

# A CRITIQUE OF SOME FORMS AND CONTENT OF BIBLICAL PAINTINGS OF ARTISTS OF THE 14<sup>TH</sup> TO 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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## **Abstract**

Drawing inspiration from the story line of books is one of the greatest and interesting challenges there is for the visual artist as it compares to painting from life. This challenge includes costume, type of architecture and the scenery under study. This paper brings to the fore the liberty taken by many artists of the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century that have painted with their cultural backgrounds as the inspirational matrix that inspired the works they produced. As liberal as art has been and still is, they freely made the paintings without any adherence to the contextual source they made the paintings from. This they did perhaps with the aim of fulfilling their creative verve and meet the demand of their patrons making attempts at propagating Christianity. The paper suggests the need for contemporary African artists to consider using written text to produce picturesque works that are lost to the lack of the camera.

The patronage of the Fine Arts in the classical period has today left us with some of the most interesting of record keeping materials that the lack of photographic devices could not do simply because of the level of civilisation at the time. As many families sent their sons and daughters to farms and sea ports to fish, music and art schools had their doors opened to those that could afford to pay to be apprenticed and become masters of their chosen art field. Noble men, women and the church held the reigns of control in the promotion of the Fine Arts as a whole such that the poor merely dreamt of ever being painted, sculpted or eulogised like the rich. The church on one hand had the bible as the platform on which an artist could be patronised, either by commission or by self-driven inspiration. While the noble and royalty had court artists make paintings of themselves and their guests adorn the walls of their magnificent homes and palaces.

With the limitless pool of inspiration an artist can paint and sculpt from books that has stories in them have over the years made for picturesque depictions.

Apart from this, these paintings help to preserve for the future generation to better understand the level of civilisation of the period depicted. The Bible has, and still remains a resource book for many artists and illustrators whose works appear in school books among other types of books to teach various lessons. The role played by the church in European art cannot be overemphasised. This is seen in the dominance of biblical themes that

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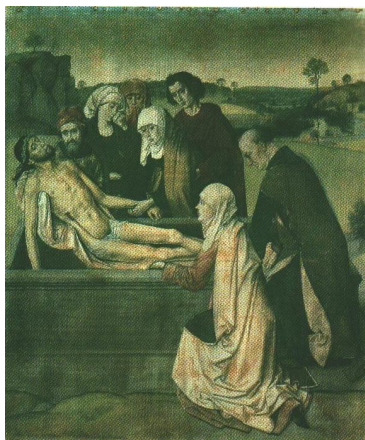
characterise the works produced. Narni-Terni in Menyah (2001:144) asserts that. The ecclesiastical and global authority of the Catholic Church and the Popes from the medieval times through the renaissance to the present day owes much to the political illustrations...and a host of biblical illustrators. They used pictures exclusively to hold human thoughts in the straight jacket of Christian dogma.

Suffice to say therefore that this also implies that the reason why some of these works bear propaganda undertones is borne out of the intention to engender the continuous patronage from the Pope and other rich clients.

It is important to note that this study focuses only on various painters and their seeming inability to capture the specific objects that existed in the scenes depicted. The scenes, judging from their titles took place in a culture completely different from theirs. This study is categorised into two by which the works will be discussed. This is with the aim of drawing comparisons with other works of like intention that perhaps, made attempts at proper depictions of the forms and content.

### **Non-Contextual Use of Forms and Content**

In the painting in figure 1, the body of Jesus Christ is depicted in a process of been lowered into the tomb with the body lying open on the cloth. Instead, the Bible in John chapter 19 verse 40 states that “These two men took Jesus’ body and wrapped it in pieces of linen cloth with the spices. (This is how the Jews bury people.)” On this, the artistic licence may be seen to have been pushed beyond its boundary so that it negates the Jewish custom of burying their dead. However, the intention of the artist is to affirm the humanity of the devine Christ albeit his Godhead position that he relinquished so as to motivate faith in the viewers.



