M ore than a quarter of Australians aged fifteen and over (four and a half million people) visit an art gallery at least once a year. Particular exhibitions can attract very large numbers. Nearly half a million people, for example, visited the National Gallery of Australia's 'Masterpieces from Paris' exhibition in 2010. Clearly for many people today the arts are an important part of their life. Most commentators believe the arts are valued for providing not just pleasure but also insights and meaning.2

Despite its popularity and significance, we don't talk much about art. From my experience working with university students, teachers and parish staff, in classrooms and galleries, it seems many of us are unsure how to express our thoughts and feelings about it, particularly about how it relates to our spiritual life. Many are not even sure how best to look at works of art. This article makes some suggestions about these and related questions. I mostly have in mind the visual arts and visits to public galleries, though many of the principles I propose can be applied to other art forms and venues. My purpose is mainly practical: to assist anyone interested in looking at art from a 'religious perspective'. I am not proposing a particular theology of art or assuming religious faith. But I will occasionally refer to some theologians whose ideas have influenced my thinking about art and how best to view it.

**Art and Religion**

My first suggestion is not to expect comprehensive or clear-cut answers. Even though we can share our views with others, our experience of art is profoundly and properly subjective. It is not simply that we interpret works of art as individuals. The works themselves are inherently ambiguous, capable of creating many meanings. This is part of what attracts us to them. It is also why religious authorities have sometimes viewed the arts with suspicion. Historically they prefer to define beliefs in clear and unambiguous terms. But if we consider 'religion' more broadly, art and religion have some important similarities. Philosopher John Caputo, for example, notes that while 'confessional religions' focus on 'rites and doctrines', religion more broadly conceived involves 'the restless searching heart in the midst of a mysterious world'. I am sure the latter sense would speak to many artists and lovers of art.

My second suggestion is that it is helpful to consider 'religious art' in Caputo's broader, more expansive sense. This means we need to include for consideration not just those works found in churches and places of worship, that deal directly with the figures, narratives or beliefs of 'confessional religion', but any work that expresses the human quest for meaning. This makes sense sociologically. A range of scholars acknowledge that art has actually replaced religion for many people today, and much of the art they are interested in is not religious in the traditional sense. There are also theological grounds for a broader understanding of what counts as religious art. For the great Protestant theologian Paul Tillich art is one of the major ways in which human beings experience and express what he termed 'ultimate reality'.

My remaining suggestions consist of a series of questions that I think can help us better appreciate religious art. An important aspect of these questions is the order in which
we ask them. We often begin by asking about the meaning of a particular work, especially if we are viewing it from a spiritual or religious perspective. In doing so we fail to appreciate that works of religious art are firstly works of art. As such, and following the advice of most contemporary writers about art, it is helpful to begin by considering what we see when we look at them. This can be followed by asking how a work makes us feel, and then what we know or can learn about it. Each of these questions prepares us for considering what a work means for me, including its spiritual or religious significance. Proceeding in this way gives us a fuller appreciation of 'religious artworks' as individual works of art. It also helps us avoid imposing on them ideas we might have about what religious art should or shouldn't be like.

What do I see?

It is important to recognise the physicality of artworks. A religious work of art may well convey ideas and arouse emotions, but it is first a thing that presents itself to us. So we need to ask, what does it look like? Initial impressions can be important and are worth noting. But it is usually helpful to look at a work very carefully. How would I describe it? If it is a painting, for example: how big is it? Is it framed? How is it hung? What is it painted on? Is the paint flat on the surface or thickly textured? What about the composition - is it balanced or chaotic? Are the colours bright or dull? What shapes and forms predominate? Does it have lines that are hard-edged or blurred? Such questions are particularly helpful when considering abstract or non-figurative art. Their apparent lack of 'content' requires us to inspect their appearance more closely.

While most art writers suggest we begin in this way, there is also a strong Christian basis for being attentive to the physical work of art, namely, the Incarnation. Anglican theologian Jeremy Begbie explains this well: 'By assuming and redeeming the material world in Christ, God has confirmed it as a proper, meaningful environment for us to enjoy, explore and develop.' For Christians, the material matters. Resisting an old suspicion of the goodness of physical creation and also the modern scientific ideal of intellectual clarity, Begbie urges us to recover 'a deeper sense of our embeddedness in creation, and of the physicality of artistic creation.'

In practice the physical qualities of artworks can be a significant part of what they mean for us. This is why we should always view the work itself and not a reproduction, if it is at all possible. We can learn about artworks from books and the internet, but if we are to experience art fully, our contact with it must be first-hand. Reproductions on paper or online rarely convey the scale or texture of a painting, for example. And the precise colour of the work itself is often quite different. Most of us know this implicitly. It is one reason why we visit major galleries when travelling interstate or overseas; why we attend 'travelling exhibitions' when they come to town. It is similar to our experience of music: experiencing a live performance is different from listening to a recording.

