



## **Post-Its from the Edge: A Look at the Arts**

*By Shannon Hopkins, a Texan in London living missionally*

In the summer of 2003, I joined 16 other pilgrims/learners walking part of the Camino to Santiago, a route that drew as many as 300,000 in the same year.

This ancient path in Spain is the old silver trade route and is familiar to spiritual seekers as it is meant to generate spiritual conversations. The almost 800 kilometer walk was popularized in recent times by Shirley McClain and author Paulo Coelho but is overseen by the Catholic Church.

For 7 days we walked 25-30 km a day in the boiling heat. However, for many of us it was going to the Guggenheim in Bilbao that really sparked the deeper conversations. For each one of us it was something different in the museum that struck us and compounded what God had been doing in us on the pilgrimage. For me it was standing in front of Calder's mobiles. (Calder utilized his innovative genius to profoundly change the course of modern art. He began by developing a new method of sculpting -- bending and twisting wire to essentially "draw" three-dimensional figures in space. He is renowned for the invention of the mobile, whose suspended, abstract elements move and balance in changing harmony.)

Many of the visitors that day at the Guggenheim were people on the Camino (even though it was miles away from the official trail), people that were there with their Camino walking sticks, backpacks and other telltale signs of their Camino experience. I felt surrounded by the ancient and the future prompting thoughts that spiritual seekers today need both -- reminders of what has been and what can be. The conversations that night were rich as we thought back to our individual experiences in the museum and drew parallels to what it meant to be on the path toward God, with God.

Calder's work struck me because it was light and free and featured balance, something I'd thought a bit about as I walked those 30 km a day. For example, simply walking challenges generally accepted ideas of productivity -- especially as productivity relates to ministry. Yet, sometimes we just need to simplify things and flow.

Even now when visiting the Tate Modern in London, when I see Calder's work... it takes me back to that summer of 2003.

Each year 3.3 million attend church in Great Britain. While each week 769,231\* (40 million a year) walk through museums, galleries and spend time with their own artistic expressions -- be they crayons or acrylics -- in search of expressing who they really are, all the while seeking who God is and how to engage with Him. Such is the new reality for the church today-- art as deliverer of spiritual connection. But "new" isn't exactly true, is it? In fact the church has often found themselves without text but with paintings and glorious works of art. Today the church needs to capture and lead in this realm just as the church once served as the primary patron of the arts until the early 1800's. But today, communities of faith are faced with the challenge of how to use the arts to communicate and draw people into conversations about God.

Some church observers suggest we are in a new reformation. If so, isn't this a great time for a renewed relationship between the arts and the church? If so, can you join

me for just a few paragraphs as we explore a "camino" of our own -- a pathway with some new thinking? Will you consider with me art as sacred space and ... as the new spiritual playground?

I want to begin this journey with a disclaimer however. My work in the fashion industry prior to becoming a church planter and now a person living with a disciples' intentionality among the emerging culture has underscored the reality of a basic human tendency. We do so enjoy finding a good thing and making it ours, making it fit whether it's a good idea or not. So some within the church might hear this talk of reformation and re-engaging with the arts and think, "Here's the thing! We will get an artist and work with him/her and we will make it fit in our box."

But my relationships with artists says no. We have to release the artists ... be in conversation with them... let them explore, interpret, respond, create. Then we can respond to them. The need is for dialogue – back and forth, two ways. Just as Paul pointed out as he stood in a gallery of sorts, amidst the statues of gods including one depicting all that we don't know, we must remember that God is already at work in the realm of the arts. All over the place exhibitions are dealing with spirituality.

For instance Rachel Whitbread just did an exhibition on Interior Spaces.. (see my write up on [www.shannonhopkins.com/?page\\_id=6](http://www.shannonhopkins.com/?page_id=6)). And in simply reviewing the list of titles of works hanging throughout the city suggests something more is going on than mere color and canvas . . . "Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master"; "Living and Dying" at the British Museum; "That Void/ What Void"; "Ready, Steady, Go"; "Culture Bound"; "Past, Present, and Future"; "Re-Birth"; "Temporal Moments"; and "Parable."

Postmodern artists are using a reverse bell curve to talk about their process with the stages: deconstruction, focus on the self, and then return to the real. Andrew Jones, a frequent chronicler of the activities of communities of faith emerging from this same mindset has used that same illustration to talk about the stages of church planting in this context, naming the stages "deconstruction, dumpster diving, and Legoland". The first phase of deconstruction refers to when leaders begin to analyze the church of their past or present to uncover meaning. Dumpster diving is the process by which leaders reclaim more ancient traditions or spiritual rhythms that had over time been lost or laid aside. And Legoland refers to the reconstruction process.

