

Art and Religious Belief: Lessons for Contemporary Theory from Renaissance and Baroque Painting

Else Marie Bukdahl

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to address the relationship between art and religious belief in the Middle Ages, and particularly during the Renaissance and the Baroque. There is special focus on the themes of art as religion and embodied belief in Christian art in the Renaissance and the Baroque viewed in a somaesthetic perspective. These themes are analysed primarily through interpretations of the works by artists including Raphael, Veronese, Titian, and Caravaggio.*

Keywords: *somaesthetics, embodied creation and perception, simulacra, transfiguration, meliorist goal, sacred and profane love, embodied experience, Eros and Agape, the active viewer.*

In the Baroque, we encounter a new notion of an independent artistic space of cognition and experience, and the notion of an embodied creation and perception that is much stronger than in the art of the Renaissance. We also encounter new connections between art and life. These interpretations can be charted through many aspects of somaesthetics, which specifically profiles these connections. Somaesthetics can also create nuances in the understanding of the relationship between faith and visual art, which Danto espoused, and which Shusterman has examined more critically. The Italian philosopher Mario Perniola's interpretation of Ignatius Loyola's image theory demonstrates that Loyola's work constitutes a precursor – in a different way and with another aim – of the aesthetics of the phenomenon and the body. This aesthetic mindset, which is particularly apparent in the visualization apparent in Caravaggio's paintings, is connected to a concept of viewers' involvement in the artistic process, in which an awareness of their own presence and their relationship with the environment arises. This relation between perception and bodily behaviour and the viewer's involvement in the artwork also anticipates some of the main themes in somaesthetics.

Introduction

All known cultures, even the most primitive, have had some form of artistic activity occupying a central place in society. This activity was often a visualization of their faith and was regarded in prehistoric times as important for the survival of society. Cave paintings, for example, date back some 40,000 years and may have had a powerful ritual function. Hunters probably believed that drawing animals on the dark cave walls would cause real animals out on the tundra to become spellbound, making them easier to kill.

In historic times, religious systems emerged, both as major, a very complex religion, and minor, a less complicated religion. In their respective ways, these systems created the spiritual base and values that became the foundation of the systems of faith and understandings of the meaning of life and interpretations of death as a condition of life in their societies, based on the

sensory experiences present in the culture.

Christianity, despite all its internal conflicts in the theological realm and on the battlefield, formed many of our values and our faith in the West from after the fall of the Roman Empire and until the Age of Enlightenment. Particularly in France the Enlightenment created opportunities for science, art, and other disciplines to become independent. A process of liberation from the church began to prevail in society. Secularization did generate a new understanding of art, which sidelined Christianity, other religions and different philosophical systems. However, although secularization became increasingly dominant and also very fruitful in society, there were still many connections between first, and foremost, Christianity and other fields of knowledge and the arts.

“Art as Religion,” “Art as Transfiguration,” and the Teachings of Zen

With the increasing dominance of Symbolism at the end of the 19th century, and Modernism at the beginning of the 20th century, a new understanding of art started to prevail in cultural life. Stephan Mallarmé was very significant in the poetic interpretation of this concept. He tried - with great difficulty - to make of the poem a religion of the future.¹ This view achieved new manifestations with the birth of abstract art and in the work of artists like Kandinsky, who created theories derived from the devoted spiritual study of Theosophy, and who was informed by an intense relationship between music and color.

A significant tendency in the art, aesthetics and philosophy of the 20th century, the new millennium thus became artistic interpretations and analyses of how the arts assumed the role of religion in revealing the general conditions and true essence of life. The various art forms were considered to have broader, more intense, and more convincing interpretations of our lives and the world than traditional religions. And in contrast to traditional religions, the visual arts and other arts have not been involved in persecution and warfare, and when they have been intolerant, it has only been in an intellectual context. It is, however, important to bear in mind that religions like Christianity have also been central culture bearers. The Christian message of love is there to suffuse our world and enshrine human rights in the many layers of society. However, human beings have frequently failed to fulfill these claims appropriately. Christianity has undergone many developments and also many sorely needed purification processes, and this is an ongoing development.

The question is how can art bear this cultural inheritance into the future in an innovative way? With this question, it is also important to get a more nuanced understanding of how artists have interpreted religions and what place they have occupied, not only in a religious context, but also in society as a whole.

The arguments for art replacing religion were very influential, but were naturally also hotly debated. Richard Shusterman has in a very loyal, and in several instances, very unexpected way, both analysed and criticised this in a somaesthetic perspective. He wants

to explore the idea that art provides a useful, even superior, substitute for religion, one that is free from the latter's many disadvantages and that should be vigorously championed as an alternative that could eventually free our transcultural world from the hostile divisiveness and backward-looking attitudes that religions have inspired and instead lead us toward greater understanding, peace, and harmony.²

1 See Bertrand, Marchal, *La religion de Mallarmé: poésie, mythology et religion*, 1998, pp. 14-16.

2 Richard Shusterman, “Art and Religion,” *Journal of Aesthetics Education*, Fall, 2008, vol. 42, No 3, pp. 1 - 18. This essay was originally written and delivered as a plenary lecture for the 17th International Congress of Aesthetics, held in Ankara, Turkey, on July 9-13, 2007, and devoted to the theme of “Aesthetics Bridging Cultures.” See http://www.deweycenter.uj.edu.pl/tekst_shusterman.html.

