



On the beauty of Christian Icon painting and its deception

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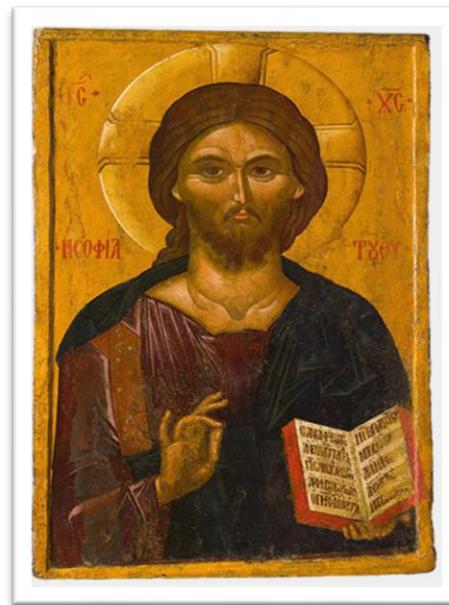
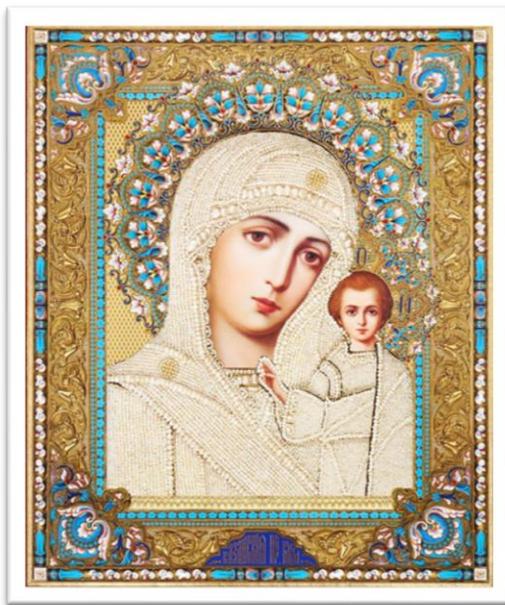
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Abstract

In this essay, I begin by outlining the beauty of Christian icon painting through an analysis of the use of elements of art. I then question whether such beauty might also embody truth. I problematize such a formulation and read such images as premodern in which case they have been neglected and a new set of images spawned with the rise of the modern notion of art alongside aesthetics as a discipline. I then ask how such images might be received in a postmodern context and conclude that the necessity for visual literacy is as imperative contemporaneously as it should have been in the historic past in Western civilization.

Keywords: Art; beauty; postmodern; Christianity

INTRODUCTION



Above are two generic images that can be associated with what has been named Christian Icon painting. Though used for religious worship and not simply as art, today we see it as such. In this light, I will begin by analyzing the sheer beauty of the style and period from a purely formalist and expressive theoretical lens. Next, I will ask the question whether this beauty also expresses a truth or truth, for one would associate beauty and harmony as definitions of truth. However, “truth” and “beauty” are two different categories. Thus, I shall argue that in fact the beauty is deceptive if it masquerades as truth or as true. The result is the worship of that which is beautiful, for as objects of worship, a form of paganism

ensues even subsequent to the Iconoclasts. Nevertheless, as art I think they are truly beautiful. Ironically, in the postmodern era, even this has lost ground.

A.

I begin with a formal analysis that is the presupposition of formalism where one can attend to the “object of art” in purely visual, formal terms and describe such elements in order to “know” the work at hand. I then include a short section entitled “expressiveness”:

- i. **SPACE:** One will note that both designs are organized with enough areas of space that are just units in themselves and so heightening the central figures. The space is serene, decorative, and patterned allowing the eye ease of movement, intrigue, and a sense of peace. There is no sense of spatial disturbance or murky uncertainty. Elements are symmetrical with nothing jagged, violent, haphazard, or chaotic.
- ii. **LIGHT:** The light is calm and attractive with little darkness or foreboding and ominous shadows. The gold and white are used to great effect. The uses of light to create facial features are soft and gentle, while a light hovers around the main images too. It is not jarring, but exudes a sense of enlightenment, peace, and tranquility.
- iii. **LINE:** The line is not sharp, heavy, or angular. Instead, it is often geometric. The use of the square signifies the finite realm, whereas that of the circle, hints to eternity. As with “space”, the line is considered and measured, rendered carefully and deftly.
- iv. **COLOUR:** The paintings do not overwhelm the viewer with too many colors or any color that may stir disgust or horror. Instead, there is a play of blue, gold, white and a hint of fleshiness. This concentration of color with certain nuances manifests as a surface that conveys order, spiritual aloofness, and certain perfection.
- v. **EXPRESSIVENESS:** The energy of these works is contained and considered. It expresses an adherence to Christian themes and ideas. It is not overly emotional but also exudes an intellectual charm or even one that transcends mortal intellect into the ecstatic world of prophesy, revelation, and miracle. The formal elements conspire, if you will, to create around such objects a certain aura, an immateriality given their iconographic motif and the craft of expressing such subject matter with skill. Thus conceived, the expressive modality of the artist is determined by a history of guilds and crafts and the use of such objects was meant for churches, not museums or galleries. Thus, its expressive value may be housed in deep piety, veneration, and mystery. In particular it is the beauty expressed by such images that acts as the veil or garment of such notions and hence its instructional power as the great mass were captivated by the sheer beauty and striking execution of such objects, not conscious of them as art as such, but rather as functional objects of beauty that assisted and indeed allowed for a certain kind of worship and lived experience within ritual in the context of the Christian religion.

