

The Iconography of Nature: Fifth to Fifteenth Century

A paper for the Eleventh Theological Conference

published in *Replenish the Earth. The Christian Theology of Nature*, ed. Susan Harris, (Charlottetown: St. Peter Publications, 1992), 39-56.

Despite Our Lord's rebuke of Thomas, demanding to touch and see, that the blessed were those who believe not having seen, and the Pauline definition of faith which opposes faith and sight, we tend to accept the axiom that seeing is believing.¹ Partly because of the domination of communication by television, the character of our relation to nature, the problems with that relation, and the solutions seem obvious. I want to show you something about the Christian understanding of nature which can quite literally be seen. Moreover, it can be seen because, as an historical transformation of the understanding of nature, it is fundamentally simple. However, I hope that what you will see and understand will give to the questions before this conference the complexity they deserve. Our Christian relation to nature is what it is because, nature is, first of all, "hid with Christ in God,"² it has died and been resurrected with him. Second, we only have the modern relation to nature in which we are at home in the world as Christians and are not afraid of it, or afraid to use it, because the nature which has appeared out of its hiddenness in the heavenly places is God's, and Christ's, and so ours.³

The Christian transformation in how we see and understand nature and our place in it I propose to treat in two parts.⁴ First, we shall see what happened to the human view of space; namely, how modern western painting came to develop the perspective box in which objects are placed in an infinite space formed by locating them on planes erected horizontally on parallel lines which converge at a necessarily hidden, or invisible, point in the beyond. This development, which arises out of certain necessities of western Gothic sculpture and painting, was a discovery of the Italian renaissance and perfected by the Flemish renaissance painters. The slides shown in Part I, "Perspective and infinite space: making the world infinite," will illustrate this historical movement of western Christian culture.

Second, we shall try to understand what this bringing of the infinite into the natural world of humans means. Part II, "The Presupposition of an infinite nature: the union of the heaven and the earth," will explore the theological presuppositions of the Christian renaissance of the Fifteenth and early Sixteenth centuries under three headings. One aspect of this Christian renaissance is a new understanding of the Christian relation to non-Christian culture, especially, though not exclusively, the culture of the pagan Greeks and Romans. It is well known that the Christians of the modern renaissance greatly admired these pagan predecessors and thought of themselves as recovering the pagan golden age. But, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth century humanists, who, like their mediaeval predecessors, called themselves "modern" because they were Christians, also thought they had surpassed the ancients. So we must begin by appreciating both what the pagan Greeks and Romans accomplished and what lay beyond them.

I. Perspective and infinite space: making the world infinite.

(a) Ancient pagans: the representation of living historical individuals

Two of the many great accomplishments of our pagan Greek and Roman predecessors were the capacities to represent both life and historical actuality. The former is especially the achievement of the Greeks, the second of the Romans. It is

essential, however, to grasp that by the end of the western Roman Empire, our pagan forebearers had either lost these powers or they had ceased to engage their art.⁵

The kouros or standing youth from Greece in the seventh century before Christ is clearly derived from Egyptian models. Its rigidity and the lack of integration of the parts of the body into a rational living whole, that is, an internally purposive self-moving individuality, indicate this derivation. Our second slide, showing the famous Kritios Boy, possesses all the features lacking to the earlier kouros. The S curve of life, observed best from the back, wherein we see that the movement of the limbs is grounded in the human torso itself, makes this self-moving rational individuality apparent.⁶ The figure of Poseidon or Zeus (throwing either the trident or the thunder bolt) brings to perfection what was begun in the Kritios Boy. For here the integration of head and eyes with the tension of every aspect of the body as it prepares to launch the weapon, directs every feature of the physique toward a rationally conceived and visually engaged end or point. The capacity to represent rational life in this way, lost in about the Third century after Christ, was not regained for one thousand years. It reappeared in the Gothic sculpture of the Thirteenth century.

The Romans, for religious reasons connected with the cult of the family, were interested in and capable of representing the historical actuality of human persons. The idealization of human types, or the exploration of every detail of the grotesque and extreme in the human condition, which occupied the Hellenistic sculptors was not for them.⁷ The Roman republican aristocrat from the First century is content to come before us with his warts, scars and wrinkles.⁸ However, four centuries later this realism is world denying; even Philippus the Arab, briefly emperor in the mid-Third century, yearns for escape. It is all in the eyes. H.W. Janson puts it well:

[the] facial realism is as uncompromising as that of republican portraiture, but its aim is expressive rather than documentary: all the dark passions of the human mind - fear, suspicion, cruelty - suddenly stand revealed here, with a directness that is almost unbelievable. The face of Philippus mirrors all the violence of the time. Yet in a strange way it also moves us to pity; there is a psychological nakedness about it that recalls a brute creature doomed and cornered. Clearly, the agony of the Roman world was not only physical but spiritual.⁹

The eight foot high head of the Christian Emperor Constantine has subordinated the living historical individual to symbol. The eyes both would stare down all opposition and are intended to show that the Emperor, and therefore the Empire under his rule, are governed by the Divine reason or *Logos*, inwardly known. This inwardness is where Christian art properly begins.

