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## COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO THE RESTORATION OF SACRED ART

Is art really meant as something that simply pleases, attracts the emotions when seen, simply relegated to the pleasurable? During a walk through the busy Metropolitan Museum of Art, on a weekday with tour groups of secondary school students who have come face to face with John Henry Sargent's *Madame X*, would inevitably hear the outcry, "Oh, that's cool." News headlines about art auctions of Ming vases to Old Masters do not emphasize the beauty of a masterpiece but its monetary price, as if it were merely a capital investment. Is beautiful art something then so perfunctory that one can actually dismiss a masterpiece as "cool?" or seek to appellate the masterpiece as a product to be bought and sold, an investment? What can religious art tell us about the experience of beauty, and if we have lost a sense of beauty in our churches? May *common sense* see, argue towards, and apprehend the *totum bonum* through simple manifestations of "Cool" and "Mine," where even the religious can fall within the range solely of the subjective and individual?

It has often been said by Pope Benedict XVI,<sup>1</sup> and it was a crisis which Josef Pieper<sup>2</sup> examined, that modernity has lost the sense of the sacred. It can be seen, especially in the design and decoration of churches, from suburban America to Padre Pio's new shrine in San Giovanni Rotondo, that there has been a rupture between this period's artistic/liturgical style and that of the Baroque, Classical or Gothic eras. La Madeleine in Paris as well as St. Peter's Basilica in Rome have a common, otherworldly

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Ubicumque et Semper*, Apostolic Letter as "Motu Proprio" (September 21, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Josef Pieper, *In Search of the Sacred: Contributions to an answer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

trajectory, a ship on pilgrimage heading Eastwards, towards the Rising Sun representing the Risen Christ, and the beginning of the Eternal Day of the New Creation. The sacred is manifested in these buildings through Classical design. They have a cosmological *telos* to a glorious reality that is tasted here within this sacred building but not yet, of the transcendent kingdom represented by the height of the statues and of the immense dimensions of the interior space.

Religious imagery encompasses the *sacred* and the *devotional*. The definition of the *sacred* must first be established in order to have a renewal of liturgical art and architecture. The term *Sacred* comes from the Latin, *Sacer*, which translates the biblical usage of *qadosh* or *hagios*. It represents a liturgical purpose: separated or consecrated for the service of God; *Devotional Art* whose ambient is secular or *profano* can be found in the great halls of Palazzo Spada, that is in the home, or even in a bureau. In the island yonder called Manhattan, Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* is at home in Henry Clay Frick's living room. However, *Sacred art* has a milieu that is *liturgical* in dimension, and thus is considered dedicated to God's ritual service. Some of the greatest masterpieces such as Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel* and Raphael's *Transfiguration* are considered sacred art. Thus, in viewing them, one sees that they are at home amidst Gregorian chant, polyphony, incense, lit candles and vested ministers facing East standing before an altar, offering prayers to the direction of the rising sun. Whether the purpose is liturgical or devotional, religious art is often used for the edification of the individuals who see them in a church or a home. Though we are thankful for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the milieu of *sacred works of art* is not in a museum, and *devotional art* should be seen within the context of a sanctification of the secular. In both instances, Religious Imagery, bears within it the imprint of the numinous *mysterion* in tangible form, whether that be a symbol, a vestment, architecture or painting; truths of God that are mysteries and known through Faith; revealed by the God-Man, which for eons was hidden amongst angels but now symbolically visible in created beauty.

Religious Imagery in general, comprises of the union of Divine Revelation and the artistically beautiful. By its beauty, it attracts man to love a transcendent theme. Being attracted is very important. In his famous work, *Six Great Ideas*, Mortimer Adler bases beauty on Thomas Aquinas'

own definition of beauty, “*Pulchrum est id quod visum placet.*”<sup>3</sup> However, Adler rightly points out that *videre* and *placere* do not mean the same things in our day as in Aquinas’ day; *Videre* used here is a contemplative way of seeing, especially with regard to understanding the Truth; this is like the biblical term, *theorein*, “to see and to contemplate” especially when it concerns seeing a divine act such as miracles<sup>4</sup> and angels.<sup>5</sup> Thus those things *visum* are given a wider definition especially when it comes to the object of the sight, one can contemplate the ineffable form through the material; *placere* is released from the narrow mindedness of only a delight in the emotions to carnal things, but finds fulfillment in finding joy in possessing a vision of the spiritual *cognoscitive*.

