

*A*  
Thousand  
Words

*Reflections on Art  
and Christianity*

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by Mary Elizabeth Podles

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# TABLE *of* CONTENTS

---

xiii FOREWORD

---

1 INTRODUCTION  
*Christ Preaching* Rembrandt 1652

---

5 *The* ANCIENT WORLD  
1st–4th Centuries

6 *Ara Pacis Augustae* 9 B.C.

9 *The Pantheon* A.D. 126

12 *The Colossus of Constantine* A.D. 312–315

---

15 BYZANTIUM  
5th–6th Centuries

16 *Hagia Sophia* A.D. 537

19 *Christ of Mt. Sinai* A.D. 550

22 *Apse of St. Apollinaris* A.D. 549

25 *The Throne of Maximianus* A.D. 547

---

29 ***The* EARLY MIDDLE AGES**

A.D. 500–1000

30 *The Gospel Book of St. Augustine* c. A.D. 550–599

33 *The Votive Crown of King Recceswinth* c. A.D. 660

36 *The Alfred Jewel* c. A.D. 880

39 *The Gospel Book of Otto III* A.D. 1000

42 *The Beekeepers* c. A.D. 1000

---

45 ***The* HIGH MIDDLE AGES**

12th–13th Centuries

46 *The Chalice of Abbot Suger* 1144

49 *Portico de la Gloria* Master Mateo 1211

---

53 **BYZANTIUM REDUX**

13th–15th Centuries

54 *Madonna and Child on a Curved Throne* c. 1250

57 *Anastasis* 1315

60 *The Transfiguration* Theophanes the Greek c. 1375

63 *The Trinity* Andrei Rublev c. 1400

66 *The Nativity* Andrei Rublev c. 1405

---

69 **BETWEEN GOTHIC & RENAISSANCE**

15th–16th Centuries

70 *The Madonna in a Church* Jan van Eyck 1438–40

73 *The Ghent Altarpiece I* Hubert & Jan van Eyck 1432

- 76 *The Ghent Altarpiece II* Hubert & Jan van Eyck 1432  
79 *The Ghent Altarpiece III* Hubert & Jan van Eyck 1432  
82 *The Portinari Altarpiece* Hugo van der Goes 1476  
85 *Vision of the Seven Candlesticks* Albrecht Dürer 1498  
88 *Noli Me Tangere* Albrecht Dürer 1511
- 

91 *The EARLY RENAISSANCE in ITALY*  
15th Century

- 92 *The Baptism of Christ* Piero della Francesca 1439
- 

95 *The RENAISSANCE in ITALY*  
16th Century

- 96 *Vitruvian Man* Leonardo da Vinci c. 1490  
99 *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne*  
Leonardo da Vinci c. 1510  
102 *Alba Madonna* Raphael 1508  
105 *La Disputa* Raphael 1509  
108 *The School of Athens* Raphael 1510  
112 *The Sistine Madonna* Raphael 1512  
115 *The Risen Christ* Michelangelo 1521  
118 *Pesaro Madonna* Titian 1518  
121 *The Submersion of Pharaoh's Army in the Red Sea*  
Titian c. 1520  
124 *Ecce Homo* Titian 1543

- 
- 127 **The LATER RENAISSANCE**  
16th Century
- 128 *The Annunciation* Federico Barocci c. 1585
- 131 *The Feast in the House of Levi* Veronese 1573
- 135 *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* El Greco 1586–88
- 138 *St. Joseph and the Child Jesus* El Greco 1597

- 
- 141 **The AGE of the BAROQUE**  
17th Century
- 142 *Equation Clock* Jost Bürgi & Hans Jacob Emck 1591
- 145 *The Archdukes Albert and Isabella Visiting  
the Collection of Pierre Roose*  
Hieronymus Francken II & Jan Brueghel the Elder 1621–23
- 148 *Fontana della Barcaccia*  
Pietro & Gianlorenzo Bernini 1627
- 151 *The Holy Family on the Steps* Nicolas Poussin 1648
- 154 *The Marriage of Tobias and Sarah* Carlo Dolci 1649