He points out that “art sustains the valuable features of religion while minimizing or refining out the bad.”³ But he is also aware that art has not been allocated an easy task. His own aim is to formulate an aesthetic in which experience occupies a central position. Experience has always had an important place in his own life and work. He describes it as follows:

Experience forms the generating core of my pragmatist philosophy, in theory and in practice. Most of my philosophical views derive from experiences outside the library, seminar room and the philosophical texts I’ve read. Those valuable and cherished texts have served me principally as a source of scholarly encouragement, argument and useful terminology for what I have learned from adventures of living and from reflecting on such experience. Experience, for me, implies experimentation, creative exploration and involvement rather than mere passive reception, mechanical habit or distanced observation.⁴

Other philosophers have transferred the role of religion to art before Shusterman, but have posed few critical questions. The founder of analytical philosophy, G.E. Moore, and the pragmatist Richard Rorty are cases in point. John Dewey, one of the primary figures associated with the philosophy of pragmatism, maintains that “the moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive.”⁵ He also points out that the arts have the power to improve, beautify and intensify social and public life. Like Shusterman, Dewey “holds the pragmatist ideal that the highest art is the art of living with the goal of salvation in *this* world rather than the heaven of an afterlife.”⁶ Shusterman, however, adds, that when Dewey rejects institutional religion, he “seems strangely unpragmatic in advocating ideal ends while regarding the concrete cultural means—our institutional practices—as irrelevant.”⁷ If we look closely at contemporary society we will see that under the secular fields of aesthetics and philosophy there are clear and less clear connections to religion. Analysing the relationship between art and religion or art and faith is a major project. To clarify aspects of this in a more succinct manner, Shusterman refers to Arthur Danto’s notion of “transfiguration.”

Arthur Danto, one of the most renowned contemporary aestheticians, has developed an interpretation of art’s almost sacred role in an impressive, original and very influential way. Danto agrees with Hegel that philosophy is capable of a greater universality than art, which must always embody its meanings in particular works, but it is not cognitively or spiritually superior to art. Danto is convinced that “philosophy is simply hopeless in dealing with large human issues.”⁸ The core of his notion of “transfiguration” is that in works of art our world is transformed - or transfigured - into a higher, almost sacred, ontological status, which is entirely different from our world’s domain of ordinary things. As an example of this kind of “transfiguration,” he mentions *The Transfiguration* (1518-29) (figure 1), which was Raphael’s last work.⁹ It was left unfinished at his death, but his pupil Giulio Romano put the finishing touches to it. In this monumental painting, the perfectly proportioned, sensual and harmonious style of the High Renaissance, which focused on beauty, worldly love and the soft light of Christ’s

3 Shusterman, “*Art and Religion*,” p. 5.

4 “A Philosopher in Darkness and Light,” and in French translation, “Un Philosophe en ombre et en lumière,” in *Lucidité: Vues de l’intérieur/Lucidity: Inward Views*, ed. Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011), p. 280.

5 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), Perigee trade Paperback edition, August 2005, p. 338.

6 Shusterman, “*Art and Religion*,” p. 6.

7 Shusterman, “*Art and Religion*,” p. 7.

8 Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 2003, p. 137.

9 Danto, 2003, p. 89.

love for us, was replaced by a new style in the dramatic expressive style of Mannerism. Here, the transfiguration represents a prefiguration of the Last Judgment and a vision of the hereafter. Shusterman highlights the fact that this work “wonderfully conveys the alleged truth of classical Christian transcendentalism (just as Hegel’s philosophical idealism does) while just as superbly implying its artistic analogue—that art’s transfiguration is an ‘elevation and separation’ into some higher otherworldliness.”¹⁰



Figure 1: Raphaël. *The Transfiguration*. 1518-1520. Tempera on wood. 159 x 109. Pinacoteca Apostolica, Vatican, Rome.

Shusterman notes that Danto’s conception of art contains traces of the Catholic faith. Because “if the religious tenor of transfiguration did not still somehow resonate with our religious sensibility, with our religious experience, faith, or imagination,” then Danto’s aesthetic would not have had as much influence as it has achieved. But even if Shusterman admires Danto’s “religious mission of transforming and re-enchanting life,” he is unable to accept its “transcendental Catholic imagery.”¹¹

10 Shusterman, “Art and Religion”, p. 11.

11 Richard Shusterman, “Art as religion. Transfigurations of Danto’s Dao,” in *Danto and his Critics*, second edition, ed. by Mark Rollins, Wiley- Blackwell 2012, p. 258.

