

Make Art—and Academia—Medieval Again

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Some years ago, a friend who works in the museum world asked me to write something about the experience of looking at devotional art in museums. In particular, she wanted to know whether I had ever had an epiphany while looking at religious art in a museum and whether it felt comfortable having that response: “Do you think museums appropriately acknowledge and interpret the deeply personal and spiritual meaning [religious works of art] had in their original contexts?”¹

I told her,

No, I have never had such an experience in a museum, and if I did, I would not have felt comfortable. Museums are not typically very good places for having any experience other than the most intellectually aesthetic. Everything about their arrangement and display of objects mitigates against most any other response. The objects are grouped according to exterior, academic categories of chronology or type, and they are labelled in such a way that their display is clearly about ‘conveying information,’ not about encouraging any sort of spiritual response. Indeed, given the history of many museum collections, it would be easily possible to argue that they were designed specifically so as to prevent such responses in the presence of relics or devotional images or the gods of other religions.

¹Paraphrased from the series of blogposts I did on *Fencing Bear at Prayer* in an attempt to answer my friend’s question: <https://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2009/08/q-spirit-quest.html>.

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Not one to give up easily, however, I took myself on a tour of various museums—the Field Museum in Chicago where I found statues of Bastet and a corn goddess and a Buddha and an ancestor spirit, the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe where I found an exhibit on “Tesoros de Devoción,” the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. where I found altarpieces depicting scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary and Christ—testing myself to see whether I could muster up some kind of devotional response. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that I am Christian, the images in the Field Museum left me cold, but so did the santos in the Palace of the Governors, despite the best efforts of the museum designers to make the display resemble a church. I had somewhat better luck in the National Gallery, where I was struck by the great beauty of the paintings, but even at the time, it was hard for me to say whether my response was devotional as such.

The paintings were intended not just as beautiful images, but as altarpieces, backdrops for the consecration of Christ’s Body and Blood. They depicted a variety of scenes: the Annunciation, the Baptism of Jesus, the Coronation of the Virgin. All were exquisitely painted, rich with symbolism. I felt quite weepy standing in front of one Coronation of the Virgin thinking what I had read in Herbert Kessler’s *Seeing Medieval Art* about how medieval artists attempted to “show the invisible by means of the visible.”² There it was right in front of me, an image of heaven, a moment in Christ’s relationship with his Mother no human eye has seen, from the gold background framing the couple to the angel musicians at the foot of the double throne. Or, again, there it was in one Baptism of Christ, where a veritable cloud of saints surrounded John and Jesus at the very moment when Christ was revealed to the world as the Son of God, and a voice spoke from heaven, saying: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Despite the variety of scenes, the theme of the paintings was the same: revelation, God’s showing himself to the world, with visible angels and doves standing in for the spiritual reality invisible except to the eye of the mind—or the heart. Would I have been affected if I had not known the mysteries that the paintings were meant to depict? Nothing in the museum setting provided any clue. The paintings hung by themselves on walls otherwise bare, nicely lit, to be sure, but otherwise sterile. The building was quiet—it was early in the day, a weekday, not a day for many visitors—and I was for the most part alone. Contrast their present setting with the context for which the paintings were originally made. Would it matter if the altarpieces still hung in a space more closely resembling a church? The designers for the exhibit in the Palace of the

²Herbert Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2004).

Governors seem to have thought it would help displaying the statues of the saints in little niches surrounding a pseudo-altar; other museums—for example, the Cloisters in New York City—have attempted to capture this experience by recreating whole chapels and cloisters as part of their exhibits. In my own experience, however, such larping rarely works. The setting is too obviously fake, even if the material elements used to construct it are real.

