

# The Yale ISM Review

EXPLORING SACRED MUSIC,  
WORSHIP, AND THE ARTS

## REREADING THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS THROUGH ART

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*Timothy D. Cahill*

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Art historian James Elkins, in his book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, tells a story of a sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago titled *14 Stations of the Cross*. Elkins teaches at the school and was interviewing students about their own religious-themed art. This Stations was “a large ceramic church, about two and a half feet high” covered with a “gray and white glaze [that] . . . dripped down like sugar frosting on an angel food cake.” Inside, the floor was pocked where the fourteen devotional tableaux of the traditional Stations had been torn away. The artist, an MFA candidate called Ria, explained she had “erased” her depictions of Jesus’ Passion, leaving only the clay structure that housed them. Elkins considered this, then gingerly suggested that, given the deletions, the work really wasn’t a representation of the Stations at all. It was, he observed, not unkindly, more a “large confectionary house, a sugarplum fairy’s house.”[1](#\_edn1)

“ ‘Well, to me it’s the fourteen Stations,’ ” the young woman replied, hastening to explain that, though from a Catholic family, “ ‘I don’t believe in all that anymore—the robes, the priests. . . .’ ” So, Elkins queried, why work at all with a motif that represents one of the most solemn rituals of Lent? Ria struggled to articulate her conception. “ ‘There is just something about them, I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I want the feeling, something about it ...

the real part.' "[2].(#\_edn2) One can almost see Elkins' neutral, knowing nod on hearing this. Later, considering the sculptor and her work, he concludes, "She wasn't trying to poke fun at anything, or show off her cynicism. She was looking for something in her parent's religion that she could accept." [3].(#\_edn3)

Ria's tentative grasp of her work reveals the anxiety many young artists feel around religious themes. "Once upon a time," Elkins writes, "—but really, in every place and every time—art was religious." [4].(#\_edn4) We know, of course, this is no longer true. The Enlightenment, the Reformation, modernism, postmodernism—all played their part in estranging art from religion. This happened slowly at first, then, seemingly, all at once. Disillusioned by the Holocaust and Hiroshima, then secularized by the "project of modernism" the 1960s and '70s, contemporary culture has evolved to a point where the "word religion ... can no longer be coupled with the driving ideas of art." [5].(#\_edn5) For artists seeking a place within the mainstream art world, this fact has left little latitude for their work to encounter the sacred. [6].(#\_edn6)

The anecdote about Ria points to another fact, however. Not only does religion occupy a strange place in contemporary art, contemporary art also has expanded the interpretation and application of traditional Christian forms beyond their original ecclesial contexts. This has been especially true of the Stations of the Cross. As an artistic motif, the Stations navigate between church and gallery by surrendering the traditional form while retaining the rich connotations of the underlying narrative. The reinterpretations traverse boundaries and expand upon the ritual's numinous core.

### **From Traditional to Non-Traditional Readings**

The origins of the Stations of the Cross trace back to the time of Constantine in fourth-century Jerusalem, where Christian pilgrims visited holy sites associated with Christ's Passion. By the twelfth century, these and other sites formed a settled route of European pilgrimage, and in time the practice was established of walking the *Via Dolorosa*, the "Way of Sorrows," observing significant points between Pilate's court and Mount Calvary. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, reproductions of the Way were constructed in Europe at outdoor sites that themselves became pilgrimage destinations. Stations became common inside churches by the end of the seventeenth century, where their use was associated with the granting of indulgences (as they still are). The number and designation of the Stations followed local customs, ranging from as few as eleven to upwards to thirty-seven. It is not certain how the number or configuration we know today was fixed. [7].(#\_edn7)

For the faithful, walking the Stations of the Cross during Lent is a personal pilgrimage of reflection and penance. While the devotion need not include a pictorial component (all that is required is a wooden cross at each station), the familiar tableaux have come to define the practice. The visual drama of the stations, whether naturalistic or stylized, is meant to stimulate empathic participation in Christ's suffering. In a sense, each of the

fourteen representations functions as a kind of time machine—one looks not at but through them to the historical events of the Passion. Modern artists work to undo this illusion. Their art is always resolutely in the present; it demands a very different conceptual engagement, situating both the viewer and the Stations in a liminal space between ritual and motif.

