

VISUAL ART IN CHRISTO-CENTRIC RELIGIOUS WORSHIP AS A CATALYST FOR EPIGNOSIS: A SYSTEMATIC DESKTOP STUDY

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Abstract

This article examines the role of visual art in Christ-centred Christian worship as a theological medium that supports *Epignosis*. *Epignosis* is a New Testament concept that describes a deep, relational knowledge of God. Using a systematic desktop research approach, the study synthesises literature from biblical theology, theological aesthetics, art history, and liturgical studies. The analysis argues that visual art in Christian worship functions not only as decoration or teaching material but as a formative medium that shapes spiritual perception and communal worship. Drawing on examples from Eastern Orthodox iconography, Roman Catholic liturgical art, and selected Protestant traditions, the study identifies several ways visual art supports spiritual formation, contemplation, narrative engagement, and embodied participation. The article proposes a conceptual model linking these artistic functions to different dimensions of *Epignosis*. It also considers theological debates about images in Christian worship and acknowledges the methodological limits of a literature-based study. The findings suggest that visual art can deepen relational knowledge of God when integrated thoughtfully into worship practices.

Keywords: *Epignosis*; visual theology; liturgical theology; iconography; theological aesthetics; worship studies; spiritual formation Formatting & consistency Christian art; *epignosis*; visual theology; liturgical theology; iconography; theological aesthetics; worship studies; spiritual formation

Introduction

Visual art has shaped Christian worship since the earliest centuries of the church. Images in catacombs, Byzantine icons, medieval frescoes, and stained-glass windows have all contributed to how Christians experience worship and understand theology. These visual forms have not only decorated worship spaces but also communicated biblical narratives and theological ideas (Camille 1996, 12). In many historical contexts, particularly when literacy rates were low, visual imagery functioned as a “Visual Scripture,” enabling believers to encounter the story of salvation through form, colour, and symbol. Scenes of Christ’s life, the passion, and the resurrection presented theological claims in a manner accessible to the whole worshipping community. Thus, visual art served not merely as ornamentation but as a pedagogical and formative element within the liturgical environment.

The presence of images in sacred space also shaped the atmosphere of worship itself. Architectural settings, mosaics, and icons created a visual framework that oriented the believer toward the transcendent. In Byzantine traditions, for instance, icons were understood as “windows” into divine reality, inviting the viewer into contemplation rather than simply presenting an object for observation. Medieval stained-glass windows similarly transformed light into symbolic expression, filling churches with coloured narratives that reinforced themes

proclaimed in scripture and preaching. Through these visual elements, worshippers were not only informed about theological truths but were also drawn into an experiential encounter with them.

Scholars often discuss religious art in terms of its educational or aesthetic value. However, less attention has been given to its role in forming *Epignosis*, a New Testament term describing a deep, transformative knowledge of God. Unlike purely intellectual knowledge, *Epignosis* refers to relational understanding that changes how believers live and perceive reality (Thayer 1996, 237). In biblical usage, the concept implies a fuller or more complete knowledge that emerges through encounter, participation, and spiritual transformation. It is therefore not limited to cognitive comprehension but involves the whole person: mind, imagination, emotion, and spiritual perception.

Within the context of Christian worship, visual art can significantly contribute to the formation of this deeper knowledge. Images can shape the spiritual imagination, enabling believers to perceive theological truths not only through words but also through visual contemplation. Artistic representations of Christ, the saints, or key biblical events can prompt reflection on themes such as incarnation, sacrifice, redemption, and hope. By engaging the senses and imagination, these images help bridge the gap between doctrinal concepts and lived spiritual experience. In this way, visual art can become a means through which worshippers move from abstract belief toward a more integrated awareness of God's presence and action.

Moreover, visual imagery often serves as a form of mediated participation in the church's worship life. The believer who contemplates an icon of Christ Pantocrator¹ or a depiction of the crucifixion is not simply viewing an illustration but entering a moment of theological reflection. The image draws attention to particular aspects of the Christian narrative and invites the viewer to respond with prayer, reverence, or repentance. This dynamic interaction between viewer and image can cultivate a posture of attentiveness and contemplation that supports the development of *Epignosis*. In such moments, knowledge is not merely transmitted but encountered.

This article, therefore, explores how visual art in Christian worship can contribute to this form of knowledge. Using a systematic desktop study of interdisciplinary scholarship, including theology, art history, and liturgical studies, the research examines how visual imagery mediates theological meaning and invites participation in worship. Particular attention is given to the ways artistic forms guide perception, structure devotional focus, and reinforce the narrative of salvation central to Christian faith.

The central argument is that visual art in liturgical contexts can guide attention, shape spiritual imagination, and encourage contemplative engagement with the mystery of God revealed in Christ. When integrated thoughtfully within worship spaces, visual imagery becomes more than decoration or instruction; it becomes a formative element in the believer's spiritual journey. Through repeated exposure and reflective engagement, such art can help cultivate the deeper relational knowledge described by the New Testament concept of *Epignosis*. In this sense, visual art participates in the broader liturgical process through which believers come to know God not only through doctrine but also through embodied, imaginative, and contemplative experience.

