

# Art Image and Eucharist

“We are what we look upon and what we desire.”  
Plotinus

“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.”  
Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

(And its de-evolution)

“You are what you eat.”  
1923 beef advertisement  
*Bridgeport Telegraph*

“Only in Heaven is looking and eating one and the same.  
Eucharist is a sacramental foreseeing of this.”  
Simone Weil

Janice Anne Jeys

April 16, 2009

Great modern thinkers, Hegel, Freud, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Rene Girard to name a few, have proposed that the historical development from simple eaters to complex culture makers, that is to artists, marked the rise of human civilization. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud puts the moment of mankind's turn toward civilization substantially earlier - when the primal horde of brothers, driven out of the clan by the father, return, kill and devour their father and in so doing realize the cultural advantage of banding together.<sup>1</sup> Theodor Reik, in *Myth and Guilt*, perceives the experience of eating the fruit of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, as devouring the Father so as to become him.<sup>2</sup> Rene Girard wrote that in ancient societies, communal peace was restabilized after a crisis by sacrificing a human scapegoat. The competing groups were then reunited by sharing the cannibalistic meal.<sup>3</sup> Exocannibalism or the eating of enemies and victims was to negate, to destroy the undesirable other. Endocannibalism was the ritual devouring of relatives to spiritually cannibalize or incorporate the beloved other. It was practiced in tribal cultures as a form of reincarnation, wherein the spirit of loved ones lived on in the family. Fossil records verify these practices yet our earliest art, painted on cave walls from Kenya, to France, India, and Spain, while associated with eating, records no evidence of cannibalism. In fact, the art of early man, depicts animal imagery, depicts their desired food, and occasionally the shaman who was engaged in a ritual that involved the desired food. Early art depicts not the mundane aspects of daily life, not their cultural or communal trials, but their mimetic desire, and ritual behaviors around that desire. As Homo sapiens, we are thinkers, and to think is to taste, to take into our imagination. We draw the outside world into us in the act of imagination, into our minds so as to

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. Abraham Arden Brill, (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Company, 1918), 155.

<sup>2</sup> Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism, an Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Astell, *Eating Beauty, the Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 9-10.

possess what we know. *Sapiens*, the present participle of *sapere* in Latin, means “to taste of, smack of, savour of, have the flavor of,” and “to have taste, have discernment, be sensible, be discrete, be wise, discern.”<sup>4</sup> In the clever words of Ann Astell, *Homo sapiens*, showed an ability to “savor their thoughts,” to “draw spiritual nourishment” from them.<sup>5</sup> To savor a thought, to taste a thought, and to “draw spiritual nourishment,” are concepts at the heart of this study, at the heart of our use of Eucharistic art.

Lest the direction this conversation takes should begin to seem too morbid and far removed from Eucharistic study, I will recount one of the most memorable sermons I’ve ever heard. During one of the MAPS-CGS Intensive study weeks in St Louis, I believe it was Reverend Charles Bouchard that came to preach in the Sisters of St Joseph of Carondelet chapel. He preached on the Bread of Life, John 6:22-7 and in a way that parallels the text, he began gently and gradually made more vivid Jesus’ demand to “eat my flesh and drink my blood.” Then came the moment when our homilist exclaimed that in this pericope, we can practically hear the sounds of mastication, the sound of tooth against bone and the smacking of lips. Well, something to that effect anyway. He built the intensity gradually, beginning with that which was easy to hear and culminating in words that grind on our values, sounding intentionally cannibalistic. It positioned us to empathize with the apostles who having heard Jesus preach the sermon (which in its own way escalates from easy enough to hear toward graphically demanding and downright edgy) respond, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it.” Jesus asks them, “Do you also wish to go away?” Such pathos lies in Simon Peter’s response, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

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<sup>4</sup> Maggie Kilgore, *From Communion to Cannibalism, an Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 251, n.23.

<sup>5</sup> Astell, 7.

What is John pointing to in this very graphic calling to Eucharist? From whence does this come? Given its location in John, perhaps it comes from a strongly Eucharistic tradition in John's time, and a community that needs urging to participate despite cultural taboo. Some scholars say John may not have even been the author of those most graphic verses, 52 - 58, finding them to be too sacramental to have been written by the author of this Gospel, making them a likely later addition.<sup>6</sup> Raymond Brown suggests that this piece and the earlier sections both preserve Johannine tradition, but are from different times in the life of the Johannine community.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is a line drawn in the sand, amidst the crisis often believed to have precipitated the composition of John's Gospel, the Christians being put out of the synagogue. John, with the Bread of Life sermon places us face to face with the Lord's hard teaching which we cannot explain, but can only enter into as a mystery.

