



Episcopal Church & Visual Arts, celebrating 23 years of service to The Episcopal Church

## ECVA's Step-by-Step Guide to Commissioning Art

Why commission art?  
What's wrong with ordering from a catalogue?  
Concerned about commissioning art?

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- Episcopal Church & Visual Arts (ECVA) hopes to encourage original commissions of visual and liturgical art in the Episcopal Church.
- Visit ECVA's 20+ years of online arts exhibitions at [ecva.org](http://ecva.org)
- Find a professional artist in the Professional Artist Directory at The Artist Registry, online at [theartistsregistry.wildapricot.org](http://theartistsregistry.wildapricot.org)



## WHY COMMISSION ART?

An art commission is an exciting prospect: church and artist coming together to create art that embodies the witness and aspiration of a particular congregation.

Imagine the results: etched glass panels that depict the life of the patron saint of a parish; a set of altar frontals and vestments incorporating the quilting traditions of the parish's African American forebears; a wooden pulpit and altar carved with decorative elements handed down from the parish's Scandinavian founders ; a processional cross with a Navajo Christ and vestments embroidered with plants sacred to the Navajo people; and, a sculpture of the Virgin of Guadalupe for a congregation worshipping in Spanish.

Each of these would enrich the liturgical and spiritual life of a congregation and signal to visitors the mission and priorities of that particular parish. In addition, the commissioning process can be an energizing and exciting experience for a church, bringing a parish together to consider their faith, their history, and their hopes for the future. Commissioning a work of custom art provides the parish with the opportunity to look at their sanctuary with fresh eyes, considering how it suits their worship and meets their other needs.

## CONCERNS ABOUT COMMISSIONING ART

A commission can also be a daunting endeavor. Clergy, staff, and parishioners may ask:

- How do we select an artist?
- How much is this going to cost?
- Should we be spending money that should go to serve the needs of others?
- What if we don't like the results?
- Will this split the congregation in ways that happened with other churches we know?

These are valid concerns. The uncertainty created by these questions often leads a church to fall back on the "safety" of catalogue resources. These ECVA guidelines address these concerns.



## **ECVA's STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO THE COMMISSIONING PROCESS**

### **I. ADVANCE PREPARATION**

#### **- FORMING THE STANDING LITURGICAL ARTS COMMITTEE**

Each parish needs a Liturgical Arts Committee to advise the rector and the vestry in all matters related to the visual arts. These include, but are not limited to:

- how to handle gifts and donations;
- how to handle a gift that is not appropriate for your sanctuary;
- how to approach restoration or changes to the sanctuary;
- how to commission liturgical art and furnishings; and,
- ways to communicate with the congregations.

The committee should be composed of representatives from the congregation, the vestry, the staff, and the clergy. At least two members should have a background and working experience in the visual arts, perhaps as photographer, graphic designer, or art teacher.

#### **- CREATING A LITURGICAL ARTS PROJECT COMMITTEE**

*- A SUBSET OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE  
TO GUIDE EACH INDIVIDUAL COMMISSION*

The Liturgical Arts Project Committee will handle all aspects of an individual commission, reporting back to the Standing Committee. The Liturgical Arts Project Committee may include members of the standing committee.

The composition of the committee may vary depending on the project but should include a representative from church leadership (clergy, staff, vestry) and representatives from the parish who have some experience with either liturgical arts or art and design in general. For large-scale projects, the committee might also include an architect or civil engineer.

The rector should decide who will have approval authority. Final approval might reside with the rector, or result from a vote by either the project committee or the standing committee.

#### **- COMMUNICATION BETWEEN ARTS COMMITTEE/S & THE CONGREGATION**

It is essential in any commission for there to be communication between the Arts Advisory Committee and the congregation! This does not mean that parishioners can micro-manage the process. But the parish should be consulted at each major step: laying out a master plan, choosing a liturgical consultant (if one is used), selecting the architect, artist, or artisan.

