

A Study of the Religious Recognition of Art

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Abstract. This article aims to examine the Religious Recognition of Art through review of the related theories, and distinguishable characteristics from religious and laic perspectives. The hypotheses state that religious art encompasses sacred themes and its narrations come from rationality and wisdom in an aesthetic manner. This kind of art is replete with secrets and allegories which bestows upon it an exclusive beauty. From a pious perspective, life is holy and it holds an endless entity in which there is no dearth while death is a new cycle of life which starts another form of living. Thus, existence is the expression of holiness and divinity as religious art can be presented through religious and celestial concepts. This kind of art consists of both religious subjects and structural artistic creation which lead to religious expressions altogether. Religious art is an aesthetic experience which is created and taken from sacred and heavenly matters beyond material issues. Thus, it is based on actual spiritual and sacred awareness; while it can also include religious civilizations and mystical signs and secrets but not just any particular religion.

Keywords: Religious Art, Spiritual Art, Signs and Secrets.

1. Introduction

The position of religious individual position and identification of their spiritual world and imagery depends on precise recognition of their wisdom and life history. History of religious art in its general sense is actually our own history which reflects human's imagination, desires and understanding when encountering the eminent power. Religious people in all communities and religions live beyond history and ubiquitous and holly phenomena form their recognition. But religious people in contemporary world have fallen behind from spiritual reality and the representation of their art is not an exception. Sometimes in modern society, artists who approach the perception of reality express their spiritual and religious view in an uncommon way which is one of the differences between an artist in a religious society and those who live in the modern world.

Experts believe religious art has its origins in religious thought. Effects of this art include a gathering of the apparent and the true meaning of religion, and while being closely linked together, each serves as a transport for the other. "The language of the sacred art comes to light due to forgathering of religious thoughts. Therefore, despite the fact that many artistic styles may have a religious subject, they are not considered "holy". Sacred Arts arose from religions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism, and their supernatural and symbolic world is based on principles of their religion"(Kamrani, 1999: 147).

Encryption is one of the characteristics of thought in religious people; this thought is transfigured in a holy atmosphere in the sacred art. Mysteries connect religious people and their perceptible world to a world beyond the perceptible one.

2. Religious Insight of Art

Traditional art in a traditional civilization is formed when the artistic works benefit from the sources of that tradition. Religious art, as a branch of this kind of art, enjoys an immediate communication with the secrets of its religious practices. Religious art presents divine and religious themes. Works of art, which somehow are the emanation of religious people's evident observations, express religious ideas and a perceptible aspect of sacred worlds' observations. Since the artist has divine features, he benefits from God's attributes in the creation of his masterpiece.

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Religious art represents the common beliefs about human in contrast to divinity. This artistic view sometimes enjoys spirituality and includes educational, historical, and visual aspects. Religious phenomena enjoy sacred characteristics. Religious art is an aesthetic experience of an eminent, sacred and heavenly matter which goes beyond material affairs. It shows sacred and heavenly world(s) and is based on secrets of the mystic and a religious insight which includes all forms of religious civilizations and is not restricted to one particular religion. "A glance at art history, from primitives' arts to that of today, shows that a sacred or eminent matter in religious art is sometimes manifested highly abstract like geometric and decorative shapes, sometimes in a naturalistic and expressionistic way and other times symbolic, coded and figurative, and at times expresses the depth of feeling, faith and religious experience; it is associated with many deformations" (Rahnavard, 2003:16). Religious works of art, either in the art of primitives or in that of expressing religious schools, is an aesthetic experience of an exalted matter, whether it is expressed abstractly through the use of codes and allegories or through figurative and pure reality. Burckhardt believes "the framework of sacred art is the symbolic expression" and considers the symbolic expression a natural part of sacred art. In his view sacred art is the one which expresses the celestial secrets and is an ironic, allegory and coded reflection of God's creations" (Burckhardt, 1997:7).

Some believe that the relationship between religious art and symbolism is a natural one; i.e. symbol is a natural and essential characteristic of religious art. Whatever exists in heavens and the earth is a symbol and a sign indicating the creator of this world. Symbol and code in religious art is not a conventional matter; while they are conventional in the non-religious one, because neither totality of the work nor its parts have the property of "leading to Him". Religious art indicates divine truths and should imitate the divine creations.

"The codified and allegorical aspect of religious art is the most fundamental characteristic of this kind of art. A traditional art is beautiful and manifests beauty; because symbolism is based on the facts of the world of existence and the higher worlds. Since a symbol is a transcendental fact, it can never be unsightly. That's why the ancient art is often coupled with the beauty, and traditional art is always beautiful" (A'vani, 1986: 100). Holy art is one that signifies God. "Holy is whatever that a divine matter can be found in it. Consequently, sacred art is that kind of an art in which exists the presence and closeness to God, and is the kind that whose observation reminds one of God" (A'vani, 1996: 318). "Sacred art notifies one of unity instead of multiplicity, beware him of negligence and oblivion, and leads him to the court of closeness to God" (Previous Resource: 319). Since "traditional art is also associated with the celestial matter, sacred art lies at the heart of traditional one, and just like religion, it is the truth and attendance" (Nasr, 2000: 75 - 76).