**Figure 1**  
Dieric Bouts (1400?-1475)  
The Entombment (1450-60)

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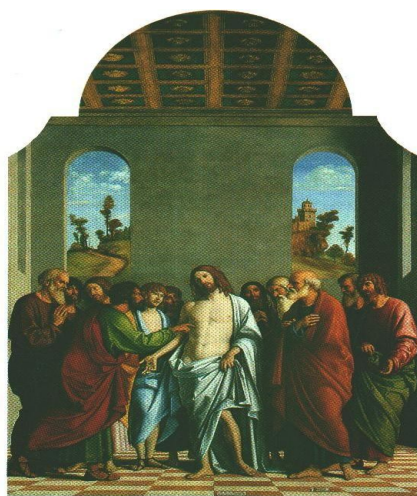
Glue size on linen

90 x 74cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

Again, it is a large linen-like piece of cloth that is used instead of the customary long strips of cloth as depicted in figure 7. Furthermore, in Luke chapter 23 verse 53 states that..."Then he put it in a tomb that was dug in a wall of rock..." This also differs from what has been depicted in the painting above, albeit the possibility of painting the scene from the available texts among others are potent enough as guide to depicting a story in context to the content. Langmuir (1994:30) explains that "...the figures are dressed in contemporary clothes." The reason for this is perhaps, to elicit from the viewers a parallel relationship expected of the would-be believers.

In figure 2, Conegliano depicts Jesus in a large single drape of cloth as though he was just getting out of the tomb. However, it had been mentioned earlier that Jews bury their dead in strips of cloth.



*The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*

**Figure 2**

Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano (1459/60-1517/18)

The incredulity of Saint Thomas

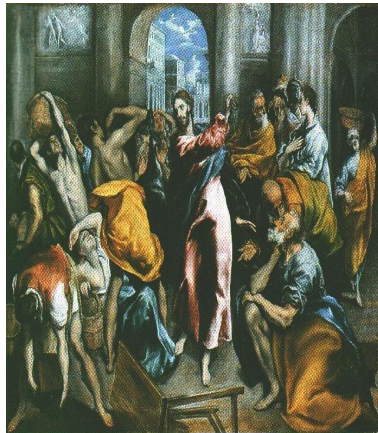
Oil on poplar, transferred to linen

294 x 199cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

The crux of the critique in the painting is the architecture that no doubt differs from the type that existed in the time of Christ and before. The town where Jesus grew up and sojourned was arid with abundance of clay. Straw and thatched roofing characterised most of the houses built at the time. The one depicted here in this painting is one that will no doubt be a far cry from where

Jesus met his disciples at the time. This is with the aim of bringing the potency of the risen Christ closer to the generation of the time the painting was made. El Greco's painting is also another painting that clearly depicts non-contextual use of imagery with the aim of drawing the souls of the viewers to the message depicted.



**Figure 3**

El Greco (1541-1614)

Christ driving the Traders from the Temple (about 1600)

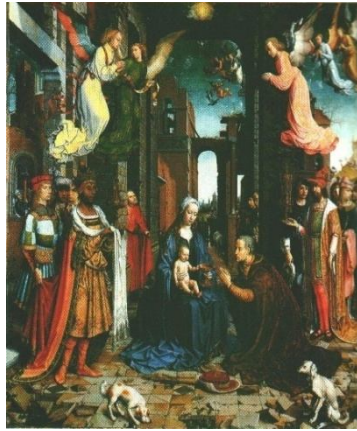
Oil on canvas

106 x 130cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

On both walls beside the entrance, El Greco depicts two relief sculpture scenes from the Old Testament; the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden on the left, and the sacrifice of Isaac on the right. These are however, pointers to the dispensation Christ has come to redeem man from on the left, and his death on the cross as an epitome of salvation, on the right relief.