An important note: Unsuccessful commissions invariably involve miscommunication or lack of communication, with parishioners feeling left out of the conversation and fearful that their opinions are not valued.



## II. DETERMINING YOUR NEEDS

Art and fine crafts commissions can take many forms: wall murals, icons, stations of the cross, paintings, sculpture, stained glass, vestments, paraments, and liturgical furnishings such as altars or ambos. There are many incentives to commission a work of art. These may include:

- replacing aging church features;
- handling a donor-directed bequest;
- updating a sanctuary;
- undertaking a major renovation projects; and,
- designing and building an entirely new space.

## III. INVITING THE SERVICES OF A LITURGICAL CONSULTANT

A liturgical consultant is trained in the liturgies of the church and the ways that sacred space enables the integrity of worship. A liturgical consultant offers a trained and impartial “eye” who can evaluate your sanctuary in light of the worship practices and particular needs of your congregation. This can be very helpful at the beginning of a commissioning process.

### - FACILITATING ONGOING COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR PARISH

Think of your Liturgical Arts Project as a teaching tool, an opportunity to share information about what you are doing, why you are doing it, and who is doing it with you. It might be a wonderful time to create a parish inventory of art, recording the heritage of your parish in a album with photos and information about the art that is already in your parish, and to which you are adding. For example, if you are adding new icons to your sacred space, you could share some of the history of icons, share why you selected the particular subject for you new icons, and sponsor a parish icon-writing workshop.

### - HANDLING A COMMISSION THAT IS A DONOR GIFT

When the Liturgical Arts Project is made possible through the gift of a Donor, you may wish to inquire if the donor would like to be involved in the planning and progress of the Liturgical Arts Project. If the answer from the donor is yes, be certain to keep this in mind as you interview artist professionals. But the committee, not the donor, should have final say on all aspects of the project. Also, if you will have a ceremonial dedication, you may wish to consider if it would be appropriate to recognize the donor in some way.

### - HANDLING A WORK THAT IS BEING RETIRED AND/OR REPLACED

Think of ways to honor a work that is being retired or replaced. For instance, when retiring vestments, you might share the history of the retiring vestments, some information about the artist, host an exhibition of historic vestments and embroidery, or plan a tour of the vestment collection at your cathedral. An altarpiece that is being replaced might be exhibited in a different place in the building or begin a new life with a different congregation.



## **IV. MANAGING THE COMMISSION**

### **- DESCRIBING AND DEFINING THE LITURGICAL ARTS PROJECT**

In simple terms and clear language, write out a description of the project. Include every detail that comes to mind. For example, if the project is for a donor-directed painting to hang in the narthex, the Liturgical Arts Project description might read: "Commission a painting to hang on the west wall of the narthex, to be framed to match molding of other paintings already in place, size to be about 36x48", artist to propose subject and to receive client approval before the start of work, style to be traditional in colors similar to the paintings on the north wall. Hanging and dedication to be completed by Advent 2023."

### **- CREATING A BUDGET**

Create a budget for the project. Is this a fixed-price project, from funds already in the treasury and earmarked? Is this a donor gift? [See above - When the Art Commission is a Donor Gift] Will fundraising be needed? Include in your budget the commission to be paid to the artist, shipping and installation costs, costs for civil engineers, plumbers or electrical contractors, any travel funds you will make available to the artist, and travel/accommodations costs if you choose to bring the artist to the church for the dedication. Reserve or hold back 10-15% as a contingency for cost overruns. Inform the Liturgical Arts Project committee of the budget and its conditions, including who receives invoices, who approves invoices, and who distributes project funds.

### **- OUTLINING PROJECT TIMELINES**

The timeline for your project will depend on the needs of your parish, the work schedule of the professional artist, and the availability of the materials and processes needed to complete your commission. If you have no real project completion date, make a note in your project description that your timeline is flexible. If you have a specific due date, note that as well and communicate that clearly to the professional artists you are interviewing.

