

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

ILLUMINATED ART IN THE COURT OF CHARLES THE BALD:
A STUDY OF THE GREAT CAROLINGIAN BIBLES OF THE 9th CENTURY

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Title of Dissertation: Illuminated Art in the Court of Charles the Bald: A Study of the Great Carolingian Bibles of the 9th Century

Abstract

This dissertation explores the relationship between technology and 9th century Christian art as well as the integrative forces that compelled religion and technology to produce art. It seeks to examine this art using the Greek definition of technology (techne-art/craft, and logia-study/discourse). It is a study of the Augustinian city of God: a city of men working assiduously to preserve sacred words and deeds using the flavors, seeds, and stones of the earth and blending them into works that would both please God and illuminate him for man. The early part of the dissertation focuses on the theological framework behind the production of these Bibles, with an emphasis on the writings of the fathers of the church including St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and St Benedict. Their thoughts concerning the effects of Scripture are of primary importance. Other chapters blend the study of methods of producing these bibles with specific forms of technology used. Various folios from these Bibles are analyzed in terms of their artistic methods and their Christian messages. The end result of this dissertation is an understanding of the political and philosophical aspects of religious art as well as the technological imperatives in their production.

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1

An Introduction to the Dissertation

This dissertation examines the relationship between technology and 9th century Carolingian Christian art. The researchable questions concern the philosophical origins and nature of this art and the integrative forces that enabled religion and technology to produce art. It seeks to examine this art using the Greek definition of technology (technē-art/craft and logia-study/discourse). The specific art studied in this dissertation is the illumination of Bibles during the reign of Charles the Bald.

This dissertation reflects the core disciplines embodied in the Salve Regina University Humanities program including philosophy, religion, technology and art. From St. Augustine's ideas on God and work to the study of specific forms of technology, the Humanities are on full display. With regard to the philosophical foundations of technical religious work, a host of authors in the Humanities program can be drawn from including Ian Barbour, Carl Mitcham, and Joseph Campbell. Their insights into the relationships between technology, religion, art and culture are important components of this dissertation.

Contributions to Research Community/Originality

Augustine's ideas on God and work reflect his central thesis that there is an ongoing struggle between the city of man and the city of God. Looked at in another way,

it may be seen as the universal struggle between good and evil. During the 9th century, the Church was often engaged in conquering the hearts and minds of people previously influenced by paganism and cult worship. To simply preach from a pulpit was not enough. The priest had to surround himself with ornate trappings such as colorful clothing, and ornamental instruments and objects. The mass eventually evolved into a beautifully evocative spiritual journey. If anything appealed to the uneducated early medieval mind, it was taking part in a mass where the followers shared in the body and blood of their God. Combine this with icons, statues, altars, and high steeples, and you have the makings of a religion that people could identify with. And when this religion portrayed the sagas, epics, and fables of its history in ink and gold, and juxtaposed them against the backdrop of monumental stone architecture, we see the beginning of an enduring legacy. This Church-inspired portrayal, crafted and illustrated by men, is the essence of this dissertation.

This dissertation expects to contribute an original and unique perspective on religion, art, and technology. Much has been written about the history of art. Countless writers have described characteristics of form, color, and procedure. But few have ventured into a study of the integrative forces that compel religion and technology to produce art. Having read or reviewed hundreds of sources on this subject, it does not appear that this dissertation is a repetition of anything previously produced. Combining philosophy, history, and technique into a holistic study of human technological activity is the goal of this study. This reflects Ian Barbour's ideas on the contextualization of technique which emphasizes that we can only come to an understanding of our technology if we understand its purpose within the framework of human activity.

Methodologies Employed in This Dissertation

This dissertation uses a qualitative methodology of study in the Humanities. The focus of this methodology is to understand the relationship between technology and 9th century Carolingian Christian art. The writings of early Church leaders such as Augustine, Benedict, and Gregory are used as a philosophical basis. The technological nature of this work will be described using works such as those by the medieval monk Theophilus in his *Diverse Arts*. The fields of thought from which this dissertation draws include all the major areas of the Humanities.

Definitions of Technology on which this Dissertation is Based

The SRU Humanities Program offers a number of definitions that are pertinent to this study. The researchable question explores the relationship between technology and 9th century Carolingian Christian art, and the integrative forces that enabled religion and technology to produce art; these definitions, therefore, would seem applicable since they reflect the perspectives of religion, philosophy, history, and technical form. Because they are commentaries on human thought and action, they embody the Greek definition of technology (techne-art/craft, and logia-study/discourse). Their foci present us with a multi-dimensional view of the philosophical diversity of the human condition.