Research Aims

This study aims to investigate the theological and formative significance of visual art within Christ-centred Christian worship, particularly in relation to the development of *Epignosis*,

¹ Christ Pantocrator, or "Ruler of All," is a 6th-century Byzantine iconographic representation of Jesus Christ as the Almighty judge and saviour. The most famous, earliest surviving example is housed at Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai. It features Christ holding a Gospel and blessing, with asymmetrical features symbolising his dual nature as fully human and fully divine.

understood as a deep, relational knowledge of God. While visual art has often been treated as decorative or didactic, this research seeks to reposition it as a dynamic theological medium that actively shapes spiritual perception, participation, and transformation within the worshipping community. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship, the study develops a framework for understanding how visual practices contribute to the believer's encounter with divine reality. Specifically, the study pursues three interrelated aims:

To examine the historical and theological role of visual art in Christian worship

This objective explores how visual imagery has functioned across different periods and traditions of the church, from early Christian catacombs to Byzantine iconography and medieval liturgical environments. It analyses theological interpretations of images, including their pedagogical and sacramental dimensions, and considers debates surrounding their legitimacy and use in worship. Particular attention is given to the understanding of images as mediators of divine presence and instruments of instruction within largely non-literate communities (Camille 1996, 12). The study also engages patristic and theological perspectives that defend the use of images as a means of communicating theological truth and fostering devotion (John of Damascus 2003, 23).

To analyse how visual art functions as a catalyst for Epignosis

This aim focuses on the capacity of visual art to facilitate a deeper, transformative knowledge of God that goes beyond intellectual comprehension. Drawing on New Testament usage, *Epignosis* is understood as a participatory and relational form of knowing that involves the whole person (Thayer 1996, 237). The study investigates how visual elements, such as icons, stained glass, and liturgical symbolism, engage worshippers' imagination, emotions, and spiritual perception. It argues that through contemplation and repeated exposure, visual art can cultivate attentiveness, deepen theological reflection, and mediate encounters with the divine, thereby contributing to spiritual formation and relational knowledge.

To propose a conceptual model linking artistic practices to dimensions of relational knowledge of God

Building on the interdisciplinary analysis, this objective develops a conceptual framework that correlates specific functions of visual art—such as narrative representation, contemplative focus, symbolic mediation, and embodied participation—with corresponding dimensions of *Epignosis*. The model seeks to demonstrate how artistic practices within worship contexts guide perception, structure devotional engagement, and reinforce the narrative of salvation. It also considers how these processes operate communally within liturgical settings, contributing to a shared formation of faith and understanding. This integrative approach highlights the role of visual theology as a bridge between doctrinal knowledge and lived spiritual experience. Together, these aims position visual art not merely as an accessory to worship but as an essential component of the church's theological and formative life, capable of nurturing a deeper, more holistic knowledge of God.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative desktop research design based on analysis of existing literature and visual sources. The approach follows interpretive and constructivist assumptions, which view knowledge as emerging through engagement with texts, images, and historical traditions (Creswell 2013, 44). The study is interdisciplinary and integrates insights from several academic fields:

- Biblical studies and theology, which provide the theological framework for *Epignosis*.

- Art, Art history and visual studies, which analyse symbolism, composition, and meaning in visual works.
- Liturgical studies, which examine how art functions within worship practices.
- Philosophy of art and aesthetics, which explain how artworks communicate meaning and shape perception (Gadamer 1989, 102).

Data Sources

Sources include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books
- Theological writings from historical and contemporary scholars
- Translated primary sources from Christian thinkers
- Scholarly analyses of religious artworks

Databases searched included ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar.

Data Analysis

Analysis occurred in three stages:

1. Thematic analysis of literature related to Epignosis and religious art.
2. Iconographic analysis of selected artworks discussed in the literature.
3. Integrative synthesis, combining theological insights with art-historical interpretations.

This process enabled the development of a conceptual model describing how visual art may contribute to spiritual formation.

Limitations

Because the research relies entirely on secondary sources, it does not examine worshippers' direct experiences. Future empirical research could explore how individuals encounter visual art in worship settings.

Visual Art in Christ-Centric Worship

Historical Background

Visual imagery has played a significant role in Christian worship across different historical periods and theological traditions. While its form and function have varied, visual expression has consistently served as a means of communicating theological ideas, shaping devotion, and engaging the senses in worship.

In the earliest centuries of Christianity, visual imagery developed within the context of a minority community, often practising its faith discreetly. Archaeological evidence from the Roman catacombs demonstrates that early Christians used symbolic imagery rather than elaborate narrative scenes. Common motifs included the fish (Ichthys), the anchor, the vine, and the Good Shepherd. These symbols conveyed theological meaning while remaining accessible to believers familiar with their coded significance. The fish symbol, for example, functioned as an acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour," while the Good Shepherd evoked Christ's pastoral care and promise of salvation. These images were not merely decorative; they served catechetical and devotional purposes, reinforcing Christian hope in resurrection and eternal life (Camille, 1996, 15). Visual art, therefore, emerged as a subtle yet powerful medium through which early Christians expressed communal identity and doctrinal belief.

