

Religion and art
by Michel Clasquin

"God is really only another artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant, and the cat. He has no real style. He just keeps on trying other things." - Pablo Picasso

"Art among a religious race produces relics; among a military one, trophies; among a commercial one, articles of trade." - Henry Fuseli

In the year 730, the Byzantine emperor Leo III issued an order forbidding the use of religious images (icons) in Christian worship. Icons were to be destroyed all over the empire; this came to be known as iconoclasm (literally, the breaking of the images). Leo's successors maintained this policy, but the empress Irene reversed it. She was an iconophile (literally, a lover of images) and during her reign the use of icons was restored. Iconoclasm was reinstated by her successors, but under the empress Theodora the iconophiles finally won the day, more than a century after the controversy first broke out. The use of icons in worship has endured ever since in Eastern Christianity. To this day it is the norm in Orthodox Churches, and Theodora was declared a saint. In the meantime, though, various people had suffered banishment and imprisonment for being on the wrong side of the controversy whenever a new emperor or empress made yet another switch in religious policy.

Almost a thousand years later, a new wave of iconoclasm arose, this time in Western Europe. Of the Reformists, both Zwingli and Calvin were dead set against the use of art in religious practice. Luther took a more moderate stance. Once again, priceless paintings and statues were destroyed. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church continued to use artistic representations of saints and angels to inspire religious fervour in its adherents - many of the world's greatest artistic treasures, like the Sistine chapel and Michelangelo's statue of Moses, were commissioned by the church. To this day, even a member of another religion can tell the difference between a Catholic and a Protestant church just by looking at its interior. Anglican churches can go either way.

Clearly, there is an uneasiness about art deep within the world's largest religion. But where does it come from? Perhaps the most obvious place to start is with the Ten Commandments.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them (Exodus 20:4-5)

You will recall that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he found to his disgust that the Israelites had already broken this commandment, with his own brother Aaron among the culprits! In one sense, one could say that the commandment had not yet been formally promulgated when they cast the Golden Calf, so perhaps one might forgive them this little error. But clearly, this was the result of a much longer process - unlike all the other nations among which they lived, the Israelites worshipped a god who did not limit himself to a specific shape or place. It was really just a matter of time before it was formally forbidden to even try to make a representation of him. And this has ever since been the question that has plagued artists and theologians ever since. For the artist, the question is "How can one depict something, no, someone, who is both a personal deity and the vastly superior creator of the universe?" Theologians, for their part, ask "Can we mere humans even dare to do such a thing"?

The dilemma has not been confined to Christianity - all religions that get their inspiration from the Old Testament in one way or another have had to face it. Judaism is naturally closest to the source, and it has taken it very much at face value. This is not to say that Jewish religious art does not exist, but it tends to be abstract and non-figurative - decoration rather than figuration.

Islam has taken a similar line, although in Persia it seems that it was reinterpreted a little: as long as the subject was clearly non-religious and no-one worshipped it, some figurative art was allowed. Persian miniatures thereby became an artistic treasure. More traditional Muslims maintained that any artistic representation of any living creature was forbidden by the Koran, just in case someone might feel inclined to worship it. Abstract decoration was allowed, though, as was elaborate calligraphy. In fact, scholars have speculated that it was this insistence on non-figurative art in Islam that inspired Leo III to proclaim the policy of iconoclasm. After all, the Muslims were at the time beating the Byzantine army back on all fronts, and they were more strict on this issue than the Christians. To the medieval mind, cause and effect could easily be deduced in such a case. The Muslims have recently made their peace with non-religious representation, or Al-Jazeera would not be able to broadcast. But they remain touchy about artistic representations of revered people, whether it is in paint, film or in any other medium. Just ask Salman Rushdie!

But of course, there are religions that do not base their philosophy on the Old Testament. Hinduism seems to have the fewest problems with religious art. There are a few modern reformist movements that do not use paintings and sculptures of deities, but they are in the minority. Most Hindu temples and homes are filled with representations of the Hindu gods. Which is a little strange, really, because Hindu philosophy sees the ultimate nature of god (Brahman) as beyond form, indeed, beyond human imagining. But below this, there are many other levels of divinity, and it is these more personal divinities that are commonly depicted. And so we get Hanuman, with his monkey-like face, the blue-skinned Krishna, the elephant-headed Ganesha, and many others.

But if the Hindus did not see a problem in using art in their religion, their cousins the Buddhists certainly did. After the Buddha's death, Buddhism gradually became strong and wealthy enough that the monks could afford to decorate their monasteries. But while they had no problems depicting significant events in the lives of the Buddha and his chief disciples, they stopped short when it came to depicting the Buddha himself. According to Buddhist doctrine, the Buddha had escaped from the circle of life and death and gone into the beyond of parinirvana. It wasn't just that he didn't exist anymore. He neither existed nor non-existed. He had gone beyond both existence and non-existence. It was felt that to make a representation of him would imply otherwise. And so for several centuries, Buddhists painted and carved elaborate scenes in which adoring crowds of disciples stood around - nothing much. Where the Buddha would have sat there was perhaps a lotus flower, or an eight-spoked wheel, or just a footprint, all of these symbolising the presence that was absent, the Buddha who was also referred to as the thus-gone (Tathagatha). In a way, these ancient artists faced the same problem as their counterparts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim cultures: how does a mere physical creature give form to that which is essentially beyond form?