The content of the religious image—that which is seen—is based upon imitation of usually, an historical scene, from the Scriptures or the Lives of the Saints. The word *imitation* is of great importance here when discussing the arts. Aristotle describes at least poetic imitation as the activity that differentiates man from the animals. What Aristotle says about *Poetry* can be said analogically about *religious art*: “Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is natural for all to delight in works of imitations.”<sup>6</sup> However, artistry is no photographic imitation of nature, narration or history; it is rather an *elaboration* on how the artist has first seen the model or prototype, how he has contemplated it and thus expressed it by his *ars*.<sup>7</sup> A great amount of contemplative interpretation is necessary to portray the interior meaning of the object imitated. Aristotle says,

The objects the imitator represents are actions, with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad—the diversities of human character being nearly always derivative from this primary distinction, since it is by badness and excellence men differ in character. It follows, therefore, that the agents represented, must be either above our

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 5, 4 ad primum, BAC, Salamanca 1965: “*pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent. Unde pulchrum in debita proportione consistit, quia sensus delectatur in rebus debite proportionatis, sicut in sibi similibus; nam et sensus ratio quaedam est, et omnis virtus cognoscitiva.*”

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jn 2:23; 6:19.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jn 20:12.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 4, 5–8, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

<sup>7</sup> *Ars* can be translated as “skill.”

own level of goodness, or beneath it, or just such as we are; in the same way as, with the painters, the personages of Polygnotus are better than we are, those of Pauson worse, and those of Dionysius just like ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

For Aristotle especially, artists portray a moral lesson, elaborating the individual or scene portrayed in terms of the good or the evil. There is moral value behind physical depiction. The sacred artist can easily analogize this experience by portraying the sacred vs. the profane, graceful vs. sinful. Portraying moral/spiritual values is the language of the artist. In this way, the scenery can be portrayed, and the entire ambient of the painting can seek to portray this end. The contrast between darkness and light, a technique called *chiaroscuro*, can be used as a metaphor symbolizing the light of Christ's grace dispelling the darkness of sin and ignorance.

The Council of Trent emphasized that sacred art in order to be beautiful has to reflect with accuracy and be proportionate to sacred history comprising of the lives of the Saints, excerpts from the Bible, historical events in Church history, or Divine or saintly persons.<sup>9</sup> The Tridentine perspective wished to portray to the individual his or her *telos* mediated through created/artistic beauty by using a nuanced meaning of sacred history. This was all termed in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, where a great amount of sacred art was being produced based on *Historia*. *Historia* did not mean a simplification of historical events simply according to time period and succession. Rather, *Historia* for the entire tradition of sacred art meant historical reality yes, but through artistic composition, drew the mind of the viewer into knowing and desiring the painting. Thus *historia* has more than a physical or empirical component, but one where the historical was united to the realization of an intellectual, emotional and even spiritual history that would attract the beholder.<sup>11</sup> With regard to uniting Faith and *historia*, a historical event in the life of Christ or a Saint would encompass the invisible moral and divine meaning present in the Judeo-Christian view of history, where the transcendent God *acts* intimately in

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 2, 1–6.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Council of Trent, *De Invocatione, veneration et reliquiis sanctorum, et de sacris imaginibus*, Session 25, December 3–4, 1563, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Georgetown, Washington DC 1990): “Bishops should teach with care that the faithful are instructed and strengthened by commemorating and frequently recalling the articles of our faith through the expression in pictures or other likenesses of the [histories] of the mysteries of our redemption (*per historias mysteriorum nostrae redemptionis*) . . .”

the midst of men's history, giving a providential dimension according to the *oikonomia* of salvation. The vision of history, not just seeing a chronology of events, was thus symbolic and worthy of contemplation, especially when the hand of Providence was involved in the minute matters of men. It really was an allegorical interpretation of not only the Bible, but of the ancients as well.

This accurate *imitation of historia*<sup>11</sup> is what St. Gregory the Great emphasized that religious art was *biblia pauperum*<sup>12</sup> or books for the unlearned. Artistic design and the harmony of colour was then, a poetry of the natural and divine significations of *historia* as Truth. In Byzantium, it was the face of Christ that settled the imitation of *historia* within the iconoclast debates of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> The question of whether He was circumscribable or not allowed for a greater nuance into the portrayal of the divine united to the human. It was St. Theodore the Studite who emphasized that the circumscription was possible based on the Council of Chalcedon's affirmation of a theological definition, that Christ's Human Nature was united to His Divine Nature under the person of the *Logos* of God. Therefore as the Son of God is truly God and truly man, like any other man, he can be portrayed.<sup>14</sup> For John Damascene, this portrayal was

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura*, II. In this book, the term *historia* is examined in its various meanings with regard to portraying events seeking an intellectual and affective response and relation from the viewer.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory the Great, *To Serenus, Bishop of Massilia*, Lib. XI, Ep. XIII, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1994): "And, seeing that antiquity has not without reason admitted the histories of the saints to be painted in venerable places . . . let thy Fraternity carefully admonish them that from the sight of the event portrayed they should catch the ardour of compunction, and bow themselves down in adoration of the One Almighty Holy Trinity."

