

Craving the Company of Beauty

Jesuit Arts and Museums

By Terrence Dempsey, S.J.

“I cried because ... I was overcome with love.”

In his book *Pictures and Tears*, James Elkins reports this reaction by Robin Parks to a work by J. S. Bach. Parks went on to explain that her tears in response to certain artworks had “something to do with loneliness ... a kind of craving for the company of beauty. Others, I suppose might say a craving for God. ...” Theologian Kimberly Vrudny, working from the stories in Elkins’ book, writes in her 2005 article “Spirit Standing Still,” about art that so moved people that it evoked tears. Vrudny describes these encounters as “sacramental—an encounter with the holy through the mediation of physical materials.” Vrudny identifies beauty “with existence itself; with God and with the perceptible presence of Being in the midst of a full range of human life,” a spectrum that embraces glory as well as suffering. Vrudny maintains that, when all superficialities and distractions are removed, we discover “the sacred presence of God,” and therein resides true beauty.

Might this affective connection between the beholder and artwork, so powerful as to elicit tears, also have the power to help us gain greater insights into ourselves, the people and world around us, and ultimately God? And could this affective experience influence our attitudes and behavior? Vrudny believes so. The late theologian William Spohn likewise recognized the power of images to influence our motivations, through what he referred to as “judgments of affectivity” (as opposed to “judgments of rationality”). In a 1984 seminar at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley,

Spohn stated:

When we are talking about discernment, we are talking about judgments of affectivity. They are based on the model of what is fitting, what is harmonious, what is somehow appropriate between who I am and what I am to do.

While Spohn refers to images that occur in our minds, I believe the physical, material images created by artists can also be major stimuli for our imaginations.

In the commendable volume *The Jesuits and the Arts*, Gauvin Bailey suggests that from the earliest years of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius and his contemporaries realized the power of imagery in the service of prayer: images engage the imagination to stimulate an affective, experiential encounter with the life of Jesus and other religious figures, thus giving the viewer an affective way of entering into devotion. Bailey points out that even though Ignatius was a visionary, he would often use physical images to help him in his prayerful state.

Ignatius of Loyola assembled a small collection of devotional pictures in his rooms in Rome, including a painting of

Terrence E. Dempsey, S.J. is the May O'Rourke Jay Chair of Art History and Theology and the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art at Saint Louis University.



“Silver Clouds.” 1966 (2006 MOCRA installation) Artist: Andy Warhol, Medium: silver mylar, air, helium.

the Holy Family, which survives today, to assist him with his prayers and meditations, a practice that would be followed by many of his successors.

In the post-Suppression Society, the connection to the arts was weakened, particularly in the case of the Society in the United States. Most of the American-born men who entered the Society after its restoration in 1814 were given no introduction to the visual arts, with the result that these otherwise well-educated men tended to regard the visual arts as decorative, superfluous, and without essential value. The neglect of the arts in American Jesuit secondary and college level schools continued through the first half of the twentieth century. The late Maurice B. McNamee, S.J., conducted a survey in 1944 of U.S. Jesuit educational institutions, finding that none offered courses in art appreciation or studio art.

However, thirty-five years later McNamee conducted another survey and found—encouragingly—that every U.S. Jesuit university, college, and high school had at least one offering in art or art appreciation, and a number of institutions had full-fledged art departments. Presently, of the 28 U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities, 23 have designated spaces for galleries and museums. Many have made use of previously existing structures. A

number have incorporated a gallery space in a fine and performing arts facility, and several have constructed buildings expressly intended for the display of art.

These galleries and museums are first and foremost for the education of students, but they have a larger reach as well. Most of our Jesuit galleries and museums actively engage with the cultural life of the cities in which they are located, for instance exhibiting the works of local artists. They thus serve as ambassadors for the school to the civic and cultural life of the community. Furthermore, several museums have achieved a national and international reach through the quality of their exhibitions. All of this follows in the tradition of the early society that John O’Malley describes in *The Jesuits and the Arts*: “The schools gave the Jesuits an engagement with general culture and the arts utterly different from that of any religious order up to that time [the mid-16th century].”

A Society that found God in all things could... include non-Christian literature.

If, as Bailey states, “the Jesuits considered the visual



Title and Dates: "Triptych: 11th, 12th, 13th Stations of the Cross for Latin America: La Pasión," 1981-88. **Artist:** Michael Tracy
Medium: acrylic on tarpaulin mounted on wood with glass, pottery, and hair, with tin corona. **Dimensions:** 234" (height) x 382" (width) x 18" overall. **On loan from the artist to the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Saint Louis University.**

arts to be key to the affirmation of the Catholic faith." we might ask if we are justified in displaying art that is not explicitly Catholic in its subjects and symbols. In the beginning of the Society's educational apostolate, there was a recognition that non-Christian classical literature could serve as a valid source of edification for students. As O'Malley explains, it was thought that if the ancient

Many of the young people...had never been in a museum of any sort.

service to the common good, in imitation of the great heroes of antiquity."

A Society that found God in all things recognized that it could draw expansively upon a body of thought and expression that included appropriate Catholic thinking but also non-Christian literature—all of which exemplified the great human themes and could help students achieve an understanding of "what is fitting, what is harmonious, what is somehow appropriate between who I am and what I am to do."

