

A Light Shines in the Darkness: Invigorating Sacred Space through Liturgical Art

Megan Marie Sawyer
University of Michigan School of Art and Design
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Introduction

Upon graduation, I will enter seminary to become a Lutheran pastor. In light of this, I decided to create liturgical art for my thesis, in essence marrying my future aspirations with what I have learned in the School of Art and Design. Liturgical art is artwork created specifically for use inside a public worship space. It is a form more complicated than artwork that simply incorporates religious themes, because of its dual role as both a didactic tool and as a way to bring the worship participant closer to a sense of the divine. In opposition to the opulence and intricacies of historical liturgical art, much modern liturgical art has fallen into meaningless abstraction or tired cliché.

In essence, the clichés in modern liturgical art are due to a marked lack of attention that churches give to visual art in the worship space. In my church especially, the type and style of music used in a worship service is frequently discussed, but visual art is nearly ignored. In light of this, I decided to use my senior thesis as an opportunity to create a piece for my home congregation, Antioch Lutheran Church in Farmington Hills, Michigan. The sanctuary at Antioch recently underwent a renovation, but behind the altar, the new wall looks incomplete. The wall is a blank expanse broken by two long hexagonal niches that are calling to be addressed (see Figure 1). Therefore, I have created a series of six pairs of paintings to fill the void in that area.

Context and Concerns

The context of the project has been my main consideration in conceiving the production, materials and physical manifestation of the piece. The parameter given to me by Antioch was that the project had to be removable so that, in the event that the wall needed to be removed, renovated, or repurposed, the art would not be destroyed with it. Given this constraint, I had to choose a sensible medium before even coming to rest on an appropriate theme and content to fill niches in the altar wall. Given that the art had to be removable, the natural conceptual

The church calendar is divided into various seasons, each with its own tone and character. The church year begins with Advent, a season of waiting in anticipation for Christmas. Following a brief time of calm after the Christmas season comes the long, solemn, and meditative season of Lent, capped by the joyous exuberance of Easter. Pentecost follows Easter to lead back into Advent. This cycle is reflected in the pattern of the spoken liturgy and the mood evoked by the hymns and music, each season with its own flavors and nuances. Since I was already given the constraint that my project had to be removable, it appeared wholly appropriate to follow the liturgical calendar and create a work that changes with each new season.

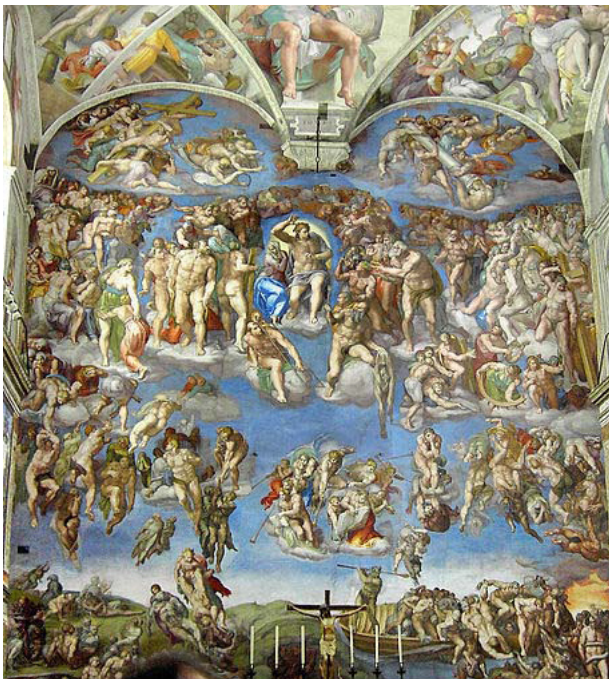


Figure 1
Interior of Antioch's sanctuary.

Each season has specific colors reflected in the sanctuary's changing vestments and paraments, so the main task was how to appropriate these colors in a way that was engaging, fresh, and appropriate in its ultimate context at Antioch. While looking at contemporary examples of Christian art, I came to a startling realization: art created for the gallery (or other fine-art setting) that incorporates Christian themes contains a rich variety of content and style, as well as considerable conceptual depth. However, artwork made for a liturgical setting consistently becomes rife with cliché banalities. This is not to say that standard symbols have no place in the sanctuary; but that as an artist, reliance solely on canonical symbols to convey a message fails to provide anything new or thought provoking for the congregation.

Historical Precedents and Conceptual Considerations

Early painted liturgical art can be seen in the opulence of Gothic cathedrals and lush, highly symbolic and figurative work in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries, such as the Frescos at the Sistine Chapel (see Figure 2), or the Ghent Altarpiece (see Figure 3). These meant to invoke a sense of wonder and awe in the viewer through sheer spectacle (Seasoltz 38).



After the Protestant Reformation, Lutherans eschewed rich visual art in worship spaces in favor of simplicity and lack of adornment, streamlining worship as a counter to the over-indulgence that was displayed by the Catholic Church at that time (Seasoltz 36). Medieval and Renaissance cathedrals and churches offer exquisite examples of early liturgical art, but it felt bizarre to draw from those sources when they are theologically very removed from Lutheranism (especially considering the countless depictions of Saints, who play extremely minor role Lutheran worship).