(b) *The Christian absorption of nature and history into the Heavenly*

It is appropriate that we begin our study of Christian art in the dark underground of the catacombs. The primitive poverty of that secret community is not the only reason why its art is symbol and sign.¹⁰ If life is "hid with Christ in God", Christians securely live, "have their conversation"¹¹ in that spiritual realm toward which the pagan world fled. By the Sixth century when Christianity was officially established, protected and

supported, the circumstances had changed; all the wealth of the Empire was lavished on the church: its officials, organization, architecture and art, but the spiritual and theological principle of that art remained what is seen in the catacombs.

The truth of the church appears in the apse mosaic of St. Apollinare in Classe, the old harbour church of Ravenna.¹² Christ, in the midst of the four beasts of Ezekiel and the Johannine Apocalypse, rules twelve sheep who represent the apostles and their churches. Below, the bishop saint of Ravenna, its apostle, Saint Apollinarius, stands in the midst of twelve sheep representing the church on earth. Joining both is the mystical cross, its lower half in the midst of a garden both paradisaical and heavenly. On either side of the cross are Moses and Elijah. The cross is a symbol of the transfigured Christ: glorious but setting out for his crucifixion, he is eternal and mortal both. The whole of true reality is in the heavenly divine light. Its source is above with Christ and the Father but its shining embraces what is below. All reality, natural and historical, has through Christ, crucified and risen, its true life in that light.

San Vitale in Ravenna reveals this more fully.¹³ Through the golden alabaster windows of that octagonal edifice (the Hagia Sophia of Ravenna), a heavenly light ripples over the glass prisms of the mosaics, and so the heavenly beings live and move in our heavenly city on earth, the church building, the visible body of the Lord. On either side of the altar the Emperor Justinian and the Empress Theodora offer the paten and the chalice respectively. The Emperor is supported on one side by soldiers and bureaucrats, on the other by the Bishop of Ravenna, Maximian, a deacon (with the missal) and a sub-deacon (with the thurible). The bodies are hidden under their symbolic vesture. All life is within, shown through the eyes, the windows of the soul.

The offering made by the contemporary ruler and his empire does at the altar what Abraham offered to the Trinity, visiting him in the form of three angels, and what Abraham was prepared to sacrifice in his son and heir, Isaac, until God held back the sword and substituted the Lamb of God. The figures here appear in sufficient space to give them position relative to one another, but the true space where the present and past meet is the eternal golden light of heaven.¹⁴ Christ is its source, as Light of Light, above the altar where he is one with the eternal angels, San Vitalis, in whose honour this church is dedicated, and with the builder of the edifice itself "ecclesieus" [sic], i.e. Bishop Ecclesius. History and eternity meet in Christ enthroned on the orb of the world.

If the art of catacombs and of imperial churches has the same theological principle, this is equally so of Orthodox and Arian Christians. The dome mosaic of the Baptistery of the Arians in Ravenna, built by the Arian king in Rome rather than by the Orthodox emperor in Byzantium,¹⁵ shows Christ in the heavenly light, the dove above, John Baptist at his left, the god of the river Jordan on the right, giving light and life to the whole church represented by the twelve apostles. Christ here is the youthful beardless immortal god; the model is Dionysus. Nothing of human pathos or infirmity is to be seen in that figure or face. Only heavenly light and eternal life are known there.

The Christ of the "Way of the Cross" from the highest register of mosaics in Saint Apollinare Nuovo is no longer beardless, God is now represented through the philosopher, but equally human pathos and weakness are absent.¹⁶ Whether praying in Gethesemane, or captured and led away, or judged by Pilate, or even with his cross on the road to Calvary, Christ is king and God, the powerful ruler in our midst, the

actuality of the Kingdom of Heaven, the rule of God. As king of martyrs, he has the inwardness of the philosophical type, but his suffering humanity is still not apparent.

It is not until Byzantium in its own anguish and decline after the terrible devastations of the Iconoclastic Controversy and wars, not until weakened within so as to be subdued and attacked without, that the pathos of humanity begins to be seen in the Mother of God, of whom Scripture foretold that her heart would be pierced also,¹⁷ and in her son who suffered in our place on the cross. From the Tenth century, the art of Byzantium, first mosaics and then frescos, when mosaics became too expensive, begins to reveal the suffering of the Son of Man.¹⁸ The one who descending, harrows hell and raises Adam and Eve, is no longer the stiff king of San Apollinare Nuovo, but the moving fire of God whose light embraces the dark, beats the doors of hell under his feet, and, uniting God and man, raises our first parents from the death of sin, drawing even the rocks of hell unto his kingdom.¹⁹ The pathetic Madonna and son of God came from Byzantium to inspire Gothic painting in the Thirteenth century.²⁰ Before we explore how the reality of nature reappeared out of the golden heavenly light and symbol in the Gothic west as well as the Byzantine east, we must look at the Romanesque. For thus we shall see in the west another form of what we saw in Sixth century Ravenna.