Vlad Morariu aptly points out that:

Richard Shusterman tried to show that Danto's attempt to increase the number of types of ontological entities was unnecessary. His alternative is a deflationist approach, although it also parallels a religious model—that of Zen. However, I believe that it is worth paying further attention to Shusterman's idea that art's transfiguration is reduced to a "suffusion of ordinary objects and events with intensified meaning and value through heightened attention, care, and insight."¹²

Shusterman is, however, most interested in the tenets of "Upper West Side Buddhism," where Danto points out, that "the beauty of Zen was that there were no sacred texts and no special practice. One could practice it as writer or a painter, but also as a butcher."¹³

Zen has a central place in somaesthetics, because it has a pragmatist notion of immanent transfiguration of ordinary objects and a close relationship between art and life. When Zen principles are practiced, art can be a peaceful journey and a path to self-realization to achieve calmness, serenity and concentration. The arts focus on the importance of the unity of the mind and the body. And this unity is also very important for the creation and perception of art. Garden art has a central place in Zen philosophy and practice. Zen-gardens like *Ryōan-ji* in Kyoto, Japan (figure 2) "take our mind away from the paltry cares of the day and serve to open us to take another look at our lives from a wider perspective." There are two fundamental principles in the creation of a Zen-garden, "one, the recreation of natural habitat and, two, the attempt to appeal to the less rational and more intuitive sense of the viewer."¹⁴ Both principles are embodied in the Zen-garden. *Ryōan-ji* is adjoined to a sub-temple of the Daitoku-ji Buddhist complex, which was constructed in 1502. The garden was rebuilt in the Showa period (1926-89).

General Reflections on Embodied Belief in Christian Art in a Somaesthetic

Prominent interpretations of the relationship between religion and art from a somaesthetic view in the art and aesthetics of the Renaissance, the Baroque and its roots will be highlighted and put into perspective. These are perceptions that are in many respects an extension of somaesthetics and can be clarified through aspects of this aesthetic. But they can also contribute to broadening the understanding of the connection between religion, art and embodied belief.

In Christian art, interpretations of the relations between art, life and embodied belief have also occupied a fairly central place. Artists have frequently worked at activating the feelings, senses, thoughts and imaginations of the viewer to help to improve living conditions for human beings and to create a greater space for experience and cognition. It is precisely these characteristics that are highlighted in the analyses of art in somaesthetics, but seldom in a Christian context. Somaesthetics has some reservations—but always in a tolerant optic—towards Christianity, because it is "based on a transcendental theology with an eternal, unchanging, disembodied God existing apart from the world" and is characterized by "an elevated distance from the ordinary material world."¹⁵ Christianity is based on a transcendental theology, but, particularly after the Reformation in the North and the Counter-Reformation in the South, has been dominated by the concept of an embodied God with more focus on this world than the

12 Vlad Morairu, "Transfiguration," *Atlas of transformation*, 28.2. 1989. See <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/t/transfiguration/transfiguration-vlad-morariu.html>

13 Shusterman, "Art as religion. Transfigurations of Danto's Dao," *Danto and his critics*, p. 258.

14 Tom Wright, *Zen Gardens text*, in *Zen Gardens* by Tom Wright and Mizuno Katsuhiko, Suiko Books, 1990, p.68. *Ryogen-in* is a Zen Rock Garden or a dry landscape garden from the Showa periode - Kyoto, Japan.

15 Shusterman, "Art and religion," p. 9.

hereafter. Christianity is not—in contrast to religions like Islam—a static entity. In the modern era, it has mostly been very open to critique, undergone many changes and been characterized by ongoing purifications.



Figure 2: Ryōan-ji Zen-garden. Showa period. Late 15th century. Zen garden. Kyoto, Japan.

Finally, not only the artists working with Christian motifs, like Leonardo da Vinci, but also many other artists and aestheticians, have repeatedly asserted that art is more open than the disciplines in which concepts and categories have prevalence. And visual art may also contain a freer view than even its “sister genre”—poetry—can communicate. In addition, visual art has a unique expressive power. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has explained in an original and clear manner how visual artists communicate an understanding of reality that verbal language cannot express in the same way, and in certain instances, is unable to encompass at all. Leonardo da Vinci wrote of the knowledge expressed in what he called a “pictorial science”:

[This science] “does not speak with words [and still less with numbers] but with *oeuvres* which exist in the visible just as natural things do and which nevertheless communicate through those things to all the generations of the universe.” This silent science, says Rilke [apropos of Rodin], brings into *oeuvre* the forms of things “whose seal has not been broken”; it comes from the eye and addresses itself to the eye. We must understand the eye as the “window of the soul.”¹⁶

16 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, 1964, p. 186. Merleau-Ponty has found the quotations from Leonardo da Vinci’s texts in Robert Delaunay’s book, *Du cubisme à l’art abstrait*, Paris, 1957, p. 175. See also Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, Paris, 1928, p. 150.

Theologians and philosophers have endeavored to reconcile Christianity with the dominant beliefs of the periods, just as they have highlighted the role of the Christian message in this world. These endeavors have often resulted in church artists visualizing this message in an open and transparent manner. How has the verbal and visual dialogue between Christianity and philosophy been characterized, particularly in the Renaissance and the Baroque periods and in their origins in the Islamic Golden Age and in the Middle Ages? And how have these dialogues gained significance for the attempts to improve living conditions, stimulate art and science, and connect the body and mind?

The Dialogue between Christianity, Philosophy, and Art in The Golden Islamic Age and the Middle Ages

The great Arab Andalusian philosopher Averroes lived in the *Islamic Golden Age* in the rather tolerant Caliphate in Spain, where Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexisted and worked together peacefully in the fields of art, philology, philosophy and science. Averroes lived in a time particularly suited to combining a broad understanding of philosophy, sciences and religion. His “dialectical treatment of the role of religion and philosophy in human affairs and his theory of knowledge remain relevant to the contemporary science and religion discourse.”¹⁷

The relationship between philosophy, science and religion was always in focus in his works. He was particularly admired for his commentaries of Aristotle’s works, which were largely forgotten in Western Europe at the time. Latin translations of Averroes’ works made Aristotle very well known outside Spain. He had a great influence on Christian Europe and has been described as the creator of secular thought in Western Europe. He opened channels both in the Islamic and the Christian world, inspired new dialogues between religion and philosophy, and highlighted the importance of finding fresh solutions to the problems and challenges of our world.