In 1951, Matisse achieved just this shift with a Stations he produced for a chapel in the south of France. Seven years later, Barnett Newman took on the subject again with the first of fourteen canvases for his series *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, which was exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966. Countless artists have treated the subject since: elite names like sculptor Michael Kenny, painter Francesco Clemente, theater-artist Robert Wilson, and those unknown many like Ria, most of whom, it's fair to say, out of aesthetic and cultural motives not related to the Stations' original purpose. Some, like Wilson, neutralize the religiosity; others find in the Stations a secularly-safe way to engage the divine. The Stations of the Cross have evolved into a container for nearly any inquiry—formal, social, political, or metaphysical.

What follows is a consideration of four artists' readings of the Stations. First, we will look more closely at the breakthroughs of Matisse and Newman, two seminal examples of the Stations from the twentieth century. In light of their influence, we will then turn to two artists working today: a New Zealand Catholic nun and painter for whom the Stations retain their religious importance, and a New York art photographer who found in the *Via Crucis* an expression of the sufferings outside his window.

### **Matisse: The Vence Chapel**

Matisse's commission in the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France, illustrates the Stations' expansiveness. In 1947, the painter was approached to design the chapel's interior by one of the Dominican sisters for whom it was constructed. Matisse, in his 70s at the time, had met Sister Jacques-Marie years earlier when, as the twenty-one-year old Monique Bourgeois, she became his nurse and confidant, and later his model and student. His paternal affection for the nun convinced him to take on the project he would later call his masterpiece. Matisse designed everything in the chapel, from its glorious stained glass windows and portraits of St. Dominic and the Virgin and Child, to the altar, vestments, liturgical objects, even the confessional door.

The Stations [Fig. 1] occupy the chapel's back wall in a grid-like composition on white ceramic tiles, six-and-a-half feet high by thirteen feet wide, containing three rows of drawings. One reads Matisse's Stations from bottom to top, beginning in the lower left and tracing a course like an S. There is no outward journey the viewer must make in order to pass from one station to the next. The pilgrimage these Stations invite is entirely within the viewer.



*Fig. 1: View of the Nave, Stained-Glass Side Window and Stations of the Cross in the Chapelle du Rosaire, Vence, France, 1948–51 (stained glass and ceramic tile), Matisse, Henri (1869-1954) / Chapelle du Rosaire, Vence, France / © 2015 Succession H. Matisse / DACS, London / Bridgeman Images\**

In a letter to the priest in charge of the project, Matisse called the Stations “a great achievement for me,” yet allowed they would “dismay most people who see it”<sup>[8]</sup>[\(#\\_edn8\)](#) for the simplicity of their depiction. “Simplicity” hardly captures the effect; “graffiti-like,”<sup>[9]</sup>[\(#\\_edn9\)](#) is how one critic saw the stark, schematic figures Matisse created with a stick of charcoal on the end of a bamboo pole. Patricia Hampl described the pathos of the work as “pained, scratching its way to Golgotha.”<sup>[10]</sup>[\(#\\_edn10\)](#) “The drawing is rough, very rough,” Matisse confirmed in his letter to the priest, “God held my hand.”<sup>[11]</sup>[\(#\\_edn11\)](#)

I have long admired Matisse’s drawings, yet I admit that at first his Stations left me unsettled. I passed through three stages of discernment before I comprehended the work as the masterpiece I now believe it is. Initially, I considered the composition as a whole, surveying it like a map—establishing coordinates, reckoning the number system, identifying individual landmarks to anchor me in the scene. Then I looked critically at the

separate depictions, debating whether Matisse's drawings were the work of a genius or the marks of an old man. They reveal either the weakened capacity of a hand compromised by age, or the gestural freedom of a seasoned master. (I learned later that Matisse created a series of finely detailed preliminary drawings that he ultimately rejected.) Finally, surveying the chapel overall, and observing the sublime balance of each detail between reverence and beauty, praise and surprise, all suspicions crumbled. I turned to the Stations a third time. Their deep compassion toward suffering drew me all the way in, opening my perception to the vastness that Matisse in his epistle described as the "great drama ... interwoven around the Crucifixion, which has taken on a dreamlike dimension." [12].(#\_edn12)

### **Newman: *Lema Sabachthani***

Barnett Newman achieved one of art's most profound interpretations of the Passion with his *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (<http://mavcor.yale.edu/conversations/object-narratives/barnett-newman-stations-cross-lemma-sabachtani>). Newman was part of that formidable generation of abstract painters who raised American art to international dominance after 1945, in the related styles of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting. His best-known canvases typically feature broad vertical bands broken by contrasting stripes or "zips" extending from top to bottom. Newman's art makes frequent allusions to his Judaism and Jewish mysticism, roots that run deep even in the fourteen black and white minimalist paintings titled for the Christian Stations and evoking the most dramatic cry of the New Testament.