<sup>12</sup> Id., 53: "For what writing presents to readers, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read. Hence, and chiefly to the nations, a picture is instead of reading."

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 2 vols. (Crestwood: St. Valdimir's Seminary, 1992); Christoph von Schönborn, *God's Human Face: the Christ-Icon*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, III, 13, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981): "There are many kinds of circumscription—inclusion, quantity, quality, position places, times shapes, bodies—all of which are denied in the case of God, for divinity has none of these. But Christ incarnate is revealed within these limitations. For He who is uncontainable was contained in the Virgin's womb; He who is measureless became three cubits tall; He who has no quality was formed in a certain quality; He who has no position stood, sat, and lay down; He who is beyond all measure of space, is placed in a manger; He who is more ancient than all time, grew to twelve years old; and He who is

not simply a photograph, but was the very likeness and *mimesis* of a *Person*, and thus venerable if He Who is portrayed is Divine; Divine Personhood is known through the created beauty of human likeness imitated.<sup>15</sup>

Eastern Iconography's reliance of the *objective* of Divine Revelation is reflected in the way icons are painted based upon the histories of the saints with very specific symbolism representing their heroic attributes. Thus, St. Lucy is identified by a silver plate of eyes, St. Anthony is often accompanied by a pig or is in a wilderness, St. John the Baptist in fur with a staff, Mary of Egypt emaciated. Specific and objective symbolism assist the viewer in identifying the person they encounter through image. The iconography is not created by the artist, and neither is the artistic style, but the iconographer literally *iconographein*, writes about Divine *historia* through the art of fashioning images. His art is a language of beauty that is proportionate to, integral in form, and radiating in its clarity a divine *historia* encompassing both physical and spiritual figures. The iconographer's art even bears semblance to Faith inasmuch that the Truths of Faith are handed down from God, while the iconographer's design and colour scheme is received from the Church as a tradition. Like Revelation, *religious imagery* speaks of God in man's own terms as Federico Borromeo says,

Colors are like words; once the eyes see them they sink into the mind just as do words heard by the ears. Correspondingly, making an initial sketch of a subject to be painted is like formulating the preliminary thoughts and arguments in a speech. This explains why the common, uneducated multitude can comprehend the language and discourse of painting. It has just as much influence among wise men, too. As Gregory of Nyssa rightly put it, painting speaks silently and with its aid the walls of a church becoming blooming meadows (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio laudatoria sancti ac magni martyris Theodori*).<sup>16</sup>

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without figure, is seen in the figure of men; and He who is incorporeal, assumed a body and said to his disciples, 'Take, eat, this is my body.' Therefore the same one is circumscribed and uncircumscribable, the latter in His divinity and the former in His humanity—even if the impious iconoclasts do not like it."

<sup>15</sup> Cf. John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, IV, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Federico Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, I, 2, in *Sacred Painting and Museum*, trans. and ed. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr., I Tatti Renaissance Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

For the Western Church, religious imagery has always taken into consideration the artistic time period. Many of the finest artists have given their talents to the service of the altar. One can only imagine Michelangelo's *Cristo Risorto* right beside the high altar of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Raphael's *St. Cecilia in ecstasy*, and a rather unknown piece, Guido Reni's *Most Holy Trinity* still in its original position used for the ancient roman rite. Romanesque, Renaissance or Baroque lent their respective artistic *ingenuity* for the portrayal of *Sacra Historia*.

There was a revelatory dimension to religious imagery, eyes were opened to the expanse of Faith; it allowed the worshipper a visual world that was divinely sacred and en-graced, not common or secular. It portrayed beauty perfected in redeemed saints, where stains of sin and distortion of passions were not present in their state of heavenly glory; a purity in the virgin's face unmatched in its porcelain skin tone. It was the Truth of Revelation allegorized through art. Thus, the Council of Trent wanted *religious imagery* to edify the layman unto greater devotion. Thus, the *cosa sacra* also pleased beyond the mere beauty of form, design, and the harmonious variation of colours. One's eyes of contemplation possessed a taste of that final *good* of union with the eternal, through the intimacy of the visible and understandable. It is sacramental. Truly contemplating a beautiful work of religious art was a foretaste of contemplating God Who is Beauty Itself.

