

# arts

21:2  
2010

ARTS IN RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

SPECIAL *feature*  
IN THE STUDY

Symposium

*Theological Aesthetics and the Art  
of John August Swanson* 14

## features

IN THE STUDIO

Ronald Y. Nakasone

*Formless Form* 4

IN THE STUDY

John Handley

*A Conversation with  
Jane Daggett Dillenberger* 12

IN THE STUDY

Cecilia González-Andrieu

Alejandro García-Rivera

Jenny Patten

John Handley

N. Frances Hioki

*Theological Aesthetics and the Art  
of John August Swanson* 14

IN REFLECTION

Paul O. Myhre

*How the Arts May Embrace  
Interfaith Dialogue* 33

IN THE SANCTUARY

Michael Dennis Browne

*Something Stood Still in My Soul* 43

IN THE CLASSROOM

Barry Stebbing

*The Art Journal  
of a Carmelite Sister* 47



**SARTS Events  
Announced!**

See page 11 for details.

John August Swanson, *The Procession*, 2007. Hand-painted serigraph,  
36 x 24 inches, [www.JohnAugustSwanson.com](http://www.JohnAugustSwanson.com). Used with permission.

## SYMPOSIUM

Cecilia González-  
Andrieu  
Alejandro García-  
Rivera  
Jenny Patten  
John Handley  
N. Frances Hioki

# THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND THE ART OF JOHN AUGUST SWANSON

## THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND THE ART OF JOHN AUGUST SWANSON

Cecilia González-Andrieu

The term *theological aesthetics* often provokes a quizzical look, and for some of us working in theological aesthetics this is a good sign. *Quizzical* at the very least denotes curiosity, perhaps caused by the unfamiliarity of the term or its apparently oxymoronic character. The good news is that quizzical can lead to “Tell me more” and even expand to “Let me respond.” In presenting this collection of essays from the conference “Theological Aesthetics and the Art of John August Swanson”<sup>1</sup> it is our hope to articulate theological aesthetics as an invitation to join us in wonder. As Pope John Paul II insists in his Letter to Artists, “faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude.”<sup>2</sup>

I point to the apparent contradiction in the term *theological aesthetics* because for most of the twentieth century the dominant understanding of *theology* has been as a highly specialized academic discourse that is exclusively text-based. Likewise, since the eighteenth century, concepts like *disinterestedness* and *fine art* reified and removed



Left to right: Jenny Patten, Alejandro García-Rivera, John August Swanson, John Handley, and Frances Hioki. Huesman Chapel, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, 2009.

art from the everydayness of life.<sup>3</sup> Thus, modernity's legacy is what the pioneering churchman Von Ogden Vogt called in the early twentieth century “the cleft between

art and religion.”<sup>4</sup> Vogt rightly noted two especially compelling arguments in his plea for a restoration of unity between the arts and the religious. The first was his insis-

tence on the centrality of humanity's search for truth, goodness, and beauty; a longing that is not a luxury for the privileged few but rather essential to all human life. The second is his insight that the ethics of life are indeed inseparable from the aesthetics of life. Ethical questions are, he insists, "the struggle of human life to have a larger share in the beauty of life."<sup>5</sup>

Decades later and from a decidedly different context than Vogt's modernist Chicago, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez called fellow theologians out of academic isolation and into the world by redefining theology as the work of "critical reflection on historical praxis illumined by the Word."<sup>6</sup> As his definition suggests, this view of theology happens in the world, and it is, as he insists, a task. As Gutiérrez also maintains, this task cannot be carried out in isolation: "Theology is not an individual task, but an ecclesial function. It is done from the word of God received and lived in the Church, with the goal of announcing it to every human person and most especially the disinherited of this earth."<sup>7</sup> In following Gutiérrez we discern a clear paradigm: the work of theology happens in history and is reflection on the events of history as these are illuminated by the word of God, and most importantly, this is a task to be done in community and *for* the disinherited. Interlacing this with Vogt, we also notice that this function of announcing the Good

News is a direct response to humanity's primal longing for truth, beauty, and goodness. The disinherited of this earth awaken us to our need of the Good News by stirring us to the ethical longing for its beauty.

It is with this foundation that the version of theological aesthetics represented in the following essays is presently developing. It is decidedly just one version of many, and it is a version self-consciously theological, inclusive and contextually situated. First, as practitioners in the theological task we have been searching for ways to work collaboratively as an intentionally diverse community of scholars and artists, and to develop and test a common methodology to carry out the "critical" part of our work.<sup>8</sup> Second, as Gutiérrez's paradigm also requires we have made a preferential option for the wide engagement of theological voices, especially those who are most often neglected. As Miguel Díaz has summarized, "theological reflections on the human reality must respond to the manifold experiences and perspectives that emerge from within the catholicity of the Church."<sup>9</sup> Art is not just for the few, we contend, and neither is theology.

To privilege the disinherited as not only readers of theology but also producers of it, we must engage theologies wherever these may be encountered. As has been suggested by Alex García-Rivera this requires that we search beyond discourses that are alien to

their experiences and contexts.<sup>10</sup> Here our search is for theological insight as it arises in life, and theological aesthetics is the methodology that allows us to recognize these insights and reflect on them critically. The link provided here between theological and aesthetics is that it is in creative ways, in non-discursive and unexpectedly varied forms where the many (as opposed to the few) are engaged in the task of theologizing.

The work of doing theological aesthetics in relation to the art of John August Swanson thus begins by (1) recognizing his work as an instance of theology that speaks from the disinherited and *to* them, (2) inviting others to theologize aided by Swanson's theology (his art), (3) modeling a liberative praxis of engagement with A/art<sup>11</sup> that includes the wider community, and (4) living and then reflecting on the experience together.

### Recognizing Swanson's Work as Theology

In proposing John August Swanson's work as theology I maintain that, coherent with Gutiérrez's definition, his art represents critical reflection that speaks from Swanson's communities of concern, especially the poor and the suffering, in light of the Word. As John Handley's article demonstrates, the foundation for Swanson's art are

1. Theological Aesthetics and the Art of John August Swanson was held at Loyola Marymount University on March 22-23, 2009. I am grateful to the Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts, the Center for Ignatian Spirituality, and the Department of Theological Studies for providing me with grants and support to make the conference possible. 2. Pope John Paul II, "Letter to Artists, 1999," Rome, 16, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii LET\\_23041999\\_artists\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_23041999_artists_en.html). 3. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Beyond Beauty and the Aesthetic in the Engagement of Religion and Art," in *Theological Aesthetics after Von Balthasar*, ed. Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2008), 120-21. Wolterstorff is referring to the eighteenth-century idea of aesthetic contemplation, which he stresses is far from clearly articulated even in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. 4. Von Ogden Vogt, *Art & Religion*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 34. 5. *Ibid.*, 36. 6. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La Densidad del Presente* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 2003), 14. The translation is mine. 7. *Ibid.*, 25. The translation is mine. 8. The authors of these symposium papers began working collaboratively in 2006. This initial process resulted in "A Dynamic Method in Religious and Theological Aesthetics," a presentation given as a panel at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, 2007. The original working group also included Bobbi Dykema Katsanis and David Friend. 9. Miguel H. Díaz, "Turning to a Context: Latino/a Theology and Its Communal Vision of Reality," *Perspectivas* (fall 2002): 13. 10. Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), vii. 11. I use the term A/art to problematize the idea of high and low art because it is counterproductive to the work of a theology grounded on a preferential option for the poor. I do not contend that A/arts share equality on formal terms, but they may indeed on theological terms. For a fascinating discussion of these questions see Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, even as he explores less explicitly Biblical subjects such as in *Jester*. Also, as Alejandro García-Rivera's article shows, Swanson's art represents a theological cosmology where the glory of God may be momentarily glimpsed by us as we are caught up in the exquisite experience of the "color of truth."

The theological depth of Swanson's art has indeed found resonance in myriad communities. His works hang in the Vatican's Collection of Modern Religious Art, grace churches and parish buildings throughout the country, and are also well represented in the collections and communal environments of a number of academic institutions. The largest holdings of art and archival materials are presently at the Candler School of Theology and Luther Seminary.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Swanson's art is often featured in print on everything from book covers to calendars. The wide popularity of Swanson's art across many constituencies evidences that his work is recognized as a faithful source of theology. As Frances Hioki's paper shows, this theological thickness reaches across cultures and time, and speaks with other powerful works, even those from distant lands.