*Stations of the Cross*, in the collection of the National Gallery in Washington, is made up of fourteen raw canvases, each six-and-a-half by five feet, painted with vertical passages of black or white paint and dark or light zips. The series' monochrome starkness is at once unsettling and contemplative. Its subject, observed art historian Jane Dillenberger, is "the individual's encounter with God." [13].(#\_edn13) This encounter, Newman wrote in the catalogue for his 1966 Guggenheim exhibition, takes place with the last agonized words of Christ:

*"Lema Sabachthani—why? Why did you forsake me? . . . To what purpose? Why? . . . This is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no complaint. . . . This overwhelming question . . . has been with us so long—since Jesus—since Abraham—since Adam—the original question."* [14].(#\_edn14)

Newman places the Station's meaning in the cesura between Christ's crucifixion and death, in an instant when God's grace can no longer be assumed. By removing the Passion's visual markers, the painter—like Elkins's MFA sculptor—erases "the terrible walk" and replaces it with a meditation on the Stations themselves. "Can the Passion be expressed by a series of anecdotes, by fourteen sentimental illustrations?" Newman insisted in the

catalogue. “Do not the stations tell of one event?”[15].(#\_edn15) As Matisse transformed the Stations from literal to expressive, so Newman remade them from a drama with fourteen scenes to a poem of fourteen lines, a sonnet of existential suffering.[16] (#\_edn16).

### Horn and Michalek: Transformational journeys

Following Matisse and Newman, artists saw their task—and their opportunity—as one of remaking the Stations with each new iteration. I met Mary Horn, a painter and Dominican sister in Oamaru on the South Island of New Zealand, in 2010, not long after she had completed her own Stations of the Cross. [Fig. 2] She had been contemplating a set of Stations in the chapel beside her home, to replace traditional views painted a century earlier by four Dominican nuns. “I wondered what I would do in this new century to speak to people of our time,” she explained of her own work. “This series is simpler and more intimate and somehow speaks not just of the Jesus journey but our journeys, where we encounter many different deaths, and are supported by others, or have to endure alone what is happening in our life.”[17].(#\_edn17).

