



The Value of the Modern Movement in Art

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“Their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.” (Luke 24:16)

God is the eternal artist, and even when not seen, He is known by his works. *“In the hearts of all who are skillful I have put skill”* (Exodus 31:6). God is the pure act of being, and everything in the universe is a participation in his being. “In Him we live, and move, and have our being; art is true to nature, and enlarges us with its beauty, when it draws strength and freshness from contact with this mystery, and in turn offers us a transfigured vision. The transformation of vision illumines the body, for the eye is the lamp of the body, and from our hearts and hands light can spread to the world.”¹

All of existence is so by way of God’s divine will, through his eternal conservation and governance. We are taught by Saint Athanasius that the eternal Word of God - the *logos* - is the divine order and reason of the universe, that God the Father, by way of his Son Jesus Christ, brings order and harmony to all things.² At the core of every *thing* is God himself, the “dazzling mystery of a thing’s being, the dynamism that keeps it in existence.”³ And the expression of existence in art, as in nature, depends on form. No material thing exists without form; form determines the essence or nature of a thing, and through its form that thing receives its existence. God, therefore, through Christ, is the existence, the order, the form, and the *being* of all things. And art demonstrates the *super-abundance* of being; rhythmic relations of lines, shapes, volumes, tones - these rhythms generate a perception of movement, of being, of alive-ness through the Word of God.

“There is something *paroxysmic* about every great work of art, insofar as the work breaks through to a higher level of organization, of form...When this *paroxysm* (a sudden expression of emotion) occurs, a work of art has what Saint Thomas Aquinas called *claritas*, which is a kind of radiant intelligibility, the energy in it bursts forth, and it comes out to meet you, and this energy arouses in the heart of the wakeful, attentive viewer an unfolding, we feel something welling up within us when we experience beauty, and so then we go out of ourselves in a kind of ecstasy to meet the beautiful.”⁴ For example, the Gothic incorporation of light and color

¹ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 8 lecture

² Saint Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, 335 A.D.

³ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 1 lecture

⁴ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 8 lecture

into the church - through jewel-encrusted chalices, stained-glass windows, and mosaics - modulated the light entering the church and thus created *claritas*, “illuminating the soul of a viewer and provoking a reciprocal opening up, a rapturous outgoing of the soul toward the radiant form, an *extasis*.”⁵ The experience of shimmering light provides a physical sensation of light-ness, of ascent, a lifting, a beckoning upward; thus, the soul is led by these experiences to an interior ascent to God.

God is depicted quite literally in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, the great works overflowing with images of Christ, the Holy Family, and the Saints. Not so in the Modern Movement, where various artistic *ism*'s - abstractionism, cubism, expressionism, etc. - dominate and define the celebrated works of the period. Nonetheless, the Modern era (1900-1950) carries great value for us in that its most renowned artists and recognized works - just like those of the Renaissance (15th/16th centuries) and Baroque (17th/18th centuries) - create *paroxysm* and *claritas* in the viewer, lifting us up, drawing our souls closer to God. Are our emotions stirred by Matisse and Mondrian as they are by Michelangelo? Are our souls illuminated by Cézanne as by El Greco? Do we ascend to God in Picasso as in Caravaggio? Quite simply, yes. “All beautiful art points to the truth of the Catholic faith; the secret to appreciating it is finding the movement.”⁶

The key to appreciating the Modern Movement is in finding the rhythmic relations of lines, shapes, volumes, and tones, and thus finding alive-ness through the Word of God. However, as was the case with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13), we often struggle to find God in our very midst; one way to comprehend art-appreciation for the Modern era is to compare it to the spiritual phenomenon known as *dryness*. Spiritual dryness occurs because “God is removing the experience of his presence so as to give us an opportunity to mature in faith, hope and love. Faith, in its essence, is believing without seeing... [i.e.] when we continually “see” the work of God in our life, there is less need for faith. When the perception of blessing or presence is removed, there is an opportunity to exercise faith on a deeper and purer level, which is very pleasing to God and unites us in a deep way with Him, even when His closeness to us might not be felt.”⁷ To experience *paroxysm*

⁵ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 2 lecture

⁶ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 8 lecture

⁷ Ralph Martin, *The Fulfillment of All Desire*, 2006

and *claritas*, the art of the Modern era often requires us to work harder, to exercise our faith on a deeper level.

But the reward in persisting is worth the effort. “*Those who love me I also love, and those who seek me find me*” (Proverbs 8:17).

“In order to have clarity you need two other factors that Saint Thomas Aquinas talked about with regard to beauty, and those are *integrity* and *proportion*. Integrity means that everything is there that ought to be there; nothing is missing that has to be there. And, on the other hand nothing is extraneous, there is nothing that does not play its role in the organic unfolding of the whole. And proportion means every part is related rhythmically to every other part and to the whole, as in an organism.”⁸

Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) was one of the most significant artists of the 20th century and (in my opinion) her work brilliantly reflects the standards of integrity and proportion described by Thomas, and as such achieves a high degree of artistic *claritas* - rhythm, movement, alive-ness, being - thus stimulating in the viewer an interior ascent to God. Two of my favorite O’Keeffe works are *Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico* (1930), and *Church Steeple* (1930).⁹ Without providing full commentaries on these pieces here, suffice to say, O’Keeffe’s work moves me in a way similar to (and in some ways even more so) than the works of Michelangelo, El Greco, and Caravaggio; O’Keeffe strikes me as an honest, authentic, courageous artist (like her Renaissance and Baroque predecessors) and her works possess that “radiant intelligibility” described by Thomas, bursting forth, calling the viewer to embrace truth and beauty.

Black Mesa Landscape is alive with color, the foreground young and lush, sloping upward to coral, arid foothills, finally wrapped by mountains that are at first gentle and inviting, then dark and foreboding, but - as the viewer ascends - ultimately breaking through to fresh, blue peaks set against a light-blue sky of endless hope: “*For I know the plans I have for you*” declares the Lord, “*plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope* (Jeremiah 29:11). In *Church Steeple* I feel the steady rocking of the church bell and hear its deep, rich chime, calling out over the hot, dry southwestern desert, sounding Christ’s quenching promise: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” (Matthew 11:28).

⁸ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 8 lecture

⁹ Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico <https://www.okeeffemuseum.org/>

“The artistic governance which frees a work of art is Providence, which works organically from inside the form, at its metaphysical roots foreseeing the fullness of time for each detail. It is a mysterious but very tangible reflection of, and witness to the Divine Providence which makes us free by operating in us, and in everything around us, from our metaphysical roots, and foresees our every detail...*Providence and beauty are inseparable.*”¹⁰

The Modern Movement carries great value for us - Providence transforming us on a deeper level as we journey on our own personal Emmaus - evoking within us light, and energy, and emotion, drawing us closer to God, in the end revealing to us the goodness, beauty, and truth attainable only through Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 8 lecture