

A Painter's Observations on the Image of Christ

Eugene de Leastar

The Greeks

For Socrates was, as is well known, uglier than original sin - Søren Kierkegaard.

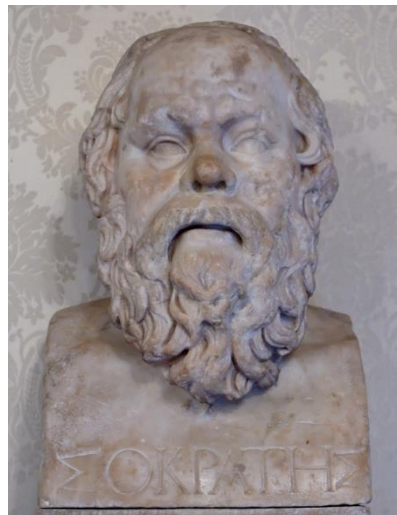


Figure 1: Socrates. Capitoline Museum, 1st century BC.

Did Jesus ever set eyes on a bust of Socrates? In his travels around Palestine where he had dealings with both rich and poor, the process of hellenisation had been ongoing for three centuries. The occupying Romans can be seen as another phase of the potent influence that Greek culture had throughout the Mediterranean.

We have no knowledge of the life of Christ as a young man. Perhaps, as a carpenter he had worked in the construction of Tiberias which was only 30 kilometres from Nazareth. There he would have heard the scandalous gossip about Antipas who founded the city in 18 AD in honour of the emperor.

It is likely that Jesus had some familiarity with the Greek language, even though he was Jewish and thoroughly immersed in sacred scripture. Contact with Greco-Roman culture was unavoidable. He would have needed only to turn a coin to see an image of Caesar.

Even in the great pilgrim city of Jerusalem, where the occupying Romans had learned that the Jews could be particularly troublesome when confronted with imperial regalia, the emperor Augustus had paid for a daily sacrifice to be offered in the temple to their god Yahweh. Well before the birth of Jesus, in Jerusalem itself:

There were many worldly Jews who probably looked like rich Greeks, living in their new Grecian palaces on the western hillside known as the Upper City. What the fanatical Jewish conservatives regarded as heathen pollution, these cosmopolitans saw as civilization.¹

But the Jews were tenacious if not obsessive in their sense of identity, so it may have been only when Jesus finally entered the corridors of power, being bundled as a prisoner between Pilate and Antipas, that he came face to face with the opulence of Antipas' late father, the charismatic monster, Herod the Great.

In these environs Jesus would have seen (and in the presence of Pilate, if he had been a rigidly observant Jew would have been defiled by), famous Herodian luxury; pagan statues, paintings, mosaics, portraits, Roman insignia, images of the emperor, and quite possibly, busts of famous Greek philosophers.

Josephus recounts that in the sulphurous world of Herod the Great, Herod's mother-in-law, Alexandra, was advised to send portraits of her children to the new ruler of the east Mark Anthony, in an effort to gain his favour. Her children being Herod's wife Mariamne, with whom he was obsessed and her brother Aristobulus, who, being of royal blood had a claim on the High Priesthood and was considered to be a threat by Herod. The advice was that their beauty would endear them to Anthony and thus gain them his protection.

The enterprise failed as Herod eventually murdered them both, as well as their mother. What is noteworthy in this horror story, considering Jewish sensitivity to image making, is the example of Jews around the time of Christ having their portraits commissioned.

¹ Simon Sebag Montefiore- *Jerusalem, The Biography* referring to the period of Simon the Just (circa 200 BC). I have not in this essay, being simply the notes of a painter, given references to matters that would be familiar to men of letters or even to common or garden academics.

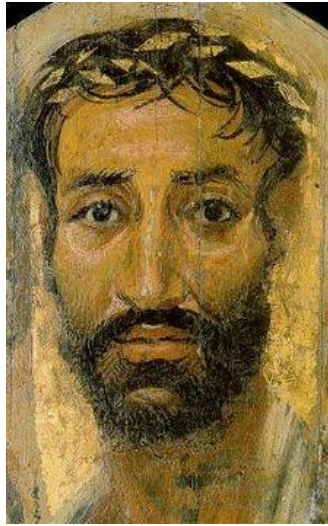


Figure 2: Fayum mummy portrait, Metropolitan Museum (New York).

Cleopatra was also involved in the intrigues at Herod's court. The portrait artist could have been an Egyptian working in encaustic (wax) on board, in a style similar to the so called Fayum mummy paintings, which have survived from the first century BC.

When Jesus appeared before Antipas, he refused to speak but would he have kept his eyes averted from pagan imagery? And when he was interrogated by Pilate in Herod's old palace complex, where the governor would stay during festival times in order to oversee the peace, he may well have looked up (with a carpenter's or artisan's eye) and seen the magnificent ceiling which according to Josephus had the cedars painted vermillion. We get little colour in the Gospels other than the purple or scarlet cloak used to ridicule Jesus.

For most of Jesus' life, the dour Tiberius was in power and when he became emperor, Suetonius tells us that with adroit political sensitivity:

He vetoed all bills for the dedication of temples and priests to his divinity, and reserved the right to sanction even the setting up of his statues and busts – which were not to be placed among the images of the gods, but only amid the temple décor.²

Making busts of the emperors must have been a lucrative industry, but for the elite, possessing a bust of a Greek philosopher or two would have been a mark of sophistication.

In the familiar scene when Pilate disdainfully asks 'what is truth?', imagine that in a moment of ironic if not anachronistic drama, Jesus glances at a bust of Plato or Aristotle.

² Not that the image of an emperor was ever a simple decoration. Suetonius claimed that Tiberius would put someone to death for undressing in front of a bust of Augustus. Tacitus reported: *In wanting himself worshiped in temples and godlike effigies.... Augustus had left no room for honours to be paid to the gods.*



Figure 3: Plato (left) 4th century Roman copy of Greek original, Vatican Museum;

Aristotle, Roman copy of Greek original 3rd century BC Nt. Museum Rome.

