

Portrait of the Artist as Iconographer

Searching for meaning in the postmodern wasteland

by BRADLEY ANDERSON

Throughout much of the 20th century, the abstraction that characterized modern art became a cliché. In television shows or movies, a painting might accidentally be hung upside down with no one the wiser. Contra the skeptics who believed that a child could slap paint on a canvas and produce the same result, there remained, in the world of painting, a great deal of formalism in the midst of the abstractions. If the history of art was indeed a story, there was by the mid-20th century a utopian sense that we had reached a kind of dénouement. But then, the deluge.

Much has been written about postmodernism, a catch-all term that encompasses the philosophical and artistic trends of the last several decades in the West. Observing its early stirrings, some might have been forgiven for thinking that perhaps the clock was being turned back, albeit in odd ways. Andy Warhol's pop-art might still provoke the old question of "is it really art?" But one could tell that it was a can of Campbell's Soup, which was at least something. But while postmodernism had re-introduced the recognizable into art, it came at a price: increasingly deliberate and pervasive irony. There was danger in taking any such work at face value, since it might have been actually a joke at the viewer's expense.

Art critic Karen Wilkin, writing recently in *The New Criterion*, writes that postmodern artists, "while insisting that their work represents a rupture with the past, treat the history of art as a sort of grab bag to be pillaged at will, with the captured elements forced into the service of non-aesthetic concerns." Artists today confront an array of dead-ends. There is the modernist tradition of pure abstraction with nowhere left to go next; the postmodernist milieu infected by political and social agendas; and a rootless marketplace obsessed with trendiness.

Some have responded by moving in a radical and unexpected direction: the ancient world of Christian iconography. Explaining why he found himself exploring the medieval art of both East and West, one such iconographer, Jonathan Pageau, says that it struck him as the only way to escape "the irony, the fragmentation, and the detachments flooding all cultural forms."

When one considers the traditional composition of an art museum, one sees the Western idea of Progress as one artistic epoch yields to the next. The stylized, mostly religious forms of the Middle Ages in the West and of the Byzantine world give way to the rediscovery of Greek classical forms in the Renaissance as typified by Michelangelo; and then those ideals are further refined and given a human touch by the great Dutch and Flemish masters such as Rembrandt and Vermeer. This march of artistic progress then moves to the shimmering vision of the French impressionists, which in turn morphs into early signs of abstraction in Cezanne and Gauguin, then on to the real thing in Picasso—and the casting off of representational art altogether with the likes of Kandinsky.

It is perhaps odd to think of Kandinsky as being in the line of Enlightenment thinking. Perhaps he isn't—and yet the presentation of the history of art as a story, a narrative with a beginning and a tentative end, was still alive and well even in the paint-splashed canvases of Jackson Pollock. In a sense, with this pure abstraction an artistic version of Francis Fukuyama's famous "end of history" thesis had reached the art world.

Studying at the School of Visual Arts in New York City in the 1980s, Marek Czarnecki, a Roman Catholic iconographer, received what he describes as a solid foundation in figure drawing, anatomy, and observational painting—something approaching a classical arts education

that was already becoming difficult to find. But even so, he was taught that the goal was spontaneous self-expression and that anything else would make him a mere illustrator or draftsman. He says he learned to paint his neuroses in a grand, neo-expressionistic style. But feeling it was not enough merely to destroy, he began to rebuild: "I literally put the pieces back together by making collages." This became his medium as he showed his work both nationally and internationally in exhibitions, galleries, and museums.

Though he was distant then from the Catholic Church of his upbringing, his collages often returned to religious subjects. Czarnecki once got his slides back from a gallery dealer, along with a note: "If you are going to work with religious subjects, you need to be more critical or sarcastic. Don't send me work like this."

It was a chance event, though, that brought Czarnecki into iconography proper: his father, a parish council member, volunteered him to paint a copy of the famous icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa. He accepted the obligation. He says, "I had no idea what I had done until I saw this icon hanging in church with people praying in front of it. I felt stupid and ashamed of myself...I also understood that in my whole life, no work of art I ever made was as important as this clumsy copy."

