

In 600AD Pope Gregory the Great was to say that "painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read". From then on the great stories of the Bible have been painted by artists throughout the centuries, from the moment of Creation as told in Genesis to the visions of St John the Divine in the book of Revelation. Clearly, the earliest purpose of religious painting was to illustrate the stories and texts that the illiterate heard in church and to give a focus for prayer. From this beginning was to spring much of the Western world's greatest art which we know today.

Even the most uninitiated viewer of art would recognise Michelangelo's great vision of the moment of creation as he painted it for the centre of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It is depicted with awesome grandeur, the image of God the Father surrounded by the heavenly host swoops down to touch the hand of Adam at the moment of his creation. Often the detail of the two fingers about to touch has been used for both religious and secular purpose and immediately understood by the viewer as a symbol of creation, connection and significant moment. Visitors to the Sistine Chapel are also in awe of the almost super human mastery of the artist who created this spectacular ceiling, the vast conception of the work and the huge physical demands required to paint it. So is there a danger that with the great masters religious paintings the admiration for the skill and mastery of the painter may dilute the message of the painting?

Tracing back to the beginning of religious art which first emerged in mosaics and icons in the Byzantine period the narrative elements of the stories from the Bible were limited. The emergence of fresco painting in the 14th century was to provide the possibilities of depicting several aspects of a narrative, sometimes I think they are almost like strip cartoons as they lead the viewer from one point of a story to the next. Throughout Italy in particular fresco painting was used in both the grander churches but also in humbler village chapels to not only decorate but to inform the viewer.

Can such images still "work" today? Can we who are literate and surrounded by images, and often fast moving ones, find in religious art a source of spiritual support and a focus for prayer? How lucky we are in Holy Trinity to have so many beautiful images. Does anyone else feel the looming image of the ascended Christ in his mandorla of light surrounded by cheeky cherubim and seraphim when they kneel to take communion? Or have you enjoyed the lovely faces of the rosy cherubim circling the Agnus Dei in the central tondo of the altar. or the Pre-Raphaelite angels on either side joyfully swinging their thurifers? For me it does "work" but I recognise that as an Art Historian images are for me always significant.

Of course, we all bring to art our own subjective response and are moved by different images. There is however, a monastery in Florence where I have been taking visitors for fifteen years where I have witnessed a unique response to the art it contains from both people of faith and sceptics.

The monastery of San Marco is located in the bustling University area of Florence and as you enter off a noisy square you find yourself in a quiet cloister. Surrounding this on the first floor can be found what was once the cells of the Dominican monks. As you move along the corridors you are able to look into each small empty cell with a single window for light. On the walls of each cell there is a fresco depicting a scene from the life of Christ. These were mostly painted by a saintly monk who was also a painter named Fra Angelico. It is said that he always prayed before picking up his brushes and was seen to weep when painting a Crucifixion. Although living within the confines of a

monastic order he was not immune to the artistic developments which were taking place outside in 15<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance Florence. The frescos are painted sufficiently illusionistically to appear as though the event depicted is taking place in a niche on the wall of the cell. Angelico was able to apply the newly understood rules of perspective which he blended with a medieval piety.

In Cell No 1 there is a fresco depicting Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the garden on Easter morning, as told in John 20:17. The garden and tomb are represented with simple colour and line and there is a remarkably modern looking garden fence running across the back of the image. Jesus seems to float a little above the ground his feet painted pointing downwards as in Medieval art, not realistically. Mary kneels on his left and reaches forward to touch him, his right arm gently gestures to her, the moment of the "Noli me tangere," "do not touch me" is captured with great gentleness. There is a beautiful simplicity in these frescoes which touches people, sometimes by surprise. There is a very peaceful Annunciation in one cell, a terrifyingly Surreal image of the mocking of Christ in another and a Transfiguration scene which glows with its own aura of light. I have witnessed people of all persuasions deeply moved by these paintings and have questioned what it is that is so special about them.

That they were painted with such integrity must indeed be responsible for the effect achieved. But also, I think that because they were painted not to be viewed as we do today, but for the sole benefit of the incumbent of each cell, for contemplation, prayer, not for grandeur, display, evidence of wealth of the patron, or artistic ambition, must account for the truly profound effect they can have on a viewer. Good painting requires integrity, with Fra Angelico we get not only a painter of integrity but also a deep commitment to his subject.

I do not doubt Michelangelo's integrity when he painted the Sistine Chapel or deny the wonders of his work, nor do I dismiss other fresco cycles or the great Baroque masters. What is clear to me is that if the Bible stories are made real for us and touch us we must all be prepared to be surprised.

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