- 
- 157 **The GOLDEN AGE of DUTCH PAINTING**  
17th Century
- 158 *The Denial of Peter* Rembrandt 1659
- 161 *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul* Rembrandt 1661
- 164 *A Woman Holding a Balance*  
Johannes Vermeer 1664
- 167 *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young*  
Jan Steen 1668–70
- 170 *Still Life with Flowers in a Glass Vase*  
Rachel Ruysch 1716

- 
- 173 *The MODERN AGE*  
18th–20th Centuries
- 174 *The Assumption*  
Cosmas Damian Asam & Egid Quirin Asam 1716–21
- 177 *John the Baptist* Anton Raphael Mengs 1777
- 180 *The Nativity* Benjamin West 1792
- 183 *Crucifix* José Aragón 1820–30
- 186 *Falls of the Kaaterskill* Thomas Cole 1826
- 189 *Annunciation* Henry Ossawa Tanner 1896
- 192 *Flight into Egypt* Henry Ossawa Tanner 1923
- 195 *Chapel of the Rosary I* Henri Matisse 1946–51
- 198 *Chapel of the Rosary II* Henri Matisse 1946–51

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201 **OUTSIDE *the* BOUNDARIES**

202 *Kintsugi Bowl*

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205 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

207 **CREDITS**

## FOREWORD

A course in anthropology first set my feet on the path that ended in this book. As an art major, I had learned to look at the history of art as a self-evolving phenomenon following formal stylistic rules and patterns, that stood (or fell) on its independent aesthetic merits. Meaning was a side issue. Only when I began to think like an anthropologist did I understand that objects of religious art were artifacts embedded in a culture of instruction, prayer, and, above all, the liturgy. It also came to me, like an unexpected thump between the shoulder blades, that art should be a part of my prayer life as well. So began my long journey to rediscover the lost language of art and to integrate it back into religion and into life.

It was not an easy process. In the academic world, religion was viewed as an abstract and largely incomprehensible concept, and irrelevant anyway. Practicing Christians, on the other hand, knew next to nothing about art and were content with a very low common denominator. So I had art friends and Christian friends but precious few Christian art friends. And so came about the column *A Thousand Words*: take a single work of art and, within the constraints of a thousand words, set it in its context and explain those things about it that you might not know if you had not been studying art history for the past fifty years. Originally published bimonthly in *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, these short, introductory essays attempt to set these works, like pebbles in a moving stream, in the larger picture of the history of art. My hope is that by decoding for you the artists' original intentions and their formal means of achieving them through line, color, light, space, and composition, I will give you, dear reader, the analytical tools that will render me obsolete.

People ask me how I choose the pictures for the column. Usually they come out of my current reading or research, although occasionally, in the pinch of a deadline, I fall back on a stash of graduate school papers, not publishable in themselves but containing useful insights. Sometimes readers ask me to tackle some of their best-loved works. Some are my old familiars. Some are works I struggle to understand. As the idea of the book began to come together, I scrambled to fill the gaps in my weaker areas of expertise. And if I have concentrated extra heavily in certain areas, well, we all have our favorites. ◆





## INTRODUCTION

# *Christ Preaching*

Rembrandt ∞ 1652

In seventeenth-century Holland, many Protestant preachers were regarded as popular celebrities, and their parishioners and admirers hung their portraits on their walls. In response to popular demand, in 1641, the artist Rembrandt van Rijn published a portrait etching of the Mennonite preacher Cornelis Anslø (Figure 1). Seeing it, the poet Joost van den Vondel (known as “the Dutch Milton”) responded with the epigram *Ay, Rembrandt, mal Cornelis stem:*

Ay, Rembrandt, paint Cornelis’s voice.  
The visible part is the least of him.  
The invisible, one knows only through the ears.  
Who desires to see Anslø, must hear him.

Without hearing his preaching, we miss the essence of the man. Rembrandt in turn painted a portrait of Anslø and his wife (Figure 2), in which the silent canvas answers Vondel’s challenge to convey the impact of Anslø’s voice, to make the image speak.

