The Art of Devotion: Sacred Illuminations, Prints, and Drawings

Christ in Glory, Liberale da Verona, about 1467, tempera, gold leaf, and ink on vellum, 274 x 215 mm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

THE BARBER INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS

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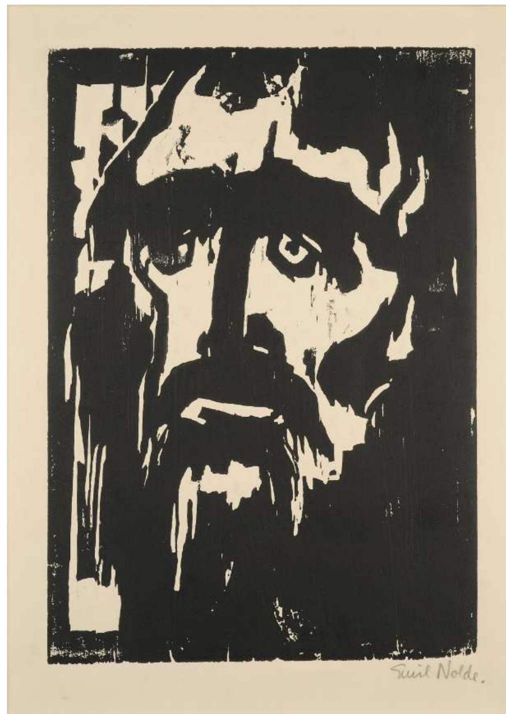

Prophet, Emil Nolde, 1912, woodcut, 495 x 365 mm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

The Virgin and Child with Saints (recto), Fra Bartolommeo, about 1509, lack and yellow chalk heightened with white on tinted paper, 260 x 196 mm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome to our next online Tuesday Talk presented by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. I'm April Armstrong-Bascombe, and between February and July I was the Collections Intern at the Barber. During this time, I curated the display: *The Art of Devotion: Sacred Illuminations, Prints, and Drawings,* the opening of which was delayed in light of COVID-19 regulations. With the doors to the Barber again safely open, it is ready to welcome visitors in the Green Gallery Print Bay until 21 February 2021.

This short talk is to welcome you all to some of the objects explored in this display, while also sharing the ideas which motivated the combination of these engaging and thought-provoking works. These images have not simply been chosen because of the scenes in which they depict, but also for what they tell us about different mediums and techniques employed by artists. But the most important purpose governing their selection is what they reveal about their makers and patrons. What mysterious functions did these salient artefacts perform for their original beholders?

Using images as windows into the past, this display asks one of the most important questions posited at Christian art: why were you made? In doing so, it will move closer to unveiling the sacred mysteries woven within the materiality of religious art, and thereby understanding its enduring appeal to artists and their patrons throughout time and across place.

Let's begin by unpicking its central theme: 'Devotion'. In our modern lives, devotion is a word which may incite thoughts of love and affection to our families and friends. Many of us express our love for one another with material goods, such as handmade objects or purchased items. We ratify our social bonds through the exchange of rings at weddings, and purchase picture frames to hold our memories.

Looking, touching, and feeling these personal items and holding them in our hands brings comfort. Interacting with these materials spark the memories of past events as we picture them unfolding in our mind's eye. These moments of private contemplation bring us once again closer to the event, thing, person we remember, whilst our imaginations miraculously manifest these thoughts into ephemeral, fleeting episodes of emotion. How often have we picked up the phone to call our loved ones after being reminded of a special time together…

This function of goods as visual guides to imploring memories, thoughts, and actions, is exactly what cultivated the most important, long-lasting, and lucrative commercial market in the medieval and early-modern period: the demand for religious art. Pictures of Christ, his mother the Virgin Mary, and portraits of the saints, enabled Christians to envisage themselves as moving closer into a relationship with God. To understand God was to see him, touch him, and imagine his supernatural presence interceding in our lives. The only method to do this was through prayer, and images provided the ideal platform to stimulate these imagined engagements and bring us closer to the divine. From spectacular golden altarpieces housed within the monumental cathedrals of Europe, to small hand-sized mosaics with the Virgin breastfeeding the infant Christ, all religious objects performed this majestic role. This enigmatic function is found interlaced in the works on paper exhibited throughout this display.

