



## Teaching the Bible with Art<sup>1</sup>

By Lynn R. Huber and Dan W. Clanton Jr.

The opening line of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word," seemingly sets the tone for teaching and learning within the field of biblical studies. Those who reside and teach in this field of study not only begin with "the Word," but also typically remain focused, perhaps obsessively, upon words. However, John's Gospel pushes us to shift our glance away from the page, as it is arguably as much about the visual as it is about the verbal. On more than one occasion, John depicts Jesus asserting that whoever has *seen* him has *seen* God (12:44–45; 14:9; cf. 1:14–18). Throughout the Johannine text, the verbal or textual and the visual are intricately related—reinforcing, interpreting, and expanding upon one another. Taking a cue from the Johannine tradition, we contend that visual art, including but not limited to works of art that specifically reference the Bible, can be an integral part of the biblical studies classroom: reinforcing, interpreting, and expanding upon the texts we explore.

In this essay we will highlight some of the reasons for employing art in this traditionally textual environment, outline some of the ways that visual art can be incorporated into teaching, and discuss how one might guide students in the interpretation of images.

There are obvious pedagogical reasons for making the visual a presence in the classroom. First, while most of us who specialize in biblical studies are close readers of the texts in their original languages, our students often have to be taught how to "see" even the most obvious textures in these ancient writings. This is particularly true given that Western culture has been saturated with biblical imagery, themes, language, and thinking patterns. This saturation effectively blinds many students to the complexity of the biblical writings. Exploring visual art with students trains their eyes to see detail in an image, which helps them see detail in other things, such as writings. Using two different types of material, textual and visual/artistic, to develop students' seeing and reading skills acknowledges the widely accepted notion, articulated famously by Howard Gardner, that attending to multiple intelligences enhances student learning and the retention of ideas and skills.<sup>2</sup>

Second, in an age of biblical fundamentalism (an interpretive perspective adopted by both "conservatives" and "liberals"), students have to be prodded to see the possibility of multiple interpretations in texts, especially texts that many hold as sacred. Most students have been better trained to think that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," which assumes that an interpreter's perspective shapes her interaction with a piece of art, than to recognize the same phenomenon exists when approaching a written text. One hopes that their recognition that a Picasso or Matisse yields many interpretive possibilities dependent upon the "eye of the beholder" will be translated to the prophets and the Gospels when we address the visual and the textual side by side.

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<sup>1</sup> This classroom activity was taken from the book *Teaching the Bible, Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*, edited by Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, published by the Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief discussion of artistic intelligence in relation to the theory of multiple intelligences, see Howard Gardner, "Artistic Intelligence," *Art Education* 36 (1983): 47–49.

Third, even when we as teachers do not incorporate the visual into our classrooms, it is present in our students' minds. Regardless of their religious upbringings, as products of Western culture, our students carry with them images related to the writings we explore, including mental pictures of Jesus shaped by the memory of Jim Caviezel playing Jesus in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and visions of God colored by Michelangelo's depiction on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Many students come to class "knowing" exactly what these figures look like and how they act in certain situations. Such "knowledge" often negates genuine, open interaction with the text. Intentionally incorporating the visual into our classrooms sheds light on these culturally given images, allowing both students and instructors to be more critical of how we use mental images to fill in textual gaps. The use of images, therefore, can disrupt students' mental images, encourage them to develop more complex mental pictures, and prepare them for the many voices of the text.

In addition, attention to the visual requires students to think metaphorically, abstractly, and in other non-literal ways. These ways of "seeing" are similar to the forms of perception employed in religion and religious texts.<sup>3</sup> Religious discourse, including biblical writings, swells with metaphor and imagery. Students, often pressed into a literal reading of textbooks, are sometimes hesitant to engage fully the metaphors and images presented in the Bible. Examining visual art, including abstract art, can help students think in abstract and metaphorical terms.