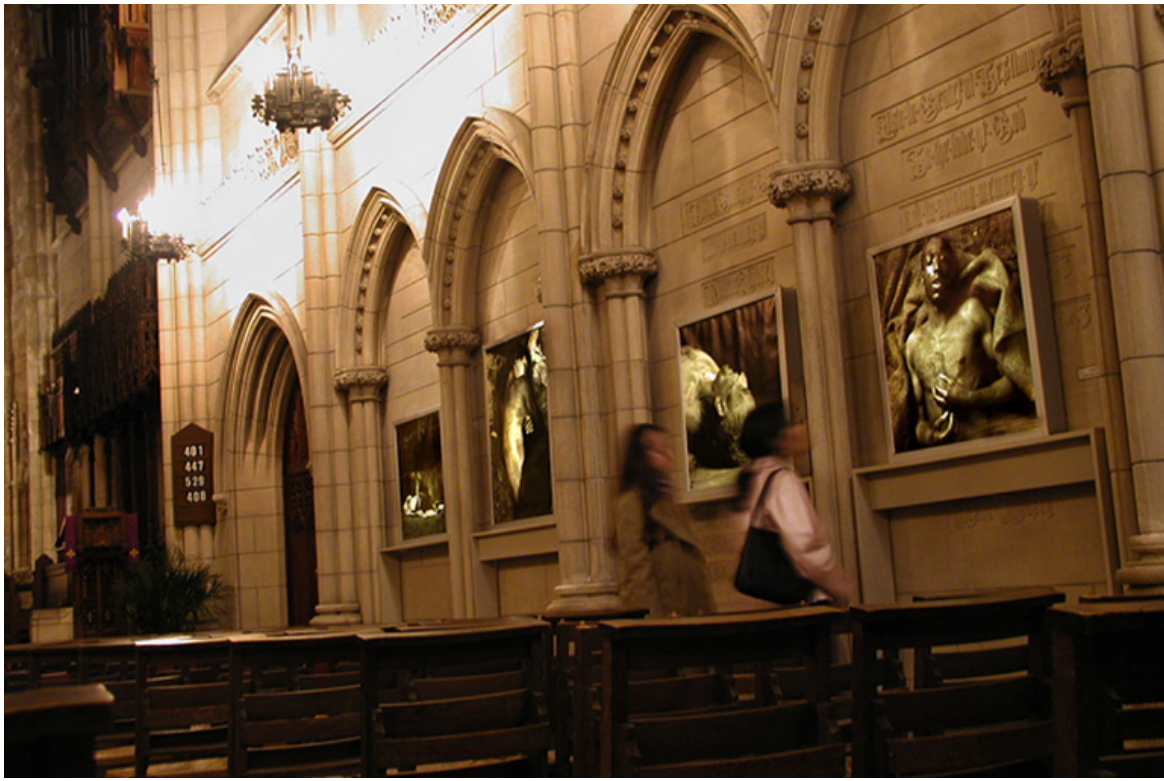


*Fig. 2: Mary Horn, Station VI: Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus and Station VII: Jesus Falls the Second Time, from Stations of the Cross, 2010. Images courtesy of the artist.*

Like Matisse, Horn simplified the figures in her Stations, stripping them of specificity to underscore their common humanity. The paintings, she avers, speak not only of the Passion but of the 9/11 attacks, that “unspeakable journey that affected us all,” and the suffering that has followed in the years since. “The ‘Way of the Cross’ speaks a hope for us all in the midst of such human-created devastation on so many levels,” she observed. For her, as an artist and a religious, painting is both a form of prayer and mission. “Does art change my idea of God? The short answer for me is yes—a new time requires different images.”[18].(#\_edn18)

The universality that Horn identifies does not need to be couched in religious terms. Yet the Stations are adaptable to many instances of suffering, particularly those of the individual struggling against authority. This was photographer David Michalek’s conception for his 2002 *14 Stations*. [Fig 3] Michalek produced the series in collaboration with formerly homeless men and women affiliated with the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing (IAHH), a non-profit organization located at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Their Stations re-vision the motif as a narrative of deprivation and kindness, redemption and death, among the urban homeless.





*Fig. 3: David Michalek, Station Six, from Fourteen Stations, 2002, and the series as installed in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Boston. Images courtesy of the artist.*

The work's central trope, Michalek said in a recent interview, insists that the suffering of the Stations, "is not necessarily in some faraway place, but on your own street corner . . . . This led us to the idea that our *Via Crucis* would become emblematic not of one man's walk, of one historical moment, but the walk of all humanity." [19]. (#\_edn19) Michalek worked with the AIHH members to conceive and reenact episodes from the Stations based on their stories of living on the street.

The artist, who was familiar with the Stations from his Catholic upbringing, used them as "starting points that could become metaphorically expansive." As an example, Michalek cited Stations IV, V, and VI, in which Jesus meets his mother, then Simon of Cyrene, who helps carry the cross, and finally Veronica, who wipes his face. "These three encounters seemed similar and quite different," Michalek said, prompting the group to design tableaux around the theme of Christian *caritas*. "The embrace of the mother is an encounter of unconditional love. Simon is an encounter of a friend who helps get you back on your feet. And Veronica is the example of loving kindness. We asked, 'How can we fill in the themes with personal experience?' and from there built the images." [20]. (#\_edn20)

The resulting tableaux reflected an ethos less of Old Master paintings than photojournalism and street photography. The large images, typically displayed in light boxes, have been shown at the Brooklyn Museum, Yale Divinity School, and other venues. They have also hung in churches, including the nave of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Boston, an installation that blurred the lines between exhibition and devotion. "The work can live very easily in a church, and people who know how to use the Stations can use



these Stations," said Michalek. "Yet if you come from a different faith tradition, it can still communicate a lot of the ideas essential to the original form without being tied to the dogma." [21]. (#\_edn21)

