



Holy Virgin Mary by Chris Offili



Alba Madonna by Raphael

Can paintings of the Virgin Mary be defined as art with reference to the *Alba Madonna* by Raphael and the *Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Offili?

The Alba Madonna is a painting by Raphael. It was commissioned by Paolo Giovio who later donated it to the Sanctuary of Santa Maria, a Roman Catholic Church in Italy after he became the Bishop of Nocera. Raphael was an Italian High Renaissance artist and the painting depicts Mary, Jesus and John the Baptist. The style of the painting (circular style) shows the influence of Michelangelo and specifically his paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The Alba Madonna was painted in 1510, during the last 12 years of Raphael's career in Rome where he was working for two Popes and their associates, many of Raphael's works are now held in the Vatican Palace. ¹

There is obviously a strong male influence of the creation of both the painting and the artist himself, put simply it was a painting made by and for men, however it depicts one of the most famous women in history. In addition, this was a painting that was created to be seen by Christians as it was originally displayed in Churches, although it is now one of the main highlights of the Imperial Heritage museum in St Petersburg.

The main question I would like to explore with this piece of art is the role of purpose in the final painting and whether this interferes with it being true art.

The Idealist Theory, created by R.G Collingwood in his book *The Principles of Art*, states that 'genuine art has no purpose: it is an end in itself'². Therefore, he argues that all religious art is a craft (which he defines as something created with a particular purpose as the craftsman begins with a plan) rather than true art which is non-physical. There are criticisms of this theory chiefly that Collingwood has too narrow a definition of art and critics argue that many great paintings that are widely defined

¹ Wikipedia. (2019). Alba Madonna. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alba_Madonna

² Warburton, N. (2004). *Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

as art are made with purpose. However, I will be using Collingwood's definitions of art as I believe that it is most relevant to my investigation, which is the role of purpose in paintings of the Virgin Mary, and whether it can in fact be defined as art.

I will investigate this using the Anti-intentionalism approach, as they believe that we must only pay attention to the intentions embodied within the work of art itself, and that the origin of the painting must not be confused with the meaning. This means that criticisms deal only with internal evidence which are contained within the work itself. I believe that this is an important approach for religious paintings as origin often has a heavy weight on how the art is criticized, and to remove the context may provide a much better analysis of the image itself. I believe this is especially important when looking at images of Mary as she is almost always depicted as a mother, or her role in relation to Jesus. And it is unclear whether this due to the patriarchy, as women were deemed inferior to men and their societal expectations of the time almost entirely revolved around motherhood. Or whether in fact, paintings of Mary are to show off the story, and communicate the message of Christianity through a more accessible media. In addition, it could be argued that Mary's depiction as a mother is simply to celebrate the truth of Jesus as the son of God, as Mary's pregnancy with Jesus is a very important story for Christians.

In Alba Madonna there is no doubt a strong motif emphasizing Mary's role as a mother. She is sat with a young Jesus on her knee and her arm around John the Baptist, who is also depicted as a young child. This is clearly to show her nurturing role in relation to the young boys and further reinforces the idea of her as a mother. In addition, there are many flowers around them, each with a symbolic meaning – including the Lady's Bedstraw which represents childbirth. However, depicting Mary as a mother is not necessarily the purpose of the painting, as it seems clear from art at the time that her identity as a mother and her identity as a woman were not separate. That to be a woman was to be a mother, and so Mary's role in Christianity was her birthing of Jesus. However, feminist theologians and aestheticians would argue that this is a view that was pushed by the early Church and patriarchal society rather than in the Bible.

However, Rafael was part of the Renaissance movement which aimed to revive classical ideas and move away from Western Medieval art- which was religious in focus, and was typically funded by the Church, powerful ecclesiastical individuals, or wealthy secular patrons. A religiously uplifting message was considered more important than figurative accuracy or inspired composition. The skills of the artisan were considered gifts from God for the sole purpose of disclosing God to mankind. Yet, the painting was commissioned by a Bishop with the intention of being displayed in Churches and it seems overly optimistic that the Renaissance movement was entirely removed from Western Medieval Art, especially when it came to religious paintings.³

In addition, there is no doubt that culture has had a very heavily influence on societies views of women, and I believe that the Anti-intentionalism approach to criticism is too narrow and inappropriate when looking at a painting that would have been very consciously and subconsciously affected by the culture that it was created within and in which it was intended to be presented. For this piece of art I believe that the origins and intentions are in fact very important when analysing it as a piece of work, and that Feminist perspectives in aesthetics are also attuned to the cultural influences that exert power over subjectivity: the ways that art both reflects and perpetuates the

³ Korsmeyer, C. (2017). *Feminist Aesthetics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*. [online] Stanford.edu. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-aesthetics/>.

social formation of gender, sexuality, and identity, and the extent to which all of those features are framed by factors such as race, national origin, social position, and historical situation.

