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29 'Logic of Theology' and 'Sensibility of Naturalism' in Christian Art:
Analysis of the Shade and Shadow in Crucifixion

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Artworks are usually understood as phenomenon belonging to the field of sensibility. Artists execute their works following their sensibility and spectators enjoy them according to their sensibility. However, if we analyze artworks in detail, we can find certain logic. In this short article, I would like to examine the logic in Christian art by considering Crucifixion paintings in the middle and modern ages as examples.

There are several techniques for rendering three-dimensional spaces on flat painting surfaces, such as perspective or foreshortening for creating a sense of depth or using shade and shadow for giving a stereoscopic effect to objects. Pliny wrote in his *Natural History* about the origin of paintings. There was a young girl who missed her love after going abroad. She outlined the shadow of his face on the wall[1]. This legendary episode reveals that the rendering of shadow was closely linked to the two-dimensional expression of paintings.

Actually, in the ancient Mediterranean world in which Pliny lived, we can observe rich approaches to render three-dimensional illusion on flat surfaces by using practical perspective, foreshortening, cast shadow, or shading. Such examples are, in a manner, the expression realized at the requests of both sides. Namely, Artists' logic pursues the plausible rendering of three-dimensional spatial effect on two-dimensional painting surfaces and spectators' sensibility expects 'joy of eyes' by enjoying the effect of Trompe-l'œil.

Abundant expressions of the volume of objects in the ancient world, however,

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[1]. Pliny, *Natural History*, Book XXXV, XLIII, 151.

underwent significant changes owing to the Christianization of the Mediterranean world. Since 313AD when the Roman Emperor Constantine gave official approval to the Christian mission, Christian art has been a leading cultural bearer in the Western world. However, there was a religious taboo against rendering holy figures, id est 'prohibition of idol worship'. 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Exodus 20:4)'. If one observes this commandment strictly, all images including holy figures must be inhibited. However, Christians asked for the image of God. Therefore, theologians in the early Christian era made up some theories to render the image of God. As a minute discussion about it is beyond the scope of this article, in conclusion, the pictorial expression of Christ was permitted, while the representation in a plastic figure was prohibited as idol in the early Christian days. Although Christian paintings were accepted, the illusionistic expression to create a sense of real flesh was still inhibited. The image of God should be the channel of meditation rather than the representational body of God. Hence, in the medieval Christian paintings, the shading or the cast shadow of objects for rendering the 3D image disappeared. Although in the transient period from the antiquity to the Middle Ages, the rendering of shade and shadow as the remnant of ancient days could be observed (Figure 1), it would be mainstream in medieval times to render the figures wearing the stylized vesture and eliminating the natural volume of the body (Figure 2)[2].

While in the Eastern Church, the above principal has been preserved essentially to the present, the circumstance was different in the Western Church. Entering the late Gothic period, the expression of shade and shadow was revived: the volume of the objects or the depiction of cast shadow based on naturalism gradually reappeared in paintings[3]. This change indicates that the demand of the spectators' sensibility, which required enjoying the scene in a painting as if it was performed live, overcame the religious logic inhibiting the illusionistic expression.

In this article, considering the examples rendering *Crucifixion*, I will examine 'the logic of theology' and 'the sensibility of naturalism' observed in them[4].

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[2]. In Figure 1, Icon from the fourth century, the transition phase from antiquity to medieval times, the approach to render the human body as a three-dimensional object can be seen: Highlights on the Christ's forehead or nose, the shading around his cheek, neck or eyes, and the expression of his palm. In the same Icon of Christ from the fourteenth century (Figure 2), the abovementioned features vanished and only the stylized white hatching on the face or the palm are traceable as the wisps of the modeling for human body.

[3]. On the renderings of shade and shadow in fifteenth-century Italy, see Toyama Koichi, Light and Shadow in Sassetta: The Stigmatization of Saint Francis and the Sermons of Bernardino da Siena, *Sassetta: The Borgo San Sepolcro Altarpiece*, ed. by Machtelt Israëls, Florence 2009, pp.305–315.

[4]. I collected 50 works of *Crucifixion* from the medieval to the baroque period. The following anal-

Figure 1. *Icon, Christ*, 6th Century, Monastery of Hagia Aikaterine, Mount Sinai.

Figure 2. *Christ Pantokrator*, 1363 c., Hermitage Museum, Sankt-Peterburg.

There are a large number of works rendering the Crucifixion of Christ, which represents the core of the Christian doctrine. Its iconographical features are also various among the works: some concentrate just on the Christ's cross and others render the variant people or circumstances around the cross. In Gospels, the scene of Crucifixion is described as below: 'And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise (Luke 23:39–43) '.

'Malefactors' are traditionally understood as 'thieves'; the former who cussed out Christ is known as 'the bad thief' and the latter who reproved him is known as 'the good thief'. Later, in the apocryphal Gospel, they were given names: Gestas (for bad) and Dismas (for good) respectively[5].

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ysis is based on this database.

