

A Comparison of Contemporary and Traditional Religious Art

Contemporary religious art has always been controversial in that the Church has always been traditional. Artwork of the Church consists of vast pieces with embellishing detail portraying events and figures of the bible, whereas much contemporary religious art would, of course, be in a more modern style, portraying similar events but in an ironic sense, to question the Church, rather than to assist it. The two types of art are strong contrasts. In their style, message and purpose. I am going to investigate the different effects of traditional and contemporary religious art, initially by comparing two contrasting artists. My studied artist F.N Souza is a contemporary artist who produces religious and erotic art. His abstract style and unusual use of media is inspirational to me. The artist I've decided to compare to F.N Souza is Michelangelo Buonarroti, an artist infamous for his fine sculptures and paintings, and a typical producer of traditional religious art.

F.N Souza produced a unique style of abstract art, authentically to the expressive modernism inspired by Picasso. This is shown in all his work in a variety of media. His paintings consist of heavy sharp paint strokes of contrasting colours, the bold colours representing spiritual and sexual attributes. Souza wanted each piece of art to have an undertone, whether it was a controversial view of religion or sexual innuendo, each piece when closely analysed expressed a strong message.

I viewed such pieces as 'Two Saints on a Landscape' and 'The Crucifixion', displayed at the Tate Britain. 'The Crucifixion' I specifically analysed, as I've never seen the crucifixion portrayed in such an ironic way. I initially noticed Jesus being black, a very disputable statement in the view of many Christians, as Jesus had always been portrayed as white. Although the statement could be initially offensive, Souza's depiction of the black Christ represented his own feelings of religious conflict and the cultural tensions between black and white, and Christian and non Christian societies. It was such a powerful statement and the piece was a significant inspiration for this essay. Also the two men in the painting with Christ are meant to represent a homosexual undertone, again an extreme bold statement, and due to the Churches strict views on homosexuality. Such a potent piece may cause a revolt among members of the Catholic Church, as the painting defies the bible and Christian Teaching, and expresses a fresh perspective on religion. This of course, is against Catholicism, as it has always been a Traditional religion with infallible teachings. I think through using such iconography, Souza achieved the international exposure to publicise the issues that most mattered to him.

..... Souza/Michelangelo pieces.....

As a traditional religion, the Church embraces traditional art; the most famous example of this would be the grand work of Michelangelo Buonarroti in the Sistine Chapel. A vast beautiful collection of paintings portrays the nine scenes from the book of Genesis, the most famous being 'The Creation of Adam'. In contrast to F.N Souza, Michelangelo produces fine art with no known underlying messages. Michelangelo considered himself a sculptor

rather than a painter, although in 1505, the Pope commissioned him to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Michelangelo was naturally reluctant, but he was forced into signing a contract and spent the next four years painting the ceiling. The project left him suffering neck and back problems for the rest of his life. This shows a key difference between Souza's and Michelangelo's religious pieces. Michelangelo was 'commissioned' for his skill and precision as a painter; the art for the Sistine Chapel was more of a chore rather than a personal passion, whereas Souza was producing personal concept pieces, to exhibit his own thoughts and views for others to interpret in their own way.

The outcomes received for each artist's work were both very extreme, but for very different reasons. Michelangelo's nine scenes from genesis have survived over 480 years, mainly thanks to the plaster he invented himself, which resisted mould and is still in use today. And although he was forced to do it, ironically the painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling is conceivably one of the best pieces of art ever produced. F.N Souza's 'The Crucifixion' was greeted with mixed reviews, some bad due to the obvious controversy and others very positive due to their understanding of what F.N Souza wanted to express in his painting, a common response to most of Souza's pieces and contemporary art in general. I feel contemporary art is a lot more personal to each individual observer than traditional art (baroque) because of the depth of thought of the modern artist. F.N Souza is a distinct example.

I found a clear overall comparison between traditional and contemporary religious art. I found that the majority of traditional art from the Renaissance Period, was commissioned by the Catholic Church, explaining why its all so similar. This was due to the Church's rigid depiction of Christ and the bible. The Catholic Church was aesthetic when it came to art, and appreciated the skill and precision of artists such as Michelangelo, rather than the thought provoking concepts of F.N Souza.

Presently, religious art and modern art as a whole is much more varied, expressing many different concepts and ideas, depicted by the artist himself, rather than the 'commissioner'. This is because over the past 500 years art has evolved, minds have developed and perspectives have changed. On the other hand religion can't change or adjust so easily. An ancient religion with infallible teachings, can't just alter its teachings to fit in with modern society, otherwise religion would be a shambles. And with that you can see the fixed boundary between traditional and contemporary religious art, art has evolved, religion hasn't.