While O'Malley is discussing literary works, I would assert that the same can be said of visual artifacts that may not be explicitly Christian in content but can nonetheless delight, challenge, disturb, move, or lift our

literary works were properly taught, they "would render the student a better human being, imbued especially with an ideal of

spirits, and can cause our imagination to resonate with larger meanings.

Allow me to describe encounters with three works of art that have been displayed at the museum I direct, the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (MOCRA) at Saint Louis University. As an interfaith museum of contemporary art that engages the religious and spiritual dimensions, MOCRA is founded on the conviction of the value of art at the service of a Jesuit education.

Members of the Saint Louis University Theological Studies faculty often bring their classes to MOCRA to explore topics in a way that engages the imagination differently from books or lectures. For instance, one professor regularly uses one work in the museum as a focus for her classes on the theology of death and suffering: a massive triptych by American artist Michael Tracy entitled *11th, 12th, 13th Stations of the Cross for Latin America: La Pasión*. This visceral abstract work, executed in the 1980s, pays homage to the poor, the powerless, and the victims of violence in Latin America. The physicality of this piece is unnerving, its rough acrylic paint surface embedded with nails, shards of glass, human hair, and blood. When students are asked what their response is to the work (before even its title has been disclosed, or any meaning ascribed to it), typical responses are that it is depressing, that it is intimidating, or that there is a lot of pain associated with it—all good answers.

As we discuss the work, including an explanation of

the devotion of the Stations of the Cross, and situate it in the context of Central American death squads and the Disappeared Ones—the students get it. Those who have studied Liberation Theology or have participated in protest trips to the School of the Americas in Georgia make connections and share them with the group. Others recognize that the relevance of the triptych is not limited to Latin America, that it also speaks about violent urban American neighborhoods, and places like Darfur and Iraq.

But the class ultimately moves beyond the political sphere into the realm of Paschal Mystery, by calling the students' attention to the gold paint applied across the whole surface of the painting, gold that draws on traditional iconography of the divine and becomes a symbol of God's identification with the victims of violence. The hope of resurrection that lies beyond the 14th station is a hope we bring also to human situations of death and suffering.

A second encounter with art work involves a population beyond the SLU community. Earlier this summer, I gave a tour of MOCRA to a group of high school students participating in the Upward Bound summer enrichment program. Many of these young people, all from disadvantaged backgrounds, had never been in a museum of any sort. Among the works we discussed was *Mother and Child*, a silkscreen print by African-American artist Romare Bearden. Basing his work on the twelfth-century icon of *The Virgin of Vladimir*, Bearden transferred a faint image of the famous icon onto a sheet of paper and then "Africanized" the facial features (see photo page 32).

I passed around photographs of the *Virgin of Vladimir* icon for the students to compare with the Bearden work, then asked this largely African-American group of students what would attract an African-American artist born in North Carolina and raised in the Baptist tradition, to an icon nearly 1,000 years old from another part of the world and a markedly different expression of Christian faith? The students were quiet for a moment, then one student spoke out by saying that both images were about a mother doing all she could to safeguard her child. Another student said the work built bridges to other times. Through this conversation with a work of art, the common human theme of the vigilant and tender mother had even greater impact on these students because this was an image of Mary and Jesus expressed in a cultural context with which they could identify.

The third work may be more surprising than the latter two: Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds*. In 2006, MOCRA gave this 40-year old installation piece its largest-ever presentation, as 55 of Warhol's large silver mylar pillow-shaped balloons drifted through MOCRA's spacious nave gallery. The entire gallery was in a state of slow motion.

Moreover, this was an interactive exhibit. Visitors played with the *Clouds*, they stretched out on the floor and let the *Clouds* brush by and surround them, they even meditated in the midst of the gallery. One mother, helping to chaperone a grade school group, asked what an exhibition like this was doing in a religious art museum. In response I asked her to spend a few minutes with the *Silver Clouds*, and then I would join her. When we spoke again, she said, "I can't explain it, but I get it. I feel lifted out of the ordinary. I feel my spirit fly, I feel connected to everyone else in the gallery, and I feel a profound sense of joy and inner peace."

The arts can serve as effective portals to experiences that might otherwise remain only theoretical for many people. They are a potent means of finding God in all things, from overtly Christian subjects such as Bearden's *Mother and Child*, to the overwhelming power of Michael Tracy's abstract work about suffering on a vast scale, to the sublime joy of Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds*. This Jesuit university and college visual arts programs are in a position to carry on a tradition dating back to the first Jesuit schools and adapt it for our times. In doing so they are tapping into what Juan Plazoala Artola, S.J. (writing in *The Jesuits and the Arts*) feels that Ignatius himself recognized: "Ignatius must have understood intuitively that if he wished to capture the 'whole person' he needed to make use of the power of the fine arts." ■

Galleries and Museums on Jesuit College and University Campuses

The following list includes a variety of institutions — museums, art galleries with permanent collections, galleries used for special exhibitions, and galleries of student art.

Boston College	Loyola University Chicago
Canisius College	Regis University
College of the Holy Cross	Rockhurst University
Creighton University	Marquette University
Fairfield University	Saint Peter's College
Fordham University at Lincoln Center	Spring Hill College
Georgetown University	Saint Louis University
Gonzaga University	Santa Clara University
Le Moyne College	University of San Francisco
Loyola College Maryland	University of Scranton
Loyola Marymount University	Xavier University
Loyola University New Orleans	