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Question 3: 'The Materiality of Surface'

Examine by drawing upon current and historical context, how [pattern, texture, form, ...] functions as a medium for communicating identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism. Discuss in the context of your own practice and with reference to two/three illustrated case studies.

Christian art has used pattern, texture, and form to convey a message since it began. Much of Christian art uses iconography, symbolism, and biblical scenes that both believers and non-believers alike recognise. Patterns are generally used as repetition of shapes or colours however in Christian art we can also see narrative patterns as most of it is based on stories from the bible. There is often imagery from the life of Christ such as The Nativity and The Crucifixion. Texture is often used in art to give it more depth and to show emotion. This is something that is useful in Christian art as it is depicting something that is deeply important to many people so adding texture can give a piece more symbolism. Form in art is often used to convey a deeper meaning by using the shape of the piece to add symbolism. This aspect of form can be seen in Christian art however form is more often used in it as narrative form and theological form.

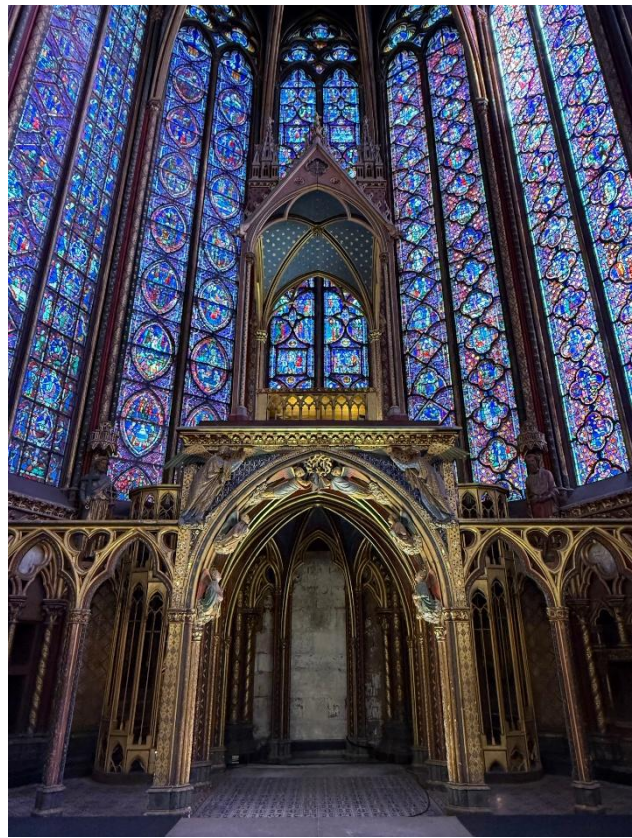
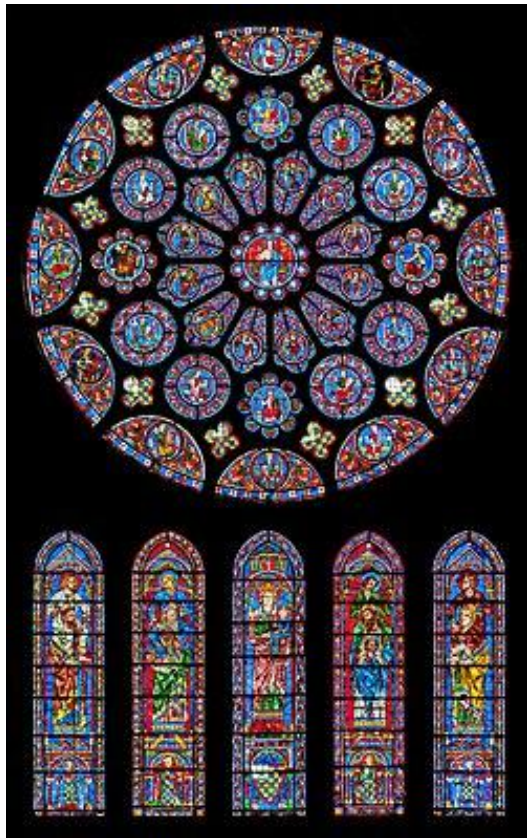
Christian art has examples that exist from Roman catacombs that have been around for nearly 2 thousand years, not long after the religion began. Since the beginning of this type of art, it has spread to many cultures. Christian art can be found all around the world however it is most common in Europe, America, the Philippines, and Africa. The art from these countries have some similarities as they are focused on the same thing and have the same purpose however they can have styles that differ from each region.