Because artworks are physical things, and because the process of appreciation is complex, it is best to focus on a small number of works when visiting a gallery. By all means scan whole rooms, especially if your time is limited. But try to spend some concentrated time on one or two works that have caught your attention. It is also helpful to rest our
eyes (and minds) for a short time, and return to a work for a second look and further reflection. A work that draws us back again and again is often one that we come to value highly.

**How do I feel?**

Works of art have the capacity to evoke the full range of human feelings, including joy, anger, peacefulness, amusement, confusion. Our feelings are part of our make-up, what makes us human. So it is important to consider what it is about a work of art that makes me feel a certain way; but also, what is it within me that makes me respond in this way?8

One of the things that can affect how we feel about works of art is the commitment the artist and we the viewers may have to the spiritual quest and to beliefs and values associated with it. Traditional Christian art, for example, commonly represents events in the life of Jesus, Mary and the saints, and reaffirms certain beliefs about them. It often arouses such feelings as awe, reverence, gratitude. But it can also challenge religious or moral ideas and attitudes. An example is the depiction of God in very human terms (anthropomorphism) found in countless paintings throughout the ages. Another is the presence of nude human figures in much of the classical and medieval art in European churches. The determining factor seems to be whether or not the work has spiritual value. Throughout history religious authorities have tried to adjudicate this, sometimes censoring imagery or even destroying it (iconoclasm).

Modern and contemporary art, including religious and spiritual works, push the boundaries of what is acceptable even further. For example, it sometimes deals explicitly with sexuality and violence. This can arouse feelings of embarrassment or unease, and even disgust or revulsion. How should we respond to this? It is also true to say that modern art and artists are often critical of religion, at least in Caputo's narrow sense. In some cases (such as works dealing with religious hypocrisy) it may be appropriate to regard such works as helpfully thought-provoking.

But even when the artist seems intent on shocking the viewer for the sake of it, I think it worthwhile testing our emotional responses. If a work makes me feel uncomfortable, I should first acknowledge my emotional response and then probe the reasons for it. What is it that concerns, excites or upsets me, and why does it have this effect?

For art to be transformative, as good art can be, we need to be open to being disturbed by it, to being taken out of our comfort zone. In exploring our feelings we are reflecting more deeply on our faith. Most religions recognise that the spiritual life deals with every aspect and dimension of human experience, from heavenly bliss to deep despair, and all points in-between. So does art. In my experience public galleries are places where we can take some risks with what we experience. We are always free to decide that a work has little of value for me and turn away from it.

We might usefully note here that some contemporary art that seems to reference religion is actually more concerned with popular culture or fashion. It is part of today's secular frame of reference and worth noting as such.

On the other hand, there are contemporary artists who continue to be inspired by religious and spiritual ideas as they explore and articulate the ultimate questions of human existence. But as modern artists they often do this by creating works that challenge traditional perspectives, the status quo, common ideas and feelings.

With such art we do well to follow the general advice given to all gallery visitors: be as open as we can to what we find there, and limit our expectations as much as we can. Be prepared to be surprised. That so many people keep returning to galleries, suggests that our
efforts will be rewarded.

What do I know?

Our appreciation of an art work may also be enriched by what we know about its creation and its creator. When and where, for example, was it made? Does it belong to a particular genre, period, movement or style in the history of art? And what do I know about the artist; about their life, ideas, influences and practice. This sort of information can be very helpful, for example, for appreciating 'icons', a very distinctive form of religious art. I think the same is true, for similar reasons, about Australian Indigenous art. It's also true about 'abstract art': when there is less to see (so to speak), the viewer has to do more work. Part of this is finding out what we can about the artist and their art.

This is not to say that learning about works of art is more important than our sensory or emotional experience of it. Many critics believe that trusting our impressions (Paton) or gut reactions (Heller) is more important. This is because works of art, especially the visual arts and music, are not primarily concerned with conveying information. And experience teaches us that while knowing about the art/artist can be instructive, often it is not. Failing to recognise this has led some 'religious people' to question the value of the work by 'non-religious artists'. Pope Pius XII, for example, objected to modern art being included in churches—because it has mostly been created by non-believers. This view, still alive today, mistakenly supposes that we should judge works of art as we would statements of belief. But this is not confirmed by our experience. The meaning and value artworks have for us can transcend the beliefs (or unbelief) of their makers. The great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner thought this is because all human beings have an innate dynamism towards the infinite, which is ultimately the Mystery of God. This can affect everything we do as human beings, including the making and interpretation of art. Sometimes we are aware of this and sometimes not. Now I'm sure some artists would object to this theological interpretation of their life and work. But I know that many would accept that their art is open to religious interpretation, particularly in John Caputo's broad understanding of 'religion'.

Noting this important qualification, we come back to the point that it can be helpful to find out what we can about particular artworks and their artist creators. The 'labels' supplied by galleries often include useful information. So too exhibition catalogues and guides. In the past these have been prone to the impenetrable jargon of art theory, but I think they have improved in recent years. Some people find exhibition audiotapes valuable, though they can distract us from visually connecting with the art. When I am really drawn to a particular artwork or artist, I find some research on the internet can be very rewarding. And most public galleries have well-stocked book shops. A little information, thoughtfully considered, can go a long way to enhancing our experience of art.

