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Medieval and Renaissance Studies: Materiality and the Religious Impulse
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The Function of Modern Art

Through the last few centuries humanity has devoted significant effort to the study of historical art and subjects ranging from medieval Christian images to ritual items from the tribal people of the Americas and Africa. At the time of their creation these art pieces were very practical. They were intended to be viewed and used by a very specific audience and, generally, for very specific purposes. Despite all the effort devoted to their study, the question of whether or not it is even possible for these items to be understood and critiqued by the modern western world – a society which creates what is now delineated as "fine art." It is a common notion that art reflects changes in the culture in which it is created. Modern western art began as completely functional artisanship, evolved over the course of less than a century and sharply morphed into something entirely new: the type of art we know today which has no function or use but exists merely to be created and observed. Modern viewers now mirror this non-functional art with detached observation. Although the idea of a functional art may seem alien to our modern culture, the habits of the viewer act as if the art does indeed still serve a function. If the development of art is traced through its artisanal roots and art's progenitor images examined through the history of Christian Europe, a trend in viewer response and artistic development shall reveal that, although art itself is said

nonfunctional, the Christian viewing habits developed in previous centuries prevail and dictate our modern treatment of art.

Part I

Throughout nearly all of Christian history theologians and common religious followers conflicted over the proper use of devotional images. Images recurrently gained a popular following and caused ontological problems for the church; theologians responded by attempting to strip the images of the powers their followings had given them.[1] The aesthetic (how the image looks and how the subject matter is rendered or depicted) of an image is what dictates how a viewer will respond to it. The aesthetics of an image have the potential to evoke an array of emotional responses in a viewer. All images, from those shown to criminals on their way to the gallows (to give them a sense of peace) to those that depict Christ as the man of sorrows (intended to allow the viewer to better sympathize Christ's suffering), are tied into the image's potential to evoke feelings from a viewer. Some of the first sanctioned Christian images were byzantine panel paintings or icons. The theory of icon use makes evident a connection to another being – the prototype of the depicted image. The viewer is intended to have significant intellectual comprehension of the image's content while deliberately ignoring its form.[2]

The term "icon reader" is not a misnomer; a viewer, in a way, literally "reads" the image. An icon's aesthetic was intended to function concurrently with the intellectual work put into prostrating oneself before it and using it as, literally, a vessel

to the prototype. The idea behind these images is that they are pathways to the sacred which should instill a sense of peace in the viewer.[3] Iconographers refer not to painting an icon, they refer to writing one. The icon writer must make the image as timeless as possible. It is not lighted, nor is it shaded to look three-dimensional in any way. Any kind of fleshly matter which might make it seem terrestrial must be refined away. The objective aesthetic is timeless, a-temporal and stoic (figure 1). Then and only then is the image consecrated, something essential to root the viewer's belief that this is not just an image but has some connection to its signified.[4]

The church officially adopted and began making images in this fashion in the sixth century.[5] It is not long after that the ebb and flow between proper use and popular use begins to manifest itself. The images began to gather miraculous associations which resulted in them being venerated questionably in the eyes of the church. "There is no century between the fourth and the eighth in which there is not some evidence of opposition to images even within the Church."[6] When an icon is venerated the objective result is that the venerator achieves a sort of personal experience with the divine in the image – a miracle. It is the popular following of the laity which created by the proliferation of these miracle legends which ensured their survival and development as well as the church's opposition to them. Although theologically all icons are considered to be sacred, such miracle-working icons are often given particular names (especially those of the Virgin Mary) and taken from city to city where believers gather to venerate them and pray before them.

The necessity of this intellectual connection to the prototype – the divine – cannot be overlooked. When icons came under attack in the eighth century, Father Symeon of the Wonderful Mountain stated in their defense that "it is not as if we venerate the surface appearance, but, calling to mind the one depicted in the painting, we look to the invisible by means of the visible picture, and understand him to be present…"[7] Keeping in mind the prerogative relationship that these icons had with their signified, the purpose of their aesthetic becomes evident: to calm and instill peace in the viewer so that meditation is facilitated by the *intellectual* concepts which made icons distinct and special from ordinary images.

Indeed, miracles began to be seen as testament to the images' authenticity as a divine object. "In the post-Justinianic period the icon assumes an ever increasing role in popular devotion, and there is a proliferation of miracle stories connected with icons, some of them rather shocking to our eyes"[8] If the achievement of a personal connection through the depicted image is the ultimate goal, how better to connect through an image than to have the image interact with you? Viewer reception and behavior begin to skew from the careful concepts originally laid out in the Byzantine institutionalization of the icon. To paraphrase Geary, the miraculous cases brought in defense of the holy images should have been the very cases used to condemn them.[9]

In sharp juxtaposition to the icon, the creation of the votive image later emerged as a very strong popular tradition and soon amassed its own variety of miracle legends. Originally looked upon with disapproval by the Church, votive images lacked not only

consecration but any of the aspects which gave the icons their prerogative relationship with their signified, justifying their existence.[10] The votive image plays into the ultimate desire of a worshipper to connect intimately with the divine. It functions as the natural endpoint to the icon logic: physical representations of the emotional connection itself, a gesture of thanks, commemoration or offering. The fact that these "ex votos" had no *a priori* connection to the entities which they signified no longer mattered, nor did the fact that they were created in the same manner as an ordinary image by an ordinary craftsman. As the centuries progressed, miracles performed by merely fashioned material, such as votives, became culturally acceptable.[11] The importance of intellectual meditation, not surprisingly, started to get lost on the laity. The reception of religious imagery began to change; the end result of a personal connection takes precedence over aspects of technicality, such as consecration, which attempt to mediate the image's materiality. By the reformation of the sixteenth century the necessity of mediating aspects of material would become unnecessary.

