

Imago turned forty-five late last fall and in June 2018 my sojourn with Imago will reach the twenty year mark. As I have thought recently about my journey with Imago and about its origins I am struck by the breadth of influence it has been able to have given the size of the organization. In fact “organization” seems too grand a term for this creative initiative. Over the years we have been able to assist scores of artists in getting the funding they need to carry out their projects. And there is a wide and growing network of artists that have been featured in the Imago newsletter or at Imago arts events. Imago has served as a source of hope and encouragement for many of these artists.

Recent decades have seen dramatic development in discussions on the subject of faith and the arts. My role with Imago has allowed me to listen in as well as participate in some of those conversations. I have watched the movement from hesitant acknowledgement of the value of the arts to enthusiastic embrace affirming their importance in the faith community. In 1980 it was not easy to find written resources on art and faith – while currently it is virtually impossible to keep up

with constant flow of books and articles that take up this theme.

The modern idea of “art” or what we call “fine art” was invented in the late seventeenth century. It was soon after this

that public museums, galleries, and concert halls appeared across Europe. Though these institutions have made an immeasurable contribution to life in western culture they have also allowed for art to be separated

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Not About The View

2011, acrylic on braced masonite, 16.5" x 18" x 2"

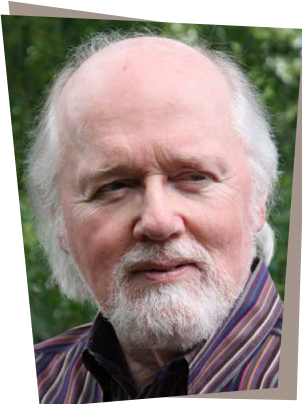
At fourteen I was invited by Robert Bateman to be mentored under him. I enjoyed a week with this beloved grandfather figure, but never wanted to be pigeonholed as a wildlife artist. A couple years later in 2011 while visiting my relatives’ farm in Saskatchewan, an abandoned homestead inspired a series of Wyeth-esque works including “Not About The View.” I wished to direct the viewer’s attention to the inside of the window, to ponder the mystery of the scene and ask “What is this architectural relic of the historical past saying to us today?” I was always an old soul.

I have often wondered why my “Watching Paint Peel” series had generated such wide interest. While nostalgia may be a contributing factor, I think there is something more visceral. Reflecting on the transient nature of structures made with human hands, we feel a sense of humility at the power of nature and time. We see beauty in brokenness and imperfection. For those like me, who think about these things philosophically, something as mundane as watching paint peel can point us to a higher power.

We have a desire for perfection and permanence, yet we cannot find anything that does not weather and decay over time, including ourselves! This human longing can only come from something or someone perfect, transcending time and space. I believe that is God, in whose image we are made.

The interaction between the natural world and human structures is of particular interest in my work, often giving rise to metaphors that highlight truth, beauty and the longing for ultimate restoration in the world. My studies in philosophy and theology undergird the reflective process behind my paintings. In the past couple years my style has refined to narrative hyperrealism. My current body of work, “Streams in the Wasteland,” based on prophetic passages from Isaiah, explores the theme of wild animals juxtaposed into abandoned spaces bringing honour to their Creator. These new works are slated for my debut international solo exhibition at New York based gallery Jonathan LeVine Projects, Fall 2019.

Josh Tiessen (www.joshtiessen.com)



**In the Beauty of Holiness:
Art and the Bible in Western
Culture, David Lyle Jeffrey,
Eerdmans, 2017**

This impressive publication by Canadian author David Jeffrey is the fruit of forty-five years of reflection on art and faith. The author is best known for his writing on Christianity and literature though it is not surprising that careful attention to word in ecclesiastical history would eventually lead to an embrace of image.

The book “is not a history of art” but it traces the development of Christian art with particular attention to the themes of beauty and holiness. This combination opens the way for exploring how art is engaged in worship. Guided by these themes the author provides an informed account of a “fundamental cultural, theological and spiritual trajectory for Christian art in the West”, choosing to address the “why” rather than merely the “what” and “how” questions, concerning the legacy that religious and secular lovers of art share. (p.7)