Christianity isn't as alone as we may believe in offering this difficult teaching of real presence in the Eucharist. Egyptian priests consecrated mest cakes which were then held to become the flesh of Osiris. In the Cult of Mithra, a sacrament of cakes and haoma drink paralleled Catholic Eucharist. In *Prescott's Mexico*, Vol. 3, the Spanish missionaries upon arriving in Mexico "witnessed a religious rite which reminded them of communion ... an image made of flour ... and after consecration by priests, was distributed among the people who ate it ... declaring it was the flesh of deity..."<sup>8</sup>

In Eucharist, a new paradigm of incorporation is engaged. Maggie Kilgore points out that in the complex structure of Eucharist, "it becomes difficult to say precisely *who* is eating *whom*."<sup>9</sup> In this "reciprocal incorporation" of Eucharist she points out that God and Man both play

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<sup>6</sup> *Harper-Collins Study Bible*, NRSV, 2025, n. 6.52-58.

<sup>7</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John" *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. V9 gen. ed. Leander E. Cook, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 606.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.chcpublications.net/CathCrn1.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Kilgore, 15.

“host.”<sup>10</sup> Being isn’t destroyed in this construct. It is rather enjoined and revitalized. It is modeled after the construct of the kenotic outpouring in the Trinity, wherein each person of the Trinity perpetually pours all of itself into the other, Father to Son, Son to Spirit, and Spirit to Source. In Eucharist we are invited to engage in such self emptying into Christ, as to allow Christ’s Holy Spirit to be poured fully into us. God’s eating of us and us of God in Eucharist doesn’t destroy beauty, it is rather a way of participating in beauty. It arranges “a mutual in-one-anotherness.”<sup>11</sup> The seeking of in-one-anotherness is a necessary precondition of empathetic understanding. To extend oneself toward being in another is to experience empathy with another. This same empathy is what we extend toward a work of art that captivates us. In first studying the parables, I recall expressing that what I most enjoyed about the parables was that I could “live in them, the way I can live in a painting, like Primavera by Botticelli for example” Catherine Vincie, on the Aquinas faculty, is fond of saying, rather than asking what is that that I am getting into in liturgy, ask, what is it that is getting into me? This speaks of that two directional empathizing, of living in-one-anotherness, that art and liturgy share. To read a work of art we must extend ourselves into it, map ourselves onto it, map it upon ourselves. An art critic may speak in terms of being able to enter into an image. An artist seeks to create an equal image, one that upon completion offers this experience of reciprocity. Plotinus acknowledged the capacity for what we view to be incorporated in saying, “We are what we look upon and what we desire.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Astell, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Image As Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 127.

In speaking of the beginning of art, Walter Benjamin says, “Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects designed to serve a cult.”<sup>13</sup> He characterizes such an object as possessing “aura.” A quality of an object with “aura” is that it remains “distant, however close it may be.”<sup>14</sup> He further elaborates that art removed from its cultic context loses its “aura.” I think this may be the case with cultic objects for primordial humans and some tribal cultures. But I think it the less so in modernity. Would the altarpiece that you sit before weekly in your church lose any of its unique capacity to represent the divine, be any less sublime, and lose its aura if it were placed in a museum? Because religious imagery communicates to us symbolically, I think an operative thinker has the capacity to bring our own experience of what Benjamin calls “aura.” Liturgy has given us practice.

Early Christian art is found not in caves, but in its urban equivalent, the catacombs. Dominant among the imagery of the Roman catacombs, such as those at Callistus catacomb dating from before 200 AD is the scene of table companions with plates of fish, or fish and bread.<sup>15</sup> “The balance of probability seems to lie in favor of the conclusion that some early Christians understood the fish in connection with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in connection with the hope for resurrection or immortality and life in the messianic age.”<sup>16</sup> Hiers and Kennedy aren’t suggesting that fish was eaten as Eucharistic food in the 2<sup>nd</sup> C, but rather that the stories of the feeding of the multitudes were understood as Eucharistic. It is noteworthy that again, as with the cave paintings, this imagery is not an attempt to record the historic moment. There exists no painting of the early liturgical service, no portrait of Christ. The artist images the believer’s

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*. (NY, Schocken, 1969), 224.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 243, n.5.

