

2013

## Visual language and the religious aesthetic in the 21st century

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This conference paper was originally published as:

McCarthy, A. (2013). Visual language and the religious aesthetic in the 21st century. *Addressing the Sacred through Literature and the Arts*.

This conference paper is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at [http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo\\_conference/13](http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_conference/13). For more information, please contact [researchonline@nd.edu.au](mailto:researchonline@nd.edu.au).



## Addressing the Sacred through Literature and the Arts

Friday 2 August – Saturday 3 August 2013

Australian Catholic University, 25A Barker Road, Strathfield NSW 2135

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### VISUAL LANGUAGE AND THE RELIGIOUS AESTHETIC IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Do we have a visual language in contemporary art that adequately presents the religious experience? Prior to 200 years ago, museums and art galleries that we visit today did not exist (p. 9).<sup>1</sup> Art was commissioned for specific purposes and related strongly to that purpose in the environment in which it existed. Sacred art was mostly in the confines of chapels, cathedrals, local churches, shrines and other places dedicated to the sacred. The work of the artist was not called a 'painting' or a 'sculpture' or known by the name of the artist. You would not say 'this is a Titian' or 'this is a Caravaggio'. Art existed in an environment that was integral to its purpose. Artists used a sacred language so that the visual theology could be 'read'. Michelangelo had theologians appointed by the Pope to familiarise him with various theologies to execute his commissions. Pietro Galatino was most likely the one directed to assist with an understanding of the Trinity, and Giles of Viterbo played an important part in mediating Michelangelo's pictorial composition of the Trinity<sup>2</sup> (p. 188).

In examining Michelangelo's work, *The Holy Family*, we can read the theology once the language is revealed to us:

Trinitarian structure

Joseph = Father

Baby = Son

Mary = Spirit – the creative nature of God

Red = divine love – incarnation – God became flesh and blood

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<sup>1</sup> André Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Francis Price (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, Limited, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich W. Pfeiffer, *The Sistine Chapel: A New Vision*, trans. Steven Lindberg (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2007).

Yellow = spiritual discernment – active in humankind at all times to draw us into the relational existence of God/Trinity

Blue = colour of heavenly truth, the heavens

Circle = perfect and eternal nature of God

*Ignudi* in the back ground = two on the left are Adam and Eve appealing to the Son, three on the right are the Father, in green with the Son in front, and the Spirit pulling the Son towards the ancestors and proceeding from the Father and the Son.

John the Baptist emerges from a sarcophagus looking towards the Trinity of family and yet compositionally connected to the *Ignudi*

Classical proportions established by the horizontal division formed by the sarcophagus

In our contemporary world art has become exhibitionist which brings a very different dimension to both the viewer and the artist. “In China, the full enjoyment of works of art necessarily involved ownership, except where religious art was concerned; above all it demanded their isolation. A painting was not exhibited, but unfurled before an art lover in a fitting state of grace; its function was to deepen and enhance his communion with the universe.” (p. 10)<sup>3</sup> By placing artworks in a gallery we intellectualise them and so diminish our capacity to enter into the conversation. This culture has infiltrated our consciousness so much that sacred places have become art galleries as well. A visit to St Peter’s Basilica in Rome will offer a profound view of Renaissance and Baroque art but will prove difficult for those seeking a religious or spiritual experience. In my travels, the only place that offered a spiritual experience as well as an art lover’s delight was the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. It is still a liturgical space, filled with the tears and prayers of millions of people over the last 800 years. Photography without permission is banned and prayer encouraged so the works of Giotto and his contemporaries become a source of spiritual enlightenment, not a spectacle.

Some years ago I visited the National Gallery in Melbourne to see an exhibition of Russian icons (as that is also an area of interest for me both academically and spiritually). I expected to be moved in some way but found myself

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<sup>3</sup> Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*.

examining them as objects. In contrast, when the icon of Sedes Sapientiae visited Notre Dame University in Fremantle it was a deeply religious and spiritual experience to ritually receive it and pray with it.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw further diminishment of art in sacred places as pious illustrations and statuary that was mass produced and untouched by an artist's hand became the norm, particularly in liturgical spaces in Australia. Images placed in churches and other places of prayer, particularly through the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the present, are reminders to engage in a particular devotion, not an art work that draws one into the life of the sacred in the special way that is made possible only through art (three images: Sacred Heart of Jesus, Immaculate Heart of Mary, Divine Mercy). These are not works of art and have not been touched by an artist.

Such a profound cultural shift drew philosophers to try and unpack the question 'what is art?'

### **What is Art? (Tolstoy, 1898 – after 15 years of thinking and talking)**

- Denies that art is associated with pleasure and beauty
- Activity of art based on the “capacity of a man (sic) to receive another man’s expression of feeling and to experience those feelings himself” (p. 121)<sup>4</sup>
- “Art begins when one person with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications.” (p. 121-122)
- Art is “one of the indispensable means of communication without which mankind could not exist” (p. 125)<sup>5</sup>

The Blake Prize and the Mandorla Art Award have sought to engage artists in contemplation and expression of the sacred through various media in order to rebuild contributions of artists to the world of the sacred. The Mandorla Art Award particularly focuses on a Scriptural theme and so anchors the

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<sup>4</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art? and essays on art*, trans. Aylmer Maude, The World's Classics (London: Oxford University Press, 1930).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

contemplation of the sacred in our ancient texts but calls for a contemporary expression. A difficulty for such expression is that artists and the wider community do not have the rich language of symbols present in older traditions and hence artists have to find other ways to communicate, or find ways in which they can revive the language. So, what kind of visual language is relevant to the religious aesthetic?