As Christianity became legally recognised within the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the use of visual imagery expanded significantly. Churches began to incorporate mosaics, frescoes, and monumental decoration that illustrated biblical narratives and

theological themes. This development laid the foundation for later traditions of sacred art, particularly in the Eastern Christian world.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the icon became the most distinctive form of visual theology. Icons are not regarded simply as artistic depictions but as manifestations of theological truth expressed through carefully regulated forms, colours, and symbolism. Orthodox theology understands icons as participating in the mystery of the Incarnation: because God became visible in the person of Jesus Christ, it is considered legitimate to depict Christ and the saints visually. According to theologians such as Vladimir Lossky, the icon functions as a “window into heaven,” directing the viewer toward divine reality rather than encouraging attention to the material image itself (Lossky 1957, 184). The iconographic tradition developed strict conventions intended to preserve theological integrity. Stylised forms, inverse perspective, and symbolic colour palettes were used to communicate spiritual rather than naturalistic reality.

Debates about the legitimacy of images reached a critical point during the Byzantine iconoclastic controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries. Opponents of icons argued that religious images violated the biblical prohibition against graven images and risked idolatry. Supporters, however, defended icons on Christological grounds, maintaining that the Incarnation made visual representation possible. The dispute was formally addressed at the Second Council of Nicaea, which affirmed that icons could be venerated but not worshipped. The council distinguished between *latreia* (adoration due only to God) and *proskynesis* (veneration offered to icons and saints). This theological clarification allowed icons to remain central within Eastern Orthodox worship and spirituality.

In the Western church, particularly within the Roman Catholic tradition, visual art became closely integrated with liturgical architecture. Medieval cathedrals were designed as immersive environments in which theology was communicated through multiple artistic media. Sculptural programs on cathedral facades depicted biblical scenes, saints, and eschatological themes, while interior frescoes and mosaics narrated key moments from salvation history. Stained glass windows were especially significant because they transformed natural light into coloured illumination that symbolised divine presence. In largely illiterate societies, such visual narratives functioned as a form of “biblical storytelling,” enabling worshippers to encounter the scriptural narrative visually during the liturgy (Chupungco 1992, 67).

The integration of art and worship reached new levels during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, when artists were commissioned to create works that deepened devotional experience. Painters such as Michelangelo and Caravaggio produced works that emphasised dramatic narrative, emotional intensity, and theological symbolism. In the Baroque period, in particular, the Catholic Church intentionally used visual art to evoke awe, devotion, and contemplation, especially in response to the challenges posed by the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant Reformation introduced a more cautious approach to visual imagery in worship. Reformers such as John Calvin expressed concern that religious images could distract believers from the centrality of Scripture and encourage idolatrous practices (Calvin 1960, 99). Calvin argued that God had chosen to reveal himself primarily through the Word rather than through visual representation. Consequently, many Reformed churches removed statues, paintings, and elaborate decorations from their worship spaces. This iconoclastic impulse reflected a broader theological emphasis on preaching, congregational singing, and the reading of Scripture as the primary means of nurturing faith.

However, the rejection of certain forms of imagery did not result in the complete absence of visual elements in Protestant worship. Instead, visual expression was reshaped in ways that aligned with Protestant theological priorities. Church architecture, for example, often centred the pulpit to emphasise the importance of preaching. Printed illustrations in Bibles and devotional literature provided visual aids for understanding biblical narratives. Symbolic

elements such as the cross, simple stained-glass designs, and liturgical banners continued to serve as visual reminders of the Christian faith. As Carlos Eire notes, even traditions that rejected elaborate religious images still relied on visual forms to structure worship and communicate meaning (Eire 1986, 143).

Across these diverse traditions, visual imagery has therefore remained an important dimension of Christian worship. Whether through early symbolic art, Orthodox iconography, Catholic liturgical architecture, or the more restrained visual culture of Protestantism, images have helped believers engage with theological truths, participate in communal memory, and experience the sacred through the senses. The continuing presence of visual media in contemporary churches, through digital projection, architectural design, and modern sacred art, suggests that the relationship between vision and worship remains a dynamic and evolving aspect of Christian practice.

Functions of Visual Art in Worship

Scholars commonly describe several interrelated roles that visual art plays within Christian worship. These functions help explain why images, architecture, and symbolic forms have historically been integrated into liturgy rather than treated as mere decoration.

1. Didactic Function (Teaching the Faith)

One of the earliest recognised purposes of sacred art is its *didactic* or teaching function. Throughout much of Christian history, many believers were unable to read Scripture or theological texts. Visual imagery, therefore, served as a powerful educational tool. Scenes depicting biblical narratives, such as the Nativity, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and lives of the saints, communicated the core stories and doctrines of the faith in a way that could be immediately understood.