These two great philosophers, dead for three centuries, were destined to have such an important effect on the religion that would soon bear his name. Would Jesus have looked with interest or askance at these figures?

'I am the way the truth and the life' proclaimed Jesus, not 'if you follow the Greeks you will find the truth.'

Marcellina

The girl with the brand on her ear.

The old 'fox' Antipas was not clever enough to avoid disfavour and exile in Lyons. Over a century later that same French town already had its second Christian bishop; Irenaeus.

Among the competing deities at the time of early Christianity, some so-called 'gnostic' groups adopted Christ as part of their mystery cults; secret knowledge is always in fashion. Writing against this heresy, Irenaeus mentions a certain 'Marcellina' who had been in Rome, with some kind of 'brand' behind her right ear signifying the particular cult to which she belonged.

According to Irenaeus, Marcellina's group:

*have images, some painted, others made of various materials, for, they say, a portrait of Christ was made by Pilate in the time when Jesus was with men. They put crowns on these and show them forth with images of the worldly philosophers, that is, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and others, and pay them the same honours as among pagans.*³

We can study the faces of the ancient Romans in our museums. These brilliant naturalistic portraits were often executed, one imagines, using itinerant Greek, or Greek taught sculptors.

The preserved towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum demonstrate how little sense we have of the pervasiveness of painting throughout the Greco-Roman world. 'Decoration' is an inadequate word to describe the centrality of imagery in ancient society. There must have been painters everywhere (at least as many as tentmakers).

What if a powerful Roman woman had heard about and had a dream involving an extraordinary Jewish healer and warned her husband not to get involved in judging him. If Pilate's wife, the wife of a Roman prefect, wished for a portrait it would have been done. Perhaps the idea of a contemporary portrait of Christ is not quite so implausible. The finds at Dura-Europos and elsewhere show that the Jews themselves were much more acquainted with visual culture than had been previously supposed.

Roman religion in the first century was a world of beautifully dressed priests and priestesses, auguries and omens, sacrifices, initiations and 'mysteries', including processions where carrying the image of a god or goddess along with sacred objects was a special honour. St Ignatius of Antioch born around the time of Christ's death, intriguingly referred to certain early Christians as 'Christ bearers'.

Perhaps the tradition of St. Luke being a painter is not that far fetched either, and may contain some remnant of truth, that one of Jesus' early followers was a painter. There would not have been much of a social difference between a wood-worker, fisherman or painter.

³ Quotation from *Theological Aesthetics – A Reader* by Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen.

The Image of the Image

The image is at the service of the liturgy – Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

A contemporary portrait of Christ might be an artistic conceit. But for the Christian artist the reason why Christ appeared at a particular time in history is significant. The priest and calligrapher Edward M. Catich (Furrow Magazine), puts it this way:

It may well have been part of God's plan that we were to have no pictorial statement of the Christ. This theory is reinforced when we recall that we do not have even a factual, verbal description of what Jesus looked like. The silence of the Apostles and disciples on this point is resonant. This unanimous silence is almost as if inspired by the Holy Ghost. It may well be that God withheld from us virtually all knowledge of Christ's hidden, personal life because such knowledge was not deemed essential for our salvation. Consequently, I suggest that personal portraits of Christ were denied us so that each age and people could assimilate Christ as their ideal.

But was Christ an ideal type? Maybe he had a face only a mother could love. Would that not belie the devotion of his close followers, both men and women? Yet charisma is not dependant on looks. Did he look like someone who was sometimes addressed as 'Rabbi'? (figure 4).



Figure 4: Erel Segal, a contemporary teacher of the Torah.

Or if he chose the humble status of a carpenter's house, perhaps he also chose a humble appearance; that of a typical Jewish artisan with a typical Jewish face. Along with the ancients, I do not much distinguish between artist and artisan. As Jesus rested at Jacob's well, a Samaritan woman recognized him as a Jew, either from his accent or his dress.

We can imagine old Homer's dull eyes losing their light, we still smirk at Julius Caesar hiding his thinning hair, and we can delight in clever Socrates snub-nosed pudgy face, but if Christ was of exceptional appearance (or had that noble beauty that art has tried to capture and that in the ancient world was a mark of divine favour) then surely the gospels and tradition would have preserved such a persuasive idea?

With Greek being the parent culture, the image of Christ that Marcellina had with her in Rome might have looked like Hermes, the messenger of the gods, or that of a good shepherd, that Jesus liked to compare himself with. ⁴



Figure 5: Osiris, 5th – 3rd century BC, Louvre Museum.

For the Roman temperament, Jesus might have looked like a young philosopher, with the beauty of an Apollo or more exotically like the Egyptian god Osiris (the Romans seemed to be fascinated by all things Egyptian). In other words a generic god type; both beautiful and powerful, and recognized by his dress or by some symbolic association.

A cross or crucifixion image is said to be unlikely, as it would take centuries for the ignominy of the cross to be overcome. That is the current theory; it awaits some find of a cross, or crosses, from the first centuries which surely must come, for that account to be rewritten.

Facing the Apostles, and especially St. Paul and his associates, was the prospect of espousing not just a new god but the only god, not just the only god but also a man, not just a man but also a crucified man.

⁴ As did Tiberius when speaking of taxation- 'A good shepherd shears his flock; he does not flay them'. (Suetonius).

Christianity emerged into the Greco-Roman world, with its promiscuous array of gods, where outside Palestine, any large city dedicated to the gods must have appeared like ‘a forest of idols’, as St. Paul discovered when he arrived in Athens.

To the sophisticated Romans, Christianity must have seemed a distinctly odd deviation from Jewish monotheism. How could one, born into a culture where power and beauty were such defining aspects of the deities, acknowledge this Jewish god-man who died in disgrace? ⁵

It is no wonder that in *The Golden Ass*, the second century writer, Apuleius, has one of his villains reject ‘all true religion’ in favour of Christianity; ‘the fantastic and blasphemous cult of an Only God.’