### *Inviting Others to Theologize Aided by Swanson's Theology*

As the popularity of Swanson's art shows, something happens to viewers when they

encounter it. It is his work's quality as gift that invites further engagement. His art makes "real" the work of the imagination and embodies possibility.<sup>13</sup> The works invite questions and lead to insights through the paradoxical attributes of accessibility and complexity. As Jenny Patten's essay demonstrates descriptive words fail to capture what only experience can know. The more experiences we access, the more we will see. Thus, although the papers included here represent only the work of scholars working in theological aesthetics, they were first delivered at a conference that also included formal papers from undergraduate students and a variety of members of the university community.<sup>14</sup> The two-day conference held at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, included an exhibit of nine of Swanson's original works<sup>15</sup> and a series of presentations and conversations at university chapels and the Library's special collections. Our intention was to make explicit the way in which the invitation to theologize *with* was answered by the many and in many settings.

### *Modeling a Liberative Praxis of Engagement with A/art That Includes the Wider Community*

During the conference near an easel showcasing Swanson's *Celebration* (and in many ways mirroring it), an unusual group of people talked in hushed tones now and then

breaking into joyful laughter. Not at its center, but among them, was the artist, his hands busily showing details. Next to him a gentle bearded man in a simple weathered windbreaker listened intently to the questions.<sup>16</sup> Crowding in upon them, the worker who just hours before had cleaned the chapel, the three librarians who had run over during their break to gaze at the artworks they had seen in books, the campus safety officer charged with guarding the artworks, enthralled by their colors and appearing to have just fallen in love, and of course the students, young ones, older ones, some with grandparents in tow and exclaiming, "Wow, the chapel never looked this beautiful before!" As research into cognitive theories continues to argue, the ways we know and the ways we express such knowing are multifold; neglect of some ways of knowing results in exclusion.<sup>17</sup> Consequently in order to do theology communally and inclusively providing an environment that subverts stratification is paramount. The entire city was invited to our campus, equally, without distinction, to share in this moment.

### *Living and Then Reflecting on the Experience Together*

The conference was planned as an instance of the joy, informality, exuberance, and community that characterize Swanson's art. The gathering was to be an occasion of theological aesthetics as a "doing" not

12. Swanson's art is also represented in the collections of the Tate Gallery and the Albert and Victoria Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. His work is also the centerpiece of worship spaces such as Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church, Pasadena, California. His works are collected by at least sixteen universities and colleges, including the University of Notre Dame, and Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. 13. "If we are awake, if the artist really was gifted, the work will induce a moment of grace, a communion, a period during which we too know the hidden coherence of our being and feel the fullness of our lives" (Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* [New York: Vintage Books, 1983], 151). 14. Papers were presented by Sydney Swanson (sophomore), Elizabeth Forrest (junior), and Mary Setterholm (senior), as well as librarian Cynthia Becht (head of LMU's Hannon Library Archives and Special Collections archives and special collections). Remarks were also offered by theologian John Connolly and Barbara Busse, dean of the College of Fine and Communication Arts and a Swanson collector. Additionally, a liturgical service of song and prayer for conference participants was contributed by John Flaherty and Tony Alonso of LMU's Campus Ministry. 15. The exhibition was organized around three theological categories: The People of God: *Celebration* (1997), *Festival of Lights* (2000), and *The Procession* (2007); the Life of Jesus: *Take Away the Stone* (2005) and *The Last Supper* (2009); and Symbols of Christ: *Star Clown* (2008) and *Jester* (2000). 16. This was, of course, Alex García-Rivera. 17. "All human beings possess not just a single intelligence. Rather, as a species, we human beings are better described as having a set of relatively autonomous intelligences. Most lay and scholarly writings about intelligence focus on a combination of linguistic and logical intelligences—the intellectual

just theological aesthetics as a "subject." In dreaming up the conference it was this "doing" characterized by the newness of encounter that Swanson's work animated and nurtured. Perhaps an accurate description of the conference's plan was that it would constitute a conscious "anti-aestheticism" experience.<sup>18</sup> As Vogt explains, aestheticism separates art from life, and even more radically attributes to art the ability to cause its devotees to realize that "life is the great delusion and Art the supreme counter-agent to existence."<sup>19</sup> This aestheticism, as Vogt was quick to point out went against what most people recognize as their actual experiences of art. For Vogt, the stakes were high: if art functioned as a "counter-agent to existence," then not only was art irrelevant to the life of religious communities, but in many ways inimical to it. This aestheticism fostered escapism and elitism, but at a deeper level it assailed the doctrine of the

goodness of Creation by devaluing life and encouraging a break in our relationship to it. "Religion rises to see that all creation is good," wrote Vogt, "it would glorify all life."<sup>20</sup> It follows then, that so should art.

How then, did this singularly constituted two-day gathering around the works of John August Swanson embody an anti-aestheticism experience? Critics often remark on the stylistic hybridity of Swanson's art: its jewel-like colors shimmer in enchanted hues, its brown-skinned figures fit comfortably with Diego Rivera and the Mexican muralists, its biblical stories seem to spill out of Medieval illuminated manuscripts, and its night skies and smiling moons celebrate it all with a childlike wonder. Swanson's art, often in miniature, takes *lo cotidiano* of life and makes us notice it is *all* beautiful. Latino theology has developed the category of *cotidianidad* as a way to speak of what human persons have known for

most of history and modern persons are in danger of forgetting: all of the stuff of life is sacred.<sup>21</sup> Poet Federico García Lorca says it this way, "the visible reality, the events of the world and of the human body . . . are much more full of subtleties and are more poetic than what [the imagination] can discover."<sup>22</sup> Swanson's works in Viktor Schlovsky's famous phrasing "defamiliarize" the daily stuff of life long enough to help us notice it again, and because it is so beautiful to also newly love it.<sup>23</sup> It is the biblical good of Creation we witness, not as an escape, but as a carefully burnished and powerful mirror.

With the publication of these essays, the spill of diminutive stars that falls through the jester's window reaches new places and new communities. In his theological reflection on human life as it is lived in light of God's Word, Swanson announces it anew to us. He opens the window to the smiling moon. *Jester* is perhaps . . . a self portrait.

## THE COLOR OF TRUTH

Alejandro García-Rivera

Jean Anouilh (1910–87), the French playwright, asserts in his play on Thomas à Becket, "Beauty is one of the rare things that do not lead to doubt of God." Why, then, has theology, in our day, so neglected Beauty in its attempt to speak of God? The reasons are many but I believe they focus on one point. If philosophy begins with wonder, theology begins with Mystery. Many

theologians have lost touch with the primal experience of Mystery. By this, I don't mean that they have stopped talking about Mystery. Karl Rahner, Jean-Luc Marion, and others have based their theologies, as they should, on this most elementary locus of theology. I do mean, however, that they have literally lost touch.

In the case of Karl Rahner, for example,

Mystery becomes a kind of unthematic intellectual orientation to a transcendent horizon. In the case of Marion, it becomes an ineffable otherness experienced only as pure given-ness. These two understandings of Mystery seem to have lost the basic structure of Mystery—it is an experience of a sensibility, a sensibility uniting us to the ineffable while, at the same time, uncovering

strengths, I often maintain, of a law professor. However, a fuller appreciation of human beings occurs if we take into account spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. While we all have these intelligences, individuals differ for both genetic and experiential reasons in their respective profiles of intellectual strengths and weaknesses. No intelligence is in and of itself artistic or non-artistic; rather, several intelligences can be put to aesthetic ends if individuals so desire." (Howard Gardner, "Recounting Multiple Intelligences: An Excerpt from a Speech by Hobbs Professor Howard Gardner" [Harvard Graduate School of Education, October 2003], <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/features/gardner10012003.html>.)

18. "In its milder form, aestheticism claimed that art should be enjoyed sheerly for its own sake, for its sheer beauty and expressiveness, without any concern for morality or instruction, for religion or the outside world. In its bolder form, aestheticism made the experience of art the model for the experience of life itself." (Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989], 65.) 19. Vogt, *Art & Religion*, 28. Vogt quotes Merton Stark Yewdale's article "The Aesthetic World," which was published in *International Studio* in November 1918. 20. Ibid. 21. See María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 38–41, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 173–79. 22. Federico García Lorca, *Obras Completas*, 10th ed. (Madrid: Aguilar, S.A. de Ediciones, 1967; reprint, Decimotercia Edición), 87. 23. Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 5–6.

our self-deceptions. In other words, Mystery is sensible Mystery. It is a unitive revelatory experience. Nowhere is this more clear than in the Liturgy.