A famous articulation of this idea comes from St. Gregory the Great, who argued that images function as the “books of the unlearned.” Through paintings, mosaics, stained glass, and sculptures, worshippers could encounter the biblical narrative visually. In this sense, sacred art acted as a form of visual catechesis, reinforcing sermons, scripture readings, and doctrinal instruction.

2. Anamnetic Function (Remembering and Re-presenting Salvation)

Sacred images also serve an anamnetic function. The concept of *anamnesis* comes from Christian liturgical theology and refers to the act of remembering in a way that makes past saving events spiritually present to the worshipping community.

Visual representations of biblical events, such as the Last Supper, the Passion of Christ, or Pentecost, do more than illustrate historical moments. They allow worshippers to imaginatively enter the story of salvation. By contemplating these scenes, believers are reminded that the redemptive acts of God in Christ are not merely distant historical events but realities that shape the life of the church today.

In this sense, sacred art participates in the church’s broader practice of liturgical remembrance alongside scripture, preaching, and the sacraments.

3. Doxological Function (Directing Praise to God)

Another significant role of sacred art is its doxological function, its capacity to direct attention toward the praise and glory of God. Beauty has long been understood in Christian theology as reflecting the divine nature. When worshippers encounter artistic expressions of beauty, whether in iconography, stained glass, or architectural design, they may experience awe, reverence, and transcendence.

The visual richness of many churches is therefore intended to cultivate a posture of worship. Rather than drawing attention to itself alone, sacred art ideally points beyond itself to the divine reality it signifies. The beauty of the artwork becomes a means through which the worshipping community expresses and experiences adoration toward God.

4. Contemplative Function (Encouraging Prayer and Meditation)

Sacred art also has a contemplative dimension. Many forms of Christian art are designed not primarily for instruction but for sustained reflection. Icons, devotional paintings, and symbolic imagery invite worshippers to slow their attention and enter into prayerful meditation. In traditions that emphasise contemplative spirituality, visual images can function almost as “windows into prayer.” By focusing on an image of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or a biblical event, believers may find their imagination and attention drawn toward deeper reflection on divine mysteries. The stillness and symbolic depth of such art can foster an environment conducive to silence, meditation, and interior prayer.

Proposed Conceptual Model: Visual Art and the Formation of *Epignosis*

This conceptual model proposes that visual art in Christian worship contributes to the formation of *Epignosis*, a deep, relational knowledge of God, through three interrelated dimensions: theological communication, spiritual perception, and participatory engagement. These dimensions are illustrated through key examples of Christian visual art (Figures 1–4), demonstrating how artistic forms function within liturgical contexts.

Figure 1: Christ Pantocrator Icon



Figure 1. Representation of Christ Pantocrator (Freeman, 2021), a central image in Eastern Christian theology symbolising Christ as the ruler and sustainer of all, is often used as a focal point for contemplation and theological reflection.

Conceptual Model: Visual Art and Epignosis Formation: Diagram

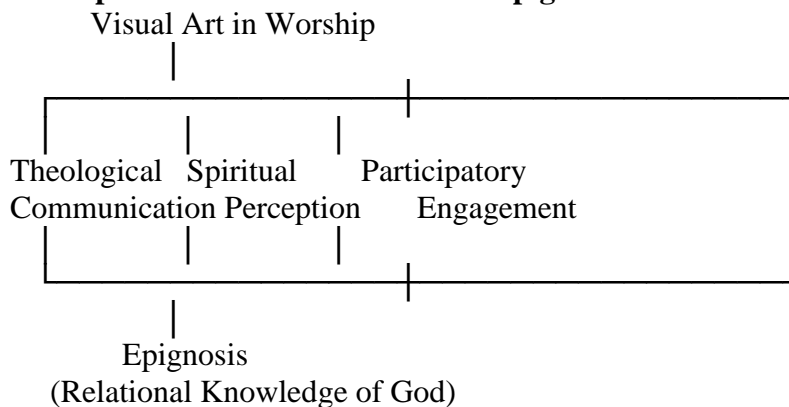


Figure 2: The “Stefaneschi Triptych” by Giotto di Bondone



Figure 3: The Annunciation of the Shepherds²



Figure 4: Sistine Chapel frescoes: the Revelation

² Roundel showing the Annunciation of the Shepherds, with details in silver stain, about 1340–45, England. Museum no. 2270-1900. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Description of the Model

1. Theological Communication

Visual art serves as a medium for communicating central doctrines of the Christian faith, including the incarnation, crucifixion, and eschatological hope. Through symbolic and narrative representation, theological truths are rendered visible and accessible within the worshipping community.