In spite of their enormous popularity, the use of images in the Christian Church has held a precarious position. Throughout the medieval period, a multitude of theologians surmised commentaries on the Old Testament passages which appeared to condemn art. Including this passage found in the Book of Exodus (20:4): 'You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above […] on the earth beneath or in the waters below'. Contrary to this unambiguous instruction, scenes inspired by the Bible circulated rapidly.

Painted illustrations of key moments from Christ's earthly ministry, for instance his birth (the Nativity), his death (the Crucifixion), or his supernatural Resurrection, acted as potent tools for Church leaders to translate otherwise complex components of Christian doctrine to the masses. This function was advocated in a sixth-century letter sent from Pope Gregory the Great to the Bishop of Marseilles. He stated, 'for what Scripture teaches those who read […] images show to those who cannot read but see'. Gregory was here emphasising the critical importance of images as a form of a visual education, particularly at a time when literacy in Latin was reserved for the nobility and the Church clergy.

Like many other Church leaders, Gregory was careful to stress one vital point. He highlighted that Christians were not to worship the image itself as this was considered a form of idolatry – the worship of false idols. But to use the sacred narratives to *guide* thoughts of the God in our minds and instigate our prayers. Images were thought of as a low rung on the ladder towards unity with God, then removed as we moved closer to *imageless* perfection. This is known as 'visual piety', a form of optical devotion imperative to the international circulation of Christian artworks.

Looking closely at *Christ in Glory* (1467) by the Italian manuscript painter Liberale da Verona we can appreciate the power of Christian art in appealing to our senses. Our eyes are instantly drawn to the lavish application of burnished gold, sea-like blues, and magnetic reds which transform the image into a spectacle of optical devotion. Dressed in a cascading gown of lapis lazuli and surrounded by a choir of singing angels, Christ appears in the centre of the image. His right hand is raised with his fingers crossed – a subtle symbol which references his death on the Cross. A two-headed beast coils itself around the divine scene and is destroyed by the weight of Christ's feet. Its presence denotes the perpetual defeat of Good over Evil, a theme which saturates the Gospels.

This small image is an example of a fifteenth-century Gradual – a leaf (page) from a medieval hymn book used during the celebration of the Eucharist (the sacrament which commemorates the Last Supper). Liberale da Verona produced this golden miniature as a trial piece for the choir of Siena Cathedral, which later commissioned 16 painted hymn books from the artist based on this design. The Resurrected Christ returns to earth to fulfil the promise of his apocalyptic return made during this final meal. Sitting alongside his disciplines, he vowed that all who consumed the bread and wine of the Eucharist would enter into the Kingdom of Heaven and be reunited with him. The sumptuous feast of colours which permeates this luminous episode was intended to capture the gaze of its intended beholder. This was not simply for aesthetic purposes, but rather to implore them to sing words of solemn praise to Christ in heaven. The Son of God stands within a decorated letter 'C', marking the beginning of a new sentence to be sung by a member of the choir.

Engagement with this image moved beyond the realm of visual piety. Its sacred imagery instructed its medieval viewer to sing its songs of praise, while holding its delicate weight in their hands. Unlike the public paintings found above the altars of churches or hanging on chapel walls, it was intended to be held, touched, and viewed in close proximity. The combination of these senses: to touch, hear, and see, would have heightened its devotional context, and brought its viewer even closer to *experiencing* the supernatural. This image invites us all to imagine the all-consuming mystical atmosphere of heaven, in which we are guided by the songs of singing angels and lost in a sensory sea of liquid gold and oceanic blue.

As evidenced by this Gradual leaf (page), some of the most magnificent images of Christian art are found on a small-scale. Their miniature dimensions capture our imaginations and excite our senses. One exuberant example is found in Fra Bartolommeo's *The Virgin and Child with Saints*.

This work on paper was intended as a preparatory sketch for a painting (altarpiece) commissioned for the high altar of the church of San Marco in Florence in 1509. Using black and yellow chalk, the Renaissance master has drawn the outline of the Virgin and Child appearing on a dais (stage) and surrounded by kneeling saints. Above, angels pour from heaven. Sketching an initial design for such an important and costly commission was common for Renaissance painters, enabling them to work through any issues before committing to paint. However, in this example, the choice of preparatory medium has impacted the theological weight of the scene, transforming it beyond the scope of a preliminary design to a mystical scene momentarily suspended in time.

The organic properties of chalk with its smoky-like application leaving smudges and darkened traces is befitting of this ephemeral, supernatural episode. A delicate, crystal-like outline of a mystical veil is parted by the descending angels who reveal the Virgin and Child to the beholder.