Odo Casel, who restored the focus on Mystery in the Christian liturgy, tells us that Christian Mystery gives great insight into the new life; its mysticism finds practical application, not in purely individual, interior strivings, but in actions which all share; they lead to vision, not of a quietistic interior sort, but to the real showing of God. In them all the soul's faculties are engaged; the rite is sacred art of great stylistic value: rich drama, deep symbolism hold individual and congregation. It puts the individual into a gripping and upraising circle of divine action, carries him up beyond himself.<sup>1</sup>

If theologians were to take this understanding of Mystery seriously, they would pay more attention to Beauty. They would see the truth of the Whirlwind's advice to Job.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to speak accurately of God. It is possible, however, to speak well of God. It is not possible to know the absolute truth of God. It is possible, however, to experience it. To speak well of God, however, is not to speak of ineffability or transcendence but rather, of Beauty and Sensibility. The Whirlwind, after all, invited Job to see the Creation as God sees it. In other words, theology's true task is the showing of God. It does this by showing God's beauty, by giving us a beautifully sensible experience of God, by helping us experience the Truth about God.

Thus, it does perplex me why more theologians have not returned to what, after all, used to be a very active locus of theology, Beauty and the arts. Actually, theology is finally waking up from its modern and postmodern sleep. There is a growing field of theology known as theological aesthet-

ics. Begun by the great theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, it is now developing far beyond his initial proposals. As a sign of its vigor, there have been three international conferences in theological aesthetics and publications in this field continue to rise.

A definition of theological aesthetics is still being worked out but it is safe to say that theological aesthetics is both a method and a subject. As method, theological aesthetics begins its reflection with the question of Beauty. As such, aesthetics is rapidly becoming an effective tool of interdisciplinary method. It is amazing how many disciplines open up to new inquiry when the application of Beauty as a hereditament key is applied. As subject, theological aesthetics studies not only traditional doctrines such as the Trinity, or ecclesiology, or liturgy but also human sensibility and imagination, interfaith discussions, the role of the beautiful in social justice, the intersection between science and theology, and of course the religious dimension of the arts.

It is this dimension that brings us to the works of John August Swanson, a dimension that is often lost when reflecting on works of art—their theology. Indeed, one of the great scandals in art history has been the systematic exclusion of the religious dimension in works of art. The same can be said of philosophical aesthetics. Contemporary philosophical aesthetics has jettisoned most considerations of the theological or religious element in our experience of a work of art. In fact, few philosophers today dare to speak of Beauty. There are good reasons for this.

In our day, images have been used for less than noble reasons. These images are used either for political reasons or to persuade us to consume something or other. There is a healthy suspicion of images be-

cause they are used to commodify and to influence power. In fact, we are literally bombarded with countless numbers of images every waking hour of our daily life. In this context, beautiful images are to be profoundly suspected.

While our suspicion of images is well-founded, we must ponder what is lost through our suspicions. Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar warns us that the loss of Beauty leads to nihilism and cynicism. The True begins to lose its charm and the Good stops being attractive. Thus one possible response to the abuse of images is to develop an aesthetics that allows us to redeem images from manipulation. In this we can learn from Lewis Hyde and his book *The Gift*. There he compares capitalist economies with gift-giving economies. He notes that commodities in capitalist economies are consumed and stop contributing to the society. Gifts in gift-giving economies, on the other hand, circulate and thus build up the community. Hyde then makes the astute observation that a work of art is intrinsically a gift.

This has three major implications for theological aesthetics when studying a work of art. While works of art may be intrinsically gifts, they circulate in a capitalist economy. A theological aesthetics must tease out the gift-nature of a work of art while avoiding the commodifying entanglements that all works of art today inevitably carry. Second, the religious dimension of a work of art is proportional to its gift-nature. As gift, a work of art functions as what Marion called an icon instead of an idol.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the beauty of a work of art is one with its religious dimension. In other words, the aesthetic experience of gift is also a religious experience. We shall come back to these three points as we look at several of Swanson's works.

1. Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship, and Other Writings*, ed. Burkhard Neunheuser (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1962), 54. 2. This insight comes from Gustavo Gutiérrez' marvelous book *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987). 3. See, for example Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, *Religion and Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Before I begin a reflection on these works, I'd like to say a word about method. I use a method in my theological aesthetics that Cecilia González-Andrieu calls "interlacing." It is based on a suggestion by Charles Peirce that an alternative way to build an argument is by "reasoning [that] should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected."<sup>4</sup> Interlacing is the artful weaving of various perspectives across disciplines to gain an insight greater than any of its components. This insight is marked by breadth of perspective, coherence of vision, and personal touch.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it reveals the fragility of our vision while at the same time offering us a greater vision than we had before. As such, interlacing is more about weaving an argument than linking propositions. It is after intellectual insight not demonstrating a proof.

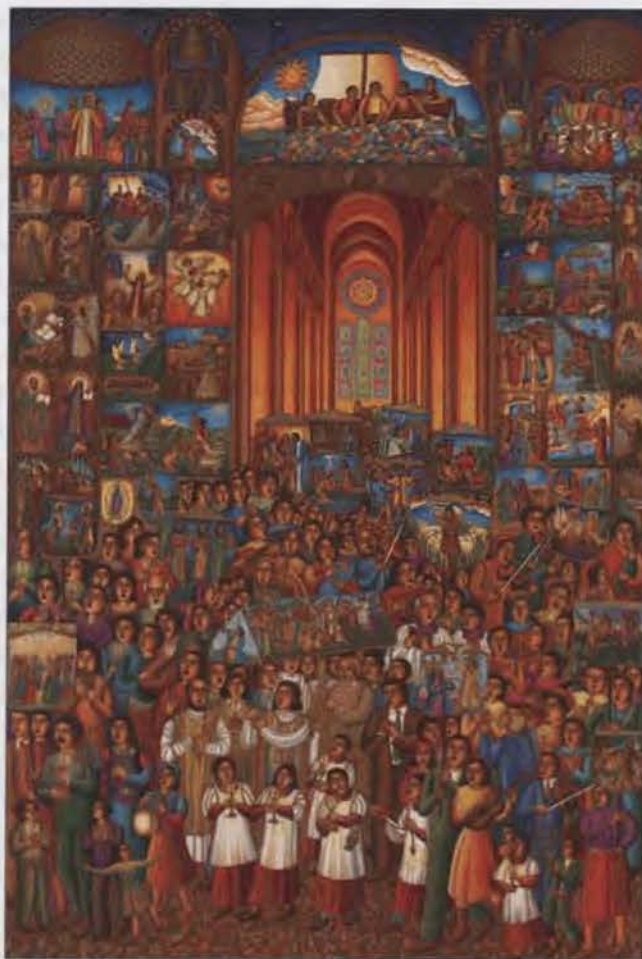
Finally, interlacing weaves across perspectives. It is not a perspective per se. The strength of an interlaced insight depends on the skill of the interlacing rather than on any one perspective. I have been severely criticized by some for this style of writing. They find it beautiful but imprecise, saying too much and saying too little, compelling yet irresponsible. To my critics, I beg forgiveness for bringing offense. Yet I believe whole-heartedly that we must begin to see the interconnectedness of the world even in our intellectual formulations of it. Interlacing, for all its weaknesses, has this as strength. It seeks the insight of interconnections not the strength of demonstration. If our questions begin with Beauty, then I do not know any other method more oriented toward helping us find an answer. For the answer to this question is also an answer to human fragility and a vision of where such

fragility may find a place of contentment and rest. Interlacing can help us ask how to bring about a place of Beauty on Earth, a place of abundant life and spiritual creativity. It is a method proper to an aesthetics.

In the spirit of interlacing, then, I intend to take a look at each work from various perspectives or disciplines. One perspective I will touch on is color. It is obvious that Swanson is a master of color and the use of color in his serigraphs is rich in meaning. Another discipline I will bring to interlace with each work is cosmology. Swanson seems concerned with the heavens and the earth and I would like to explore this aspect a bit further. Finally, I will try to interlace what I consider one of Swanson's most intriguing insights—the context of Mystery.

My favorite of Swanson's works is *The Procession* (2007). The gift-nature of *The Procession* is not hard to uncover. Swanson himself tells us that he "was profoundly moved by a procession at San Javier del Bac Mission in Tucson, Arizona."<sup>6</sup> *The Procession* began as a gift, the gift of a procession at San Javier del Bac. It is obvious it continues as gift as a serigraph. The love of the artist for his subject shows everywhere.