(c) *The Romanesque: the union of figure and mass*

The theological principle which governs the art of the eastern Patristic church is that "God is light and in him is no darkness at all".²¹ Through the Word and Son of God, "the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not".²² The transformation within eastern Byzantine Orthodoxy makes it known that

the darkness hideth not from thee:
but the night shineth as the day:
the darkness and light are both alike to thee.²³

This is manifest insofar as the suffering, dying humanity of Christ appears within and emerges out of his ascended majesty. The depth of mortality, the finitude of nature, is seen to be contained in the humanity and natural creation which are sign and symbol of the fulness of life vibrant in the eternal golden light of heaven. Humanity and the natural creation having found their true being in the divine light, first assume only its immortal form, but then it appears that the whole reality of the finite and mortal is present in eternal light.

A similar theological principle governs western mediaeval Christianity but here we find the statement of its form in the first Epistle General of Peter:

Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house,
an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable
to God by Jesus Christ.²⁴

Humanity and nature have true reality by merging in the solidity of Christ our rock and hiding place, the sure refuge. Western mediaeval Christianity undergoes a

transformation similar to what we saw in eastern Orthodoxy when we moved from the art of Sixth century Ravenna to that of Byzantium in the Second millennium after Christ. But, in the west the movement is the change from Romanesque to Gothic forms.

St. Sernin in Toulouse shows us the round solid embracing forms of the western Romanesque. The windows are mere slits, appropriate to a fortress; the solidity of walls is everything. The interior comforts the Christian in a warm strength; the light is modified by the color of the massive walls. It makes their surrounding strength known. Figures are flattened into the walls.²⁵ Shoulders are pinned against them and are happy to be in the strength of the eternal rock, our fortress and refuge. The only possible facial attitudes are either direct frontality or profile. This may be seen in the Ascension of Christ on the South Portal of St. Sernin. The merging of the saints and Christ, our rock, is even more complete in the earlier face and pillar from St. Philibert in Tournus. The lions of Judah, Jeremiah and St. Paul are twisted into the forms required to make them the portal pillars of St. Pierre in Moissac.²⁶ Even the Christ in Majesty of Autun is stretched over his mandola, flattened into the wall while enthroned.²⁷ He is

the chief cornerstone, elect, precious: and he that
believeth on him shall not be confounded.²⁸

Complete unity and solidarity with that cornerstone is salvation.

(d) *The Gothic discovery of natural space: the division of figure and space*

The Romanesque window is a slit in a fortress wall: the strength of the wall is our comfort as Christ is he in whom "all fullness dwells".²⁹ The Sainte Chapelle is instead a glass crown, stone has become lace. So the wall is the moment where the pure white light of heaven becomes the multivariied diversity of God's goodness in creation. Descending, it is God coming to us; from our side, the building is an opening to heaven, a way up. Gothic architecture is for light and lightly rising. At Lincoln the vault shows us the lines by which the weight is carried off the walls so that all can ascend.³⁰

Chartres shows us the transformation between Romanesque and Gothic.³¹ The West, or Royal, Portal belongs to the mid-Twelfth Century and is Romanesque. Christ confronts us in his mandola, pinned into the wall of the tympanum, he gazes on us like the Pharaoh gods of Egypt or Constantine in the Fourth century. The biblical figures of the jamb statues are pillars. No space separates the persons from the pillars, elongated and rigid, they are the living stones of the spiritual temple indistinguishable in principle from the twisted Jeremiah of the portal pillar at Moissac.

But the North and South porches belong to the Gothic style in which Chartres was rebuilt following the great fire. The body of the Blessed Virgin turns so that she can converse with her crowned son in heaven, and he and the angels have emerged from the wall to communicate with her. The jamb statues have assumed the bulk and proportion of living human individuals. They stand in front of the pillars and over each of them is a canopy to show that they have emerged from the sacred solid space having taken a portion of it with them in which they retain the heavenly reality by and in which they can live and move. They can thus, like Mary and Jesus above them, turn toward one another and communicate. In the figures from just a little later in Strasbourg, the angels from the Judgment Column in the North Transept and the

figure of blind Synagogue from the Porch, we see at last again, after a millennium, the S curve of life.³² The body, alive in the sacred space, shows its self-moving power by integrating the movement of limbs, head and eyes in the opposed and balanced rhythms of a single body. Nowhere are the possibilities for sacred narrative, feeling, and effective and affecting communication, which this Gothic naturalistic realism allows, shown better than in Nicola Pisano's pulpit at Siena. We must be touched by the communion of Mary and Elizabeth in the Visitation there portrayed.³³