One suspects that it is not only the male monotheism and the crucifixion that offended Apuleius, who became a priest of Isis and would have been familiar with the death, dismemberment and ‘resurrection’ of Osiris, but the absurd and disgusting behaviour of Christ, washing his followers’ feet like a low slave.

We learn from the New Testament how artists reacted to the new Christian cult that denied the reality of the prevailing gods, they did what artists tend to do when faced with an incomprehensible and income denying argument; they rioted.

When the silver smiths of Ephesus rebelled against St Paul, he advisedly made his escape. Considering the place of Christian art in western culture, this was an inauspicious beginning for the great Apostle to the gentiles; fearing for his life at the hands of artists. Historians tend to credit the success of Christianity in terms of its appeal to the poor and to slaves, augmented by the genius of St. Paul.

⁵ The manner of a man’s death colours our sense of his life. But in the story of Christ, his gruesome death as a divine being by crucifixion, (whether sanitized or glorified by art), remains a mystery beyond any satisfactory analogy, metaphor or image. Both Shelly’s death by drowning off Livorno and Keats’ miserable demise from tuberculosis in Rome, add a certain poetic power and poignancy to their works. While W B Yeats’ simian attempt to reverse the impotence of old age wounds and vivifies his great romantic poems. It is also discomfoting to encounter the work of the great spiritual writer Thomas Merton knowing that he died by electrocution from the faulty wire of an electric fan while getting out of a bath in Bangkok. If God spares me, and as I live on a mountain side, I am hoping for a similar death to that of the tragedian Aeschylus, who while in reverie on a Sicilian hillside, an eagle mistook his bald head for a stone and dropped a tortoise on him with fatal consequences.

But it is still no small wonder that after a few centuries, even including the approbation of the emperor Constantine (which may have been a political recognition of its success), that the image of Christ should enter the basilicas of the rich, ascend from the catacombs to the cathedrals, overcoming the mighty Greek, Roman and Eastern panoplies of deities, supplanting even Greek scepticism, to become the Pantocrater, the ruler of the world and the focus of the greatest intellectual concentration on an idea in human history; the incarnation.

Logos

The logos purifies and heals all cultures - George Cardinal Pell

'In the beginning was the Word...' but the artist would say that to conceive of anything is a function of the imagination. God is not simply an envisioned word, albeit an unsay-able word for the Jews. Thinking requires imagery because sight is the fundamental sense (which is why according to Leonardo, painting is the highest art). If a painter were to write the 4th gospel he would say;

'In the beginning was the Image so that the Word could be written down...'

Faith may suspend reason but it may not suspend the imagination. Even mystics need an image, light being the ultimate, while the image of the lover being the most intimate. And when a sense of presence is lost, one is left with the image of the night; empty and arid.

The promise of salvation has never been to understand god, which would be truly absurd, but to see him. 'He who sees me sees the Father,' this is the crux of the matter for the artist. Early church history presents itself as disputes about the meaning of concepts as defined by words. The 'fathers' of the church are those that got ink and not paint on their fingers. The question of images only arose in the context of their permissibility.

Nobody asked the artists. Perhaps this is just as well as many would have been unschooled in those abstract marks that make up words. The suspect reputation of the artist has had a long history and possibly originated in the classical idea of the poet being somewhat unhinged by divine inspiration.⁶

⁶ Joseph Razinger describes the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in sacred music as 'an inebriation surpassing all the possibilities of mere rationality.'

Professor Norwood's description of the unfortunate Greek poet Anacreon of Teos (6th century BC), sums up the miserable repute of the artist down the ages as; 'an amorous tippling dotard.' This is somewhat unfair as artists rarely have the talent to combine all three. ⁷

Byzantium

The hypostasis of the Logos

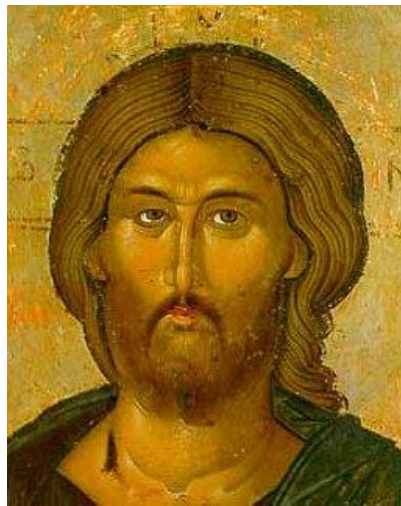


Figure 6: Icon of Christ (detail) 14th century, Museum of Macedonia.

Something happened on the move from a Greek inspired Rome to a Roman inspired Constantinople. Byzantine Christian imagery does not seem to have been inspired by being in the Greek heartland. Even though Latin Byzantines called themselves Romans, espoused their Greek heritage and returned officially to the Greek language in the seventh century. On the one side were stunning examples of their pagan Greek heritage while on the other arose the fearsome heterodoxy of image-denying Islam.

In the eight century, Byzantium, starting with the emperor, entered into a theological convulsion; the destruction of sacred images. Iconoclasm was surely more than a revival of the Old Testament prohibition against graven images.

⁷ It is also unfair to poor Anacreon for as the professor has pointed out, the incriminating works that earned him such an abject reputation were not even his.

There is something psychotic in this rage against sacred imagery (which is still with us). There are studies as to the madness of artists but little attention has been paid to the madness of theologians writing as they do with such economy on the ineffable.

This iconoclasm however is never about art. As Christoph Cardinal Schönborn in 'God's Human Face' writes:

The icon controversy was primarily not a dispute about aesthetic ideas but about theological and christological fundamentals. This fact may explain, at least in part, why the entire literature of that time (for or against images) does not contain any discussion about questions of aesthetic or artistic theories. In our own day, one would very much expect instead discussions of those topics than the endless theological debates of the Byzantine icon controversy. Art as such was not a topic of discussion then. The interest focused on the limits of the use of art.

Could or should human hands try to depict the divine? The artist replies: 'what have we being doing since before Homer was born, from Baal to Bacchus?'