Part II

According to David Freedberg, one of the most affective aspects of a figured image is verisimilitude – how closely an image resembles the object it depicts. Freedberg also argues that we as humans have a natural tendency to relate to things which resemble us or that with which we are familiar – we do so automatically.[12] For example, a picture of a woman giving birth evokes memories of birth in a viewer who

has children. A picture displaying a woman giving birth in agony evokes sympathetic memories in a woman who has given birth.

Apart from representation of emotion, aspects of familiarity exist in the non-evocative form of verisimilitude and accuracy – how relatable the image is to its viewers. This is exemplified in the trend in images of Christ continually changing to look similar to the people of the culture in which they appear. When these aspects are used in conjunction as outlined, they create an *evocative realism*. They depict their subject in a manner not only relatable to the viewer, but also very evocatively – especially if the image displayed anthropomorphic tendancies.[13] The employment of this evocative realism in an image's aesthetic is what efficiently stirs and evokes the viewer's emotion and sympathy – they are what enable the image to function on its viewer in lieu of the viewer comprehending the image's content exclusively.

There is a strong relation between the formal quality of images and their efficacy as emotionally reactive objects.[14] As Christianity becomes more entrenched and, as has been examined, the need for personal-divine connection presses forward on the masses of laymen, images began to play into the immediacy of response which could be released by these formal qualities. The use of a more evocative aesthetic in the picture itself began to emerge as a way to more quickly elicit a response from the viewer. If the image as a whole gains its power from its miracle-working abilities, then the use of this evocative realism was a way for the image makers to tap into this miraculous potential. The idea behind religious imagery taking intellectual work to be meditated upon begins

to become somewhat lost to the desire to simply achieve the end result of an experience with the image. This change can be seen through the centering of miracle legends around images which have particularly appeared especially beautiful or lifelike.[15] The relationship between the proliferation of miracle legends and the way the images are felt or fashioned is a cyclical one.

As the church became more institutionalized, the main viewers were no longer looking for monastic meditation in order to be stirred, but are laymen chiefly looking to be emotionally moved. This shift in viewer desire demanded artists who knew well how to manipulate a viewer's empathy and fashion an image to meet their demands and let them easily access their emotions. Not surprisingly, it is precisely the element of evocative realism which we see begin to fortify itself in public religious imagery and give them this immediacy of access.

The *Deposition* of Netherlandish artist Rogier van der Weyden was originally an alterpiece intended for a chapel in Leuven (figure 2). It has, at its center, Christ being taken down from the cross by a bearded Joseph of Arimathea and a well-dressed Nicodemus. Christ's pale body forms an arch with the upper arm of Mary Magdalene. Christ's body is almost immaculate apart from his wounds; the holes in his hand and feet, the blood on his forehead from his crown of thorns, and the cut inflicted by a Roman spear. Mary, dressed in blue, is overcome by her immense grief which causes her to faint. In her fall, her body takes on the same shape as Christ's, implying that her suffering is close to his. "The painting is universally recognized for its unique

expressive force. Based upon a sculptural device of compressing a maximum of form into a minimum of space, the work evokes sentiments of profound religiosity and emotional intensity."[16]

By contrast, Fra Angelico's frescoes (figure 3) convey completely different emotions. Their purpose to encourage private devotions in a monastic setting, they employ a meditative, not evocative, aesthetic. The meditational frescoes in the cells of the convent have a quieting quality about them and many take on an unmistakable byzantine aesthetic. The point of departure from byzantine images, however, is that they are humble works in simple colors. There is more mauvish-pink than there is red while the brilliant and expensive blue is almost totally lacking. In its place is dull green and the black and white of Dominican robes. There is nothing lavish. "Each one has the effect of bringing an incident of the life of Christ into the presence of the viewer. They are like windows into a parallel world."[17]

Fra Angelico employs linear perspective by depicting parts of the convent itself in the frescoes, yet Van der Weyden uses elements of expression and dimension which draw the viewer into the picture in a way that Fra Angelico's frescoes do not. Although northern and southern Europe advanced their art in different ways (looking forward at new forms versus looking backwards at old), the important distinction between these pieces is how their intended functions shaped how they viewed their subjects. The Van der Weyden altarpiece is a public display intended for the laity while the frescoes are for private monastic meditation. They are both equal parts realism and stylization, yet

one is emotionally live while the other is emotionally still. The art in a monastic setting endures in a meditation-appropriate byzantine aesthetic while the art intended for the laity provides greater ease of access to emotional response.