### *Teaching Students to Read and Think through Images*

Successfully employing visual art in the classroom requires teaching students how to read and think through images in a careful and critical fashion. Sometimes we assume that they will be better equipped to interpret images or visual art than texts, since students have been raised in a world in which they are bombarded with images. However, it is problematic to equate exposure to the visual with an ability to navigate critically the complexities inherent in a piece of visual art. In fact, the need to teach students how to read biblical texts is paralleled by the need to teach students how to read visual texts. Furthermore, students must be taught to take time with art, not to just look at a piece, but to really *see* a piece. As Douglas Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona have observed, the learned discipline of seeing means that viewers allows a piece of art to engage, challenge, and even transform them.<sup>4</sup>

There are a variety of ways to encourage students to become more careful readers of images. For example, students can study images outside of class in conjunction with the texts they read for class. Course websites and blogs make this relatively easy, since an instructor can gather images electronically for students to view. It is also interesting to have students find and share relevant images. In our own classrooms, students have submitted images ranging from Adam and Eve for an Altoids advertisement to a *Rolling Stone* photograph of Madonna, taken by David LaChapelle, which can be read as an allusion to Revelation's Great Prostitute. This approach allows students to gather images and analyze them on their own. In addition, it can help instructors build their own image collections.

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3. Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 4.

4. Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona, "Art as Religious Studies," 4–5.

To help students read images, especially ones that involve the interpretation of biblical texts, it can be advantageous to provide a guideline for them to follow. First, encourage students to take time to look carefully at an image. This may seem obvious; however, students tend to turn quickly to the question of what an image means. Second, have students describe the artistic elements within the image. It may be necessary to provide them with the requisite vocabulary (color, line, texture, balance, etc.) and a set of explicit questions to consider: What media are used to create the image? What lines, shapes, textures, colors, and patterns do you see? Do the lines and shapes of the image suggest movement? How does the image use space? Is there negative space? Or, is the piece completely “full”? Is the piece monochromatic?

Third, prompt students to read the image either alone or in relation to a particular text. For instance, ask them to talk about what the text “says” and how it “says” it. If they are reading an image in relation to a text, ask them to describe what parts of the text the image captures and what parts it seems to ignore. Finally, students should be given the opportunity to communicate their own opinions about the piece. Given the deliberate nature of the process, the opinions they articulate are, one hopes, grounded in their observations of the image rather than their initial impressions.

Making art an integral part of the classroom requires a number of commitments on behalf of the teacher. First, it takes time to find pieces that provoke us and speak to us. While images are becoming easier to access through electronic resources, developing a collection of high-quality images still is labor intensive. Image databases, such as ARTstor (a nonprofit digital library sponsored by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) and CAMIO (a nonprofit database sustained by OCLC—the Online Computer Library Center), allow instructors and students at subscribing institutions access to thousands of images for instructional purposes.<sup>5</sup> Thankfully, these electronic resources make it possible for instructors to use copyrighted images legally, which is a growing concern in the digital age. Also, we recommend using images that captivate or challenge you as a teacher; this makes it much easier to help students engage with the piece. Second, it takes a certain willingness to consider different types of art. If all of our images are medieval manuscripts or renaissance paintings, they lose their power to provoke students to look for the different ways texts and images function and communicate. We need to look in unexpected places, among the self-taught artists, conceptual artists, and photographers. Artists, especially modern and contemporary ones, often challenge commonly held ideologies and theological assumptions. Before we bring these types of images into the classroom, we have to consider whether we are ready for those challenges.<sup>6</sup>

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<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>

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5. ARTstor ([www.artstor.org](http://www.artstor.org)) provides access to over 500,000 digital images, including artistic works and images of material culture, and CAMIO ([www.oclc.org/camio/default.htm](http://www.oclc.org/camio/default.htm)) provides access to over 90,000 images. Most museum websites have online collections that are searchable by artist's last name or by title.

6. In addition to items catalogued in this chapter, Roncace and Gray, *Teaching the Bible*, contains other strategies using art: see Daniel E. Goodman, “*Guernica* and the Art of Biblical Hermeneutics,” 5–6; Sandie Gravett, “Genesis 22: Artists’ Renderings,” 97–98; Lynn R. Huber, “Introducing Revelation through the Visual Arts,” 398–400; and Jaime Clark-Soles, “Christology Slideshow,” 282–84.