

Sacred Art

By Cat Clark

ISSUE: What is sacred art? How is its significant in the life of the Church?

RESPONSE: Works of sacred art are symbols of faith. They represent realities that cannot be seen, stories that are already known, truths that we perceive. As symbols of faith, they foster deeper devotion and encourage a greater understanding of truth. Sacred art witnesses to the truths of our Catholic Faith.¹

DISCUSSION: What is art? Although many answers may be given to this question, the answer might be simplified by saying that art is a symbol, and *represents* something beyond itself. It *communicates* more than what it is.² In other words, it is a big piece of wood or a piece of canvas covered with gesso and oil based paint, but it represents and communicates man's hopes and dreams, aspirations and struggles, miseries and joys, loves and hatreds, needs and strengths, truths he has learned and his yearning for truth, his probing of himself and the universe in which he lives.³ As a book is more than ink on paper because it communicates a meaning far beyond the materials out of which it is made, art is more than just a carved block of stone or a molded and fired chunk of clay.

As our Holy Father notes in *Letter to Artists* (LA), "The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection. In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty" (no. 3). Sacred art represents the good and beautiful. And, as God creates the good and beautiful, the artist creates the art that represents it.

CREATED TO BE CREATORS

When God, the Creator, called the heavens and the earth and all their inhabitants into existence in the beginning, He "saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good," (Gen. 1:31). As Pope John Paul II teaches, "In perceiving that all He had created was good, God saw that it was beautiful as well" (LA, 3). Among His creatures, man and woman were specially made in His own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). God's own creation is the beginning of art, for not only did He create beautiful things, He also created human "creators" with an inherent desire to imitate Him in this regard (cf. LA, 1).

Art has been with humanity since its very beginning. From paintings to carvings to beautifully decorated utensils imbued with significant meaning, art predates the earliest historical records we know. The beautiful and mysterious cave paintings in Altamira, Spain, and Lascaux, France, are a testimony to the ancient artistic inclinations of man. Most early writing began in hieroglyphic form, when men represented their ideas and sounds with symbolic pictures. Some Christian authors, like G.K. Chesterton, have implied that art may perhaps be the best evidence that man is radically different from other earthly creatures. After all:

Pithecanthropus did not draw a reindeer badly and Homo Sapiens draw it well. The higher animals did not draw better and better portraits; the dog did not paint better in his best period than his early manner as a jackal; the wild horse was not an Impressionist and the race-horse a Post-Impressionist. All we can say of this notion of reproducing things in shadow or representative shape is that it exists nowhere in nature except in man; and that we cannot even talk about it without treating man as something separate from nature.⁴

Art is something fundamental to being human. In every time and place, man has engaged in some form of art or craft.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE WORSHIP OF THE LORD

Art has an important, integral place in Jewish and Christian history. When the Lord brought His people out of slavery in Egypt and gave them His commandments, He also instructed them to build, weave, carve, and otherwise make many beautiful objects to be used in His worship (e.g., Ex. 25-31). These included the

golden Ark of the Covenant decorated with cherubim (Ex. 25:1-22), the blue and scarlet and purple curtains and veils decorated with cherubim (Ex. 26:1 & 31-35), the elaborately crafted vestments of Aaron with colors and bells and jewels (Ex. 28), etc. The tabernacle which housed the Ark, though in many ways only a temporary provision, and everything within it were to be treated and handled with the utmost respect (Num. 4). When Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem for the worship of the Lord, it was also gorgeously ornamented (1Kings 6-8). Two cherubim, approximately fifteen feet high and wide and covered with gold, stood in the sanctuary with the Ark (1Kings 6:23-28). Carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and flowers decorated the walls (1Kings 6:29), doors (6:32-35), and furniture (7:36-37). When it was finished, the Lord consecrated the Temple for His worship (1Kings 9:1-3). The Temple, the house of the Lord, was a place that inspired awe and reverence as well as joy (Ps. 5:7, 27:4, 65:4, 69:9, 122:1, 134, 135:1-3). Although apart from these descriptions the Ark and the Temple are no longer with us, we know from the excavations of ancient synagogues that art has always played a role in Jewish worship of the Lord.