Gothic painting begins from the sense for human pathos to which Byzantine fresco had brought art. This is evident in Cimabue's "Madonna Enthroned" and even more sweetly, powerfully and effectively in the "Maesta" of Duccio at Siena. Meister Bertram reminds us of all that is alive in the golden light of heaven transferred from Byzantium to Gothic Europe. But with Giotto, the naturalism of this feeling for humanity and nature combines with the separation of figure from mass which had taken place in Gothic architectural sculpture. The Madonna has acquired sculptural bulk, she is not simply on a throne but in a sacred space, her heavenly space, in which she lives and moves. The angels surrounding her are not just above and around but recede into the space which the room she occupies makes. So also Giotto's "Crucifixion" from the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi gives us solid sculptured figures moving, turning, living, communicating in the blue light of God's kingdom.³⁴ The "Annunciation" of Melchior Broederlam and the "Battle of San Romano" of Paolo Uccello show the first unsuccessful attempts to join the spaces in which the figures live and to extend those spaces into one cube.³⁵ Only when the space of the figures acquires the infinity of heaven will this be done successfully. Doing it makes Renaissance painting.

(e) *The Renaissance: "correct" perspective and infinite space*

Colossians asserts of the Christ in whom "all things were created" and "by whom all things consist", "the beginning," and also the crucified and "firstborn from the dead", that "in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily".³⁶ Initially this is seen so far as because of him everything made and redeemed by God lives in his heavenly light or is a living stone in his immortal body. But the development both within Byzantine Christian art and also from Romanesque to Gothic manifests that it is the very living and historical individuality which disappeared at the end of pagan Greek and Roman culture which has been resurrected in the Christian heaven. This now reappears. It appears with greater depth. The historical humanity has felt and endured the pain of death. The space in which natural creatures live is the heavenly reality. The creatures are infinitely grounded. Christ, "the image of the invisible God" is "the firstborn of every creature". They are all in him. By him "all things consist".³⁷ Thus, when the created individuals are joined together, the space they constitute is infinite. The natural world of Christians is constituted out of the heavenly reality. The natural individuals of creation are located in an infinite space. This is the conclusion of western Gothic theology, architecture and art. It remains for the Renaissance to solve the artistic problems of this situation and to represent it visually. The Italians do this by creating the perspective box in which figures can be placed in infinite space. The Flemish painters show this infinity both on the largest scale and microscopically.

Masaccio clearly takes up from what Giotto accomplished.³⁸ The figures in the golden heavenly light have the sculptural bulk of natural self-moving individuals. But,

beyond Giotto, they are located in one space. This space meets the one we occupy immediately but it potentially recedes into infinity - even if we see no farther than the back of the room in which the Madonna and Child are enthroned. The angels are mid-way between heavenly flying spirits and earthly musicians. When the Blessed Mother is placed within the loins of her own mother, Saint Anne, we perceive that:

... glory dwells in the land ... righteousness and peace
have kissed each other. Truth springs out of the earth
and righteousness looks down from heaven.³⁹

This union of earth and heaven, so far as earthly creatures retain their natural individuality and life while conformed to perfect mathematical forms and harmonies, and humans and nature are capable of being represented in a space continuous with ours but potentially infinite is what makes Christian Renaissance art. We see this in the "Annunciations" of Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi. Notice in the second how the figures conform to the arc of a circle and are perfect in their balance and harmony though they are located in an earthly garden and a room "made with hands".⁴⁰ Piero della Francesca's "Ideal City" uses circles, squares, and triangles: "perfect" forms to realize the heavenly Jerusalem on earth.⁴¹

When we move to Flanders, two developments in art explain further what Christians had come to know about the nature which had emerged from Christ "the firstborn of every creature", creator and preserver of all.⁴² First, we see that the space which meets ours at the foot of the carpet in the "Madonna" of Canon George van der Paele extends beyond the figures in the apse to a world indicated by the light of the windows. In the Madonna of the Chancellor Rolin we see that world, and the infinity of the point at which the converging parallels meet has become the grey of the horizon where sky, water and earth are one.

These two "Madonna's" of Jan van Eyke exhibit the other feature also seen in the first landscape in modern western painting: the "Adoration of the Lamb" from the Altarpiece of St. Bavo's in Ghent. This is the attention to microscopic detail. Canon George van der Paele's Madonna exhibits the attention van Eyke gave to every hair and thread. A similar reverence for the particularity of every individual detail of each object is seen in Chancellor Rolin's "Madonna". But the consummation is to be seen in the "Adoration". For there the great and the small infinity meet. The infinite vanishing point is the horizon from which the Sun of Righteousness emerges, the place where heaven and earth are one. But equally every blade of grass, each petal of every flower, each leaf and branch of every tree, as well as the particularity of each human and sacred object is treated as a matter of infinite interest and importance. Each part of the creation has become holy, we have heaven in a handful of dust.