Christ's birth though was heralded but not in the pomp and pageantry that is depicted in figure 4 by Gossaert. There were basically five people when Jesus was visited by the three kings as recorded by the bible; his parents and the three kings. Instead the artist, caught up in the excitement of the birth of the son of god, who is also king of kings, and perhaps, with the intent of making an impression on the spirits and souls of the viewers, made the flamboyant painting. The painting itself overtly differs from biblical account found in Matthew chapter 2 verses 12 that states "but God warned the wise men in a dream not to go back to Herod. So they went home to their own country a different way".



**Figure 4**

Jan Gossaert also called Mabuse (active 1503-died 1532)

The adoration of the Kings (1500-15)

Oil on wood

177 x 161cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

This instruction from God came on the hills of King of Herold's intention to kill Jesus. Again, the architecture differs from the manger and they lived temporarily where cattle are fed. The intention of the artist in the painting above is to perhaps appeal to the sensibility of the rich and affluent to be converted to Christ's teaching on humility.

In the work of Bassano in figure 5, the woman on the bottom right of the painting is Saint Veronica who despite the grief and pain of the moment is flamboyantly dressed by the artist to perhaps, to further please the parish that commissioned the work, heightening the appeal to the rich as done by Mabuse above.



**Figure 5**

Jacopo Bassano (active 1535-died 1592)

The way to Calvary (about 1540)

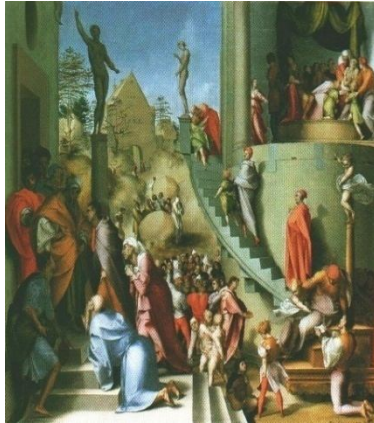
Oil on canvas

145 x 133cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

The two men from the top left of the painting are not dressed as Roman soldiers of the time of Christ, but more like Venetian soldiers of the artist's time. The other two on the top right hand corner of the painting could be mistaken for a discussion between a Venetian nobleman and another. The three other women, the three Marys are dressed in the Venetian female costume instead of the Jewish one. This was aimed at touching a variety of class strata in the artist's cultural milieu and generation for the church's intention of soul winning to succeed.

The titling of paintings at times is also simplistic so that it appeals to the different persons in their varying degrees of understanding. For example, the painting in figure 5 above cannot bring any controversy as to the theme depicted, while the painting in figure 6 brings to bare the Italian styled flight of stairs at par with what Jacob might have seen in his dream yet, using relevant visuals that Italians were used to so as to enable them understand the thrust of the bible story.



**Figure 6**

Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557)

Joseph with Jacob in Egypt (1518?)

Oil on wood

96 x 109cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

Apart from the depiction of the figures of Joseph and Jacob on the left with the rest of their Jewish family members, the rest of the figures in the

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painting does not depict the citizens of Egypt, albeit their mode of dressing. The three sculpture pieces in the painting are not what Egyptian monumental cubical paintings look like. And the architecture is no doubt Italian and not anyway near Egyptian architecture of the era before the modern times of today. The building between the two sculpture works is a church which did not exist in Egypt at the time of Joseph's stay, while the trees are Florentine and not palm trees that predominantly dot Egypt's landscape.

In figure 7, the painting is mellowed into a sunset, almost a night scene that yet needs no lamps that can prevent the novice viewer from seeing the landscape in the background.



