

Stairway to Heaven: Sacred Art, The Middle Ages, and The Threefold Spiritual Function of the Gothic Cathedral

By Adib Faiz

“Sacred art helps man to find his own centre, that kernel whose nature is to love God.”¹

- Frithjof Schuon -

In an excerpt from Fons Vitae’s documentary, *Beads of Faith*, Aisha Gray Henry sums up the traditional function of art: “In former times, there was no separation between the sacred and the profane. The arts, music, drama and literature, were not meant to entertain, but to instruct”.² The creative energy of a theocentric society was directed toward spiritual instruction and inner transformation. Nowhere is this clearer than in liturgical art, art connected to specific acts of worship mandated by a given religion. However, the question nonetheless arises: how exactly do works of sacred art bring about transformation? If a work has complex symbolism, what guarantee do we have that these symbols will be readily understood and assimilated by the masses? Moreover, sacred art is often created within and for specific times and cultures. How does the universality of the sacred impact particular historical circumstances?

This article examines the transformative impact of sacred art, with specific reference to the Gothic cathedral. I argue that the Gothic cathedral provided spiritual “instruction” to the society of its day via three levels or “modes”: didactic, non-didactic and experiential. While the didactic mode communicates easily intelligible stories and concepts, the non-didactic mode crystallises complex doctrines into concrete forms. The experiential mode is intimately tied to the notion of pilgrimage,

¹ Frithjof Schuon, *Art from the Sacred to the Profane: East and West*, ed. Catherine Schuon (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), 36-7.

² Fons Vitae, “Excerpts from “Beads of Faith”,” YouTube, August 20, 2009, 0:40-0:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5KkpwmowA> (accessed July 26, 2022)

as artistic elements are arranged to generate inner transformation. To give more focus to my analysis, I have examined the Gothic cathedral in a specific socio-historical context, focusing on the British Isles in the High Middle Ages. Particular attention is given to Canterbury and Lincoln Cathedral, as well as English cathedrals more generally.

Poor Man's Bible: The Didactic Mode

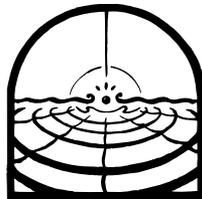
In its didactic mode, sacred art acts as a book, allowing the faithful to receive religious instruction through easily intelligible means. Though the emphasis upon knowledge may vary, all religions require their adherents to learn religious doctrine at a certain “baseline” level. Essential theology, basic morality, and key moments in religious history act as the doctrinal bedrock of a given religion, becoming the foundation for both the individual's spiritual journey and the worldview of the religious community. In addition to the more formal methods of religious instruction, sacred art becomes a cultural support for this didactic process, acting as a tool for learning and a means of disseminating ideas to the broader society. In a Western European context, this process took the form of “pictorial catechism[s] for the use of the unlettered”.³ From the Fall of Man to the Last Judgement, the friezes and painted walls of the Early Middle Ages made the Bible accessible for the illiterate laity. The St. Augustine Gospels provide an interesting example of this process in the Early Middle Ages, with the literal text being complemented by images from events such as the Passion of Christ.⁴ Romanesque architecture transposed this process to the architectural realm, rendering iconography on the actual building itself. The West Romanesque frieze of Lincoln Cathedral provides a clear example of this, with a panel depicting souls in hell making Christian eschatology intelligible to onlookers.⁵ Yet the friezes had clear limitations; relief sculptures could

³ Schuon, *Art*, 35.

⁴ Unknown author, 'AugustineGospelsFolio125rPassionScenes.jpg'. 6th Century AD, jpeg, 1736 x 1982 pixels. Folio 125r of the St. Augustine Gospels, (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 286), Scenes from the Passion. Cambridge, England, UK. Available from: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AugustineGospelsFolio125rPassionScenes.jpg> (accessed July 26, 2022).

⁵ Rock drum, 'Carving on exterior of Lincoln Cathedral (1).JPG'. 9 June 2013, jpeg, 5184 x 3456 pixels. Lincoln Cathedral, Lincolnshire, England, UK. Available from: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carving_on_exterior_of_Lincoln_Cathedral_\(1\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carving_on_exterior_of_Lincoln_Cathedral_(1).JPG) (accessed July 26, 2022).

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