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## Art history is integral to Catholic education

by Dale Artis Hackerman



An early Paleolithic painting of a bison from the Cave of Altamira near Santillana del Mar, Spain (AKG/Newscom/Bildarchiv Steffens)

### **VIEWPOINT**

The church's role and support of the arts throughout the development of Western civilization cannot be underestimated. With that in mind, I stress the importance of art history as part of the curriculum of Catholic high schools.

The Roman Catholic church was a major force in the development of Western art and culture. In light of this, and after more than 35 years as a teacher of art history in the Catholic school system, I am convinced that the study of art history is an integral part of a well-defined and superior Catholic high school education.

In many U.S. public high schools, budgets are being cut, especially in the arts. So why mention the importance of a strong curriculum in art history as part of a well-rounded Catholic high school education? Because I believe that when students study art history, they become closer to the church on an intellectual

and cultural level that greatly enhances their relationship with God. I have already alluded to the important role that the church had in the development of Western art. Investigating that role in a study of art history, from medieval to modern times, enhances spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. Art history helps the student to understand the mechanisms of culture and society.

Art and religious expression go hand-in-hand, and the importance of art to convey spirituality is ancient. It has existed since the dawn of civilization.

Let us begin with a question that probably has no proven answer: Why was art created in the first place? The scholarly consensus is that the first works of art probably were associated with ancient ceremonial practices. The earliest images created by humans date back to around 30,000 years, the Paleolithic Era. Since they are prehistoric and have no written history, the questions surrounding them go unanswered.

Incredibly beautiful paintings of stylized leaping and running animals have been found in remote caves throughout Europe and elsewhere in the world. Scholars suspect that these fantastic drawings must have had some spiritual meaning surrounding the importance and success of the hunt. Perhaps they were associated with ceremony and prayer. We will never know their exact purpose, but the likely function of the cave paintings was probably religious.

It is interesting to consider that art up until around 600 years ago had been dominated by religious subject matter. The use of art for art's sake is relatively recent, if you consider how long humans have been creating art.

I am convinced that by the time every Catholic high school student graduates from high school, he or she should understand how when Christianity was legalized, the art of the church had to establish an entirely new identity and appearance distinguishing it from other faiths. No longer could religious art imitate Greek or Roman types.

The church had to invent a new system of iconography that established an innovative and unmistakable Christian presence. Cleverly, the early church invented a new language of religious Christian symbols. When students discuss the differences between pagan and Christian art, they will understand how important it was for the artist, under the direction of the early church, to create images that did not imitate pagan religious art. Simply stated, the church felt that early Christians, through the use of unique Christian symbols, would understand and identify with their new faith. The image of an anchor, for example, would represent the hope Christians had in Christ; a peacock would symbolize eternity; the fish was to be identified with Jesus; a pomegranate with its seeds in one fruit would represent the unified church; the lamb, Jesus' sacrifice -- to name just a few. These and many others adorn Catholic churches to this day.

How wonderful it is for a Catholic student to view religious works of art from any century and gain both spiritual and intellectual reward. When students study the course of art history, they will also understand the shift in the church's attitude towards art and aesthetic representation as the Middle Ages drew to an end with the dawning of the Renaissance.

Of course, we all know the giants -- Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael, to name just a few -- but enlightened individuals will also be aware of the great Venetian artist, Giovanni Bellini, and his famous painting of Francis of Assisi, which recently returned to the Frick Collection in New York City.

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Many will view this miraculous work of art, but when one learns about the life of St. Francis from having attended a Catholic high school and complements it with an appreciation acquired by the study of art history, the emotional, intellectual and spiritual reward of viewing the painting becomes more personal and worthwhile.

We send our children to Catholic schools because we believe that they will receive a superior education, and the study of this history is a valuable component of an excellent education. Knowledge about art is highly rewarding and a lifelong experience. As well, it helps us enjoy and appreciate the God-given talents and gifts of others. As part of the Catholic high school's curriculum, this study will enhance the student's inner, personal experience of faith, and foster a greater understanding of Christ's teachings.

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