There is a natural trend for people to develop connections with material objects. The byzantine icon attempted to mediate its material with a direct connection to its signified saint. Miracles amassed around these icons, which, due to these mediators, were ontologically sound. The votive image appeared as a representation of the ultimate goal of icon veneration, skipping over the crucial fact that it was the mediation of the material which made icon veneration permissible. This teleology continues until it moves away from the icon logic entirely, ending in devotional art pieces such as van der Weyden's. The material quality of the image has gone from being circumnavigated in the icon, ignored in the votive, to existing in devotional art as the aspect which makes the image effective. By the sixteenth century, emotional response was *the* sought-after result of viewing an image and meditation had been left in the monasteries. Comparing devotional art to byzantine icons, the laity had become attached to the very material qualities that they were originally supposed to ignore.

Northern artists truly find their *forte* in creating these emotionally live images. A very familiar northern depiction of Christ was as the Man of Sorrows. The viewer was meant to feel that Christ was eternally dying before them.[18] Artists such as Mathias Grünewald had emerged with the experience and skill to fashion the material in such a way to meet the demands of the viewers: the more evocative the aesthetic of the image,

the more funcional it now was in terms of a devotional object. To quote Joseph Koerner "on the eve of Protestant iconoclasm, people reveled in grisly depictions of Christ's abject body, in which every bit of necrotic flesh stood artfully portrayed." Grünewald's *Crucifixion* (figures 4, 5 and 6) takes the familiar form of Christ as Man of Sorrows and renders it with unprecedented evocative realism. Koerner writes

> "…everything that Christ became – hands and feet wrenched and dislocated by the nails; loincloth hyperbolically shredded; skin darkened by filth, gangrene and congealed blood and bristling with thorns, each causing a specific infection; rib-cage collapsed and the suffocation that, were it not for the centurion's lance, would have killed Christ that much more painfully – becomes surreally visible within the deprived visibility of a night-time setting." [19]

Freedberg writes about this same image that "[o]ne can imagine the strength – if not the exact content and quality – of the emotions that might have been aroused by pictures that showed this…"[20] Not only does this image have no ontological ties to the divine Christ, it does not even attempt to picture him in divinity. This is, to quote Koerner again, "everything that Christ is not". The reactions to this antithetical notion of Christ, the greatest and most high, dejected and deformed like he is in this image, are the very things which enable the image to function. How could one, in fact, view this painting and meditate on Christ's divinity? How could one resist the emotional response that would inevitably follow from standing before this sight? Doubtless, through the now generations-old practice of viewing images such as this and anticipating an immediate reaction, the act of viewing itself had changed. To elicit an emotional response was now

their intended function. The presence of divinity was now omitted; the material itself was now what the viewer responds to.

Begun with the ideal empathetic content, devotional art had been refined out of hundreds of years of desire to be emotionally moved. The art itself had evolved into things which drew emotions out of a person masterfully– in turn giving the viewer the greatest immediacy of access to those emotions. Viewers now expected to stand in awe amidst of flood of emotion. They now expected to have those long-sought personal connections, not facilitated, but delivered from a good religious painting. To look back at what the Byzantines had guarded against, it proves that through history there indeed was a difference between an icon, which somehow embodies the divine presence, and art which just points to the sign. The intellect that was required to allow one to meditate is paramount in the icon and absent in images such as Grünewald's. Having an emotional reaction to an icon, which has some connection to divine presence, is one thing; simply reacting to the aesthetic of a religious painting is quite another. Let us think back once more to the importance that Symeon of the Wonderful Mountain gave to presence. It is little wonder why such violent iconoclasm erupted at the time such powerful emotion was being invoked in viewers.

The role of the image in society had grown so that it dominated a central role in peoples' lives. People had established connections to the images themselves. During the iconoclasms, exemplified very effectively in England, iconodules hid and protected icons like refugees. Meanwhile, the Protestant iconoclasts, arguably humanizing the

images which they attacked more than the venerators, hunted them down and dragged them through the streets like lynch mobs. [21] The iconoclasts favored shouting such things as "look! It is merely wood!" not because they thought there actually was a God in the image (or even less likely that they believed anyone else did): they sought to counter the manner in which society has collectively come to connect with these images. Whether or not the increased "functionality" of images such as Grünewald's got anyone closer to God, the people certainly became strongly connected to them in and of themselves. By this time, a spectacle such as Grünewald's *Crucifixion* would have aided a Christian's piety. [22]

Part III

The written word played a critical role in both the reformation of the church and the reformation of the image. Although image and text had existed together in illuminated manuscripts since the time of the Byzantines, the potential of text in and of itself did not reach its climax until the advent of printing and the prevalence of the book. Text and image were used together in illuminated manuscripts yet the impetus was on the image. The image was a visual mediator which transmitted the content of the inaccessible text to the viewer. Until prayer books such as *The Douce Apocalypse* emerge around the thirteenth century, followed by books of hours such as *Les Très Riches Heures de Jean duc de Berry* in the fifteenth century, text was chiefly available only to clergy, rarely available to the laity, and could be understood much less clearly than an image and with much less efficacy. [23] Simply put, the relationship between text and

image before the reformation was that of an icon to an acheiropoietos. The presence of text functions to anchor the images into divinity like an icon is anchored to divinity through relics like the Veronica Veil. The scripture, in this case, was not valued for its content but valued in itself as an *object of content*; a whole. It was not until the Protestant heralding of The Word as the only truth and developing common translations of bibles for common laymen that text is finally able to break free of this secondary role.

