

Module: Research in Context – ADAD5004

Course: BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

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Independent Inquiry proposal: Congruence, Context and Culture

Table 1 Introduction

Using these three keywords ‘Congruence, Context and Culture’ I will be looking at religion within the lives of the 15th Century Flemish Artists. Early Flemish Art creates a portal in which the viewer can be transported back to a time when religion was intertwined with every aspect of everyday life, it is able to reveal the way in which Flemish people viewed life and brings to light a visual example of how their life and culture coincided with their spiritual beliefs.

This essay will look at the work of early Flemish religious paintings from artists such as Robert Campin, Rogier Van Der Weyden and Jan Van Eyck these paintings are permeated with visual signs and symbolism that turn everyday objects and settings into spiritual connections. Drawing on theories by thinkers such as Erwin Panosky, Clifford Geertz and Hans Belting and applying iconographical and semiotic approaches to these artworks will allow for a deeper exploration of the use of these signs and help to interpret potential meaning within their historical setting.

Table 2 Congruence



Figure 1 Annunciation Triptych (Campin, 1427-32) Oil on Panel.

Looking at my first keyword “Congruence”, I have begun to consider Figure 1, Robert Campin's Merode Altarpiece; Annunciation Triptych can be seen, this painting displays three panels with each telling its own story. The middle panel is set within a domestic household setting, a telling of the story of The Annunciation of Mary in which the virgin Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel in her chambers and is unknowingly about to be told that God has chosen her to be the carrier of baby Jesus. The right-hand panel depicts Joseph who is Mary's betrothed at the time, he is also placed within a humble working setting as he is seen working as a carpenter. The Left-hand panel is thought to be a depiction of the painting's owners studying the stories and praying. This painting directly links to my chosen keyword “Congruence” as it shows how religious events can become merged with an everyday setting, this leads me to consider Geertz's (1973,p.90) approach to the topic of religious culture in which he says, “Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if most often, implicit) metaphysic and in so doing sustain each other with the borrowed authority of the other.” This theory directly links back to my analysis of Campin's use of the realistic Flemish household settings combined with a religious event taking place inside, it allows viewers of the time to imagine and integrate religious presence and ideas within their own lives and household settings. It creates a subconscious link between religion and everyday life by using familiar surroundings and achievable settings. Using regular household objects such as candles, the lily in the vase, and the job of carpentry and transforming them into a religious symbol allows for spiritual connections to be made within everyday life. The illustration in the left-hand panel of the painting's owners kneeling and studying the depiction of the annunciation reveals how important religion was to them in their daily life, but also how dedicated they were

to their beliefs. This painting would have been in their house for their own personal use and it reflects their willingness to want to take part in the religious world and to even include themselves into a painting that was just for them to study and use as a symbol of religious presence within their prayers. When religion is enforced by your very surroundings, it becomes embedded in culture and also the way you live your life, letting emotions, cultural values, gender roles and social behaviour become aligned with your religious beliefs and therefore connecting in a way in which they reinforce each other; letting the religious worldview be experienced as a natural truth. Looking at the harmonious relationship between religious belief and its connection to regular life seen within this painting, I am led to further consider the contextual topic of these paintings which I will now apply to Figure 2.

Table 3 Context



Figure 2 Triptych of The Seven Sacraments Altarpiece (Rogier Van der Weyden c.1445-50) Oil on Panel.

Figure 2 draws on my second keyword 'Context', I have chosen to look at Weyden's 1445-50 Triptych of the Seven Sacraments Altarpiece as I feel it directly links into the topic of the context within this type of art. Triptych of the Seven Sacraments is set in St. Gudule church in Brussels, within this painting the viewer can see illustrations over three different panels. The central panel shows Christ's Crucifixion, which stands compositionally at the centre to connect the seven sacraments displayed visually through the painting; the seven sacraments in Christianity and as seen in the painting are Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist (holy communion), Penance/Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony. The painting works to present the most important structures of Christian life and place them all simultaneously into one space, the context of this painting informs the viewer of how important religion was at that historical and cultural time and shows how life was viewed as a series of religious structures and order within a Flemish life. Applying Hans Belting's views on iconic

presence to this painting, his quote “In the Context of religion, pictures represent deities who have no direct presence in the physical world” (2016, p. 235) applied to Figure 2 leads me to question how painting is used to allow religious figures to be brought into reality by creating a physical form for them, the painting visually illustrates a picture of multiple invisible sacraments and their religious context. It brings to life something that cannot be seen and places it in a visitable space, when you view the painting and enter the St. Gudule church in which it is set, you can step into this world created by Weyden and feel the presence of Christ and all of the religious figures that are depicted inside the church. Another quote from Geertz’s helps to further the idea that the place in which the painting is set in is a significant symbol for the spiritual experience, “Aesthetic sentiments as experiential evidence for their truth” (1973, p. 90) in this quote Geertz is talking about the how aesthetic experience helps to feed into the religious experience. This quote is easily applied to Weyden’s painting as the church its set in is a very grand cathedral with beautiful architecture, high ceilings and golden archways, this works to reinforce the power of religious authority and reflects the importance of practicing Christianity at the time. The context of the painting shows how important churches were and the significant role they played in hosting important milestones in Flemish 15th century religious life, as well as the aesthetic awe and sacred atmosphere they inspired.

Table 4 Culture



Figure 3 The Arnolfini Portrait (Jan van Eyck 1434), Oil Panel.

