

The Sacred and the Profane: Contemporary Art in Sacred Space

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### Abstract

With a focus on the art of the Abrahamic faiths and on the art programs that host contemporary art installations in sacred space, I will explore the potential of contemporary art as hierophany, transcending a profane existence to reveal the sacred “wholly other”. In consideration of the perspectives of the artists, viewers, and curators and with respect to the environment, an analysis of the manifestation of the sacred in contemporary art, and more precisely, the ontological and semiological status of contemporary art in the religious environment, will be examined in an attempt to answer the question, “what makes art sacred?”.

## Introduction

Art has the ability to act as the intraconnection between man and the divine,<sup>1</sup> providing an experience with Being at its absolute and essential depth “through its ability to communicate a view or intuition of transcendence (L. I. Faruqi, p 164-167).” Paul Tillich discusses art as striving to communicate ideas about “ultimate meaning, the most profound apprehension of reality (Adams, p 80).” Many cultures throughout human history have used art as a way to relate to Reality considered more absolutely, as Being-Itself or as one of its theistic representations. This transcendent experience through art occurs when art acts as hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred that leads one to a transcendent experience. In early western and eastern European history, sacred art would have been seen in reference to representational and textually religious art that followed the symbolic codes of the religious environment, but today we have examples of nonrepresentational art, bare of religious imagery exhibited in places of worship that, much like religiously imaged art of before, has the ability to awaken the spirit within (Kandinsky, p 9, 48-54). We can broadly categorize the former as “traditional religious art” and the latter as “contemporary art,” categorical distinctions that were not necessary to be made in early cultural history when art and religion were inexorably intertwined (Apostolos-Cappadona, p 408-419).

Notions of the intertwining nature of art and religion have been found in imagery on cave walls dating as far back as c. 17,000 BCE.<sup>2</sup> Much of early primitive art is thought to be imagery related to man’s attempt to understand the mysteries of life and death, a foundational idea in the development of religious thought (Encyclopedia of Religion 2020). As religious man developed from archaic times of cave painting to the use of imagery in religious storytelling, art brought

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<sup>1</sup> Divine: of, from, or like God or a god. <https://languages.oup.com/research/oxford-english-dictionary/>

<sup>2</sup> Lascaux Cave, Paleolithic cave in southwestern France famous for its prehistoric cave paintings. <https://ancient.eu>

religious comprehension to the masses, enhancing man's impression of the holy. As societies developed from nomadic tribes to settled man in cities, man's intertwined relationship with religion and art formed the governing rules and moral values of the day. In western and eastern Europe, art and religion remained united until the 18<sup>th</sup> century modern art movement became established, creating a sharply divided idea of the sacred and the profane (Elkins, p 5-20). Religious art in the contemporary world was seen as kitsch by contemporary art critics and viewers alike in that it "no longer asks for the suspension of disbelief but instead prompts the suspension of judgement and taste (Mihailescu, p 55-59)." Today the pendulum seems to be settling in the middle of these extremes. The 20<sup>th</sup> century avoidance of "religious kitsch" by critics, artists and viewers alike led to a development and appreciation of Abstract art, a contemporary art movement that Wassily Kandinsky described as the "artistic embodiment of spirituality through form and color" (Kandinsky, p 27- 45). Contemporary art including Abstract art became welcomed in religious settings, commissioned or on loan, through newly formed contemporary art programs hosted by religious institutions that were seeing beyond the representation of objective reality (Faure, p. 808).

With this changing attitude toward religious art, a study of art as hierophany can be made by examining the curatorial criteria of these art programs, and, with an analysis of environment, artistic intent and viewer perspective, the question, "What is sacred art?" can be considered. Does environment affect the sacrality in art? Does the artist's attitude affect the sacrality of the art? And, with the emotional tension that is tied to both art and religion, does the determination of sacrality in the art depend on the attitude and expectations of the beholder?