The serigraph itself seems to offer itself to us as gift. The procession seems to walk out of its frame into our hands as a gift of-



John August Swanson, *The Procession*, 2007. Hand-painted serigraph, 36 x 24 inches, [www.JohnAugustSwanson.com](http://www.JohnAugustSwanson.com). Used with permission. See the front cover for a larger version of this work.

ferred from the artist to us. Indeed, the mission itself in the top center background appears to be handing over to us the procession that started within its walls. One must ask, then, what do I do with this experience of gift? To one so involved in a society and culture of consumerism, it is a difficult question. Shall I consume what is offered? Or shall I share the gift?

I find it significant of Swanson's paintings that they do not lend themselves to be easily consumed. By this I mean that they cry out to be displayed in public places rather than in the homes of private collectors. They cry out to be enjoyed by a community

4. See Charles Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2 (1868): section 3. 5. I have called these five elements of interlacing "aesthetic insight" in a previous book: *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003). 6. John August Swanson, "The Procession, Artist's Notes," 2007, <http://www.johnaugustswanson.com/default.cfm/PID=1.2.21>.

not an individual. *The Procession's* predecessor hangs in the Vatican.<sup>7</sup> What better evidence of the gift-nature of *The Procession* do we have than its finding its way into one of the most public places in the world? Since the dimension of gift is an indicator of the religious dimension in a work of art, one can be confident in saying that *The Procession* has much to offer by way of theology.

Let us begin by looking at the use of color in the work. I began this reflection by claiming that theology's task is the color of truth rather than the truth itself about God. Let me explain further. Swanson's bright use of colors reminds me of my roots in physics and my work in quantum optics. I started my intellectual journey with the scientific study of light. It took me a long time to realize that what started as a scientific study of

most sensitive organ of sense, the eye. Light means to be seen and it means to be seen by a mind. Thus light is acutely connected to mind yet only accessible to it through sense.

Indeed, when people blind from birth are somehow able to be given sight again they report astounding difficulties in seeing. Faces are but blurs and shapes are indistinct. It appears that merely having a healthy physical eye is not enough to see. Without a formative visual imagination, we are blind. More astounding, color is the most striking manifestation of this formative visual imagination. For color cannot be correlated easily to a wavelength of light. The color we see is not a direct perception of a wavelength. Color is more mysterious and it appears to be the product of the light that stimulates our eye and the mind that per-

sacred reality we must know its color. To my eyes it is a color grounded in the soil of Arizona. The orange and red hues that give Arizona its name also give *The Procession* its soul. From the brownish orange of its bells to the bright red hues of the acolyte's cassocks to the bright yellow of the candles, Swanson has permeated *The Procession* with the soul of Arizona itself.

But also notice that it is the predominant color of the Mission. Color grounds the Mission in the ground of Arizona. Such locatedness is significant in my mind. Though *The Procession* offers itself as an imagination, it is grounded in the very soil of a physical reality and a physical building. The imagination of *The Procession* is linked to a very real place. The link to place opens up a cosmic dimension in the work. Complimenting the orange hues of the Arizona earth is the blue of the starry sky. Moreover, the blue of Heaven is mingled with the orange of Earth. In this work, this curious mix of Heaven and Earth suggests a different cosmology where Heaven is not only to be found above the Earth. Here Heaven mixes thoroughly with Earth. Heaven and Earth mix and complement each other in the Swanson's work of art.

Such a cosmology reminds the theologian of the Apostle Paul. Heaven, he said, has already come to Earth but not fully yet. The juxtaposition of blues and oranges bring this point out nicely. In *The Procession* we walk on Earth but side by side with Heaven. Heaven and Earth accompany us in this marvelous procession of the imagination.

The Heaven and Earth analogy is given weight in the way Swanson achieves the luminosity of his color. He overlays point after point of color. In this he reminds me of the mosaics of St. Apollinaris in Ravenna. By using cubic tiles, the artists there did one up on the ancient world. Unlike the flat tiles of Roman make, the cubic tiles bounced

### *Color stands between the light and the mind, the place of the imagination.*

what I thought was a strictly physical object turned out to be a spiritual journey of trying to understand a most spiritual being. For light, as it turns out, has been always identified by Christian theologians as the most spiritual of creatures. And color as its soul.

Yet light ensouled by color appears to have a direct relationship to the human mind. Arthur Zajonc, a fellow physicist who also worked in quantum optics, wrote a fascinating study summarizing the history of theories about the nature of light.<sup>8</sup> What struck me most about Zajonc's account was the number of theologians who participated in giving us our present understanding of light. At the heart of this understanding is the crucial observation that light, a most mysterious entity, inaccessible to common sense is also that which has shaped our

ceives the light. Thus color stands between the light and the mind, the place of the imagination. Color, the soul of light, is also the soul of mind, and, let me suggest the soul of the mind's capacity to know truth. Thus, I have modified David Tracy's notion of the analogical imagination. Let me suggest we ought to rethink it as the analogical imagination, that is, an imagination that lifts us up towards the spiritual. After all, it is color that lifts the mind's imagination to something greater than itself. Color gives life to an image's imagination.

Swanson uses color in this spirit. He seeks the truth of a sacred reality through the formative visual imagination. This is the first clue to the theological aesthetics of *The Procession*. Color is the soul of a sacred reality emanating from the heart of the Mission of San Javier del Bac. To know this

7. The first *The Procession* painting (1982) is in the Vatican Museum's Collection of Modern Religious Art. 8. See Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).



light within themselves sending the light back from within their depths. The tiles of Apollinaris appeared to be filled with light, original light instead of reflected light. This experience of original light coming from tiles forged from the earth began that long Christian artistic tradition of finding ways to express how Heaven is now commingling with Earth. Swanson's serigraphs follow this ancient tradition.

The juxtaposition of Heaven and Earth, however, has doctrinal interpretations. It is the Holy Spirit that brings Heaven to Earth in Catholic doctrine. I find in the orange hues of *The Procession* not only the Earth of the adobe of the Mission but also the flame of the fire that is the Spirit. The Mission itself speaks of this to me. It is illumined by a fire from within, not a light reflecting off its walls. The blue juxtaposed with the orange makes the orange that much more significant. Here between the Blue of Heaven and the Orange of Earth dwells the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who hallows this serigraph.

Another striking element in *The Procession* is the depiction of Biblical passages within a frame. The façade of the mission is surrounded by images of biblical passages. The framing of a Bible story reminds me of Kevin Seazolt's treatment of the liturgy of the Word. Seazolt reminds us of the ancient Jewish understanding of a word, *dabar*. *Dabar* means not only "word" but also "event." For this reason, words can be imaged and not merely written. The reason biblical passages lend themselves so well for framing is that they are words that have a beginning, middle, and end. In other words, they are events—or better, stories. And stories can be imaged.

So the Mission façade reveals the words that give its true meaning. The framed biblical passages are the little stories of the Bible that point to a Big Story of redemption. Yet more is at work in the little stories of the Mission in this work of art. The little stories of the Mission somehow seem to melt into the procession of the people and are

taken off the wall and carried by them. The words spoken inside the Mission find their true nature as living stories outside the Mission. These little stories of the Bible become through the Mission the living stories of the individuals carrying them in procession. This element of life, of living story, seems to me to be marked by the color green. The color green is seen amidst the people as slender and elongated strokes, like tender shoots or blades of grass coming out of the orange of the Earth. The beauty of *The Procession* is not the beauty of design but it is more a living beauty, a beauty that inspires and helps us experience a new form of life.

The gift nature of *The Procession* now makes itself manifest. *The Procession* invites us to join its imagination and, in doing so, we also become part of *The Procession*. Our living story commingles with the little stories of the Mission and, then, somehow we realize that our story is part of a larger story, a Big Story of Heaven coming to Earth and bringing forth new life. *The Procession* offers us an imagination that is a kind of door into a Big Story, a living, sensible Mystery. By doing so, Swanson reminds the theologian of what is often forgotten. Theology begins not with doctrine or Revelation but Mystery. In this, Swanson well depicts the scriptures. They are bearers of Mystery not the Mystery itself.