Another response in terms of religious response was recently in *Vogue*. The behaviour of our new Pope has moved the artists who design clothes to reconsider their aesthetics.

Religious or spiritual – artists have approached Mandorla with that question

Religious – requires that in some way the artist connects with the viewer using a visual language that draws from the beliefs and tenets of the common religion. There is a need to be aware of the ‘story’ and be able to communicate such material.

### **2012 Winner John Paul**

Born of a woman nurtured by her, freed by her and finally mourned by her. If Mary loved her son and we are told that she did, then all women loved him. Her love came without conditions, without a quid pro quo caveat, not the stereotypical Jewish mother that we hear of today, but a genuine love that left him free to choose or not choose her companionship. I represented Jesus as a fully evolved man who felt no shame in his attraction to women and was not frightened by their attraction to him. The drawing is set out like a 1950's cartoon where Jesus the alpha male, has just roared up on his motorcycle in this case his donkey. Other influences that make up this work are Roman sarcophagi and northern Renaissance engravings. In memory of Paul Tyler.

### **“Palm Sunday” – John Paul, gouache and pastel, 120cm x 120cm, 2012.**

The theology of the artwork.

John Paul’s “Palm Sunday” is a very rich symbolic view that stems from the theme of the Mandorla Art Award taken from St Paul’s letter to the Galatians

4:4. : “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law”.

Born of a woman, Jesus learned to love through the love of his family, and particularly the love of his mother Mary. Love comes in many forms and in this image Jesus is surrounded by women. The sensual woman in the front of the artwork carries a basket of fruits and bread, fecund symbols representing our procreative gift that directly connects us to the creative nature of God. Jesus, with his Jewish curl and tranquil face, reaches out to her lovingly and gently. The olive fruit and leaves above him is a further symbol of the bounty of God’s gifts to us all. The woman has turned her back to the pagan image on the wall behind and reaches for Jesus instead.

Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem to confront the Temple leaders with a conscious reference to the prophet Zechariah 9:9-10 where the king comes “triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey”. John Paul comfortably jumbles the narrative with other iconographical details such as the crown of thorns and the crucifix, an emblem of his death, held by a woman, possibly his mother, in the background. The crown of thorns has a grape vine leaf attached to it giving a connection to John’s gospel where Jesus describes himself as the vine, necessary for the growth of the branches – the development of Christianity. Christian artists through the centuries have often put many parts of the story into the one image so that we can explore the narrative through the one view.

The woman near Jesus’ right shoulder is serene and shows signs of wealth recognising the women who supported Jesus in his ministry through their own resources (Luke 8:2-3). The young woman to the right holds a newly hatched chicken, symbol of new life and resurrection. The palms present over the archway certainly image the palms used to honour Jesus on this fateful ride and as a further symbol in Christian art they represent martyrdom with a vine winding its way around them to anchor Jesus in this reality too. The old Jew skulking off in the background symbolises the betrayal of the Jews in relegating the Law and work of God to mere words rather than a just and loving way of living. On the archway that links Jesus, the women and the Jew are some of the ancient symbols that are now used for the evangelists, linking this work directly to the gospels.

John Paul has used a very interesting style in that he has created the work in a monochromatic way with all the action happening in a very shallow plain, just as in the bas relief works of early Christian sarcophagi. His use of this style places his work firmly in the Christian tradition. John Paul, like other great artists, has been able to encourage us into an understanding of Jesus, who was born of a woman, born under the law and fully realised in his suffering, death and resurrection.

### **2004 Joint Winner**

**Scriptural Theme:** Whatsoever You Do for the Least of them, You Do for Me (Matthew 25:40)

Lea Kuhaupt

*Verse for the millions*

Acrylic on canvas

127.5cm x 118cm

Leah Kuhaupt – The composition of this work by Lea Kuhaupt is very orderly, formal and symmetrical which leads the viewer to contemplation and stillness. However, embedded within the geometric arrangement the convergence of the circles painted in gold form the Star of David and symbolise that individuals make up “the least of them” but that the least are necessary for the Kingdom of Heaven. The viewer is invited into the work to respond in a sensory and spiritual manner. The work is not painterly, but rather fastidiously detailed in the application of paint and would have provided much contemplative time in its execution as a work of art. The stillness, draws you in, two levels of the cross, poem within, icon-like indentation for the central focus, meditative experience to paint, the ‘least’ carefully executed in paint, the ‘many’ form the cross on two levels.

Malraux, André. *Museum without Walls*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert and Francis Price. London: Martin Secker & Warburg, Limited, 1967.

Pfeiffer, Heinrich W. *The Sistine Chapel: A New Vision*. Translated by Steven Lindberg. New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2007.

Tolstoy, Leo. *What Is Art? And Essays on Art*. Translated by Aylmer Maude. The World's Classics. London: Oxford University Press, 1930.