Iconoclasm ultimately expresses an unbridgeable separation from the divine, a sense of worthless abasement before the immense 'other.' It denies the Jewish inheritance of man created in god's image. It is an aesthetic of despair.

St Theodore the Studite was one of the great defenders of the icon of Christ. Although Jesus is divine he is also man. It is the incarnation, god becoming man, and therefore matter and form that allows and necessitates the response of art. The Byzantine response was the theologically infused icon; the image of the image of God. Again in the words again of Schönborn;

"The One who is invisible becomes visible": this means that the Eternal Word of the Father has appeared in visible form to our mortal eyes. We have therefore, seen the Person of the Son of God, or in theological terms: the hypostasis of the Logos. Theodore the Studite constructed his entire icon theology under this perspective. "the icon of someone does not depict his nature but his person..."

Yet the 'person' that St Theodore identifies implies uniqueness; those very eyes, that particular mouth, that nose...aye, for the painter, there is the rub. In his defence of sacred images, St. Theodore was flogged. Surely he deserves, along with St Luke and Fra Angelico to be considered a patron of the arts. As far as is known, no member of the hierarchy in recent centuries has been flogged in the name of art.

Byzantine art, although capable at times of an intense beauty, seems closer to Egypt and Syria than to Greece or Rome. It eventually became stultified, with the icon of Christ formulized and fossilized in gold, even though that gold represented the transfigured light of Christ on Tabor.



Figure 7: Giotto 'The Arrest of Christ', Cappella Scrovegni, Padua.

It was Florentine genius and Giotto that bridged the gap back to the Greeks and found again the spirit that freed painting to re-affirm the efficacy of man's human form; man in man's image and so in god's.⁸ This is still an offence to the eastern spirit. The 20th century Greek icon painter Photius Kontoglou in an essay called 'What Orthodox Iconography Is', dismisses Renaissance art:

In the countries of Europe there are churches with paintings that are famous for their artistic merit; yet they do not have the mystery and the power of evoking contrition (katanyxis) possessed by the icons that were done by some unlettered and simple Byzantine painters.

He came to regard the catholic west as producing merely 'illusionistic' art that:

came into being in Italy during the so-called Renaissance, because this art was the expression of a Christianity which, deformed by philosophy, had become a materialistic, worldly form of knowledge, and of the Western Church, which had become a worldly system. And just as theology followed along behind the philosophy of the ancients - so too, the painting which expressed this theology followed along behind the art of the ancient idolaters. The period is well named Renaissance, since, to tell the truth, it was no more than a rebirth of the ancient carnal mode of thought that had been the pagan world's.

⁸ Art can hardly be seen as a proof of God, but Greek art does show that He has an aesthetic sense.

There are many in the west who would agree with Kontoglou, and today icons and icon painting (usually miserably executed) are again popular in the west. There is an eastern gnosis about the icon. The postmodern Christian is more likely to go to his yoga teacher to have his chakras re-aligned than to go to confession. At its best, icon making is a closed shop for the mystical. As Professor George Pattison describes it:

*Its world is a sacred world, turned away from the concerns of secular living and the common life in the world. There is no sign of either artistic or spiritual existence having been risked in the dangers and delights of the sensuous phenomenality of life.*⁹

Perhaps the image of Christ is not achieved by the saintly or by genius, but by artisans like those at Ephesus who had originally put the run on St. Paul. Although in today's terms it would be Chinese factory workers adding finishing touches to statuettes of Our Lady or Padre Pio.

Even though one can sympathise with Kontoglou, one still wonders that in all the long centuries of sacred icon art, with all the prayerfulness, the fasting and the spiritual readiness necessary for such painting, Our Lord did not appear to some icon painter (perhaps to someone like the great Andrei Rublev), and say "today Andrei I am going to show you how to paint hands." ¹⁰

The Byzantine icon makers may have looked contemptuously at the bravura of the renaissance yet they still showed its influence. If the Byzantines been free to do so, they might yet have recovered the genius, that should have been their heritage.

Alas after the catastrophic evil unleashed on Constantinople by the fourth crusade in 1204, from which it was never to recover and was so despoiled that it fell finally to the disaster of Islamic assault in 1453. This loss to Christian religion, to culture, to art cannot be quantified. The loss of Hagia Sophia, the most beautiful building in the Christian world, hangs like a curse over Christendom. No western Christian artist can look at his eastern brother artist in the eye without shame.

⁹ Quotation from *Theological Aesthetics- A Reader* Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen.

¹⁰ If piety is necessary for true religious art then my own painting may be discarded.

Benedict

Can Benedict XVI save Christian art?

There is one sentence that for the artist jumps out when reading *The Question of Images*, a chapter in Joseph Ratzinger's study of *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. 'One cannot bring about a renewal of art in faith by money or through commissions'. If there were any religious artists left in Rome this last statement might have caused a riot on the Via della Conciliazione, but we have come a long way from Ephesus.

His intimacy with music has awakened in him the soul of an artist, but as Professor D. Vincent Twomey has pointed out; 'Benedict XVI is acutely aware of the necessity for reason to combine with aesthetic and intuitive sensibility, both in liturgy and art.'¹¹

Joseph Ratzinger senses in art the moral power of beauty:

Through the appearance of the beautiful we are wounded in our innermost being, and that wound grips us and takes us beyond ourselves; it stirs longing into flight and moves us toward the truly Beautiful, to the Good in itself.

On the history of Christian imagery he acknowledges the importance of the new discoveries in early Jewish art:

The Christian images, as we find them in the catacombs, simply take up and develop the canon of images already established by the synagogue... Still more than in the Synagogue, the point of the images is not to tell a story about something in the past, but to incorporate the events of history into the sacrament.

He maintains that these images, however inferior technically they may be, 'have a thoroughly sacramental significance' in that they essentially point to the Resurrection:

They have the character of mysteries, going far beyond the didactic function of telling the stories of the Bible.

