Tyler Sulsenti

Professor Ogden

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Art in 17th Century Italy

Upon analysis of Italian art form the 17th century at the Metropolitan Museum of Art have a new understanding on the importance of the expression of culture and religion through the means of art. Religion, particularly Christianity, has played a hugely influential role in Italian culture and art. Italian painters of the 17th century often painted portraits depicting Jesus Christ in various Stations of the Cross, the Virgin Mary and other heavenly, angelic figures that have appearing in religious scripture. I saw, through details in specific paintings, various interpretations of scripture and what it means to the artist.

I saw two different interpretations of the same biblical event. The paintings, both titled “The Lamentation” depicted the removal of Jesus Christ from the cross and very similar details pertaining to that event. The two paintings, by Scipione Pulzone and Ludovico Carracci, use the same detail to paint the event’s happenings, such as the tears of the Virgin Mother over the body of Christ, the removal of the crown of thorns by Saint John. However, one would be able to see the two interpretations of the event. Pulzone painted his depiction brighter and more vivid. The sky Pulzone painted, although cloudy, is given light, which I find to represent the start of Christianity and its teachings. Carracci used darker and fierier colors in his paintings, that I believe showed a direct approach to the importance of this heartbreaking event in the construction and foundation of Christianity. I found, that although presented differently, both interpretations helped to show the inspiration of religion in their artwork.

Italian painters of the 17th century also painted many depictions of saints and angelic figures mentioned throughout the teachings of Christianity to display their importance to the beliefs and teachings of Christ. Guercino’s “The Vocation of Saint Aloysious (Luigi) Gonzaga” show angles crowning Saint Aloysious with wreaths as he renounces his marquisate standing for his religious following of Jesus. Guercino used these details to describe the goodness of the Saint. I came across two paintings, both of Saint Francis. The first, titled simply, “Saint Francis”, painted by Federic Barocci showed the saint, arms out, facing a statue of Jesus on the cross in what appears to be a rock tomb of some sort. One can see wounds on the hands of Saint Francis and a book that I assumed to be of scripture or prayer. Looking upon the paining I see a full devotion by the Saint portrayed to Jesus and his teachings and I see a devotion by the painter to express this. The other, titled “Saint Francis in Ecstasy” was done by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione. Castiglione painted Saint Francis hugging and worshipping a statue of Jesus on the cross, almost similar to the depiction done by Barocci. We see under Saint Francis a skull and an open book which is read to symbolize the world and mortality. I find this to represent that life is finite and will end but scripture and teachings of wisdom are infinite and will live on forever, much like the pages in a book. The glowing air and sun around Saint Francis and Jesus on the cross again show the connection between Saint Francis and Jesus and his devotion for Christ. This painting is another example to the various interpretations of religion and religious figures in 17th century Italian art.

Many paintings and depictions of the Virgin Mary existed on my visit through the galleries of 17th century Italian art. “The Annunciation” by Luca Giordano was a particular work that popped out to me. Giordano paints the Virgin Mother in an elegant room, almost royal, reaching out to an angel who is presenting the the Virgin with a bouquet of lilies to symbolize charity. We also see light, almost like and angelic halo, circling around the head of the Virgin Mary, a very common detail in 17th century Italian art, used to show goodness, The use of angelic children in the painting was another very common detail I saw that I take to symbolize purity as well as goodness in the painting. This picture, although a common depiction, stood out to show the goodness and fondness of the Virgin Mary in the Italian culture. A rather uncommon depiction, at least that I saw, was “The Birth of the Virgin” by Francesco Solimena. This painting was of the birth of the Virgin Mary, to-be mother of Jesus Christ. The light ring emitted from the head of the infant was yet again present in this painting, showing the goodness of the infant. In the background of the painting I observed lights that appeared to be originated from the clouds or sky. I observe this to be heavenly and shows the religious importance of the birth of the Virgin Mary.

Christianity vastly inspired the art and culture of 17th century Italy. The large numbers of religious paintings of Jesus Christ, The Virgin Mary and important religious figures and symbols show the importance of religion to the lifestyle and culture of the time. Upon seeing varying interpretations of the same event or figure I was able to grasp a better idea of the importance of these events and figures to Italian culture and the religion that they belong to. The analysis and observation of the 17th century art allowed me to obtain a better and more vivid understanding of the meaning of the thoughts, feeling, ideas, and beliefs painting into the paintings found at the 17th century Italian art galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.