In this essay I will be looking at Christian art examples such as stained glass windows with reference to the Chartres Cathedral, Ethiopian Christian iconography in the Debre Berhan Selassie Church, and the abstract art of Makoto Fujimura. I will be finding out how they communicate identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism.

To understand how the art techniques I mentioned earlier can convey meaning in Christian art, I must understand certain theories. An important theory on analysing images is Semiotics. This theory was thought of by Charles Sanders Peirce. It is studying signs and symbols and looking at what their meaning could be and how they could be interpreted. There is lots of common imagery and symbols found in Christian art which conveys a message of Christ however some Christian art can be more abstract. Peirce states that “The meaning of a sign is the idea it ultimately produces in the mind of the interpreter” (Peirce, 1931-1958). While looking at Christian art some meanings may seem obvious and some may be more subtle however the way we perceive them determines the ideas we have about them in our minds. Symbols that are typically associated with Christianity, such as the cross, are often seen in a secular way now in art and fashion. While some people may look at this symbol and not think anything of it, it is very meaningful to Christians.

As Christianity is a very important thing to many people, symbols and depictions of biblical figures in art can be seen as though they are the real people and not just an image. Hans Belting talked about this idea of artworks and spiritual presences being merged into one when he said “the image, understood in this manner, not only represented a person but also was treated like a person, being worshiped, despised, or carried from place to place in ritual processions” (Belting, 1994). I find it interesting when he said that this depiction of a person was also “despised” as that shows that even people who do not identify as Christian can add meaning to religious artworks and feel deep emotions about them.

Another quote that I think is useful when looking at Christian art is from John Ruskin. He states that “The greatest glory in handicraft is not what is made, but in the honesty of the maker’s labour” (Ruskin, 1853). The reason why I think that this is useful to keep in mind is because making an art piece that glorifies God can be seen as an act of worship. Because of this, I think that no matter what the art looks like, it is the makers intention behind it which is most important. This is similar to an idea from Glen Adamson that says “Craft is not defined by particular materials or techniques, but by a way of thinking through making” (Adamson, 2007). This further implies that it is the thoughts of the maker that add meaning to an artwork.