Immersed in the Fathers of the early church, Ratzinger is sympatric to the Byzantine icon and because of the secularization initiated in quattrocento art he is somewhat harsh on the Renaissance and its Greek influence:

¹¹ I am grateful to Fr. Twomey, Professor Emeritus of Moral Theology, Maynooth, who, out of kindness to a penurious artist sent me *Benedict XVI and Beauty in Sacred Art and Architecture* (editors; D. Vincent Twomey and Janet E. Rutherford. Quotations from Cardinal Pell are from this volume.). Thus by a simple act of charity is art rescued from aesthetics.

There is often scarcely a difference between the depictions of pagan myths and those of Christian history. The tragic burden of antiquity has been forgotten; only its divine beauty is seen. A nostalgia for the gods emerges, for myth, for a world without fear of sin and without the pain of the Cross, which had perhaps been too overpowering in the images of the late Middle Ages. True, Christian subjects are still being depicted, but such "religious art" is no longer sacred art in the proper sense.

In a response to Ratzinger's concept of beauty in the liturgy, Cardinal Pell raises an alarming idea:

Is Christianity, for all its claims to transcend culture, actually a prisoner of the Greeks...?

The painter's response is that if Greek philosophy can move like a light through Christian theology, then Greek art may do likewise for western art and Christian art. Greek culture, despite the loss of painting and the treatises on painting written by Greek artists, through its sculpture remains the west's pre-eminent expression of form. That is, the human form as it moves and manifests itself in beauty and therefore, truth. This is not to be confused with realism.

Ratzinger's appraisal of contemporary art is blunt:

Today we are experiencing, not just a crisis of sacred art, but a crisis of art in general of unprecedented proportions.

How long has it taken the church to engage with this crisis seriously? Or other than with words? Western Art, separated from a sense of the sacred, has been slowly dying for centuries. Since the romantic movement in the 18th century, art has moved from an initial sense of exuberance and engagement with landscape to inevitably losing its way with various essays into 'isms' in a distorted propitiation of its own genius. This has resulted in either pretentiously vacant design or in spectacularly banal and empty-headed 'concepts'. Expressed in faux irony or abject silliness, these 'concepts' are euphemistically described in probably the most vacuous of all clichés as 'cutting edge'.

It is too much to expect the present pope in the face of western indifference to regenerate sacred art. The outlook is bleak.¹² He has configured a pontifical commission for culture, but will this end up as a commentary of words on words or an attempt at the revival of the image? Since the enlightenment, for every ninety-nine colleges of theology has the church founded one academy of religious art?¹³

¹² Within weeks of writing these words the Pontiff, apparently unaware of my sentiments, resigned.

¹³ Perhaps some half used Umbrian monastery could be dedicated to the revival of religious painting. Ironically there are some painters from the USA who still hold on the classical principles of drawing and

The Word without Image is a false incarnation. When Leonardo was defending visual art he asked; 'With what words can you, a writer, equal in your description the complete face that is reproduced in a drawing?' He saw the painter as open to divine inspiration; 'The divine character of painting means that the mind of the painter is transformed into an image of the mind of God.' ¹⁴

Joseph Ratzinger is aware, as artists are painfully aware that; 'Inspiration is not something that one can choose for oneself'. And he rejects the romantic notion of artist struggling alone; 'No sacred art can come from an isolated subjectivity'. But the inspiration that once evoked so much great religious art is no longer alive in our museums where religious art is interred in an aesthetic void without any sense of the times in which they were created. As a contemporary religious painter puts it:

*(historians, critics, artists) who cannot feel for the vital atmosphere of belief of these times are no better than eunuchs at a harem - adequate for creating a sense of order but ultimately rather unproductive.*¹⁵

Ultimately Ratzinger says that 'the great cultural tradition of the faith is home to a presence of immense power' and so religious artists 'who take this task upon themselves need not regard themselves as the rearguard of culture'. For the religious painter, this rearguard, at present seems lost in sight; isolation is our daily bread.

As sometimes happens with men of great learning, Joseph Ratzinger, like his compatriot E. H. Gombrich on art, is capable of speaking about theology and Christ with a clarity that even painters can comprehend, especially with his books on the life of Christ, and while journalism is safe with caricature and discomfited with ideas, history may well judge him as a pivotal teaching pope. In his concept of the Liturgy, he has re-awakened the possibility of equality for the Word and the Image. *In the beginning was the Word ...* but when god made the world his first reaction was to 'see' that it was good.

In Joseph Ratzinger's writings one can find a sensitivity for what could be called the magisterium of art and he offers hope that artists might again find a place as the visual custodians of the incarnation.

painting. An academy based on an apprenticeship model could be instituted where western painters might meet with orthodox painters and teach students again the efficacy of form. Perhaps a seed could be planted. At worst it might help regenerate 'secular' art. Or is this a fantasy? When faith dies so too does form.

¹⁴ Leonardo quotations from *Leonardo The Artist and the Man* by Serge Bramly.

¹⁵ Eugene de Leastar in an email to Dr Francis P De Stefano relating to the latter's fascinating work in deciphering the meaning of Renaissance masterpieces, see <http://giorgionetempesta.blogspot.ie/> I apologise to the reader in this case, being unschooled, one's contact with the 'relevant texts' is limited and one is often reduced to quoting oneself.

Turin

There was a reason for St. Thomas.



Negative image of the Shroud of Turin.

When church figures write favourably about the so called *acheiropoieta*; images of Christ created by supernatural means, then the grubby ears of the painter prick up. It is one thing for the painter to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, but it seems unfair if God were to cut out the middleman.

Any painter is aware of how random patterns can be ‘recognized’ as this feature or that, a dog, a dragon, a human head, Jesus, my aunt Maggie. Yet serendipitous randomness will never produce the coherence of art (which is why enough monkeys will never write the works of Shakespeare, though they will soon produce Derrida).

But it is easy to see how a particularly successful painting of Christ could create a legend; from a work inspired by the Lord to a work executed by the Lord (just as the legend of a sculpture of a beautiful woman being so life like, could inspire the idea of it coming to life, as with the story of Pygmalion).