“To make the image speak.” In a later etching, *Christ Preaching* (page 3), Rembrandt again struggles to make a voice and its effects visible, this time the voice of Jesus. In the etching, Christ stands at the center, his hands upraised and his lips parted and his head inclined to one side, a clear reference to the pose of Christ in Raphael’s *Disputa*, the *Disputation of the Sacrament*, in the Vatican Palace in Rome. (See page 105. Rembrandt would have known it from prints himself.) There, Christ holds up his wounded hands as the ultimate explication of the sacrament; here, Rembrandt has transformed the gesture into one of speaking. Christ, then, is the ultimate Word incarnate.

Christ speaks, and all around him people listen. With only a few sketchy lines, Rembrandt lets us know just how each person is listening. Look at their faces one by one. Some, with their eyes cast into shadow, listen with hardened hearts, waiting to trip him up;



1

## A THOUSAND WORDS

another, his face full in the light but his expression impassive, seems, like Nicodemus, to think, “Does our law judge a man without giving him a hearing?” Another tilts his head and raises his hand to his face as if beginning to be swayed; others lean forward and listen intently; still others are rapt.

All the lines of the composition focus our own attention on Jesus. The wedge of figures on the left makes a line that directs our gaze inward to the central figure of Jesus, while on the right, the crowd spirals upward and around to where Jesus stands in a halo of light. Everyone’s eyes, ours included, are on Jesus.

Everyone’s but one. A small boy directly below Christ’s feet has set aside his toys and turned away; it is at him that Jesus is looking and to him he speaks. The little boy is engrossed in drawing in the dust. He is an artist. Not only an artist, but, perhaps, the artist, Rembrandt.

Rembrandt, whose face we know well from his dozens of self-portraits, included himself specifically in the painting *Christ on the Sea of Galilee* (now, sadly, lost to thieves in a heist from the Gardner Museum). The twelve apostles, in varying states of distress, man the boat as Christ sleeps exhausted in the stern. One bails; others struggle with tiller and sails or shake Christ awake; one throws up over the side. And clinging helplessly to the rigging, a fourteenth figure, with the face of Rembrandt, stares outward at us in desperation.

Why does an artist include himself within a biblical scene, particularly one in which Christ is present? It is a tradition of long standing: perhaps Rembrandt



self-consciously wished to place himself in the company of the medieval and Renaissance masters.

Or perhaps it reflects some aspect of his personal life. In the years before Rembrandt etched *Christ Preaching*, his wife had died and he had become embroiled with the widow hired as his son’s nanny. She sued him for breach of promise, and in the end he had her detained in the house of correction. In the meantime, he had entered into a common-law (and very happy) marriage with



## Rembrandt's *Christ Preaching*



Hendrickje Stoffels, a girl originally hired as a maid in his household. The provisions of his first wife's will precluded him from remarrying without incurring considerable financial loss, and Rembrandt was, to say the least, not a good money manager. Hendrickje was called up before church elders and reproached for her irregular status. Rembrandt, though under strong Mennonite influence (witness the portraits of Anso), was officially unchurched and escaped public sanction.

That he was unchurched by no means implies that he was an irreligious man. Few artists before or since have studied Scripture so closely, or to such effect as Rembrandt. Perhaps in *Christ Preaching* the artist gives us a glimpse of his inner mind: he, Rembrandt the little boy, has turned his back on Christ, who calls to him and looks upon him tenderly. But the boy, unheeding, is absorbed in his art. So Rembrandt the etcher draws upon his knowledge of older art, his knowledge of the Bible, his observation of the expression of inner psychology in the human face, and perhaps his own personal struggles, to create this image of the Word and its power, and to make us hear it speak.

"To make the image speak." In this book, it will be my purpose to examine certain individual works of art, to try to see how an artist listens to the voice of Christ and conveys the spoken message to us, whether through a language of symbolism which we no longer understand, through references to older art or to contemporary events, or simply through the formal means available to him as an artist. I hope that then these silent images may again find their voice. ♦