There is more I could say about the theological aesthetics of *The Procession*, especially its understanding of Mystery. But I'd rather do this by looking at another work by Swanson, *Star Clown*. Swanson is well known for his use of the jester or clown in his paintings. What strikes me about his choice of subject is the aptness of the jester or clown for a profound understanding of Mystery. Dante understood something profound about the Paschal Mystery—it is a divine comedy. By this I don't mean that Dante understood comedy as tragedy with a happy ending. No, comedy's true theology lies not in happy endings but in revealing self-deception.

We laugh at jesters and clowns because they reveal to us our many self-deceptions. Herein lies the redemptive element in Swanson's work. God chose the fools of this world to shame the wise. In the frailty of what is human is found the strength of the Lord. Thus, Star Clown dwarfs the sun and moon it holds in its hands. The Star Clown, the revealer of human frailty and self-deception, also is master of sun and moon. As such, however, the Star Clown reveals what I find to be Swanson's most profound insight. The really real is Mystery. We live in the midst of Mystery yet we make ourselves blind to it. We do this for lack of a playful imagination for imagination is the key to seeing the truly real. The imagination is the key to the truth about ourselves and our existence.

This is also the case with *The Procession*. Both in *Star Clown* and *The Procession*, Swanson uses primary colors that speak of a childlike, playful imagination. What perhaps should give us pause is the implicit warning in *Star Clown*. Unless we see with the eyes and imagination of a child, we deceive ourselves. We live not in a universe of strict laws but in the grip of a playful imagination. It is this imagination that gives us life inasmuch as we are willing to enter it.

The key to entering it, however, is to pay attention to the Star Clown and allow him to uncover the self-deceptions that stifle the playful imagination. In this, we ought to be grateful to John August Swanson; for in both these works, he has not only shown us the color of true reality but also has offered us a marvelous gift, a door into a profound yet playful Mystery, a sensible Mystery that fills our souls with the color of truth. Heaven has come to Earth and we need to fear no more. The Star Clown is the true master of the universe and of our lives. Let us then accept Swanson's gift and enter that door into a Mystery where hearts are lifted up and light becomes ensouled. There we shall find the color of truth, the playful, jesting face of a merciful God who picks us up when we fall down and wipes every tear away.



John August Swanson, *Star Clown*, 2008. Hand-painted serigraph, 17.5 x 12 inches, [www.JohnAugustSwanson.com](http://www.JohnAugustSwanson.com). Used with permission.

## “What Is Swanson’s Art Like?” A Foolish Question?

Jenny Patten

I am a curious scholar and a lover of art, and I see art as deeply relational. In keeping with this, I consulted with my mother on which aspect of theological aesthetics and the work of John August Swanson to explore. Let me explain.

First of all, my mother is an artist.<sup>1</sup> I told her about the great blessing we have been given in being able to work with the art of Swanson—the original serigraphs, no less—not to mention the artist himself. Sensing the excitement in my voice, she asked me to elaborate. “Well, what is his artwork like?”

“Oh, mom, they are magical! I have never seen colors so vibrant! The works of art really come to life before the viewer’s eyes and seemingly bring the viewer into that life that exists on the other side of that two-dimensional plane that is the artwork’s surface.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes, and they tell stories! And stories within stories, for that matter. If you really look at all the details, you would understand the subtle yet persistent narratives.”

Just then I realized that even after such a description I still hadn’t said much to answer her question of “What is his artwork like?” So I encouraged my mother to visit his web site while we continued our conversation.<sup>2</sup> My mother commented on the prettiness of the art. That was not enough for me. Not with Swanson’s art.

I felt frustrated, as I often do teaching art history, that much of the art’s voice and power was being ignored. Sometimes I look back at a classroom full of students after having practically been moved to tears by the beauty of a work of art and I see someone yawn. Of course, I also see lots of stu-

dents with wide eyes and smiles over the splendor of the masterpiece in discussion, but it amazes me that there can be others who don’t get it, or maybe I should say, those who haven’t caught it, this contagion of passion . . . or maybe I should say, those who haven’t been moved. I don’t fault the artist, or the painting, or even the underwhelming technology that forces us to look at art by means of a somewhat hazy reproduction.

I am going to be very candid here: I think art history vernacular fails us when trying to communicate the beauty of images such as Swanson’s. I think language in general falls short of expressing the truths that *art* can in its triumphant freedom from verbal restraints. And I don’t believe that this is a matter of having or not having the dexterity with the words that come from the academy. I often feel that there is something missing from the art history methodology, interpretation, conversation and the community of scholars at large. As an artist myself, I know that art is about much more than what the eye sees, or even what the microscope magnifies, or what the X-ray machine detects. Art goes beyond what the artist writes in regard to his or her own artwork, or what their agents publicize, or what the critics madly pen. Art transcends all of that. This complexity is what is addressed by the field of art and religion and further by the emergent methodology of theological aesthetics.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, back to my conversation with my mother, her question, and my initial inability to articulate an answer. What is Swanson’s artwork like? Working as an art historian only, my answer goes something like this:

In subject matter, Swanson’s artwork is similar to Marc Chagall for its narrative qualities and biblical inspiration. Chagall also captured the wonders of modern life that surrounded him, from the pure and humble beauty of life on a farm, to the our-of-this-world spectacle of circus performers, bringing a shimmer of hope and an appreciation of beauty in a life otherwise tattered by the atrocities of two world wars. Swanson is similar in that regard, although the historical circumstances of his life are quite different.

Other of Swanson’s subjects (and even stylistic aspects, such as his rendering of human forms) have much in common with the Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera, in particular, especially in their activism and call for social justice. Beyond this, when looking at paintings by Swanson, especially *Jester*, somehow I am most reminded of the work of Georges Seurat. Seurat is synonymous with pointillism, the technique where artists applied pure dots of color to the canvas side-by-side and let the eye mix and interpret the hue. It was thought that this gave the artwork a more lively quality than the previous method where artists mixed the desired color on a palette and applied the formulated hue to the canvas.

The first work of art that comes to most people’s mind, when they think of Seurat is *Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte* (1884–1886), yet there is another work by Seurat that connects him to Swanson: *The Circus* (1891). The painting beckons with those familiar dots of radiance and explodes with sheer exuberance and triumph.

There is a female acrobat riding in an almost ballet arabesque pose—*en pointe*—

1. The author’s mother is artist Jule Patten Kamakana of Molokai, Hawaii. 2. See [www.johnaugustswanson.com](http://www.johnaugustswanson.com). 3. Some of the important voices in this field are the scholars represented in this symposium. But there are many others, including especially Frank Burch Brown.

on a horse mid-leap, all things defying the laws of gravity. There is a ring leader standing to the right, smiling and directing our attention with a grand gesture as if he was somehow conducting the magic. But note that it is over the shoulder of the clown (the comical fool, not the sage ring leader) that we gaze, as he throws back a curtain revealing to us the enchanting spectacle.

Let's bring Swanson's *Jester* into conversation with *The Circus* for a moment. Swanson says of his own painting *Jester* that the figure of the fool embodies a well-known scriptural paradox, "God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise" (1 Cor. 1:27). The foolish jester is the one who notices and is enlightened by the Beauty of the stars at night, perhaps answering a call or making a petition to the creator.<sup>4</sup> I am reminded of the first stanza of an anonymous seventh-century hymn used at Vespers during Advent called *Conditor alme siderum*, or *Creator of the Stars at Night*. "Creator of the stars of night, Thy people's everlasting light, Jesu, Redeemer, save us all, and hear Thy servants when they call."<sup>5</sup> Looking at the jester interlaced with this hymn, we see that unity with creation and the creator is being prompted, and we would indeed be wise to follow the fool.

Now let us return to the curtain within Seurat's *The Circus*, and the borders around Swanson's *Jester*, as they are key cues inviting us to ponder our location within the artwork. In the case of *The Circus*, examining the curtain, we must ask ourselves: Are we merely a witness to the magic? Or a part of it? Is the spectacle for our benefit? Or are we waiting in the wings backstage for our moment to go forth into the arena to shine? When we look at Swanson's *Jester*, we must likewise ask ourselves: Are our eyes closed

or open to the glorious light? Are we on the floor sleeping in oblivion or merely dreaming of the encounter with the Divine that the jester lives? And furthermore, are we in a room? Or under the heavens? The dark border here seems to suggest the perpendicular walls joining in the corners of the room, but the way the figures break that space seems to suggest otherwise. The magnificent frame around the piece depicts something like celestial constellations, reminding us of our relationship with the larger world, with the universe, and all of creation. It helps us see our finitude, while opening us up to something far beyond us. The constellations Swanson renders are imaginative rather than actual. For example, rather than seeing Orion or the Bear, we see a celestial body of trapeze artists, reminding us about the necessity of taking a leap of faith, and acrobats, reminding us of the precariousness of life.

