

Recontextualizing Christian Iconography: Devotional Art in the Museum

Throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods in Europe, art not only served as a means of aesthetic exploration, but also as a functional tool in liturgical settings. Christianity dominated the government and culture, and art was implemented as a vehicle for spreading Christian messaging.¹ As these artworks have stood the test of time, they have naturally evolved with culture, religion, and the art around them. Many of these pieces are now on display in galleries where their function has shifted. Rather than fostering a connection between God and the viewer, these works now function primarily as examples of artistic mastery. In an attempt to create an objective space, the museum often secularizes these intrinsically religious works. I will explore two altarpieces: The Mond Crucifixion (1503) by Raphael, and the Wilton Diptych (1395–1399) by an unknown artist. The Mond Crucifixion is an oil painting on canvas, while the Wilton Diptych is a two-panel tempura on baltic oak. The Mond Crucifixion depicts Jesus after his death, surrounded by Saint Jerome, Mary Magdalene, the Virgin, and John the Evangelist, while the exterior panels of the Wilton Diptych illustrate a hart and two coats of arms. The interior panels of The Diptych depict Richard II, Saint John the Baptist, Edward the Confessor, Edmund the Martyr, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and eleven angels. Comparing the Mond Crucifixion's initial setting, in the Gavari Chapel of San Domenico in Città di Castello, Italy, with its current location at the National Gallery, reveals how discrepancies in framing, lighting, and location can alter the impact and narrative nuances of High Renaissance altarpieces. Furthermore, by comparing The Wilton Diptych's history, as a portable altarpiece, with its

¹Schwartz, Michael, "On the Post-Metaphysics of Painting: Raphael at the Limit," In *On the True Sense of Art: A Critical Companion to the Transfigurements of John Sallis*, edited by Michael Schwartz, Jason M. Wirth, and David Jones, 71, Northwestern University Press, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv47wd0d.10>.

current display in the National Gallery, the benefits and drawbacks of immobile museum displays are made evident.

The lighting scheme created by the Gavari Chapel's architecture interacted with the Mond Crucifixion, connecting 16th century viewers with Raphael's depiction of Christ's sacrifice. The Chapel's primary light came from the windows near the choir.² As one moved around the altar and observed the Mond Crucifixion, they would find a position in which the gold used to paint the sun reflected the outside light.³ Furthermore, the left-hand column of the chapel's niche shielded the light from the figures of the Virgin Mary and Jerome.⁴ This architectural feature made it so the figure of Mary Magdalene was most directly illuminated by the light.⁵ Raphael enhanced this lighting scheme by painting the Virgin and Jerome in dark colors.⁶ Conversely, he depicted Mary Magdalene wrapped in a bright pink fabric, extenuating her illumination.⁷ As the painting's colors engaged with the chapel's lighting, the boundaries of the outside world and the landscape of the painting were blurred, connecting viewers to this scene of sacrifice. As the congregation partook in the Eucharist, surrounded by pockets of shadow cast by the chapel's architecture, they would look to see Jesus's sacrifice and a mirrored color/lighting scheme. This allowed the congregation to relate their actions to Jesus. Raphael's intentionality becomes clearer when examining primary source documents that discuss his keen interest in the lighting of the chapels where his paintings were displayed. In a letter between the Italian diplomat, Baldassare Castiglione, and the patron, Isabella d'Este, Castiglione shares that Raphael had accepted a

²Hadjinicolaou, Yannis, Gastel, V. Joris, and Rath, Markus, *Synagonism: Theory and practice in Early Modern Art*, (Leiden: Brill, 2024). 114, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004693142>

³Ibid, 111.

⁴Ibid, 114.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid, 115

⁷Ibid.

painting commission, but had requested certain information beforehand;⁸ According to Castiglione, Raphael was invested in choosing a spot for his painting that exposed it to natural light.⁹ The painter requested information on the windows of the chapel he would be painting.¹⁰ This letter highlights the value Raphael placed on external lighting, and thus proves that his interplay between subject and context was not accidental.