Museums may not be the best places to encounter religious art, but compared with academia, they are positively friendly to the idea—if not the reality—of religious experience. Museums at the very least encourage an appreciation of art as worth looking at for its aesthetic features, even if many of the objects found in more modern collections seem designed to defy rather than celebrate the concept of beauty. Academia, by contrast, has no place for anything other than the most critical response, including in those disciplines ostensibly dedicated to the study of religion. My own discipline of history is a case in point. Despite decades of discussion about the importance of empathy—borrowed willy-nilly from anthropology and psychology, particularly for the study of emotion—historians as a class are no closer than we ever were to admitting the possibility that our own perspectives as scholars might give place in our scholarship to religious belief, never mind devotion. To do so is seen as a catastrophic category error, an exercise not of interdisciplinary analysis or understanding (academia's original criterion of “diversity”), but of intellectual bad faith.

Why such hostility to the possibility of seeing religious experience as something which academic study might facilitate, not to mention enrich—or vice versa? The opposition is arguably as old as that between Apollo and Dionysius, reason and emotion, but in fact this Nietzschean dichomizing is a modern fiction that the academy has embraced, particularly in postmodernism. The real opposition goes somewhat deeper, although it is potentially visible to anyone who steps foot on almost any American campus, including the one where I have taught since 1994. Just as museums built in the Golden Age of American collecting (or looting) sought to recreate the settings from which their objects had been taken, so universities and colleges built (or rebuilt) around the turn of the twentieth century consciously adopted a particular architectural style both as a way of attracting philanthropic donations (it worked) and as a way of engineering a particular kind of experience (not so much, to the dismay of many generations of students).

As Jan Ziolkowski has shown in his six-volume study of the role of one medieval story (“The Juggler of Notre Dame”) in the construction of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity, it was during this period that

“Gothic” became the preferred architectural style for American colleges and universities.³ Ridiculed by Thorstein Veblen, who was teaching at the University of Chicago at the time, the style was purposefully intended to promote the very conspicuous leisure that he criticized. Housed in replicas of the medieval colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, students at universities and colleges like Yale, Princeton, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Chicago, not to mention hundreds of others, were invited to imagine themselves as medieval scholars rapt out of time and breathing the rarified air of “higher” education. Since I arrived at Chicago, students have become more likely to imagine themselves not at Oxbridge, but at Hogwarts (our mascot is, after all, a phoenix), but the fiction of the residential college is the same: “Here be adventures in learning, perhaps even the possibility of traveling in space—*look, we have study abroad programs*—and time!”

As with the museum exhibits designed to give visitors the experience of stepping back in time or into another culture, however, collegiate Gothic—and, thus, almost every conservative appeal to rescue the humanities from the present-day dragons of diversity and postmodernism afflicting them in the academy by going back to a presumed Golden Age of American education—is premised on a lie. It was never the art or the architecture that generated the experience for which museum-goers or students long; it was the understanding (*intellectus*) and devotion (*affectus*) which generated the architecture and art. The question that my friend asked me about my experience in museums might easily be translated to my experience on campus: “Do you think the academy appropriately acknowledges and interprets the deeply personal and spiritual meaning [religious works of art] had in their original contexts?” “No,” I would have to answer her, “never—all the more ironically given that the dominant building on the campus where I work is a \$1.5 million chapel which John D. Rockefeller intended to serve as a symbol of the way in which ‘the spirit of religion should penetrate and control the University.’”⁴

Spoiler alert: It didn’t work—but why did anybody ever think it would? In a word: idolatry, the worship of things (artifacts) rather than God (the Maker of heaven and earth). Expecting art or architecture to work on us in the way museums and academia suggest it should is a species not of reverence, but of magic. More prosaically: lists of Great Works of Art (or Great Books) Which We Should All Study cannot save us, any more than will sticking gargoyles on a gate or a chapel in the center of campus. *Nor should we expect them to.* The

³*The Juggler of Notre Dame and the Medievalizing of Modernity*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, England: Open Book Publishers, 2018).

