I have some hesitation in calling myself a liturgical artist. Quantitatively this represents a lesser portion of my total output. Nevertheless, it is an essential part and in various ways penetrates all of my work.

But as a liturgical artist I feel isolated. There seems to be little comprehension of the nature of liturgical art, and few others who perceive themselves to be liturgical artists. By contrast, in the fifties, there was great enthusiasm about liturgical art, with several international periodicals devoted to the subject. In France, an artist/priest, Père Couturier, O.P., was getting his artist friends Matisse, Léger, Braque, Chagall, Rouault and others, to do work for churches. There was promise of a major rebirth of church-sponsored art. But ironically, Vatican II, for all its work on liturgical renewal, did little in the area of the visual arts beyond discouraging the presence of distracting devotional images. The directive of the American bishops, Environment and Art in Catholic Worship, contains only two out of one hundred seven paragraphs specifically on art. The thrust of reform was on the use of vernacular, a more communal arrangement of seating, a more congregational use of music, and a dignified, non-distracting environment. The liturgical designer has become the person who determines the visual form of worship space.

The Vatican II story is part of a long history. The stricter forms of Judaism and Islam are aniconic, as is the reform tradition in Christianity. Many felt that the post-Vatican II Catholic Church moved strongly toward Protestantism. Even in those periods when imagery was more valued in western Christendom, it was because of its illustrational possibilities rather than, as in the eastern church, because it was perceived to have a sacramental character.

It was during the flourishing of the middle ages that major changes took place within western Christian culture. The rise of the city and the university were symptomatic. As John O’Malley, S.J. has written:

Theology moved from the Episcopal cathedral and the monastic chapel to the classroom. It moved from a primarily liturgical context to one that was professedly academic or even
"scientific." If we say that the Bible moved from the chapel to the classroom, we must realize that this move made the Bible a very different book from what it was before. From being a book of devotion, it became a data-base—a source of information about the sacred with which to confront the "natural theology" of Aristotle. (O'Malley 101)

While his primary concern seems to be how this change altered theology, it had an equal effect on art. The tradition of liturgical art that existed until that time was broken in the West and became an ever-rarer series of isolated examples.

The liturgy itself became increasingly less central and vital; its place, especially for the laity, was largely taken over by devotions. Accordingly, most religious art became devotional rather than liturgical. Even the Eucharistic host became a cult object for devotion. This was the predominant situation in the Roman Catholic Church, even further rigidified in reaction to the Protestant Reformation, until the Vatican II reforms. Even then, what hope and promise for art had been generated during the pre-Vatican II revival was not given the opportunity to develop and mature. The liturgical renewal did not include art in any significant sense.

Thus in the West today there is no living tradition of liturgical art within which to work. Nevertheless, one can construct at least a general sense of what it should be like.⁶

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Those drawn to the sacred in art frequently have a strong attraction to icons. Icons are a liturgical art, but are rarely perceived that way outside of the Orthodox community. There are many books with wonderful reproductions devoted to them. But almost never is one made aware, in text nor in illustration, that in the context in which they are made and used, namely the Byzantine tradition, a large part of the meaning of each one is to be understood in terms of its place on an icon screen. This screen, the iconostasis, is in turn an encapsulation of the iconography which typically covers the dome, apse and walls of the entire worship space; together they become an integral part of worship. Instead, we become infatuated with each image individually, in isolation, as an object we might wish to buy and hang in some unspecified place.