

“Art is the best way to express religious ideas and values.”

It is very difficult to agree or disagree with this statement because there are many other good ways to express religion, such as music, dance and literature. Each of these ways is very different from one another but I feel inclined to agree with this statement because art lasts for a long time and because it can portray complex ideas in a quick and simple way. Also even if people are illiterate or if languages change then the paintings and issues will still be understood because of the use of symbols, whereas if they were written down then thoughts may be lost or misunderstood.

Symbols are used a great deal in religious paintings. We went to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford to look at religious paintings that use symbols to portray different issues and thoughts.

There are many common symbols in these paintings such as doves, symbolising the Holy Spirit and important people wearing blue or if they were religious figures not wearing blue then they would have a gold halo over their heads. Colours are used an awful lot as signs. Blue means the figure is an important or religious person. Red is a sign of danger and suffering as it is the colour of blood and this is what we associate with the suffering of Christ on the cross. White symbolises purity. Gold is used regularly when depicting heaven because it shows richness and wealth, which is what people seek in life and would make them go to heaven.

In the painting by Montagna entitled “Madonna and Child” Mary is clothed completely in blue apart from a thin strip of material of white material. The child is naked and is holding a goldfinch. The finch is symbolic because a bird was supposed to have plucked a thorn from Jesus’ head; this species of bird has been used as a

symbol because the red spot on his head is supposed to be where Jesus' blood fell on him.

“The Adoration of the Shepherd’s” is a nativity scene, though not what you would typically associate or expect to see the birth of Jesus Christ painted as. This is because the scene is set in the ruins of a roman building. This symbolises the fall of the Roman Empire, this happened around the time when Jesus was born. This fall leaves way for something else to take its place and its portrayed that Christianity is stepping in. In the background there are the shepherds and a woman is featured among them, this symbolises the first signs of equality among the different sexes in religion. This equality is also shown in the piece showing the story of “Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary” in the background of the picture Mary is sat at Jesus’ feet and normally only men would sit at a teachers feet.

Many people feel that art is not the best way to express religion. They think this because great art is usually not appreciated or enjoyed until people are older and by this time the teachings will be coming too late. Another reason why art may not be the best way is that most of the symbols would need to be known in order to understand the paintings whereas if the stories were written down then nothing would need to be explained, as it would be easy to understand.