II The presupposition of an infinite nature: the union of the heaven and the earth

We should now be able to see what Christianity in the millennium between the Fifth and the Fifteenth centuries did to nature. The human and the heavenly worlds became one. The natural world was represented as infinite: both spacially and in each detail of each individual.⁴³ Thus Christians could be in the natural world and seeing its infinity

not depart from God. But why is this not idolatry? How can we continue to hear and affirm the truth of the Second Commandment:

Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.⁴⁴

and create art like this? Orthodox Jews cannot. The Eastern Orthodox cannot; for them, there must be no graven images and even paintings, their holy icons, must preserve the heavenly golden framework of light so that the natural world is never seen or conceived as infinite. What enables western Christendom to represent nature as infinite without confusing God and his creation? Briefly, the answer is that the natural creation became for western Christians the mirror in which the heavenly was seen. The more closely earth and heaven conformed, the more the divine could be known through the creation which Christ had shown to be God's and had united to the Father at the point of its most extreme opposition to Him in death and sin. The positive and negative sides of this come out in the three considerations of the second part of this paper.

(a) *Real Symbol or disguised symbolism*

The Christian piety of northern Europeans has always been and remains to this day very different from that of the people of the Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁵ In the Netherlands the demand of holiness was to bring together Christian devotion and ordinary life.⁴⁶ Robert Campin shows us the theological and spiritual principle here. His painting of St. Barbara nursing the infant Jesus takes the ordinary elements of daily life and turns them into symbols and pointers of heavenly things.

Behind Barbara we see a wicker fire screen. So that we can be sure this is its nature, the flame in the fireplace appears just over the top and the fire irons are on either side. But the round screen has become the halo of Saint Barbara and the Son of God. The saint sits on a bench, with lions of Judah on its corners and with an open book on its pillows. The bench is thus both throne and the rest of the contemplative soul, the true citizen of heaven. Barbara offers her breast to Jesus and at her left is a chalice. So the nurse's milk reminds us of the passion of our Lord, his shedding of his blood for us. Our giving of our lives in service, in particular the self-giving of the mother, becomes a participation in the sacrifice of Christ.

The "Merode Altarpiece" now in New York City carries out the same kind of programme in a more complete way. The donors, ordinary burghers, kneel in the garden of the Virgin's home in a Fifteenth century Flemish town. Lilies and roses ("I am the rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley"⁴⁷), symbols of Mary, dominate the garden.

On the other side of the main panel, we have Joseph painted working as a carpenter. Over his shoulder the town is seen so that the pious viewer associates his own work and Joseph's. He is making a mouse trap, a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross where he offered himself as the bait to Satan, that by the death of unconquerable immortal life, death might be trapped and destroyed.

Within we have again the bench become for pious eyes the throne. Mary the contemplative is meditating on Scripture but, because of her great humility, she sits on the floor only leaning against her throne. Between her and the angel Gabriel is the lily

of her pure conception, a theme emphasized by the hanging basin of water and the towel which are connected in a straight line with the lily and the Virgin's head. The message of the angel and the descent of the Son of God are signified by a ray of light streaming from the north. This is then the light of grace, since no natural light comes from the north. The light of grace overwhelms the light of the candle which goes out as the Light of Light enters human flesh.

"The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Jean Cenani" is a creation of the greatest master of Flemish renaissance painting, Jan van Eyke. With his greater sophistication and perfection of technique he carries forward the spiritual programme of Robert Campin. The painting is the record of marriage vows, which could be taken without a priest but needed a witness. The essentials of matrimony are all present: the raising of the hand in oath, the joining of the hands in union, the bed as sanctuary of consummation. The mirror shows the presence of a third party, the witness, and above the mirror the painter records that he was in fact that witness: "Jan van Eyke was here" it says in Latin. The lighted candle shows us the all seeing eye of God in whose presence the act truly takes place. Thus the painting is itself a real effective symbol: it is a marriage certificate. In this context the accidents of circumstance are also signs: the dog of fidelity, the oranges of fruitfulness, the clogs of purity, and so on.

Rogier van der Weyden, likely a student of Robert Campin, shared Campin's sense of drama with the luminous coloration technique of Jan van Eyke. The "Last Judgment" of the Hotel Dieu of the Chancellor Rolin in Beaune originally stood over the altar in the chapel at the end of the great bedroom of that hospital. There it consoled, comforted and warned the sick and dying. One element of this great work marks the progress of real symbol. Until this time, the scale of St. Michael weighed good deeds against evil deeds. So, the soul, heavy with many acts of charity, fell. Rogier van der Weyden has reversed this so that the direction of the good soul is what we would expect to see. The good soul, the elect, here rises toward heaven, the *peccata*, the sins of the damned, carry him down. The symbolic universe is made consistent so that we can see what is believed.

Renaissance Christians can be godly in an infinite world because every detail of that world has become a sign and symbol of the heavenly reality.

