Contemporary Discussions In Art History

Sociohistorical And Psychological Observations

Bruna Bejarano

Contemporary Discussions In Art History

Sociohistorical And Psychological Observations

Bruna Bejarano

PRESENTATION

Art History is a vast field of study which, loosely explained, deals with the effort to understand how, historically, different groups and people represented their artistic talents. Philosophical and religious beliefs, economic conditions, psychological constructions — all the elements that play a role in the development of human beings — influence stylistic choices of artists, whether they are manifested in painting, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, or any other form of artistic efforts. An interdisciplinary field *par excellence*, Art History looks at art from a holistic perspective, trying to understand artistic manifestations in their relation to the time periods and social context in which they are produced. Cultural influences — such as religion, social arrangements, institutions and gender constructions — all have a direct impact on every human intellectual manifestation, including the arts.

This book, entitled "**Contemporary discussions in Art History: sociohistorical and psychological observations**" is a collection of six articles that point to some ways in which specific art works are either (or both) a revelation of a sociohistorical moment or a subversive attempt to transform their context by denouncing operating power structures. In one way or another, all artists studied in this book used their craft to affirm what they perceive as an agenda worth advancing.

I hope you enjoy reading it!

Bruna Bejarano

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT: The Council of Trent – convened between 1545-1563 within the context of the religious movement known as the Counter–Reformation – embraced art as a tool for catechesis and evangelization. Although art was not the main point in the agenda at the time, prominent Catholic figures established guidelines about its proper content through several writings produced during and after the Council. In fact, the Catholic Church was the first institution to consistently engage in the activity of propaganda, creating a new administrative body inside the Church to oversee the propagation of the catholic faith. Thereafter, the issue of *decorum* became a central element to be considered by artists: religious art ought to be appropriate to its ecclesiastical objectives. The censorship imposed by the Church created limitations to artistic activity and affected the artistic production of the period. While Catholics fully embraced an aesthetic of embellished works that appealed to the emotions and had the specific objective of silent preaching, Protestant art sponsored a more humble, simpler approach to religious themes in works that were true to the values of Reformers. Besides, without the patronage from ecclesiastical sources, Protestant countries saw a huge reduction in the amount of religious art, opening the way for more secular works: genre, portrait, historical painting and still-life grew in demand.

KEYWORDS: Decorum; Counter-Reformation; Council of Trent and art.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the religious movement known as the Protestant Reformation[1] initiated by Martin Luther in the 16th century, a delayed but vigorous reaction by the Catholics ensued. The Council of Trent – an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church that was held in 25 separate sessions from 1545-1563 and overseen by three different popes over the course of those years – embodied the spirit of the Counter-Reformation.

Although the Council condemned the selling of indulgences (one of the main reasons for the Protestant Reformation), it passed several decrees aimed at reaffirming

---

1. The Protestant Reformation (ca. 1517-1555) was an initially religious reform set forth by Martin Luther´s "95 theses" (embraced by many other reformers, such as John Calvin, Henry VIII) which challenged the Catholic Church's power and authority to define Christianity. It triggered wars and had vast political, cultural and intellectual implications that changed the entire European Continent and the world.

the dogmas of the Catholic faith and defining as heresies the objections of the Protestant doctrine. Thus, it glorified the worshiping of the Virgin Mary and the saints; emphasized the doctrine of transubstantiation and confirmed Latin as the language for saying the Mass. In addition, it reactivated the Inquisition (*Tribunal do Santo Ofício*), reaffirmed the doctrine of papal infallibility and confirmed the seven sacraments, the indissolubility of marriage and the existence of purgatory.

In other words, the Council of Trent forcefully strengthened the Catholic dogmas by an uncompromising defense of them. It also embraced art as a tool for catechesis and evangelization. The Second Decree of the Council of Trent, "On the invocation, veneration and relics of saints and on sacred images," affirms the importance of art for religious teaching:

> And the bishops shall carefully teach this,- that, by means of the histories of the mysteries of our Redemption, **portrayed by paintings or other representations,** the people is instructed, and confirmed in (the habit of) remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith; as also that great profit is derived from all sacred images, not only because the people are thereby admonished of the benefits and gifts bestowed upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful (…) Moreover, in the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and **the sacred use of images,** every superstition shall be removed, all filthy lucre be abolished; finally, all lasciviousness be avoided; in such wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust; nor the celebration of the saints, and the visitation of relics be by any perverted into revellings and drunkenness; as if festivals are celebrated to the honour of the saints by luxury and wantonness. (MATHIAS, 1832, p. 402).

Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), an important figure in the later sessions of the Council, wrote a treatise about the proper content of art. In his *De sacris et profanis imaginibus* (Sacred and profane images, 1582), the former Archbishop of Bologna argued for the power of holy images in the development of Catholic devotion:

> Not the first, but perhaps the most influential strategists of propaganda for the Church's power, he knew exactly how man's mind worked, how society functioned, and what one should do to make the medium carry the message. To him, beyond the written text, it was the spoken word, but even more, the visual image that were the most influential information carriers. (RIETBERGEN, p. 17)

More specifically, to Paleotti art was to be used to influence the public into accepting the religious Catholic teachings and to secure the Church's power: a tool of propaganda that better achieved its goal when it reached people's hearts. Baroque culture – and painting style – developed precisely from this notion of an all-encompassing emotion.

To reach people's feelings, Paleotti thought, one needed to consider the consumers and the producers of art. To him, society was divided into four categories of people: the "spirituali" (represented by the clergy, who generally were the most

powerful group even in non-papal states) and the "letterati" (which included the nobility and all literate members of society) were the actual producers of art, in the sense that their patronage was what sustained it. The "pittori" was the third group, and included those who could be employed or paid to use their skills to represent the messages the producers of art would like to convey in an adequate manner, tuned to the groups they intended to reach. Finally, the fourth and largest group (about 85% of all females and 75% of males, by his estimate) was the "idioti," formed by the illiterate who were the target group - the intended consumer of art. Thus, in the shrewd analysis of Paleotti, artists were instrumental in the conveying of the message, as they were the "image builders" of the time.

The Catholic Church was, in fact, the first institution to consistently engage in the activity of "propaganda" – the term itself was coined in the context of the Counter-Reformation, and has its origin in the *Congragatio de Propaganda Fide* (Congregation for the Propaganda Fide), which created a new administrative body inside the Church to oversee the propagation of the Catholic faith.

2. PROTESTANT VERSUS CATHOLIC ART

The Protestant Reformation, in varying degrees, triggered a wave of destruction of imagery in many countries: paintings, sculptures and other Catholic decorations were removed from churches, usually burned, and replaced with more "Protestant" items. The dismantling often yielded treasures: the enormous wealth of the Catholic Church, mostly in the form of land ownership and gold relics, was an incentive to many political leaders who supported the Protestant Reformation. As an additional benefit, secular rulers gained greater control over churches traditional affairs, such as the appointment of clergy. Thus, while Catholics fully embraced an aesthetic of embellished works that appealed to the emotions, Protestant art sponsored a more humble, simpler approach to religious themes in works that were true to the Christian values of Reformers.

The difference in theological approaches was reflected in the choices of subject: images of the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation of the Virgin and the Transfiguration of Christ became recurrent in the sacred art produced by Catholic artists. Protestants, on the other hand, favored paintings that were more naturalistic, less symbolic: according to Protestant theology, the relationship between the worshipper and God was an individual one, thus common people, landscapes and ordinary scenes were all pleasing to God. Without the patronage from ecclesiastical sources, Protestant countries saw a huge reduction in the amount of religious art, opening the way for more secular works: genre, portrait, historical painting and still-life grew in demand.

As for Catholic art, one of the consequences of the Council of Trent was that it was decided that religious art had a specific objective of silent preaching. Without acknowledging any of the claims of the Reformers to be correct, the Second Decree ("On the Invocation, Veneration and Relics, of Saints and on Sacred Images") reaffirmed the doctrine that veneration of images is not to be construed as idolatrous, but as an educational tool to instruct the illiterate. To achieve this divine ending, art should closely follow scripture and, for the sake of legibility and proper instruction of biblical narrative, should avoid "superstition," "beauty exciting to lust" or any other form of "indecorous" themes.

Thus, the issue of decorum became a central element to be considered by artists: religious art ought to be appropriate to its ecclesiastical objectives.

3. AGAINST DECORUM

Even though the Council of Trent did not provide specific guidelines about how religious art should be, it made some clear indications about what it should avoid, which brought the Renaissance art of the time into debate.

The Counter-Reformation occurred at a time when Renaissance art had reached its peak – with the scientific advances of the post-medieval period, Renaissance as a socio-cultural movement had imposed its humanist character on painting, sculpture, architecture and literature. In painting, the techniques had evolved to the use of perspective, depth, the balance of forms and the search for harmony based on classical art, which contrasted with the dominance of straight and two-dimensional planes of the medieval period.