### **- IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL ARTISTS AND REQUESTING PROPOSALS**

Whenever possible, plan to select 3-5 professional artists to interview for your Liturgical Arts Project. Three ways to identify the right artist for your Liturgical Arts Project are: soliciting recommendations from colleagues; scheduling visits to churches that have completed similar projects; and consulting the ECVA Professional Artist Directory, which is online at The Artists Registry, <https://theartistsregistry.wildapricot.org>.

Professional artists will be comfortable with your request for a proposal. Provide the artist with the project description and timeline; it is your choice about when and how you provide budget information. After describing your Liturgical Arts Project, you should request that the artist to show you examples of similar work and to send references from similar projects.



## **- WRITING A CONTRACT**

The artist that you hire will be considered a contractor for legal and accounting purposes. It is in the best interests of both parish and artist to have a clearly written contract describing what work will be done, for what price, and in what time frame.

It is worthwhile to have the contract reviewed by someone experienced in hiring contractors. Think through every aspect of your project, from start to finish, as you review the contract. If a lift will be rented to install a 14' tall altar cross, who is responsible for that cost? If a pair of icons will be framed, who is responsible for that cost? If the old baptismal font is to be removed and a new font installed in its place, who is responsible for labor and materials for the installation?

It is customary to include a payment schedule and timeline in the contract itself, and to include room for church-approved drawings of the finished work when they become available.

Liturgical Arts Projects often have at least 2 phases - design and fabrication. Larger projects may also have a 3rd phase - installation. After the contract has been signed by both parties, it is customary to pay the professional artist a deposit to begin work, with progress payments made as benchmarks are reached. For a series of stations of the cross, for example, the payment schedule might be: 5% deposit, 15% when drawings are approved, a 30% materials payment, a 20% payment when the work is ready to be shipped, and a final 20% when the church receives the works and approves receipt.

It may be helpful to include a "kick-out" clause that will allow either parish or artist to withdraw from the project at certain stages of the project. Perhaps the artist becomes ill; or the parish may have to divert funds after a major flood. In this case the artist is paid for work to date and all obligations are ended by mutual agreement.

Communicate with your bookkeeping and accountancy departments when hiring a professional artist, to insure that the church receives all necessary documentation from the artist and that all required reporting is done correctly.

## **- COMMISSION OVERSIGHT**

When the artist is located at a distance from the church, site visits and video conferencing can be extremely beneficial for both artist and church. A site visit can be invaluable, but the Project Planning Committee should plan ahead, ensuring that a knowledgeable committee or staff member is available to meet the artist, provide a tour of the your sacred space, answer the artist's questions, and ask any questions the church might have. Consider inviting the artist in-person to a Liturgical Arts Project Committee meeting. As the artist reaches the benchmarks in the project's



timeline, consider using video conferencing to make informative presentations to the committee and to the congregation.

#### **- FINAL INSPECTION AND SIGN OFF**

When the day arrives that you receive your commissioned art, give yourself time to examine the work(s) you have received. The Liturgical Arts Project Committee will view the work(s), and the person with approval authority will decide to grant final approval, or will opt to bring questions to the artist. For instance, if the project was for a set of 6 paraments and only 4 have been delivered due to a delay in a materials shipment, then final approval might be withheld until the remaining works have been received. And if in the received paraments there are several stitches that appear to be loose and could easily fray, the committee may wish to request that the artist rework those areas.

#### **V. DEDICATION AND CELEBRATION**

New art in a sacred space is a wonderful reason to celebrate. New liturgical furnishings such as altars, altarpieces, baptismal fonts, or vestments may be dedicated during a liturgy, possibly with the artist present as well as donors, if appropriate.

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#### **RESOURCES**

Episcopal Church & Visual Arts offers free resources for churches and individuals interested in commissioning works of art for their churches. To learn more, visit the ECVA website and The Artists Registry Professional Artists Directory online at these websites:

<http://www.ecva.org>

<https://theartistsregistry.wildapricot.org>

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