(b) *Union of the heavenly and the earthly*

(i) Incarnation

The Italians rejected the Flemish turning of the details of the ordinary into heavenly realities. For them grand conception was the realm of art. Piero della Francesca, whose "Ideal City" we have already seen, shows us the union of the heavenly and earthly as the truth of the Incarnation of the Son of God in the most direct and simple way.⁴⁸ The tree beside the Christ signifies what his baptism means. Beneath its branches we see the dove descending on the Christ, his feet are at its roots. The tree, uniting heaven and earth, shows us what Christ, approved of the Father, conceived by the Holy Ghost but born of woman, means for reality. Similarly, the meaning of the passion and atonement is shown by the pillar at the centre of the "Flagellation". The suffering of the Son of God unites heaven and earth, God and sinful humanity. The "Nativity" has Christ adored but lying on the very earth, while praised by angels who have lost their wings in order to become travelling minstrels. Similarly, as the Madonna of Leonardo da Vinci

embraces and holds in one gesture Jesus and John the Baptist, so the holy assembly is protected and sheltered by the rocks of the earth. As Mary, daughter of Eve, bore the Son of God, so earth holds heaven.

(ii) Neoplatonic syncretism: union and profanation

The Incarnation understood in this way has a negative side. The holy in our midst is in human hands and, because seen everywhere, is capable of profanation. Sandro Botticelli's Venus rising from the seafoam, his Spring goddess of the forest dance, his Madonna, and his Venus conquering Mars in the bed of Eros have all the same face.⁴⁹ The Madonna of Jean Fouquet is indistinguishable from a courtesan, in the negative and positive senses of that personage.⁵⁰

The profanation of the holy is what many saw in the Renaissance understanding of Christianity.⁵¹ Other papers will explain how western modernity attempted to correct the evil implicit in it.

(c) *The Encyclopedia*

Scholars often speak of the mediaeval synthesis of faith and reason and think it manifest in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, the great mediaeval cathedrals and the *Divine Comedy* of Dante.⁵² There is nothing comparable in the modern western Renaissance, but what comes closest we might well expect to find in painting. What Raphael accomplished in a single room of the Vatican palace, the *Stanza della Segnatura*, compares best to the works of Aquinas, Dante and the mediaeval cathedral architects.⁵³ There he placed beside one another philosophy, inspiration and faith.

Philosophy is depicted in the "School of Athens". All the sciences have their representatives and the two directions of thought are depicted at the centre. Plato points thought upward toward the heavenly reality. Aristotle bids it to know the world before it.

On Mount Parnasus, Apollo assembles music, poetry, dance and draws together the arts of imaginative inspiration. The truth is known here in symbol and sign, feeling and ecstasy.

The last of the three paintings in this room, the "Disputa", or consideration of the Blessed Sacrament, does more than show us another side of human life. Certainly it does that. Christian faith is not to be confused with philosophy or with poetry and imaginative inspiration. Faith descends from God the Father seen in the golden light at the top of the aura in which Christ is enthroned. The Holy Spirit descends from both on the sacrament in the Monstrance enthroned on the altar and the church beneath. Theology is not simply dependent on philosophy or the inspired imagination of the artist for its knowledge of the truth. But neither does it neglect them.

Indeed, the *Disputa*, so far as it unites reflective reason and inspired imagination, is the synthesis of the "School of Athens" and "Mount Parnasus". The three do not collapse into one another but they do come together. Heaven and earth unite in all three. Plato and Aristotle are harmonized. Christian Dante and the virtuous pagans, Virgil and Homer, meet on Mount Parnasus. The *Disputa* brings together through reflection on the sacramental miracle of the Eucharist, the earthly and heavenly church, visible symbol and

conceptual thought. The Christ in the golden aura shows the wounds of his suffering humanity. By these are God and man, heaven and earth, one. Nature is both dying and eternal in the Christ in whom it consists. To the manifestation and understanding of this union Christian art devotes itself.

July 4, 1991

W. J. Hankey

King's College

The Iconography of Nature: Fifth to Fifteenth Century

Slide Programme

I Perspective and infinite space: making the world infinite

(a) *Ancient pagan: the representation of living historical individuals*

Kouros (standing youth)	600 BC
Kritios Boy	480 BC (the S curve of life)
Poseidon (or Zeus)	460-50 BC
Portrait of a Roman aristocrat	1st century BC
Philippus the Arab	244-249 AD
Constantine (8 feet)	Early 4th century AD

(b) *The Christian absorption of nature and history into the Heavenly*

Christian symbols from the catacombs	2nd century AD
Saint' Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna	533-549
The Church in heaven and earth	
The Mystic Cross	
San Vitale, Ravenna	Mid 6th century
Justinian and Attendants	547 AD
Abraham Mosaic	
Christ with archangels, San Vitale and the bishop	
Arian Baptistery	450 AD
Dome Mosaic	
Saint' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna	c520 AD
Jesus in Gethsemane	
Jesus in the hands of wicked men	
Jesus before Pilate	
Jesus on the road to Calvary	
Jesus king of Martyrs	
Hagia Sophia, Byzantium	
Mosaic of the Theotokos	10th century
Mosaic of Christ	13th century
Karije Camii, Byzantium	
Anastasis and Harrowing of Hell	1312-20 AD