One of the most the most famous *acheiropoieta* is a portrait of Christ said to have been acquired by the King of Edessa when he sent emissaries to Christ in order to cure him of an illness. This portrait is said to have ended up in Constantinople and may have had an influence on the development of the icon of Christ. Now the truth could at last be seen (and Plato’s ideal finally visualized), in the words of Joseph Ratzinger; ‘the Greek longing for the vision of the Eternal seemed to be fulfilled.’

However painters look at things differently from theologians, for one thing few theologians go hungry for want of skill. For another it is much harder to be a genius than a saint (the latter state being oversubscribed and apparently open to all).

But it is in tracing the acheiropoieta from Edessa to Byzantium and on to the shroud of Turin that scholars literally and metaphorically are stretching it.¹⁶

The suspiciously long face of the Turin shroud, that of a middle aged northern European, has a distinct relation with byzantine iconography. The opinions of scientists may be excluded in this case because as a general body they are even more gullible than artists or theologians.

Turin has thrown up new 'experts' on the art of facial reconstruction, computer regeneration and made for TV iconography. Now I as a painter of portraits, could argue diagrammatically that the shroud could be a transposition from any particular icon. Indeed the human head can be, without too much trouble, turned into that of a donkey. One is reminded of Xenophanes famous contention that if cattle or horses could paint they would depict the gods as cattle and horses.

If Christ wished his face to be known, the Holy Spirit might have inspired four artists as well as four evangelists. However Turin smacks of human artistry whereas God tends wherever possible to avoid magic.

The case of the Turin shroud is symptomatic of our desperate need for proof, to touch, to see that we may believe. In this case one would imagine that God would be more accomplished in the art of the self-portrait, even with his eyes closed.

¹⁶ Interestingly in the Doctrine of Addai, written about 4 centuries after Christ, it is the royal archivist, Hannan, who paints the portrait of Jesus. Such an unlikely combination of artist and intellectual suggests that this individual may have had some basis in reality.

The Masters

Which one is Jesus?

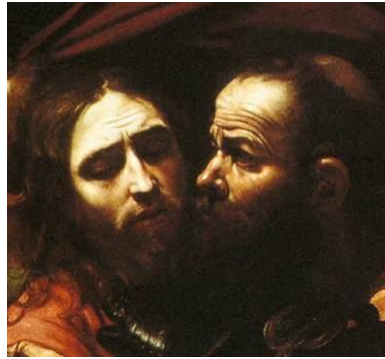


Figure 8: Caravaggio 'The Taking of Christ' (detail). Nt. Gallery Dublin.

The verbal portrait of Jesus in the Gospels is of someone who enjoyed close relationships with men and women, he loved children, yet he often needed to be alone. He was a man of passionate intensity and contemptuous of hypocrisy. Although he had fasted and slept out-doors, he disliked displays of piety.

He was close to nature; he would spit on the earth and make a paste to effect a cure, instead of simply saying the word. A storyteller of genius who wore an all in one woven tunic. He was sensitive to beauty; he would not have compared wild flowers to Solomon's glory if he had not been struck by the beauty of nature in the first place.

He was easily moved, especially by the poor; other people's tears moved him to tears. He was a singer of songs. He sang with the apostles at the last supper and must have done so at festival times. Yet there is no iconography of the singing Christ.

The gospels' sought to portray Jesus as divine; the image is of a somewhat stern teacher with little indication of humour. There is no iconography of the smiling Christ, not in the sense of the smiling Buddha.

The Renaissance humanized the Byzantine icon of Christ. He moved from the sacred into narrative history, from the strictures of mosaic and gold leaf, to the miracle of paint suspended in oil. There is a mysterious phenomenon of communication in the formal arrangements of the human face that is at the heart of art.

The motif of the icon was long established; dark hair, large knowing eyes, long thin nose and a noble forehead with high cheek bones. The mouth being such an extraordinary subtle indicator of mood and more dangerously of sensuality, it is often not only downturned but implausibly small. John Singer Sargent maintained that a portrait is a likeness with something wrong with the mouth; this is usually true of the icon.

The crown of thorns is rarely painted credibly; some vicious Syrian mercenary would hardly have spent the time delicately intertwining the crowns of thorns shown by art. Even with artists of the highest genius, the image of Christ has often been a challenge.



Figure 9: Michelangelo, Christ in Judgement (detail) Vatican.

The physical perfection of Christ was often expressed in overt muscularity. That extraordinary miracle of art, the Sistine Chapel, has its central image of Christ triumphant, so beset with muscles, that this new Adam is more like the old Hercules. It would be difficult for him to walk let alone judge the nations.



Figure 10: Titian. *Entombment of Christ*, (detail) Louvre.

Even Titian, perhaps the greatest painter ever to hold a brush, in his beautifully poetic *Entombment of Christ*, the body of Christ is more of a Samson than that of a wandering preacher.



Figure 11: Velazquez. *Christ*, (detail) Nt. Gallery London.

Where painters depended too much on direct models, something is always lost in particularization. In Velazquez's *Christ contemplated by the Christian Soul*, the picture fails because the Christ figure is too dependant on Velazquez's genius for portraiture.

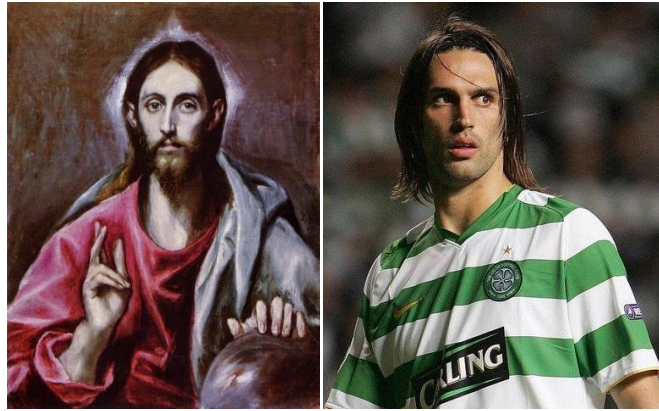


Figure 12(left?): El Greco, Christ Nt. Gallery Scotland and Georgios Samaras of Celtic FC.

