



Art and Spirituality Plan



Aim/s

- To look at the role/use of art within Christian spirituality in different eras of history.
- To see how some people use it as part of worship today.
- To show it is not necessary to be a great artist in order to use art for spiritual expression.

Resources

If you are not able to use the accompanying PowerPoint for this plan, you will need to collect a small range of images to use within the session or print some from the PowerPoint.

As always, adapt the plan and images according to the culture and the needs of the group.

Starter

Discussion:

- Who likes/is good at art? Everyone draws – even if it is just doodling on paper or the front cover of your book or even a desk! Why?
- Some people use art to express spiritual ideas and beliefs. Why do you think they do that?
- We are going to whizz through the past 2000 years to see how people have used art in different ways in the context of the Christian faith and consider what we think about this.

You could start this discussion by asking them to draw anything they like (as long as it's not rude!).

Summary of slides/key facts & questions:

Slide 1: Title page

Italics indicate wording on the slides

Slide 2 'Beware Art!'

- *Why did the Jews & early Christians not use art in worship?*
- *Why do you think Christians later began to use art in churches?*

The Old Testament – the Ten Commandments forbade the use of images because there was so much idolatry in the ancient world.

There is no mention of this in the New Testament. As Christianity spread to places like Greece and Rome, people were not familiar with this taboo and they began to use art.

Whereas Jewish boys were taught to read, the lower classes in other nations mostly were not. Artwork began to be used to help teach Bible stories due to widespread illiteracy.

Slide 3 Symbolic Icons in early Christian times

The early Christians were reluctant to make pictures of Christ, so artwork is very rare.

Early images were symbolic and not intended to look real.

Slowly art began to be used to teach and to help with worship.

Symbolism has always been used by Christians. The ICTHUS / fish symbol was a secret symbol for the faith used as early as AD 33 because of the persecution. In Greek, the letters stand for 'Jesus, Christ, God, Son, Saviour.'

Catacombs Christ c.375 AD

Early Christian art such as this, painted on the wall of an ancient underground catacombs in Rome, was also intended to be symbolic and not to portray a lifelike image of Jesus.

Jesus is dressed here in the robes of a philosopher. This was meaningful to Greeks and Romans. There are two Greek letters on either side of Jesus's head: alpha and omega, the A and Z of the Greek alphabet. Why?

Ruler of Creation c.1070 AD:

This fragment of stained glass is from an abbey church on the French-German border.

- What do you think the artist is trying to convey? Majesty? Calmness/peace? Authority/ruler of creation?
- What effect do you think rich coloured stained glass had on people before the days before TV and PowerPoints?

Eastern Icon 6th century

This classic Eastern image of Jesus shows a man from the Eastern Mediterranean, with olive skin and brown eyes. It is kept in the monastery at the foot of Mt Sinai.

Slide 4 The Book of Kells:

The Book of Kells is an illuminated manuscript of the Gospels, written in Latin. It was created in a monastery around 800 AD & can be seen in Dublin.

- *Why do you think the monks decorated it like this?*

Slide 5: The Last Supper by da Vinci:

The 'Last Supper' is one of the world's most famous and most studied Christian paintings.

Jesus has just declared that one of the twelve will betray him. Da Vinci depicts the reaction of each disciple to the news.

- What do you notice in this painting that is different from the icon paintings?

The Renaissance saw great advances in all art being realistic – much of it was centred on Bible stories. This is more of an action picture, intended to portray a real-life drama; very different from the icon paintings.

Slide 6: The Last Supper by Walter Rane

- How does this painting of the Last Supper by contemporary artist Walter Rane compare with that of Leonardo da Vinci?

Slide 7: A modern portrayal - Jesus Laughing

- How does this differ from other images of Jesus?

Slide 8: 'The Light of the World' 1850's

The theme of symbolism in Christian art has continued down the centuries. One notable example is 'The Light of the World', a famous painting by Holman Hunt. (He did 3 copies at different times.)

It is inspired by the Bible verse from Revelation chapter 3 verse 20. (Translation reference slide 8)

"Here I am! I have been standing (for a long time) at the door and I am constantly knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."

Can you spot any of the symbolism?