Back to Seurat, one of the things I remember most from standing before *The Circus* at the Musée d'Orsay was something that I had never seen in print, though I had studied Seurat, the frame. Seldom does one see the frame decorated by the artist, or decorated at all, much less integrated with the painting. And yet the reason appeared very clear. It seemed to be a statement that the construct of a border couldn't contain the exuberance and joy of the artist and the subject matter. It radiated forth, even on to the frame, in turn emanating light onto the face of the viewer, and dare I say in his or her heart as well. I am reminded of another verse from scripture.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.

Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father. (Matt. 5:14-16, NAB)

I am not implying that Seurat intended for a viewer to think of this scripture passage when looking at his painting, nor do I believe that there is any real overt "religious" symbolism in this painting. Rather, I believe one of the greatest gifts of both Seurat and Swanson is the inherent polysemantic nature and the ambiguity (as made evident by the innovative technique of abandoning rigid scientific perspectives and disregarding laws of gravity). All this ambiguity allows for a vast array of interpretations, a real gift of plurality within the community of the Beautiful.<sup>6</sup>

There is yet another question that theological aesthetics asks of the artwork, specifically relating to the idea of defamiliarization. Does the artwork disrupt our relationship with the everyday world? And if so, what does this disruption allow us to see that we could not see before?<sup>7</sup> I think we have come back to the question asked by my mother. "What is Swanson's art like?" Let me take another stab at an answer, using theological aesthetics and the insights provided by interlacing Seurat and Chagall.

Swanson's art is narrative, and often biblical, though he draws from the wonders of modern life that surrounds him, from the pure and humble beauty of life on a farm, to the out-of-this-world spectacle of circus performers, bringing a shimmer of hope

4. Beauty (with a capital B) is different from beauty (with a lowercase B) because it is a beauty that is filled with God's presence. For a discussion of Beauty see Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 20-26. 5. *Conditor alme siderum*, trans. John M. Neale in *The Hymnal Noted*, 1852 and 1854, ed. J. M. Neale; music editions ed. Thomas Helmore. 6. Here I reference and pay homage to García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*. 7. These very helpful questions have been formulated by Cecilia González-Andrieu. Her work on systematizing the methodology of theological aesthetics in light of the foundational work of Alejandro García-Rivera and Frank Burch Brown is a tremendous asset to the emerging scholars in the field. See Cecilia González-Andrieu, *García Lorca as Theologian: The Method and Practice of Interlacing the Arts and Theology* (PhD dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 2007).



Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *The Circus*. 1891. Oil on canvas, 185.5 x 152.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/ Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

and a much needed appreciation of Beauty to our wounded souls. Much of Swanson's art is also directive, calling us to activism in the plight of social justice. From a stylistic perspective, Swanson's dots of radiance, similar to pointillism, emanate a feeling of exuberance and triumph. They remind the viewer to be a light onto the world.

The subjects of Swanson's paintings

defy the laws of gravity, perform miracles, and other seemingly impossible acts, and I believe in them, because they happen before my very eyes. My wisdom is replaced by foolishness (or is it the other way around?) as his comic figures embody the well-known scriptural paradox "God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise." In *Jester*, unity with creation and the creator is being

prompted, and we would indeed be wise to follow the fool. Swanson's art reminds us of our relationship with the larger world, with the universe, and all of creation. It helps us see our finitude, while opening us up to something far beyond us. And that is an answer, at least in part, to the question "What is Swanson's art like?" that would make my mother proud.

## JOHN AUGUST SWANSON'S JESTER John Handley

My response to John August Swanson's *Jester*, working out of a theological aesthetics approach, begins with three closely related questions from a Christian perspective: Does the work of art move us? How does it move us? What does it move us toward? As we know, a work of art, especially one like *Jester*, can present us with infinite possibilities.

These questions, originally formulated by Cecilia González-Andrieu in her work on a method for theological aesthetics, provide us with an entry point—a way to approach a work of art.

### *Does the Work of Art Move Us?*

Another way to think of this question is to ask, does the art work *speak*, and does it speak to the intellect, and perhaps more importantly, to the heart? Does it convey something of importance to us—does it make us aware of ourselves in light of something else? And if the answer is yes, then it follows that we can ask, just how does it do so?

Swanson's playful and brightly colored imagery in *Jester* at first glance may not appear to invite theological reflection. When viewing a work of art, I begin with the judgment that its capacity to move us is a *conditional* one, depending on whether or not we, the viewers, want to be moved, want to engage, want to listen. As Jesus put it in Matthew 11:15, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (RSV).<sup>1</sup> And so we first must decide on the encounter itself. Do we want it?

Art historian and theologian Jane Dillenberger once said to me that

when we confront a painting, it is not a matter of a few moments of vi-

sual contact in those few moments of temporal time; our entire lifetime of visual, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience is being drawn upon and stimulated. There we, like the painter who creates the work of art, endow with significance the forms of our daily visual experience, and we become artists in our seeing of the world about us.<sup>2</sup>

We as the viewers have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the work of art—not a one-way conversation—but a dialogue where the artwork speaks, and we respond and the conversation continues. As I engage in such dialogue with *Jester*, I begin to make associations between Swanson's imagery and that of other artists, stories in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and church history.

Where to begin? I do not know of any scripture that speaks about a jester per se, but there is a helpful analogue that appears, that of the fool. The Apostle Paul uses the term directly when he claims that preaching about the cross is foolishness to those who do not believe (1 Cor. 1:18), and, later, he shifts his focus and states: "We are fools on Christ's account, but you are wise in Christ" (1 Cor. 4:10).

Ler's look formally at *Jester* for a moment. Here we have a picture of a man who has just reached the top of a ladder, and now he pauses to gaze through a window at a beautiful celestial sky and a somewhat astonished moon. Upon a closer look we discover in this sky a macrocosmic universe complete with constellations and apparently teeming with life. Of the seven figures found in the central composition, only the jester is awake. His dress is distinctly

different from the rest, both in style and color—festive, or even ceremonial, as if he is about to perform. Below him are six peaceful sleeping figures—men, women and children—all slumbering while the light rays of heaven (made up of nearly microscopic stars) cascade through the open window.

Around this composition is a border, which is comprised of scenes from a circus—the tent at center below, the animals and performers rising up on each side, and a glorious cloud at top center crowning the piece. The composition of this border mirrors the composition within—that is, earth is seen below and the heavens above. The use of pattern and color is central to the work, causing the eye to continuously move about the picture—every area contains details—there is much going on here.

### *How Does the Work of Art Move Us?*

Already we have made several associations that are significant, not the least being how beautiful it is to gaze upon, and the longer one gazes how the discovery of that beauty continues to unfold. Our jester has climbed upon a ladder in order to gain another worldview. It invites our recalling of the Old Testament story of Jacob's ladder and Jacob's mystical encounter with God. Jacob was sent by his father Isaac to the land of his maternal grandfather to seek a wife. On his way, he settles down for the night:

Then he had a dream: a stairway rested on the ground, with its top reaching to the heavens; and God's messengers were going up and down on it. (Gen. 28:12)

1. Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the New American Bible. 2. John Handley, "A Conversation with Jane Daggett Dillenberger," *Black Zinnias*, no. 3 (2008); reprinted in *ARTS* 21:1 (2009), 14–20.



John August Swanson, *Jester*, 2001. Hand-painted serigraph, 26.75 x 20.75 inches, [www.JohnAugustSwanson.com](http://www.JohnAugustSwanson.com). Used with permission.

And here God speaks to Jacob and blesses him with the promises that he had also given to his forefather Abraham:

He took him outside and said: "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so," he added, "shall your descendants be." (Gen. 15:5)

And Jacob responds:

"How awesome is this shrine! This is nothing else but an abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven!" (Gen. 28:17)

There is a second account from early Christian history that comes in the form of first-hand report by the twenty-two-year-old Perpetua, who was martyred for her faith around 203 CE. (She gives us the earliest surviving text written by a Christian woman). She, along with others, had been arrested because they were Christians. On the urging of her brother, Perpetua asks God for a vision of their fate. She records:

And I asked, and this was what was shown me. I saw a golden ladder of marvelous height, reaching up even to heaven; and very narrow, so that persons could only ascend it one by one; and on the sides of the ladder was fixed every kind of iron weapon. There were there swords, lances, hooks, daggers; so that if any one went up carelessly, or not looking upwards, he would be torn to pieces and his flesh would cleave to the iron weapons.