El Greco is a kind of crossover point from the old icon to the freedom of the Renaissance. His image of Christ has a mystical quality. Although sometimes nature will imitate art in order to show us its provenance.

The soccer player Georgios Samaras, presently playing for Celtic FC is the living icon of an El Greco Christ. Both the painting and the player reside in Scotland and as if by divine ordinance, both the player and the painter originate from the Greek island of Crete.

The Sacred Heart image of more recent times tends to feminize Christ in a form of doe eyed, saccharine kitsch; emasculation being a cheap price for spirituality. A simple assessment can be made of these Sacred Heart images by asking oneself; if this Jesus walked into a bar would he be seen as someone suffering from some hormonal, glandular or cranial disorder?

Painters find it difficult to view images of Christ with dispassion suffering as they do with the curse of the critical eye. Nevertheless, one should be mindful that the man who did not suffer fools gladly, is likely to be misjudging himself.

If there is a danger in high culture elitism, perhaps it would be wise to get a Jesuitical view. Rev Dr Dermot Power (*Thinking Faith*, the online journal of British Jesuits) considers our difficulties in dealing with religious kitsch:

I can understand completely why the kitsch dimension cannot be overlooked by many, for it can interfere with the original, creative struggle or sacrifice that is associated with true art. However, we need to remember that it is what people project onto the mass-produced kitsch that must be respected. People who do not have high culture or access to its special world are often people who suffer very deeply. They have a wisdom and refinement which is cultivated in the crucible of having to live at a very profound level, and they can find some identification with

an image such as the Sacred Heart... We need to walk more carefully in this world of the Sacred Heart, Divine Mercy and images and relics of the saints, lest we tread on people's dreams.

Suitably chastened by these words one is tempted to leave the subject of Christ and look elsewhere. Why is it easier to depict the devil rather than Christ? Because to get an image of the devil one need only look in the mirror.

Fr. Edward M. Catich maintains that; 'The artist composing a religious hymn or carving a crucifix is teaching theology'. This would make one fearful for contemporary theology but it may be that the religious painter, whatever he daubs or scratches, is pretending in some way to be a mini philosopher and micro theologian. Probably as a divine act of mercy this remains unexpressed in verbal form, (though not in the present case).

Of course in modern times painters no longer draw. It is looked down upon as unworthy of the artist whose true oeuvre is now conceptual, even if the concepts are of numbskull banality. Lack of facility is a postmodern badge of honour, as though artists have broken through to some new aesthetic realm. This is true; they have broken into the largess of complicit 'cutting edge' directors of institutions and into the pockets of rich fools.

It is the artist's nature that is now a sacred thing, and the artist himself has evolved into an emblematic cultural hero; a genius obviously, and touched by the divine, but quite talentless.

Modern religious art has also hit a blank. This can best be seen in the work of the painter Rothko who has entered the halls of fame with "the Rothko Chapel" in Houston, Texas. This non-denominational church is a modern version of the Sistine.



Figure 13: Rothko chapel.

Large almost monochrome paintings, Rothko's work in this 'chapel' exhibits slight variations of colour, such as mauve showing through a basic grey black.¹⁷

Sitting before large expanses of colour can affect one's mood (as can staring at anything). Obsessively contemplating this type of painting, which is a new-age quasi Buddhist form of meditation, has two wonderful effects; one gets the benefit of a 'buzz' from such concentration and also the delicious feeling of superiority that one 'gets' modern art. This is all quite harmless. But staring too long at such simple arrangements of colour masses can have a degenerative effect; it can turn one into a contemporary critic.

Tenured academics, disguised as aestheticians, have eulogized over the slightest variations in Rothko's often pleasant abstracts. One critic sees 'Annunciations' in his work, especially in the places where one colour meets another suggesting; 'that loaded area between God's and Adam's fingers on the Sistine ceiling'.

Another, a Harvard professor, after referencing Hegel, Fichte, Cartesian epistemology and German idealism sees a 'pieta' in Rothko's work in that it 'might be said at the time to parallel the structure of a conventional mother and child image' (remember these are simple rectangular bands of colours). To the above comparison Roger Kimbal, the scourge of academic art-criticism gobbledygook responds:

*Your may say that it parallels 'the pictorial structure of a pieta' but then you might say that it reminds you of the state of Colorado, Nelson's semaphored message at the Battle of Trafalgar, or Euclid's proof of the Pythagorean Theorem.*¹⁸

The philosopher Roger Scruton has recently written an important essay (*The Great Swindle* -Aeon Magazine) on what has happened to modern culture and the circular self-delusion of fakery that is at its heart. Modern artists have felt the need to be 'difficult':

Because they were difficult, there grew around the modernists a class of critics and impresarios, who offered initiation into the modernist cult. This impresario class began to promote the incomprehensible and the outrageous as a matter of course, lest the public should regard its services as redundant. It fostered a new kind of personality, determined to move with the times, while understanding less and less what the times might actually be. To gain the status of an original artist is not easy, but in a society where art is revered as the highest cultural achievement, the rewards are enormous. There is, therefore, an incentive to fake it, to produce a complicit circle; the artists posing as the originators of astonishing breakthroughs, the critics posing as the penetrating judges of the true avant-garde.

¹⁷ Mauve is not a name of a colour on the painter's pallet, but can be found on any interior decorator's chart.

¹⁸ *The Rape of the Masters* by Roger Kimball from which the Rothko quotations are taken.

The experience of Rothko's work is said to evoke tears from some visitors. These tears are probably brought on by a combination of religious ecstasy and the exhilaration of exposure to high culture. Not since the death of little Nell has there been such a need to profane such sacred places with sacrilegious laughter.

The answer to the eastern disdain of western art is Rembrandt van Rijn. No painter has surpassed Rembrandt's facility for seeing into the soul of man; he is the high priest of the spirit in western painting. Rembrandt, who lived in the Jewish Quarter in Amsterdam, may have based his biblical figures on his neighbours and a fanciful notion of their ancient dress.