Smudging around their wings captures this sense of flight, as though they have miraculously flown from heaven to partake in the act of unveiling. A performance which places special emphasis on the sense of sight and its exaltation through the agency of God. These subtle yet transformative details perhaps offer an explanation as to why this early sketch survived beyond the completion of the Florentine altarpiece.

So far, we have spoken exclusively about how these devotional images were consumed by their beholders. But we must also engage with how they were understood by their makers. For many painters, printmakers, and draughtsmen throughout history, the production of Christian artworks extended outside the limits of artistic production. In the opening lines of the Statutes of Siena (a rule book for painters active in the Italian Republic in the fourteenth century), it describes the role of artists as translators of the divine.

Through the skill of their hands, they performed the sacred task of bringing the mysteries of God before the eyes of the faithful. An undertaking which undoubtedly provided a sense of self-worth but also placed a hefty weight on their shoulders. This creative authority had ancient foundations. Many in the medieval period believed in the legend that the Apostle Saint Luke painted a portrait of the Virgin Mary from life. Henceforth, Luke became the patron saint of painters, an appointment which both strengthened the importance of the craft and also reiterated the value of artists in the dissemination of Christian themes. Because Luke alongside Christ's other disciples was tasked with spreading the Word of God, his role emphasised that art was a key component of this responsibility.

The 'Hand of the Artist' has become synonymous with the concept of the genius or the production of a masterpiece. But in this context of Christian devotion it can hold another meaning. Traces of the artist's hand reinforces their agency in the depiction of religious subject, bringing the legend of Saint Luke to life. In no other work is this most forcefully felt than in Emil Nolde's harrowing woodcut *Prophet*, which exhibits a stark departure from the intensely bright watercolours more characteristic to his Expressionist *oeuvre*.

Nolde's presence looms over this print with a haunting intensity that feels palpable. Made in Berlin on the eve of the First World War in 1912, *Prophet* has evident Christ-like features. The black cavity above his eyes evokes the Crown of Thorns that pierced the head of Christ during the Crucifixion. The dark recesses left by the wood gouged out by the printmaker's chisel appears like a pool of blood. To create the print, Nolde transformed a slab of wood into a religious image. A transformation which changed its matter. The poignancy of wood as a natural material capable of assuming a multitude of other forms has early origins. Medieval theologians mused over the bounty of symbolism embedded within this natural organism.

Writing in *Etymologiae*, Spanish scholar Isidore of Seville (about 560–636) described 'wood as all matter', with the two sharing the identical Latin name *'materia'*. He noted the similarity between *'materia'* with the Latin for mother *'mater'*, a substance which gives birth to other things. A characteristic which is of course true of wood. Trees act as disseminators of knowledge in the form of paper, emit oxygen through photosynthesis for new life, provide shelter for animals, or in the example of Christ's Passion, are moulded into objects of torture. The harrowing figure communicates a deep sense of spiritual anguish as though contemplating the suffering which awaits Christ at the Crucifixion.

The role of Nolde's hand in changing the matter of wood into devotional subject would have awarded him with an imagined sense of religious authority, seemingly reflected when he explained that a 'work of art becomes a work of art when one re-evaluates the values of nature and adds one's own spirituality' (Nolde 1934).

This mesmerising woodcut alongside other exceptional illustrations of Christian devotion are now on display in *The Art of Devotion: Sacred Illuminations, Prints, and Drawings.* This includes a rarely displayed Book of Hours, an Italian painted Prayer Book of the Renaissance (made in Rome about 1480), which offers an outstanding glimpse into the dynamics of Christian devotion on a small and intimate scale.

If you have any questions or would like to continue the conversation, please get in touch with the Barber at info@barber.org.uk, or use our social media platforms. Thank you to Jack Davies for providing original music to accompany this talk.

About the speaker

April joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in February until July 2020 as a Collections Intern. She has recently completed her PhD at the University of Durham as an Arts and Humanities Research Council (Northern Bridge) funded scholar in Hispanic and Italian medieval visual culture. She specialises in the Christian materiality of the Western Mediterranean in the fourteenth century and has received generous funding to undertake original research in Oxford, New York, Spain, and Italy. Previously, April completed her Masters at the University of Oxford (Lady Margaret Hall) in Art History and Visual Culture and was awarded the Sarah Louise Dale/Clarendon Scholarship in Renaissance Studies.

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Music composed and played by Jack Davies.