

LUTHERAN **ART** + RESOURCE

How do we commission liturgical art?

Commissioning artwork is a special experience. It is a rare opportunity to collaborate with an artist in bringing an idea to fruition. Here are a few suggestions to help you and your congregation wade into the waters of artistic patronage.

Form A Committee

There are avenues to commissioning a work of art that do not involve committees (such as having a pastor or patron lead the project). And while it may not be preferable in every case, a committee is the most typical way among Lutherans. It allows the congregation to feel that the patron's various needs are being adequately represented. It is advisable for the members of any committee that deals with worship (e.g., liturgical art) to have a sound theological foundation, and if possible, a degree of artistic experience. Keep in mind that a small committee will be more efficient. While it does slow things down, it can be good to have different opinions at meetings, and to allow enough time to work out the issues involved.

Select A Theme

It is important to have a clear objective. Decide early in the process what you want to communicate with the artwork. Examples might include sin and grace; Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever; your Word is a lamp to my feet; Word and Sacraments; Immanuel—God with us. This decision can help guide communication between the artist and committee. It is like a mission statement; it is the *why* that helps with the *how*.

Find Your Artist

There are many ways to find an artist for your project. Volunteers are a blessing, but before you rely on someone who likes to dabble in carpentry to create art for your sacred space, be sure their work is professional. By definition, professional work is done by someone who is qualified due to specific training and study. Professional liturgical

art is created by people who are doubly blessed, first by an artistic sensibility, and second, by a passion for and understanding of our faith and beliefs.

Consider publishing a "call for artists." This could be done in your bulletin or newsletter. Perhaps you can send out an email to the pastors and teachers in your district. College art departments are a good place to find talented students and professors. It is also possible that you could publish a synod-wide appeal on your synod website or circular. Maybe you can get the word out with Facebook.

By sending out a call for artists, you can set parameters like size, budget, and deadlines. You have set up a competitive situation in which you make the rules. Historically, competition drives quality, but there should be an adequate prize. The project and the budget should be worth an artist's time, especially if they realize they may not win.

When the proposals come in, the committee should carefully and prayerfully consider them, weighing each artist's interpretation of the theme, craftsmanship, experience, and overall appeal. Sometimes an artist's proposal needs clarification. It is perfectly fine to contact him or her to ask questions. When a winner is chosen, he or she should be contacted immediately.

Perhaps you already know your artist or you've been shopping around and hand-selected one. In that case, contact the artist to ask for a proposal and cost estimate based on your theme. This approach saves time and effort on your part because you do not have to organize a call for artists. The trade-off is that you are missing the variety a call for artists might provide, and other artists are missing out on an opportunity to address your theme. You also are now negotiating with an artist rather than setting the terms. Sometimes an artist inspires you and you are confident that he or she is the one for this project. If so, then go for it!

Fund Your Artist

Funding is the most common obstacle to commissioning liturgical art. Opinions will vary about whether it is worth spending money this way. Of course, it is important to realize that you are not buying "decoration." It is not wallpaper, carpet, or light fixtures from a catalog. You are participating in making something new that will be not only lovely to behold but will cultivate an authentic encounter with Christ for generations to come. It is unlike almost any other project in the church.

Sometimes an artist will want partial payment up front to cover supplies. This is a customary practice and indicates a commitment on the congregation's part, while allowing the artist to begin work without financial duress. The timing of the first payment is something to discuss. Two occasions could be the signing of the contract

or the approval of the designs. The remaining payments can be made in a single large payment or many smaller installments.

When budgets are small, it is advisable to delay and fund-raise rather than commit to inferior quality materials or workmanship. Raising funds can be related to the project itself. Perhaps the artist will agree to sell a limited edition of the preliminary design. This could be done with sculptures as well as two-dimensional work.

Agreements

A contract or a written agreement should be worked out at this point. This is an essential safeguard for both parties. It is a useful tool for working out payments, timeline, procedures, and responsibilities. Do not assume that the artist will allow the church to publish (or sell) images of the finished artwork. It remains his intellectual property and he retains the copyright unless otherwise stated. Make sure the expectations of the artist and the church are clear. A little extra work at this stage can make this a positive experience.

Design

When an artist is involved, he or she will likely see a wide variety of design options. Even if you are talking with an artist whose proposal you have chosen from a call for artists, he may have more ideas. "What if" thinking is often a strength of creative individuals, and gathering ideas is the first step in any creative project. You want multiple options to begin with. Variables to consider include the materials, location, arrangement, colors, style, and size.