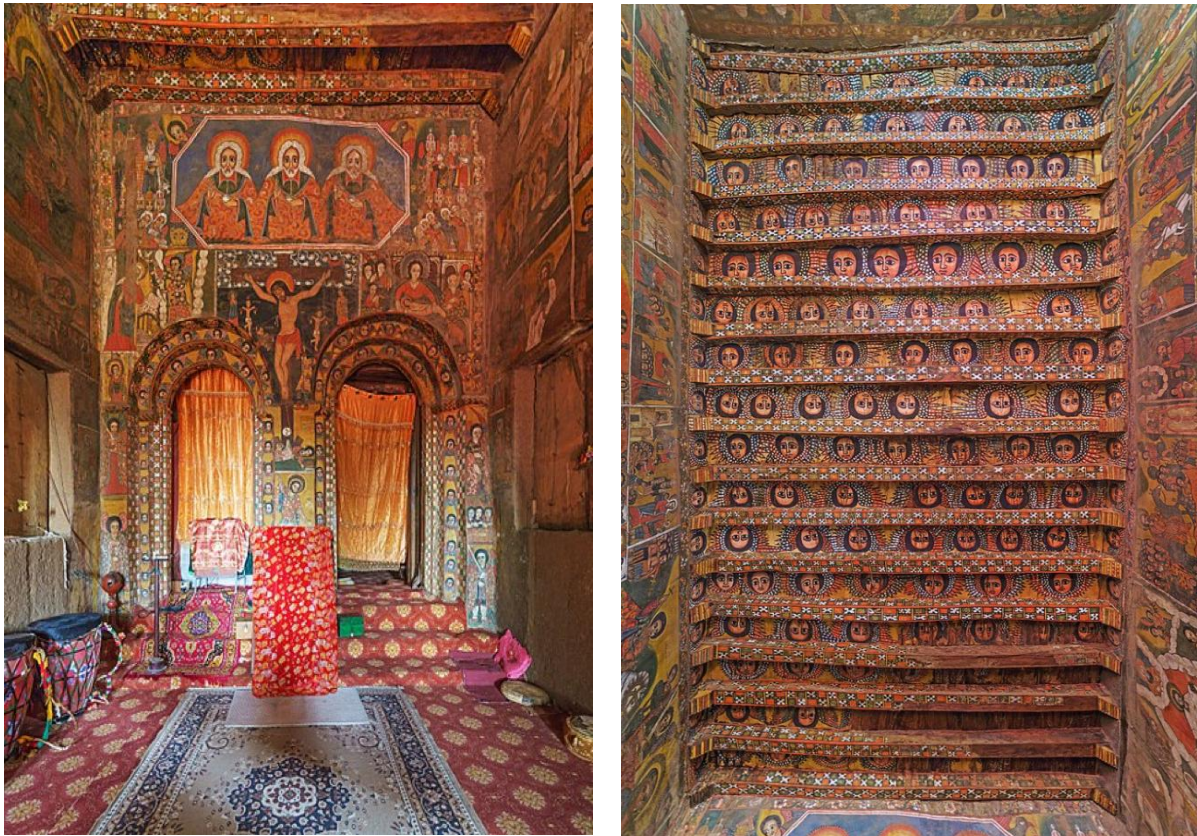


Chartres Cathedral

Stained glass is a popular and very common form of Christian art. Stained glass is often seen in churches and cathedrals, such as Chartres Cathedral, which is shown in the images above. It was first used in these environments in the 4th and 5th centuries. The patterns on stained glass are often used to retell Biblical stories and honour the people from those stories. The reason why stained glass became so popular in churches is because at that time many people could not read, so as an alternative they were able to look at the Biblical narratives portrayed on the stained glass to come to an understanding of Bible stories. There are often many stained glass windows in a cathedral with lots of informative stories. A quote that I like regarding this is “The stained glass programs of the Gothic period functioned as visual encyclopaedias of Christian doctrine” (Caviness, 1977). Encyclopaedias are usually very large and filled with knowledge. Since the stained glass is likened to encyclopaedias I can come to the conclusion that they include lots of knowledge and stories.

The texture and colours of stained glass have meaning and symbolism in them. The light passing through the glass can be seen as a metaphor for God’s light entering the building and shining on the people inside. There are some different meanings for the colours of glass used in a religious stained glass panel. Some

of these include gold representing God's goodness, green representing hope, white representing purity, and purple representing royalty. Emile Male talks about stained glass windows not just existing for aesthetics but existing because they teach a message. This is stated when he said "The Gothic window was not conceived as decoration, but as a sermon in colour and light" (Male, 1913). I find this interesting because it implies that a stained glass window itself is a sermon in "colour and light". This tells me that a sermon can be a beautiful thing and it is thought of with high regard.



Debre Berhan Selassie Church

Ethiopian Christian iconography is very unique with its colours and style however like lots of other Christian art it shows a narrative. The paintings which decorate the inside of the Debre Berhan Selassie Church, which are shown in the images above, are great examples of this cultural art style. These paintings were done by artists named Apu and Wu. Like the stained glass windows I earlier talked about, these paintings were also created to share Bible stories to people who could not read.

Many repeating patterns are used in Ethiopian Christian art. There are both repeating patterns that reference the Christian faith and patterns that reference Ethiopian culture. Across the ceiling of the Debre Berhan Selassie Church there are lots of images of angels. There are also repetitive border patterns that are a reference to weaving traditions in Ethiopia. The reason for the repetition of images which keep on going is because it is seen as a metaphor for eternity.