"Tradition creates an atmosphere in which the truths about that tradition are apparent. Humans breathe and live in such an atmosphere which is rich in meaning and is in compliance with the tradition. In other words, tradition creates its sacred art before expanding its philosophical and theological systems. This is evident in all divine and non-divine religions like Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. For example, first Islamic mosques were built before its philosophical and theological schools" (Nasr, 2001:426). Anything in sacred art is a secret of a higher truth that leads human to it and to lofty archetypes, thus causes a kind of pure intuition. Separation from material aspects and joining the holy worlds manifests innovation in sacred art, and it is through separating from the material worlds that human becomes worthy of receiving the light of knowledge from the source of truth. "When the sacred is manifested in every holy manifestation it becomes holy. This single rupture is not place congruence; rather, it is the appearance of an absolute reality which is in contrast to the non-reality of the spacious surrounding area. Ontologically speaking the manifestation of the sacred lays down the foundations of the universe" (Elyadeh, 1996: 47 - 89).

Expressive forms of religious art and sacred art include interpretable forms. In order to explain the signs and codes of such arts, interpretability tries to correspond the appearance to the subject matter; it also tries to show in a work of art the unity and centrality resulted from the interpretation. Unity and centrality in holy art are the appearance of the ideal world manifested in drawings and images. Religious artists and talented believers create artistic forms for their spiritual experiences and mystical observations whose main characteristic is based on symbolic expression, establishing order and unity; accordingly, a circle is a symbol of infinite, and the center of the circle represents absoluteness. "Religious art tries to manifest the purity aspects in its artistic expression and it avoids in its expression the likening to nature. That's why it avoids presenting objects in three dimensions and the use of perspective (Elyadeh, 1995: 254).

Interpretation of a work of art is based on the recognition of symbols, codes, comparisons, metaphors, ironies, and signs specific to the culture and civilization of which that art, in its particular situation, is an inseparable part. Different religious civilizations have symbols, signs and codes particular to them; however, it doesn't prevent deferent themes from sharing those signs and symbols. Every civilization's works of art presents the very same civilization's concepts. Although conforming religious cultures brought about commonalities in harmonizing sacred art's signs and symbols and religious art, but this harmonization has never caused mono-cultures in any era of mankind's history; thus, symbolic representation in sacred art is changeable by nature. In modernity era such a capability in art has been nullified due to the neglect of the holy matter. Therefore, concepts of holy art for people of this new era are hidden behind vague shapes and symbolic forms.

Interpreters of the new era impose their mental concepts and language to the art. This imposition causes the change or evolution of mental background of the audience and the interpreter, and at the subsequent confrontation another background causes another interpretation. In this case the work of art presents another concept. This can be a continuous process in the form of a dialectical encounter between the work of art, audience and interpreters. This hermeneutic change in sacred art tries to explore the meanings of the work of art in the heavenly worlds and religious experiences. The artist's personal codes or unfamiliar signs and bizarre symbols make the understanding of the meaning more difficult.

“Calligraphy is the noblest visual art in Islam and the holy book of Quran is considered the absolute sacred art. Each sacred art is based on knowledge and understanding of forms, or in other words on a symbolic costume which is a necessary part of forms. Sacred art is a secret and is needless of any other kind of achievements; it is also a sign and an irony whose radix is heavenly and whose models are a reflection of realities beyond the worlds of forms” (Burckhardt, 1997:815- 59). “Modernism considers art subjective, prestigious, emotional and personal; but holy art is neither a mental nor an emotional nor a prestigious affair. It is rather an objective reality” (A'vani, 1996:321). “Dividing art into sacred and non sacred is one of the achievements of the modern world. Unlike the modern world, such divisions have no place in traditional cultures (especially in the East) that nothing other than tradition exists” (Burckhardt, 1997:59). This meaning emerged at the time of Renaissance, when religious art was no longer holy, and when heavenly human turned into a terrene one.

2.1. Code and Symbol in Religious Art

Religious art being codified and symbolic has had few opponents among religious critics. Even if it is claimed that the nature of religious art is summarized in symbol and code, it won't be without a reason. Despite all this, there are some who doubt the existence of any symbol in art. Hossein Nasr, Burkhardt and Avini are among those who consider code and symbol in art as real. Avini states: “artistic expression, considering meaning, is in fact an allegorical and a symbolic expression; thus, “ambiguity” constitutes an intrinsic characteristic of artistic expression. It should be noted that by ambiguity it is not meant “pure ambiguity” or “absolute mystery”. Not any kind of ambiguity can be considered as a characteristic of artistic expression, but the ambiguous allegory or symbol, by its real meaning is intended” (Avini, 1998: 27).