Furthermore, if medieval art was related to a theocentric religious culture, Renaissance art was inspired by classical antiquity - that is, the Greco-Roman arts - thus departing from the Church's dogmas. Although many Renaissance themes were associated with religion, the change in mentality was evident in the variety of themes, which started to include elements from Greco-Roman mythology, landscapes and customs. Renaissance art, it can be said, prioritized reason, knowledge and the pursuit of perfection: although its themes are often religious, its aesthetic is classic. The public of Renaissance art, therefore, was a select cultural elite.

Not surprisingly, in the context of the Counter-Reformation, notable Renaissance painters became an additional obstacle to be managed: if art should serve the purposes of the Catholic Church and incite an emotional religious response, how to reconcile with Michelangelo's Christ, who in everything resembled a Greek athlete?

It is thought that Michelangelo Buonarroti's *The Last Judgment*, although not mentioned directly at the Council, inspired much of the debate about decorum and,

on the onset of the Catholic Church's Counter-Reformation became an example of what should be avoided:

Figure 1. *The Last Judgment,* Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel, Vatican. 1535-1541.

Painted on the high altar of the Sistine Chapel, a beardless Christ is located at the top center; on his left are the damned, who are going to hell, while on the right are those who are going to heaven. Beside Christ is the Virgin Mary, who looks over the blessed. The angels, not readily identified as they are seen without wings and lack any visual markers that would make them recognizable, are blowing their trumpets and struggling to save the souls beneath them.

Michelangelo was accused of desecrating the Sistine Chapel with his nudes, which followed the aesthetic ideal of Greek beauty: strong, healthy and proportional bodies. Besides the nudity, the painting was decreed heretical for mixing elements of Greek (pagan) mythology – as Charon and Minos – with Christian subjects, and for giving Christ a distinct Apollonian[2] aspect:

Figure 2. *Mary and Christ (detail)* Sistine Chapel, Vatican. 1535-1541.

Furthermore, the contorted positions of the bodies painted were seen as undignified poses of labor men and performers, not the holy.

Following Michelangelo's death, a painter by the name of Daniele da Volterra applied vestments and loincloths to many of the figures - covering some of the genitals in the work and sending the message that nudity was frowned upon and no longer allowed.

Another example of how the censorship by the Council would affect the artistic production of the period and impose limitations to artistic activity is the imbroglio in

2. Apollo was considered the most beautiful and Greek of all gods and was represented as the ideal of the *kouros* - a beardless, athletic youth.

which the painter Paolo Veronese was found in 1573.

Commissioned to paint *The Last Supper* for the refectory of the Dominican Monastery at Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Veronese painted a huge (5.55 x 12.8 meters) canvas, on which Jesus and his apostles are not lead characters and several other figures - dwarves, buffoons, drunken soldiers, dogs - share the canvas with a self-portrait of the painter in the foreground, drawing the attention away from Jesus and the spiritual moment:

Figure 3. The Feast in the House of Levi, Paolo Veronese, 1573.

The scene, Church officials would argue, looked more like a 16th century Venetian banquet than a last supper. It was inadequate, among other reasons, for the fact that if art was to serve the faith, it should not be distracting, but a channel for disseminating the important messages they cared to propagate.

Called by the Inquisition, Veronese was asked to explain and defend the inclusion of certain subjects, and told to remove the dog in the foreground and paint Magdalene in its place:

> They first gave Veronese the option of changing the dog in the foreground into a figure of the Magdalene, thus implicitly converting the picture into the episode where Christ encounters a repentant prostitute while feasting in the house of a Pharisee. Veronese provoked them by arguing quite correctly, on the basis of pictorial decorum, that the Magdalene had no place in a Last Supper. (CAMPBELL, 2012, p. 561)

In view of the technical difficulty of reforming it to meet the requirements of decorum, Veronese found a solution that would save the work of more than a year: rather than submit to the changes requested, he and the friars simply renamed the

piece *The Feast in the House of Levi*.

According to a biblical passage found in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was invited to a party at Levi's house – the painting, under its new name, illustrated a biblical story in which a wealthy man entertains Christ. The fact that Church officials accepted the painter's justification for the change illustrates the lack of clear criteria used to determine what was and what was not considered adequate.