In contrast to the dramatic lighting within the Gavari Chapel, the National Gallery illuminates the Mond Crucifixion evenly, emphasizing its composition. The London-based museum employs skylights that are scattered via diffusers and softened by opaque glass windows to illuminate Raphael's altarpiece.¹¹ This lighting causes minimal formation of shadows. This gives the painting a level of uniformity that was not possible within the Gavari Chapel. While the lighting enables viewers to better observe Raphael's meticulous brush strokes and details, it also visually homogenizes the subjects and strips the painting of its relationship with the outside world.¹² Thus, the National Gallery diminishes the connection between viewer and subject intended by Raphael, while simultaneously encouraging a viewing that is most concerned with form over effect. While the impact of lighting was important to Raphael, the artist considered various other site-specific factors.

The height of the Mond Crucifixion in the Gavari Chapel functioned as a catalyst for continued devotion. Hung inches above the altar, the Mond Crucifixion was intended to interact with the Eucharist; as the priest raised the host, the congregation would have seen the "body" of

⁸Ibid, 113.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Bem, Caroline, "A Moveable Form: The Diptych in Art, Book Culture, and (Post) Cinema," McGill University (Canada), May 2015, 103, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/b5d8c99cf2c335eebaa9b7da33a3d39c/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

¹²Ibid.

Christ against the physical sacrifice of Jesus, depicted by Raphael.¹³ This marriage of Eucharist and Jesus's crucifixion was most evident when the congregation was kneeling, as their positioning perfectly aligned the raised bread with the body of Jesus on the cross.¹⁴ Even when mass was not occurring, there would have been a "memory" of the Eucharist that informed the viewing of the Mond Crucifixion.¹⁵ Just as the relationship between the Chapel's lighting and the painting's colors encouraged devotion, the marriage between the imagery of the Eucharist and Jesus on the cross connected the congregation's actions with Christ's experiences.

Furthermore, the placement of the painting behind the altar encouraged a more nuanced understanding of Christ that aligned with Renaissance ideologies. By placing the painting above the eye-line and situating the altar between the congregation and the painting, Raphael created a separation between viewers and Christ.¹⁶ This visual separation was juxtaposed with the visual inclusion created by the lighting and color choices. This paradoxical relationship aligned with the beliefs of the Medieval and Renaissance periods, where Christ was viewed as eternally human and also eternal divine. The period of the Middle Ages marked an increased interest in framing Christ as exceeding any metaphysical position.¹⁷ According to theologian, Jérôme Baschet, art from this period often included "visible objects that helped reach the contemplation of the invisible."¹⁸ This is also sometimes referred to as "dissemblance," wherein by depicting a figure that does not represent Christ, the viewer contemplates the mysteries of Christ.¹⁹ By increasing

¹³Schwartz, "On the Post-Metaphysics of Painting," 71.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Marc Bayard, In Front of the Work of Art: The Question of Pictorial Theatricality in Italian Art, 1400–1700, *Art History*, Volume 33, Issue 2, April 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2010.00742.x>

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Reddaway, Chloë, "Christ Is Not like a Snail: Signs and Symbols | The Audacity of Christian Art | National Gallery," YouTube, October 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbY_2l9dnFQ.

and decreasing the proximity between Christ and the congregation, viewers were asked to contemplate the unexplainable/non-visible qualities of Jesus, such as his metaphysical positioning.

In contrast to its dynamic setting in the Gavari Chapel, The Mond Crucifixion's lower height and sparse surroundings in the National Gallery decrease viewers' understanding of Jesus, while shifting the work's function from religious to artistic. Within the Sainsbury Wing, Raphael's altarpiece hangs 100 cm from the ground. Viewers can get inches away from the work, observing details that were not visible in the Gavari Chapel. While this allows viewers to closely examine Raphael's technique, it diminishes the feeling of separation achieved by the work's former setting. Thus, by giving onlookers a better view of the painting, the National Gallery paradoxically denies viewers a more accurate depiction of Jesus as both human and divine. Furthermore, the altarpiece's museum setting has transformed its primary function from a liturgical item to an artistic masterpiece. The painting's access places an onus on viewers to examine the details of the painting. Thus, the lighting, height, and positioning in the National Gallery have shifted the Mond Crucifixion's function. While its recontextualization in a museum setting has altered many of its former intended effects, it does allow for a more holistic viewing of the altarpiece.

