

THE MYSTICAL IMAGE IN RENAISSANCE ART

I SHALL be using the term mystical imagery to signify something more specific than imagery with allegorical, emblematical, or some obscure meaning. The mystical image in Renaissance art to which I refer stems from the doctrine of the Christian mystics who professed direct intercourse with the divine spirit, and a knowledge of God and of spiritual things unattainable by the process of the natural intellect, and therefore incapable of being completely analyzed or explained. The mystical image in Christian art is the representation of some aspect of the act of spiritual insight, or of the direct visual relationship between a saintly person and the divine spirit. It is the poetry, not the prose, of religious art.

There are certain basic problems involved in the artistic representation of mystical imagery. One is the problem of representing transcendental experience by means of familiar natural phenomena such as light and color or through familiar objects such as the human figure, clouds and trees. Second is the problem of making public a private experience originally hidden from the mass of men. Third is the necessity of representing this type of experience secondhand or vicariously through the agency of an artist who interprets the experience. Finally, due to the lapse of time between the life of the saint, canonization, and the creation of works of art which describe or celebrate the mystical events in the life of the saint, the subject of the painting or sculpture is essentially the mythology of mysticism, a popularized or institutionalized interpretation of the original inspiration. While there is no inevitable antagonism between legend and illumination, the dichotomy does pose the problem of validity.

The development of mystical imagery in the Catholic art of the Renaissance was stimulated by, and to some extent formed by, four major influences.

If you will permit me to consider the work of Giotto and his followers as preparing for if not actually beginning the Renaissance style in Italian painting, then you will doubtless agree that one of the formative influences upon mystical imagery was the legend and spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. The impression which St. Francis made upon his world is strongly felt in the art of Giotto, his followers, and over a century later, in the Sienese artist Sassetta.¹ Their mystical imagery is gentle and restrained. Seraphic and divine visions experienced by Francis or his associates are described clearly and simply. The motivating energy is love rather than power. Their purpose in painting was essentially spiritual.² The great artists of the fourteenth century were the first to represent freely the personal visions of godly men.

The second influence was the impact of classical literature upon art, especially the visionary allusions of classical mythology. In Euripides' version of the story of Creusa and Ion, Athena appears before the mother and son as a radiant cloud-borne vision who helps them to understand their relationship and gives them her divine support.³ The *Metamorphoses* of Ovid recounts miraculous legends involving transformations of shape. The long series of stories consists to a large extent of tales of love and marriage between mortals and the gods. Ovid also describes the remarkable dreams of fair women. He possessed great power of imaginative vision. None of the Roman poets created a purely imaginary world with such spontaneous fertility of fancy, or wrote with such transparent lucidity, ease and directness. The *Metamorphoses* of Ovid was one of the most attractive of the recovered treasures of

The Mystical Image in Renaissance Art 87

antiquity, and its influence was strongly felt in the literature and pictorial art of the Italian Renaissance. Despite the worldly and sensuous character of the poems some of the devices and themes were transferred to Christian and mystical art.⁴

Florentine Neo-Platonism, a third major formative influence, not only called attention to the complexity of the human emotional system but to the possibility of its refinement and sublimation by seeking God through visions of physical beauty as well as by truth and goodness. In response to this philosophical outlook, artists represented the Virgin and the female saints as exceedingly fair women, but visions of fair women now symbolized the yearning of the soul toward eternity and the pathos of man's separation from the divine.

The father of Florentine Neo-Platonism was, of course, Marsilio Ficino, and it was his translation of the *Enneads* of Plotinus in 1492 that marks the dividing line between the naturalism of the early Renaissance and the idealism of the High Renaissance.⁵ Ficino, a priest, then a canon of the Cathedral of Florence, hoped that Plato would prove a means, as Aristotle had for St. Thomas and the Schoolmen, of saving the world for the Church. But his study of Plato led him to Plotinus who freely invoked the supernatural, and it was the philosophy of the latter who helped Ficino most to reconcile Christianity and the ancient philosophy; there was precedent for this because much of the thinking of Plotinus had already been absorbed into Christian dogma by Augustine. Ficino interpreted Plotinus as follows: Through some spiritual disaster man had become separated from the divine. Life lived without spiritual communication varies somewhere between the strangely unsatisfactory and the downright intol-

erable. The greatest human instinct is therefore to seek reunion with the glory from which we have been banished. This instinct is the instinct of divine love. This union of self with divine glory is the essence of mystical teaching.⁶