Ian Barbour writes that technology is the “application of organized knowledge to practical tasks by ordered systems of people and machines” (Barbour 25). The words practical and ordered are important in considering the relationship of technology and human life. If one were to apply this definition to artistic production, it would seem to fit into Barbour’s idea that the “welfare of humankind requires a creative technology that is... socially just and personally fulfilling” (Barbour 25). Barbour sees technology as one important part of the fabric of life. Christian philosophers who wrote artistically and the craftsmen who produced the art fit comfortably into Barbour’s definition.

Lubomir Gleiman, formerly a professor at Salve Regina University, and one of the early teachers in the Humanities Program at Salve Regina University, presents a more generalized definition of technology than Barbour. He writes, “Technology is the organization and institutionalization of knowledge for practical purposes” (Lappin and O’Connor 10). This definition reflects the values and goals of Salve Regina’s Humanities Program and speaks directly to the question: What does it mean to be human in an age of advanced technology? This definition implies “organized human knowledge transmitted to others, and applied to practical tasks” (SRU Graduate Catalogue 1994-96, 25). Gleiman’s use of the word practical indicates those things that pertain to the welfare and common good of the community. The art produced in the 9th century reflects this desire to contribute to the common good, and to give people a philosophical as well as practical stake in their religious community.

Conversely, it is interesting to ponder the purely engineering definition developed by Carl Mitcham in his work *Thinking through Technology: The Path between Engineering and Philosophy*. Mitcham writes, “Technology is the making and using of

artifacts by human beings” (Mitcham 1). He maintains that technology is “a largely unthinking activity” (Mitcham 1) that presupposes a moral and ethical disinclination as to what and why things are produced. Mitcham assigns no motives or ideas to technology; to make something is more the result of habit than conscious reflection. However, the significance of using Mitcham’s definition in a study of Christian art is that it is important to wonder if we have moral or ethical predilections within our “techne” and whether they are necessarily separate in a social or philosophical context?

Expected Findings

This dissertation expects to uncover a number of important findings between Christian art and technology in the 9th century.

These findings relate to the interaction of religion and technology in producing this art. What were the compositions, forms, and techniques of this artwork? How was the art made? What materials, tools, and procedures were used? Why was the art produced in the first place? What inspired the King and the Church to enlist armies of craftsmen to paint, gild, form, and mold organic materials into magnificent relics? Were there historical, social, economic, or cultural factors that precipitated this religious fascination to produce precious objects in color and form? Was this outpouring a pure form of Christian love, reflected in a craftsman’s desire to please and honor God, or was it a hodgepodge of creative impulses and techniques, some commercial, some religious, with no definable relationship? If there was a directive in ordering its production, what

was its intended effect? And above all: What was the art's message to the Carolingians who worked to produce it and who lived among it?

Exploring and answering these questions are the fundamental goals of this dissertation.

Background to the Study

The Christian Church was undergoing a remarkable transformation during the 9th century. In an era of social, political, and economic instability caused by continued Barbarian attacks, the Church responded to the need for moral direction in human life. This response was expressed in the construction of beautiful churches and thick, stonewalled monasteries. Added to this was the growing desire on the part of Church officials to decorate, embellish, and extol the history and culture of Christianity. This adoration was found in beautiful artifacts of tile, glass, paint and gold. They were produced by skilled men working with primitive tools, paints and brushes. These objects added to the panoramic picture of Christian life in its full spiritual sense.

This artwork was ostensibly inspired by a love for God. The Church found it increasingly important to produce beautiful things for people to read, use, or look at while they participated in or observed the Christian liturgy. Art became the vehicle for not only glorifying God, but for bringing humans within his realm, either as skilled craftsmen or as participants in public worship. The Abbot Suger, writing later in the 12th century, once said that the magnificent glass at the Cathedral of Chartres allowed the uneducated to see the Gospels. We know that 6th century Christian monasteries and churches such as Monte

Casino and San Vitale had simple but elegant clerestories to allow light to enter them. They promoted this work not only through a religious philosophy but also through the encouragement of both religious and secular craftsmanship. Were these efforts part of an organized or institutionalized program of outsourcing religious work or were they the result of haphazard and unlinked creative impulses? When producing these wonderful works of art, were men doing it for the love of God or for the exultation of themselves? These questions will be fully explored in this dissertation.

Early Greek and Christian Influences on Carolingian Art

Except for the earliest periods of human history, when work was in its simplest stages and had more to do with instinct than intellect, there has generally been a deep correlation between reason and work. Work may be defined as making, doing, or acting upon something, usually with some kind of finished product resulting from the activity. Reason enters the picture as work becomes abstract in the sense of needing innovation or creativity. Reason may be seen as having a dual nature of both thought and justification for that thought. Humans think, form judgments, and draw conclusions about specific acts as well as develop philosophical justifications for them. Reason becomes a tool by which humans arrange their ideas on work as well as explain the nature of specific types of work.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus, writing in the 5th century B.C., offers us some insight into this phenomenon with his ideas on revealed beauty. He theorized that great art was intrinsically spiritual because the artist was able to give life to something

previously unseen. The artist unconcealed that which was concealed by revealing its form. The form had always existed as God's work but in a spiritual dimension devoid of anything human. The artist somehow entered this dimension and brought forth an organic entity. To understand this, one might study a beautiful golden chalice, inlaid with silver and precious stones. The artist did not create this work; rather he allowed it to become part of man's awareness. That which was hidden emerged as an expression of God. Spiritual form was revealed as truth seen through man. The hands of man had opened the door to God.