For the early sixteenth century laity, the prospect of meditation on the content of an image was something either forgotten or, in cases like Grünewald's image, nearly impossible. The laity had come to want simply the result of that meditation: the emotional response. Why then do the northern painters, who become so skillful at conjuring such gut-wrenching images of a mutilated Christ, quite suddenly arête their brushes so that not a single drop of blood contacts the ground beneath the cross? [24] When the reformation broke and the written word began to rise, a process began which divested the image of its former function. [25] The content that used to be so readily sought for empathy in the image is now provided exclusively by the realm of text and oration in a manner which provides the intellectual content itself in an un-mediated form. Conversely, religious art becomes no more than a visual language.

With text widely available and readable to the laymen and sermons and prayers given in common tongue, the age-old defense of images as books for the illiterate finally falls through. Images are no longer needed to convey content, and as a result of iconoclastic tension religious imagery undergoes a radical change. The new protestant

images now serve as supplementary illustrations to narratives (similar to the old illuminated manuscripts but with transposed roles between text and image). Instead of merely authenticating the content provided by the images, the text now directly provides its own content. The Word of God itself, Luther argued, revealed the only true path to salvation. Images had lost their former function of signifying the divine. They were now supposed to make you think about its signified rather than feel. With this obligation lifted from the image, text freed it to be able to be about anything. Thus began the evolution towards the image as we know it today.

Although the face of religious art changed drastically due to protestant reforms, the increasing focus on the secular world in art had been developing for some time before the break of the reformation: it was not only books which freed the subject of Art. Ushered in by the Renaissance, humanism (the focus of art and thought on the human condition) played a key role in the beginning transition of the artisan to the artist. The whole tradition of artists painting the divine stemmed from St. Luke. Although it was not uncommon for artists (or patrons, for that matter) to render themselves in an image with the divine (a self-portrait, if you will), it was not until the onset of humanism that the focus shifted from being "a painter of the divine" to being "a painter." The self-portrait of the thirteenth century chronicler and illuminator Matthew Paris (figure 12) consists of him crouched beneath the Virgin and Child in the lower margin of the page. This is one example from centuries of image production in which authorship was either not registered or was, as in this case, framed by submission.[26] As the Renaissance

unfolded, a focus on the act of painting for the sake of painting developed in the south. Albrech Dürer made his first trip to Italy in 1494. There he encountered

> a new, humanistic conception of the sovereignty of the artist, a conception that he recognized was missing in his own native Germany; hence his famous remark to his friend Willibald Pirckheimer in a 1506 letter written from Venice: "Here I am a gentleman, at home only a parasite." ([27]

The effects of humanism on artists, even northern artists, cannot be overlooked in regards to the status it gave them.

After Dürer returned from Italy, he fashioned a series of self-portraits that showed he had procured more from her than simply Italianate technique. In his Prado panel (figure 13) self-portraiture, perhaps for the first time in the history of art, distinguishes itself from other kinds of portraits.

> "Dressed in lavish and festive clothing of modish taste and design, and wearing the expensive doeskin gloves that were a Nuremberg specialty, Dürer elevates himself above the modest social rank into which he was born…. The Prado panel combines artistic pride, evident in the daring of its pictorial invention and voiced in its inscription, with Dürer's personal pride in who he is, how he looks, where he has been, and what he is worth. It celebrates the power of the individual and elevates what self-portraiture is intended to depict: not merely the look and status of its maker, but the underlying idea of painting itself." [27]

Later, dated in the year 1500 in Münich, Dürer produced another self-portrait in which he assumes the traditional posture of an icon of Christ (figure 14). Here, his posture dramatizes the personal force of the artist as representative man.

> "Dürer stands dressed in the fur-trimmed coat worn by patricians and humanists; he demonstrates his learning at once in the geometry of the iamge and in the difficult Latin of his inscriptions; all in order to assert,

> once and for all, the Renaissance painter's ascent from craftsman to artist, from manual to intellectual laborer … In analogizing artists's portrait and cult image of God, in celebrating his art as the *vera icon* of personal skill and genius, Dürer realigns the terms of artistic and human self-understanding. He leaves behind centuries of image production in which authorship either was not registered or else was framed in postures of submission" [28]

During the Renaissance, as reflected in Dürer's 1500 self-portrait, religion had stopped being a way of thinking and had begun to turn into something to think about. These pre-reformation artistic movements prepped art for what the book would enable it to do after the protestant reforms. The trend of humanism and secular content in art emerges pre-reformation, but it is not until the reformation, and the reformation of the religious image, that art and secularism can completely merge.