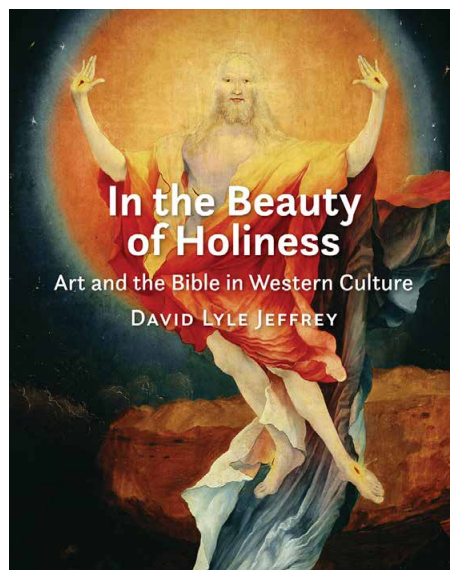
The twelve chapters of this book merit a more sustained review than I can give here. It is a 400 page work richly illustrated and includes a twenty-five page bibliography. My focus will be to offer a brief account of chapter four on the theme of The Beauty of Light. But before turning to that topic I want to note a foundational assumption that informs the perspective of this work.

...that an experience of beauty invites us to something beyond itself suggests an inherently metaphysical or religious dimension that lies behind the surface of beauty, to which beauty may somehow become a portal. (p.12)

Getting more clarity about what is real requires that we find a way to move beyond the surface of things and probe for deeper meaning and perhaps a presence which mere physical perception cannot capture. Among the places where beauty has consistently shown up are in those places we deem to be sacred or holy. And Jeffrey is intent on giving an account of that connection in the Western Christian tradition. It is a story which includes the “divorce of beauty from transcendence” which he deems as one of the casualties of the post – Renaissance

turn to a more secular and human-centred vision. The influence of classical culture gained momentum and replaced religious sensibilities with nature and the erotic. To be clear the latter are not incompatible with the former but they do compete for a place of priority.

Eight of the twelve chapters in this book directly address the theme of beauty. Beauty and proportion, the paradoxical beauty of the cross, the beauty of holiness and beauty, power and doctrine are among the chapter themes. Here I will comment on chapter four titled *The Beauty of Light*.



Medieval thought on beauty was shaped by the influence of Greek thought much of which came through St. Augustine. The aesthetics of proportion was most common resting on a geometric model of what was pleasing to the eye. But not far removed from proportion is illumination. The latter being more abstract than the former. The one being quantitative the other qualitative. There is, with light and colour an immediacy and simplicity. As one author notes: “...it was the Middle Ages which developed an art form in which, to an unsurpassed degree, the brilliance of simple colours is married to the brilliance of light: the stained glass windows in Gothic Cathedrals.” (Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* – p.45)

The aesthetics of light is closely linked to the Christological affirmation in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world”. There were also significant associations of light with God who is the “Father of lights” and the one who said “let there be light”. But it is

the “Logos” “the light that comes into the world” “a light to lighten the darkness” that grounds the aesthetics of light. It is here that inspiration is found to profile light as a quality that speaks eloquently of divine presence and nurtures the human soul as it aspires to the light and away from the darkness.

Jeffrey provides a fine account of this medieval aesthetic of light. He rightly notes that it is in the architecture and specifically the stained glass windows of this period that beauty and light are brought together. One of the most arresting examples of this is Sainte Chapelle in Paris. An important figure who wrote on the beauty of light – was Bonaventure who began teaching in Paris in 1248, the year Sainte Chapelle was completed. (p. 99) Bonaventure would have visited this church and – as Jeffrey suggests – one could speculate that the experience of this splendid building served to inspire some of his theological reflections. Once the technical know-how was mastered these windows began to appear in the Gothic style cathedrals and churches throughout Europe. These well engineered vehicles of light provided not only a stunning visual array but contained “individual panes of glass ...narratively ordered to portray to the dedicated observer the stories and the theological truths of the Bible.” (p.101) it is likely that the beauty of the stained glass would have served to invoke a sense of the holiness of the space for those medieval worshipers. Jeffrey draws on the seventeenth century poet George Herbert who longed to repeat the transparency and colour of the stained glass in the life of the believer and the words of the homilist.

Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?

He is a brittle, crazy glass;
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford

This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window through thy grace.

(George Herbert, *The Windows*)

Light is a powerful metaphor capturing the truth of the incarnation as expressed in the Prologue to the Gospel of John and in generating a sense of divine presence commonly experienced in places of worship. It is worth noting that light is also a central theme for those who follow the path of mysticism. This book promises to become a classic on the theme of beauty and holiness.