Thomism dominated church life in the West during the Middle Ages. It was founded by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and consisted of a combination of Christian theology and the philosophy of Aristotle. His studies of Aristotle’s epistemology and ethics were inspired by Averroes’ works and created fertile dialogues in the beginning, but he ended up constructing a firmly established theological system that culminated in the *Summa Theologica* (1265-1274). Aristotle’s approach was used to comprehend and substantiate a Christian worldview, not as a guideline for open epistemological discussion. He was convinced that the arguments and concepts from the pagan Aristotle and Muslim Averroes were too controversial in the Catholic Church of his day. However, Thomas Aquinas also argues for tolerance, not only of culturally different people (such as Jews and Muslims), but also of their public rituals.

Bertrand Russell has described the essence of the critique—from the Middle Ages and in the centuries that followed—of the final versions of Thomism as follows:

He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an inquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith.¹⁸

It became the task of art to visualise and bring alive the evangelical message, everyday life and

¹⁷ Muzaffar Qbal, “Averroës,” *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, 2003.

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Ch. 34, “St. Thomas Aquinas,” Allen & Unwin, London; Simon & Schuster, New York 194. See ed. from 1967, p. 463.

the wonders of nature. For people in the Middle Ages, the world was a whole created by God, with large and small perspectives. According to Thomas, God reveals himself through nature, so to study nature is to study God. Medieval people, who were often illiterate, encountered aspects of both the Christian universe and their own world in a sensuous way.

They met stories from the Bible (figure 3), but also impressive pictures of scenes of courtly love and romantic adventures (figs. 4 and 5). Stories of this kind were very popular at this time. These love scenes were often used as decorations in upper class homes, on their mirrors and later visualised in more accessible media. They represented an often-unattainable dream of fantastic encounters with love, which were seldom played out in real life.



Figure 3: *The Mother of God Enthroned with the Christ Child Amidst Angels and Saints*. 1308-1311. Tempera and gold on wood. 213 x 396. The central panel of Duccio's huge *Maestà* altarpiece for Siena Cathedral. Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del Duomo, Siena.



Figure 4: Scenes of courtly love on a lady's ivory mirror-case. Paris, 1300–1330.



Figure 5: *The Assault on the Castle of Love*, attacked by knights and defended by ladies, was a popular subject for Gothic ivory mirror-cases. Louvre. About 1350-1370. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

It was not only visual art in the form of paintings and sculpture, which had a central function in transmitting the Christian message to ordinary illiterate people in the Middle Ages. There were also rituals, such as burial rites and various objects, which appealed to both sight and the sense of feel, and which generally provided a variety of opportunities for corporal experiences. These objects visualise different forms of “embodied beliefs.” Examples of these could be brooches with Christian symbols and motifs. They became increasingly popular in North Western Europe in the 8th to 10th centuries: “These objects, in being worn, held, and touched, were used by individuals in their everyday experience and expression of Christianity.” The common use of these brooches created community and “religious identities within the context of the changing socio-political landscape of early medieval Europe.”¹⁹

In the Islamic Golden Age and in the Middle Ages, we find traces of the beginning at times fierce, but also rewarding debates about the relationship between theology and philosophy, or belief and knowledge, which led to taking up the changing challenges that came from the society surrounding it. Furthermore, we encounter a closing down of fruitful dialogues inside and outside the Church.

Religious art of the Renaissance - the Marriage between Christianity, Neo-Platonism, and the Influence of the Art and Culture of the Ancient Greeks and Romans

In the Renaissance, the philosophy and art of the Ancients conquered cultural life and opened up new dialogues with Christianity, which was still the most important value system of the era. Christianity underwent a process of purification and a powerful dialogue between the philosophies of Antiquity—Plato’s, in particular—was established. The art and literature of the Ancients were studied with great enthusiasm and rapidly made its mark on the art and literature of the time.

In *The School of Athens* (figure 6), Raphael provides a monumental interpretation of

¹⁹ Rosie Weetch, “Embodied Belief: Wearing Brooches and Being Christian in Early Medieval Europe,” paper given at the International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, July 2, 2013. See http://www.academia.edu/2241604/Embodied_Belief_Wearing_Brooches_and_Being_Christian_in_Early_Medieval_Europe.

the renewal of great interest in the art and culture of antiquity and thereby also a consistent preoccupation with how it is possible—both artistically, scientifically, and philosophically—to interpret the world that we live in. The building is in the shape of a Greek cross, which some have suggested was intended to show a harmony between pagan philosophy and Christian theology.²⁰

Almost every figure in the painting can be identified as a Greek philosopher, rather than a religious character. The two main figures at the center of the fresco, at its architecture's central vanishing point, are: Plato on the left and Aristotle, his student, on the right. They are engaged in a deep dialogue. Socrates is present—debating passionately. Plotinus, the creator of Neo-Platonism, is also there on the right close to the corner, dressed in a red gown. Raphael has even painted Michelangelo as the philosopher Heraclitus, Plato as Leonardo da Vinci, Plotinus as Donatello, and himself as the Greek painter Apelles. Through this he wanted again to create relations between Greek philosophy and Christianity, symbolized by the Christian artists. And he has not neglected to visualize Fornarina, his mistress and model, as the personification of Love.



