EXPLORING THE

Catholic Artistic Imagination

Center for Catholic Faith and Culture
Division of Mission & Identity
Our series exploring Catholic artistic imagination highlights the vital role that universities, particularly Catholic universities play in creating, promoting and sustaining the arts.

Established at Duquesne University in 2012, the CCFC fosters interdisciplinary research and collaborative problem solving that is oriented and informed by Catholic ideas and ideals. The CCFC is an institutional space that hosts conversations on social issues, pedagogy and the arts, a steward for Duquesne’s Catholic and Spiritan identity and for Catholic intellectual tradition more broadly, and an agent for change in concert with internal and external stakeholders.

We work in an irenic, interdisciplinary and collaborative fashion to develop and deploy the intellectual capital of Catholicism. Our confidence in the contemporary value of Catholic intellectual tradition is coupled with commitments to critical reflection on it and non-defensive engagement with other faith communities. Whether we are supporting faculty research, sharing in justice education, or celebrating the arts our work has a second-order significance, namely to calibrate our stakeholders’ understanding of what it means to be a Catholic university.
Catholic Artistic Imagination

The CCFC celebrates the humanizing power of the arts. Artistic expression is a testament to the dignity of the person and plays a crucial role in contributing to cultural vitality and the common good. Catholic tradition brings a distinctive lens to the arts, an artistic imagination that expresses Catholic convictions about creation, the person, the polis, the good, the beautiful, the true and the divine. We explore Catholic artistic imagination through appreciation of art that is informed by Catholic faith and reflection on other art from a Catholic perspective.

Our series fosters a broad and inclusive understanding of Catholic intellectual tradition. By considering varied artistic media from different eras and cultures we appreciate the historical sweep and global diversity of Catholic tradition. The arts provide an entry into the ideas that inform the Catholic artistic imagination, drawing participants into an encounter among faith, reason and aesthetics.

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Our Approach

Our series contributes to the good of our University community. It showcases the artistic and intellectual expertise and gifts of Duquesne faculty, graduate students and staff. It promotes collegiality and collaboration across divisional and disciplinary boundaries. It makes members of our community more conversant with our Catholic and Spiritan mission and identity.

Our series provides opportunities to share beautiful works of art with interesting people in a relaxed setting. Guests gather and mingle while enjoying cocktails and hors d’oeuvres. Soft seating is arranged to facilitate a conversational approach that is informal and intimate. Our presenters eschew formal lectures in favor of more experiential and dialogical approaches. The content is aimed at educated but non-expert audiences. We nurture collaboration with academic programs, Spiritan Campus Ministry and occasionally external stakeholders. We have partnered with the School of Music, the Department of English, the Department of History, the Department of Theology, Gumberg Library, Spiritan Campus Ministry and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

The following pages illustrate the range and content of our series.
Catholics have created important and enduring works of art, including painting, sculpture, music, photography, literature, architecture, theater, dance, cinema and performance art. At one event we may consider the Pieta. At another we listen to classical music and discuss philosophy. At yet another we may consider work originating from other Christian traditions, such as Andrei Rublev’s justly famous icon of the Trinity.

**Michelangelo’s Catholic Imagination**

Our series began with an exploration of Michelangelo’s artistic engagement with Catholic liturgy and devotion, focusing on his first major commission, the Pieta in St. Peter’s.

**Memory, Time and Sacred Proportion in the Music of Guillaume Du Fay**

We listened to the influential 15th century Renaissance composer Guillaume Du Fay’s musical masterpiece, Missa Se la face ay pale. A beautiful and haunting work, the sacred symbols within the music begin to reveal themselves only after careful study. We explored some of the thinking that informs Du Fay’s musical imagination, from the philosophy of Plato to the visionary writings of St. Augustine, focusing on the way that his music uses proportion to create an overlap of “past” and “present” and lead the listener to an intimation of eternity. Finally, we listened to the Gloria of Du Fay’s mass, experiencing for ourselves the rhythms and repetitions that express the music’s sacred meaning.

**Rublev’s Icon of the Trinity**

In his icon of the Trinity, Rublev builds on iconographic representations of the Lord’s appearance to Abraham in the form of three men (Gen. 18). Early Western and Eastern icons interpreted this passage Christologically. Rublev illustrated the same event as an interaction between the three persons of the Trinity and invited the viewer to participate in the life of the Trinity.
Catholic tradition includes artistic genres that enrich the Church’s liturgy and prayer. Series events have focused on Gregorian chant, contemporary musical interpretations of the Passion from diverse cultures, hymnography and iconography.

**Gregorian Chant: Liturgical Music and Catholic Intellectualism**

The quietness within the monastic walls provided adequate space for chanting and creativity. It also offered the monks a favorable environment for the invention of a system used to visually represent aurally perceived sacred sounds through the utilization of symbols called neumes. Drawing on chant examples from the 9th through the 12th centuries, we discussed the ingenuity of these monks as they created the neumatic notations and their use even in contemporary liturgical music. Duquesne students performed a few simple chants in the University Chapel in order to give the participants the opportunity to experience this music within the ambient in which the repertoire is usually performed.

**Composing Inner Resonance: Contemporary Musical Settings of the Passion**

The accounts of the Holy Week Gospel narratives have inspired composers throughout music history to set the narrative of Christ’s Passion to music. From cross-cultural and cross-denominational perspectives, the presentation unveiled a selection of more recent Passion music by present day composers. The discussion offered a window into the composers’ creative world as it arranges a moderated dialogue between the sense of the composer’s musical representations and music’s ultimate manifestations at the crossroads of tradition and innovation.