My third keyword "Culture" brings me to look at The Arnolfini Portrait by Jan Van Eyck that can be seen in Figure 3, I will be using Erwin Panofsky's iconographical approach in which he views the iconological symbols through the cultural lens of the time, in order to interpret them accurately within the historical cultural understanding of 15th century Flemish people and artists. Panofsky developed three levels of interpretation which include; firstly, a pre-iconographical description, secondly, an iconographical analysis which works to recognise the symbols and their usual meaning. And thirdly, the iconological interpretation to try and understand the artworks meaning to and about the culture of its time. Using this system I am able to survey Figure 3, it can be seen that there are two figures presumably a man and a wife set in an upper class domestic setting, they are dressed in expensive robes and are situated in a bedroom which contains expensive decoration such as the mirror and the golden chandelier. At their feet stands a small dog which looks well groomed. Using the second and third rule to create the iconographical analysis and interpretation, symbols within this painting can be recognised and the meanings within the cultural time deciphered; everyday objects such as the mirror, the fruit, the hidden deities and the dog all hold a deeper symbolic meaning which contributes to the worldview of the Flemish people at the time. Understanding these iconological symbols is important for grasping the full narrative of this work, looking closer at the mirror in the background of the painting it can be seen to show a highly detailed reflection of the couple and two more figures. The mirror's frame contains a series of small paintings that line it, these paintings are a portrayal of Christ's life, up until his crucifixion. The mirror is a representation of God watching over the couple, this reflects the prevalence of the religious worldview within this cultural time. Within the painting, hidden deities such as the patron saint of childbirth St. Margaret can be seen carved into the top of the wooden bed frame; this hidden symbolism reflects that the use of deities where an everyday thing and a normal ritual to use in the bedroom. On the left hand windowsill, oranges can be seen reflecting the light from the window; these bright and plump fruit can be an indication of wealth and fruitfulness, they also work to signify the nature of the Garden of Eden. This quote on Panofsky's theory "While every artwork is specific to its culture he also sees every cultural expression as a characteristic articulation of certain essential tendencies of the human mind" (Hatt and Klonk, p. 96, 2006) describes how his theory determines that art is shaped within specific cultures and how paintings from different cultures will reflect their beliefs, values and life; and so their symbolism can only be understood within that context. This quote also leads me to consider that art not only reflects the cultural and religious beliefs of the time, but also a greater more universal way of thinking within humans. A need for structure, purpose and a sense of order within the world is not a unique need, it is something that is prevalent throughout all humans in every aspect of time. Eyck's The Arnolfini Portrait reflects a range of symbolism that connects humans to a deeper meaning, a way that the world can be connected to a spiritual force through everyday objects and settings.

Table 5 Comparison

Looking back on my research at this point, I feel able to make a clear comparison between the artworks in Figure 1, 2 and 3. All three paintings create a space in which religious beliefs and symbols are brought into everyday spaces both publicly and privately. Figure 1; The Merode Altarpiece presents religion within a regular Flemish home, Figure 2; The Seven Sacraments brings the sacraments into the church which is a more public space for religious belief to be studied and shared, Figure 3; The Arnolfini Portrait shows that religious symbolism lies within more private and wealthy homes too. These paintings highlight how religion was seen within every aspect of life for Flemish people at this cultural time, it was accessible to them at home as well as within public spaces such as churches. The level of realism and detail within these paintings also show that religion was something worth spending a lot of time and money on in order to create these deeply spiritual paintings full of detail and hidden meanings, it was important for people in this time to be able to look at physical manifestations of their beliefs as well as reading them through script they wanted to be immersed in their religious beliefs.

Table 6 Conclusion

In conclusion of my research, I have used the three keywords 'Congruence, Context and Culture' to analyse religious symbolism and apply iconographical theory within early 15th Century Flemish art. Applying theory by Panofsky, Geertz and Belting to famous Flemish paintings by artists such as Robert Campin, Rogier van Der Weyden and Jan van Eyck has led me to consider the way in which these paintings used symbols as a culturally understood systems of religious and spiritual meanings. Applying the keyword 'Congruence' and theory by Clifford Geertz, onto Robert Campin's Merode Altarpiece in figure 1; I was able to reflect on the way in which religion blends harmoniously into everyday life, routine and rituals for people in that culture within that time. Drawing on my second keyword "Context" in figure 2, Rogier Van Der Weyden's Triptych of the Seven Sacraments I looked at theory by Hans Belting to understand the contextual use of religious figures in these paintings and how their illustration can create physical presence within the real world by giving them a form to be viewed and thought about. This led me to consider the importance of painting in creating spiritual presence, and apply Clifford Geertz theory to further explore the aesthetic component of the space in which the painting is set in and furthermore the place which you physically enter into to study these stories; grand architecture creates a feeling of importance and an emotional response that can manifest spiritual feelings. Lastly, I applied the keyword 'Culture' to The Arnolfini portrait by Jan Van Eyck in figure 3 and theory by Erwin Panofsky to describe, analyse and interpret different symbols and iconology within the culture of that historical time. I found it useful to apply Panofsky's approach in this way

as it creates a solid foundation for being able to interpret signs and symbols within their cultural context, it helps the viewer to be able to discover true narratives intended for the painting.

When combining this research along with the chosen keywords and applying these critical theories to all three works, I have aimed to work my way down to an overarching theme; not just to use methods of analysis to interpret these early religious paintings but to also understand the way in which they reveal not only a cultural system of symbolic signs but also a more universal human need for rules and systems in order to create a sense of balance and structure. The Context of religious paintings create a feeling of importance around religion, the Congruence between everyday life and religious objects and beliefs create a Culture around religion which fuels and reinforces itself.

My research has finally led me to the question; **Can Signs and Symbols used in Religious painting construct the integration of religious meaning into everyday life?**

Table 7 References

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