Wherever we find ancient places and churches where Christians used to congregate for worship, like the catacombs of Rome, we also find art. Some of the biblical themes depicted in catacomb paintings and carvings include Adam naming the animals, Moses receiving the Law, Samson slaying the Philistines, the three youths in the fiery furnace, Tobias and Raphael, Mary holding the infant Jesus, the wedding at Cana, the loaves and fishes, the Good Shepherd, Jesus being beaten in the crown of thorns, Peter baptizing, and many more. Often, Old Testament and New Testament themes were combined to represent how the Old Testament prefigured the New.⁵

As Christianity became more popular and public, Christians built more churches and cathedrals, richly decorated with paintings and icons, carvings, and mosaics of Christ the Ruler of all, events of salvation history and images from scripture, and the glorified saints who had gone before them. Christians did not hesitate to describe the artistic and architectural marvels of these churches. The Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, also known as the Cathedral of Holy Wisdom, appeared “to hang from the heavens as though on a golden chain.”⁶

Some Christians, in misguided zeal, sought to eliminate representational art from the churches in the 8th century. They believed that Exodus 20:3-6 forbade the making of any representational art, in spite of the biblical evidence to the contrary (e.g., Ex. 25-31). In response to the “iconoclastic controversy,” the seventh ecumenical council, Nicæa II, was convened. This Council responded that representational art was inextricably linked with orthodox faith in the true incarnation of the Word of God, and defended it on the basis of biblical and traditional precedent. The “triumph of orthodoxy,” the restoration of the holy icons, was aided by some of the greatest biblical apologists of all time, like St. John of Damascus.⁷

As time passed, new architectural technologies and styles were employed to improve and highlight the beauty of church buildings. In the West, for example, dark and blocky Romanesque architecture gave way to the soaring Gothic style, which allowed churches to be both larger and lighter. With more space for windows, Gothic architecture also encouraged the cultivation of stained glass masterpieces. Man’s artistic inclinations were employed in every opportunity to glorify God. Altars, linens and vestments, chalices, manuscripts, furniture—everything bespoke the splendor of the heavenly kingdom Christians belong to in Christ. If ever the people were silent, the very stones would cry out (cf. Luke 19:37-40)!

NATURE OF SACRED ART

When viewing and evaluating a work of art, one should consider the technical merits of the piece, its overall success in communicating its intended meaning, the worthiness of the subject matter and meaning it conveys, and in what ways its meaning is good and / or evil. Every artistic work deserves just and educated⁸ consideration of each point, and no work should be dismissed without honest and probing reflection. Even when a work of art is ugly and the viewer finds it immediately repulsive, this contemplation is still necessary. Remember that “even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption” (LA, 10). Though art elicits an emotional response, great art does more.

Pope John Paul II touched on the true nature of art in these words:

For [the artist] art offers both a new dimension and an exceptional mode of expression for his spiritual growth. Through his works, the artist speaks to others and communicates with them.... Every genuine artistic intuition goes beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality's surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery. The intuition itself springs from the depths of the human soul, where the desire to give meaning to one's own life is joined by the fleeting vision of beauty and of the mysterious unity of things (LA, 2, 6).