The Voice of Environmental Hope in Contemporary Ontarian Poetry

Poetry, though the oldest form of literary expression, has struggled to rediscover its public voice in the last century, but there are signs of revitalization, not least in poetry that speaks to environmental concerns. I am working on a project which looks at the recent poetry of several southern Ontario poets with strong environmentalist sensibilities: among them are Madhur Anand, a poet and also professor of Ecosystem Science and Biodiversity at U. of Guelph; Adam Dickinson, an English professor and poet at Brock U.; and John Terpstra, a professional writer and cabinet-maker in Hamilton. I am discovering how these poets speak into environmental issues, what grounds they have for hope, and how they hope their poetry may have an effect on public perceptions and behaviours.

With the help of student researchers, I have been exploring several local environmental organizations, to ascertain their vision,

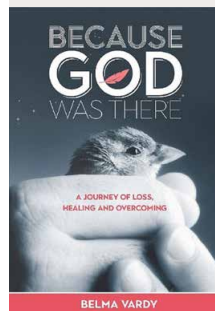
their own grounds for hope, and their interest in collaborating with the arts. In Hamilton, we've interviewed A Rocha and the Hamilton Conservation Authority, and are in touch with Hamilton Victory Gardens, the Mustard Seed Co-operative Grocery, the Suzuki Blue Dot initiative, and the Greening Niagara project. Some of these groups are overtly Christian, others are coming from a secular perspective. There are plans to talk with the Royal Botanical Gardens, the Bay Area Restoration Council, and the Bruce Trail members' group, and to engage organizations both Christian and secular in and around Guelph, St Catharines and Brantford. We have produced a series of leaflets on "Poetry and Ecology" for distribution through environmentalist and cultural

groups: the leaflets' topics include food, water, trees, birds, wild creatures, flowers and pollinators, and human interactions with the land. By looking into the public life of poetry as it addresses a vital contemporary issue, we believe this project will demonstrate poetry's value well beyond the arts community, as it builds collaboration between environmentalists, poets, and other interested groups. We are excited, too, to express a Christian faith perspective on environmental issues that will foster dialogue with secular thinkers.

Deborah Bowen recently retired from her position as Chair of English at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario. She continues to teach courses in Environmental Literature, Contemporary Canadian Poetry. Her book *Stories of the Middle Space: Reading the Ethics of Postmodern Realisms* came out in 2010 with McGill-Queen's UP. She has published widely on Canadian poetry and on contemporary fiction.

Two books launched

Last Fall I attended book launches two nights in a row. The books are vastly different but each important in what they offer to the reader. Both found funding support through their connection to Imago.



Belma Vardy has had a long association with Imago as a dance teacher. In her recent biography *Because God was There: A Journey of Loss, Healing and Overcoming*, (Castle Quay Books), she

tells her story beginning in war torn Berlin. Belma experienced an unsettling childhood walked a difficult path over the years – buoyed up by her confident faith in God and some significant people in her life. Her journey was one in which dreams and visions play a role coming together with her deep struggles to shape a life characterized by gratitude and filled to overflowing with grace. In recent years she has had significant involvement with First Nations people and her story has served to encourage many in this community and beyond.



The second book is edited by D. S. Martin and is a fine collection of works by contemporary Christian poets. *The Turning Aside* (Cascade Books) takes its title from words found in Exodus 5 and the story of the burning bush. The range of the collection demonstrates that the poetic sensibility is alive and well among people of Christian faith. Poets whose work is to be found in this anthology include. Margaret Avison, Malcolm Guite, Mary Karr, Les Murray, John Terpstra, R.S. Thomas, and Lucy Shaw. The themes covered are diverse though many land on subjects significant for the Christian tradition. There are of course glimpse into the human soul as well as insights and inspiration for the human journey. If you enjoy reading poetry this book is a worthy addition for your collection.



Imago at forty-five

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from its original context. An altarpiece once in a church is now in a museum and a cantata sung by a church choir for a worshipping community is now a concert piece for all to enjoy. The point to be made here is that this model for where and how to engage art has disconnected religious art from its sacred setting. The religious voice has been silenced and religious presence has been replaced by a preoccupation with ourselves. There appears to be little or no place for religious sensibility in our secular art institutions. This situation has posed a significant challenge to developing a discourse on faith and art. Some years ago James Elkins made the observation that the modern art world had no place for “religious art” that is, art for the purpose of devotion.