In recent years there has been a marked increase of contemporary art programs hosted by religious organizations. In New York City, St. John the Divine Episcopal Church has an established contemporary art program with changing exhibitions throughout the year exhibited

within the main nave of the Church.<sup>3</sup> Saint Paul the Apostles Roman Catholic Church has an annual curated show that asks artists to provide work within a designated theme provided by the curators.<sup>4</sup> This work is displayed throughout the nave, altar niches and transepts of the church. The Eldridge Street Synagogue has commissioned art installations through their art program, displaying contemporary art in the synagogue's sanctuary with the permanently installed Rose Window and in rotating temporary exhibitions throughout the building.<sup>5</sup>

These are a few examples of contemporary art programs developed for religious environments that in the historical past welcomed only traditional religious art. Reaching beyond traditional displays of iconography, aniconic calligraphy and traditional religious symbolism, many houses of worship are embracing new ways of engaging their constituents and the general public at large. On the other side of the spectrum there is religious art displayed in public museums, setting devoid of religious intent. Art intended for the religious environment placed in the secular world can also be analyzed with the same set of questions. Does the environment impact the perception of the work, and how does the viewer perceive intentionally sacred art when placed in the environment of the profane?

### The Three Fundamental Modes of Religious Art

Historically, when art, politics and social life were wrapped into one's religious tradition, religious ideology occupied the dominant position. In the early days of Christianity, art was an important element in the church as a guide to the religious texts, particularly for the illiterate. Of the Abrahamic faiths, Christianity adored its iconography with few exceptions, embellishing its churches with mosaics, frescoes and icons that displayed figurative reflections of the Christian

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.stjohndivine.org/art/art-exhibitions/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.openingsny.com>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/event/kikismith/>

religious figures. Decorating houses of worship with representational art of the saints, prophets, son of God and Mother Mary, was considered a blessed way to convey the religious stories.

Icons were admired as a focal point for adherents to send their prayers to heaven. The aim of the art was to inspire greater devotion and to instill an understanding and desire for salvation. As Christianity broke into sects, some maintained their devotional relationship to the icons, while others, such as many within Protestant Christianity, preferred the word over imagery, and much like Judaism and Islam, adopted an aniconic stance toward art in the religious setting (Kaufmann, p 254-269). Judaism, actively iconoclastic in the past is today primarily aniconic in practice.

Islam, also aniconic in practice, was and is well known for its use of ancient Kūfic<sup>6</sup> calligraphy and implicit symbolism of infiniteness in arabesque patterning as both scriptural and decorative art. Staying true to the aniconism of the *tawhid* message, these scriptural and decorative arts are intended to stimulate the viewer through suggestion of infiniteness as a quality of transcendence. (L. I. Faruqi, p 164-173)

With attention paid to Iconicism, Aniconism, and Iconoclasm, the three fundamental modes of religious art, we are reminded that there is no universally agreed upon definition of art or of religion. In recognizing this, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona<sup>7</sup> created five distinctive relationships “as a means to distinguish the power of art and religion” (Brill Research Perspectives, p 27-29). In discussing a few particular works of art within these five terms, the distinguishing features between the power of art and religion can be discerned and applied to the question, “What makes art sacred?”.

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<sup>6</sup> Kūfic script: earliest extant Islamic style of handwritten alphabet used by early Muslims to record the Qur’ān. It went out of general use about the 12<sup>th</sup> c, although it continued to be used as a decorative element to contrast with scripts that superseded it.

<sup>7</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Haub Director of the Catholic Studies Program, Professor of Religious Art and Cultural History in the Catholic Studies at Georgetown University.

1. Authoritarian: art is subject to religion used as propaganda for the authoritarian cause.
2. Opposition: art and religion as equal powers with a struggle to subjugate the other.
3. Mutuality: equals inhabit the same cultural environment as a symbiotic union.
4. Separatist: each operates independent of and without regard to the other.
5. Unified: Individual identities blended into a single entity that makes it impossible to discern what is art from what is religion.