Figure 6: Raphael. *The School of Athens*. 1509 - 1511. Fresco. 500 x 770 cm. Stanza della Segnatura. Vatican. Rome.

In contrast to the artists of the Middle Ages, who preferred an abstract, two-dimensional linear style, Renaissance artists emulated the body-conscious quality of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, drawing inspiration from the extensive depiction of nudity and the use of drapery as a means of articulating the body. And the gods and goddesses of antiquity are often resurrected as holy persons from the Bible. It is precisely because the artists of the Renaissance period strove for mastery of the physical world that they preferred to transpose biblical episodes to their own time. Through those free interpretations, they wanted to visualize the stories in the Bible to

20 Horst Voldemar Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art: The Western Tradition*, see the section about *The School of Athens*.

appeal powerfully to viewers of their own era, and to create new orientations and meanings in their own life. With a masterly freedom of interpretation, Veronese transposed the biblical story of *The Wedding Feast at Cana* (1561) (figure 7) into the sumptuous, joyful setting of a Venetian wedding. The colors—the yellow-oranges, vivid reds, and lapis lazuli—create an intense impression of vibrant life.

At the Venice Biennale in 2009, Peter Greenaway transformed Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* into an impressive video installation. He highlighted the more worldly aspects of the work: the gossip amongst guests, servants fretting about food supplies, the soaring music. The continued popularity of this sixteenth-century painting clearly indicates that Veronese's work speaks to viewers in the twenty-first century as well as its original Renaissance audience. Veronese's aim resembles some of the basic ideas about visual art in somaesthetics, with his focus on how a piece resonates with viewers and captivates their senses. Veronese wants to incorporate viewers actively, to give them a sense of being a part of the scene in the painting, to provide them with an opportunity to meditate, and to deepen their understanding of the significance of the message in the stories from the New Testament for *this* world. Somaesthetics can deepen our understanding of Veronese's art, because it establishes a theory about the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. In relation to the artist and the viewer, somaesthetics aims for a fully embodied experience, creation, perception and a meliorist goal.



Figure 7: Paolo Veronese. *The Wedding at Cana*. 1563. Oil on canvas. 677 x 994. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

But how did the philosophers and artists of the Renaissance connect the new interpretations of the philosophy of antiquity with Christianity? They did so in several ways. Their overall aim was to combine the claims for the enforcement of the rights of the individual and improvements to society as a whole, which both the philosophers of antiquity and the New Testament put forward in their respective ways.

One of the people who took on this demanding work, was Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), the great Florentine scholar, philosopher, priest and the architect of Renaissance Platonism. His enduring influence on philosophy, love, music theory, medicine, and magic extended across Europe. He tried to create a new kind of synthesis between Christianity and Classical Antiquity. He translated the most important works of Plato and other ancient philosophers. And “Plato was introduced as a gateway to St. Paul: Christianity became the crown of human dignity, the source and culmination of inner tranquility”²¹ and harmony. His most important book *De religione Christiana et fidei pietate* (1475-6) was an apology for Christianity, but it also dealt with the problems in other monotheistic religions, particularly Judaism and Islam. Ficino analyzes in a new optic the connections between Plato and Christianity in a series of letters to his colleagues. The same connection was also described in a collection of sermons and commentaries on St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Paul. The parallel between Ficino and St. Paul can be interpreted as a parallel between Ficino’s conception of *Eros* and St Paul’s concept of *Agape*.²² He had worked hard to convince the leaders of the Catholic Church to create a new and fruitful relationship between reason and faith and to improve the relationship between the art of living and religion:

Marsilio Ficino was more than a philosopher with powerful intellectual and spiritual ideas. He was a *Magnus*, a unique type of philosopher that brings spirituality into the heart by making it part of the total environment and culture of society. Ficino knew that there was no other way for human institutions and society to live and prosper. Ficino, while wholeheartedly devoted to philosophy, was immensely practical. He brought about cultural change by continually encouraging leaders to maintain their health in body and mind, to keep good company, and to live and work in an environment that was harmonious and uplifting. He also insisted that leaders become examples of the highest qualities and only focus on activities and actions that bring out the best in human nature.²³

Ficino’s medical works, for example *De vita libri tres* (*Three Books on Life*),²⁴ exerted considerable influence on Renaissance physicians such as Paracelsus. Both of them were keen on analyzing the unity of the microcosm and macrocosm and their interactions through somatic and psychological manifestations with the aim of investigating and curing diseases.

Ficino’s desire to establish a better relationship between the art of living, religion, and philosophy is a Renaissance forerunner of one of the main aims of somaesthetics, which is that philosophy and aesthetics should not merely be considered a purely intellectual body of doctrines, but more. Later, in somaesthetics, it is called an “art of living”²⁵ which also focuses on health.²⁶

21 Dermot Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Cardinal Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 1972, p. 2. On Ficino’s theology generally see: Marsilio Ficino: *His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. M. J.B. Allen and V. R. Rees, Leiden - Boston - Cologne 202. It contains an ample bibliography.

