



Art in Cathedrals

Newsletter

Spring 2025

The Church was the original patron of the visual arts, successfully using it to communicate faith and to share its truth and beauty.

How can we use art today to share Christianity with a new audience?

Art in our cathedrals: A discussion paper from Adrian Dorber, former chair of AEC and Dean of Lichfield

How we use art to engage the more contemporary world?

Welcome to this newsletter. The AEC has recently convened an Art in Cathedrals Advisory Board, which meets online every couple of months to think about the place of art in our cathedrals, to find out what's going on, to share good practice, and to encourage cathedrals to be bolder in their use of art in all its forms. You may be aware the AEC has launched a new partnership with consultant arts curator, Jacqueline Creswell, as a resource to any cathedral wanting to explore new opportunities, push their artistic boundaries and encourage and promote an associated programme of activities and learning, and this Board exists to support her in her endeavours.

The Advisory Board's conversations are becoming increasingly fruitful, and we thought it would be helpful to produce a termly newsletter to share some of our thinking, and to encourage Cathedral Chapters to consider what they are currently doing in the field of the arts, and how this might be developed to further the cathedral's mission. This is the first such newsletter.

We are very pleased to offer an article by Adrian Dorber, the previous chair of the AEC, drawing on his extensive experience of working with artists during his time as Dean of Lichfield. It is accompanied by a few questions which you may wish to use with your Chapter to initiate or continue a discussion around some of these themes and suggestions for further reading if you so wish.

The sole purpose of this Advisory Board is to be helpful to cathedrals. If there are ways in which you think we might do this more effectively, we'd be grateful to hear from you. Do get in touch at susan.chapman@englishcathedrals.co.uk.

Jonathan Greener
Dean of Exeter
Art in Cathedrals Chair

We live in an intensely visual culture, to be in dialogue with that culture means exploring the richness of a cathedral's inherited visual culture and encouraging, in the public domain, the human search for transcendence in the here and now. Cathedrals have the advantage of being open and accessible spaces that many feel confident to visit and navigate themselves around. They are liminal spaces and are themselves built on a conviction that the presence of God can be found in the core of ourselves. (cf Judith Wolfe "The Theological Imagination: Perception and Interpretation in Life, Art and Faith" CUP 2024). However, fleeting, ephemeral or tantalising those moments of perception are, they open us to what is outside ourselves and beyond us, but also what is most real about us. The Bible and the Liturgy continually disrupt our settled deterministic view of things and get us to live and act in a hope that continually feeds our imagination.

One of the best things the Church can do for the world is to point to alternative ways of seeing and hearing and to join forces with artists, poets, composers and writers who see the imagination as key to full human existence, the threshold of glory.

Art Galleries and Museums, Theatres and Cinemas, Concert Halls and platforms offer spaces for profound encounters with beauty, playfulness, truth and tragedy.

When a Cathedral commissions and curates an exhibition, artwork or performance it is inviting the public to see the work in sacred space, where the possibility of contemplation and surprise, even revelation is being courted and welcomed. It does so in conjunction, and not in opposition to its reason to be, nor in compromising its role and function, but in actively soliciting a response and reaction.

Serious engagement by Cathedrals in art needs planning, advice and discernment.

It is easy to gain a public by staging a popular blockbuster (and swelling the coffers in difficult times) but real encounters that move, challenge and entrance, need serious thought, planning and good advice, such that what is offered becomes part of the life and worship, prayer and routine of a Cathedral for the time it is there. As a serious piece of work, art, like cathedral music, needs serious resourcing both financial and intellectual and the proper allocation of staff and volunteer time and training. Furthermore, every project must have the opportunity for gaining feedback and encouraging maximal participation.

This information, numerical and narrational, becomes the raw data for further reflection and response.

How can art open up new dialogue around the gospels and our own ministry and mission?

The Church has an ordered Liturgical year covering the seasons. Using these high moments of celebration, fasting and lament, together with particular local customs and events gives really rich opportunity for art. For example, re-imagining Jesus's journey to Calvary each Lent opens up themes of betrayal, temptation, abandonment, injustice, the coercive power of the state, the manipulation of the powerful over the individual, the loneliness of suffering, the reality of pain. Equally, the six weeks of Easter explore the new hope of a world re-born and re-imagined in God's purpose, the reconciliation of betrayers with the one betrayed, the sharing of hope, the belief that God's purpose will not be defeated or ultimately frustrated, that all creation can find its home and purpose in a love beyond our imagining and expectation. Nothing is lost. Nothing is futile.

Creation-tide in summer and autumn opens up the whole cycle of life, agriculture, economy and polity, human stewardship, and the wonder of life, existence as it is accounted for by all streams of thought and knowledge and the sheer immensity of the universe. These are wonderful themes to pursue and explore. The annual autumnal commemorations of Remembrance, All Saints and All Souls presage and invite consideration of judgement, the questions of Theodicy and Eschatology, our ultimate human purpose and end.

Again, using any special installations, events and exhibitions for dialogue and explanation/questioning, provide moments for ministry and fresh contact with the public. The co-ordination of specific outreach initiatives is key to success, as is the voicing in prayer and worship of the concerns, feelings and observations of those who have participated or visited.

What have you learned from having art installations in your Cathedral?

That they win a cathedral a very high profile in the local and national media (provided you do the communications expertly and professionally); that the whole cathedral staff, community and volunteers have to own them to be successful; training and briefing the whole cathedral community on the rationale, operation and hoped for outcome of the event is essential.

Additional finance is necessary and can be obtained from judicious grant applications from public and philanthropic

sources. A long-term backer (such as the Cathedral Friends) can ensure the success of an Artist-in-Residence programme.

That carefully thought through themes which highlight questions and subjects the cathedral can give priority and attention to (intellectual, liturgical, musical and administrative) have far greater resonance and success than exhibitions brought in from a travelling cavalcade. Commissioning and working with an artist can be demanding work but often provides the best results. It enables integrated outreach and education work and makes a bigger impact. Going for "off the peg" shows is less demanding but doesn't have the same impact. Similarly, working with the objective to ensure public participation in the making of the artwork and works, reaps huge dividends in terms of interest and ownership.

Reputationally, hosting and commissioning art, gives the cathedral a name for creativity and innovation, for seriousness and playfulness, for being a reliable partner in private and public searches for meaning, and a place where contemplation, reflection and hope become possible. Art can help break down negative or unhelpful public presuppositions of what a cathedral is, does and who it is supported by, and its example can be an encouragement to other parts of the church to be creative and imaginative.

Some questions your Chapter might like to consider:

- What do we mean when we speak of art in cathedrals? It should be seen as more than just a product – it encompasses visual, sound, installations, projections, performances, music, exhibitions etc.
- How might Cathedrals use visual art to engage in today's world to open up discussion relevant to congregations and communities now?
- Our cathedral building is of itself a work of art. What are we already doing that we might term artistic? How would we hope to see this develop?
- How can we use different artistic media and forms to engage a diversity of audiences with Good News - or to involve and draw in the whole community?
- What support, help or resources would we like to see from the AEC Art in Cathedrals Advisory Board?

Suggested further reading for Chapter:

Judith Wolfe *The Theological Imagination: Perception and Interpretation in Life, Art and Faith* CUP 2024

Aidan Hart's *Beauty: Spirit: Matter-Icons in the Modern World* Gracewing 2014

Richard Viladesau *Theological Aesthetics; God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* OUP 1999

Graham Howes *The Art of the Sacred* I.B.Tauris&Co, 2007.