The paintings surrounding the Mond Crucifixion contextualize and add meaning to Jesus' sacrifice. Scholar James Clifton argues that "by displaying works by chronology and geography, Christian art is subsumed into a narrative of the history of style - no regard to its subject matter and initial function."²⁰ While the National Gallery has surrounded the Mond Crucifixion with

²⁰ Clifton, James, "Truly a Worship Experience? Christian Art in Secular Museums," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 52 (2007): 107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167746>.

chronologically similar paintings (within a 20-year time frame), the curator's efforts to assemble works with similar themes add depth to Jesus's story. Along with the Mond Crucifixion, room 11 of the Sainsbury Wing holds works by Filippino Lippi, Raphael, and Luca Signorelli.²¹ The inclusion of Luca Signorelli's *The Circumcision* is valuable, as it engages in an overt dialogue with Raphael's *Crucifixion*; both demonstrate Jesus's sacrifice. Signorelli's inclusion of a metal basin under baby Jesus draws attention to the inevitable bloodshed that will occur with his circumcision.²² The painting depicts the moments before Jesus first bled for mankind, while the *Mond Crucifixion* depicts Jesus' last bloodshed. The paintings' proximity draws a connection between Jesus in infancy and Jesus during his crucifixion. The association highlights Jesus's lifelong sacrifice for mankind.

As has been proven, the liturgical settings of the *Mond Crucifixion* blended with the formal attributes of the painting, binding them as one. When relocated to the National Gallery, aspects of the work's intended impact were disregarded. While this altarpiece was influenced by its initial setting, many altarpieces lacked any one specific setting. For example, *The Wilton Diptych* was a portable devotional painting likely created for Richard II's campaigns in Ireland.²³ The altarpiece consists of two hinged wooden panels, painted on both sides. It likely acted as a backdrop to Richard's celebration of mass and was thus personalized for him.²⁴ This is evident by the depiction of Richard II on the left inside panel of *The Diptych*.²⁵ Much like the *Mond Crucifixion*, the *Wilton Diptych* was intended to engage in a conversation with the devotee, while

²¹Bem, "A Moveable Form," 38,

²²Basin circumcision

²³Buskirk, Jessica E. "Intimacy and Anticipation in the Devotional Portrait Diptych," University of California, Berkeley, published April 2008, 55.
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/660b841c87dcb2563deaf8a6573af958/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750>.

²⁴Ibid, 30.

²⁵Ibid.

accurately portraying humans in relation to Christ. However, unlike Raphael's work, the Wilton Diptych achieved this by its temporal state rather than its fixed setting.

The Wilton Diptych's malleability was central to its devotional impact. Because of its function as a portable altarpiece, the Wilton Diptych was designed to be easily folded and stored during travel. While The Diptych's malleability had a practical function (storage during transit), it also served as a means of connecting Richard II with the object. Scholar Caroline Berm claims that the process of opening any diptych or triptych sparks a transformation in the viewer, wherein the limited range of colors on the front of the altarpiece is overwhelmed by the bright pigments and abundance of subjects on the inside panels.²⁶ Berm writes that "the beholder's sensation of wonder can be accounted for through the emergence of a new object - a form that distinguishes itself from the diptych's previously closed state."²⁷ This can be applied to the Wilton Diptych, as the panels on the outside display two figures in isolation. On the left, a white hart is depicted with charcoal grey shadows against a dark green rosemary thicket. The right panel depicts a shield, cresting, and mantle, as well as the arms of England, impaled with the arms of Edward the Confessor. The outside color scheme is darker and the subjects are depicted in isolation. Conversely, the inside panels are bright blue and illustrate various figures clumped together. The devotee's emotional transformation would have mirrored the physical transformation in size and aesthetics that The Diptych underwent when opened.²⁸ This mimetic relationship would have connected Richard II with the devotional piece, as they transformed in harmony.

Furthermore, The Diptych's spatial and aesthetic transformation would have mirrored the transformation of bread into Jesus's body. This shared metamorphosis tied The Diptych to the

²⁶Berm, "A Moveable Form," 38,

²⁷Ibid, 50.

²⁸Ibid, 51.

Eucharist, enforcing its purpose as a devotional object. According to Caroline Bem, The Wilton Diptych's transformation from closed to open symbolized the paradox of transubstantiation, the ability "to exist as two substances or two object-states at once."²⁹ The mobility of The Diptych made it so that whenever it was in one state, its other states existed within the object as its past and future; as an opened altarpiece, the Wilton Diptych's former and impending state as "closed" might have existed in the mind of Richard II.³⁰ The altarpiece's ambiguous existence mirrored the fundamental paradox of transubstantiation, wherein the bread exists both as wheat, water, and yeast, as well as the physical body of Christ.³¹ As the bread was picked up and eaten, the transformation that would soon occur with its ingestion informed the way it was handled. Naturally, the body's former state as bread was remembered after its ingestion. This connection reinforced The Diptych's devotional purpose, as the object's temporality drew Richard II's attention to Christ's sacrifice.