22 *Eros* is the love that can exist between man and woman, and *Agape*, the distinctly Christian love of God and of neighbor.

23 Ron Cacioppe, “Marsilio Ficino: Magnus of the Renaissance, Shaper of Leaders.” *Integral Leadership Review*, March 2007. See <http://integralleadershipreview.com/5397-feature-article-marsilio-ficino-magnus-of-the-renaissance-shaper-of-leaders/>.

24 *Three Books on Life*, 1489, translated by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clarke, Tempe, Arizona: *The Renaissance Society of America*, 2002. With notes, commentaries and Latin text.

25 Richard Shusterman, “Somaesthetic Awakening and the Art of Living,” *Thinking through the body. Essays in Somaesthetics*, 2012, pp. 302-307.

26 Richard Shusterman, “A Disciplinary Proposal.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 57, No. 3 (Summer, 1999), pp. 306-307.

Ficino's words and actions convinced his contemporaries to treat others with dignity and respect because the human soul was an expression of the divine.²⁷ His conception of the soul does not indicate the dualism of Descartes, because Ficino regarded the soul as one of the elements with the capacity to bind human beings, heaven, and earth to one another. For him, love linked all things together as well and flowed first from God, also called The One, into all existing things, which, consequently, shared the property of similarity; however different they appeared from the outside. The soul has, so to speak, a material effect on the phenomenological world. The duality between body and mind, introduced by among others Thomas Aquinas, was beginning to lose its position. Carl Henrik Koch explains Ficino's unity of the earthly world and spiritual divinity:

Plotinus had taught Ficino to conquer the duality between soul and body by understanding Being as an outflow of the creative force, or God. Just as the rays of the sun spread out and light up the darkness, so Being streams out of God. And just as the light of the sun gives the perceived world the character that it has, it also creates a likeness of the source. This earthly, sensual beauty is thus an afterglow of heavenly, spiritual beauty. It thus provides greater continuity between the earthly and the heavenly. With Plotinus and Ficino, the earthly is analogous with the sun's halo, and ideal beauty is the sun itself.²⁸

In the Renaissance both artists and aestheticians believed that art could broaden, develop, and deepen our understanding of the other, our world, and ourselves. But art can also have a transformative force in making human life more harmonious and beautiful, and connecting sacred and profane love. It was a widely held view both in the artistic world as well as that of the church, that art and culture could elevate and cultivate people so that the destructive forces of evil and sin could be pushed to the periphery and gradually lose their power. This idea was later called the "Golden dream of the Renaissance." According to Ficino, "this century, like a golden age, has restored to light the liberal arts...poetry, rhetoric, sculpture, architecture, music...and all this in Florence."²⁹

In 1693 Titian created his famous painting entitled *Amor Divino e Amor Profano* (Sacred Love and Profane Love). There have since been many interpretations of it. Most scholars are now convinced that the title is correct and that Erwin Panofsky's interpretation of it is convincing. In a very long and detailed article, he posits that the two female figures are personifications of the platonic concept of sacred and profane love (figure 8). In his book *De amore* (1484), Ficino calls the personification of the two kinds of love "The Double Venus" (*Venus Duplex*). Panofsky interpreted the two figures in Titian's painting as "*The Double Venus*," because "the Neoplatonic doctrine of love and beauty filled the very air which Titian breathed (..) he was no less responsive

27 "Even though Ficino generally marks a distinction between being and becoming, or between the incorporeal and corporeal, he is no simple dualist. His view of soul, and the role that it plays in the material world, is fundamentally different from, for example, the strict dualism of the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes. Matter and soul are entirely distinct from one another, according to Descartes, and these two basic substances share no qualities in common. In his treatise on physics, *The World*, Descartes distinguishes himself from earlier approaches to natural philosophy when he explains that he uses the word "nature" to "signify matter itself," and not "some goddess or any other sort of imaginary power" (AT XI 37). According to Descartes, a natural philosopher does not need to appeal to anything other than matter in order to properly explain the natural world. On the contrary, according to Ficino, the material world is not something that can be adequately explained by turning to matter and motion alone; nature is an active power that suffuses matter and provides it with its life, activity, and order. On this account, nature is a dynamic force operating on material things from within, and this is the proper or genuine cause of things changing, as well as their generation and corruption. Soul, therefore, has a paramount role to play in Ficino's natural philosophy." *Marsilio Ficino. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ficino/>

28 Carl Henrik Koch, "Kunsten, kunstneren, skønheden og kærligheden," *Kunst og æstetik*, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen, 1996, p. 85.

29 Ficino Marsilio, 1492 (Severy, 1970: 43).

than Michelangelo to the new gospel of Neo-Platonism.”³⁰ There is little doubt that he believed that contemplating the beauty of the Creation led to an awareness of the divine perfection of the order of the cosmos.



Figure 8: Titian. *Sacred and Profane Love*. 1513-1514. Oil on canvas. 118 x 279 cm, Borghese Gallery, Rome.

The clothed woman in Titian’s painting is seated *below* and closer to the ground than her nude counterpart. She is wearing crimson gloves and holding a case of jewels, both signs of worldly interests. And she is dressed very elegantly in white silk with crimson sleeves and rich fabrics. She is the Venus that is a symbol of profane love.