Part IV

During and after the reformation, the reactions evoked in venerators of images such as Grünewald's were now socially feared and branded as idolatrous. Because devotional artwork was no longer accepted or necessary, it was only natural for art to take humanity for its new subject. Religious themes were often alluded to, but the main focus was no longer a religious theme but a celebration of secularism. For example, let us examine the artist Hans Holbein the Elder and his son. Holbein the Elder worked in the Northern Renaissance style. He visited Frankfurt in 1501 where he likely encountered the work of Mathias Grünewald. This encounter shows itself in the second phase of his work between 1501 and 1510 in images such as the Kaisheim altarpiece (figures 7 and 8). These paintings have much greater depth than his earlier work (figure

9) with a freer grouping of highly individualized figures—often portraits—in rather lively movement.

Holbein the Younger was trained by his father and carried a lot of his religiously artistic traditions. What is of concern is how he broke away from those traditions in reaction to the reformation. Working mainly out of Basle, his early artistic career produced religious imagery. As the reformation proceeded and reached Basle, he began to work for reformist clients and a marked difference between his art and his father's made themselves present – not (as a matter of importance) in style so much as in content. Text's usurp of religious content from the image was critical in the development of the image. Without the supposition that people are supposed to connect with content of images, even if a picture displayed a religious theme (such as Protestant religious art) it was defused – experiencing religion through images isn't what people we supposed to do anymore. The Renaissance rendered art more concerned with the secular and less concerned with the spiritual. Artists, instead of trying to depict the divine, now take worldly things as their subjects. This is an appropriate arrangement, for it is what artists had developed the techniques to best depict with realism. The secular had stepped up to fill all facets of the void left by the removal of the image's (originally spiritual) signified. The content of still lives consists of a secular version of symbolism while portraiture replaced iconic images. The spiritual aspect of the image's signified was replaced by religion's larger *universe of discourse* – philosophy and idea.

While Holbein the Younger lived in Switzerland he painted, over the years 1521-1522, the work most frequently recognized as "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb." (figure 10) It is painted as a piece of art functioning not to illuminate Christ but to illuminate the notion of death and melancholia.[29] It allows the spectator to not only encounter the death of a human figure like Christ, but also one's own death. Nothing here would signify this body as Christ except the placement of the wounds. There is nothing romantic about it. It is bruised, emaciated, its eyes are rolled into its head, its mouth is open and rigor mortis has set in. Nothing evokes empathy here; it is very clinical, lifelike and there is no depiction of divinity; this is a man's corpse. Furthermore, Christ (or the body, as may be more appropriate to say) is left alone without onlookers – an element of composition. It would be premature to say that Holbein had lead Christ across the threshold of atheism – an idea not yet intellectually feasible. Holbein had lead Christ across the threshold of humanity. Although there is still a signified Christ, there is no expectation of a connection with a prototype: the way to the divine was through the word now, not the image.

Switzerland at this time was undoubtedly a difficult place for an artist to work. Not surprisingly, Holbein moved to England in 1526 to get away from the factional strife of the reformation where he produced, as Henry VIII's court painter, chiefly portraits. The evolution of artistic technique and viewing habits – which enabled society to become so attached to images – now went to work on non-religious subjects. Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII was said to be "life size, so well that everyone who

looks is astonished, since it seems to live as if it moved its head and limbs." This response is in fact a throwback to images of Christ which appeared to move their heads and limbs (in fact, several altarpieces of Christ had moveable arms and heads to specifically touch this anthropomorphist verisimilitude [30])

Another piece produced by Hans Holbein was *The Ambassadors* in 1533 (figure 15). Whereas traditional religious Netherlandish paintings used symbolism to link their subjects to divinity, here Holbein used symbols to link its figures to the age of exploration. Although the meanings of many symbols are still debated, it is doubtless that the still life aspect of the picture alludes to the aspects of a "renaissance man" – a man accomplished in both the arts and sciences. There are two globes (one celestial and one terrestrial) a sundial, a quadrant, a torquetum, a lute and various books and textiles. Among these books is a hymnal in the translation of Martin Luther. In addition, one of the men is dressed in secular garb and the other in clerical. The floor is recognizable as that of Westminster Abbey. In the far left upper corner, there is a curtain drawn aside to reveal as small crucifix. Regardless of the exact meanings of these symbols, whether they are references to strife between the church and the secular world, the church and science, or the church and reform, their secularism is doubtless: they comment about the human condition itself. Holbein is an example of the development of the artist from the artisan that will fully emerge in the eighteenth century.

The overarching general subject of art is transitioning towards the mundane. Pieter Aertsen was another Netherlandish Painter and pioneer of still life and genre painting. It should be noted that Aertsen was a follower of Hieronymus Bosch who specialized in pre-reformation depictions of hell (as well as painting several altarpieces none of which, not surprisingly, survive to this day). Aertsen, on the other hand, was best known for "inverted still lives:" scenes that at first glance look like pure examples of still life and genre, these elements being placed prominently in the foreground, yet in fact have a religious scene's narrative elements incorporated into the background.