<sup>15</sup> Richard H. Hiers, and Charles A. Kennedy, "Bread and fish Eucharist in the gospels and early Christian art." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spr 1976): 22. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 15, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

eschatological desire. This bread and fish Eucharistic imagery carries through into the basilicas, most notably in Da Vinci's Last Supper where a plate of 7 fish sits upon the table.

Constantine's conversion and the subsequent adoption of Christianity as the imperial religion caused Christian imagery to flourish abundantly. The eastern orthodox icon descended from a tradition of veneration of the imperial image of the divine Caesar.

“As the emperor's image represented the presence of the emperor, Christ's image, or the image of a saint, came to serve as a kind of ‘proxy’ for their presence. . . Neo-Platonism certainly played a role here with its view of the transparency of the image. Venerating the image was not a veneration of the object but the person who was visible in and through the image. The image did not simply represent the one portrayed but actually became transparent; that is, one could see through the image to the sacred presence it represented.”<sup>17</sup>

The eastern orthodox seeing of sacred presence mediated by the icon is of the same cloth as the tasting of real presence in Eucharist. In both we bring ourselves to the experience in order to take into ourselves God's sacred presence. In our western tradition we do this through eating. Taste, is the more intimate and intense mode of incorporation. “Taste is basically a discriminatory sense...Taste is a yes or no sense ... a take-it-or-no sense, letting us know what is good for us and what is bad in the most crucial physical way.”<sup>18</sup> Seeing and hearing on the other hand is held to be more refined. Nicholas of Cusa in the 15<sup>th</sup> C said, “Vision and hearing ... comprehend the beautiful... (are) near the rational spirit... are nobler ... by reason of union with the intellectual spirit.”<sup>19</sup> In the Elevation of the Host during the Middle Ages, popular visual theory held that seeing the Host was to touch it, that seeing was held to be real physical contact.

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<sup>17</sup> William A Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Kilgore, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Astell, 2.

Visual ray theory proposed that light rays emanated from the host, and beamed to the eye of the adorer, as rays from his eyes extended, contacting the Host.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly the altarpiece developed in this same period. It has been imagined that the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council in 1215, after which the priest was required to consecrate the bread and wine with his back to the congregation, led to putting altarpieces in churches. In a time when worship for the parishioners in the church was such an individual devotion that bells had to be rung to announce the elevation of the host, altarpieces would have served to focus the believers gaze forward. However, Beth Williamson, as well as Paul Binsky, noting the synchronicity, still finds the conclusion “much too simplistic.”<sup>21</sup>

On Sunday mornings, I am in Morrow Chapel, amidst the jazz mass, amidst the very eclectic faction of Trinity Church’s larger congregation, and before an amazing altarpiece. I have found through talking to other parishioners that I am not alone in having been drawn to attend Trinity regularly by *this* painting. In red, yellow, black and white, the colors according to Jewish legend of the dust gathered from the four corners of the earth to form the first Adam, the resurrected Jesus, stands before an atomic cloud.<sup>22</sup> “Resurrection,” Kermit Oliver’s 9’ X 6’ altarpiece is a realistically painted presence of Christ stepping out of the tomb. Of its scale we can quote Charles Bouleau, author of *The Painter’s Secret Geometry*, a guiding text for Oliver. “The monument is that which is bigger than a man, that which dominates him by its dimension and mass – and which in consequence calls for an attitude very different from the simple perception

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<sup>20</sup> Astell, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Beth Williamson, “Altarpieces, Liturgy, and Devotion,” *Speculum* 79.2, (April 2004), 347.

<sup>22</sup> Alvia J. Wardlaw, *Notes from a Child’s Odyssey, The Art of Kermit Oliver*. (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), 41.

of an object. A monumental work is bound up with the space which surrounds us.”<sup>23</sup> I can confirm that this image of Christ is bound up in the space which surrounds the congregation. “Resurrection” is so rich with iconographic depth, that after nearly three years of attending Trinity and despite the insights one gains in holding a Bachelor’s degree in Art History, I continue to have my eyes opened to seeing new meaning in this work. I attended a morning when the artist came and spoke to the congregation about his work. Like a good homilist, he told us a lot of the story, he answered lots of questions, but in some instances, told the truth, but told it slant. He, like his painting, wasn’t going to give up all the depth at once. I’ve been grateful for that, over time, as more of the painting’s depth has granted itself to me. Beth Williamson mentions a particular ensemble called the tomb altar.<sup>24</sup> It is a funerary monument used for saints. The altarpiece would be hung above a tomb-chest upon the nave wall above the altar. I wonder if Oliver intentionally paints the tomb into his resurrection with this ensemble in mind. The figure of Christ here is a painting of Oliver’s son, once a convict on death row.