I believe that the purpose of this painting may not have been conscious by the artist himself, but has been reinforced by the deep patriarchy of the Church and images of the Virgin Mary have her shown as a mother in order to reinforce separate gender roles within society. The Catholic Church claims to place high value on Mary, but yet the most expensive paintings of her are always with Jesus. My interpretation of this is that it portrays the idea that a women's key role is as a mother and this undermines their innate value and autonomy. Yet, if these paintings are playing a role in reinforcing these values to women then can they truly be classed as art, as they serve such a strong purpose? And although it can never be quantified the extent to which these images have assisted in the development and continuation of social standards for women, the fact that these images have been so widely viewed and created and a women's role as a mother is a stereotype still deeply ingrained in society today appears to correlate.

Mary is also depicted in this painting as young, with matching flowing clothes, long hair, clear skin and delicate features – all of which are seen as traditionally attractive qualities for women. It seems important that Mary is has been portrayed in a way that many would perceive as beautiful. That the visual appeal spans further than just the overall painting but also in Mary herself.

So, what was the purpose of the Alba Madonna? It was commissioned to be hung in a Church, and so was intended to be viewed by members of the Catholic Church. But it also appears to have more subtle purposes, such as angelizing Jesus and I believe reinforcing the Catholic view of the Virgin Mary as a mother. This is something that is very important to Catholics as they view Mary as an important figure in the Church. However, in my opinion a purpose does not have to be conscious, Raphael may have had deeply subconscious reasons for making Mary attractive, or be projecting what he saw as idealistic values of women on to such a prominent figure, I would still perceive this as a purpose. As a result, under Collingwood's definition the Alba Madonna would be defined as a craft as it is not as art in an end in itself.

However, I have also chosen to contrast the more traditional images of Mary with a different artistic interpretation. I will be using this to explore whether I can prove the title as correct or whether some similar paintings come under Collingwood's definition of Art. The Holy Virgin Mary by Chris Ofili is a much more modern and controversial painting of Mary. His painting is vastly different to the Alba Madonna, depicting a black Mary with an exposed breast formed of lacquered elephant dung and a robe made of pornographic depictions of woman's bottoms. Despite its less traditional depiction of Mary the painting is valued at \$2.3 million showing that it is a valued within the art community.

In terms of Art style, the two images are vastly different, with Ofili going for a more abstract, mixed media approach whereas Raphael used just paint to create a more Realistic piece. However, under R.G Collingwood's version of the Idealist Theory (*from his book the principles of Art*) art is a non-physical as it is an idea or emotion in the artist's mind. This idea is then given physical imaginative expression, and is modified through the artist's involvement with a particular artistic medium, although the artwork itself remains in the artist's mind. Although this theory has been heavily criticised for being too strange and narrow for a definition of Art as a whole, I believe that is an interesting approach to compare the two paintings. Both the Alba Madonna and The Holy Virgin Mary depict the same woman, the Virgin Mary from the Bible. Yet the two interpretations couldn't be more different, all the way down to the colour of her skin. To me this highlights how driven by

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the artist's or commissioner's motives the artwork is. They have been created to push forward ideas about Mary, and her characteristics as a form of political message.

I find the reaction of the many Catholics to the Holy Virgin Mary to be deeply interesting, as when looking at the two paintings from a purely art critical point of view then both depictions of Mary are just as valid and have both strengths and weakness in the art form. However, this is not the view of the Church. When the painting was first displayed at the Brooklyn Museum it particularly enraged Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a devout Catholic who in reaction attempted to cut off the museum's city subsidy and remove its Board, calling the piece "sick stuff." In my opinion, this is not a reaction to the artwork itself, as it has clearly taken skill and is an objectively interesting piece. The offense to Giuliani (and many others), is what the painting represents, and how it has clearly been made to contrast the traditional depictions of Mary and challenge the boundaries of her image.

Therefore, I believe that lots of people would not accept Ofili's painting to be a representative or appealing interpretation of Mary, although it is just as objectively valid as the Alba Madonna. In addition, it is likely that Mary would have in fact had darker skin due to being from the Middle East, although she actually has very limited description in the bible. Yet, the Church is unable to accept this image, and has instead chosen to depict Mary as a white mother. To me, this perfectly demonstrated that within Christianity Mary as a woman cannot be removed from her beauty or motherhood and that the paintings of her serve the purpose of maintaining this image.

Overall, I therefore believe that the purpose of these two paintings is so intrinsic to their formation that they are unable to be truly defined as artwork and as Collinwood says, are craft.

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