However the landscape has been changing and the religious voice is once again sounding in the precincts of the art world. There are many examples one could choose to illustrate this shift. I want to note an event that took place in the year 2000 at the National Gallery in London. The exhibition, *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art*, running from February to May was among the most attended British exhibits in two decades. The show went well beyond having a merely historical purpose intended only for engagement with art of the past. The date of the exhibition provides the occasion to focus on the person of Jesus. The link between Jesus and salvation is explicit. Put in theological terms the exhibition was centred on Christology. The organizers were explicit about their intent. A survey of those who attended makes clear that for many it was not just aesthetic experience that drew them or that sustained them while they were there. Reports of strengthened faith, spiritual healing, transformative experience, fresh understandings of Jesus, personal worship and new appreciation for the gospel narratives

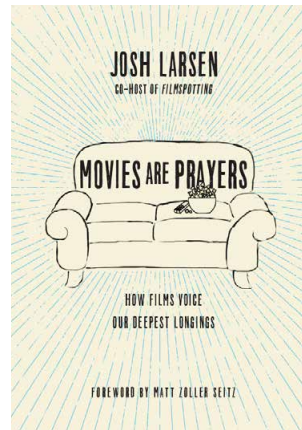
imago evening

NEW LOCATION

Yorkminster Park Baptist Church
Cameron Hall, 1585 Yonge St.
(2 blocks north of St. Clair)

Wednesday June 27 at 7:00 p.m.

\$10 at the door. Reception to follow.



Movies are Prayers: How Films Voice our Deepest Longings, Josh Larsen, Intervarsity Press 2017, 183 pages

Film has been getting a lot of attention recently in faith communities. There was a time when movies were on a taboo list for anyone who wished to be devout in their faith. And it is not that long ago since some well know and influential Christian magazines have broken the silence and begun to feature movie reviews. In the Fall of 2015 Imago hosted an event under the title *Meeting God at the Movies*. A bold claim but one which has become widely accepted, believing that film is a location for divine encounter.

The title of Josh Larsen’s book *Movies are Prayers* caught me off guard. Surely this was a stretch to think of movies being prayers. Larsen soon persuaded me that there is something fruitful to explore in this unusual claim. The link to prayer is the expression of human longing. And movies seem to be one of the significant places in our culture where our longings are expressed.

There are eleven chapters in the book where Larsen takes up a variety of themes familiar to those who pray such as, praise, lament, anger, confession, obedience and joy. In each case he draws on several films that fit the theme. For example in the chapter on lament – films that get attention include; *12 years a Slave*, *The Dark Knight*, *Batman vs Superman*, *Watchman*, *Chinatown*, and *No Country for Old Men*. His discussions consistently interweave the film narrative with well selected biblical content. In the chapter on reconciliation he writes about *Do the Right Thing*, *The Interrupters*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Brave* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. In all of these he points to places of reconciliation.

The author seeks to provide a case for the deep connection between human longing and its cinematic expression. Larsen knows the film world and references films from the distant past – the 1940s for example. This is a book from someone both film savvy and bible savvy. The book is provocative and insightful providing much to consider from the world of film while energizing some fresh discovery of links between film and prayers that are likely to permanently change the readers experience of the movies.

means this was no ordinary art show. For some, art brought about a “felt” relationship with Christ. One expects that in church not in an art gallery. The exhibition was not without controversy as it crossed some boundaries “sacred” to the art world and not everyone who attended was positively disposed to what they saw. But it is just such divergent viewpoints that open the way for addressing questions concerning the artistic and religious.

On this same subject it is interesting to note that the launch of the *Theology Through the Arts* project centred at Cambridge University – under the direction of Jeremy Begbie – took place in the fall of 2000. I attended that conference and there first heard of the Scottish Catholic composer James MacMillan. He has become a renowned artist whose compositions are performed around the world. He has no hesitation to speak of his devout Catholic faith when in conversation about his music, much of which is

religious. In a recent issue of BBC Music magazine I learned that MacMillan, referred to as “one of UK’s most celebrated musical voices” hosts an annual four day festival in his home town of Cumnock Scotland.

These are just two of many signs of a new openness to a religious presence in the world of fine art. Resistance to the religious in art is still a force to be reckoned with – but that resistance appears to have diminishing resolve. The conversation on this important topic is certainly not over – but it appears it has taken an unexpected turn.

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