Although Agnolo Bronzino's monumental *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* represented a Catholic narrative, it also fell short under the guidelines set forth by the Council of Trent. In the painting – which combined the characteristics of the styles we know today as High Renaissance – Bronzino approached the demands of the Acts of the council inadequately. The tone of the scene is in conflict with the fact that St. Lawrence was being burned alive, and the massive fresco fails to portray the true horror of his martyrdom and the injustice committed against the persecuted Christian saint:

Figure 4. Martyrdom of St. Lawrence, Agnolo Bronzino, 1569.

Again, the striking abundance of naked bodies and the festive organization of the characters in the frame (their poses contorted much like that of the figures in Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement)* reveal a secular concern with aesthetics, more than with the actual gruesome narrative. The nudity would have been considered profane under Catholic doctrine and a mimicry of allegorical Greco-Roman subjects. The absence of pain, the multitude of figures and the dynamic setting distract the viewer from the suffering of the martyr, thus failing to communicate the religious message.

The art of the 15th and 16th centuries – produced by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli and Titian, to name a few – and by which we refer today as Renaissance art for representing a humanist, anthropocentric and rationalist view of the world, inspired by classical antiquity, would enter decline following the Counter-Reformation.

The two renditions of The Last Supper below, one by Leonardo da Vinci and the next by Tintoretto (a Late Renaissance painter) help illustrate the transition that occured at the end of the 16th century:
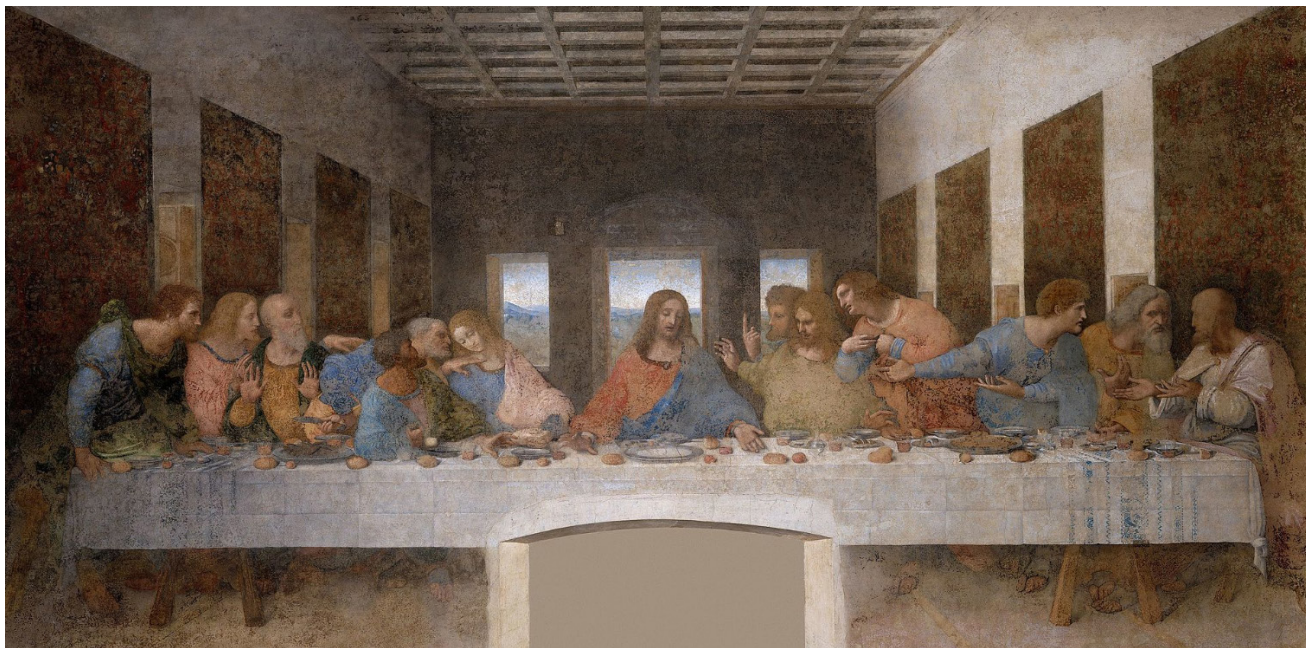

Figure 5. *The Last Supper (restored),* Leonardo da Vinci, 1490.