This brings us to the question of how form is created, especially in a deeply spiritual sense where the object is not solely an object, but also a repository of spiritual meaning and purpose. St. Augustine and the other early fathers of the Church saw man's creative reason as a way to glorify the Church. The church altar or the chalice is not just a work of art, but also a tool for the liturgy. This duality of meaning and purpose is important in understanding great religious art. The *Book of Kells* could have been written in black ink. But the monks, toiling in their scriptoria, illustrated it with colorful iconographic writing and images. Their intent was to preserve the written Gospel in the face of unrelenting Viking attacks on their monasteries. But they were also interested in the interplay of color in their compositions, and as a result, they became serious artists.

The *Book of Kells* is an important part of this study because it contains many of the creative elements of early Christian art, namely great technical skill, primitive instruments, colorful inlays, and a deep, spiritual purpose. The book was produced in the early 9th century by Celtic monks working in an isolated monastery off the southwest coast of what is today Scotland. These monks, laboring in obscurity, reflected the

determination of the Church to preserve the Gospels of classical antiquity, as well as to ornately decorate them in rich and vibrant hues of natural color. Their inspiration was powerful and their task was precious because they and most other Christian communities were surrounded by murderous bands of infidels. In their dark, cold, stone fortresses, with little natural lighting, and writing mostly on their knees, these monks were part of an industry of artistic expressionism never before seen in Europe. The *Book of Kells*, written and drawn in a technical form known as iconographic illumination, is as Sister Wendy Beckett described it in her work *The History of Painting*, “a wild and controlled paradox of lacelike perfection in linear patterns of geometric complexity” (Beckett 3). The *Book of Kells* reflects the Augustinian view of the city of God, a city of men working assiduously to preserve the words of their God, using the flavors and the seeds of the earth, and blending them into a work that would both extol and illuminate God.

Scriptural books and the Beginning of a Theology of Work

An important part of this dissertation is the influence of Hebrew and Christian writing on the evolution of work. Some of man’s earliest writings on work are from Scripture. And we know that Christianity sees work somewhat ambivalently. On the negative side is Genesis that tells us that it did not take God long to decide that Adam, because of his unfortunate decision to “take the bite of the apple,” should be punished with life long work. Adam would have to “till the ground from whence he was taken” and to add insult to injury, when he was through working, he would return to the ground, “for dust thou art, and unto dust shall thou return” (Genesis 3:29 and 19). This was a rather

inauspicious debut for man, for it left him with little recourse but to go out and work, and laboriously at that. St. Augustine wrote that man would “learn by experience the harm that disloyalty and disobedience would do” (Augustine CG, 579). In biting the apple, man was choosing knowledge over the “bliss of ignorance” (Augustine CG, 579). St. Basil, writing in the same time period as Augustine, lamented that man “was compelled to submit to the hardships by the hostile earth which he himself had rendered accursed” (Basil 1956, 61). Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan and Augustine’s mentor, for years preached to a packed cathedral of mostly destitute Christians. He once remarked that work must have spiritual significance because it gave man purpose in a world in which we are “born naked and leave buried without an inheritance” (Ambrose 1954, 83). He often cited Job that “riches amassed unjustly are disgorged but the root of the righteous remains and flourishes like a palm tree” (Genesis 20:15).

On the other hand, Christian theology also sees work as having a positive purpose, ordained by God as a redemptive activity. To aid man in his spiritual work, according to Christian theology, God gave him the ability to use reason. Since Adam had eaten of “the tree of knowledge of good and evil,” he and his descendants were destined to eat it for the rest of their lives (Genesis 3:17). God intended for man to subdue the earth. Man’s reason would allow him to produce, through the sweat of his brow, the most wondrous examples of human love for God. Man’s technology, crafted and molded into beautiful objects, is the result of the goodwill of God. From another perspective, reason has become man’s worst nightmare. Augustine said that work, or “human action is the yardstick and the test for man’s moral goodness” (Augustine OFC, 18). What do we make of the undeniable evil that man is capable of? Augustine believed that man’s work

was retribution for the sins of Adam. If some of this work was for evil purposes it was because of man's free will. Augustine spoke often about avarice. He wrote, "The man who makes evil clings to them with love and is entangled by them" (Augustine W, 32). In the *City of God*, Augustine talks about the fallen man and his love of those things temporal and declares that man's greatest fear is to lose these things (Deanne 30). Augustine warns us as early as the 4th century that work, when it is released from a religious purpose and takes on a secular identity, is dangerous to the future of man. This is a struggle between the earthly city of man and the city of God. Augustine believed that when man becomes "fixed on material goods and earthly enjoyments, he will be punished" (Deanne 30). Work is to be done with dignity, goodwill and humility for it reflects the love of God.