For instance, the *Christ Pantocrator* icon (Figure 1, Freeman, 2021) presents Christ as sovereign judge and ruler, visually articulating doctrines of divine authority and incarnation. Similarly, Stefaneschi Triptych by Giotto di Bondone (Figure 2, Giotto di Bondone 2024) communicates the glory of Christ alongside the intercessory role of the saints, integrating theological hierarchy and ecclesial identity. In both cases, visual form reinforces scriptural teaching, enabling worshippers to grasp complex doctrines through contemplative observation.

2. Spiritual Perception

Beyond conveying doctrinal content, visual art shapes the believer's perception of divine reality. It orders attention, frames spiritual awareness, and invites contemplation of transcendent truths. This dimension reflects the theological insight that knowing God involves a transformation of perception, not merely intellectual comprehension (Lossky 1957, 34).

The use of light and narrative in *The Annunciation of the Shepherds* (Figure 3, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2021), as seen in stained-glass traditions, exemplifies how visual media can evoke divine revelation breaking into ordinary experience. Likewise, the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel (Figure 4, Jatta, B. 2021), particularly those depicting apocalyptic and revelatory themes, immerse the viewer in a visual theology of divine judgment and redemption. These works do not simply depict theological ideas; they cultivate a way of seeing that orients the worshipper toward the mystery of God.

3. Participatory Engagement

Visual art also invites active, embodied participation. The viewer is drawn into a relational encounter through acts of contemplation, prayer, and affective response. In this sense, the encounter with sacred imagery becomes a mode of engagement rather than passive observation. The frontal gaze and solemn presence of Christ in the Pantocrator icon (Figure 1) establish a reciprocal relationship between image and viewer, prompting reverence and introspection. Similarly, the narrative richness of the Stefaneschi Triptych (Figure 2) encourages meditative reflection on salvation history, while the immersive scale of the Sistine Chapel frescoes (Figure 4) envelops the worshipper in a communal and cosmic vision of divine reality. Through such

engagement, visual art facilitates the experiential dimension of *Epignosis*, where knowledge emerges through encounter and transformation.

Integrative Function

These three dimensions—communication, perception, and participation—are dynamically interconnected. Together, they form a holistic process through which visual art mediates theological meaning and fosters deeper relational knowledge of God. The figures illustrate that visual art operates simultaneously on cognitive, perceptual, and experiential levels, shaping both individual devotion and communal worship.

Epignosis: Transformative Knowledge of God

***Epignosis* in the New Testament**

The Greek term *Epignosis* (ἐπίγνωσις) builds on the root *gnōsis* (knowledge) but intensifies its meaning. While *gnōsis* can refer to general understanding or awareness, *Epignosis* implies *full, mature, and experiential knowledge*. It conveys recognition that arises from encounter, commitment, and transformation rather than detached observation.

In the New Testament, the concept is especially prominent in the writings of Paul the Apostle. Paul frequently links knowledge of God with spiritual maturity and ethical change. Knowledge is therefore not merely intellectual comprehension but a dynamic relationship with God that reshapes a believer's identity and behaviour.

For example, in the Epistle to the Colossians (1:9–10), Paul prays that believers may be “filled with the knowledge of God's will.” This knowledge is immediately connected to practical consequences: walking “worthy of the Lord,” bearing fruit in good works, and growing spiritually. The text suggests that true knowledge produces transformation, aligning a person's life with God's purposes.

A similar emphasis appears in passages such as the Epistle to the Ephesians (1:17) and the Second Epistle of Peter (1:2–3), where *Epignosis* is associated with wisdom, spiritual revelation, and participation in divine life. In these contexts, knowledge becomes the means through which believers grow into deeper communion with God.

Connection with the Hebrew Concept of *Yada*

The Greek idea of *Epignosis* parallels the Hebrew verb *yada* (יָדָע), which is frequently used in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe relational and experiential knowing. In biblical Hebrew, *yada* can denote intimate relational knowledge, including covenantal loyalty and even marital intimacy. For instance, in the Book of Genesis (4:1), the term describes the intimate relationship between Adam and Eve.

When applied to God, *yada* expresses knowing through relationship and covenant, rather than merely possessing information about God. This relational dimension strongly influenced early Christian theology and helps explain why New Testament authors describe knowledge of God as transformative. To know God is to participate in a relationship that shapes the believer's life, ethics, and identity.

Epignosis and Christian Formation

The concept of *Epignosis* has significant implications for Christian formation, the process through which believers grow spiritually and become more Christ-like. Knowledge of God, in this sense, involves a lifelong journey of learning, experiencing, and responding to divine revelation.

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann emphasises that knowing God cannot be reduced to intellectual theology. Instead, it involves participation in God's life and mission. According to

Moltmann, Christian knowledge arises through engagement with God's redemptive work in the world, particularly through community, worship, and service.

Christian tradition, therefore, emphasises spiritual practices that cultivate experiential knowledge of God. These include:

- Prayer, which fosters direct communion with God
- Scripture reading, through which believers encounter divine revelation
- Communal worship, where faith is shared and reinforced within the church
- Sacramental life, particularly practices such as the Eucharist and Baptism, which symbolically and spiritually unite believers with Christ

Through these practices, knowledge becomes embodied and relational rather than purely theoretical.

