

Religious art: fig leaf or full frontal?

by [Peggy Fletcher Stack](#)

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) The Rev. France Davis doesn't want any nude Adam-and-Eve figures at his Calvary Baptist Church -- even if they were painted by the famed Michelangelo himself.

Davis is unequivocal in his view that there is nothing inspiring or redeeming about naked figures in religious art.

"Since we sinned, as it said in the book of Genesis, the human body has certain parts that are private," the outspoken pastor said. "We should keep them for more intimate settings like people's bedrooms." Davis is hardly alone in that view.

From the prudish impulses of the Counter-Reformation, to the Vatican's use of the fig leaf as a genital cover-up a century later, to modern Christians objecting to a nude Christ sculpted out of chocolate, there have always been those who wanted to see everything clothed. Scores of believers oppose any nakedness in art as blasphemous -- even a glimpse of the Virgin Mary's breast as she nurses her baby son -- or akin to pornography.

For other Christians, though, the line between celebrating and eschewing artistic nudity is neither easy nor clear-cut.

It depends, they say, on whether the artist intends to enlighten a biblical narrative or trigger a sexual response, whether the nudity is theologically important or just there to shock.

It's also crucial to ask about a work's intended audience, setting and spirit.

Pope Benedict XVI recently praised the use of nudity in the 16th-century masterpiece, "The Last Judgment," which dominates an entire wall behind the altar in the famed Sistine Chapel.

"The bodies painted by Michelangelo are filled with light, life and splendor," the pope said in a news story from Deutsche Presse-Agentur. "He wanted to show that our bodies contain a mystery: within them the spirit is manifest."

The debate about whether nudity in religious art inspires or denigrates could merely be a question of time and distance.

"The world has changed around us so much; it's harder today to utilize nudity in a constructive and edifying way. The innocence of nakedness has been blasted out of the way or ratcheted up by sexual content in art," Mormon artist Brian Kershisnik said. "Maybe in 200 years people will look at paintings we have trouble with and they won't have the same issues."

When the Rev. Sam Wheatley was leading a congregation in Atlanta, the group decided to engage area artists by creating a gallery in the church foyer. The works coincided with Wheatley's sermons, and then a jury of their peers decided which ones to exhibit.

The question immediately arose: What about pieces with nudity? Because it was a church space, the congregation didn't want any works that would cause problems for parents or people with more conservative sensitivities, Wheatley said. Plus, the Bible commands believers not to make a "graven image" and cautions against using the body in ungodly ways.

But the congregation also wanted to affirm the Christian teaching that "the body is something beautiful and, in Christ, God has taken on human form," said Wheatley, now pastor at Salt Lake City's New Song Presbyterian Church. "(That act) gives our lives a dignity and beauty that is blessed by God."

In the end, the Atlanta artists produced some nude figures, but none was overly graphic or stirred trouble.

Great art, like great worship, points to something beyond this world that touches us, Wheatley said. "When that something is invoked, I am drawn into awe and I want to explore its source."

Too often, Wheatley said, Christians prefer art that is more like propaganda or illustration -- pieces that tell believers what to think rather than pieces with the power to awaken thoughts and emotions within.

That's partly why so many Christians have not been part of the arts community in very vibrant ways, Wheatley said, and why nudity has so often distracted Christians from seeing the artists' love for grand themes.

Kershisnik has painted naked portrayals of Adam and Eve, without benefit of fig leaves or wandering vines. He has portrayed a disrobed Christ, though his body is not completely visible. He has shown Madonna and child, sucking on her breast.

And, in a recent work, "Resurrecting," the Mormon artist depicted unclothed believers coming out of their graves.

"Although I have a firm conviction of the resurrection of the body, I have no such conviction of the resurrection of fabric," he said. "In practical terms, if your clothes survived for a couple hundred years, they wouldn't survive your standing up."

Kershisnik said he doesn't "feel a mission in life to rub people's faces in more nudity than they are prepared to observe," but said that "if nudity seems to be an important part of the metaphor of the painting, I hope I am not too squeamish to shy away."

In 1997, Mormon-owned Brigham Young University excluded four nudes from a traveling exhibit of Auguste Rodin sculptures, saying they would distract viewers from appreciating the artist's dignity.

At figure-drawing classes at BYU, models wear full-body leotards to avoid any suggestion of impropriety. Even many who admire nudity in classics or in museums may not want it in their sanctuaries.

"I wouldn't have a problem with a nude Adam and Eve in a Mormon meetinghouse, but I can't see it happening," artist Lee Bennion said from her studio in Spring City, Utah. "Not right now anyway. Some (members) would be confused by it."

The LDS Church doesn't take a position on artistic nudity, she said, but it does oppose pornography, which is a "horrible thing" and some people have trouble telling the difference.

"If it is going to bring that kind of trouble into a worship space," Bennion said, "it's probably not worth it."