B.

I now ask this question: If such objects are beautiful, are they true? Does this question even make sense, considering something can clearly be beautiful whether or not it is true. A tree can be said to be beautiful, but a tree is not true! A mathematical equation can be true, but is it to be denoted as beautiful? I think in the latter case, as distinct from say the love of nature, can be described as both true and beautiful. The solution to a problem, the astute method of resolving it and the very line of reasoning and symbolic notation that converges to its simplest, most pure form can be described as an object of beauty. The work of art, like a mathematical equation is an invention, a cultural artifact as opposed to nature which just is, that which precedes any concoctions of man. Therefore, one could call such a work of art as both true and beautiful.

Yet, what is asserted as true through its beautiful garment or form? Obviously, the tenants of the Christian religion. In the first instance, the deification of Christ; in the second the Madonna and Child motif. In the former instance, Christ is said to embody the Creator. The divine worship of god as incarnate is certainly of pagan origins with god like qualities attributed to gods like Hercules, Zeus and of course encompassing religions of the East as well. Such religions invariably would create “art” that would embody in primarily painting or sculptural form such a god and be included in all manner of worship. In the second, the divine mother is minding the god-child. Historically, one may trace the idea of god within or as human form as pagan, where the gods had a certain power over an aspect of the cosmos and the idea of the virgin birth which Paul began preaching to the gentiles.

His converts came from the Greek and Roman religions of Zeus and Jupiter, Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, and many other creeds and sects where virgin birth stories were common. A few examples: Perseus was the mythic Greek hero who killed the Medusa. His mother, Danaë, was impregnated by Zeus; Cybele (or Nana), the mother of Attis — a semi-deity of Phrygia (eastern Turkey) — was impregnated by an almond or pomegranate tossed away by the gods; Ra, the Egyptian sun god, had no father. His mother, Net, conceived by parthenogenesis. Horus was another Egyptian god conceived parthenogenically by Isis and other pre-Christian figures believed to have been born of a virgin

include Sargon (Babylon), Adonis (Syria), Osiris (Egypt), and Dionysus (Greece). Even Apies, the sacred bull of Memphis, was believed to have been fathered by a god striking a cow with a ray of moonlight.

Thus, the first aspect – the god-like nature of the Christ and the second, Christ’s virgin birth, were not initiated by Christianity and not even agreed upon or mentioned by all the gospels. Notwithstanding, Christianity has a long history of the visualization of god in human form and the miraculous origins of the Christ-child. If one were therefore to assert it as true that would be tantamount to accenting to a form of pagan religiosity. However, a monotheistic account, of which Christianity is said to echo, would disallow such pagan truths or ideas.

Monotheism prohibits imagery of the Infinite Being, both in concept and as something to worship. Moreover, since infinity implies the impossibility of a finite form by its very definition, the imagery spawned by Christianity are not strictly monotheistic. If one accents to infinity as the source of all – commonly referred to as the Creator – then such images are not to be within its ambit and therefore are not truthful. And to pray to such forms, just as the pagan might create gods of stone or wood or metal, is certainly not in line with such a conception. Thus conceived, these images are not true, though they may yet be beautiful.

This incongruence between beauty and truth is now very interesting. I would maintain the illiterate mass, in not making such a distinction, have been fooled with such imagery in thought and behavioral expression. I would go further that such visual forms are therefore deceptive and cunning in their claim to be true, the very gospel truth.

Subsequent to modernism though, with the advent of aesthetics and the modern concept of art and the secular appraisal of the artist, such that the modern, even the great throng and mass of people, see such images at once as art and as a reminder of the old religion in the form of early Christianity. This means such work no longer carry such power and potency as embodiments of mystical truths, but rather are recognized as artistic constructions and later in the Renaissance as the work of great artists.

