

A REVIEW OF BIBLICALLY INSPIRED PAINTINGS OF THE RENAISSANCE

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Abstract

Artists find their inspirations from a diverse range of sources; some from other artists, some from contemporary activities and others from nature. This paper focuses on paintings spurred by stories found in the Bible as they have inspired many artists of the Renaissance era in developing spiritually and aesthetically engaging paintings. It would appear that the bible has many inspirational elements that artists can tap from. It seems many artists of the modern era do not get inspiration from Biblical scenes anymore. Concentration has been placed on paintings produced by Italian, Dutch and Spanish painters. This paper exposes the virtues of the Renaissance paintings and hopes by so doing it will reveal the hidden nuances of the art forms as inspiration for the contemporary painter to draw from.

Key Words: Inspiration, Bible, Painting, Renaissance, Sacred, Scenes

Introduction

The Renaissance was a series of literary and cultural movements in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. These movements began in Italy and eventually expanded into Germany, France, England, and other parts of Europe. Paintings, sculptures, architecture, music, and literature produced during these centuries in Europe were done under the combined influences of an increased awareness of nature, a revival of classical learning and style, and a more individualistic view of man (Kleiner, 2011).

Today scholars no longer believe that the Renaissance marked an abrupt break with medieval values, as is suggested by the French word *renaissance*, literally meaning rebirth. Rather, historical sources suggest that interest in nature, humanistic learning, and individualism were already present in the late medieval period and became dominant in 15th and 16th centuries Italy concurrently with social and economic changes such as the secularization of daily life, the rise of a rational money-credit economy, and greatly increased social mobility. Renaissance painters turned from the purely religious subjects of the Middle Ages to a depiction of the natural world. Technical advances in the representation of perspective, anatomy, light and shadow were matched by a great expansion in subject matter. Portraits, studies of the human form, animals, landscapes, scenes of daily life, and historic events all joined religious subjects as acceptable material for the painters.

Lazzari and Schlesier (2008) believe that creativity is the quality that allows us to originate something or to cause objects to come into being. Stories in the bible have always inspired artists. The bible has many inspirational elements that many artists can draw on. Some artists find their inspiration from many different places, some from other artists, some from modern day life and others from nature. Mittler (2000)

noted that Christian art was intended to illustrate the power and glory of Christ. It was also meant to tell, as clearly as possible, the story of his life on earth.

Surviving Early Christian paintings dates from the 3rd to 4th centuries and consists of fresco paintings in the Roman catacombs and mosaics on the walls of churches. Certain stylizations and artistic conventions are characteristics of the representations of New Testament events. For example, Christ was shown as the Good Shepherd, a figural type adopted from representations of the Greek god Hermes. The resurrection was symbolized by depictions of the Old Testament story of Jonah, who was delivered from the fish. Among the most extraordinary works of this Early Christian period are the mosaics found in the 6th century churches in Ravenna, Italy. San Vitale, in particular, is noted for its beautiful mosaics depicting both spiritual and secular subjects. On the church's walls, stylized elongated figures, mostly shown frontally, stare wide-eyed at the viewer and seem to float weightlessly outside of time.

The new naturalism of the Netherlands, best shown in the intricate work of Jan van Eyck, began to attract attention and by the mid-1450s, its influence was widespread. Flemish artists like Rogier van der Weyden (c1400-1464), Hugo van der Goes (1440-1482) and the German artist Matthias Grünewald (c1470-1528), worked almost exclusively with religious themes, using a naturalistic approach which gave their paintings a sharper sense of purpose and clarity than ever before. However, it appears that many artists don't feel inspired by biblical scenes anymore but the Bible has many inspirational elements that artists can draw on. Artists that work with biblical scenes find ways of reaching all of us through the subjects they paint, even though the subject has been painted by others thousands of times before. Artists can be inspired through biblical paintings, or any other thing that inspires them. It is important that the artist feel inspired by anything and whatever it is that he finds inspiring he will be able to transpose those feelings into his work. Examples of these paintings can be viewed in the works of Michelangelo's *Martha and Mary Magdalene* (figure i), (Mathew 27:56, Luke 10:38-42, Luke 24:8-12, Mark 15:33-41, John 19:28-42) and Paolo de Mattie's *The Triumph of the Immaculate* (figure ii) are paintings inspired by religious subject matters.

Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden's emotional works usually focused on religious themes, and he is known for his inventive, dynamic compositions. In *Descent from the Cross* (figure iii), he has placed the drama on a flat, gold background and compressed the figures into a shallow pictorial space, bringing the action of the scene to the forefront. Rogier van der Weyden (1399-1464), Flemish painter, was the leading artist of the mid-15th century, known principally for his sensitive, deeply moving renderings of religious themes.



Figure I, Artist: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio Title: Martha and Mary Magdalene, Medium: Oil on Canvas Size: Unknown Year: Unknown, Source: Source Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990): National Gallery of Ireland



Figure ii, Artist: Paolo de Matteis, Title: The Triumph of the Immaculate, Medium: Oil on Canvas, Size: Unknown Year: Unknown, Source: Flinck, G. (2014), Encyclopedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite



Figure iii, Artist: Rogier van der Weyden Title: Descent from the Cross, Medium: Oil on Oak Panel Size: 220cm x 262cm Year: 1435, Source: Microsoft Encarta 2009 (DVD). Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

- i. highlight the importance of Biblically inspired paintings of the Renaissance era;
- ii. showcase the salient paintings of Italian, Dutch, and Spanish Renaissance artists that depict biblically inspired themes;

- iii. prod the imagination of contemporary Nigerian artists into seeking for imagery from the Bible for their artistic oeuvre.

Sacred Themes

Artistic imagery using religious inspirations and motifs is often intended to uplift the mind to the spiritual. The art and religious themes focus on interpretation of paintings that are of sacred subjects, nearly all of which are Christian. Christianity eventually became the predominant power shaping European culture after classical antiquity, inspiring artists to evoke the nature of these sacred mysteries in visual terms. Biblical texts, commentaries and apocryphal stories inspired artists to create these objects of devotion, yet the translation of the word into painting often raised difficult problems. Artists were faced with challenges of suggesting, in visual terms or forms, the nature of Christian mysteries such as miracles performed by the Saints as well as other profound theological beliefs and debates.

These images were made to inspire and strengthen faith through public and private devotion in churches or domestic settings. The images are now displayed in an entirely different context in the gallery. They are now widely accessible to the public and the power of their narratives and beauty of their execution speak to believers and non-believers alike. The paintings reviewed are from the collections of the National Gallery of Ireland which was established in 1853. The Gallery has an extensive, representative collection of Irish paintings and is also notable for its Italian Baroque and Dutch masters painting. The National Gallery of Ireland is located in the heart of Georgian Dublin of which it has about 14, 000 artworks including about 2,500 oil paintings, 5,000 drawings etc. The aspiration to establish a permanent collection of old masters art works in Ireland can be traced back at least to the second half of the eighteenth century (Keaveney, Wynne, Harivel and Croke, 1990).

Biblically Inspired Italian Paintings

The acquisition of Italian art in the National Gallery of Ireland includes a number of quality copies of acknowledged masterpieces of religious paintings that were derived from Biblical stories and subjects for painting expression. A good number of some Italian artists were inspired by religious scenes in the Bible. In the painting titled *David and Goliath* (figure vii) by Orazio Gentileschi who has translated the scene of the beheading of Goliath by the boy David (1 Samuel 17:41-54, 2 Samuel 21:19). Figure viii is a painting executed by Giovanni Lanfranco titled: *The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes*. The story was drawn from the Holy Bible (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:1-14). In this painting, Jesus is seen among the crowd portrayed in red and blue robes. Figures ix and x are paintings by Felice Ficherelli titled *Lot and his Daughters* (Genesis 19:30-38) and Lodovico Mazzolino's titled *Pharaoh and his Host Overwhelmed in the Red Sea*, (Exodus 14:26-29, Hebrew 11:29) are clear stories derived from religious scenes. These paintings are all executed in oil paints on canvas.