“Sacred art” must at least be art, as described above, but it is even more specific. Sacred art is “the ‘summit’ of religious art” (LA, 11). Sacred art includes all the objects specially set apart or consecrated for use in divine worship. These works of art, including furniture and architecture, should be “worthy, becoming, and beautiful, signs and symbols of things supernatural.”⁹ They ought to depict articles of the Christian faith or things, events, and people sacred to the faith. Sacred art must be consistent with and conducive to true Christian faith, morals, and piety, so it must also have true artistic merit and avoid “mediocrity or pretense.”¹⁰ The functional should “always [be] wedded to the creative impulse inspired by a sense of the beautiful and an intuition of the mystery” (LA, 8). Sacred art is *never* superfluous to the Church:

In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, *the Church needs art*. Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. It must therefore translate into meaningful terms that which is in itself ineffable. Art has a unique capacity to take one or another facet of the message and translate it into colors, shapes and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look or listen. It does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery.... I appeal especially to you, Christian artists: I wish to remind each of you that, beyond functional considerations, the close alliance that has always existed between the Gospel and art means that you are invited to use your creative intuition to enter into the heart of the mystery of the Incarnate God and at the same time into the mystery of man.¹¹

The Church has, for this reason, always sought out, educated people in, and sponsored the sacred arts (Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 122-123, 127; *Letter to Artists*, nos. 7-14). The Vatican II council fathers actively promoted the study of the history and development of sacred art to better enable its appreciation, preservation, and encouragement.¹²

MAN THE ARTIST

Art, with all its perils and glories, is a vocation, a calling from God built into the individual man or woman. This “divine spark,” this talent, must be made to bear fruit for the enrichment and service of neighbor, society, culture, and humanity (cf. Mt. 25:14-30; LA, 3, 4). The growth is given by the Holy Spirit:

Every genuine inspiration... contains some tremor of that “breath” with which the Creator Spirit suffused the work of creation from the very beginning. Overseeing the mysterious laws governing the universe, the divine breath of the Creator Spirit reaches out to human genius and stirs its creative power. He touches it with a kind of inner illumination which brings together the sense of the good and the beautiful, and He awakens energies of mind and heart which enable it to conceive an idea and give it form in a work of art. It is right then to speak, even if only analogically, of “moments of grace,” because the human being is able to experience in some way the Absolute who is utterly beyond (LA, 15).

Not without reason is art “classed among the noblest activities of man's genius.”¹³

Art is the vocation of *every* man and woman because they are each created in the image of their Creator:

Through his “artistic creativity” man appears more than ever “in the image of God,” and he accomplishes this task above all in shaping the wondrous “material” of his own humanity and then exercising creative dominion over the universe which surrounds him.... Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, *all men and*

women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life; in a certain sense, they are to make it a work of art, a masterpiece (LA, 1, 2 added emphasis).

¹ Because the scope of this FAITH FACT is so broad, we earnestly encourage readers to delve into the profoundly rich resources on which it is based, including the Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*; Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*; and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 1145-1162, 2500-2503, 2515.

² The words "represent" and "communicate" should be read with all their power. Art and symbols make their meaning present and give it to their audience.

³ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 62.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, chapter one "The Man in the Cave" (New York: Image Books; 1925), 35. Some higher primates have been said to draw and paint, but only when provoked and provided equipment by humans—never on their own impulse.

⁵ J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978).

⁶ Procopius' *De Aedificiis* quoted by Christa Schug-Wille, *Art of the Byzantine World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1969), 113.

⁷ Look for St. John of Damascus' *On the Divine Images* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press) recommended at the end of this FAITH FACT. Cf. also *Letter to Artists*, no. 7.

⁸ Just as a novel cannot communicate with the illiterate, a work of art may not communicate with the artistically illiterate. Even a small amount of artistic education can do wonders for a person's understanding.

⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 122.

¹⁰ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 124.

¹¹ *Letter to Artists*, nos. 12 & 14, emphasis added. Cf. also the comments on the necessity of architecture with artistic merit in no. 12. Because sacred art is indispensable to the Church, "ordinaries should ensure that sacred furnishings and works of value are not disposed of or destroyed, for they are ornaments in God's house" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 126).

¹² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 129. Although article 129 is explicitly addressed to clerics and the professors who train them, this advice is—without question—universally beneficial.

¹³ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 122.

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