

# The Influence of Christian Religious Art in Renaissance and Reformation on Cultural Identities in Europe

Luojia Xu

Jiangsu Tianyi High School, Wuxi, 214101, China

## Abstract

This article explores the profound impact of Christian religious art during the Renaissance and Reformation periods on shaping cultural identities in Europe. By examining prominent art forms such as altarpieces, paintings, and sculptures, the study highlights how these artworks communicated core Christian values and engaged the public with religious themes. Notably, the Antwerp altarpieces, created by Rubens, played a pivotal role in reinforcing Catholic devotion during the Reformation. The works of Caravaggio and Michelangelo exemplify the shift toward humanism and realism in religious art, with their innovative techniques such as chiaroscuro and naturalism, emphasizing the humanity of divine figures. These artistic movements not only enhanced religious worship but also contributed to the cultural and social fabric of Europe, influencing both the religious and secular aspects of life. The paper concludes by discussing how these art forms helped mold cultural identities across Europe, bridging the gap between the sacred and the secular through their visual storytelling.

## Keywords

Christian Art, Renaissance, Reformation, Cultural Identity, Religious Iconography.

## 1. Introduction

Renaissance refers to a period in Europe following the Middle Ages, covering the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. More significantly, it is a cultural movement that marks the transition from the Middle Ages to a modernized European society. The French term “renaissance” corresponds to “rebirth” in English, showing that this movement was characterized by an effort to revive and surpass the ideas and achievements of the classical era (Brotton, 2006). Reformation, also known as the Protestant Reformation, was a major theological movement in Western Christianity. The age marked the break-up of Western Christendom and the development of the Protestant branch of Christianity. In these two periods, a portion of art forms emerged and flourished. Art often acted as a medium that conveyed the core beliefs of Roman Catholicism (CatholicTV, 2017). The fundamental intellectual attitude of the Reformation involved the doctrine of a decline from an ideal in the past and a devoted attachment to theology at the expense of other studies (Elton, 1958). The three most prominent art forms in these periods were painting, sculpture, and decorative art. Similarly, numbers of artists emerged in different parts of Europe, including the well-known Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Caravaggio (Sorabella, 2008). This article aims to answer how these artworks and artists integrate Christian elements and why there was great significance.

## 2. The Antwerp Altarpieces

The Antwerp altarpiece was a representing religious artwork in the Reformation period. The altarpieces are housed in the Antwerp Cathedral and painted by Rubens, the great Flemish Baroque painter. The altarpieces clearly reflected the religious influences of the Protestant Reformation in Northern Europe (Bø, 2020). The altarpieces mainly portray the Passion of

Christ, including scenes like the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection, which was crucial to Catholic devotion during this period. Notably, the altarpieces have a rich and complex iconography. They are designed to educate and inspire the faithful and play the role of the messenger of the Roman Catholic church of their beliefs and visions (*Figure 1: The Antwerp Altarpiece in Ringsaker (C. 1530), Open Position. . .*, n.d.). These visual narratives reinforced Catholic teachings and provided a focal point for devotion and contemplation. In addition, the Antwerp altarpieces were not just made for local churches but were also exported across Europe, particularly to Spain, Portugal, Scandinavia, and Germany, according to Bø (2020). As a result, the altarpieces became a major export product of the city and contributed to its wealth and fame. Altarpieces were chosen as a medium to convey religious content for several reasons. According to Johnson (2005), first, altarpieces were mainly placed in churches, often above or behind the altar, which is the most sacred part of the church, making them focal points for worship and reflection; second, they provided visual narratives that complemented the rituals and teachings of the church, as many worshippers in the Middle Ages were illiterate, and altarpieces provided a means of teaching biblical stories and theological concepts in an accessible and engaging way. ; third, many altarpieces were commissioned by local guilds or wealthy patrons, linking them to the community's identity and values, thus reinforcing communal ties and shared beliefs.

### 3. Caravaggio

Caravaggio was an Italian painter active in Rome for most of his artistic life. He had a profound influence on reshaping Baroque art through his dramatic use of chiaroscuro, the technique of integrating light and shadow into his artwork (Ennui, 2023). Moreover, his emphasis on the human condition and everyday life resonated with audiences, ultimately impacting religious art and the broader art movement by encouraging a more personal, emotional engagement with the subject matter (Saltandlighttv). To be noteworthy, his depiction of religious content was revolutionary. As mentioned before, the integration of light and shadow in his artwork was influential to the development of art techniques. However, this type of artistic performance not only created a dramatic effect but also emphasized the spiritual significance of the moment, which better conveyed the connection between the deity and the life of ordinary people and gave the audience a sense of realism (Cottle, 2018). Furthermore, he portrayed biblical figures and scenes as ordinary life, which is called Caravaggio's Naturalism. He used real models, often drawn from the streets of Rome, which brought an unprecedented authenticity to his work. This approach emphasized the imperfections and humanity of his subjects, allowing viewers to see divine figures as relatable individuals rather than idealized forms (*Caravaggio's Baroque Naturalism*, 2017). His attention to detail in textures, facial expressions, and gestures created a sense of immediacy, making scenes feel current and impactful. Additionally, his realistic depictions often included the employment of chiaroscuro, further enhancing the three-dimensionality of his figures. This naturalism not only engaged the viewer but also conveyed complex emotional and spiritual themes in a way that resonated deeply with audiences of his time and beyond.