1. Authoritarian: art is subject to religion used as propaganda for the authoritarian cause.

Propaganda art is message art, and, in authoritative form whether political or religious, is like a straitjacket for the artist and for the viewer. Authoritarian propaganda art does not allow room for creativity, individuality or originality (Staebler, p 25 - 27). Authoritarian propaganda art does not want the artist or the viewer to add something of their own individuality to the experience or interpretation of the artwork, contrary to many artists intention of personal art-making and of many viewer's desire to have a personal experience. Religious art propaganda "re-presents", relying on a conscious state of interpretation, whereas religious art created through the artist's freedom from authoritarian rules allows for the potential of a personal experience (Cappadona, p 28). "In art we find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time" (Gilkey, p 190 - 191). Authoritarian religious art in sacred space cannot represent absolute existence in the way contemporary art in sacred space can, for authoritarian art is a dictated and forced belief, contrary to the depth of being.

2. Opposition: art and doctrinal religion as equal powers with a struggle to subjugate the other.

Exhibiting art that challenges doctrine may seem counterintuitive to the purpose of installing art in a place of worship, but contemporary art does not carry the same obligations as religious art. Artistic attempts to subjugate doctrine within the religious setting, rather than creating doubt and discontent, can build strength in faith when a viewer examines their faith relative to that of an opposing visual message (Schuon 1995).

A purpose of sacred art is to communicate spiritual truths and to reveal the wholly other. This statement assumes that sacred art reveals vast eternal “truth that is beyond mankind and at the same time can be communicated to man. In the sacred, the central Reality of the universe speaks.” (Schuon 1995). Asking the purpose of contemporary art, we can say it is the artist’s attempt to communicate a personal viewpoint, but, once the artist releases the work, does the artist intent remain relevant? Does the artist’s message remain dominant or does the work itself communicate through individual interpretations? How does the environment add or detract to the artistic intent?

The “Openings”<sup>8</sup> art program at St. Paul the Apostle Cathedral in New York City has an annual art exhibition that invites artists to produce a work of art under a curated chosen theme. The artists selected for the show are not required to be of any given faith nor is the exhibited work required to represent a religious motif. The theme is chosen annually and can be widely interpreted by each artist. The curators have the freedom to select the artists by merit with one of the few stipulations being that the art cannot be insulting to the religious environment, however it is acceptable to respectfully challenge the teachings of the faith through imagery and

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.openingsny.com/about> “Our vision statement: *Connections between creativity and transcendence foster meaningful conversations that have the potential to unite individuals and promote community.*”



textual additions. The works are displayed in the nave, altar niches and transepts of the cathedral, enabling the congregation to see the art while listening to the service.

“All of the Above”, is an example of a theme one year that for me, as a participating artist, instigated research on the similarities found in many world religions. I reviewed creation myths of some of the world’s most popular religions and created a painting that united them through the similarities in these myths. I used similar symbols and figures I found in the creation myths and enhanced their similarities through color and composition. My aim was to challenge the idea of one faith as the “right” faith by displaying key religious figures together on one canvas and showing these similarities in the myths instead of highlighting the differences.

My work typically comes from an abstract idea that I communicate through the figurative, bringing ambiguity to the work. I asked several congregants to share their responses to the painting, thinking the content allowed for a variety of interpretations due to the abstract nature of thinking that I had attached to it. A man of Islamic faith mentioned my inclusion of the symbol of Allah, the Arabic calligraphy for the word God, stating that the allowance of this work to be hung in the Cathedral brought to him hope of religious acceptance at a time when being Muslim is so misunderstood. I spoke with a person of Catholic faith who saw the work as a way to communicate God’s acceptance of all. Showing this piece in the Cathedral setting, the majority of responses to the work were comments about religious acceptance. Faith, hope and unity transpired in others as it did in me as I painted the work and thought of the Cathedral it would be installed in. My intention was to create an inclusionary piece; I also wondered if by including religious symbolism from different faiths if this piece would become controversial. It did not - instead it brought on feelings of light and hope from those who viewed it in the church. A few months later I showed this piece in a popular gallery downtown. I asked the same question

of viewer response and received comments that were more academic in nature, revolving around discussions of religious art in an art historical context, composition, color and medium. Most asked me how long the painting took me to paint and other questions on technique.