The nude figure symbolizes sacred or divine love. She carries a flaming chalice in her hands, which is an attribute of Christian Charity. She is placed at the same level as her twin sister, but occupying a higher position. So they are twins, but on a different level. And this means—as Panofsky has formulated it—that they do

not express a contrast between good and evil, but symbolize one principle in two modes of existence and two grades of perfection. The lofty-minded nude does not despise the worldly creature whose seat she condescends to share, but with a gently persuasive glance seems to impart to her the secrets of a higher realm; and no one can overlook the more than sisterly resemblance between the two figures.³¹

The two Venuses are seated on a Roman sarcophagus filled with water. A little Cupid—another symbol of love—stirs the water, and may suggest the “Neoplatonic belief that love, a principle of cosmic ‘mixture’ acts as an intermediary between heaven and earth.”³² On the sarcophagus is a relief with the wild horse and the flaying of the Phrygian satyr Marsyas. The depiction of the gruesome and uncontrolled sides of the human being are thus placed on the very sarcophagus that the two Venuses are seated upon, and are without direct visual connection to them and the sun-drenched landscape. This depiction seems very self-contained. Titian probably wanted to visualize his dream that humanity’s dark side could be conquered through the powerful influence of culture and love.

30 Erwin Panofsky, “Reflections on Love and Beauty,” *Problems in Titian. Mostly iconographic*, London, 1969, pp. 109-110.

31 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939) Torchbook edition, 1962, pp.151-152

32 Panofsky, 1962, p. 152.

The New Theory of Images in the Baroque and a New Conception of Art and Life

In the Baroque, we encounter a new notion of an independent artistic space of cognition and experience, and the notion of an embodied creation and perception that is much stronger than in the art of the Renaissance. We also encounter new connections between art and life. These interpretations can be charted through many aspects of somaesthetics, which profiles precisely these connections. However, it can also create nuances in the understanding of the relationship between faith and visual art, which Danto espoused, and which Shusterman more critically examined.

The Italian philosopher and aesthetician Mario Perniola, in particular, takes this new trans-historical approach to the Italian Baroque. This is an approach that humanists have not been able to provide until now. Perniola started his analyses referring to the conflict between iconolaters, the worshippers of icons and images, and iconoclasts, breakers or destroyers of images, which has surfaced repeatedly since the beginning of the Byzantine Empire in the 7th century. This debate has always created new orientations in the aesthetic debate and in the visual arts. But between the Scylla and the Charybdis of these two positions, Perniola created the idea of the “image as simulacrum” that is “neither icon nor vision.”³³ He found the source of this third standpoint in the aesthetics of the Baroque and of the Counter-Reformation, including in Roberto Bellarmino’s theory of images. Perniola sums up this theory as follows:

(He) destroyed the direct connection between the image and its model, the foundation of iconophilia, yet nonetheless without falling into iconoclasis, nor even into devaluation of the image. The essential is that the validity of images is no longer due to the reality and the dignity of the metaphysical prototype, but rather depends on their intrinsic, concrete, and *historical* qualities.³⁴

Ignacio de Loyola’s *Exercitia spiritualia* (1548) was one of the most important sources of inspiration for the aesthetics of the Baroque and for the Counter-Reformation, influencing, for instance, both Bernini and Caravaggio. In this book, Perniola uncovers the theoretical premises on which the conception of images as simulacra rests.³⁵ He proposes that Loyola’s writings on images dissolve the dispute between the attribution of a transcendental value to icons and the denial of the role of images in spiritual life and introduce a third possibility: the image as simulacrum that satisfies a necessary condition for spiritual life even though it is only an appearance that signals the absence of the sacred being.³⁶ Ignacio de Loyola’s approach to images is based on two irreconcilable attitudes “disinterest” and “application of the senses.” In *Exercitia spiritualia*, he emphasizes that it is important to “to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is found which I want to contemplate” e.g. the temple where Jesus has been (1. Exercise 47) and also to use the senses in order to approach reality as concretely as possible, because there is no spiritual progress if things are not felt and acknowledged internally. This method involves the four senses: “The sight, the hearing, the smell and the touch.”³⁷ The

33 The following quotes from “Icons, visions, simulacra” are English translations from the French version of Perniola’s article, published in *Traverses*, no. 10, 1978, pp. 39-48. The abovementioned quotation can be found on p. 45. See also R. Bellarmino, *De controversiis christianae fidei* 1986-93, Quarta Controversia, Liber II, cap. XX, sq.

34 Perniola, p. 45.

35 Perniola, pp. 45-46.

36 See *Baroque Garden Cultures: Emulation, Sublimation, Subversion*, ed. Michel Conan, vol. 25, 2005, p. 12 and Else Marie Bukdahl, “Vers un post-baroque?” *Puissance du Baroque. Les forces, les formes, les rationalités*, ed. by Carsten Juhl and E. M. Bukdahl, Éditions Galilée, Paris 1996, pp. 135-138.

