

## Review

*A Guide to Christian Art.* By Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. Forward by Gabriele Finaldi. London: T&T Clark, 2020. xii + 299 pp. Paper \$26.95. ISBN 9780567685124.

Intersections of history, theology, and art easily overwhelm even the most dedicated scholar, art-collector, student, and museum-goer. Attempts to systematize such connections collapse under the weight of comprehensive summaries and related canvases of social, religious, historical, and interpretive contexts. In this respect, *A Guide to Christian Art* by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona wisely avoids runaway ambition. Modestly, yet with a judiciously inclusive eye, Apostolos-Cappadona deftly surveys common themes and symbols that provide vocabulary, history, and cultural reference points for theological messaging in Christian art. She acknowledges up front that the volume does not address all forms of Christian art, and readers with special interests (such as music, opera, and ballet depicting theological themes) may find the volume wanting. However, her aim is theological: to provide a *guide* to Christian art that affirms Christianity's central figure, Jesus, and its foundational theological tenants, faith traditions, and praxes.

To set expectations for the reader, the volume contains a helpful introduction that describes its purpose followed by two main sections. The first section, "Narratives of Jesus Christ and His Mother, Mary, in Christian Art," summarizes the primary events of Jesus' life and ministry followed by a discussion of artistic symbols portraying his humanity and divinity. The second section, titled simply "Themes," contains two sub-sections, "Personages" and "Signs and Symbols." The former reviews the figures and metaphors associated with classical and apocryphal characters, the Saints, and the realms of heaven and evil. The latter reviews animals, flora and fauna, human beings, clothing and adornments, colors, words, and musical instruments attending to aspects of Christian life and faith. In discussing visual portraits of the church, the author includes a very helpful review of architecture, liturgical vestments and vessels, and religious orders. The work finishes with a glossary, a selected bibliography, a brief timeline of Christian history, an overview of religious movements and historical artistic periods, and a list of significant Christian artists.

In each section, Apostolos-Cappadona describes figures, symbols, and events in their primary biblical or cultural contexts followed by the way one generally finds them in artistic portrayals. Some biblical events and their artistic counterparts are described in significant detail while others receive only a mention. Some readers with particular interests may find the unevenness of detail and the lack of exemplary art pieces frustrating. However, the descriptions provided are often compelling enough to prompt the reader to look up various art pieces to verify the author's observations about the

artistic function of a figure or sign. As described below in the review of each section, there is sufficient description and detail to make the volume an intriguing read with respect to basic connections between art, theology, and culture.

The first section concerns the life and ministry of Jesus and his mother Mary and provides a window into the cultural development of attending theological themes. For example, portrayals of the baptism of Jesus became more intricate as the theology of baptism and repentance developed. The author briefly traces the performance of baptism by noting variations between portrayals of baptism as immersion in Eastern Orthodox iconography and pouring water over the head and body in Western Christian artistic traditions. Apostolos-Cappadona also calls our attention to the artist's portrayal of body positions, gestures, and symbols as clues to its theological development. She also provides insight into how some religious themes came into the foreground over others. For example, the Marriage at Cana gained popularity as it was associated with one of the three festivals of the Epiphany. In early Christian representations, Jesus figured prominently. However, as time progressed with the rise of Mariology, Mary took center stage along with a wedding couple and guests. By the Renaissance, neither Jesus nor Mary are featured prominently but are merged into expansive scenes of a great wedding banquet. Works such as *The Wedding Feast at Cana* (1563) by Paolo Veronese abandon the miracle of the wine in favor of encoding the culturally intricate tensions and social conventions of large social gatherings of its day. The miracle of the loaves and fishes underwent a similar transformation. By the Renaissance, early paintings foregrounding the overflowing baskets of the loaves and fishes had given way to beautiful landscapes, thus marginalizing the miracle itself. Here, *A Guide to Christian Art* prompts readers to consider how art not only mirrors theological and cultural developments but also how theological developments are themselves subject to cultural influences and attending artistic interpretations.