As her vision continues, Perpetua's friend and probable mentor, Saturus, makes his way to the top of the ladder. Looking back, he declares,

"Perpetua, I am waiting for you; but be careful that the dragon [does] not bite you." And I said, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, he shall not hurt me."

Perpetua succeeds in making her way to the top of the ladder, where she is rewarded by a white-haired man in the dress of a shepherd, who gives her a little cake of cheese: "I ate it, and all who stood around said *Amen*. And at the sound of their voices I was awakened, still tasting a sweetness which I cannot describe." From this vision the prisoners concluded that their fate would be death, "and we ceased henceforth to have any hope in this world."<sup>3</sup>

I quote these two examples—one biblical, the other historical—to illustrate the profound symbolism ladders hold for the Jewish and Christian traditions. They represent a mystical encounter—an instance of transcendence—where the temporal world is bridged to ultimate reality. In light of these two examples, it is not so surprising then that ladders would begin to appear in icons, most notably *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, dating from the twelfth century and in the collection of St. Catherine's Monastery, at the base of Mount Sinai in Egypt.

### *What Does the Artwork Move Us Toward?*

Linette Martin, in her study *Sacred Doorways* (2002), has written that icons are essentially portals to another reality—they are meant to be looked upon, hardly as works of art (for Orthodox Christians do not see them that way), but rather as doorways to help us apprehend the spiritual reality of the universe.<sup>4</sup> All of which brings us back to Swanson's work *Jester*. Standing on the ladder, he looks intently through the heavenly

portal at another reality far more real and permanent than this world. His icon is the universe itself.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims its builder's craft.

One day to the next conveys that message; one night to the next imparts that knowledge.

There is no word or sound; no voice is heard;

Yet their report goes forth through all the earth, their message, to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19:2-5)

The ladder allows the jester to ascend—and us with him—to ponder another realm. Much like an icon that acts as a portal, Swanson's piece is intent on taking us up and out of ourselves—toward that glorious sky. As Jacob encountered angelic beings and the voice of God through his vision of a ladder, and as Perpetua saw the hope of a heavenly reward in her vision of a ladder, Swanson's jester invites us to seek our own heavenly encounter.

Let us turn our attention for a moment to the border that surrounds this image. On the surface, we see a delightful retelling of the circus, with its death-defying feats and splendor. But the intertextuality of Scripture and tradition invites us to see this in cosmic terms as well. Could this circus tent be a reference to the tabernacle as described in Exodus? The Hebrew word for tabernacle *משכן* means literally a residence, but it is also a shepherd's hut, or lair for animals. I find this definition illuminating as both the tabernacle and the circus tent are a place where animals and humans are brought together in a ceremonious event. The Exodus narrative describes the walls of the tabernacle as walls woven in blues, pur-

3. Perpetua, "The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity," in *Readings in Medieval History*, ed. Geary, Patrick (New York: Broadview Press, 1998), 58.

4. See Linette Martin, *Sacred Doorways: A Beginner's Guide to Icons* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2002).



ples, and reds (Exodus 25:3-4), the colors of Swanson's pallet. In the narrative, the details of the making of the tabernacle are minutely described, and we can only imagine that it was a splendid thing to behold—perhaps much the same way that a child perceives the circus and its performer in which it becomes other-worldly. The costumes, the movement of animals and performers—the ritual of it all—is a spectacle to behold. And finally there is the detail of the cloud at the top of the border. In their long sojourn in the desert, the Israelites were led at night by a mysterious pillar of fire, and during the day, by a mysterious cloud that this border cloud might point to (Exod. 13:21).

demarcation in the picture. In Swanson's *Jester* and in several of Chagall's pieces, this treatment of light means that some figures fall within the light, and some fall outside of it—or at least linger on its edges.

Swanson has treated his celestial light like a waterfall—it pours through the portal in radiant particles that seem to fade the closer they fall to the earth. On both sides of the room, these light beams are obscured, leaving both a woman and a child partially outside their reach. One might be tempted to read this use of light as some form of judgment—those who fall “within” and “without” the heavenly light. But in keeping with my final question, what does this

in a flash of light while on the road to Damascus: in that moment he went from one who had persecuted Christians, to someone who was himself persecuted. His world was turned upside down, and as such, his worldview was forever altered. There is an illuminating comment that Paul makes that is crucial for my understanding of *Jester*. It is found in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he describes a man in Christ who, whether in or out of his body (Paul was not sure), had been taken up into Paradise where he “heard ineffable things, which no one may utter” (2 Cor. 12:2-3).

It is generally understood today that Paul was referring to himself in this pas-

*The ladder allows the jester to ascend—and us with him—  
to ponder another realm. Much like an icon that acts as a portal,  
Swanson's piece is intent on taking us up and out of ourselves—  
toward that glorious sky. . . . Swanson's jester invites us  
to seek our own heavenly encounter.*

By looking at the works of another modern artist, Marc Chagall, we can press the experience of this work further. Chagall crafted his career by freely drawing upon both Jewish and Christian imagery. He produced several versions of Jacob's ladder, as well as numerous crucifixions, most notably his *White Crucifixion* (1938). Although these are very different images from those of Swanson, there is one notable similarity: the treatment of light.

As in *Jester*, light plays an important role in many of Chagall's pieces. First, it is light from above—that is, it streams down on its subjects. Secondly, it creates a division or

work of art move us toward? I see this work as an invitation like that found in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Rise up in splendor! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you” (Isa. 60:1). Interestingly enough, Chagall also loved the circus and created many whimsical works on this theme bringing to these compositions this same use of light.

### *The Moment of Clarity*

Now I wish to return to Paul's use of the terms *fool* and *foolishness*. As the scriptures teach us, Paul's life was utterly changed

sage; it was he who had been blessed with an ascent of his own, up into the heavenly place where he encountered ineffable things. Paul's mystical encounters became the foundation of his ministry—of his foolishness in the eyes of the world. His foolishness was no folly, however, but based on the clear and concise apprehension of ultimate reality. Swanson's *Jester* moves me toward such reflections. He has captured the very moment when somebody—Paul, Perpetua, you or I—are caught up in a moment of extreme clarity. While the world may be oblivious to such things, there remains for those of faith the possibility of divine encounter.

## The Moon Shines on All: Appreciating John August Swanson's *Jester with a Chinese Painting, Geese on the Maple River*

N. Frances Hioki

The purpose of this essay is to explore the spiritual breadth of John August Swanson's paintings from the perspective of interfaith aesthetics. To begin the exploration, first, it is necessary to point out important questions with regard to the evolving concept of "interfaith," and I do so using an example from my own family.

I was born and raised in Osaka, Japan, in a Buddhism oriented family—which means that we have a small family temple at home, family graveyard in a Buddhist temple, and funerals presided by a Buddhist priest. My father follows the Buddhist traditions, while my mother comes from a Catholic family. At home my mother has been asking to have a Catholic "home altar"; she says that we will keep the Buddhist family temple upstairs, and the Catholic home altar will be downstairs. But my father wants to have the Buddhist family temple only.

In this situation, the questions of interfaith are these: Is it permissible to have the "temples" of two different religions at home? Can they co-exist, or do they repel and exclude each other?

I would say that Buddhist and Catholic temples are indeed different, but they do not necessarily exclude each other. I think this because there will be common items placed in each temple that represent memories of the family: small tablets with the inscription of the names of the deceased

(accordingly to Japanese custom) and their photos.

In this essay, I look at a Chinese, Buddhist painting and appreciate it with John August Swanson's *Jester*. In doing this, I follow the steps Alejandro García-Rivera proposed in his article "Interfaith Aesthetics" in the book *Exploring Christian Spirituality*.<sup>1</sup> First, I look at the two paintings and how different they are from each other. Second, I examine the paintings closely and point out the parallels. Third, I place them in conversation with each other and reflect on the curious connections between two entirely unrelated works of art. I hope to show that the Chinese painting and *Jester* are both religious and spiritual art. They move our hearts because they bring together what García-Rivera calls "theological hardheadedness" and "spiritual openness."<sup>2</sup> According to Wendy Beckett, religious art is for believers, and it "stands or falls by its ability to raise the mind and heart towards the truths of faith."<sup>3</sup> Spiritual art, on the other hand, takes us "into a realm that is potentially open to us, we are made more than what we are meant to be."<sup>4</sup> The distinction is useful because it allows us to be faithful to our own religious tradition, while being spiritually open to other religious traditions.