My introduction to the parallels between the spiritual journey and the conceptual level on which artists are working began that summer of 2003 with my friendship and discussions with Linnea Spransy (<http://www.linneagabriella.com>). Linnea had finished her MA at Yale Art School and then done an exhibition in China. She had been on a journey of faith and it was showing up in her art. When she did her final project the professors were blown away and commented that it was the first really unique thing they had seen in years.

The idea of art as a new spiritual playground takes on irony when I consider my first encounter with artist Rob Pepper. July 2004 was unusually hot in London but that didn't stop either one of us from volunteering for a reclamation project, restoring an urban playground. As an artist, Rob was tapped to create a mural. As a supporter of the idea of Soul in the City, a community renovation project, I was ready to do whatever came my way. That day it was scraping paint from fences.

Rob took pity on me in the heat. He invited me to assist him in his shaded work and the conversation that followed led us to a relationship that has included the launch of an internationally produced and acclaimed art exhibit.

I learned that Rob was on a spiritual journey along with his partner of more than a decade Aimie Littler, an actress. While Rob had rejected what the church had to offer after experiencing tradition-based responses to his questions and concerns on what it means to live, Aimie was trying to find a way to engage with Jesus. Though she and Rob had together explored various faith practices including Aimie's love for dance and freedom expressed in Suffism, Aimie's pursuit, which took her into churches, concerned Rob and they began a dialogue.

Soon they realized a shared bias against Christianity that was rooted more in associations with the church rather than experience with Christ and his teachings. This realization paralleled Rob's exploration of a new approach to his art. Using what he's termed Conscious Reflex Drawing (he doesn't look at the page while capturing the image), he began to visually respond to some of the great works of art in London's cathedrals. The result was an illustrative manifestation of his and Aimie's spiritual pilgrimages.

Limited funds didn't keep us from staging what is now being referred to as the first chapter of the Doxology experience. But our abilities and creativity were somewhat hindered by the absence of resources. Still the paintings hung alongside written responses from individuals representing a variety of ages, faith traditions, and viewpoints and the multimedia installations called forth responses challenging stereotypes and associations. The opening night included a time of individual and corporate reflection after a series of experiences fashioned to engage the senses.

The exhibit is more than a series of 15 paintings (75" x 48" enamel and gold leaf on aluminum). The paintings, the responses, the experiences are reflections caused one young pastor to draw comparisons to what was said in the early days of a Billy Graham Crusade – "this is not the end of the debate but the beginning of the conversation . . . drawing more and more people in."

While the established church has certainly already engaged with this project – at least three churches have housed the paintings and we are currently looking for a number of financial partners to give grants and gifts from \$500-\$5000 – the potential goes well beyond a "come and see" exhibit hanging on church walls. Our dream is to take these depictions of Jesus to galleries and spaces where Jesus might have visited himself – where real people gather and ask thought provoking questions.

Rob still doesn't describe himself as a Christian but he readily admits to following the teachings of Christ and is often amazed at how his and Aimie's friendship community has grown to include so many believers. He sees his art as meditation, a way to be present, and a way to encounter. And he celebrates the mystery of what may be next on the journey.

Yet another artist on the path is Scott Harrison who certainly wouldn't have pictured himself launching a worldwide photographic exhibition just two years ago. But after living the high life full of "money, models and cocaine," he looked around and realized he wasn't happy and no one he knew was happy. He knew things had to

change. He encountered Jesus and ultimately asked, "What would the polar opposite of my current life be?"

Soon he was paying his own way to go and serve on a Mercy Ships hospital and out of that created an exhibition that is leading people to ask questions of how they can make a difference around the world.

My friends Bryce and Sam have been working with Mercy Ships for over 10 years, challenging the organization to utilize the arts to both engage with young people who will want to be discipled and also with donors. And Scott's story is evidence that their emphasis on art is working. His photo exhibit has generated a huge response from volunteers who are willing to both join Mercy Ships and be part of a discipleship training school. Scott's previous connections with groups like MTV and major retailers have created the kind of buzz that has generated financial resources for the organization as well.

While I have primarily focused on the visual arts in this report, I will be the first to acknowledge that what God is doing among the artistic community spans well beyond this one segment of the arts. For instance, I am engaging with performing artists on a regular basis and will unpack other areas and those relationships in a future report.

\*2004 London Statistic (40 million people attended a museum/ gallery in London while 3.3 million attended church in Great Britain or 769,231/ a week)