The *Wedding at Cana* (figure iv), one of the famous stories in the bible, was painted by Paolo Veronese executed in oil on canvas in 1563 for the Benedictine Monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. It depicts the Biblical wedding feast at Cana where according to the New Testament; Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water into wine. The Biblical story is set during Veronese's time although some figures are depicted wearing antique clothing. Figure V is *San Zaccaria Altarpiece* by Giovanni Bellini. It is a painting that depicts the Virgin Mary with the Baby Jesus in the centre. They are depicted with four Christian Saints; St. Peter the Apostle, St. Catherine of Alexandria at the left, St. Gerome, St. Lucy at the right and an angel playing a violin at the foot of the altar. Figure VI is another story in the Bible titled *Salome with the head of Saint John the Baptist* by Bernardino Luini. It was painted in the first half of the 16th Century. The painting depicts a scene from the Gospel of Mark, when Salome demands the head of John the Baptist for having danced before King Herod and his royal guests. The King, who promised to give her anything she wants, reluctantly agreed and beheaded John the Baptist in the prison. Luini's painting shows the moment when her request is met. Below are artworks based on biblical stories.



Figure IV, Artist: Paolo Veronese Title: The Wedding Feast at Cana, Medium: Oil on Canvas Size: 262inch x 390inch Year: 1563, Source: Source Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990): National Gallery of Ireland



Figure v, Artist: Giovanni Bellini Title: Madonna with Saint, Medium: Oil on Canvas Size: 4.92m x 2.32m Year: 1505, Source: Richardson F. L (2009) Giovanni Bellini. Scale/Art Resource. Microsoft Encarta



Figure vi, Artist: Bernardino Luini Title: Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist, Medium: Oil on Canvas Size: Unknown Year: Unknown, Source: Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure vii, Artist: Orazio Gentileschi Title: David and Goliath, Medium: Oil on Canvas Size: 185.5cm x 136cm Year: 1610, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure viii, Artist: Giovanni Lanfranco Title: The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, Medium: Canvas Size: 229cm x 426cm Year: 1620, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure ix, Artist: Felice Ficherelli Title: Lot and his Daughters, Medium: Canvas Size: 159cm x 176cm Year: 1650, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure x, Artist: Lodovico Mazzolino Title: Pharaoh and his host overwhelmed in the Red Sea, Medium: Panel Size: 124cm x 157cm Year: 1521, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland.

Biblically Inspired Dutch Paintings

Among the Dutch artists, painting inspirations were also drawn from religious themes like *Christ in the Synagogue at Nazareth*, (figure xiii), (Luke 4:31-37, Mark 1:21-28) a painting executed by Gerbrandt Van den Eeckhout who was a poet that mastered several media including metalwork, etching and drawing, but is perhaps best known for his biblical themes and genre. In figures xiv and xv are paintings by Ferdinand Bol, titled *David's Dying Charge to Solomon* (1Kings 2:1-9) and Govert Flinck's *Bathsheba's Appeal* (2 Samuel 11:1-26), allegorical subjects solely inspired by Biblical stories.

Figure xi is *The Last Judgment* by Hieronymus Bosch. The painting consists of three panels. The left panel depicts the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve being tempted by the serpent on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The central panel depicts the Last Judgment with Jesus on the throne as the Judge of the world. The right panel depicts the Hell which is thematically very similar to the central one. But instead of Jesus, it includes the Satan who receives the souls of the damned. Figure xii is *Tower of Babel* by Pieter

Brueghel the Elder. It was painted in 1563 and like its name suggests, Brueghel's painting depicts the Biblical tower of Babel which was built by the unified humanity with an aim to reach the heaven. Angered by the building project, God decided to prevent it by scattering the people throughout the world and confusing their languages so that they were unable to return and continue from where they left.



