down. In the last issue of the newsletter we noted the widespread interest in sacred music. I cite here another example from visual arts that suggests a new openness in the art-world to the world of religious faith. In times past these two worlds have had little interaction as they have been characterized by a mutual suspicion. (Particularly Protestantism on the religious side.)

Initiated by the National Gallery of London this virtual exhibition features nine works from the Gallery collection that are paired with nine more recent works from other galleries in the UK. Each pair addresses one of the fruits of the Spirit noted by Saint Paul in the letter of Galatians—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This biblical letter offers counsel on how to build and maintain community in the face of disagreement. A timely message for a fragmented culture. The more recent borrowed art works invite the viewer to consider the particular "fruit" in the light of current cultural concerns. As with all good art, these works serve to open conversations on matters important to the human community.

At the website you can then click on a link and do the virtual tour. www.nationalgallery.org.uk/visiting/virtual-tours/fruits-of-the-spirit

An IMAGO Evening

Featuring Irish poet Micheal O'Saidhail and special guest Jazz Pianist Mike Janzen

7:30 p.m., Wednesday, September 20, 2023

Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, 230 St. Clair Ave. W.

In partnership with TEMC, IMAGO will host an evening with the renowned Irish Catholic poet Micheal O'Saidhail. Selections from two recent works will be featured, *The Five Quintets* and *Testament*. The first is a rich collection of poems to "take stock of the world" entering into dialogue with figures from many walks of life, Dante, Bach, Eliot (George and T.S.) Chagall and Messiaen. The second volume consists of 150 psalms written by O'Saidhail and some 50 poems on the Gospels. Don't miss this unique opportunity to experience this celebrated poet in person.

A Word About Hope

The philosopher Immanuel Kant is known for highlighting three questions humans ask: What can I know? What ought I to do? What can I hope for? This third question has received much less attention than the first two. Knowledge and morality capture our interest while hope is often overlooked. The changing circumstances of our world have drawn fresh attention to human longing and our need for the presence of hope. Sadly our confidence is often placed in technology or in human resourcefulness and ingenuity. It has been said that the opposite of hope is not despair but “self-determination”. If we are authors of ourselves (as many believe today) there is no need for hope. Hope is readily paired with humility, we confess our limits and we acknowledge our inability to fully grasp either the present or the future. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann notes that hope keeps us radically unreconciled to the present. It resists the temptation to idolize current circumstances. And hope is not optimism. Optimism is grounded in a temperamental cheerfulness while hope, though fallible, must rest on reasons that make it credible. The biblical narrative provides a vision for the future when “all things will be made new.” However hope is not simply a matter of expectation but involves

living in such a way that we draw the future into the present. Art has a hopeful quality about it as it provides glimpses of what might be, cultivating in us not just a feeling but a disposition that acknowledges there is more than meets the eye.

CIVA Concludes

Launched in 1977 Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) sought to explore and nurture the relationship between visual art and Christian faith. Its impact has been significant. I have attended several of its biannual conferences that took up important themes in the faith and art conversation. (See note on *Art and the Church* page 3) It was sad and unexpected news to hear that CIVA would close all programs and operations by April 2023 and conclude its charitable charter in June 2023. Over the 45 year history CIVA has expanded networks, provided rich resources for reflection and encouraged hundreds of artists. There were 1500 members in 2022 including many Canadians. This loss leaves a significant gap in the North American faith and art landscape. However CIVA's pioneering work in the arts has generated the founding and development of a number of arts initiatives that will extend its legacy. www.civa.org

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Some critics of Christianity see faith as a sellout which undermines human autonomy. Not least Nietzsche, who was vocal about how the notion of submission to God could only result in a diminished humanity. Modern thought is deeply enamoured with the idea of human autonomy believing it is the path toward human flourishing.

If one thinks of an artist who is Christian it is an easy conclusion to say that their submission to the divine will compromise and even destroy creativity. This facile conclusion fails to discern clearly what is entailed in the life of faith and the activity of the Spirit. I want to make two brief observations.

First the Spirit is both a gift and a giver of gifts. Openness to the Spirit does not erase our humanity but enriches it. Artistic work for the believing artist is not a matter of mere passivity but entails active engagement of skill and intelligence that leaves room for the generating presence of the Spirit. This model breaks the binary assumption that it is either me or the divine that brings art to life. We are not dealing with a competition but with a relationship that allows for the enriching and humanizing presence of the divine as well as the active engagement of the human. Theologically speaking the Holy Spirit works “to complete and perfect our humanity”. The presence of the Spirit is no obstacle to human creativity rather it helps generate the creative process by turning us away from focus on ourselves. We become free to draw on the givens of nature and our relationships as well as our social and cultural context.

The second observation is that the Spirit brings freedom. The Spirit releases us from the bondage of occupation with ourselves

and with the idols of our time. The Spirit gives us breathing space unrestrained by the stifling expectations of a secular culture. We are invited to see the world differently and the eyes of faith—at their best—open new horizons and encourage us to reimagine reality in ways that bring fresh meaning to our experience. We must acknowledge that religious faith influences how we view things but then there is no bias-free location from which we can operate. What we are given in our experience is filtered through these lenses but not fully determined by them. The biblical narrative repeatedly invites us to see and hear in fresh ways and to discover the unexpected.

The Day of Pentecost held the surprise for everyone to hear a new message in their own language. The Spirit who was at work at Pentecost continues to be at work in the world not least among artists—who provide us with a newness that comes from creative imagination and by their works signal hope in the midst of the distress and uncertainty that permeates our human communities.



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