Figure 14: Rembrandt. *Jesus and The Woman taken in Adultery* (detail) Nt. Gallery London.

Although if Jesus was the beautiful towering red head as painted in *Jesus and The Woman taken in Adultery*, then Zacchaeus, although a short man, would hardly have needed to climb a tree in order to see him.



Figure 15: Rembrandt. *Self Portrait as the Apostle Paul*. Rijksmuseum.

Man, in the image of god, is given new meaning in the paintings of Rembrandt. Here the efficacy of the craft of painting finds a fulfilment. It is his self-portraits, these great images of suffering and resignation that could be described as sacred icons. Can secular art be described as sacred? In the words of Simone Weil:

In all that awakens within us the pure and authentic sentiment of beauty, there, truly, is the presence of God. There is a kind of incarnation of God in the world, of which beauty is the sign. Beauty is the experimental proof that incarnation is possible. For this reason all art of the first order is, by its nature, religious.

Will religious art revive or ever return? The making of art does not necessarily follow a linear momentum; Apelles hardly said to himself 'now that I am born in the classical period I will paint thus.'

Religious art dies as Christian faith dies across Europe. Why did the people stop believing in the Greek gods? Paganism died because the gods lost their power. They became simply empty statutes and declined into the aesthetic world. Christ is losing his power in the west as his icon is fading. His image is moving into the museum rooms adjacent to those with Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite and Dionysius.

When George Pell asked if we had been a prisoner of the Greeks, he was referring to Joseph Ratzinger's contention that Christianity at the beginning chose the 'God of the philosophers and against the gods of the various religions.'

Every age has its own madness, its own iconoclasm, ours is that science has the answer to questions it cannot even ask. It is the folly that isolated reason could ever be a paradigm of meaning. As Pell summarises it:

Faith and reason, revelation and reality, have to go together. When they go it alone it always ends badly. For beauty too, anchoring it in the Logos (with the assistance of Greek philosophy), understanding it as a form of knowledge which points inescapably to the reality of the transcendent, preserves it from collapsing into the incoherence and aestheticism that has occurred with such dismaying profusion with secular or de-Christianized art in the modern world.

What was Jesus writing in the sand when he refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery? Perhaps as the son of the divine artist he was drawing not writing in the sand. The Greek word for writing, *graphé* may also apply for drawing. Perhaps he was outlining some sign. We are a wicked people always searching for a sign, yet none will be given to us.

Christ

Jesus walks into a bar....

I once took Jesus on a visit to the Sistine chapel. We met under the obelisk on St. Peter's square and as I approached, he had his back to me and was looking up at the Egyptian monument. I recalled that he had been in Egypt as a child and I wondered what he thought about this pagan monument to the sun god in the heart of the Vatican.

He was wearing a black woollen cap to keep out the February cold. When he turned around I kept my eyes down, afraid at first to look him in the eye, not so much for what I might see in his face, but for what he would see in mine. He linked me the way eastern men do which can be a little embarrassing for north Europeans but we were soon at the door of the Sistine.

Through the good offices of a friendly Monsignor we entered on the coat tails of a visiting cardinal, thus avoiding queues or having to enter via the vast Vatican museums and its great repository of Greek art.

Entering the Sistine Chapel is always a kind of shock for the religious painter. It is, one imagines, like entering the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem and finding that the Arc of the Covenant is still in place. This is a sacred place for art.

The milling of tourists having 'done' the Vatican museums created a hubbub of mummings and with tired eyes they strained their necks to see the most famous ceiling in the world. I could see no pilgrims here. My companion too was looking upward but also around him at the throng...I felt a weight of sadness envelope him.

The cardinal, ahead of us, a tall old man, protected by his small entourage of obsequious clerics, moved slowly around as he navigated Michelangelo's firmament, his pallid face and grey querulous eyes enraptured. I guessed that this was a brief final visit (otherwise he could have arrived after hours, in comfort, without the tourists). He reminded me of what Cardinal Newman must have looked like; the strange talent that some men have for both intellectualism and falling in love with god. How fascinated we are with the power of our own obsessions, with the culture of ourselves.

I was interrupted by a rough tap on my elbow, 'this is a church, the house of god' said a gruff uniformed attendant in stilted English. This offended me as it was my companion, not me, who was wearing the cap and as he removed it, he turned to me and in the epiphany of the moment, we both looked each other and smiled.

Later we walked down the Borgo Pio where I knew he would leave me. He squeezed my arm as though to say 'goodbye' as he entered a café bar. Through the half steamed window I observed him standing by the counter and order something from a young woman with a pinched unhappy face. She looked through him, as if wishing she herself was not there. The place seemed run down and forlorn. There was a cheaply framed print of a Modigliani nude behind the counter.

Seated at a table, was the only other person in the café, distractedly leafing through some free newspapers. He looked like a local, heavy set and a little dishevelled but with a proprietorial manner, the owner perhaps, a husband and wife with only one customer. He glanced over at Jesus and raised his eyebrows as though in recognition of an acquaintance or in acknowledgement of a stranger. I would never know.

I stared for a few more moments through the window wondering at the three of them together. Two of them, but not gathered in his name. I looked back at the dimming lights of the Vatican and thought about the story of art; sometimes true and sometimes empty and I wondered about the spirit that has kept the memory of this man alive for 2000 years. The frosted night was turning my breath into little fumes of cloud as I turned and steadied myself for the long journey home.

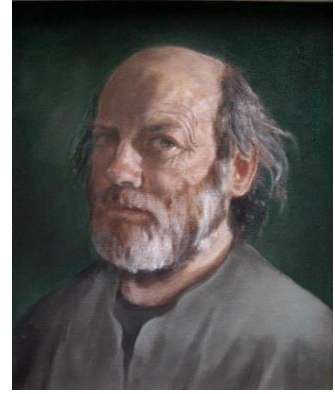


Figure 16 : Eugenio, self portrait, 2007

Eugene de Leastar

Baltimore, Co. Cork. 31st December 2012