Figure xi Artist: Hieronymus Bosch Title: The Last Judgment, Medium: Unknown Size: Unknown Year: 1505 Source: Masters C. (2008), Renaissance. London Merrell Publishers Limited



Figure xii, Artist: Pieter Brueghel the Elder Title: The Tower of Babel Medium: Oil on Wood Size: 144cm x 155cm Year: 1563, Source: Masters C. (2008), Renaissance. London Merrell Publishers Limited



Figure xiii, Artist: Gerbrandt Van Den Eeckhout Title: Christ in the Synagogue at Nazareth, Medium: Canvas Size: 61cm x 79cm Year: 1658, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivell & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure xiv, Artist: Ferdinand Bol Dordrecht Title: David's Dying Charge to Solomon, Medium: Canvas Size: 171cm x 230cm Year: 1643, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure xv, Artist: Govert Flinck Kleve Title: Bathsheba's Appeal, Medium: Canvas Size: 105.5cm x 152.6cm Year: 1651, Source Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990): National Gallery of Ireland
Biblically Inspired Spanish Paintings

Spanish artworks inspired by Biblical subject matter include works by Juan Fernandez de Navarrete 'EL Mudo' titled *Abraham and the Three Angels* (figure xi) (derived from Genesis 18:1-15). It captures the visit of the three angels to Abraham's house sent by God according to the Holy Scriptures. The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the younger of two brothers who takes his inheritance, spends it on loose living, repents, then returns to his father and brother. He is depicted in the landscape of 17th century Seville. This chronological set of paintings is executed on six stretched different canvases in oils by Bartolome Esteban Murillo. They are titled *The Prodigal Son Receiving His Portion* (figure xii), *The Departure of the Prodigal Son*, (figure xiii), *The Prodigal Son Feasting*, (figure xiv), *The Prodigal Son Driven Out*, *The Prodigal Son Feeding Swine*, (figure xv), and *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, (figure xvi) (Luke 15:11-32). He was a Baroque religious painter of 17th century; Spain is noted for his idealized, sometimes precious manner of painting. These chronological set of paintings are a systematic translation of the story of the Prodigal Son from the start to the finish in visual terms. These paintings are inspired by Biblical subject matter.



Figure xvi, Artist: Juan Fernandez de Navarrete ‘El Mudo’, Title: Abraham and the Three Angel, Medium: Canvas Size: 286cm x 238cm Year: 1576, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure xvii, Artist: Bartolome Esteban Murillo Title: The Prodigal Son Receiving His Portion, Medium: Canvas Size: 104.5cm x 134.5cm Year: 1660s, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure xviii, Artist: Bartolome Esteban Murillo Title: The Departure of the Prodigal Son, Medium: Canvas Size: 104.5cm x 134.5cm Year: 1660s, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure xix, Artist: Bartolome Esteban Murillo Title: The Prodigal Son Driven out, Medium: Canvas Size: 104.5cm x 134.5cm Year: 1660s, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure xxii, Artist: Bartolome Esteban Murillo Title: The Prodigal Son Feeding Swine, Medium: Canvas Size: 104.5cm x 134.5cm Year: 1660s, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure xx, Artist: Bartolome Esteban Murillo Title: The Return of the Prodigal Son, Medium: Canvas Size: 104.5cm x 134.5cm Year: 1660s, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland



Figure xxi, Artist: Bartolome Esteban Murillo Title: The Prodigal Son Feasting, Medium: Canvas Size: 104.5cm x 134.5cm Year: 1660s, Source: Keaveney, Wynne, Havivel & Croke (1990) National Gallery of Ireland

Conclusion

In this paper emphasis has been placed on biblically inspired paintings produced essentially during the Renaissance period by Italian, Dutch and Spanish painters. This is to show the rich array of possibility of representing bible stories in the painting ideology of painters. It is possible for contemporary Nigerian painters to seek for inspiration from the bible too as a way of creating imagery that is indigenous to African cultural beliefs and close to the realities of the day. The situation where Christian imagery is solely based on a Western perspective is not necessarily progressive for the belief system of the Christian church in Nigeria. For the sake of academic exercise too, contemporary artists can as well get inspiration from biblical stories to enrich their repertoire of artistic collections and search for spiritual upliftment.

Faust (1988) opines that there are no limits to artistic creativity today. It is because of this limitless search for creativity that artists keep experimenting with different subjects, objects, media and techniques to express themselves on religious issues, cultural issues, socio-political issues, and economic problems. The use of Biblical stories and events and translating them into visual terms creates a relationship between religion and painting. The exercise will create a new vocabulary in painting in Nigeria.

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