Aquinas' own definition of the components of the beautiful, that for something to be beautiful it must have proportion, integrity and clarity reflect something in Trinitarian Life, thus raising the dignity of human discourse on artistic beauty, especially if the subject is sacred. Even in God there is *historia* as Eternal. In Trinitarian life there is a *narration*, or the procession from origin/mind to word, *logos*, Who is the *eikon tou Theou aoratou, image of the invisible God*.<sup>17</sup> The Logos differs from artistic imitation because it is God: *Quia Filius procedit ut Verbum, de cuius ratione est similitudo speciei ad id quo procedit* (For the Son proceeds as Word, whose ratio is to be a similitude of the features of that from which he proceeds);<sup>18</sup> the eternal word is a *mimesis* that radiates perfectly and simply the divine mind. Aquinas further says that unlike man who is made *ad imaginem Dei*, denoting an imperfect image, Christ on the other hand is the *perfecta Patris imago*, so much so is he in similitudo from which he pro-

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<sup>17</sup> Col 1:15.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 36, 1.

ceeds, that with the Father He is consubstantial. It is for this reason that John Damascene describes him as the primordial sacred image. Between the relation of Father to the Son, Origin to Image, there lies a relationship as a model to our own experience of a contemplative *visio*. In the Trinity, the *Logos* is *Deus*, who is not only known but also loved in the Spirit—that is, affection, divine desire proceeding forth from the Father by the will as the exhalation of love upon seeing the Son who is Divine Beauty. In God there is truly relational contemplation of Beauty: *Hic est Filius Meus dilectus in quo mihi complacui* (*This is my beloved, or dear, Son in whom I am very pleased*).<sup>19</sup>

A beautiful *mimesis* of the Christ's *historia* has to portray that natural accuracy of the model, and its spiritual/moral importance and meaning, even down to the nails of the Crucifixion. A painting of a crucifixion is understandable and thus, can be seen through contemplation, because it portrays the Truth in the portrayal of great suffering, and the mystery of redemption through the poetry of colour. It is this proportion to naturalism and divine meaning, established through written Scriptural word, that fosters enjoyment; and in a truly Damascenian sense where the image is an imitation of the Person, the contemplative/aesthetic experience is transformed into the ecstatic/unitive at finding a taste of the One Who is Truth, Goodness, and Beauty itself—there is joy at having finally apprehended Divine Personhood!

One of the greatest problems of modern religious imagery is the spirit of iconoclasm, an indifference to religious images. A contrast between a New York City parish church one hundred years ago, built by immigrants from Europe and the modern day suburban Catholic Church is striking. A church of St. Rita would have had a statue of the saint as the centerpiece to a *reredos*, today, it might be on the side—a white expanse of dry wall replaces gothic minutiae, the focus is a simple table facing the congregation, or even, the congregation itself. Is the whitewashed expanse of wall supposed to describe the sacred and heavenward orientation of the building? Is it really just that, a “gathering space” as it is so described in parish announcements? Where have all the images gone, is the crucifix supposed to be annihilated of its dark gravity when it is portrayed that Christ rises from within it? Is this proportionate to *historia*?

If there is a poverty of *religious imagery*, then there is no *biblia pauperum*, and thus no sacred beauty being an experience for all, no for-

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<sup>19</sup> Matt 3:17.



mation of man's common sense through the beauty of the sacred. Human senses are not asked to encounter the sacred: the way in which the medieval man of common sense interacted with the objective Revelation portrayed in something like stained glass, or the baroque's man of common sense, the *l'honnête homme*, being surrounded by masterful and complex altarpieces is lost in rational awe at a mystery beyond apprehension apprehended. The formation of what one prays by seeing/contemplation, and rejoicing in the vision, do not become the nourishment of belief for modern day Hooper if there are no images he can contemplate, thus, he could not imagine Brideshead Castle in its magnificence—there is no joy in iconoclasm. He is trapped. It is by sight man is asked to know and to love what in the end is divine, ineffable, “other”-worldly and which is seen through the glass, but darkly. Blue–Divinity, Red–Flesh, Gold–Sanctity, Wide eyes on visages—contemplation: this is the Logos of *religious imagery*, it is of a *rationalitas* which can be argued and moreover, contemplated, lauded, and tasted with the senses.

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### COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO THE RESTORATION OF SACRED ART

#### SUMMARY

In this paper, Sacred Art is examined as an imitation of *historia*. *Historia* interprets historical human events as empirical, material and real while seeking to understand their moral and spiritual significance. It is from *historia* that sacred art can be understood, where Christ and the saints are portrayed in the integrity of their human natures united to symbols representing Divinity or grace in order to present a visual/contemplative narrative. Mortimer Adler rightly sees that the vision of the beautiful is inherently *contemplative*, thus sacred iconography provides a language that can form the common sense of men and women.

KEYWORDS: *historia*, imitation, sacred art, contemplation, common sense.