Ficino recommended a course in self-purification. It was part of the psychology of the Renaissance to assume that progress toward perfect union might be accomplished even during a mortal life. In effect this was a Christian sanction of the ideals of humanism and individualism.⁷ The good, the true, and the beautiful had their source in the divine, and emanating in the manner of light from their divine source would fall upon all things. By directing and refining the impulses toward the good, the true, and the beautiful already within themselves, men might hope, even during life, for temporary union or reunion with the divine, for the state of ecstasy, the capacity to stand outside oneself. The beautiful was obviously the most agreeable mode of seeking unification with the divine and was popularly pursued without reference to the companion virtues of goodness and truth. The Neo-Platonic theory of love and beauty was wonderfully popular with the Italians of the Renaissance and consequently misinterpreted with some frequency; but how fortunate we are that the artists of the High Renaissance actually worshipped beauty and believed it to be not only a reality but a reality emanating from God and ennobling in its effect.

Renaissance Neo-Platonism influenced art through the mystical interpretation of number and geometry. Thus, for example, Palladio could confidently state that the circular form was most appropriate for the plan of a church because the circle was the most perfect, that is, most divine, form.⁸ Neo-Platonism also tended to identify God with light, and representations of Jesus and the Virgin Mary are almost

The Mystical Image in Renaissance Art 89

without exception the source of pictorial light in Renaissance painting.

But the High Renaissance preoccupation with ideal beauty which resulted in such serene and sometimes worldly mystical imagery was jolted and destroyed by the Reformation, by the founding of the Society of Jesus in 1540, the Universal Inquisition established in 1542, and the Councils of Trent beginning in 1545. Catholic art lost its dignified, mundane and rather static character. Artists were commissioned to create works with powerful dramatic impact and emotional intensity. Dynamic action became an artistic value as well as a theological one. Jesuit theologians placed emphasis upon free will and the human agency in the attainment of salvation. Illumination through ecstatic religious experience was celebrated in art, most notably of course, in the scenes of ecstasy and glorification of St. Theresa and St. Ignatius. The audacious Baroque artists went so far as to present to the individual dazzling views into heaven such as we see on the ceiling of Sant'Ignazio in Rome, and the personal anguish of St. Theresa's ecstatic vision as interpreted in sculpture by Bernini.

In its treatment of the mystical image the art of the Counter Reformation represents a significant departure from the art of didactic, rational Scholasticism; it seems incredible that both should stem from the same Church. Individual emotional participation supplants collective exposition in response to a significant theological reorientation. By a survey of representative examples let us observe and review the changing process of mystical imagery. Our story of the representation of a mystical vision as it appears to a saintly person begins early in the fourteenth century and grows out of the literature on the life of St. Francis.

Giotto's fresco showing the death of St. Francis, located in

the Bardi Chapel of Santa Croce, Florence, is generally recognized as a masterpiece of art from several points of view: the carefully balanced composition, the simplicity and solidity of the figures, the convincing sincerity of emotional expression, the superb economy of means, and the harmony of its color. But the very force of these virtues may have overshadowed the fact that here is one of the earliest examples of the convincingly realistic representation of a mystical vision by a godly man. The smallest and most insignificant of the monks, the one who appears just above the head of the recumbent St. Francis, raises his eyes heavenward and sees the soul of Francis ascending in glory surrounded by angels. Giotto allows this aspect of the scene to take precedence over the verification of the stigmata by Jerome, knight of Assisi, who appears in the center foreground, the leftmost of the three kneeling figures.

Above the arch by which the Bardi Chapel is entered is a fresco panel by Giotto depicting St. Francis receiving the stigmata. The facial expression of the saint betrays little of the pain mingled with joy which must have accompanied the experience; he is tense and transfixed as he beholds in the sky a seraph resembling the crucified Christ who inflicts upon Francis the marks of the five wounds. All the texts down to the *Fioretti* give a singularly spiritual account of the stigmatization, saying that "this vision was vouchsafed the saint that he might understand that not by bodily martyrdom, but by mental burning, was he to be changed into the exact likeness of Christ crucified."⁹

Apocalyptic scenes are sometimes representations of mystical visions. In the late fourteenth-century tapestry of the Cathedral at Angers, Jean de Bruges has depicted the scribe of the Apocalypse rather casually observing and recording

The Mystical Image in Renaissance Art 91

the assumption of the seven souls. The artist has adapted to tapestry the prevailing Franco-Flemish style of manuscript illustration. It is superbly decorative in line and pattern but rather detached and impersonal as the representation of a mystical experience when compared with the work of Giotto.

