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Imago Dei, we participate
in the ongoing act
of creation.”

CATHERINE KAPIKIAN

Enlisting Others: Collaborative Commissioning

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"The enemy of art is the absence of limitations." Orson Welles

Having assumed the great filmmaker's statement refers to the creation of art, I link this supposed meaning to a long-held conviction that life's great gift is its continual yielding of new possibilities. Thus, a commission's constraints, often perceived as barriers by some, are viewed conversely by others as a supportive structure. Within constraints, unlimited possibilities exist, otherwise halted by a stalled imagination or truncated by myopic vision.

52 Hundreds of years of art history demonstrate that artist, artwork, context, and viewer (parameters of the artistic enterprise) existed in a hierarchical relationship wherein context and then viewer, or vice-versa, topped the hierarchy and thus dictated the artist's approach. Today the artist sits atop the hierarchy. Often indifferent to the viewer, they have no advanced knowledge of the context where their artwork will reside, since that is mediated by a gallery. "Limitations" imposed by attention to context or viewers (a congregation, for instance) yield triggers that fire my imagination rather than extinguish creative possibilities. Constraints are perceived as opportunities.

As a site-specific artist, I have accepted commissions for decades in diverse contexts such as small and simple to ornate and corporate-sized churches (chancel, sanctuary, narthex, and fellowship hall contexts); military, hospital, and university chapels; civic centers; hotel lobbies; convention centers and a synagogue. I begin my work by visiting the space for as much time as necessary to look carefully and consider possible solutions. Ultimately, a singular way forward suggests itself after wrestling with and dismissing other possibilities. I study principle site lines, the scale of parts, dominant and subordinate color schemes, patterns of repeating architectural details, and all the unique elements of design that comprise the space. I seek to create work that collaborates with the built environment rather than compete against it. I desire to create a work in which visual elements coalesce with the context in a dynamic equilibrium that



ABOVE Catherine Kapikian, *Tree of Life*, 15 x 18 feet.



communicates a heightened perception of the whole. Often, my work yields reinvigorated theological symbolism relevant to the commissioning community.

Next, I insist on sharing with the commissioning community how I understand their space as a context for the commission. It is imperative that I educate the community on how to read (focused seeing) their space from the start. This background provides leverage for the artist to change any inappropriate initial commission requirements or ward off counter-productive roadblocks perceived as obstacles to a successful solution. Often, visual noise (clutter) or an element that is abysmally out of scale disfigures the unity of the space's architectural integrity. A new vista of understanding opens when the group overseeing a commission fully sees their space. A conversation we have may start with the question, "Have you ever thought about this possibility...?" and may end with a committee member's response, "I never did understand that... ." In other words, as we converse, reflections are shared, and complexities unmasked, enabling trust in ongoing recommendations. This way of working is as much about the process of achieving a creative solution as it is about the final product.

Another requirement is the preservation of the oversight committee (or lead persons). It must remain constituted until the commission is installed and insist that no one else joins during the project. The latter eliminates the possibility of someone entering midway through the process who may seek to change a design element in the

emerging work without understanding why it is essential. I have found maintaining an educational mindset by the artist and oversight committee is the key to success in the planning process. I listen carefully to their needs and help them understand the various parameters. We build trust through these conversations and finalize a shared creative vision. The committee must trust the artist enough to give them full creative autonomy, or they risk a mediocre result. After our conversations, I create a final plan for the space and return to the committee with a completed model. Any final changes happen at this juncture, but such an event is rare, precisely because I have taken the time to listen to the committee and their desires for the outcome.

If a commission is large, complex, or involves several parts (liturgical season paraments for the pulpit, lectern, table, or altar), it is helpful to engage the committee in a discussion concerning the solicitation of community members in helping to do the work. Doing so allows the community to have a greater sense of connection to the outcome and removes the entire burden of responsibility from the artist. Other issues that might be worthy of discussion with the oversight committee are the following: traditional versus innovative solutions; consequences of the use of representational, abstract, or non-objective imagery; permanent versus temporary solutions; or a work that changes over time.

Three works serve as examples of these ideas and resulted from attention to the principles enumerated. The first is the 15 x 18-foot *Tree of Life* work for the Garden Chapel at

the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland. The limitation dictating my approach to the UMD commission was the worldwide religious diversity utilized in the context, necessitating a common symbol. Magnificent trees and landscapes seen through the chapel's windows supported the choice of a Tree of Life. The UMD staff, students, and friends participated in the process by needlepointing the sculpture's inserts. After the installation, the university changed the chapel's name from West Chapel to Garden Chapel.

The second example is two 10 x 19-foot "windows" for Pullen Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. The limitation that guided my approach to the Pullen Baptist Commission was the conviction of the oversight committee to reflect Pullen's inclusive diversity and outreach by visually balancing the all-male imagery in the sanctuary's stained glass windows. Congregational members participated in executing these works by painting the "windows" with approximately 180 custom colors provided by the local Home Depot.

The third example is the Advent and Pentecost Paraments at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary Chapel in Evanston, Illinois. The limitation of the Garrett Commission, which included six sets of paraments total, was the maintenance of the table's architectural integrity, plus surrounding all four sides with liturgical symbolism.

These examples highlight my way of working, which is born out of the



community for the sake of the community. My work exists in the community, not in galleries or museums, and it yields insights into contexts rich with shared meaning. When a community engages in the execution of a design, a life-giving process ensues. Such creation affirms an integral aspect of our humanity. As bearers of the Imago Dei, we participate in the ongoing act of creation. An encounter with a hands-on, often slow, meditative process, implicit in the aim of making, stands in sharp contrast to today's cryptic, if not truncated, forms of being and communicating. In this protracted encounter with non-verbal vocabulary and syntax, participants experience a language that speaks theological proclamations articulating the affective side of their faith through sight. This way of working,

a theological method, is doing theology together. The finished work becomes the work of the people from whom emerges the work and the stories of the making.

Catherine Kapikian is a distinguished artist and writer, and she is the founder and Director Emeritus of the Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary. To learn more about her and her work, visit catherinekapikian.com.



LEFT Catherine Kapikian, *Tree of Life*, in progress.
 TOP Catherine Kapikian, *Pentecost and Advent Paraments*, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary Chapel, Evanston, Illinois.
 BOTTOM Catherine Kapikian, *Windows on the Community*, in progress.