

## THE OLD, *old Story*

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*The process of making art involves asking many questions. The artist asks questions of the composition, of art history, of the culture around us and more. In this section, an afternoon of questions and answers have been transcribed that offer insights into making art from a Christian perspective. In this conversation painter Edward Knippers touches on many themes, including Dutch painting, propaganda, the body, calling and the ultimate subject—God’s Story of Redemption . . .*

If artists are not dealing with the most profound subject and the most profound part of reality that they know, then they are playing in the shallows. For so long, artists in our time have played with the artistic means (the elements and principles of design) to the point that they have thousands of ways to say nothing. Christians should come to art-making knowing that the artistic means is not the highest goal we know. It is the language we use. How do we deal with that language? I remember from my college art history that the one thing Christianity brought to the art of the Romans and the classical world was a story to tell. In form, early Christian art was seen as a degeneration of classical Roman art. It doesn’t really matter whether this decline was the decadence of the civilization that was Rome, or Christianity’s untrained handling of the artistic means. The new thing that Christianity brought to the whole mix was that the Christians had a unique and compelling story to tell of God’s sacrificial dealing with mankind, and they found a way to tell it. That is the mark of the Christian worldview—the story we have to tell. We may tell it in all kinds of ways as artists. But Christian art, to be Christian, must at least assume that Christ has come in the flesh and is a living agent in our world.

### ***How would you define “Christian art”?***

If art is a poetic parallel to reality, then Christian art is a poetic parallel to Christ's presence in the world. The art may be Christian in the more predictable sense of either openly or obliquely affirming His abiding presence and work in the world. Then again, the art may be created in a negative sense as non-believing artists assume that they are making Christ's presence obsolete by attacking the evil in the world without reference to Him. They may even use their art to attack God's people for their real or perceived sins. But even the moral indignation of these artists can only have meaning in the context of a world created by a Righteous God. In both cases the art is dealing with His presence and the truth of the Gospel. God uses whom He will to speak His truth. If He doesn't have his witnesses within the Church at a given time, then he will find them outside the Church.

### ***How does this influence your work?***

Christ's immanent presence is the foundation of my work as a Christian artist even when I am not painting the Christian narrative. At graduate school I did still-life painting as I grappled with the role of the Christian artist. How in the world could my still life speak of the Gospel? My painting finally evolved from being borderline decorative into religious still-lives in which I was using objects on a table as a metaphor. Interiors became very unstable with objects in the roles of idols piled on top of each other. Chairs became little human thrones.

Even then I felt it necessary to make a link to earlier Christian art. I began to look at ancient illuminated manuscripts. I saw the possibility of a relationship between those ancient works on paper and the contemporary watercolors on large buckled paper with borders that I began to make. The primitive nature of some of the manuscripts was even more interesting to me. The primitive, as we have learned in the twentieth century, can translate into the painterly with rhythmic mark-making creating patterns, which in turn can create space. I was finally striving towards a larger metaphor for how the world works. The theme of the place of humanity in the world was ever present. So simple still-life painting increasingly held a human significance that I never suspected possible at the beginning.

### ***How did you get from still-life painting to what you paint today?***

The still-lives increased in size and finally began to incorporate small figurative vignettes such as in *Christ at the House of Mary and Martha*. Now my paintings are, for the most part, large biblical narratives that attempt to portray Christ's presence in the world. I tell people that the paintings are too large for homes (6 x 8 or 8 x 12 feet), too nude for churches, and too religious for public spaces. They don't seem to fit our society, but the size and the nudity are important to my Christian statement.

***Since the focus of your artwork is on biblical narrative, is the church your primary audience?***

My calling is not necessarily to the Christian community. My paintings can and have benefited Christians and I hope that they will continue to do so. But Christians are not my target audience. Contrary to what many people think when they first see my paintings, I am not making Sacred Art, which I would define as art intended for worship and the sanctuary. My art is religious, but why should that exclude it from the public square? I see my job as an artist as making an art powerful and engaging enough that the society at large must deal with it.

***Can you give an example?***

A middle-aged American woman visited my studio and was standing in front of my *Stoning of Stephen*. I told her the title. She seemed intrigued by it but looked at me with no recognition at all. I thought she hadn't heard me so I repeated the title and added, "That is an account in the Bible." She said "Oh yes, the Bible. Is that Old or New Testament?" I said it is New Testament, the first Christian martyr. Then she said, "Now I know why you used so much blue. That is the color I see when I meditate." I said, "No, that's the color of the sky." That is indicative of the society in which we live. Our contemporaries don't know the Bible stories, but have almost unlimited understanding of New Age spirituality. We do not have the luxury enjoyed by the artists of seventeenth-century Holland of living in a world with common understandings, and common readings of visual things.

***I think that this is what Cal Seerveld was saying when he warned us, "Christian culturing must not generate museum pieces."***

Yet as Christian artists we must do our work well enough so we do not give the museums, our cultural storehouses, over to exclusive pagan use. Therefore I do have some disagreement with Seerveld on this point. One of the clearest Christian witnesses that we have in Washington, DC is the National Gallery. I would therefore ask, "are contemporary Christians producing art that is important enough and clear enough in its Christianity to be a part of that witness?" Museums are an important part of our art culture and should not be overlooked as a proper place for speaking of the Gospel.

***Aren't museums too elitist a place to be forums for the Gospel?***

No. Art museums are important historically and aesthetically. They let us know something about where we stand as a people. The existence of the museum does raise the question of good and bad art as there are decisions that must be made about what will be included in a collection and what will not. Egalitarians don't like designations such as good and bad, high and low, better and best, but I find such distinctions helpful. And such distinctions are more than a mere matter