This changed when Buddhism reached Gandhara in the western outreaches of India. Gandhara had long ago been founded by Greeks, and while their descendents were enthusiastic converts to this new religion, they were not much impressed by the theology of non-presentation. If they were going to be Buddhists, they were going to make sculptures of the Buddha, and there was an end to it! One small problem arose: There was no longer anyone around who remembered what the Buddha had looked like, and the Buddhist texts were quite ambiguous. So they based their first statues on those of Apollo, and this started an artistic tradition that spread across Asia, changing shape whenever Buddhism entered a new cultural area, but always recognisably descended from those first Greek-Indian statues.

In all of those cases, one can see a common thread. Art had a certain utility value, but not necessarily an inherent one. It could be used by a ruler to glorify his reign, or by a priest to glorify his god. But its primary value was that it adorned and glorified something else. "Art for art's sake" would have been a perfectly meaningless phrase to the pre-modern mind. The artist was basically an artisan: "Herr Bach, we are having the Duke of Saxony over next week and we need you to compose two menuets and a violin concerto. That will be all."

This changed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photography was invented, and portrait painters found themselves out of work. Edison discovered a way to reproduce sound and thousands of journeyman musicians were surplus to requirements. This turned out to be a double-edged sword. It was true that art lost much of the patronage on which it had been living for so long, but those artists who decided to stick it out were now suddenly free to experiment with form, sound and emotions. Before, the important thing had been the client's wishes. Now, the artist needed only to listen to his (and increasingly, her) inner feelings. Perhaps Oscar Wilde expressed this new conception of art most clearly:

A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or dishonest tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered as an artist.

Forms of artistic expressions, which had once evolved so slowly that it still makes sense to speak of, say "18th century English painting", now started to arise and die out with dizzying speed. Impressionism begat Fauvism, which begat Cubism, which begat Futurism, which begat Abstract Expressionism . . . The public at large stopped even trying to keep up and turned away from the world of art even more that they had been doing already.

Oh, there have been artistic movements, especially in music, that have tried to bring their vision to the masses. But they have been quickly subverted by commercial interests. The blues originated as a cry of anguish against slavery and discrimination. It gave birth to jazz, which was then tamed to become the comfortable middle-class music of the big-band era. Later on, Bob Dylan and John Lennon reached back to the original spirit of blues and folk music, again to express their deepest feelings about what they saw going on around them. But what is their legacy today? Pre-manufactured boy bands, whose music expresses absolutely nothing. In the same way, commercial interests have felt free to plunder the visual arts. Where would advertising be without Surrealism? Popular art is at the mercy of the editor, the market researcher and the record executive.

Eventually, a new kind of patronage was found. Not the mass patronage of the past, where every well-to-do burgher needed a portrait of himself to hang on the wall, but a small section of the seriously wealthy, who might not be able to create art themselves, but who aspired to share the artist's vision.

Of course, there were never many such patrons, and it is from this period that we first observe the rise of a popular stereotype: the struggling artist, starving in a garret, spending money on nothing but art materials and the occasional dose of narcotics, creating works of art understood by no-one but himself, a few other artists and, hopefully, future generations. Vincent Van Gogh was one of the first to live this kind of existence, and is by now the most famous. But there were others whose work has been entirely forgotten.

But let us think about that. Does this kind of lifestyle not remind us of something? To give up a comfortable bourgeois way of life in service to a higher calling: To insist that there is more to life than making money, or even making babies: To work with the finite in a stylized way in search for infinity: To insist that one knows a truth that others do not, a truth accessible only to the initiated. It sounds a lot like religion.

And indeed, today art has become a secular religion. It has its temples (art galleries) its high priests (curators) and heretics (art critics), its theologians (art historians) and its sacred icons. It does not offer an afterlife yet, but note how easily the word "immortality" slips into the conversation when talking about major artists. The original sin of this new religion is vulgarity, and it offers the sacrament of the exhibition opening, bringing us the salvation of good taste.

Anyone may try to join this cult, but to be accepted in the inner circle takes effort, dedication and talent. Or money - artists may tolerate starvation in the garret for now, but still they long to be "discovered", to make that million-dollar sale to a gallery, to get that publishing or recording contract. This secular faith is closely connected to our other secular religion, commerce, after all. The day of the gentleman amateur is far behind us, and while artists no longer wish to be seen as mere artisans, few seem able to resist the lure of celebrity status. In time, the successful artist becomes a parody of his former self, creating searing indictments of capitalist society while lounging in the back of his Rolls-Royce.

Meanwhile, the old religions soldier on. Now that they can no longer count on the services of the really good artists, they are reduced to repeating the decorative patterns of the past, stamped out in ever-increasing numbers and ever-decreasing quality. Same old, same old. Kitsch.

Today, when an artist consciously uses images and ideas from the established religions, it is front-page news. And the result is as likely to be uproar as appreciation. When Muslims burn a Rushdie book in public, when Christians protest against the showing of *The Last Temptations of Christ*, or against the showing of Mapplethorpe artworks, this is not merely in outrage over a secular person misusing the symbols they hold dear. It is a fully-fledged conflict between two very different ways of seeing the world. In a small way, it truly is a religious war.

We started off this essay with quotes from Picasso and Fuseli. Let us end it with another, this time by Marcel Duchamp:

"Art is a habit-forming drug. That's all it is for the artist, for the collector, for anybody connected with it. Art has absolutely no existence as veracity, as truth. People speak of it with great, religious reverence, but I don't see why it is to be so much revered. I'm afraid I'm an agnostic when it comes to art. I don't believe in it with all the mystical trimmings. As a drug it's probably very useful for many people, very sedative, but as a religion it's not even as good as God."

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