This painting provided religious content, but it was the message perceived that allowed for transcendence beyond the relative social expectations. In painting this piece for exhibition in the church I felt I had created a piece in opposition to the doctrine, but in hearing the responses from the religious viewers I came to see that this was not the case, the message instead revealed a communication in the unity of the spirit. In the secular environment of the gallery where religion became a topic of theological study rather than of faith, the painting was overall not perceived as communicating or triggering any emotional transformation. The viewer saw art without religion in one setting and religion within the art in the other, trading the artistic and religious positions of importance dependent on the environment. The art, or object, was considered less important than the message revealed within religious setting - religion held the dominant role, and in the secular gallery environment the art as object dominated the conversation.

### 3. Mutuality: equals inhabit the same cultural environment as a symbiotic union.

Thomas Franklin O'Meara is not as concerned about the illustration of ecclesiology<sup>9</sup> through the arts but instead focuses on the "human theological interpretation of divine revelation" through the experience of art (O'Meara, p 205). Looking at art has the potential to result in immediate understanding and emotion, "Theology can flow from an encounter with and a grasp of revealing mystery in a manner analogous to the production and appreciation of art."

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<sup>9</sup> O'Meara's focus in this context is on Christianity

(O'Meara, p 210). O'Meara speaks of the human interaction with the art and the art interaction with the space in a way that brings these elements together in a symbiotic union.

This symbiotic union can be seen in the work of Chinese artist Xu Bing's *Phoenixes*. Xu Bing created two large phoenixes out of construction debris left behind at a construction site in Beijing, China that largely relied on migrant laborers for its work force. The commission was originally intended for the formal atrium of the new World Finance Centre in Beijing. Upon visiting the construction site and seeing the mistreatment of the migrant workers, Xu Bing created the phoenixes. The resulting work proved to be too politically controversial for the World Finance Centre site and was rejected. In 2013 the phoenixes were installed in St. John the Divine in NYC for temporary exhibition, organized by St. John the Divine's contemporary art program. The Phoenixes not only bring on theological reflection when viewing in the church, but they also raise a social justice issue. The Reverend Dr. James A. Kowalski, dean of St. John the Divine considers the debris used to create the Phoenixes "as representative of the human condition", stating, "This beautiful, even sacred installation has transformational powers. This is not just a critique about laborers in China, it is about a subject that affects us all. It's about fair pay and human wages for all people." (Vogel 2014)

Xu Bing did not create this work with the intention of transcending the mundane but instead created it originally to be a commentary criticizing the economic exploitation of people who should be treated as 'sacred' – or absolute value – and thus not be exploited. Yet, in the case of the phoenixes, given the socially spirited message of the artist regarding the poor treatment of the migrant workers and the religious atmosphere of the church which presumes the absolute value of all individuals in welcoming all, a symbiotic union occurred. Art critic Taney Roniger wrote, "If the cathedral's lifeblood is the salvific power of the transcendent, the salvation

heralded by these creatures is to be found in the transformative potential of human ingenuity. Though not its intended context, the cathedral lends the work a dimension of meaning that both universalizes and expands upon its original intentions. Here, art, social activism, and the spiritual fuse to create a force so compelling we might wonder why they were ever dissociated.” (Roniger 2014). Xu Bing’s Phoenixes displayed in St. John the Divine’s soaring cathedral unite the spiritual and the mundane, its use of left-over metal scraps, hard hats, construction tools and trash acknowledges the pervasive suppression and mistreatment of the migrant worker and simply by its presence in the soaring nave of the church imbued it with the transcendent quality of the sacred.