Titus Burkhardt also believes that since the reality subject of the sacred art cannot be put into words, it's nothing but suggestion and irony. He adds: “The ultimate goal of sacred art is not recalling and remembering emotions, or transferring impressions; the sacred art is code. For this reason it only needs simple, primary and fundamental tools. Furthermore, it can be nothing but irony and reference; because, it's hard to put its reality subject into words, it has a heavenly origin, and its models are a reflection of realities beyond the material world. Sacred art which expresses and repeats the compendium of God's creations in an allegorical language, shows the cryptic nature of the world and thus frees human soul from attaching to the unstable and horrendous realities” (Burckhardt, 1997:9).

Symbolism came into the center of attention in the nineteenth century and some consider it a result of the romantic school. Mahmoud Bostani writes about symbolism, which he considers an independent school: “In Islamic perspective, using this kind of language is not an issue, on the condition that the codes maintain their implemental aspect; in other words, these codes or symbols can be utilized as a means of showing the extent of desired concept. The compilation of codes should not be indistinct as it is seen in the work of many

followers of this school” (Bostani, 1996: 90). Islamic art is a code of a belief, mystical intuition, perceptible and material worlds and in general a sign of spiritual worlds. And since art is a perceptible image of the spiritual world, the perceptible form always symbolizes a spiritual form and concept. However, sometimes excessive use of symbolism is seen. For example, Titus Burkhart considers Islamic places being closed among four walls as a code of the fact in Islamic society that every man can take four wives if he could be just too all four! Elsewhere in his book, the book of holy art, he writes: “Nudity can also be eligible for having sacred characteristics; because, it is a reminder of primary state of human and it also removes the distance between human and the universe. Hindu ascetic “is wearing the raiment of space” means his covering is space...” (Burckhardt, 1997:155).

3. Differences between Religious and Non-religious Art

Religious art is the manifestation of divine truth. Religious art imitates the divine creation and manifests God’s indication. Religious art shares foundational similarities with Islamic art, like the spirit of symbolism that is generally found in religious art. But also they, in turn, have their differences.

“The content of the work of art and how it was used is the most important issue in religious or sacred art; whereas, these factors only constitute an excuse for the joy and pleasure of the act of creation. However, in traditional civilizations an entirely religious art doesn’t exist. Art can be relatively non-religious, to the extent that its component parts become less of code and allegory and more of instinct of creativity... Religious art is representative of direct and indirect spiritual realities. Non-religious and common art should also express some values; otherwise, it would be wrongful” (Schuon, 1993:96- 99). In religious art form and meaning are in harmony, and reflect divine secrets and a spiritual insight; while, in non-religious art forms don’t follow a specific spiritual insight. It presents sensual worlds, emotions and feelings.

A necessary relationship between art and truth constitutes one of the characteristics of religious art. God is the absolute truth and beauty, and by depicting beauty, an artist explores truth according to his potency. But non-religious and non-divine art is not associated with truth. “Religious art has a rational characteristic and is a result of rationality which manifests it by beautifying. Since religious art naturally belongs to the observable world, it is the representation of a reality which is beyond the observable world. It is a true image that has never been created”(Schuon, 1993:100). Another feature of religious art is its spiritual aspect. There’s no religious art which is not sacred. Monotheism in the religious art dominates.

4. Conclusions

The following results were obtained from the discussions in this paper:

- Religious art presents the beauty of God and the divine light which manifest the existence of the world.
- A religious artist makes use of symbols to express exalted truths and discovers the imperceptible worlds through secrets, imaginary forms and different manifestations of imaginary faculty; thus, his perceptible art would represent an imperceptible subject. Basically, religious arts have a common aspect, i.e. their symbolic aspect because the entire universe is an indication of an exalted truth.
- Symbol is beautiful, because it is essentially a manifestation of an exalted truth. Beauty is a natural characteristic of religious arts; consequently, religious arts are all beautiful.
- One of the most important principles of religious art is paying attention to the meaning behind the apparent form. Since religious thinking always guides human to moving from the appearance to conscious, and summons human to ponder the truth of appearance, the art which is based on this kind of thinking, will have such a manifestation, and inevitably uses symbols to express it. Human would not be able to understand this language, unless he has reached intuition.
- Since religious art is subject to intellection and intuition and creates perfection and self-awareness, it is not necessarily emotional. Reaching the truth is another reason for its indisputability.

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