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## **The Story Behind the Whore of Babylon on Spectrum's Cover**

Artist John Hoyt tells about the inspiration behind his arresting Whore of Babylon image on the latest issue of the Spectrum journal.

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## Spectrum March 2020 Interview

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*Artist John Hoyt tells about the inspiration behind his arresting Whore of Babylon image on the latest issue of the Spectrum journal.*

**Question: You are the artist who created the latest cover of *Spectrum* magazine. The image is a pictorial representation of the Whore of Babylon, and it is an arresting and disturbing image. The seated woman, dressed in a flowing gown of dusty pink that melds into her long pink hair, looks anything but sweet. Her pale glowing eyes shine out like a devil from her dark skin. She wears a crucifix and is smoking a hookah. Can you tell us about the imagery and what it represents?**

Answer: The figures in this set might be thought of as a sort of Black Madonna, i.e. a "lost" quadrant of the pantheon with a decidedly Dionysian aspect. For the magazine cover she is seated in front of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (based on a painting by Lucas Cranach).

This is also a Chthonic Goddess — Chthonic goddesses are figures like Persephone who have a clear association with the darkness and the underworld.

This theme has gone through a number of iterations as I continue to work with it. Attentive viewers will be aware of the tradition of the Black Madonnas; as mentioned above, the “blackness” seems to signify her association with the Dionysian side of creation. In this respect she has a clear relationship with Isis, Persephone, Nut (Egyptian goddess of the night), Ishtar, and so on.

I am inclined to also consider “Alice” (she of the Rabbit Hole and Looking Glass) as one of the Goddesses of the Underworld. And she was the original inspiration for this set of images (which explains the hookah).

The chalice with serpents associates her traditionally with the Book of the Apocalypse; the blackness resulted from an accidental experiment with photo filters.

You can see more images and read more about my work at [www.johnhoyt.ca](http://www.johnhoyt.ca).

**I believe that the commission to illustrate this issue of *Spectrum* focusing on Revelation 17 inspired you to create a whole Whore of Babylon series. What other images have you included in the series? What similarities and what differences are there between the different images?**

See my [website](#) for just a few examples. There are actually dozens (including GIFs, digital images, and an oil painting currently on my easel). Some seem to me more Apocalyptic (the woman holding the chalice with serpents); some more Alice-like (the woman with the hookah).

**What do you hope that viewers of the latest cover of *Spectrum* will feel, think, or learn upon seeing this image? Were you trying to be controversial?**

This question is (perhaps without intending to be such) somewhat “loaded” and problematic. I have experienced a long history of conflict between my artistic work and my teaching in a Christian setting, keeping in mind that Protestants in particular have a problematic relationship with the visual arts.

So, the question (rhetorically speaking of course) becomes: Who are the readers of *Spectrum*? Would they not prefer, for example, to see work inspired by Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman, i.e. something “calming” and “ethereal,” devoid of any troubling figurative subject matter? (More of my thoughts on art contemplation appear [here](#).)

**Tell us more about how you created the image? What medium did you use? What tools?**

The work was done digitally with a program similar to Photoshop. The final outcomes will include a few oil paintings on canvas, potential digital prints, GIFs, and so on.

**How is this Whore of Babylon series representative of your body of work as an artist? What themes and what types of art most inspire you? Can you tell us about any of your favorite artists?**

I typically work with religiously-inspired themes. I have created various series of “icons,” influenced by the painters of the Early Renaissance (like Italy and Flanders in the “Quattrocento”).

European art of the 1400s (both Italian and Flemish) continues to be a huge source of inspiration. But the artists who inspire me span a wide time frame. Three artists: Hieronymus Bosch, Matthias Grunewald, and Francis Bacon have been [a particular focus of mine](#) recently. These three artists inspired recent artistic pilgrimages to Madrid (The Prado, to view the work of Hieronymus Bosch), Colmar (France, to visit the home of the Isenheim Altarpiece), and Dublin (to visit the studio of Francis Bacon).

**Besides painting, what other mediums do you work in?**

I also work in various digital media, including programs similar to Photoshop, DAZ Studio, and Hexagon (the last two involve 3-D models). I have also experimented with video editing and recently spent a great deal of time learning WordPress (in order to design my current [website](#)).

**You have been a teacher of art at Burman University in Alberta, Canada for many years. What have you most wanted your students to learn from you?**

I have taught a wide range of subject areas over the years, including sciences (physics and chemistry), languages (French and English), art, and education (Multicultural Education was one of my favorite classes). I really like the types of discussions we had in Multicultural Education, which related in particular to the experience of indigenous people in Canada. I also liked teaching art history, but art practice is so subjective that it can at times be difficult to “teach.”

**What art projects do you have in mind for the future?**

I will continue to work on oil paintings on themes I have worked with in the past; this will take much of my studio time. However, I am particularly interested in some themes related to animated GIFs. These are more experimental and more difficult to “show” in a gallery setting, but I have seen some work with GIFs and short video clips that I found quite inspiring.

**Some time ago you lived and taught in Rwanda. Did you teach art there? Did you find that your Rwandan students approached art differently than your Canadian students?**

I taught mostly sciences on the high school level (in French) in Rwanda; my wife and I were there for six-and-a-half years. Since this was really my first teaching experience (apart from some work as a graduate assistant at the University of California) there was little to compare it to. People thought of Rwanda as the “Switzerland of Africa” at the time, an oasis of calm and tranquility, though there were clearly hints of trouble to come. Perhaps it has now re-gained this status as a place of peace and progress.

**And what else do you do when you are not traveling and creating art?**

I spend time at least once a week with indigenous (Cree) friends in Red Deer, Alberta, working in a small tool shop/garage on functional antique firearms. The photo here shows me on a day in 2014 when we were testing out some of the flintlocks we had recently completed.



Note – this photo is actually from 2023 and shows me (left) and Lyle Keewatin Richards (right) working on a “Firestick” project in his shop in Red Deer.