Figure 6. *The Last Supper,* Tintoretto, *1592-1594.*

As it can be observed from the two paintings, Tintoretto's *The Last Supper* drastically broke away with the stylistic formula of his fellow Renaissance artists and engaged the viewer in a scene more aligned with the Counter-Reformation ideals:

> "The contrast of the two pictures reflects the direction Renaissance painting took in the 16th century, as it moved away from architectonic clarity of space and neutral lighting toward the dynamic perspectives and dramatic chiaroscuro of the coming Baroque." (KLEINER, 2014, p. 524)

Tintoretto brought the biblical story of the Eucharist alive, with Jesus standing out, his halo glowing while he hands bread to his disciples. The belief in saints is also observed – as there are other smaller halos in the figures – and the contrast between earthly life – represented by the servants, the cat looking into a basket – and the divine, all contribute to the conveying of the religious message.

4. CONCLUSION

Tintoretto's *The Last Supper* is considered a "transition" piece to the Baroque style that would prevail in the 17th to 18th centuries and largely met the plans that the Catholic Church reserved for art: to manifest religious messages in a dramatic way, through great emotional appeal. From a technical point of view, this meant greater attention to curves and diagonals, the play of light and dark and attention

to the whole of the work, as opposed to the concern with details, which marked Renaissance art.

The strong, healthy and lively figures of Christ and the Saints painted by Michelangelo gave way to suffering and pain in the crucified Christ and Saints of the Baroque painters. Martyrdom, which was thought to strengthen the Church by demonstrating the value of those who bravely died for their faith, became a favorite topic. Paintings of Saints and the Virgin Mary would also serve to reaffirm Catholic faith as distinct from Protestant beliefs.

Throughout the years, the issue of decorum continued to play an important role in art production, demanding that themes and modes of execution be aligned with the Church's ideals. Art served as a didactic tool, helping to consolidate a set of religious imagery in the minds of followers – most of them illiterate – and to spread the message to those the Church wanted to guide into the principles of the faith. With the adequate visual portrayal of biblical narratives, ordinary men and women could be converted. It would be the task of Baroque art, with its emotional and realistic appeal, to rescue the suffering Christ and bring the "consumers" of the art of that time closer to the dogmas of the Church.

REFERENCES

Campbell, Stephen J. and Michael W. Cole. **Italian Renaissance Art.** Thames and Hudson, 2012.

Hartt, Frederick and David G. Wilkins. **History of Italian Renaissance Art.** *Seventh Edition.* Prentice Hall, 2011.

Locker, Jesse. **Introduction to Art and Reform in Late Renaissance:After Trent.** Routledge: 2018.

Kleiner, Fred S. **Gardner's Art Through the Ages.** *Fourteenth Edition, Volume I.* Wadsworth, 2014.

Rietbergen, Peter. **Power and Religion in Baroque Rome: Barberini Cultural Policies.** London: Brill Academic Publishings, 2006.

Mathias, Benjamin Williams. **A Compendious History of the Council of Trent.** Dublin: William Curry, Jun & Company. 1832. Available online: https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=7_hCAQAAMAAJ&hl=pt_PT&pg=GBS.PA2

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRUNA BEJARANO has a Bachelor of Science in Communication - Journalism (2012) and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History (2018), both from Florida International University (Miami). She is currently pursuing a Masters in Art Education at Florida University (Gainsville). Ms. Bejarano has more than 10 years of professional experience as a Mass Communicator, supporting and coordinating a broad variety of activities related to media and marketing/PR efforts at Baptist Health South Florida, KSG Group, GMG Marketing Company, the Rubell Museum and Borboleta Music. She is the Creative Director at Coffee Table Productions and is currently researching on the role of the Arts in Education (learning through art). She may be contacted at: bruna.bejarano@gmail.com. IMDB info: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm9406819/

INDEX

A

Agnolo Bronzino 35
Art History 1, 17, 49, 62, 65, 70, 73
Art of Resistance 1, 2, 14
Art of Spain 62
Avant-Garde 2, 3, 5

B

Barbara Kruger 1, 2, 3, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Baroque Art 38, 51, 52, 60, 61
Bartolomé Murillo 55, 58, 59, 62

C

Chapel of La Merced 49, 57
Colore 39, 40, 42, 44, 46, 47
Council of Trent 28, 29, 31, 35, 38, 51
Counter-Reformation 28, 30, 31, 32, 36, 37, 51, 52, 55, 62

D

Decorum 28, 31, 34, 38, 60, 70
Defense Mechanisms 19, 24
Diego Quispe Tito 50
Diego Velázquez 62, 65, 72
Disegno 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47

F

Francisco Pacheco 55, 56, 62
Francisco Zurbarán 55, 58, 59

G

Giorgio Vasari 43
Gustave Courbet 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 17

I

Immaculate Conception 30, 49, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61

J

Jacob Lawrence 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, 17

EDITORA
ARTEMIS
2020