What does it mean?

When we have considered what we see in a work of art, how we feel about it and what we know about it we are well-placed to consider what it means for us. In fact the meaning of the work starts to emerge throughout this process. This is because experiencing a work of art is like all human experience. Interpreting and understanding something (or someone) depend on us engaging with it. The discipline of hermeneutics suggests that this process is like having a conversation. In this case, it is the viewer and the work of art that interact with each another. We viewers bring our questions to the experience: 'What do I see' and 'What do I know'. And the work of art asks questions of us: 'How do I make you feel' and 'What do I mean to you'.

This is a two-way conversation. It is not
the work alone that determines its meaning (objectivism). But neither is it the viewer alone who determines what a work of art means (subjectivism). Both viewer and artwork contribute to the process of interpretation and to the understanding that emerges from it. Interpreting our experiences in this way, including works of art, is part of being human. Karl Rahner teaches us that part of being human is to encounter God (named as such or not) in our experience.15

This view of meaning has been more commonly applied to literature, including biblical texts. Here scholars refer to the importance of knowing both the world of the text and its author and also the world of the reader or interpreter. Much the same applies to the visual arts. My appreciation of an Indigenous painting, for example, will be limited if I know nothing about the worldview of the artist who created it, their spiritual beliefs and artistic practices. It will also be limited if I am not aware of my worldview, what I bring to the conversation. For example, if I assume that my modern Western idea of 'perspective' is normative. This is why my final suggestion for looking at a religious art is to converse with it.

Our primary conversation partner is the artwork itself. Of course the artist is important; they invest something of themselves in their works. That is why it can be helpful to know about their life and ideas. But most artists accept that once completed, a work exists in its own right and that viewers will respond to and interact with the work itself. Hence our focus on 'what we see'. As in all conversations, we must be open to the other party, allowing it to speak. This includes acknowledging that it is different from me, may express a different perspective. This can be very challenging. Our own view of things can be strongly held and deeply felt, sometimes unconsciously. It is hard to be truly open to 'the other'. Sometimes we conclude that a particular work 'does not speak to me' at all. But in a genuine conversation we should not rush to such judgements. And we do well first to heed Paton's advice: imagine someone to whom this particular work does speak.16 What might such a person make of it? Can I relate to that in any way? In so doing we might revise our view of the work.

My role in the conversation—my feelings, beliefs, understandings—is equally important. When a work of art speaks, it speaks to me. Very often this occurs in an act of recognition: I recognise something of my own experience in what the artwork is presenting. In the case of 'religious' works of art, it is my experience of the religious, the spiritual, the transcendent. A particular artwork might confirm my experience, but it might also help me name it, illuminate it, or refine it. Or, as suggested earlier, it might challenge me, even to the point of changing me in some way. To allow for such possibilities I need to devote time to the process; time for me to ask questions and consider the answers. But also time just to be with the art work, in a similar way that I need to spend time with a person if I am to know and appreciate them. I find that gallery sofas, especially those with good views of the art, can be a great help with this.

It is also important to remember that I am not alone when engaging with works of art. I am part of a community that includes other viewers, artists, gallery curators and directors, critics and scholars, art collectors and sellers. We all have an impact on the art-experience that we share. Art, like religion, is both a solitary and communal reality. So, for example, it can be both fascinating and illuminating to observe those around me in a gallery. How are they engaging with the works? Which ones attract most attention? What reactions can I see? Are they the same as mine? And at exhibitions with a theme it can be helpful to reflect on the curator's intentions, selection and positioning of works. Do they add to my appreciation of the works, individually or together?

If we adopt this conversational approach to interpreting and understanding art, it is
never possible to determine a single meaning of a work, the real meaning, the true meaning. Though this is something we often claim. Historically we have certainly made such claims about religious art. But as much as we can share our experience with others, we know experientially that such claims are always dubious. This not the old question of whether knowledge of art is objective or subjective. It is manifestly both. Rather, it is because our interactions with artworks are like our interactions with people; we can never fully grasp 'the other'. It might even be, as Rahner has argued, that our experience of art (like our experience of people) is connected with our quest for the Mystery that is God.

In this article I hope at least to have shown that engaging with religious art in this dialogical manner can make our experience of it meaningful for us.

NOTES


2. Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding* (London and New York: Mowbray, 1994) 101-114. See also Grayson Perry, *Playing to the Gallery* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2014). In this accessible and enjoyable introduction to contemporary art Perry never refers to 'religious art'. But he insists that art's 'most important role is to make meaning' (111); and states near the work's end that art is 'a way of accessing spirituality' (129).


5. Because of this Tillich recognised and argued that in order to be of religious significance, works of art need not have an explicitly religious content. See Paul Tillich, 'Art and Ultimate Reality', in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (ed.), *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 219-235.


13. We might also note that this view of religion as 'the restless searching heart in the midst of a mysterious world' readily connects with Rahner's more explicitly theological understanding of the human person.


15. Thiessen, p. 233.