### 4. Michelangelo

Michelangelo was a versatile artist in the Renaissance. He was a painter, a sculptor, an architect, and a writer of sonnets. He was the first artist to be recognized by contemporaries as a genius (The National Gallery, London, n.d.). Michelangelo's influence on art and architecture was monumental. His mastery of the human form, evident in sculptures like "David" and "Pietà," set new standards for anatomical accuracy and emotional expression (Eknoyan, 2000). His frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, particularly "The Last Judgement," showcased innovative

composition and dramatic storytelling, influencing generations of painters. Michelangelo also emphasized the connection between art and the divine, inspiring a spiritual depth in artistic endeavors. His techniques in sculpture and painting, including the use of vibrant colors and dynamic poses, laid the groundwork for Baroque art (Clements, 1961). His approach to creative process and individuality encouraged artists to pursue personal expression, solidifying his legacy as a pivotal figure in Western art history (Kratochvíl, 2021). Michelangelo's depiction of religious content was marked by a profound emotional intensity and an innovative approach to the human form. In his works, such as the "Creation of Adam" on the Sistine Chapel ceiling and the "Pietà," he infused biblical narratives with a sense of humanity, capturing deep psychological and spiritual states. His figures often exhibit a muscular grandeur, embodying both physical strength and divine grace, which conveyed the idea of humans created in God's image. Michelangelo's compositions frequently emphasized movement and gesture, inviting viewers to engage with the stories on a personal level. By blending the sacred with the human experience, his art not only reflected theological themes but also explored the complexities of faith, making his religious depictions timeless and relatable (Thomas, 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, these artists and artworks can be considered messengers of Christianity. The essential idea is that the artists focused on biblical narratives and Christian themes in their work, using their art to convey core spiritual messages and moral lessons. By presenting religious figures in a more humanized and relatable manner, they made Christianity more accessible to the general public. Their works emphasized the humanity of saints and biblical characters, encouraging a personal connection to faith. Through their innovative techniques and profound emotional resonance, they played pivotal roles in the visual expression of Christianity, influencing how faith was understood and experienced by audiences.

## References

- [1] Brotton, J. (2006). *The Renaissance: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- [2] Bø, R. M. (2020). Making and Meaning-Making: The Antwerp Altarpiece in Ringsaker (c. 1530) across the Reformation. *Journal of Early Modern Christianity*, 7(1), 1–42. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jemc-2020-2019>
- [3] Caravaggio's baroque naturalism. (2017, March 5). *Art History Lover*. <https://artnerdsite.wordpress.com/2017/03/05/caravaggios-baroque-naturalism/>
- [4] CatholicTV. (2017, August 29). Why do the arts matter in the church? - CatholicTV - Medium. <https://medium.com/@CatholicTV/why-do-the-arts-matter-in-the-church-b957c3dc58c9>
- [5] Clements, R. J. (1961). Michelangelo as a baroque poet. *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 76(3), 182–192. <https://doi.org/10.2307/460348>
- [6] Cottle, M. (2018). *Of Life and Lighting: a study of the evolution of light in Caravaggio's painting*. Uvu. [https://www.academia.edu/37951774/Of\\_Life\\_and\\_Lighting\\_A\\_Study\\_of\\_the\\_Evolution\\_of\\_Light\\_in\\_Caravaggios\\_Painting](https://www.academia.edu/37951774/Of_Life_and_Lighting_A_Study_of_the_Evolution_of_Light_in_Caravaggios_Painting)
- [7] Eknoyan, G. (2000). Michelangelo: Art, anatomy, and the kidney. *Kidney International*, 57(3), 1190–1201. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1523-1755.2000.00947.x>
- [8] Elton, E. R. (1958). *The New Cambridge Modern History: Volume II The Reformation*.
- [9] Ennui, D. (2023, November 16). Caravaggio & how chiaroscuro emerged from the dark to become an iconic art style still influencing today. <https://www.distilennui.com/journal/caravaggio-and-how-chiaroscuro-emerged-from-the-dark-to-become-an-iconic-art-style-still-influencing-today.html>

- [10] Figure 1: The Antwerp altarpiece in Ringsaker (c. 1530), open position. . . (n.d.). ResearchGate. [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Antwerp-altarpiece-in-Ringsaker-c-1530-open-position-Photo-Birger-Lindstad-C\\_fig1\\_341680964](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Antwerp-altarpiece-in-Ringsaker-c-1530-open-position-Photo-Birger-Lindstad-C_fig1_341680964)
- [11] Johnson, G. A. (2005). 2. The art of the altarpiece. In Oxford University Press eBooks (pp. 13–29). <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780192803542.003.0002>
- [12] Kratochvíl, P. (2021). Roman Catholicism and Europe. In Oxford University Press eBooks (pp. 437–457). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198834267.013.24>
- [13] Saltandlighttv. (n.d.). Caravaggio: A Catholic artist?. Salt + Light Media. <https://slmedia.org/blog/Caravaggio-a-catholic-artist>
- [14] Sorabella, J. (2008, June 1). Painting the life of Christ in medieval and Renaissance Italy. The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chri/hd\\_chri.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chri/hd_chri.htm)
- [15] The National Gallery, London. (n.d.). Michelangelo (1475 - 1564) | National Gallery, London. <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/michelangelo>
- [16] Thomas, A. S. (2023, November 15). Exploring Christian Iconography in the Renaissance: A Divine Renaissance of Art. Medium. <https://medium.com/@ameerasara2000/exploring-christian-iconography-in-the-renaissance-a-divine-renaissance-of-art-ef151c773967>