A painting from 1551 called "A Meat Stall with the Holy Family Giving Alms," (figure 11) is one of the first paintings that intentionally combined these religious symbols with a secular subject. These symbols would have been easily recognizable to the viewers during this time period as allusions to biblical narratives. In the background Aertsen painted a religious scene: Joseph with a donkey carrying Mary and the Christ child. The holy family has stopped to give beggar alms. The people eating in the back right corner of the painting are displaying the sin gluttony. The person picking up oyster shells is warning us of another sin: lust (oysters and shells were thought to be aphrodisiacs). The hanging entrails and meat products were typical within the culture as well as possibly symbolizing that this life is temporary – a memento mori. The pretzels allude to lent and the fish and wine allude to the Eucharist. Perhaps all of the symbols mentioned would not be recognizable as such today? Perhaps the only reason they are recognizable to the viewers of the time is because of their history responding to

these symbols. Here is an example of an image exhibiting religious themes, but, as Holbein's *Dead Christ*, the image is defused of its spiritualism. Just as Holbein's subject is not Christ but a dead man, Aersten's subject is neither the narrative nor the holy family – they are merely elements – its subject is meat.

Part: V

Emerging secular art, as the pieces above demonstrate, continues to exhibit religious throwbacks in motif. As has been seen, trends in art are mirrored by trends in viewing and vice versa: he artists reflect the viewing culture and the viewing culture shapes the artists. Religion was the progenitor of secular art until the two sharply diverged during the reformation. When the content of religious art is given to the book, what happens to the viewing habits of a culture that has spent hundreds of years of their history responding, intimately and religiously, to images? Nothing: secular art, and viewing secular art, take up the vestiges of religious art. We continue to see religious behaviors coupled with artistic viewing into the 17th century, with incidents coming to mind as when the duke of Buckingham's art collector worshipped a crucifixion by Michelangelo as "the most divine thing in the world. I have been such an idolater to kiss it three times, for there is nothing more perfect." This behavior here would not seem so out of place; the reformation is still fresh and it is the time of the great Italian master. Art, above all, is supposed to be lifelike and the most anthropomorphic. [31]

What is interesting is that advancing into the eighteenth century, when "fine art" has evolved as a free-standing entity dissolved from the integrated activities of medieval society into distinct spheres of politics, economics, religion, science and art, these throwbacks to religious viewing do not manifest themselves any less strongly. Although *The Ambassadors* did not have the same sort of function as a religious piece, it was still intended for a specific audience and function, exemplifying a way of life and commentating on it. Fine art emerges as the polar extreme: for the first time in thousands of years, art is completely separate from function, yet viewers still expect an emotional connection. Although the signified isn't a divinity, this no longer matters. It is wholly the material which we are responding to: the signified is more often than not an unknown.

By the eighteenth century, art was well underway to creating its own following. Cultural institutions such as libraries and museums had risen all across Europe, along with a distinct market and public for the fine arts. [32] The artist has fully emerged from the shell of the artisan as a creative genius; fine art and craft are definitively split. Artistic independence has become an ideal and the artist himself a pseudo-divine figure. "Like the Christian saints, artists were to embrace their suffering as a sign of election." [33] The role of the artist began to be viewed as a high spiritual calling. In 1834 one critic remarked that "The despot of the day is the word *Artist*…. In the old days one said of good artists that they had beliefs…. But Art itself is a belief. The true artist is the priest of this eternal religion."[34] Perhaps this rise in the status of the artist is a response

to the decline of religion? Although declarations such as Alfred de Vigny's "art is the modern spiritual belief" were abound, it is not feasibly that the common man would give up Christianity for Art.

What these declarations do tell, however, is that art is being viewed in a spiritual light and elevated to a spiritual height – especially by the increasingly skeptical intellectual elite. In art, this elite was finding a substitute for the old religious ideals and certainties. To paraphrase Shiner, the spiritual elevation of art took the form of viewing art as the revelation of a superior truth with the power to redeem. The insights of the imagination and feelings invoked by art, although lacking in the clarity or certainty of scientific reasoning, give us an immediacy of access to a sense of spirituality.[35] The ability of an image to affect its viewer is something that has become habitually expected and ingrained in humanity. All we still know about art is that it is supposed to move us – it is what we have looked to art to do for over a thousand years.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the aesthetic itself develops a proper aesthetic behavior which mirrors religious reverence. Attentive silence becomes the appropriate mode of viewing art, from plays to operas to paintings. When part of the Louvre Palace was opened as a public art museum during the Revolution, signs had to be posted asking people not to sing, joke or play games in the galleries but to respect them as "the sanctuary of silence and meditation."[36] The expectations on a viewer mirror those on a cleric in a church. According to Shiner, the more sophisticated members of the emerging art public needed no such prodding to treat painting and

sculpture as the object of refined spiritual pleasure. The literary critic William Hazlitt described the spiritual thrill of visiting the collection of the duke of Orléans in 1799:

A mist passed away from my sight; the scales fell off … a new heaven and a new earth stood before me. We had all heard names of Titian, Raphael, Guido, Domenichino, the Caracci – but to see them face to face, to be in the same room with their deathless productions,… from that time on I lived in a world of pictures [37] Such deification of masterpieces was not an isolated instance. One critic referred to the exhibition room in the Louvre as "this temple of the arts." To again quote Shiner, "already the cult of art was beginning and the inflated, quasi-religious rhetoric that goes with it." [38]