Transformational Knowledge

Ultimately, Epignosis describes knowledge that transforms the whole person—mind, character, and action. The New Testament portrays spiritual maturity not as the accumulation of religious information but as deepening participation in God's life. This perspective integrates theology, ethics, and spiritual practice, suggesting that a genuine understanding of God naturally produces love, obedience, and service.

Thus, in Christian thought, knowledge of God is not merely about *knowing truths* but about being drawn into a relationship that continually reshapes the believer's life and identity.

Visual Art as a Catalyst for Epignosis

Mediation and Participation

Within many Christian traditions, visual art is not treated merely as decoration or illustration but as a mediating practice that facilitates encounter. Theologically, mediation refers to the way created forms—words, gestures, bread, wine, or images—serve as means through which believers perceive and participate in divine reality. In this framework, images operate sacramentally: they do not replace God but direct the viewer toward divine presence through material form.

This understanding becomes particularly clear in Eastern Christian traditions. Within the theology of the icon articulated by John of Damascus, images are legitimate because of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Since God became visible in Jesus Christ, the invisible God can now be depicted in visible form. As he argued, the honour given to an icon is not directed to the material object itself but passes to the prototype it represents (John of Damascus, 2003, p. 89). In practice, icons are approached reverently: worshippers may bow before them, light candles, or kiss them. These actions illustrate how the image functions as a relational point of contact between the believer and the sacred.

Such practices demonstrate that sacred art invites participation rather than passive viewing. The viewer is drawn into a devotional posture—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The image becomes a focus for prayer, contemplation, and theological reflection, enabling believers to encounter divine truths not only conceptually but experientially.

Examples from the Literature

Scholarly studies of Byzantine iconography illustrate how visual elements themselves communicate theological meaning. In classical icon painting, gold backgrounds are frequently used not to depict natural light but to signify uncreated divine light. Rather than representing a physical environment, the gold surface indicates a transcendent realm where time and eternity intersect (Ouspensky & Lossky, 1982, p. 34). This visual strategy deliberately disrupts naturalistic space to suggest that the saint or biblical figure participates in divine glory.

Western medieval church art offers another form of theological mediation. In the fresco cycles created by Giotto di Bondone, narrative scenes from Scripture cover the walls of chapels and churches. These paintings function as immersive storytelling environments. Instead of encountering biblical narratives only through text or preaching, worshippers visually inhabit a sequence of scenes that unfold around them. As viewers move through the space, they experience the story of salvation as a surrounding narrative landscape (Camille, 1996, p. 121). This spatial storytelling encourages imaginative participation. Worshippers can identify with figures in the scenes, contemplate moments of suffering or redemption, and locate their own lives within the broader drama of salvation history. In this way, sacred art becomes a pedagogical and devotional tool that helps internalise theological narratives.

Catalytic Pathways

Research on visual theology and spiritual formation suggests several pathways through which sacred art may contribute to *Epignosis*—a deeper, experiential knowledge of God.

Contemplative Attention: Sacred images encourage slower and more attentive forms of perception. In contrast to the rapid consumption of modern visual media, devotional viewing requires patience and stillness. Icons, for example, are designed to support prolonged contemplation through simplified composition, symbolic colour, and stylised form. This contemplative gaze creates an environment conducive to prayer, allowing theological insight to emerge gradually through reflection.

Narrative Engagement: Biblical imagery allows believers to engage the scriptural story imaginatively. When viewers encounter visual representations of events such as the Nativity, Crucifixion, or Resurrection, they are invited to enter the narrative world of Scripture. This imaginative participation can foster empathy with biblical figures and help worshippers interpret their own experiences in light of the redemptive narrative. Visual storytelling, therefore, functions as a bridge between ancient texts and contemporary faith experience.

Embodied Perception: Sacred art also works through the body and the senses. In liturgical environments, images interact with architecture, light, incense, music, and ritual movement. The worshipper does not simply observe an image but encounters it within a multisensory field of worship. Gestures such as kneeling, crossing oneself, or kissing an icon reinforce this embodied engagement. Such practices support holistic spiritual formation by integrating intellectual understanding with sensory and emotional experience.

Integrative Perspective: The Role of Visual Art in Worship

Taken together, these pathways suggest that visual art can serve as a powerful catalyst for theological understanding. Through contemplative attention, narrative immersion, and embodied participation, images enable believers to move beyond abstract doctrinal concepts toward a more lived and experiential form of spiritual knowledge. In this way, sacred art contributes to *Epignosis*, a deep, relational knowledge of God, by shaping how believers perceive divine realities and understand their place within the unfolding story of faith.