Since work is a vehicle by which redemption can be found, it becomes God's way of making amends with us, of giving us a direction to perform acts of goodwill and love. Augustine reminds us often of the inherent goodness of man; that we have the ability to seek the eternal law that "will turn our love away from temporal things" (Augustine OFC, 31). In producing colorful pages of Gospel books, the human mind becomes the transmitter of truly spiritual matter as it seeks reconciliation with God. This is the essence of the truly spiritual being, one who becomes one with God through free will. To Augustine, the purpose of human work was to create order so as to please God. God's work allows the city of God to conquer the city of man. God, work and order become the "inviolable norm of all created development and activity" (Augustine W, 17).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to point out the major sources that help to address the fundamental concern of this dissertation, namely the integrative forces of theology, art and technology that allowed for the production of beautiful illuminated Christian art in 9th century Carolingian Europe. To this end, a number of general areas will be examined starting with the more general literature from the SRU Humanities program and then proceeding to readings on the production of a number of great holy books from the period. These books are the *Book of Kells*, *The Vivian Bible*, the *Codex Aureus*, the *Grandval Bible*, and the *Bible of San Paolo*. These studies will be accompanied by analyses of important aspects in the production of these books including the technological aspects of the illumination, the historical, theological and scriptural foundations of the art, and specifically, the reign of Charles the Bald, for whom all of these books excepting the *Book of Kells* were produced.

Literature from the Salve Regina University Humanities Program

The literary scope of the Salve Regina University Humanities Program is important in this study because of its emphasis on technology and human society. Although only a few of the books are directly related to the interaction of art and technology, some, like Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* serve as powerful

reminders of the importance of sacred images in the cultural disposition of human society. Campbell tells us that humans, whether they live in primitive or advanced civilizations, rely on created images to remind them of their religious past and to reinforce the messages of their gods. He writes that art is “a recognition of the radiance of one eternity through all things” (Campbell 162).

These images, when they are part of a religious identity such as Christianity, give us what Huston Smith, in his work *The World's Religions*, believes are “.... the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos enter human life” (Smith 9). Campbell and Smith remind us that religious art has the important function of giving faith a visual as well as a spiritual meaning. Although much religious art has historically been confined to the inner walls of temples, mosques, and churches, the art's beauty has always been available to see, to listen to, and to feel. The art reflects not just the love of people for their God or gods but also the pride and devotion they have for their faith.

On another philosophical plane, Smith's “clearest opening” reminds one of Martin Heidegger's “clearing” in which the human being comes closest to recognizing the essence of his being. Heidegger is an important part of the S.R.U. Humanities Program in providing us with a distinct version of productionist metaphysics. His classic work, “The Question Concerning Technology”, examines the Greek idea of matter turned into form, especially with regard to the ideas of Aristotle on this subject. Michael Zimmerman, in his accompanying study on Heidegger (*Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art*) reinforces the Heideggerian view that the artist is able to release objects from a kind of spiritual captivity, or from a metaphysical state into an unconcealed, revealed state. So the artist does not so much create as he allows objects

to present themselves. This process of revealing leads inexorably to an understanding of how humans can understand form and, according to Heidegger, how they can argue against Plato's metaphysics. Zimmerman notes Heidegger's famous statement, "That there can grow the understanding of an entity that is present at hand in itself before all production and for all further production" (Zimmerman 157). From a theistic perspective, while God may have been the initial creative force in art, man has become his facilitator. It would only follow that the production of art is part of God's plan. The craftsman, the skilled artisan is concerned with lifting the real from the metaphysical, with giving life to the idea of something, with pulling it from the realm of the concealed into the realm of the unconcealed. Heidegger uses the example of the silver chalice to underscore this idea. The artist has allowed the concealed chalice to be what it wants to be. Without the chalice the artist has nothing but an idea (Heidegger 8). In other words, concealment of something is brought forth into unconcealment. Man has discovered with his senses what was previously unknown, and now it is open for all to see.

Thus there develops a universal element to the study of history, art, and technology. Arnold Pacey, in *Technology and World Civilization*, maintains that there is a dialogue among human cultures that although not spoken directly, constantly reinforces the notion that philosophically we care about the same things, that our philosophies, techniques, and inventions spring from the same well. We may reflect differences in race, bio-development, or religion, but we are all nonetheless guided by a need to see meaning in the past and the future.