4. Separatist: each operates independently of and without regard to the other.

Margaret R. Miles speaks of understanding an image as not just knowing the theology behind it but the viewer’s interaction in front of it, or “the religious use of vision” (M. R. Miles 1985) that is important for religious use of images in the twenty-first century.

With the theory that the religiosity of a work of art is strictly dependent on the viewer’s religious perspective, Miles supports the separatist category in speaking of religious art. She disregards the setting and the artist as having an influence on the art once the art is complete. The setting, the art and even the artist are independent of the other, relying on the viewer’s interpretation to bring all aspects of the work together. If we agree with Miles, it is the viewer alone that holds the key to the religious intentions and therefore the environment and the artist do not have any bearing on the viewer’s interpretation of the work. Each element operates independently without regard to the other. Yet, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is much discussion about religious art being held “captive” within a museum unable to be realized of the full potential of

original intent because of the profane environment of a museum, an opposing view from Miles' assertion.

Edmund Leach presents the argument that "icons are part of a "space-syntax" of sacred buildings" (Faure, p. 782-785) and to remove them from this context entirely changes their nature. Leach believes that works of art are not just "things in themselves, they are objects carrying moral implications" and the moral implications depend upon its location (Faure, p. 782-785).

Eike Schmidt, director of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, one of the world's oldest art museums, agrees with Leach saying that "devotional art was not born as a work of art but for a religious purpose, meant for religious setting." Schmidt, citing examples from the Uffizi's own collection, suggests that religious artworks residing in institutional collections should be returned to their respective places of worship. Schmidt considers context to be a deciding factor in recognizing the full appreciation for a religious work of art, "not only from an art historical perspective, but also in connecting the viewer with its spiritual significance." (Cocks 2020).

From the artist' perspective this category of separate and equal is presented with a third perspective. Contemporary Iranian artist Kamrooz Aram's work challenges Miles' notion of space as neutral arbiter of cultural objects. He speaks of the "eeriness of going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC and seeing a *mihrab* from a mosque in his hometown of Isfahan" (Aram 2018). Aram speaks of the potential in a work of art. To explain his perspective further, he uses an example of his sculptural work titled *Ephesian Fog*, which includes an object on a pedestal in front of a painting of geometric shapes. This sculptural work could be looked at as metaphor for Islamic belief in that the painting becomes a backdrop to the object representing the role of the mosque, the pedestal becomes a support for the object representing the role of the scripture, and

the object itself represents the role of the faithful; none can exist without the others (Aram 2018). This grouping can be seen as Aram's example of how contemporary art has potential, when all elements involved have active relationships with each other, to activate the potential of the whole. The culmination of these elements has the capability to manifest the sacred and become hierophany for the worshipping viewer. In the case of the Uffizi gallery, Schmidt, in his belief that religious art should be returned to its originating country, signifies that he does not believe the museum has the potential to act in participation of sacred intention. Schmidt may be right in this, outlining the fact that the items he is referring to are ancient religious artifacts that were created and consecrated in the manner of the people who believed they were sacred and used in sacred ritual, but which were then relocated to the profane space of the museum without ceremony. Lacking activation of sacred space<sup>10</sup>, all symbolic elements are not united as a whole and cannot then act as hierophany to reveal an absolute reality (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p 131-132).

5. Unified: Individual identities blended into a single entity that makes it impossible to discern what is art from what is religion.

Friedrich Schelling wrote that nature and spirit were united ultimately in an aesthetic act of consciousness or imagination. "Through imagination artwork can be both real and ideal as it presents and symbolizes the union of spirit and nature" (O'Meara, pg 207-209) . For Schelling, creation, art, and revelation were in the same category, stating that "art reflects for us the identity

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<sup>10</sup> There have been welcoming religious ceremonies conducted in museums to acknowledge the spiritual in tribal sacred sculptures – in 1986 the MET welcomed Maori elders to stage a ritual greeting for the ancestral spirits believed to live in the Maori sacred objects when the sculptures arrived in New York. The New York Times, "A Dawn Ritual Prepares Maori Sculptures for Opening at the MET" Sept. 11, 1984 <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/09/11/arts/a-dawn-ritual-prepares-maori-sculpture-for-opening-at-met.html>

of conscious and unconscious activity. Their tension is infinite... the basic character of art is a conscious-less infinite.” (O'Meara, p 208).