Rather than simply conveying information, visual art creates a space in which theology is not only taught but also seen, felt, and encountered. It invites worshippers into an experiential engagement with truth, allowing doctrine to be internalised through perception and reflection. Taken as a whole, this integrative model demonstrates that visual art plays a vital role in theological formation within Christian worship. Sacred imagery instructs in doctrine, reveals aspects of divine presence, directs contemplative vision, and immerses the community in the narrative of salvation. In doing so, it operates within the Church's wider liturgical language, working alongside scripture, music, and ritual practice to communicate and embody faith.

Accordingly, visual art should not be regarded as merely decorative or supplementary. When thoughtfully integrated into worship, it becomes a formative theological medium—one that

nurtures devotion, shapes the spiritual imagination, and deepens participation in the transformative knowledge of God described as *Epignosis*.

In other words, this model demonstrates that visual art is integral to theological formation within Christian worship. Sacred imagery teaches doctrine (Figure 2), reveals divine presence (Figure 3), directs contemplative vision (Figure 1), and immerses the community in the narrative of salvation (Figure 4). In doing so, it functions as part of the Church's broader liturgical language, alongside scripture, music, and ritual practice.

Theological Debates about Images

Debates about the use of images in Christian worship have existed since the early centuries of the church and reflect deeper concerns about how believers relate to the divine. At the centre of the discussion is the tension between the biblical prohibition of idols and the human impulse to express faith through visible forms.

Critics of religious images often appeal to the Second Commandment, which warns against making graven images for worship (Exodus 20:4–5). Reformers in the sixteenth century, especially John Calvin, argued that visual representations of God or sacred figures could easily lead believers toward idolatry. Calvin maintained that the human mind is prone to creating false images of God, and therefore, the safest path is to rely on Scripture and preaching rather than visual depictions. From this perspective, religious images risk shifting devotion from the invisible God to material objects, thereby compromising the purity of worship.

Other Reformers shared similar concerns. They believed that excessive use of images could distract believers from the authority of the biblical text and encourage superstitious practices. In some Protestant regions, these concerns led to periods of iconoclasm, during which religious statues, paintings, and stained-glass images were removed or destroyed in churches.

Supporters of sacred images, however, developed a different theological rationale. They argued that images are not objects of worship in themselves but serve as signs that point beyond themselves to divine realities. According to this view, visual representations can help communicate theological truths and assist believers in meditation and devotion. One of the most influential defenders of this approach was Gregory the Great, who argued that pictures serve as “the books of the unlearned.” In a largely illiterate society, images could convey biblical narratives and doctrinal ideas in ways that written texts could not.

This supportive perspective also rests on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, the belief that God became visible in the person of Jesus Christ. Because God took on material form in Christ, many theologians argue that material representations can legitimately participate in communicating divine truth. Images of Christ, saints, and biblical events are therefore seen as reminders of God's action in history rather than as idols.

The issue became particularly intense during the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries. Those who opposed icons feared that venerating images blurred the line between reverence and worship. Defenders of icons insisted that honour shown to an image passes to the person represented, not to the material object itself. These debates eventually influenced the wider Christian tradition and helped clarify distinctions between veneration (respect shown to saints or icons) and worship, which is reserved for God alone.

In contemporary theology, many scholars attempt to balance these historical concerns. They acknowledge that images can indeed be misused if they become objects of devotion independent of their spiritual meaning. At the same time, they recognise that art, architecture, and visual symbolism can deepen worship by engaging the senses and imagination. Within appropriate theological boundaries, sacred art can serve as a means of teaching, remembrance, and contemplation.

Thus, the debate over images ultimately reflects broader questions about how divine truth is mediated through material forms. Christianity affirms both the transcendence of God and the

possibility that physical elements—words, sacraments, and visual art—can point believers toward spiritual realities. When used thoughtfully and within a clear theological framework, many theologians conclude that images can enrich the life of worship while maintaining the primacy of God and Scripture.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that visual art contributes to a broader liturgical ecology in which multiple communicative forms: Scripture, preaching, ritual action, music, and imagery, interact to shape spiritual understanding within worship. Rather than functioning as a decorative or peripheral element, visual art can serve as a meaningful theological medium that participates in the liturgy's communicative life. Within such an ecology, meaning is not transmitted solely through propositional language but emerges through the interplay of sensory, symbolic, and performative dimensions of worship.

In this context, visual art can foster particular modes of engagement that are conducive to spiritual formation. First, visual imagery encourages attentiveness. In a liturgical environment often saturated with spoken words, the presence of visual forms invites moments of pause and contemplation, enabling worshippers to dwell more slowly with theological themes. Such attentiveness can open space for reflection and interior appropriation of the liturgical message.

Second, visual art stimulates imagination. Imagery can evoke layers of meaning that extend beyond literal explanation, allowing worshippers to explore theological ideas through metaphor, symbol, and visual narrative. This imaginative engagement enables individuals to encounter scriptural and doctrinal themes in ways that are affective as well as cognitive. Through this process, visual art may help bridge the gap between abstract theological concepts and lived spiritual experience.