This simplicity in Protestant worship space continued up until the Twentieth Century through a myriad of different architectural styles, when churches began to look again at the role of art in a worship setting (Seasoltz 239). Much of this art, especially from the last twenty years, is extremely abstract in nature, serving an almost architectural function. Mark Rothko's



Figure 2 (top): *The Last Judgment* fresco from the Sistine Chapel, depicting the apocalypse and second coming of Christ.

Figure 3 (bottom): *The Ghent Altarpiece*, open. The center figure is God the Father, flanked by Mary and John the Baptist, as well as Adam and Eve in the outer panels. The bottom panels feature multitudes worshipping Jesus, represented by a Lamb.

chapel in Houston, Texas is a famous example of this style of artwork. While now non-denominational, the chapel was originally to be Roman Catholic, hence Rothko's use of the triptych. The enormous color-field canvases fill the space, in what Rothko intends as a transcendent experience (see Figure 4) (Seasoltz 51). However, in the absence of an established artist's talents, many churches adorn their sanctuaries with mass-produced paraments, which are generally pedestrian, simplistic handlings of symbol and text.

While the niches at Antioch are in essence an architectural element, imagery consisting of purely abstracted liturgical moods would be a purely decorative. In my opinion, art in a worship space should facilitate a deeper understanding and connection to the worship that is taking place, not just exist to make the space look better.



Figure 4, Interior of Rothko Chapel

Theological Influences and Considerations

To elevate the work beyond decoration, I began to consider what I was trying to say with these works and how that message is a part of my larger calling to ministry. Ultimately, the role of a pastor is to be a person who shares the message offered in the Gospels— that God offers us hope and peace through the death and resurrection of God's Son. While the Christian Church has a variety of teachings, this is the message at its most elemental. The art I created for my church should, therefore, be a way to illustrate and illuminate this message within the different liturgical seasons.

What I discovered was a verse in the Old Testament book of Isaiah: "The people who walked in great darkness/ have seen a great light; / those who lived in a land of deep / darkness—/ on them light has shined" (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Isaiah 9.2). Stumbling upon this verse, I remembered hearing it appropriated into Holden Evening Prayer, a setting my church has used during Wednesday worship in Lent for over a decade. In the Evening Prayer, the congregation sings "Jesus Christ you are the light of the World / the Light no darkness can overcome [...] let your light scatter the darkness / and shine within your people here" (Haugen 5). This theme is reiterated later in the liturgy when the leader says, "A light shines in the darkness" and the congregation responds, "and the darkness has not overcome it", a paraphrase of the first chapter in John's Gospel (Haugen 15). The image of light breaking through darkness as a metaphor for the Gospel struck me as visually powerful, and I took that as the overall theme for the painted series.

The Work

Each painting has an overall palette that uses the colors of the liturgical season represented and uses imagery that evokes each season as well. I paint with a fair amount of realism although my brushwork is heavily influenced by Impressionism, especially Degas. This style is fairly unusual for painted liturgical art; the predominant style leans more towards Cubism or Minimalism. Each composition plays with light and shadow so that there is a central point of luminosity that radiates out to the rest of the painting, appropriating the Isaiah verse into a concrete visual form as seen through the lens of each liturgical season.

The first in the cycle is Advent, the season before Christmas, which uses deep blues to depict the night sky, with one large star that dominates the composition, a reference to Luke's Gospel account of a brilliant star

that leads a group of shepherds to the infant Jesus (see Figure 6). Next, the Christmas painting illustrates Antioch's tradition of holding candles while singing "Silent Night" at the conclusion of the Christmas Eve service, rendered in warm red tones (see Figure 7).



*Figure 6, Advent
(left)*

*Figure 7, Christmas
(right)*

Following Christmas is Lent, a solemn season of prayer and meditation that is often referred to as a journey. The Lenten diptych depicts a winter forest, the sun barely shining through deep purple clouds and tree limbs (see Figure 8). Lent gives way to Easter, a season of joy following the restraint of Lent. These paintings are slightly more abstracted, with white, gold, and pale green suggesting magnolia trees in bloom; one of the paintings depicts a chrysalis bursting with light (see Figure 9).

*Figure 8, Lent
(left)*

*Figure 9, Easter
(right)*



The Easter season concludes with Pentecost, a season that celebrates the presence of God’s spirit in the world. The diptych shows a bright red sunrise over a wind-tossed ocean, with a bonfire blazing on the beach (see Figure 10). The final diptych is for days that are not marked by a particular holiday (referred to as “ordinary time”); these each allude to the two Lutheran sacraments, Communion and Baptism, by showing objects used in those ceremonies emitting a soft glow (see Figure 11).



Figure 10, Pentecost



*Figure 11, “ordinary time”
as seen on exhibition*

Installation

The paintings were installed in the sanctuary of Antioch on May 8th, 2011, with the Easter diptych as the first to occupy the space. A group of volunteers at the church are in charge of maintaining the sanctuary and preparing it each week for worship; therefore, this group is responsible for rotating the paintings at the change of each liturgical season, along with the other paraments. Per my pastor’s request, the out-of-season paintings will hang in Antioch’s prayer chapel so that they will be visible throughout the year. I have no qualms about leaving the work in the care of the congregation and feel that they will be treated with care in my absence.

Conclusion

Ultimately, given my goal to become a pastor in the Lutheran church, this project has been an opportunity to connect my artistic practice with my future calling, in essence using my art as ministry. My hope is that this project not only re-energizes worship at Antioch, but also that it can provide an avenue for other congregations to consider the possible role of visual art in their worship spaces.

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