- Jesus is standing in a dark wood.
The only light comes from his lantern. "I am the light of the world. John 8:12
- Jesus is dressed in a robe with a clasp similar to those of a High Priest. The halo around Jesus' head shows that he is a holy, 'set apart' person.
- The crown of thorns and nail prints are reminders of the Easter story.
- His face shows a patient expression but his feet are turned as though to leave.
- The door represents the door of our lives. It is closed and the handle is on the inside.
- The weeds - things that hinder the door being opened.
- The top of the lantern has holes showing six pointed stars and crescent moons, the symbols for Judaism and Islam. Jesus is the Light for all people.
- The fruit, fallen on the ground, is rotten and has been discarded, a symbol of desolation and decay.

Slide 10: Modern symbolism: The Revolutionary 1999

This picture of Jesus was produced by a church group.

It imitated the style of a famous poster of the 1960s revolutionary fighter Che Guevara because...

"Jesus was not crucified for being meek and mild. He challenged authority. He was given a crown of thorns in a cruel parody of his claims about proclaiming the Kingdom of God."

- Does modern symbolism differ from ancient and medieval symbolism?

Slide 10 Modern symbolic Christian art by John Reilly

- *What do you think the artist is depicting in these pictures?*
- *What do you think of this type of symbolic art?*

Slide 11 Cultural Images:

These are all images of Jesus as portrayed by different cultures.

- *Why do you think people paint Jesus according to their own culture?*
- *Do you think this is ok?*

Slides 12-19: Current Expressions

Before the Protestant Reformation, churches were richly decorated with colourful illustrations of stories from the Bible.

Many Protestants believed that this went against the Ten Commandments so they whitewashed the walls, removed the statues and returned to a plain simple style of worship.

In recent times there has been a growth of creativity within Christian groups. Many people have broadened the use of art and other creative expressions as part of their worship.

Slide 12: Flower arrangement depicting Easter scenes.

Slide 13: Use of collage materials and pebbles.

Slide 14: Local artist Helen doing some painting at a shopping precinct on Good Friday.

Slide 15: Bible verse Matthew 10:31 visualised by Helen.

Slide 16: Some simple spiritual pictures. Anyone can use art as a means of spiritual expression.

Slide 17: Bible verse Psalm 91:4 as painted by teenager Katie.

Slides 18-19: A creative prayer room, Easter 2015

Slide 20 Reflect:

“Looking at art is one way of listening to God. “Sister Wendy Becket

“Art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos. A stillness which characterises prayer, too...”Saul Bellow, Nobel-prize winner and writer

Discussion questions:

Divide into groups & give each group a copy of one or more images to discuss:

- What do you see?
- What message is the artist trying to convey?
- Do you like the painting?
- Do you think it is effective?
- Do you think it is useful?

General:

- Why are the arts used to express religious beliefs?
- How effectively do religions express their belief through arts?
- How do Christians express their beliefs and experiences through the arts?
- Should people be allowed to express their spirituality in any way they choose?

Reflective activities

A words activity: Provide a collection of images and ask people to pick out one image that is meaningful to them. Ask them to talk or write about that image.

A creative activity: Provide a few inspirational verses, some creative materials and soft music. Ask them to paint or draw some kind of spiritual picture. It doesn't have to be a work of art! Encourage them to listen and reflect rather than talk to each other.

Photo diary: Invite the group to take some photographs over the course of a week or month of anything that speaks to them in a spiritual way. Share the photos.

Credits and Further Sources

This session was inspired by an REinspired lesson by Carrie King on 'Faith and Art'. REinspired helps schools in the UK to deliver the Christian part of the RE curriculum. <http://www.reinspired.org.uk/>

One option within the UK RE curriculum is 'Religion and Art'. Details here:

www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/religious-studies/gcse/religious-studies-b-4055/subject-content/unit-5

<http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/AQA-4055-W-SP-14.PDF>

Information and images: http://www.rejesus.co.uk/site/module/faces_of_jesus/

Slide 8: <https://www.stpauls.co.uk/documents/Education/Light%20of%20the%20world%20booklet.pdf>

Slide 6: Walter Rane <http://www.walterraneprints.com/prints/in-remembrance-of-me>

Slide 10: John Reilly: <http://www.thejohnreillygallery.co.uk/>

Art books by Sister Wendy Beckett, e.g. 'A Child's Book of Prayer in Art'.

Look for local Christian artists where you live.

<http://www.prayerwindows.com/>

<https://www.methodistpublishing.org.uk/books/ga202-ed-07/the-christ-we-share>

<https://www.revelationillustrated.com/>

St. Paul's Cathedral offers educational visits & useful information: <https://www.stpauls.co.uk/>