A twentieth century work of art that embodies this union can be experienced in the art of artist Kiki Smith's collaboration with architect Deborah Gans on the monumental stained-glass window at the Eldridge Street Synagogue, titled the *Rose Window*. Smith's abstract contemporary design for the window was her first commissioned piece in a sacred setting. The stained-glass window design, with its fragmented random shapes and hues of blue glass and embedded fields of five-pointed stars, evokes the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of creation, an ordering or cosmicization of space which Eliade considers a consecration (Eliade, p 31). The design combines the traditional with the contemporary in abstract form following the aniconic heritage of Judaism. The synagogue describes the work saying, “It's about rupture and regeneration, themes that are particularly meaningful in this restored sacred site, one with a history of decline and renewal.” The work currently stands as the only 21<sup>st</sup> century addition to the 19<sup>th</sup> century synagogue. The window seamlessly fits into the existing context of the synagogue, the infinite tensions of the conscious and unconscious are felt in the restored space and in the uniting of artistic intent, the sacrality of the environment and viewer perspective.

#### Conclusion:

In looking at art and religion through an examination of doctrine, environment, intent and response, an analysis of contemporary art and religion begins to unfold. We can see what they have in common and what separates them, yet the relationship of art and religion is complex. Art as an object can be experienced as empowering when one relates concerns about the essence and nature of Reality, of Being-Itself, to the ground from which art springs. Art as hierophany

provides a transcendent experience considered communication with the sacred, and it can also, not only reflect the faith but also become an object for commentary about faith in today's society.

In viewing these art installations within the categories provided by Diane Apostolos - Cappadona and in examination of the inseparable and separable relationships of art and religion, one could agree with O'Meara and Kandinsky that art imbued with the intent and beliefs of the artist and the religious ideals of the viewer are key elements to the perception of the sacrality of the art. "With the viewer as with the artist, faith is seeing. The faith-revelation experience, like the artistic one, gives not a single but a double access: one into the self, and the other to the holy." (O'Meara, p 213-214).

This has been evidenced in the iconography, aniconism and in the iconoclastic attitudes as seen through the reactions of the viewer of traditional religious arts, but has this been carried through to the non-representational contemporary art that has been discussed?

As Kandinsky wrote, art nourishes the spirit, both for the artist who is creating and for the spectator, who upon viewing the art, "feels the corresponding thrill in himself. The harmony -or the contrast- of emotion, cannot be superficial, the mood of a picture can deepen and purify that of the spectator." (Kandinsky, 2). Kandinsky does not dismiss traditional religious art but instead adds to the canon of what religious art can be: both spiritual and religious, representational and non-objective. Kandinsky holds the idea that what matters is what the artist sought after more than the object created. (Kandinsky, p 17). In this way, a painting of a still life or a mosaic of the Pantocrator, if endowed with the gift of divining inner life in the work, Kandinsky states that it would be suitable to say that the art holds spiritual harmony. The motivation of the artist is itself



a symbol in the sense it participates in the reality it represents (Faure, p 791). The curator intent can be equaled to that of the artist in that exhibition is dictated by the intention of curator, but once out of the curator's hands, much like once the art-making is complete and out of the artist's hands, how much is translated to the viewer out of each's control.

Using sacred space as a platform, art can illuminate the intersections between spiritual and social identity and the ways in which individuals and community speak to each other and come together. This unity can support ideas of dignity and inclusion, a meaningful aim of contemporary art programs in religious space. The environment has also been shown to have an effect on the artists as artist Kamrooz Aram expressed upon viewing the *mihrab* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The environment also had an impact on the painting titled, "All of the Above", noting the conversational shift from the sacred to the profane in relationship to its location. The environment can also show the many facets of the divine concept, or lack thereof through the separate and equal concepts of art and religion.