The second section focuses on a constellation of themes that include biblical, apocryphal, and mythological figures, signs, and symbols. Throughout the section, Apostolos-Cappadona employs the term “foretype” to denote the original identity and function of the figure or symbol prior to being pressed into the service of Christian art. Her introductory clarification on the meaning of foretype addresses the way in which Christian tradition often obfuscated (and continues to do so) the original function of classical and Old Testament/Hebrew Bible figures. In relegating an original figure to an “antitype” that was in turn fulfilled in the New Testament or Christian “type,” the original meaning of the figure was often lost. Thus, her substantive review of figures, signs, and symbols becomes much more robust. The figure’s original function remains largely intact as she explores (albeit unevenly at times) the cultural reasons behind their incorporation into theological messaging in Christian art, and the ways in which many foretypes were conflated over time. Once again, the reader is challenged to think about not only the theology of the art piece but also the developing theology *in* the art piece as figures are re-appropriated and combined to suit theological purposes.

Classical gods and goddesses from Greece and Rome formed the basis for many key biblical figures. One biblical character may represent the conflation of several foretypes. Among some of the more striking examples, Marian iconography assimilated the qualities of Artemis (protectress of youth, the moon, and the hunt) and other virgin goddesses, such as Diana of Ephesus, Athena (wisdom), Demeter (earth's abundance), and Hera (the Roman Juno, queen of the goddesses). Bacchus, the Roman god of wine, found its way into representing the eucharist in Renaissance Christian Art. Apollo, the Greek god of light, became the foretype for the Hebrew Bible's David and the New Testament's Jesus. Perseus, who held the head of Medusa, became the foretype of David holding the head of Goliath, the apocryphal Judith beheading Holofernes, and the daughter of Herodias serving the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Orpheus descending into the underworld to retrieve Eurydice also became the foretype of Jesus' descent to save the "spirits in prison" prior to his resurrection. Likewise, the Greek Pluto, ruler of the underworld, became the Roman foretype for portrayals of the Devil or Satan.

In the review of biblical figures and symbols, *A Guide to Christian Art* raises the question of how large a role the artistic depiction of a biblical figure or symbol may have played in its theological development. For example, the biblical text does not indicate what kind of fruit Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, the apple became the fruit of choice owing to the pun on the Latin for apple, "malum," and the Latin for evil, "malus." While in the biblical text Adam and Eve are together when presented with the fruit from the forbidden tree, Eve assumes full responsibility for the entry of sin in the period of medieval art. In some representations, the serpent takes on the face and the torso of a woman. Later, Eve becomes the foretype of Mary who brings Jesus into the world, the savior whose church is born from his wounded side just as the woman came from Adam's side. The section on themes also mentions the ways in which biblical stories were appropriated artistically for political purposes. The author notes the dance around the Golden Calf became code for lewd and wanton behavior. Ecclesial and other officials used artistic representations of the Exodus story to discourage liturgical dance, thus cementing negative connotations of the story. On the positive side, artists employed figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi to promote the value of humanity and devotion.

The scope of *A Guide to Christian Art* is sufficiently broad to attract readers from a wide variety of audiences. Students of theology and art are sure to find the volume helpful in providing an orientation to understanding the theological and cultural messaging of works of art from various periods. For beginners, Apostolos-Cappadona's volume is extremely informative in providing the biblical and theological background for understanding the identity of biblical, theological, mythological, and ecclesial figures and their foretypes. Teachers and educators will find the volume helpful as a resource for explaining the function of signs and symbols attending religious art as well as the

way in which art has influenced theological developments over time. For the Sunday school or adult learning audience, *A Guide to Christian Art* is a possible resource of illustrations for lessons on subjects ranging from biblical studies to church history, polity, and practice. For museum-goers interested in gaining an informed theological and interpretive perspective on the myriad of works produced by Western artists, *A Guide to Christian Art* is a welcome, valuable, and easily accessible reference.

Charles M. Rix  
Oklahoma Christian University, Edmond, Oklahoma