The later anti-traditional stance that modernism brought about and the search within the abstract, denied mimesis, traditional historical, mythological, and religious subject matter in favor of a “new world” that meant art itself become a world unto itself and a retreat from conventional symbolism, methods, and meanings. As Hegel said to the effect that art is no longer to be a form of veneration. The image is expunged of idolatry; it is now art and art had by then begun to take a secular turn, to be a discipline in and of itself, not necessarily in pursuit of beauty, even truth, but rather an exploration of a transient inner world, a perception of nature without magical associations and a transcendence of nature into the world of the abstract, a meta-world that no longer relies on representation and the patterns of centuries of past “art”.

Once beauty and truth could be intellectually separated, the investigation as to what might be true, become conceivable. Once premodern imagery took a modern turn, especially in the age of the Enlightenment and the rise of science, so the cult of object-worship began to wane. Nevertheless, the beauty of such images may yet captivate minds and heart. It is the intention of this account to draw attention to the limitations of asserting a truth quotient to such acts and skillful renderings of themes whose origins are pagan and whose truth therefore is dubious to say the least.

C.

How are such images received then in a postmodern age and are they still considered beautiful? Let’s turn to a fairly contemporary work that may shed light on the issue: Immersion (Piss Christ) is a 1987 photograph by the American artist and photographer Andreas Serrano. It depicts a small plastic crucifix submerged in a small glass tank of the artist’s urine. It caused an outrage, vandals, death threats to the artist, denouncement, political response and was eventually sold in auction for over 100 000 dollars.

I would maintain in form, as a visual image, it is beautiful. Yet the fact that it includes the abject, namely urine, questions the very notion of beauty. For the Christ image is sacrosanct and to have it mingled with urine, considered “dirty. “Excrement”, waste” and so on creates a synergy that calls into question the very transcendental purity of such a form. Yet, it is still beautiful and this asymmetry between truth and beauty suggests that postmodern reevaluation of history is at once rebellious and yet continues the Western tradition in the visual arts, albeit in a highly original form. The reaction in the States is worrying and suggests a great majority still inhabit a medieval past and remain ignorant of the freedom of the arts and the freedom that creative expression necessitates. In fact, the artist himself claimed to be an adherent of Christianity and simply offers a new interpretation and states that in fact the actual crucifixion would have been marked by urine and even feces – thus one might even call such an interpretation highly accurate and truthful, rather than the simple reading that he wished to offend common prejudice.

Postmodernity certainly “attacks” common and accepted ideas of beauty. The deconstruction of firstly the ancient triad of beauty, truth, and goodness; the opposition to mainstream religion and its offshoot – discrimination and power-

mongering; of male dominance - and the Enlightenment program of reason as the sole guide, reevaluates art itself as the communication of standards of beauty, whether it is the classical, the mimetic or the icons of the past. This is a necessary development, I would argue in the extrication of art from other social institutions and bodies of power. Though one might say the balance has merely shifted and the dominance of the Western, white, Christian male is still valorized, that binaries and power-structures have not changed, while coopting the “other” within this mainstream discourse does not offset such a narrative.

The point of this brief essay, however, is not so much an assessment of beauty as such and whether it equates to the truth or a truth, but simply to bring to awareness the idea that such early works of visual art may still be considered beautiful in current times. However, their meaning and function cannot be compared to their meaning and function today considering their provenance. Therefore, what such images mean; the truth of the story they communicate and the fact that their beauty is not so much the story they communicate but the development of artistic means to convey beauty as such divorced from any notions of truth. In the same way one might cite the terrible events of 9/11 as at once being utterly untruthful and immoral and yet aesthetically pleasing. Such distinctions are necessary in the evaluation of imagery, of visual culture, lest one is duped by the constant flux of visual culture and its apparent beauty, without a critical stance and an evaluation of the truth behind such beauty. A simple awareness of the elements of art and how they conspire, even deceive to fabricate such beauty-truth is thus in order. In education, this means instructing students to analyze imagery in such terms. This is especially urgent in the great proliferation of images on the digital platform and the dangers of an uncritical stance.

CONCLUSION

The power of imagery may even evoke a stronger response to literature in its immediacy. This is especially the case when confronted with what appears to be beautiful, an aesthetic phenomena. This essay problematizes such a quick response, where the time lag between that which is considered beautiful and that which is considered true may be erroneously equated. Hence the need for text, for theory and for analytical thought before the reflex judgement is made. Knowing the means the artist has at his disposal for conjuring the magic of images lessens the mystical aura that may surround such images. Although, perhaps art is not worshiped as such and may be considered a secular enterprise, a commercial interest and the like, its genesis as early religious imagery, cautions against taking a work of art at face value. Modernism was precisely the attempt to undo such a history, yet it too became an assertion of power, simply replacing one set of images with another. Postmodernism attempts to erase even that, yet a healthy sense of history might do well to recover the kinds of images herein assessed not simply as historical relics but as instances of beauty.

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