A century and a quarter after the Giotto frescos, the Sienese artist Sassetta interpreted the life of the gentle mystic St. Francis with a fascinating combination of naïveté and elegance. In a panel, originally executed as an altar painting but now in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, a Franciscan vision is enacted with convincing three-dimensionality. One day, when the saint and his physician were walking on the road to Siena, Francis encountered three maiden forms in poor raiment who saluted him with the words, "Welcome, Lady Poverty," and suddenly disappeared. St. Bonaventure in his characteristically stiff and formal literary style comments: "The brethren not irrationally concluded that this apparition imparted some mystery pertaining to St. Francis, and that by the three maidens were signified Chastity, Obedience and Poverty, the beauty and sum of evangelical perfection, all of which shone with equal and consummate lustre in the man of God, though he made his chief glory the privilege of poverty."¹⁰

Sassetta has represented the event in two scenes within one picture. The three maidens are shown confronting the saint and then disappearing in flight. Poverty, dressed in brown, occupies the central position, and it is poverty who turns her head back during flight for a last look at her mystic bridegroom.

Vittore Carpaccio, who painted the Dream-Vision of St. Ursula in 1495, worked in a curiously archaistic style resembling the somewhat earlier Flemish and German schools

of oil painting. He seems to have ignored or been oblivious of the contemporary figural achievements of Leonardo although we find in his art the abundant space of his contemporary Perugino. The latter observation would be illustrated more clearly by reference to other paintings in Carpaccio's Ursuline series. Pictorially there is no difference in treatment between the saint and the angel who appears in her dream. One may also observe this in the mystical marriage by Sassetta. It is typical of the fifteenth century mystical image. The angel is distinguished by being closest to the source of light, the open door, in the painting by Carpaccio.

Although there were many Ursuline legends during the Middle Ages, it was not until the Renaissance that a religious order was founded in her name. The earliest was founded by Angela Merici who, at the time of this painting, was a woman of twenty-five. The dream-vision portrayed by Carpaccio took place, according to Helentrude's eleventh-century account, after a powerful pagan prince demanded in marriage Ursula, Christian daughter of a minor British king. Ursula is told by the angel to ask for a three-year postponement of the marriage, time enough to organize a large company of Christian virgins. This company became noted for its austerity and vigorous exercises. These spiritual Amazons escaped from Britain, following their bridegroom Christ to the East. During their travels they met with many adventures and finally were martyred by the Huns.

Raphael's St. Cecilia in the gallery at Bologna is a woman of physical beauty commensurate with her spiritual perfection. Her attributes, musical instruments, are delineated with realistic precision. The eyes of the saint are directed heavenward. She is the only one of the company to see a vision of singing angels. She recognizes that the source of the beauty

The Mystical Image in Renaissance Art 93

of music is divine. A significant innovation in modelling is observable in this painting. The heavenly vision is represented bathed in light of obscure origin. The figures of the angels are not clearly defined but are modelled by a soft, hazy atmosphere, like a thin cloud. Raphael's philosophical mind places a careful organization of beautiful and saintly people between the lowly, haphazard collection of the instruments of creative endeavor and divine inspiration above.

Another example of High Renaissance mystical imagery is Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* of 1518. There are similarities with Raphael's *St. Cecilia*. The Virgin is the embodiment of perfect feminine beauty. Titian, like Raphael, has divided his picture into three zones; the three zones of organization are earthly, heavenbound, and the sacred presence of the Almighty. However, the upper zones are united so as to constitute a circle, symbol of divine perfection. In the earthly zone all is confusion and the action somewhat violent. Shadows all but wipe out the faces of some people. The crowd looks or points upward; they can see the miraculous assumption but cannot understand it. The Virgin is drawn upward not by the cloud or host of angels but by the intangible power of God. She is radiant with light.

For the great sixteenth-century Venetian artist, Tintoretto, light was one of the chief plastic means and he used it in unique and creative ways. Although he adhered to the High Renaissance identification of ideal physical beauty with divine grace his lighting effects and compositions are unusual. The figures of his *Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine to the Child Christ* are modelled with strong contrasts of light and shade suggesting a supernatural source of light. The setting is not of this world. It defies explanation in terms of ordinary human experience. The Madonna and Child are seated upon

a throne approached by steps. A great parted curtain reveals a misty landscape. The ground plane is not defined. Yet the observer is encouraged by every pictorial device to feel himself a part of the event. The absence of pictorial limits, that is, the seeming arbitrary location of the frame which cuts off our view of some of the figures, is the strongest means to achieve this effect.