In contrast to The Wilton Diptych's original settings, the piece now sits permanently open at the National Gallery. Its positioning in the gallery eliminates the functional purpose of the object while decreasing the intimacy fostered by its former transient state. The Diptych no longer impacts the viewer by undergoing a spatial transformation. Thus, the viewer can no longer undergo a psychological metamorphosis. Scholar Philip Fisher discusses the museum as a script that makes certain acts possible and others impossible.³² In his discussion, Fisher asserts that when a sword is bolted down in a museum, "we cannot say that the balance or imbalance is even a fact about the sword."³³ In their stagnance, objects formerly defined by their movement become

²⁹Ibid, 53.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Fisher, Philip. "Local Meanings and Portable Objects: National Collections, Literatures, Music, and Architecture." *Studies in the History of Art* 47 (1996): 19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622114>.

³³Ibid, 20.

redefined altogether. In placing *The Diptych* in a permanent position, the National Gallery not only eliminates the relationship between viewer and object, but also eliminates the relationship between the object and the ritual of the Eucharist.

While it may seem that both the Wilton Diptych and the Mond Crucifixion are fully secularized by their setting in the National Gallery, an exploration of the glass display case surrounding *The Wilton Diptych* demonstrates the inadvertent inclusion of Christian ideologies within the National Gallery. As has been previously mentioned, the late Middle Ages marked an increased belief in mass as a ritual intended to demonstrate Christ's duality as human and divine.³⁴ By placing *The Diptych* within a glass case, the National Gallery has illustrated Christ in a manner that aligns with 14th-century thinking. While the display case protects the work from any damage, it also embodies a separation between museum-goer and object, much like the architecture in the Gavari Chapel encouraged a separation of congregation and Christ. The glass acts as a physical boundary between the visitor and the devotional object, which creates a separation between the viewer and the figure of Christ depicted on *The Diptych*.³⁵ Conversely, the glass case allows for visible access for the viewer, connecting them to the object and figure of Christ.³⁶ Thus, the display case affords viewers an understanding of Christ that aligns with the beliefs of those using *The Diptych* in the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance.

As argued above, the Mond Crucifixion and the Wilton Diptych are actors in a social script determined by the museum. Similarly, these paintings were once actors in a script determined by the Church. Functionally, the Mond Crucifixion served as a reminder of mass within its chapel setting; however, its intended impact on the congregation was far more

³⁴Bem, "A Moveable Form," 103.

³⁵Berns, Steven, Considering the glass case: Material Encounters Between Museums, Visitors and Religious Objects, *Journal of Material Culture*, 21(2), 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183515615896>

³⁶Ibid.

complex. The relationship between the Gavari Chapel's lighting and the Mond Crucifixion's color palette fostered a relationship between viewer and subject that encouraged piety. The altarpiece's paradoxical connection with and separation from the congregation demonstrated the relationship between Jesus and his devotees. Thus, through its liturgical context, the Mond Crucifixion encouraged the ritual of the Eucharist and the congregation's pious contemplation. Conversely, the altarpiece now functions as a relic of artistic mastery. Its flat lighting, low height, and accessibility have secularized it while calling attention to its form over liturgical function. The Wilton Diptych complicates this discussion, as it was originally intended to have no set location. The Diptych's malleability connected Richard II with God and encouraged piety. Its physical transformation sparked an emotional transformation in those who used it, while calling attention to the transformation of the Eucharist. Its current setting in the National Gallery limits this transformation; however, it does demonstrate Christ in relation to viewers. Whether intentional or not, the glass display case creates a separation from and connection with the devotional object and its subjects. This aligns with the beliefs about Jesus that emerged during the Middle Ages. The evolution of these two pieces demonstrates the impact of setting on function. They both may be composed of wood, canvas, and oil paints, yet, subscribed within their DNA is the lighting, architecture, and culture that surrounds them. This prompts a reflection on the role of museums. Should a piece of art's initial function be preserved within its gallery setting? Or should we accept the inevitable evolution of artwork, and the unexpected benefits that may come from it?

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