Advancing into the late nineteenth century, we begin to see the idea of presence emerge again. As byzantine icons were awarded their divinity because they had a direct connection to their divine; reliquaries were effective as devotional objects because of the idea of authenticity. In the late eighteen hundreds, a parallel mode of thought resurfaces in museums. Many American museums which had plaster casts of ancient sculptures put them in storage as the idea that only the finest "original" works belonged in a museum. The assistant director at Boston declared in 1903 that the first aim of an art museum is to "maintain a high standard of aesthetic taste" by choosing objects for their "aesthetic quality" to afford its visitors "the pleasure derived from a contemplation of the perfect." [39] As recently as sixty years ago there were influential artists and critics ready to deny the name of 'art' to any work of literature, painting or

music that did not participate in the modernist quest for purity. [40] This language bears striking resemblance to that which the medieval church may have used in the tenth century referencing to the divinely signified Christ. Here, it is used in reference to perfectly rendered material. The material now shows trends of filling the gap left by the absence of a divine signified.

The idea of fine art as a surrogate religion is not new. It has been argued that the fine arts do indeed provide the secular and individualistic society more varied spiritual insight than the historical religions. [41] Although the fine arts have indeed been invested with the same kind of feeling and devotion, simply stamping them as a secular religion is an oversimplification. Let us consider the anti-art movement of the early twentieth century which strove to deflate this claim. Art has recently been exploded to incorporate almost any conceivable material, sound or activity into art and get it accepted by art institutions. Why? For the first time in thousands of years, the image has been separate from function. Viewers, however, never ceased to treat the images as functional, despite modern arts best efforts at insisting it is not. The viewing habits of European Christendom persist; it is ingrained in western culture for the viewer experience divinity in an image. Art, at this point, can be everything but nonfunctional. The merely two-hundred-year-old category of "fine art" is an unnatural trend at odds since its inception with the thousands of years humanity has spent responding intimately to images. The explosion of modern art is perhaps a harbinger that fine art

itself will disappear in its turn. Perhaps all the advances and shifts in modern art are resurfacings of our habituated desire to make art a functional part of life again.

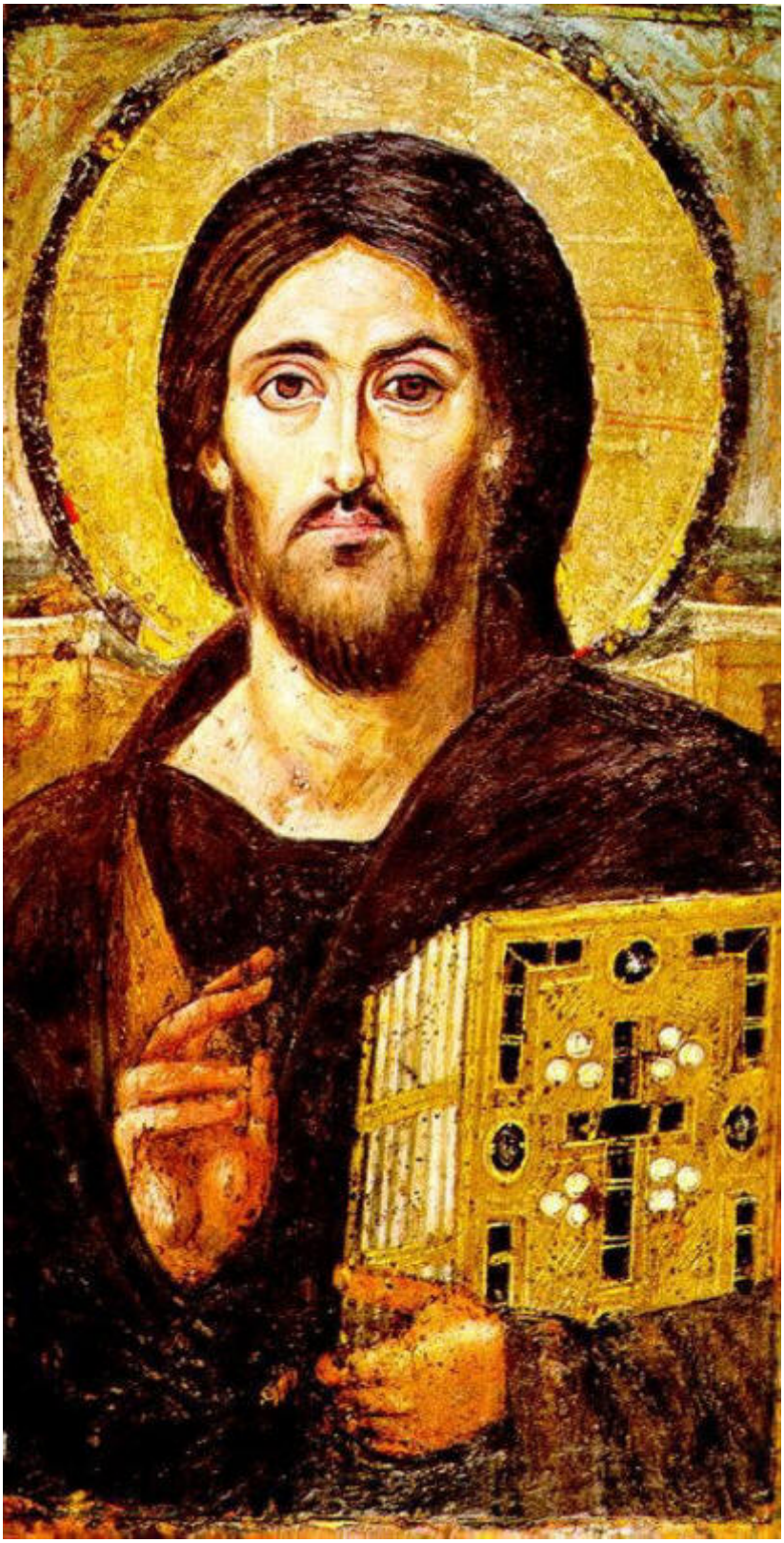
Figure 1: 

