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## Christian Art for the 21st century

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## Christian Art for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by Angela McCarthy

Since the early centuries of Christianity, art has been an integral part of the expression of our faith. While Islam and Judaism cannot have representational art, our understanding that the Incarnation is real in the person of Jesus of Nazareth means that we can image God and we can image ideas that are sacred. Christian art can be divided into different categories but I would suggest three; religious art, sacred art and liturgical art. The religious aspect can cover those art works that respond to our religious beliefs or even illustrate a scriptural passage. Sacred art is specifically art that draws us into the experience of God, into the realm of the sacred. Liturgical art refers to the art and architecture that is necessary for the celebration of liturgy and therefore is primarily in places of worship.

The Mandorla Art Award is a national art award held every two years that focusses on a scriptural theme. It encourages artists to respond to that theme and therefore develop a language of art that encourages the viewer towards different insights into the scriptural passage and in that sense enlivens us to more deeply experience the Word of God. The recent Award held in Perth in July 2016, focussed on the theme of "The Resurrection". There are many scriptural passages both from the Old and New Testaments that speak of Resurrection and the 44 finalists in the Award each gave a rich and varied view of this complex religious belief. The finalists were judged by Rev Dr Tom Elich from Brisbane, Dr Petra Kayser from the National Gallery of Victoria and Prof Ted Snell who is the Director of the Cultural Precinct of UWA.

The winner of the \$25,000 Award was Megan Robert, a textile artist from Sydney. Her work, "The Bread Basket at Emmaus – then Flesh returned to Word" was created from the pages of three bibles which she rolled individually and sewed into a basket. Here is her description of her work:

In trying to raise Jesus and give him life, I created his death.  
Every page of the Bible taken out and rolled up. It can't be used as intended, the text cannot be understood. Words of Jesus lost, gone.  
Like Cleopas and his friend, the script they knew had become undone.  
Jesus came, and on their journey he stitched their undone script back together, the rolled up pages of words of death opening up in a new way. Death was giving birth to Life.  
But the scriptures were still not enough, they needed to 'eat' Jesus to know that he was alive.  
This artwork is not enough either....you need to eat the Bread of Life, to know the real art within.  
Take and eat, this artwork has been broken for you.

The basket was machine sewn with red thread to represent the flesh and blood of Christ. Around the top there are five gashes to represent the five wounds of Christ. As a basket it also reminds us of the very basic necessities of life, something in which to carry our bread, and from that very basic human need comes the real need for the life given us by the Eucharist that was only possible through the Resurrection. The catalogue of artworks can be seen on [www.mandorlaart.com](http://www.mandorlaart.com)



“The Bread Basket at Emmaus – then Flesh returned to Word”  
By Megan Robert, photo provided by the artist.

There were also two Highly Commended Awards. The Catholic Archdiocese of Perth, represented by Monsignor Michael Keating, presented the \$5000 Award to local Fremantle artist, Camilla Loveridge. Camilla sees her artwork practice as a way of experiencing God.

Creating art is essential to my being. Painting and drawing bring me the most intense pleasure, and it is in artmaking that I feel connected to my core, to God and to humanity. In the process of creating, the moment is suspended and nothing else is important to me. This intense experience of being present and profoundly happy is my gift from God, and one that I am compelled to share.

It is through my artwork that I feel I can help draw others to the beauty of God’s creation. Trained as a printmaker, I have developed a passion for rich visual language expressed through mark making, and I am drawn to marks that surround us, as well as marks that are created in art. In recent years I have moved into painting and find that my works have become more layered and nuanced, and maintain evidence of beginnings whilst recording also investigations and toil. With sweat and deliberation I excavate and rework the surfaces of my work. This process engages me completely in the moment, and exposes my emotional state to a greater consciousness.

I have found that the Mandorla Art Award has provided me with a unique opportunity to express my experience of God, through the biblical themes I have been challenged to interpret. The integrity of the artmaking process, research and contemplation of scripture have magnified for me that my arts practice is my experience of God. My hope is that through this artmaking I can share my experience with others and draw them into this particular union.

The second Highly Commended Award of \$5000 from the Anglican Diocese of Perth was presented by Archbishop Roger Herft. It was won by a Melbourne artist, Libby Byrne. She embarked on a liturgical journey by prayerfully painting every day from Ash Wednesday to Resurrection Sunday and photographically recording her work every day. The collection of images was then presented in a unique box where viewers could look through the images at their leisure. The judges of the Award were very impressed with her process driven work. When asked why she entered she replied:

I was intrigued by the many different prompts that were offered by the Mandorla [Art Award] for considering the theme of 'Resurrection'. I read and listened to the commentaries that were being offered on the theme and I realised that there was a significant level of interest in provoking artists to respond deeply to this theme. There seemed to be a real desire to open the theme for both broad and deep exploration and a recognition that the artist might be able to extend the way that we think about the theme of 'Resurrection'. It was the generous spirit of inquiry that led me to want to be involved with this award.

The People's Choice Award is sponsored by the Benedictine Community of New Norcia where the acquired artworks are housed and exhibited in their museum and gallery. This \$2000 Award was won by another Melbourne artist, Julie Davidson, who also regularly exhibits with Linton and Kay Galleries in Perth where the Mandorla Art Award has been exhibited in 2014 and 2016. She has also been a finalist in the Mandorla Art Award and first entered in 1996. When asked how she approached the theme she responded with this description:

I spent time examining the scriptures and listening to podcasts of sermons based around the theme. I also had friends just back from a trip to Jerusalem with photos of the area and the tomb. The difficulty I found was not in trying to come up with an image but in having to decide between a flood of different ideas. I've spent years referencing Renaissance religious art, particularly the altarpiece and the use of drapery and dramatic light. It has allowed me to feel connected to the church's vast field of historical images. I wanted to use traditional images from a contemporary viewpoint - as if I were placed there in the tomb at that moment.

One of the aims of the Mandorla Art Award is to help the Church by encouraging artists to engage with Christian Scriptural texts. So many of our churches are totally devoid of art so we need to encourage the church communities to purchase real art that can have a deep and lasting effect on spirituality and belief. It was encouraging recently when a major secondary college in Sydney contacted me to get the contact details of our 2014 winner, Paul Kaptein who is a sculptor, because they wanted to commission him to do a sculpture for their chapel. We need the ripples to keep on flowing outwards so that once again Christian art will be seen as an essential part of Christian life.