5. The Gospel of Nicodemus (Acts of Pilate) 9:5, 10:2.

251

Figure 3. Bohemian unknown master, *Crucifixion*, 1360 c., Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

Figure 4. Ferrari, Gaudenzio, *Crucifixion*, 1513, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Varallo Sesia.

In Christian art, the cross of the good thief is allocated to the right side of Christ (honored position) and that of the bad to the left by tradition. This positioning is fixed, but other symbols of good and bad vary among the artworks. It is unexceptionally seen that Christ inclines his head to the right—the side of the good thief. In some works, the good thief turns his face to Christ and the bad thief away from the Lord (Figure 3). In other examples, the angel and the devil are added to distinguish good and bad (Figure 4). These expressions can be understood as the visualization of the logic of theology based on the biblical text.

The same rendering based on the logic of theology can be observed in the expression of shade and shadow in *Crucifixions*. Following the logic of theology, good and bad ones should be rendered brightly and darkly, respectively. For example, a north Italian painter Mantegna's (1431–1506) *Crucifixion* shows the good thief in bright and the bad thief in dark (Figure 5)[6].

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6. This work is one of the predella panels from *the San Zeno altarpiece* in the basilica of San Zeno in

Figure 5. Mantegna, Andrea, *Crucifixion*, 1457–59, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 6. Bramantino, *Crucifixion*, 1515 c., Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

However, there exists an entirely different expression of shade and shadow in some *Crucifixions*, for instance, *the Crucifixion* by Bramantino (1460c.–1563) (Figure 6). In this work, the good thief to the right of Christ—the angel side—is rendered with dark shading and the bad one to the left—the devil side—is expressed in bright light. These are impossible features according to the logic of theology. In theological requirement, good things must be illuminated gloriously and bad ones must be shrouded in total darkness. As the original location of Bramantino's *Crucifixion* is unknown, it is unclear if he assumed natural light in the installation site as the light source in the work[7]. Another likely possibility is that Bramantino designed the shade and shadow in this work assuming the sun in the background of the painting, to the spectator's left side, as the light source. In this case, the

Verona. Mantegna depicted the consistent shade and shadow based on the light from the right side of the work. *The San Zeno altarpiece* is established on the main altar in the basilica. Mantegna might design the shade and shadow in the work assuming the light source in the painting as the natural light form the window on the right wall of the chancel. Thus, in this case it can be said that both 'the logic of theology' and 'the sensibility of naturalism' are satisfied in its expression of shade and shadow.

[7] *Brera: Guide to the P` coteca*, ed. by Laura Baini, Milan, 2004, p.111. Germano Mulazzani, *L'opera completa di Bramantino e Bramante pittore*, Milano, 1978, p.93. Germano Mulazzani, Bramantino's 'Crucifixion': Iconography, Date and Commissioning, *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 116, No. 861, Dec. 1974, p.733, note 38.
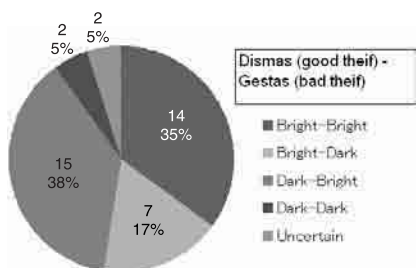
Figure 7. Analysis of the rendering of shade and shadow for Dismas and Gestas in 40 Crucifixions.
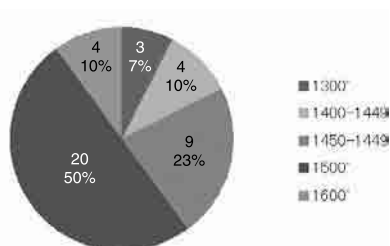
Figure 8. Distribution of the date of the works in 40 Crucifixions.

shade and shadow of the work is rendered based on naturalism, disregarding the theological requirement for good and bad. Here, the sensibility of naturalism is given preference.

I statistically analyzed the shade and shadow for the good and the bad thieves from among 50 works of *Crucifixions* (Figure 7). There are 40 examples rendering the consistent shade and shadow based on a certain light source[8]. Although some of them do not distinguish the good thief and the bad one by expression of shade and shadow (Bright-Bright or Dark-Dark in Figure 7), 55% of the examples provide some sort of distinction by shading. In this analysis, the works following 'the sensibility of naturalism' (Dark-Bright: 15 examples, 38%) are double of those based on 'the logic of theology' (Bright-Dark: 7 examples, 17%). This is due to the time distribution of the examples (Figure 8): 82% of the examples were executed after 1450 when the consistent renderings of shade and shadow became mainstream. In the present analysis, the significant correlation between the date of works and the shade and shadow for the thieves in Crucifixion has not been obtained thus far. In further study, the movement of times from 'the logic of theology' to 'the sensibility of naturalism' would be drawn by enlarging the examples[9].

As is shown in a sample above, in artworks, logic and sensibility live side-by-side in the cultural and historical background.

[8.] In other 10 works, I do not observe any expression of shade and shadow or only an inconsistent rendering of shade and shadow (mismatch of the direction) is found.

[9.] Of course, a phenomenon like art does not always show evolutionary progress. However, the statistical approach has the possibility to clarify the current of the times numerically.