Figure 2: 

Figure 3: 

Figure 4:

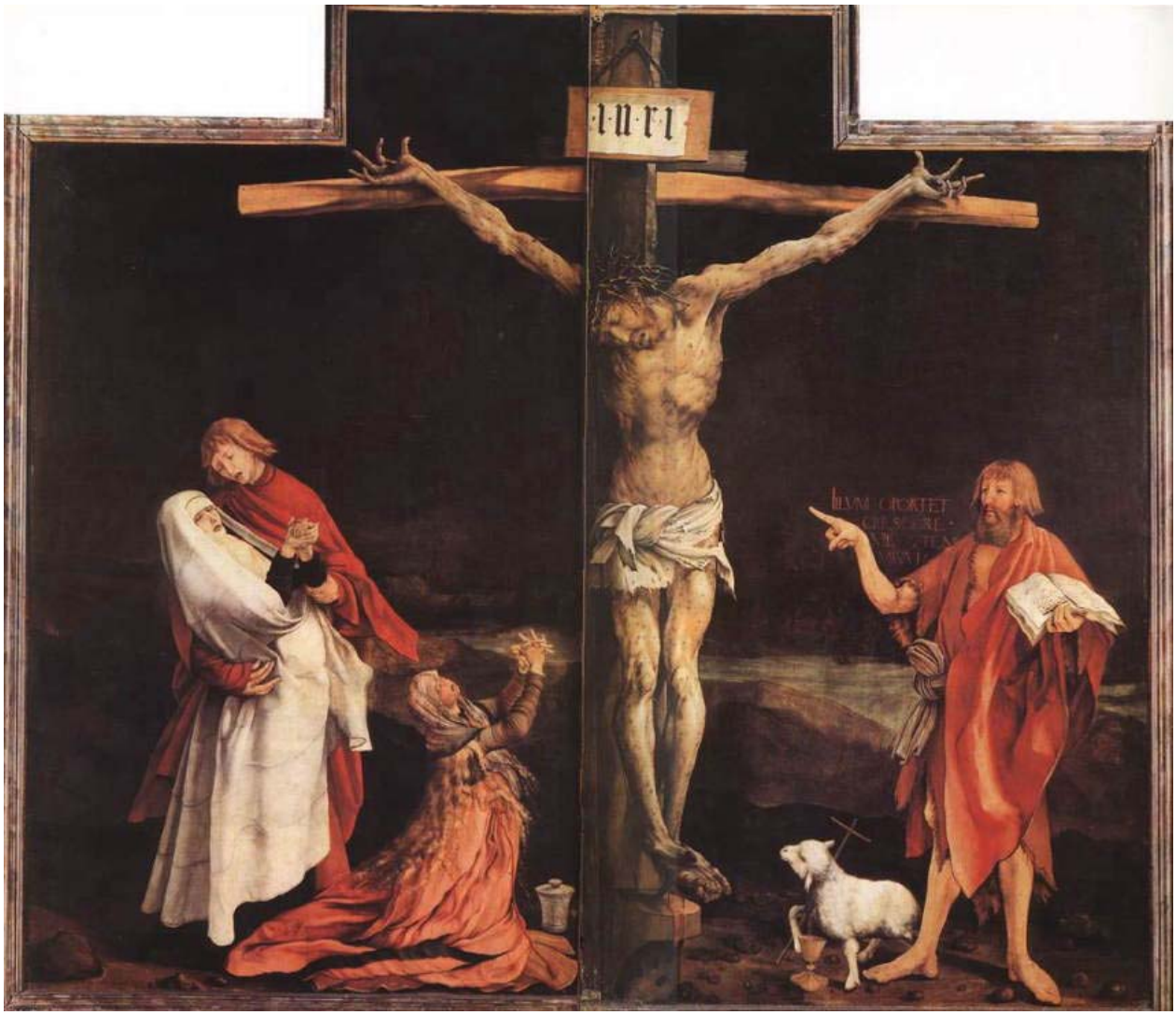


Figure 5 :

Figure 6:

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Figure 15:

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