(c) *The Romanesque: the union of figure and mass*

St Sernin, Toulouse	1080-1120 AD
tympnum: Christ ascending	
St Philibert, Tournus	9th century
St Pierre, Moissac: South Portal	Early 12th century
Jeremiah (portal pillar)	1115 AD
Autun, tympanum: Christ in Majesty	1130-35 AD

(d) *The Gothic discovery of natural space: the division of figure and space*

The Sainte Chapelle	1203-1248
rose window	
Lincoln: South Transept, the vib vault,	13th century
Chartres	
West (Royal) Portal	1145-55
tympnum	
jamb statues, biblical personages	
North Portal	c1230
Triumph of the Virgin	
South Portal	1215-20
jamb statues	
Strasbourg	
Angel from Judgment Column	1225-30
Figure of Synagogue	1230
Nicola Pisano, Pulpit at Siena	1302-10
Nativity with Visitation	
Cimabue	1251-1302
Madonna Enthroned	1280-90
Duccio	c1250-1318
Madonna Enthroned from Maesta	1308-11
Meister Bertram	1345-1414
Creation of the Animals	1379
Giotto	1267-1337
Madonna Enthroned	1310
Crucifixion	
Melchior Broederlam	flourished 1381-1409
Annunciation	1392-99
Paolo Uccello, the Battle of San Romano	1455

(e) *The Renaissance: "correct" perspective and infinite space*

(i) Italy: Masaccio	1401-1428
Madonna and child	1426
Madonna and St. Anne with Child	
Fra Angelico	1400-1455
Annunciation	c1440

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Fra Filippo Lippi | 1406-1455 |
| Annunciation | |
| Piero della Francesca | 1420-1492 |
| Ideal City | |
|
(ii) Flanders: Jan van Eyke | |
| Madonna of Canon George van der Paele | flourished 1422-41 |
| Madonna of Chancellor Rolin | 1435 |
| The Ghent Altarpiece | completed 1432 |
| Adoration of the Lamb | |

II The presupposition of an infinite nature: the union of the heaven and the earth

- (a) *Real Symbol or disguised symbolism*
- | | |
|--|-----------|
| Robert Campin (died 1444), St. Barbara | |
| Merode Altarpiece | 1425-28 |
| Jan van Eyke | |
| Giovanni Arnolfini and Jean Cenami | 1443 |
| Rogier van der Weyden | 1399-1464 |
| Last Judgment, Hotel Dieu de Beaune | 1443 |
- (b) *Union of the heavenly and the earthly*
- (i) Incarnation
- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------|
| Piero della Francesca | 1420-1492 |
| Baptism of Christ | |
| Flagellation | |
| Nativity | |
| Leonardo da Vinci | 1452-1519 |
| Madonna of the Rocks | c1485 |
- (ii) Neoplatonic syncretism: union and profanation
- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| Sandro Botticelli | 1445-1510 |
| The Birth of Venus | c1480 |
| Primavera | |
| Madonna | |
| Venus and Mars with Eros | |
| Jean Fouquet | 1415/20-1480 |
| Madonna with angels | |
- (d) *The Encyclopedia*
- | | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Raphael | 1483-1520 |
| Stanza della Segnatura | 1510-1511 |
| School of Athens | |
| Mount Parnasus | |