## Conclusion

The art of Horn and Michalek, like that of Matisse, Newman, and even, in her way, the art student Ria, provide new readings of the Stations. They present various ways the devotion may be reinterpreted, recast, or repurposed; they offer sides of a crystal with as many facets as there are artists. In taking the Stations from familiar shores of tradition, do alternate interpretations undermine the ritual's religious nature? An analogy from Thomas Aquinas may help answer the question. In reading scripture, Thomas argues, one goes beyond the text's literal sense to its "spiritual senses," meanings which flesh out the historical narrative with moral and spiritual implications. Alternative readings are salutary not for their sake alone, the theologian believed; they are a kind of excursion that brings the reader back to the literal word with deeper comprehension. T.S. Eliot expressed this same effect in *Four Quartets*, assuring us that

*"...the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."* [22]. (#\_edn22)

Artists rouse us from assumptions and challenge expectations; their new readings increase the resonance of the Stations. Looking beyond the traditional Lenten ritual can lead us, paradoxically, closer to the Passion.

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## FOOTNOTES

[1]. (#\_ednref1) James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 34–35.

[2]. (#\_ednref2) *Ibid.*, 35.

[3].(#\_ednref3) Ibid., 77.

[4].(#\_ednref4) Ibid., 5.

[5].(#\_ednref5) Ibid., xi.

[6].(#\_ednref6) Needing to draw borders around the elusive term “fine art,” Elkins settles on the “institutional definition” of the art world, i.e., that work “exhibited in galleries in major cities, bought by museums of contemporary art, shown in biennales and the Documenta, and written about in periodicals such as *Artforum*, *October*, *Flash Art*,” etc., to which he adds work engendered by top MFA programs and prioritized by leading scholars in the history of art.

[7].(#\_ednref7) The traditional fourteen Stations depict scenes from the gospels and incidents from outside scripture (i.e., the three falls and the encounter with Veronica). Typically designated with roman numerals, the Stations are: I. Jesus is condemned to death; II. Jesus carries his cross; III. Jesus falls the first time; IV. Jesus meets his mother; V. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross; VI. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus; VII. Jesus falls the second time; VIII. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem; IX. Jesus falls the third time; X. Jesus is stripped of his clothes; XI. Jesus is nailed to the cross; XII. Jesus dies; XIII. Jesus is taken down from the cross; XIV. Jesus is laid in the tomb. For a detailed history of the Stations, see the [New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15569a.htm) (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15569a.htm>).

[8].(#\_ednref8) “Matisse to Father Couturier, 27 February 1950,” in Henri Matisse, Marcel Billot, Michael Taylor (trans.), *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation*, (Milan: Skira Editore; Houston: Menil Foundation, 1999), 303.

[9].(#\_ednref9) Alastair Sooke, “[How Henri Matisse created his masterpiece](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10744750/Matisse-masterpiece.html).” (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10744750/Matisse-masterpiece.html>.)”

[10].(#\_ednref10) Patricia Hampl, *Blue Arabesque* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 200.

[11].(#\_ednref11) Matisse, et al., 303.

[12].(#\_ednref12) Ibid.

[13].(#\_ednref13) Jane Dillenberger, *Image and Spirit In Sacred and Secular Art* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 104.

[14].(#\_ednref14) Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman—The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966), 9.

[15].([#\\_ednref15](#)) Ibid.

[16].([#\\_ednref16](#)) A fifteenth painting, *Be II*, was exhibited by Newman at the Guggenheim show and has been seen with the *Stations of the Cross* ever since. Containing a thin band of red along its left edge, it is both a contrast and a companion to the black and white *Stations*; scholars debate as to whether it should be considered part of the cycle or not. There are those who contend a fifteenth station should be added to the *Via Crucis* depicting Christ's resurrection; the question of affinity between the proposed additional station and Newman's *Be II* is also subject to interpretation.

[17].([#\\_ednref17](#)) Statement from personal correspondence with author, February 2015.

[18].([#\\_ednref18](#)) Ibid.

[19].([#\\_ednref19](#)) Interview with author, February 2015.

[20].([#\\_ednref20](#)) Ibid.

[21].([#\\_ednref21](#)) Ibid.

[22].([#\\_ednref22](#)) From "Little Gidding" in *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 222.

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Recommended Citation: Cahill, Timothy. (2015) "Rereading the Stations of the Cross through Art," *The Yale ISM Review*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 10. Available at: <http://ismreview.yale.edu>

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