The textures and materials that are used in the Debre Berhan Selassie Church shine light to its Ethiopian heritage. These paintings are on rough surfaces, which is different to the smooth surfaces that are commonly used in parts of Europe. The pigments used to create the paints used in these artworks come from materials found locally near this church. This adds to the distinctively

Ethiopian style of these paintings. Similar to the quotes I earlier talked about from Ruskin and Adamson, there is a quote from Stanislaw Chojnacki which I feel demonstrates the spirituality in these paintings well. He says “The Ethiopian painter is less concerned with naturalistic representation than with the expression of spiritual meaning through stylised form.” (Chojnacki, 1983). This further explains that when it comes to Christian art, the artists heart while making is more important than the outcome.

Ethiopian Christian art is very recognisable due to the forms that are used in it. Many art pieces in this style use large eyes. These can be interpreted as symbols of holy watchfulness. This whole art form uses similar forms and styles. It has been noticed as being similar as Marilyn Heldman says “Ethiopian Christian painting is distinguished by its consistency of style over many centuries, a visual continuity that reflects the stability of the Ethiopian Church” (Heldman, 1993). From both looking at images of Ethiopian Christian art and reading this quote, I can guess that Christianity in Ethiopia is stable and has strong foundations. Around two thirds of Ethiopians identify as Christians so like how Ethiopian culture is prevalent in their Christian art, Christianity is prevalent in their culture.



Makoto Fujimura

Makoto Fujimura is a Christian artist who creates abstract paintings. His art, of which there are photographs shown above, is an example of contemporary Christian art. These art pieces are different to the other forms of art that I have looked at since they do not include images of Biblical figures or iconic Christian symbols. This further links to the idea that the intentions of the maker are more important than the final outcome as Fujimura's artwork is still considered Christian art despite not having literal depictions of scenes from The Bible.

Texture is very important in Fujimura's work. He blends his Japanese heritage into his art by using the Nihonga technique of layering precious minerals that have been mixed with glue onto rag paper. This technique often takes a long time to do which can create lots of time to reflect. A quote from the artist which I like is, "The discipline of making slows us down to see the world as it truly is - charged with the presence of God" (Fujimura, 2021). This quote tells us that this slow technique of making can be seen as an opportunity to spend time with God. The materials that he uses mirror western traditions of using expensive materials when portraying someone important. The way that Fujimura uses layers in his art creates depth, which can give the pieces more meaning and make the viewer spend more contemplative time looking at it.

Fujimura does not use distinctive patterns in his work. Instead, he uses abstract marks to portray prayer and spiritual meditation. While there does not seem to be Biblical narratives shown in this artwork, it can still express to the viewer the Christian meaning that it has. Fujimura believes that “Grace exists in the in-between, where the artist and the viewer meet in mystery” (Fujimura, 2021). This implies that while the viewer may not fully understand what the artwork is portraying, there is a link between them and the artist where the spiritual meaning is.

As a ceramicist, form is very important in my practice. I create slip cast objects and then decorate them with delicate hand painted patterns. At the moment I am using form to reflect my Christian faith in my art. I am creating ceramic crosses, which will serve as a reminder of the death and resurrection of Christ. I create different patterns which are then reflected onto my artworks. A shape which I have used a couple of times in my work is a heart. A heart symbolises love and it makes me think of the love which God has for us. I also often take inspiration from nature in the patterns in my work. I do this because I believe that God created all things, including nature, and it is a beautiful reminder of what He can do.

I use clay in my practice and this can also be linked to Christianity. In the Bible there are a few references to clay in the context of humanity being like clay and God being like a potter. Two of these references are found in Isaiah 64:8 and Jeremiah 18:6

Pattern, texture, and form have been used both in the past and in the present as powerful ways to convey Christian meaning, identity, and place. Christianity is a large religion and its art can impact people who are Christians and people who are not. I believe that anyone can find meaning in Christian art and that is what is so beautiful about it.

My own practice uses clay, a material that has been used for millennia. It can be seen in so many art pieces, including Christian ones. I feel that as I am using clay and including the message of Jesus Christ in my work I am participating in a long tradition of people using these techniques and sharing their faith through their art.

Christian art is constantly changing from time to time and place to place. Like the traditional regional art from Ethiopia and the contemporary art by Fujimura so much of it is very different and unique yet they are united in the same message. I think that the evolution of this art form will continue to happen as time goes on. I believe that art that is created to glorify God will always be made and they will communicate identity and place to the people who see them.

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