It is advisable to hold several meetings with your artist to view and discuss his or her ideas. As the discussions continue, both the committee and the artist will gain a clearer vision of the final product. Be flexible at the beginning, and firm as you near the end.

Patrons remember: the artist is not there to simply do your wishes, nor can they read your minds.

Artists remember: the church is paying for this and will live with the result. They cannot see what is in your head, either.

When both parties arrive at a rough design, it is time for a scale model, sometimes called a maquette. The scale model should be a miniature version of the final product as seen by the artist and the patron. This provides a clearer image for the committee and the congregation before the work is initiated. The scale model often can be used

for publicity and fund-raising. From an artist's standpoint, a scale model helps to work out some issues such as color, technique, and lighting, and to become familiar with the piece before committing to the final work. The scale model is a practice run and a crucial step that should not be skipped.

It is important during these design considerations to see the context. Consider the design's compatibility with the existing worship environment. What style or color scheme would be appropriate in the existing space? If the artist cannot be physically present to see the space, take good measurements and send as many photos as possible. A work that seems huge in the artist's studio, might feel tiny in a sanctuary.

Also consider what it will take to install the final artwork. How heavy will it be? Where will the mounting hardware be attached? How will it be lit? While artists should help to plan for these practical measures, they should not be expected to personally install the work or provide optimal display conditions.

Artists often think about the integrity of materials. This relationship to the physical "stuff" of art honors the potential of a material over time. If you are commissioning a wooden altar, the natural grain offers tremendous potential, so covering it with house paint would be foolish. Even concrete should be honored for what it is. There is honesty involved in using a material to its best advantage. It is also wise for artists to use archival materials. They must think about the future of their work. If it is a painting or a drawing, the canvas or paper should be acid-free and the colors should be lightfast. If it is an outdoor sculpture, it should be strong enough to withstand generations of weather and potential abuse.

There are a lot of clichés about artists: they make millions for splattering paint, they are moody, disorganized, passionate, flakey, they can't do math, etc. As with anything else, generalizations will not do. The artist you work with will have particular strengths and weaknesses. However, what makes a liturgical artist truly valuable is the ability to subordinate his or her vision to Christ and the needs of the Church. In other words, a great artist is humble. The divine service is no place for 'making your mark' or 'expressing yourself.' The themes in liturgical art are of the greatest significance and therefore far outweigh the opinions of any one person. Ideally, the artist is putting all his or her masterful technique and creative energy into the service of a universal concept, to the glory of God.

Communicate

You have agreed on a design, payment, location, size, schedule, and everything else. Now the artist goes to work. A good contract will typically stipulate a point at which the final designs must be signed off on, whether it be at the maquette stage, or some point earlier. An artist needs to have full commitment and complete autonomy before beginning the final artwork. He cannot work with a committee looking over his

shoulder second-guessing every decision. The opportunity to make changes has passed; it is time for the idea to become a reality.

This may take a long time. It might be a month or a year before you see the finished product. Assign a member of the committee to make occasional contact with the artist. The artist may email progress photos or even document the project online. Do not pester or pressure, but just keep in touch.

Installation

The artwork is done and it is time to install it. This is an exciting time as you finally see the work in its final location. This is also a vital stage for safety and appropriate placement. Again, always work with qualified professionals. You might be able to find someone in your congregation with construction experience to help determine the best methods for installing art. An expert will understand how best to attach the piece to wood, brick, or drywall to support the weight.

Celebrate

With the artwork installed, you may want to mark the occasion. Give it all the pomp and circumstance that months of hard work and planning deserve. Consider having the artist give a presentation on the symbolism and process behind the artwork. A dedication service could be held and surrounding congregations be invited to participate. For the sake of your community and your church body at large, publicize the event. This will encourage other congregations to do the same. Regardless of how you celebrate, know that you have encouraged an artist in his or her God-given gifts, and have enriched worship in your sanctuary for generations to come.

FEATURED IN THIS PRESENTATION

CENTER FOR LITURGICAL ART - <https://liturgicalart.org/>

LINDA WITTE HENKE - www.lindahenke.com

JOHN HREHOV - www.johnhrehov.com

SARA NORDLING - www.saranordling.com

SCOTT PARSONS - www.damnfineart.com

EDWARD ROIJAS - <https://edrojasartist.com/>

PHIL THOMPSON - www.philthompsonart.com

WORSHIP ARTS TEAM - www.acceptingall.com