Ours is a time of revival for Christian interest in the visual arts. It is not without its tensions however. Today’s artists work against a backdrop that lacks clear cultural and artistic consensus, and without a broad foundation of community support. Christian artists live in a culture that abounds with multitudinous theological directions and few can pin down their own community’s theology, as there is not a theology at work so much as many individuals’ theologies. In the cultural and religious pluralism of the postmodern era, the artist lobbies a fractionalized culture in which no shared underlying values can gain wide appreciation in the arts. Every ethnicity, generation, and lifestyle has its own values. Structures of patronage, both individual patronage and that of the galleries that used to be the gatekeepers of the art world are undergoing change.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Williamson, 357.

Even so, William Dyrness claims that, “The contemporary generation has been raised and nourished by images, it has an inescapably visual imagination.”<sup>25</sup> He admonishes liturgists to “reintegrate word and image” as he is concerned that “we may actually win the battle of words but lose the battle of images. And losing that battle could well cost us this generation.”<sup>26</sup> He is optimistic, reporting that there is “even talk of a MFA designed for Christian artists.”<sup>27</sup> Father Terrence Dempsey opened MOCRA, The Museum of Christian Religious Art, about 15 years ago, on the St. Louis University campus. Father Dempsey isn’t an artist, but values art. In this museum, earlier this year, I was deeply struck by the range of works, but even more so by the manner of use of the museum. We were invited to sit with, engage with, and pray with this art, in the museum setting. It sort of blows the roof off of Walter Benjamin’s concerns about “cult value” vs. “exhibit” value of works of art, and the stripping away of “aura” in the age of exhibition.<sup>28</sup> Looking upon my favorite artwork in that show, *Pietà Stone: Meditation of the Last Temptation*, by Steven Heilmer (1992), being invited to kneel upon one of the prayer cushions provided by the artist, I experienced no separation of cult value/exhibit value, no loss of “aura.” This pristine 3’x 2’ x 2’ mass of marble appears to be bound with gauze. (It wasn’t. Instead it is masterfully carved marble!) It sits framed/cradled in a low, Zen-like table, maybe 8’ long with the aforementioned cushions. Beside each cushion are chopsticks and a rice bowl filled with ground marble. I need further time of contemplation to contend with the Pietá aspect of the piece, because the piece is so overwhelmingly Eucharistic for me. It asks me many questions... questions about what we bring to the table, what we bind and loose at this table, how we share this table, and how we don’t, the impossibility of this not only possible, but actual gift

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<sup>25</sup> Dyrness, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, 224.

we receive. Karl Rahner asks the question, “What do we mean when we speak of ‘seeing’ or ‘hearing’ God in a work of art? If it is not the ears alone which hear, but the whole person, then something is religious or not religious depending on what kind of a person the hearer is and on the total concrete situation in which he is doing the hearing.”<sup>29</sup> And what of the artist, then?

“Only because the human person is a being who by his very nature pushes beyond every given boundary, a being for whom every end is a new beginning, a being who encounters the unfathomable mystery of things, only because and insofar as the human person is a transcendent being can there be both art and theology in their real senses ... True art always embodies a very definite, particular and historical instance of human transcendence ... The artist by his very nature is necessarily the discoverer of a concrete situation in which man concretely actualizes his transcendent being in a new and different way.”<sup>30</sup>

This confirms for the one who views the art and the artist who makes it that both must BYOAura. The transcendent aspect of an art experience is in the human ultimately. My visit to MOCRA will be an ongoing meditation for some time to come. We live in a time when the art culture is full of tensions and challenges for the Christian artist, it is also a time of new and hybridized opportunities.

In *Waiting on God*, Simone Weil says people are drawn to God in three ways, affliction, religious practices, and by the experience of beauty.<sup>31</sup> I lived a childhood largely devoid of religious practice, but rich with gallery going and lovely coffee table art books. As a child, it was the experience of beauty in the paintings I saw by Fra Angelico, Botticelli, and the like that fed my faith. As a young adult, it was more so affliction that turned me toward faith. At this point in my life, religious practices feed my faith, but I am at a crossroads in my life. As I return to painting and engaging myself in the art culture again, I have spiraled back to my beginnings, to myself, and to my God.

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<sup>29</sup> Karl Rahner, “Theology and the Arts” in *Theological Aesthetics, a Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 220.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>31</sup> Dyrness, 22.

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