

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST”—Arts for the Mass—Fr. Steve Lape

Whenever I enter a Catholic church in my travels, the first thing that usually strikes me is the architecture and various styles of art inside: paintings, sculptures, icons, tapestries, relics, Stations of the Cross depictions, stained glass, and displays of various saints. Beautiful depictions of Christ and the saints through such art in a church can help me feel more immediately “at home” and spiritually enlivened as I prepare for prayer and Mass there. Art is always going to be a more subjective experience for everyone, since one person may look at a certain painting and see wonder, beauty & even a masterpiece, while someone else may see it as uninspiring or even ugly. Yet, art of some kind has always been of great importance in the Church since its earliest days, hopefully lifting up people’s hearts, minds & spirits to greater heights in desiring to know Christ and follow His ways.

Over the years, I’ve read various historical perspectives on the development of art among the Christian faithful. Certain holy images have been found on walls of catacombs and homes of Christians where Mass was celebrated, especially those who were persecuted for their faith during the first 3 centuries of the Church in the Roman Empire. After Christianity was legalized under Roman Emperor Constantine in the early 4th century, art began to flourish even more, as churches began popping up all over the empire and beyond. Early Christian artists were influenced by Roman styles of art and architecture, leading to the Church’s becoming a major influence on the development of Western art in general in the coming centuries.

Of course, there were peoples who fought against expressions of such religious art. Many Jews since the early centuries saw such depictions of God, saints or other holy realities as breaking the 1st Commandment—“I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.” It forbade any such graven images from being made or used. In their literal interpretation, such reverencing of graven images constituted idolatry. Many Muslims are against such images. During 2 periods of the 8th & 9th centuries, the Byzantine Empire banned religious art for the same reason. Many 16th century Protestant Reformers, such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli also cried foul over such holy works of art, leading to very plain white walls or

barren worship spaces for many different Protestant celebrations. Such groups as these who opposed sacred art were known as iconoclasts.

Yet, the Catholic Church does not see such art as idolatrous. Holy artworks are not intended to be worshipped as idols themselves, but serve as doorways into developing stronger, closer relationships with God and the community of saints & believers. When I see, for example, statues or stained glass window images of saints in St. Mary’s of the Lake and St. Benedict’s, I’m not only in awe of the talent and inspiration that went into creating these works of art, but my faith is set more on fire, as I recognize that the people represented in these images are part of my faith family. Just like we would have photos of loved ones around our homes to serve as signs of love as family for us, sacred art in churches aid us in experiencing God’s love from over the centuries to now and into the future, as we are all Church together! Also considering that most people of the 1st 18 centuries after Christ couldn’t read, seeing such holy images was a critical teaching tool for people to learn their catechism.



As stated in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (the Church’s official document outlining all the necessary rules, rituals and rubrics for celebrating Mass in the Roman Catholic Church), chapter 5 highlights this: “Sacred buildings... for divine worship should be truly worthy and beautiful and be signs and symbols of heavenly realities. Consequently, the Church constantly seeks the noble assistance of the arts and admits the artistic expressions of all peoples and regions. In fact, just as she is intent on preserving the works of art and the artistic treasures handed down from past centuries, and, insofar as necessary, on adapting them to new needs, so also she strives to promote new works of art that are in harmony with the character of each successive age. On account of this, in commissioning artists and choosing works of art to be admitted into a church, what should be required is that true excellence in art which nourishes faith and devotion and accords authentically with both the meaning and the purpose for which it is intended.” (#288-289) So, thank God for artists who help color our faith lives!