⁴Cited by Lester F. Goodchild, “Oxbridge’s Tudor Gothic Influences on American Academic Architecture,” *Paedagogica Historica* 36, no. 1 (2000): 266–98, 283.

medieval Christians on whose colleges modern American architects have modeled our campuses—and, therefore, our fantasies about the purposes of college education—did not expect art or architecture to generate religious responses in the way in which museums like the Cloisters or museum exhibits like “Tesoros de Devoción” pretend. Their art and architecture were an expression of their devotion to God and to searching out the Truth, not a means by which they expected to effect that devotion or study. This, ultimately, is what I told my friend who had asked me to write something about my experience looking at religious art in museums. She had sent me on a fool’s errand—more charitably, an illusory quest—searching for a grail that never existed, an experience that mere artifacts could never produce.

Postmodernism is an easy scapegoat, but it is only the proximate reason that the academy is at odds with the appreciation of the arts. The real problem is with modernity—the Enlightenment, if you will—and its corollary Romantic expectation that art could serve in place of religion. Both postmodernism’s destruction of the arts and modernism’s reverence for them give artifacts a power that, in Christian terms, they were never meant to have, not even the icons on which late medieval Western artists modeled their panel paintings like the ones that I saw at the National Gallery. Museums and the academy make the same mistake about “science,” the holy quaternity of STEM purportedly at odds with the Humanities. In the academy, sitting in a seminar room staring at a slide of a late medieval altarpiece is no different from sitting in a lecture hall staring at a slide of brain anatomy. Both exercises presume that what really matters is what we can see or otherwise apprehend materially. Both expect the material world to in some way effect whatever experiences we have, whether by acting on our senses (art) or through our synapses (consciousness). Both involve staring at corpses—dead things in which there is no life.

Medieval—that is, pre-Reformation, pre-Newtonian, pre-Whig, pre-Enlightenment, pre-Romantic, pre-modern—ideas about education and art were somewhat different. The whole point of what came to be called “Gothic” architecture—ironically, given that “Goths” were barbarians purportedly opposed to civilization—was to let in *light*, and not just physical light. As St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) put it in his *On Retracing the Arts to Theology*, citing the letter of James, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights” (James 1:17).⁵ Bonaventure distinguishes four types or levels of illumination: an *exterior* light enabling

⁵Trans. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., as *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1996).

appreciation of the forms of artifacts, things made with mechanical skill; an *inferior* light of sense perception enabling understanding of the physical world; an *interior* light of philosophical knowledge enabling understanding of intelligible truths; and a *superior* light of wisdom leading by grace and the study of Scripture to the truths that transcend human reason. Properly speaking, a Christian education ought to engage the student at all four levels, encouraging the acquisition of technical skills like weaving, metal-working, hunting, agriculture, navigation, medicine, and the dramatic arts of song, music, poetry, and pantomime; the refinement of perception of the physical world through the senses, including the study of natural forms; the inquiry into the inner and hidden causes of things through the truth of speech (rational philosophy or logic), the truth of things (natural philosophy or physics), the truth of conduct (practical philosophy or morals); and the study of Scripture, whereby the mind is lifted up to truths beyond reason which cannot be acquired by human research, but only by inspiration from “the Father of Lights.”

This, I now realize, is why I was never able to write something for my friend who had asked me to reflect upon my experience looking at religious art in museums. What I saw in the paintings in the National Gallery was an attempt to give visual form to the mystery which Bonaventure describes—the experience of illumination by way of engagement with the mechanical arts (the craft of the painters), the experience of the senses (my ability to see the paintings), the inquiry into the causes of things (the arguments surrounding the meaning of words needed to describe the reality of history), and the study of Scripture (the figures and tropes by which Jesus was revealed to be the Son of God)—but taken so utterly out of context that there was simply no way in. It is also why academia has been so hostile to the study of religion, even as it has attempted to replace religion with the study of the literary and visual arts. The medieval Christians who designed the buildings on which we have modeled our American campuses had a much wider vision of what it was possible for the human mind to grasp, in comparison with which our modern methodologies appear not just inadequate, but fundamentally impoverished. Medieval Christians were able to invent Gothic architecture because they saw light not just as a property of the physical world, but as a metaphor *and* spiritual reality at the same time. The more we try to imitate them without entering into the light by which they saw, the more we blunder in the dark, wearing costumes that cannot transform us, play-acting at being scholars hoping the magic will somehow work.