**Figure 7**

Sebastiano del Piombo (about 1485-1547)

The raising of Lazarus (about 1517-19)

Oil on wood, transferred to canvas, remounted on synthetic panel

381 x 289cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

Langmuir (ibid:150) explained that “while striving for Roman grandeur, Sebastiano imbued the huge panel with Venetian atmosphere, setting the figures in a vast landscape extending to the high horizon.” This position chosen by the artist to depict Venice instead of Jerusalem simply shows his attempt at drawing the viewer to the relevance of Christ to his generation. However, the shadows have not concealed the aqueduct in the centre of the painting in the distant landscape, and neither are the magnificent buildings hidden on the top left of the building. The pillow of clouds stretching across the sky in the painting is also a great rarity in arid Israel. Just like the previous Netherlands and Venetian painters discussed before this work in figure 7, they continue to depict the figures in their own costumes for the sake of making the bible stories relevant to a people whose culture and time differs from those written in the bible.

**Near Contextual Use of Forms and Content**

In figure 8, Tintoretto's painting made the ground a carpeted one which might have been inspired by his own studio floor.



**Figure 8**  
Jacopo Tintoretto (1518-1594)  
Christ washing his Disciples' feet (about 1556)  
Oil on canvas  
201 x 408cm  
Source: The National Gallery companion guide

The floor however also would be a delight for the affluent of the time to be able to relate to Christ as one that is wealthy yet modest in disposition. The costume as always continues to be a contemporary of the artist's locale. The next painting in figure 9 would also brings in buildings that the people of his time can relate with such that it gives a feeling that Christ actually was in Italy in his lifetime on earth.





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**Figure 9**

Titian (active about 1506-1576)

'Noli me Tangere' (1510-15?)

Oil on canvas

109 x 91

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

The trend of depicting male figures in the nude is perhaps, borne out of the fact that the groin is the only thing a man has to cover, and from the man's point of view, it does not engender much indecency as it compares to that of a nude female figure. The point in this is that the person of Christ is depicted as one who displays transparency and purity, which is also depicted where he was under arrest or being taken to Golgotha as depicted in figure 5. Again, Mary in the painting is also dressed as a Venetian and not in the Jewish clothing.

In figure 10, Caravaggio's painting shows the bare wall of the interior he has placed the group that is close to what the interior might have looked like at the time.



**Figure 10**

Caravaggio (1571-1610)

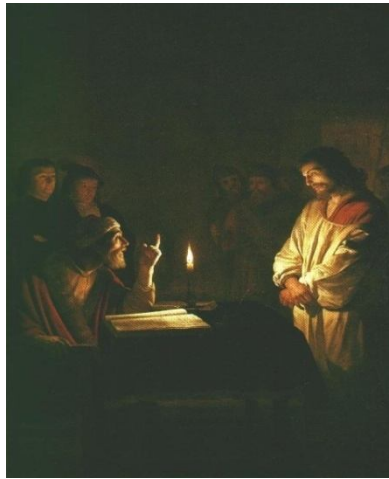
Supper at Emmaus (1601)

Oil on canvas

141 x 196cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

The bowls are not made from clay but metal which differs from the ones used by Jews within the context of the period depicted. This is perhaps made to motivate the rich of Christ's ability to relate with all without disparity. Honthorst's painting in figure 11 which was produced 16 years also depicts a solemn feel like Caravaggio's in figure 10. Lamps made from clay were the traditional Jewish light source except for the torches borne by Roman soldiers while they held Israel as one of her colonies.



**Figure 11**

Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656)

Christ before the High Priest (about 1617)

Oil on canvas

272 x 183cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

The interior also bears credence to the bare humility typical of most of the interiors of the lower class against the backdrop of the control the Roman Empire had over Israel and many other cities and nations. Though the way Jesus' dressing is depicted shows a prelude to the later states of manhandling, he is dressed in the Dutch mode of dressing; this is also seen in those of other figures in the painting. Despite these formalistic mannerisms, the scene bares good semblance with a Jewish scene as it compares to the other seven works in the previous category.

Rembrandt in figure 12 depicts the feast of Belshazzar with near resemblance by using gold embellished Dutch robes similar to those that were worn in Babylon.



