

Study Questions for “Image, Story, and Place: Portals to Spiritual Transformation”

By Paula Bowser

1. The question Paula Bowser’s cohort asked themselves was, “How do image, story and place create openings for spiritual transformation in us?” It is a question about how the arts nurture spirituality. On the pages below you will find a set of photographs of classic European artworks on Christian and biblical themes. Use the questions on page 43 in *Brethren Life and Thought* 54.1-2 to explore the meaning of the art.
2. “We know spiritual transformation when we see it, whether in ourselves or others. It radically ‘altars’ behaviors, attitudes, lifestyles, and habits. The heart is forever changed.” Take turns describing what each of you would consider to be transformative experience. How often would you say you have had a life-changing experience? Could you describe what happened? What triggered it for you?
3. How does your congregation use stories and artwork in worship or meditation? Do you have a visual focus for worship in your sanctuary? Look at the biblical texts for worship over the last month. Brainstorm a list of images that would express the intent of the passage. What art pieces are hanging in your church building? Take a tour together to look at them and talk about them using Bowser’s questions for evaluating art.
4. There is a great deal of thinking these days about the future of the church and downward trends in worship attendance, church membership, and giving. What role does spirituality play in the future of the church? Why?
5. Which artistic format is most meaningful to you—theater, music, literature, painting, or sculpture? Why? Which would you like to learn more about? Which one has never succeeded in touching you? Why?



1. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Supper at Emmaus 1606, Oil on canvas, 141 × 175 cm Pinacoteca di Brera. Milan, Italy.

Any given passage in the Bible is almost certainly richly layered. Just like a preacher, the artist often zeros in on one character, symbol or moment in time and seeks to focus the reader/viewer's attention on that aspect of the story.

Caravaggio here shows us the moment just after Jesus blesses the food during the Supper at Emmaus. If he showed us the next moment, we'd see Jesus vanishing! What do you notice about the body language of the disciples and how does it differ from the body language of the servants? Put yourself in the picture. When have you recognized the presence of the Risen Christ? Was hospitality to a stranger involved? How did it change you?



2. The Dead Christ Supported by Mary and John by Giovanni Bellini (1460). Pinoteca Brera, Milan.

It's been said that one of the strengths of Christianity is that it does not shy away from the reality of suffering and death. Bellini's pieta is filled with stark realism of grief as depicted in the patently unglamorous faces of Mary and John, who are often shown as physically beautiful.

Does this painting remind you of a time when you or someone you love was in the throes of sorrow? How might such a painting help us make the transitions from grief to hope? How might this work of art help those who mourn?



3. Bellini's Pietà... up close and intensely personal. What emotions do you sense in Mary's facial expression? What of your own memories does this close-up bring to the front of your mind?



4. The plant at the base of the cross resembles a fountain of what Hildegard of Bingen called *viriditas*, a manifestation of that divine creative power which makes all things come to birth, grow, revive and thrive. This is the resurrection power that transforms all things, both in nature and in the realm of the soul.



5. In the film Pan's Labyrinth, young Ofelia is given a piece of enchanted chalk which creates doors. These portals lead to other worlds where she will be tested and forever changed.

Story, image and place are among the tools we as pastors and worship leaders use to create openings for spiritual transformation.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep....

an excerpt from "The Breeze at Dawn"

The Essential Rumi, p. 36

by Jalal al-Din Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks
Harper Collins Publishers, Inc, New York, NY,
1995



6. Never underestimate the reality of viewer's fatigue on your immersion trip. We saw literally hundreds of images of the Annunciation, but this one "Ecce Ancilla Dei," or Behold the Handmaid of the Lord, penetrated the fog of one saturated soul, probably because we scheduled Sabbath time. It was taken by Paula Bowser at a little chapel in the heart of Fiesole near Villa Linda, on the outskirts of Florence, Italy.



7. Here I am at the Porch of the Caryatids which is part of the Erechtheum at the Acropolis in Athens. From where I'm standing you can see the Parthenon. To get to the sacred temple of Athena, the worshipers of Ancient Greece had to climb upwards from the marketplace and enter a gate.

As they did so, they would cross a threshold and pass from the profane, earth-bound realm into the realm of the holy. The architects made a deliberate attempt to help the pilgrims become physically and spiritually conscious of the passage leading from earth to heaven. In many ways, it's a metaphor for what we do every Sunday.



8. Darlene stands at the North Doors leading to the Baptistery at Santa Maria del Fiore - the magnificent Duomo, in the heart of Florence. She's pointing to "The Adoration of the Magi." Since most people never learned to read, these works of art, like the stained glass windows, were visual doorways to the stories embedded in scripture.



9. We've all seen this famous image from the Sistine Chapel. But Ann, our guide on the tour of the Vatican, revealed to us some of the open secrets of Michelangelo's art.

Did you ever notice, for instance, that the area surrounding God is in the shape of the human brain? As Mark Twain said "God created man in his own image, and man returned the favor."

And who is that lady beside Him? Could it be Lady Wisdom from Proverbs 8 and 9? Or could it be Eve? Perhaps the Divine Matchmaker is awakening Adam in order to introduce him to his bride.



10. The sculpted angel looks sinister and somewhat threatening... the wings seem more like pixie wings - leaflike, fiery and vaguely reptilian - rather than the birdlike affairs you'd find on a da Vinci angel or one by, say, Fra Angelico.

Look at his hands. Gabriel has the requisite flower in his right hand, but his left hand looks like the hand of a teacher or parent. The hair echoes the wings and looks like a raising tongue of fire.

More importantly, Mary is shrunk back as far as she can possibly go, and is braced against the wall -- literally cornered, in fact. Even the Holy Ghost Dove feels agitated in its present form, with wings beating against the ceiling as it hovers over the maiden.

We think the work itself invites awe and introspection, and asks soul-opening questions, like: "When has God sent a messenger who asked me to do something that made me shrink away as Mary is doing here?"

" Have I ever felt 'cornered' by God?"

11.

Watch this space, there may be another photo posted in the future.



12. Michelangelo Caravaggio's painting of The Calling of St. Matthew evokes the work of another Michelangelo... the famous sculptor who painted the Creation of Adam on the Sistine Chapel.

Here, Caravaggio wants us to see Jesus as the second Adam (c.f. Romans 5). If you remember, the limp hand on the end of His arm is not the one depicted as the hand of God, but as an inverted image of the hand of Adam.