Faure speaks of traditional religious art – art that has a visual representation of a religious object - and states that "something appears in the icon that is beyond representation – it interrupts the demarcation of the art, the aesthetic, and the symbolic and bridges the gap between the two realms." (Faure, p 789) But he also adds that even with traditional religious art, "when the focus is on the object the danger is in missing or minimizing the response of the subject (as in the viewer) (Faure, p 791).

Each of the elements brought into discussion of art as hierophany – artistic intent, curator intent and environment - rely on the viewer perspective. "Every human experience is capable of being transfigured" (Eliade, p 171). The viewer sees the work and takes all the elements in; if capable of feeling the sacrality of the environment, the presence of the art, and the unity of the

spirit, it is the viewer that holds the key to the transcendency of the work. Contemporary art, and particularly that which is abstract, can bring about deep contemplation in the viewer. The viewer opens up to the hierophany, enabling a transcendental experience to occur.

It is true in all the contemporary art examples cited that the art is non-representational, carrying an abstract idea or appearance. It is the viewer that activates the response of the sacred in art, for without the viewer response an abstract work remains simply a color field or a large bird or abstract assortment of symbols without sacrality. The interpretation of Xu Bing's Phoenixes is affected by its environment, in the Cathedral it became a soaring symbol that bridged the gap between the two realms of the sacred and the profane yet in its original commissioned environment it was rejected not for its religious affiliation but because of its political implications.

What I have tried to retrieve from this small group of contemporary art samples may be considered an elusive reality in that looking at each artistic-religious relationship separately, it is difficult to determine when or how contemporary art can be recognized as hierophanic and not simply 'abstract'. Yet if we recognize that each element depends on the other as seen through the eyes of the beholder, we recognize that a transformation can occur that activates art as hierophany. Art recognized by the viewer as hierophanic transforms the environment from a profane, relatively understood space into a sacred one, where all elements, including individuals, are understood in relation to the sacred realm of what religions consider the Divine.

Eliade points out that revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point – one with absolute meaning – and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity to live in a real sense, in the context of the Eternal instead of the merely temporal. In the efforts of the contemporary art programs in religious settings, it could be claimed that the

installation of contemporary art brings the viewers in and offers them art as the fixed point for contemplation and activation of hierophany. Thus, the art becomes an animated “monument”, a passage beyond the representation of objective reality, the hierophany for the viewers to realize their relationship with the sacred.

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### **Annotated Bibliography:**

1. Faruqi, Lois Ibsen al. 1984. "An Islamic Perspective on Symbolism in the Arts." In *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in religion and art*, by Diane Apostolos-Capadona. New York, NY: New York: Crossroads.

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona's book, *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in religion and art*, is an anthology of essays from various theologians, artists, sociologists and art historians compiled in chapters that address the ideas of religious art, the religious impulse of the artists and art as hierophany. Lois Ibsen Faruqi writes on the role of symbolism and Islamic art, Mircea Eliade on modern art and David and Linda Altshuler write about the ancient iconoclastic attitude to the state of contemporary art in the synagogue, all of which I have quoted from.

2. Brill Research Perspectives. 2017. "Religion and the Arts: History and Method." In *Religion and the Arts: History and Method*, by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, 27-29. Boston: Brill.

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona's book *Religion and the Arts: History and Method*, discusses the origins of the field of religion and the arts dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cappadona writes an analysis on the development of traditional religious iconography and moves on to the impact of religious imagery in contemporary culture. Key to my research is Cappadona's exploration of the artistic process of "image-making and meaning-making" as a dialogue between man and the Sacred and her five relationships between religion and the arts.

3. Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Visual Culture*.