Another graduate of New York's School of Visual Arts is Father Silouan Justiniano, an artist of Puerto Rican descent who is now a monk at a Russian Orthodox monastery on Long Island. He recalls being brought up short by a professor telling him, "I don't want you to impress me with how well you can draw!" Subsequently pursuing a master's degree in fine arts at Hunter College at the City University of New York, Justiniano turned to "a kind of 'postmodern' abstraction." But then the promising career opportunities that were presenting themselves by the time of his graduation were brought to a halt when he decided to turn to a life of monasticism.

Like Czarnecki's venture into iconography, Justiniano's early steps in the discipline were self-taught and came about



Wood icon of Christ rescuing Peter Jonathan Pageau

because he was approached with the need for a specific work: a “Plaschanitsa,” a cloth icon that portrays Christ being prepared for burial and that is used in Orthodox Holy Week services.

The process of learning to be an iconographer is unique. While traditional iconography requires an understanding of form and proportion characteristic of classical Western art, and while it involves elements of abstraction and altered perception that influenced modern artists such as Matisse and Chagall, iconography, at its core, employs both a realism and an abstraction emanating from a particular view of the cosmos. Put simply, iconography attempts to portray outer and inner reality simultaneously.

Rather than drawing what the artist sees in nature (although good iconographers have mastered that skill), the iconographer studies and learns to copy as many of the best examples of iconography as possible, thereby internalizing hundreds and even thousands of images representing an unbroken tradition of more than a millennium and a half. And while iconography by definition must

make use of abstraction in order to portray a spiritual reality, these abstractions cannot come from an amateur iconographer’s solipsistic impulses, since those are considered likely to be misguided, incomplete, and immature. The final product of a mature traditional iconographer can be stunning—a timeless visual summing up, both of millennia of Christian tradition and of the spiritual experience of a unique individual who stands at a particular point in history.

Jonathan Pageau, an Orthodox iconographer, was trained as a painter in contemporary postmodern styles at Concordia University in Montreal, but he followed his discovery of the Western Medieval and Byzantine traditions to a less common branch of iconography: carving bas-relief in wood and stone.

Pageau, who broke from his previous artistic pursuits and committed himself fully to iconography, notes that the functionality of his current work has a singular effect: “The very desire to make something that participates in a community makes one approach with reverence and humility the forms handed to us by our predecessors.” He adds that “in postmodernism, we saw a breakdown of the grand narrative of progress in art, as well as the breakdown of the hegemony of art for art’s sake.” But for Pageau there was a silver lining in that development:

The surprise in that breakdown, maybe the unexpected side-effect, was the possibility to explore our own traditional art—that is, the traditional art of the Christian civilization against which much of the progress boasted of in Western art was compared to, that dark Middle

Age. The Middle Ages had become the projected space and time of everything we hated, everything we saw as opposed to modernity. As the uniqueness of the Renaissance began to be relativized [in postmodernism], as the brightness of the Enlightenment began to appear dimmer, the dark ages appeared less dark. In fact, the Middle Ages began to appear to me as the place in history where the entire Church had come to a basic consensus on its visual language and this had happened without too many decrees or canons or ecclesiastical rules.... And so it seemed like...the point of departure of the modern world, the universal visual language of the Middle Ages, seemed like the only final place to explore...

Similarly, Father Justiniano notes that the “chimeric formlessness” of postmodernism “hails a slip into nothingness,” but that in doing so “it has cleared the field and placed us back to square one—the formlessness of Genesis.” He adds, “In the end, postmodernism destroys itself and from its ashes the sacred art of the icon arises as a phoenix of hope, reminding humanity of the one thing needful... instilling in us a desire for a center of gravity, a structure of meaning..”

Many in today’s world will respond by grasping at parasitic postmodern ideologies or by yielding themselves to addictive pathologies. Others will attempt to return to the old narrative of modernism proper, which the late Hilton Kramer felt was still “the only really vital tradition for the arts.” But one hopes there also will be those who in their own ways plumb the depths of tradition, even while being themselves buffeted by postmodern storms. As T. S. Eliot wrote almost a century ago, tradition “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour,” while “the more tardy must sweat for it.” ■

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