37 See *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, 1548, translated by Mullan, Father Elder, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1914, p. 31 and p. 46.

conditions necessary for the appearance of the simulacrum are thus present, inasmuch as the metaphysical legitimization of the identity between things and the world has disappeared and consequently their historical status has become a reality. No image constitutes *a revelation*, and yet all images become “a necessary condition of a ‘spiritual exercise’, e.g. the formation of experiences. Images of Hell, just like those of Christ, contribute toward this end as well.”³⁸ The simulacrum draws attention away from the imitated object and towards the image as an image and is therefore able to activate the senses. It thus succeeds in evoking an image that is larger, more unexpected, and more sensual than that which our usual viewpoint is able to produce. By being active participants in the completion of the artistic process, our senses are also provided with a more in-depth view of the process of artistic creation. They are, in essence, a very integral part of the work.

In Caravaggio’s monumental church art, we encounter the most original and most innovative visualization of an understanding of the image, which is a parallel to Perniola’s interpretation of the picture theory of the Baroque. His depictions of the stories of the New Testament are so realistic that the church often disliked them. He did not—like the artists of the Renaissance—portray the human individual as sublime, beautiful, and heroic. No artist before him depicted the entombment in such a radically naturalistic format, very foreign to the grand manner. And nobody before him dared to hire common people as models for saints and apostles. His figures are bowed, bent, cowering, reclining, or stooped.

One of the main characteristics of Baroque art is the breakdown in the divisions between our space, the space of the painting, and the opening out to infinite space. The result is that we feel much more a part of the painting than we do viewing a Renaissance painting. We are simply drawn into the pictorial universe. This effect is extremely visible and intense in the paintings of Caravaggio. Experiencing something with your body has a much more powerful effect than knowing it in your mind. Baroque art, Caravaggio’s paintings in particular, often impel you to have an experience that is situated in your body. This means that Baroque art is even closer to the concept of the active viewer and of the notion of the embodied perception of somaesthetics than Renaissance art. These characteristics are particularly evident in *The Entombment of Christ* (figure 9), which was painted for the second chapel on the right of Santa Maria in Vallicella, also called Chiesa Nuova, a church built for the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri. The Oratory regarded his realism as too intense and asked him to tone it down.

This large painting, dominated by a very dramatic diagonal spiral of mourners and cadaver bearers, which point at the dead Christ and the bare stone, is not a scene of transfiguration, but of deep mourning. At the top of the painting is the figure of Mary of Cleophas, the sister of the Virgin Mary. She raises her outstretched arms to the sky, in a gesture of inconsolable grief, bereft of hope. Beneath her is Mary Magdalene, drying her tears with a white handkerchief. On her left, the head of the Virgin Mary, covered in a nun’s habit, is visible. Her extended hand is also a sign of intense sorrow, and is in close proximity to the shadowed face of John, which is also marked by deep sadness.³⁹ Beside him emerges Nicodemus, helping to bury Christ and one of the key figures of the painting. He is modeled as a thick-limbed laborer, and looks directly and intensely at the viewers, establishing a psychological bond with them, and drawing them into this drama of life and death. His elbow and the edge of the lid of the tomb—which is not parallel to the picture plane, but is positioned obliquely—also invite the viewers to enter into the burial scene. Or as Giorgio Bonsanti points out:

38 Perniola, p. 46.

39 This figure can be identified as either John, the writer of the Gospel, or Joseph of Arimathea, who obtained Christ’s body from the Romans. Here, we will just call him John.

The scene is viewed as from the tomb; the impression is almost as if the figures are about to surrender the body of Christ, if not to the observer, at least to someone standing in the same place. The identification is therefore complete, the involvement inescapable. The way the painting affected nineteenth-century artists is understandable. It combines a structural classicism that is timeless (Cézanne) with an extremely strong sense of drama (Géricault).⁴⁰



Figure 9: Caravaggio. *The Entombment of Christ*. 1603-1604. Oil on canvas. 300 x 203 cm. *Pinacoteca Apostolica*, Vatican, Rome.

The diagonal placement of John, Nicodemus, and the dead Christ on the picture plane is connected to the dramatic spiral line. This compositional strategy intensifies the overall impression.

⁴⁰ Giorgio Bonsanti, *Caravaggio*, Scala, 1984, p. 50.

Caravaggio created a very complex, intense, and tightly organized figure composition, viewed against an endless, absolute, black space, dominated by an experience of death, suffering, deep loss, and hopelessness. But the deep darkness is pushed aside by the powerful light surrounding the thin body of the dead Christ, which in one diagonal movement, forces its way up to the head of the sister of the Virgin Mary. There is no doubt that this light symbolizes Christ's messages of love, which create new meanings and orientations in our life. Or as John expresses it, he is "the light of the world" and so he that follows Him "shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John, 8.12).

Conclusion

The aestheticians and artists of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Baroque were aware, in their respective ways, that concepts and verbal language never entirely correspond with artistic expression. Visual art is, therefore, capable of grasping perspectives or revealing traces and significances of belief that philosophers and scientists cannot grasp with their tools alone. The artists of these three periods transformed and applied new strategies in their artistic production in a variety of imaginative ways.

The artists and artworks here discussed illuminate somaesthetic ideas because they focus on embodied creation and perception, full-bodied, sensuous aesthetic experience, the establishment of a bridge between art, real life and praxis, and the interactive dialogue with the viewer and their surroundings. The artists engage viewers by drawing them into an impressive artistic space of experience, inspiring them to think and create in new ways, stimulating them to positive action. Although these artists perceive and work within a Christian context, they address their—often open—visual message to *this* world.

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