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**Figure 12**

Rembrandt (1606-1669)

Belshazzar's feast (about 1636-8)

Oil on canvas

168 x 209cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

The other figures are also dressed in expensive Dutch costumes befitting of those attending a king's feast, yet, not of the Babylonian origin. In figure 13, Reni depicts the only surviving people that escaped Sodom, leaving out the chance of seeing the pillar of salt Lot's wife had turned into.



**Figure 13**

Guido Reni (1575-1642)

Lot and his Daughters leaving Sodom (about 1615-16)

Oil on canvas

111 x 149cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

Reni went ahead to use symbolism to describe the story as expressed by Langmuir (op cit: 233) that "...they are proceeding towards incest, the elder daughter carrying the fateful wine." Neither of the three knew that Lot's wife will look back and there was no exclusive prophesy revealed to them hence, the plan to commit incest. The attempt at explaining intensions by a particular character from a biblical account ends up creating a challenge in depicting the original story; moreover, the darkness under which the trio are depicted still indicates the feel of an impending foul play. Maes in figure 14 though depended on his Dutch costume to dress his figures; the painting captures a solemn moment of care and attention to the smallest of peoples that might be dimmed unimportant.



**Figure 14**

Nicolaes Maes 1634-1693)

Christ blessing the Children (1652-3)

Oil on canvas

206 x 154cm

Source: The National Gallery companion guide

Just as soon as Christ announced that the children be allowed to come to him, he is crowded by children. Although it is dark, Maes mystifies the source of light coming from the left side of the painting. Akolo (1992:29) explained that “Some reviews are just a play with words while others actually misrepresent the works.” In some of these representations, the critic praises the work as it parallels the original story that gave life to the work. Mounier in Adamson (2005:166) asserts that

...it is necessary to put back a bit of order in the House of Art...to rediscover the direction of each artistic essence is a preliminary task of putting things in their place, perhaps, accentuating distinction for a while in order to see clearly, to avoid misrecognition of the resonances between one order and another, without giving in, above all, to the academic superstition of the “genre”, which today is a task of urgent priority.

The above statement comes on the heels of the various trends of the 1930s such as Dada among others. Yet, for this paper, though the artists whose works are discussed are long gone, but the art historians, critics and artists that are practising today must make integrity based comments on works that draw inspiration from any text of proven originality without taking advantage of the layman’s blindness to the visual arts. Bazaine in Adamson (ibid: 114) explained that.

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...the purpose of painting is not simply to capture simulacral surface appearances of an object, but to give a viable form and authentic meaning to a life that experienced as a symbiotic engagement with the exterior world and with interior, or spiritual, imperatives.

Most of the renaissance artists to a large extent were more concerned with impressing their rightly artistically hungry clients through the display of skill on the platform of relevance to the cultural milieu they lived. This prompted the use of contemporary costumes architecture and landscapes as against the generally arid and serene scenery of the Jewish landscape of Christ's time. Franco in Shearman (1967:168) posit that

I hold the painting and sculpture of Michelangelo to be a miracle of nature; but I would praise it so much more if, when he wants to show the supremacy of his art in all that posturing of naked limbs, and all those nudes..., he did not paint it on the vault of the Pope's chapel, but in a gallery, or some garden loggia.

It is clear from the above that even with Bishop Cirillo Franco's letter screaming sacrilege; both artists and patron turned a deaf ear. This led to the use of nude figures in many of these religious paintings perhaps with the aim of exposing God's primal intention of transparency, purity, and a life that is not given to greed.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the clients were at loss for words at the skill of depictions the artists displayed. This subsequently led to the continuous production of creative works that led to the deaf ear turned to a call to a correction among others that could have marred the artistic creativity of art and the ease in the propagation of Christianity; and some of what is today termed Christian art.

### **Recommendations**

This study suggests to contemporary artists to delve into the use of written materials that can be depicted to reveal visual possibilities that have been lost to the lack of the camera.

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