Margaret Miles discusses the idea that in understanding religious imagery one must take into account the viewer's response over the environment or the artist's intent he writes about the artist's ego as taking over religiosity in art, thereby suggests it is the viewer's interaction in front of the image that is important for the religious use of images in the twenty-first century. Miles regards religiously themed art as being separate from religion without the viewer's idea of the religious theology intended for the art.

4. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, "The Movement of the Triangle". Kandinsky writes about his own experience into the sacrality of the arts as being similar to the viewer in that art feeds the spirit, both for the artist who is creating and for the spectator. The overarching idea of Kandinsky's writing is that religious art can be non-objective and still represent the spiritual and religious. It is the artist intention in creating the work that brings meaning to the work.

5. Thomas Franklin O'Meara, *The Aesthetic Dimension in Theology*.

O'Meara discusses the theological interpretation of divine revelation in Christian art with a focus on the "immediacy" in art, stating that gazing at art can result in a spiritual understanding and arise emotion. He considers the interaction of man, the environment and the art as factors that bring all the senses together to create a union of spirit.

6. Bernard Faure, *The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze*, "Critical Inquiry."

While Faure's work focuses on Buddhist imagery, his essay discusses the power of the icon and can be applied to iconography as a whole. He analyzes the "work-being" and the "object-being" of the icon, stating the nature of the icon blurs the distinction between presentation and representation. Influenced by what we already know, our "seeing" does not take the position of importance that Faure feels is relative to understanding the distinctions of

presentation and representation, the point of the icon being it is something that bridges the gap between the two realms. In addition to the object-being of the icon he speaks of the work-being, the motivation that is behind the creation of the work as symbolic which participates in the reality it represents.

7. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*.

Eliade speaks of man's reaction to nature as conditioned by culture and history. Religious man finds expression in experiencing opposition between the sacred space and the profane. He discusses the prospect that no man has completely desacralized life, there is religious behavior within that appears in other ways in man (such as superstitions). Every space implies an hierophany, every religious moment implies the cosmogonic moment. He introduces symbolism as it speaks to the whole human being (not just the intellectual) and warns of the consequences of removing cosmic sanctity from symbol reducing symbol representation to human emotion alone.

8. Langdon B. Gilkey, *Can Art Fill the Vacuum?*

Gilkey suggests that one significant role of art is to enhance a direct and immediate experience. He considers art as a reality in itself, for itself. Seeing art as it is is a significant enjoyment in the moment and in that moment, we are challenged to see in a new way. This Gilkey says is a re-creation. The essential role of art and the artistic is to re-create ordinary experience into valuable, enhanced experience. He suggests that when art stops the flow of time in an enhanced moment, a moment of new awareness, understanding, intense seeing and participation in what is being seen, then the transcendent appears through art, and art and religion approach one another.



Public Component:

For the public component to my research, I will reach out to contemporary art programs hosted by religious organizations. In addition to speaking with the religious hosts and curators of these programs, I plan to conduct interviews with artists who have exhibited within these programs.

Using Diane Apostolos-Cappadonna's guidelines and my questions afore mentioned, the goal of my research will be to bring about an understanding of the changing relationship of art in religious spaces, and thereby, on a larger level, to understand the changing relationship of the arts in religious and secular societies.

The intentions of the artist, the visions of the viewers and the role of the environment will all be considered in conjunction with the aim of the contemporary art programs in religious settings in determining what brings sacrality to the art.

The panel discussion guests are:

- Father Frank Sabatte, Director of "Openings" Art Program at St. Paul the Apostles NYC
- Katarina Wong, Artist and Director of Columbia University's Teachers College Gallery
- Michael Prettyman, Artist of religious works in Saint John's Episcopal Church

In looking at art and religion through the examination of doctrine, environment, intent and response, an analysis of contemporary art and religion begins to unfold. We can see what they have in common and what separates them, but can we determine meaning in art as inherent in the forms without consideration of place, intent and response?