To use my own domestic example, in view of the religious, having both a Bud-

dhist home temple and a Catholic home altar maintains the distinction between the two religions with sufficient respect to the otherness of each (for my Buddhist father and Catholic mother). And in view of the spiritual, we may appreciate them more because of what they share—our prayers and the memory of the deceased.

Now let us look at the paintings. *Jester* (2001) is one of Swanson's great works and the focus of our inquiry into his theology of the Holy Fool. But what do we know about the Chinese painting? The painter's name is Wu Li (1632–1718) and he is considered one of the six masters of the early Qing orthodox school of painting.<sup>5</sup> The painting is an album leaf called *Fengjiang qunyan tu*, and it is in the collection of Nanjing Museum, China.<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Chaves, who studied the painter's poetry, gave it the English title, *Geese on the Maple River*.<sup>7</sup> Using ink and brush on paper, Wu depicted the serene image of a lone goose flying over a mountain valley. At the bottom of the valley, there is a stream with a broken bridge, and there are also groups of geese resting on both sides of the stream. Tints of orange are applied in the background, to indicate the dawn approaching.

Wu Li's life was somewhat tragic. He lost his wife and mother the year he was thirty, and thereafter he made his way through several religions while working as a popular

1. Alejandro García-Rivera, "Interfaith Aesthetics: Where Theology and Spirituality Meet," in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*, ed. Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert, SHJM (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 178–95. 2. *Ibid.*, 181. 3. *Ibid.*, 179. 4. *Ibid.*  
5. See Laurence C. S. Tam, Christina Chu, and Tang Hoi Chiu, *Six Masters of Early Qing and Their Followers* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1986). On Wu's life and his paintings, see Xiaoping Lin, *Wu Li (1632–1718): His Life, His Paintings* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2001). 6. I thank Ning Yao and Dr. Manhong Melissa Lin of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary for helping me with the Chinese language inquiries and others in writing this essay. 7. Jonathan Chaves, *Singing of the Source: Nature and God in the Poetry of the Chinese Painter Wu Li* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 60. 8. *Ibid.* Translation by Jonathan Chaves.

painter. At first, he was close to a particular Confucian group involved in movements for social justice. Around the time this painting was done, he was also acquainted with French Jesuit missionaries and some Chinese Catholics. But Wu was also inclined to Buddhism. The painting was part of his gift to his Zen master, with whom he was practicing meditation at a monastery. His Zen master died shortly after and three or four years later, Wu entered the Society of Jesus and moved to Macao to study theology. He was eventually ordained and worked as a Jesuit priest in mainland China for the rest of his life.

Now what are the differences between these two paintings? It is clear that the two paintings are unrelated. One is American, the other Chinese. One represents figures of human beings inside a house, and the other represents a flock of birds at a river. *Jester* was painted in 2001, and *Geese on the Maple River* was painted around 1678. *Jester* is a serigraph, and *Geese* is an ink painting on paper. On top of all this, the biggest difference between the two is the color. *Jester* is colorful and luminous; radiant colors that speak to us directly. *Geese* is mostly black and white, quiet and somewhat distant. Finally, there is no inscription on *Jester*, but on *Geese* there is a four-line inscription in Chinese next to the painter's signature. The inscription reads:

Maple River's waters run chilly  
 All creatures come home early  
 Dreams are filled with blossoming  
 reeds  
 Autumn not abated  
 A single goose does not go to sleep  
 He frolics in the moonlight  
 Where ripples glitter, trembling in the  
 distance  
 the sky will soon show dawn.<sup>8</sup>

On reading the inscription, we start seeing colors in the Chinese painting. The



Wu Li, *Fengjiang qunyan tu* (*Geese on the Maple River*). 46.5 x 26.1 cm, ink and colors on paper. Nanjing Museum, China. Source: *Zhongguo meishu quanji*, part 1, vol. 10 (Shanghai: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1989). Used with permission.

inscription helps us to imagine a moon-lit night in the valley and a sleepless goose frolicking in the moonlight. The river's waters run chilly, and the ripples glitter with the moonlight, trembling in the distance. The sky will soon show dawn. The moon is not depicted in the painting, yet the painting is about the moon and the goose. And here comes an important connection, or we may even call it a common theme between *Jester* and *Geese*—they are both about a sleepless one. They are both about getting up in the middle of the night and going up to see the moon. The two paintings are entirely different, in terms of time, location, subject, color, aesthetic sensibility, in all things possible, and yet there is something common between them and it is the moon, the Mystery.

Having pointed out a common theme between two paintings, I may as well end my exploration, but I agree with Cecilia González-Andrieu that finding an intersection is not enough.<sup>9</sup> So, I must place them in conversation with each other. Among other things, there are two interesting parallels between *Jester* and *Geese*. One has to do with the sleepless one's solidarity with friends and families, and the other is our brokenness and vulnerability. When we look at the sleepless one in both paintings, we are able to sense what a moment of mystical experience would be like, the experience of being one with the moon. But is the jester going to transcend this world, climb all the way up

to the moon leaving his company behind? Is the goose going to fly away to the moon? What is important to notice here is that while the jester is looking up to the moon/Mystery, he seems to be grounded, still in solidarity with the sleepers in the room. Similarly, the sleepless goose belongs to its flock. There's a sense of connection between the sleepless goose and the others, and the same relationship is found between the jester and the others. The sense of solidarity that is apparent in the two paintings may reflect the fact that both painters were involved in social justice movements in early periods of their lives—even though the context of such movements in seventeenth-century China and twentieth-century America is necessarily very different. Beyond this, both Swanson and Wu found their true vocation in their forties.

The two paintings also touch on our vulnerability and brokenness in a poetic way. *Jester*, with its women and children sleeping on the floor, shows the vulnerability of poor families in a traveling circus. Wu painted the sleeping geese especially vulnerable, hiding in the bush in a quiet valley, taking sleep on the way as they migrate to a far away land. The bridge across the river is broken, but the sleepless one is flying over the river bridging the two sides.

*Jester* and *Geese on the Maple River* deliver us the sparkling beauty of the lights of the universe and the silver moonlight glittering on water. They awaken us to the sense of

what it is like to experience Mystery, while grounded in solidarity with others. Both are religious and spiritual art, and freely cross the boundary of religions. There are also elements of distinct religious iconography in both paintings. *Jester* is related to the biblical story of Jacob and his dream, and therefore carries an implication of going up and down between heaven and earth. In *Geese* the image of a flying bird superimposed on the full moon evokes Buddhism, especially the Zen tradition that associates the moon with enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> Thus, religiously the painting can be appreciated in two ways. However, in order to enjoy the Chinese painting and be moved by it, Christians do not have to reduce its visual narrative to the story that is familiar to them. The same thing can be said of the universal appeal of *Jester* to people who are not familiar with the story of Jacob.

I hope I have shown that the Catholic and Buddhist traditions can be in conversation without compromising their uniqueness. Moreover, seeing the two paintings side by side makes us realize that the two traditions in fact belong to a larger spirituality. While Christianity and Buddhism understand religious Mystery differently, the moon shines on all; Swanson's *Jester* and Wu Li's sleepless goose belong to the same community of interpreters of the moon, transcending the boundaries of religions, societies, and times. |||

9. See Cecilia González-Andrieu, "Theological Aesthetics and the Recovery of Silenced Voices," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* (winter 2008), <http://www.visualarttoday.com/Exhibitions/AlfredQuiroz/index.html>. 10. According to Japanese Zen master Dogen's (1200–1253) *Genjo-koan*, "A person getting enlightened is like the moon reflecting in the water" (Hakuun Yasutani, *Flowers Fall: A Commentary on Dogen's Genjokoan*, trans. Paul Jaffe [Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996], 65). For the meaning of birds in Zen iconography, see Helmut Brinker, *Zen in der Kunst des Malens [Zen in the Art of Paintings]* (Bern: Otto Wilhelm Barth, 1988), 138–52.

**Cecilia González-Andrieu** is Assistant Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California. Her book on theological aesthetics is forthcoming from Baylor University Press in 2012.

**Alejandro García-Rivera** is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University, Berkeley, California.

**John Handley** is completing his doctorate at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.

**Jenny Patten** is Adjunct Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Sonoma State University, Santa Rosa, California.

**N. Frances Hioki** is Visiting Scholar at Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture, Tokyo, Japan.