Third, visual art invites participation. Unlike forms of communication that rely primarily on verbal comprehension, visual imagery allows worshippers to engage interpretively, bringing their own experiences, memories, and perspectives to the act of viewing. In this sense, the reception of visual art becomes an active process in which meaning is co-constructed between the artwork and the observer within the communal context of worship.

These qualities—attentiveness, imagination, and participation—may support the formation of *Epignosis*, understood here as a deepened, experiential knowledge that involves the whole person. Rather than addressing only the intellectual dimension of faith, visual art engages affective, sensory, and imaginative faculties. Such engagement may enable worshippers to encounter theological truths in embodied, relational ways, potentially contributing to a more holistic mode of spiritual knowing.

The conceptual model proposed in this study remains primarily theoretical. While the argument draws upon theological reflection and interdisciplinary insights from liturgical studies, aesthetics, and religious education, empirical investigation is needed to evaluate how these dynamics function in practice. Future research could explore how worshippers interpret and experience visual art within contemporary worship environments. Qualitative approaches such as interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observation may provide insight into how visual imagery is perceived, how it interacts with other liturgical elements, and whether it influences processes of theological reflection and spiritual formation.

Such empirical work would help clarify the extent to which visual art contributes to the development of *Epignosis* within worshipping communities and could further refine the conceptual framework proposed here. By examining the lived experience of congregations, future studies may also identify contextual factors, such as cultural background, artistic style, or liturgical tradition, that shape how visual art is received and interpreted.

This discussion brings the study's three aims into integrative focus and demonstrates how the proposed model advances the field of visual theology. First, by situating visual art within its historical and theological trajectory, the study reaffirms that imagery has long functioned as a meaningful and contested medium within Christian worship rather than a purely decorative addition. Second, by analysing visual art as a catalyst for *Epignosis*, the findings show how imagery can actively facilitate a relational, participatory knowledge of God through attentiveness, imagination, and embodied engagement. Third, the conceptual model developed here offers a constructive framework that links specific artistic practices to dimensions of relational knowing, thereby providing a systematic way to understand how visual forms contribute to spiritual formation within communal worship. In doing so, the study advances the field by bridging historical theology, liturgical studies, and aesthetic theory, and by repositioning visual art as an integral component of the church's formative and theological life rather than a secondary or supportive element.

Conclusion

This article has argued that visual art within Christ-centred worship can function as a catalyst for *Epignosis*: a deep, relational, and transformative knowledge of God that extends beyond intellectual comprehension. By drawing together insights from theological reflection and art-historical scholarship, the study demonstrates that sacred imagery possesses a formative capacity within Christian worship. Images do not merely illustrate doctrine; rather, they shape the believer's perception, imagination, and attentiveness to the presence of God. When encountered in a worshipping context, visual art can guide the congregation toward contemplation, enabling worshippers to engage with theological truths in embodied, experiential ways.

The review of scholarship suggests that sacred images have historically served as pedagogical and devotional tools within Christian traditions. Artworks centred on the person and work of Christ invite viewers into a visual meditation on the narrative of redemption. Through symbolism, composition, and iconographic tradition, such images can draw the viewer's attention toward the mystery of the incarnation, the suffering and resurrection of Christ, and the hope of restoration. In this way, visual art contributes to a form of theological communication that complements preaching, scripture reading, and liturgical practice. Rather than competing with these elements, art operates alongside them, opening additional pathways for reflection and spiritual engagement.

Furthermore, visual art can play an important role in shaping communal worship. When integrated thoughtfully into the worship environment, through paintings, icons, projections, or architectural design, images can create a visual atmosphere that directs the congregation's attention toward Christ and reinforces the themes of the liturgy. Shared contemplation of sacred imagery can also foster a sense of collective participation in the narrative of faith. In this context, art becomes not only an aesthetic element but also a communal practice that supports the church's formation as a worshipping body.

At the same time, the study acknowledges important theological and practical considerations. The use of images in worship has been historically contested, particularly in traditions concerned about the potential for distraction or idolatry. Therefore, integrating visual art requires discernment and theological sensitivity. Art must remain Christ-centred and aligned with the church's proclamation of the gospel. When used responsibly, however, sacred images can deepen rather than dilute the worship experience by directing attention toward the mystery and beauty of God's revelation in Christ.

Although this research is limited to a review of secondary sources, it contributes an interdisciplinary framework that brings together theology, art history, and worship studies. By

synthesising these fields, the article highlights the potential of visual art to function as a medium of theological reflection and spiritual formation within Christian worship. Future research could build upon this framework by exploring empirical studies of congregational responses to visual art, examining specific liturgical contexts, or analysing contemporary artistic practices within churches.

In conclusion, visual art has the potential to enrich Christ-centred worship by fostering deeper contemplation, shaping theological imagination, and supporting communal engagement with the mystery of God. When integrated with care and theological clarity, sacred imagery can become a meaningful instrument through which the church encounters the transformative knowledge of God—*Epignosis*—and grows in its worship, faith, and spiritual formation.

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