**The Mystery of the Crucified One in Byzantine Hymnography and Iconography**

This presentation discussed Byzantine icons and hymns of the Crucifixion, examined their biblical-exegetical basis and pondered their theological claims.
Time Out, Eternity In: Transitions into Heaven in the Music of Olivier Messiaen

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, time is “nothing else but the measure of before and after in movement.” Thomas’ most musical student, French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), developed several ways of representing not only “before” and “after” in his music, but also ways of symbolizing the absence of time altogether, the eternity of heaven as unfurled in music. Attendees listened to and discussed various ways of knocking on heaven’s door by exploring how symmetry, tempo and ametricality may provide the soundtrack of our final journey home.

Music and the Sacred: How a Composer Approaches Music

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra’s Composer of the Year, Sir James MacMillan, led a conversation on faith and music.

Shusaku Endo’s Silence

Endo is Japan’s most significant Catholic literary voice. His novel Silence, explores suffering, redemption and cultural differences through the story of Portuguese missionaries to Japan during an era of Christian persecution. Participants enjoyed a book discussion then went to the theater to see Martin Scorsese’s film adaptation of the novel.
Works of art posit different interpretations of what it means to be human, why we suffer and what is good. They offer narratives that sustain or reform our histories and traditions. They warrant or subvert the status quo. They imagine possible futures. Our series provides opportunities to consider these claims as they appear in art that originates beyond Catholic tradition.

The Problem of Pity from Augustine to Shakespeare
Can art have a positive impact on the world? In Confessions, St. Augustine suggests that, while pity (misericordia) can be a virtue that moves people to help others, the pity elicited by works of art—particularly tragedy—might be antithetical to virtue. We discussed the difference between virtuous pity and aesthetic pity in two writers of the English Renaissance: Spenser and Shakespeare. These writers recognize the power of pity to produce ethical relationships between individuals in terms that would have been familiar to Augustine and to Thomas Aquinas, yet they also consider how the kind of pity inspired by art might limit the virtuous it is supposed to produce.

Faith and Reason at Hogwarts: Harry Potter and Christian Intellectual Tradition
J.K. Rowling’s fantasy series Harry Potter was denounced by some as devilry, lauded as inspirational by others. The controversy, confined in large part to the U.S., underscores important distinctions in the high church intellectual tradition—a tradition of which Rowling is a self-professed part.

Experiencing the Religious Music of J.S. Bach, Then and Now
The passions, cantatas and sacred works of Johann Sebastian Bach are regularly performed on concert stages today. These performances may profoundly move us, but to what extent are we really having the same experience as Bach’s congregation when they heard these pieces as part of their worship services in St. Thomas Church, Leipzig almost 300 years ago? In this session, we reflected on the many differences between the musical, cultural and religious environments of Bach’s 18th-century Germany and those of our own time. We also sampled some recordings and videos of modern-day approaches to presenting Bach’s religious music that deal with this historical divide in interesting and sometimes provocative ways.
Through the Catholic Artistic Imagination series we can educate members of our campus community regarding our sponsoring congregation, the Spiritans, thereby building conversancy with our mission and with features of Catholic tradition. A work of historical fiction occasioned discussions of colonialism and Spiritan approaches to missionary work. An introduction to indigenous music and dance informed attendees about the presence of Spiritans in Ghana and Duquesne’s strategic commitments to Africa and the African diaspora. Original work from a local artist prompted a discussion of Catholic Social Teaching.

**When the Emperor was Divine by Julie Otsuka**
As part of Duquesne’s Big Read, faculty, staff and graduate students were invited to participate in the Catholic Artistic Imagination Series book discussion of *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka and enjoy a lively conversation, wine and cheese.

**Encountering the Other: Catholic Social Teaching and Art**
We explored aspects of the Church’s social ethics through the work of a local artist who is also a Duquesne University employee. Painting and sculptures reflect on human dignity, peace and the common good.

**Fume Fume: An encounter with a traditional dance from Ghana**
Traditional music in Ghana often combines song, rhythm and dance into an immersive, communal experience, shared by people of different ages, backgrounds and musical abilities. In this experiential and informal presentation, we experienced a recreational dance from southern Ghana named Fume Fume. In addition to learning the music, we uncovered relationships between movement, language and rhythm, saw how the musical structure allows for creativity and flexibility, and discovered a wonderful approach to performance practice that contrasts with many Western musical activities.
Duquesne University displays its appreciation for the social and communicative power of the arts through curricular offerings and campus landmarks.

**Music as Therapy**
Music Therapy is a 60-year-old profession with principles of practice founded in human experiences of music. Attendees learned about music therapy as a profession and, by listening to music together, appreciated how its principles operate. We discussed the ways Music Therapy manifests many aspects of Duquesne’s Catholic and Spiritan mission through a concern for vulnerable populations, a commitment to promoting the integral development of persons and attentiveness to intercultural communication.

**Spirit and Symbol: A Campus Tour of Religious Art**
Through a walking tour of religious art on our campus, attendees learned about the history and symbolism of key pieces of public art that beautify our campus and contribute to making us a community of “One Heart, One Spirit.”
To learn more, visit duq.edu/cfc

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