Disputa

1. John 20.29, 2 Corinthians 5.7, Hebrews 11.1.
2. Colossians 3.3.
3. 1 Corinthians 3.23.
4. My treatment of both parts is largely dependent on Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting, Its Origins and Character*, being The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1947-48, 2 vol., Icon ed., (Harper and Row, New York, 1971), and Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, Icon ed., (Harper and Row, New York, 1972).
5. H.W. Janson, *History of Art, A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day*, 2nd ed., (Prentice Hall and Harry Abrams, New Jersey and New York), 1977, 98 ff., 166-185.
6. Janson, 99-102, 126-30.
7. J. Charbonneaux, R. Martin, F. Villard, *Hellenistic Art 330-50 BC*, (Thames and Hudson, 1973), 251 ff.
8. Janson, 166-68.
9. Janson, 174-75.
10. Janson, 194-95; K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, (Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 1979), xix-xxvi.
11. Philippians 3.20.
12. Weitzmann, 562.
13. Janson, 205-6; G. Bovini, *Ravenna Mosaics*, (Phaidon, Oxford, 1978), 39-48.
14. Panofsky, *Early*, i, 12-13.
15. Bovini, 23.
16. Otto G. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress, Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1987), 73-9.
17. Luke 2.35.
18. Janson, 209-11; David Talbot Rice, *Art of the Byzantine Era*, (Praeger, New York, 1963), 219 ff.
19. Janson, 212-13; Rice, 229-32; Paul A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, Bollingen Series LXX, 4 vol., (Pantheon, New York, 1966), i, 192-95; ii, 340-59.
20. Kurt Weitzmann, *Art in the Medieval West and its Contacts with Byzantium*, (Variorum Reprints, London, 1982), 20.
21. 1 John 1.5.
22. John 1.5.
23. Psalm 139.12.
24. 1 Peter 2.5.
25. Panofsky, *Early*, i, 14; for a general discussion of St. Sernin, cf. Janson, 262, for the sculpture, cf. Janson, figure 368, 272 and Paul Deschamps, *French Sculpture of the Romanesque Period, Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, (Hacker, New York, 1972), figures 5-11, text, 3-4, 20-21.
26. Janson, figures 369 and 370; Deschamps, figures 17-19, text 24-7.
27. Deschamps, figure 34, text 4.
28. 1 Peter 2.6.
29. Colossians 1.19.
30. For the architectural and sculptural development generally cf. Janson, 283-312, for the analysis cf. Panofsky, *Early*, i, 15-20.
31. Janson, 308-10; Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *The Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral: Christ, Mary, Ecclesia*, (The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1959), 91-102; Émile Mâle, *Chartres*, Icon ed., (Harper and Row, New York, 1983), 67 ff.; Marcel Aubert, *French Sculpture at the Beginning of the Gothic Period: 1140-1225*, (Hacker, New York, 1972), Panofsky, *Renaissance*, 57 ff.
32. For figures (not analysis), cf. Wim Swann, *The Gothic Cathedral*, (Ferndale, London, 1981), 163 ff.
33. The cathedral, its sculpture and paintings are surveyed in Swann, 299-305.
34. Duccio and Giotto are treated by Panofsky, *Early*, 16-31 and at length in *Renaissance*; Janson, 320-41, gives a good general treatment. Jacqueline and Maurice Guillaud, *Giotto, Architect of Color and Form*, (Guillaud Editions, Paris-New York, 1987) reproduces Giotto superbly. There is a brief consideration of Bertram in Panofsky, *Early*.
35. For Uccello, and the technical history of perspective generally, cf. Lawrence Wright, *Perspective in Perspective*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983) and Panofsky, *Renaissance*, 126 and 168. For Broederlam, cf. Panofsky, *Early*, 86-9, 112 ff., 142 and Janson, 338.
36. Colossians 1.16, 17 and 18.
37. Colossians 1.15-17.
38. Panofsky, *Early* and especially *Renaissance*, figure 130 and p. 164 and elsewhere, Janson, 393-96.

39. Psalm 85.9-11.
40. Janson, 396.
41. Wright, 78.
42. The developments in Flanders are the subject of Panofsky's *Early Netherlandish Painting* which should be consulted throughout for support of the interpretation given here. Janson's treatment of Flemish painting, 353 ff., is borrowed from Panofsky and may be used as a summary. J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages, A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Doubleday, New York, 1956) is useful generally and at 258-66, 277-85, 297, 303-5 particularly.
43. For the general history cf. Alexandre Koyré, *From Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1957).
44. Exodus 20.4.
45. Cf. Huizinga, 264 ff.
46. References note 42 above.
47. Song of Solomon 2.1.
48. The essential works may be seen in Kenneth Clark, *Piero della Francesca*, 2nd ed. (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1969). My interpretation of them owes much to Dame Julian of Norwich's understanding of her "example" of the Lord and the servant: *Showings*, chapters 51 and following (long text).
49. Kenneth Clark, *Civilization, A Personal View*, (British Broadcasting Corporation and John Murray, 1969), 107-8.
50. Huizinga, 158-59.
51. Huizinga, *passim*, regarded as such the Renaissance is only the degenerate waning of the Middle Ages cf. W.J. Hankey, "The Renaissance and the Reformation", *Foundation Year Programme Handbook, 1990-91*, (University of King's College, Halifax, 1990), 57-63.
52. Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism, An inquiry into the analogy of the arts, philosophy, and religion in the Middle Ages*, (New American Library, New York, 1976).
53. Luisa Becherucci, "Raphael and Painting", *The Complete Work of Raphael* (Harrison, New York, 1969), 87-88:
 [it] gathers in all the loftiest activities of the human spirit and their final fulfillment in the Faith: it is almost a new *Summa*... This is why the decorating of the Stanza della Segnatura with its grandiose allusions - Truth sought through reason by Philosophy (the *School of Athens*); *Good*, in the two-fold aspect of the Virtues and of the Law; *Beauty*, signified by the Muses listening to the music of Apollo (the *Parnasus*); and the greatest spiritual "categories", all converging around the exaltation, in the Eucharist, of the fundamental mystery of the Christian Faith (the *Disputa*) has been considered the presentation of Renaissance Humanist and Christian Thought in a new synthesis almost comparable to what the *Divine Comedy* achieved at the conclusion of medieval thought [the reference is to Vasari].