The Sibylline Oracles of the Apocrypha contained polemics against visions, but these could hardly restrain the Renaissance imagination from taking up and exploiting this means of asserting the significance of Christian prophecy in ancient Roman, Greek, and Eastern history. A cloudborne vision of the Madonna and Child is revealed to Augustus by a sibyl in a rather pompous and melodramatic way in a painting in Siena attributed to the architect Peruzzi. But the sibyls created by Michelangelo are able to convey the force of revelation without dramatic gestures. Michelangelo's Delphic Sibyl in the Sistine Chapel looks out into space. Her prophetic, occult power is expressed by her face and form, rather than overtly demonstrated in the Peruzzi manner. Yet there is no question of the intention. She is truly in ecstasy, outside herself; her motion is arrested, her jaw drops and her lips are slightly parted as the coming of Christ is miraculously revealed to her. Through the expressive power of the figure the observer gains some insight into the intensity of religious experience.

The great master of mystical imagery in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, El Greco, divided his painting of the Burial of the Count of Orgaz into two interrelated zones. The lower zone is miraculous in nature. Herein is enacted the legend of Toledo. At the burial of the good count, St. Stephen and St. Augustine appear and gently lower the

The Mystical Image in Renaissance Art 95

body of Orgaz into his coffin. This is witnessed by a monk, a page, and the assembly of dignified Spanish noblemen. The priest, however, looks toward heaven where the Great Intercession is revealed to him in the form of a vision. An angel supports the soul of Orgaz represented as a semi-transparent form, resembling a child. To either side of Christ in judgment we see the Virgin Mother and John the Baptist. Behind the Virgin we see the figure of St. Peter, signified by his keys. The lower zone is rendered with normal light and color, but the heavenly vision is pervaded by a strange bluish-white light which El Greco used most effectively.

My last two examples are drawn from seventeenth-century Italy. Bernini's sculptured interpretation of the ecstatic Vision of St. Theresa and Fra Pozzo's ceiling for the Church of St. Ignatius in Rome are superb examples of Baroque art. While they are distinctly different forms of art they have much in common as mystical visions. Both transcend their material substance. Both invite as completely as possible the direct participation of the spectator. They are designed to make us feel that we possess the vision. Everything about the Cornaro Chapel where Bernini's statue is located is designed to heighten the effect of the sculptural representation and fortify its emotional impact. The same is true of Pozzo's illusionistic ceiling of Sant'Ignazio. Here the actual church architecture merges with simulated architecture painted on the ceiling in perspective. Then the ceiling plane is painted away and we see instead a view of the sky, not an ordinary sky but the celestial region of angels where St. Ignatius is received into Paradise.

Baroque ceiling paintings of this type are unsurpassed masterpieces of illusionism. As mystical images they repre-

sent something of an anomaly. They are mystery pageants of a highly theatrical type, collective rather than personal experiences.

We have seen how Renaissance mystical imagery underwent stages of development, beginning with Giotto's attempts to describe pictorially the reaction of a simple, pious man in the presence of a vision; increasing realism; the impact of the cult of physical beauty, and finally the zealous, ecstatic imagery of the Baroque.

The Renaissance artist accepted the challenging problem of representing, realistically and convincingly, saintly persons in the atmosphere as well as the act of worship, in their sense of oneness with the divine, in ecstasy or harmony with God. Modern religion, materialism, science, and preoccupation with technological, military, and social questions constitute barriers between us and the Renaissance artist, yet there exists today a strong current of opinion that finds a relationship between artistic and religious experience. We find this in the writings of the artist Kandinsky, or the philosophers Bergson, Maritain, and T. M. Greene. Malraux goes so far as to say that in our day it is art, not religion, which has absolute validity. No matter what our present-day viewpoint may be, the mystical image in Renaissance art is one chapter in a book which will never be finished.

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NOTES

1. The case for the greater importance of Sassetta in this connection is presented by Bernard Berenson in *A Sienese Painter of the Franciscan Legend* (New York, 1909).
2. Cf. Basil de Selincourt, *Giotto* (London and New York, 1905) *passim*.

The Mystical Image in Renaissance Art 97

3. Euripedes, *Ion*, translated with notes by Hilda Doolittle Aldington (Boston and New York, 1937) pp. 122-132.
4. Note the illustrations which accompany *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologized, and Represented in Figures*, translated by George Sandys (Oxford, 1632). Here we see cloud-borne celestial beings radiating light, demons, and figures undergoing strange transformations.
5. See P. O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (New York, 1943) and the summary of Ficino's influence on Florentine art in *A History of Western Art* by John Ives Sewall (New York, 1953), pp. 649-654.
6. Sewall, *op. cit.*, p. 652.
7. *Loc. cit.*
8. Cf. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London, 1952), for a scholarly exposition of the relationship of number and geometry to architectural perfection during the Renaissance.
9. Berenson, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 36.