

ARTICLE

Revelation as Refraction

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"But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." -1 Samuel 16:7



Rachel Ruysch, *Flowers in a Glass Vase with a Tulip*, 1716.

In 1 Samuel chapter 16, the Lord sends the prophet to Bethlehem to anoint a king of Israel from among Jesse's sons. Upon seeing the eldest son, Eliab, Samuel seems confident that he is the one God has selected, saying in verse 6, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before him." However, in verse 7, we learn that God has rejected him. He instructs Samuel, "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." The scriptures do not specify what distracted Samuel—whether it was Eliab's bearing or perhaps a cultural preference for the eldest son. This verse teaches us, however, that God sees beyond the surface appearance; as an omniscient being, he sees the larger picture. Unlike humans, God is not deceived by external beauty and stature, traits which we learn are inadequate substitutes for inner righteousness when it comes to a life devoted to serving God.

As an art historian, this verse particularly stands out to me. The intricacies of sight—who is looking, when, and under what circumstances—are central to my discipline, a field that examines the rich visual and material culture of the past and present. Art historians have long been interested in images: what they depict and how it is depicted; how they function within a larger cultural context; and how a diverse audience interacts with the work to produce meaning. In the process of analyzing images, the possibility of new interpretations emerges and initial impressions are gradually replaced by a nuanced understanding of the complexities at play in the artwork and the culture in which it was created. I have found that this method of investigation, one that enables the viewer to see potential and meaning in each work of art, has parallels with the divine sight mentioned in 1 Samuel 16:7. In the same way that I have learned of the necessity to see beyond the surface in order to learn what is significant, either personally for the artist or culturally, I believe that the skills developed in art history can teach us how to see others and "see" God.

One of the entries for the word *image* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is, "a visual representation or counterpart of an object or scene, formed through the interaction of rays of light with a mirror, lens, etc., usually by reflection or refraction."¹ Although this definition is inclined toward a scientific and literal creation of an image, the two words referenced in the definition, reflection and refraction, provide fitting metaphorical contexts through which to explore the deeper implications of visual representation. Reflection implies a direct, unmediated relationship between the object and its resultant image, whereas refraction indicates the presence of an interface through which the transmission of light must travel, a journey that yields an altered image. Beyond facilitating a deeper understanding of images and how they function, these concepts have taught me about my relationship with the divine.

In the history of European art, a strong illusionistic impulse persisted for centuries. Leon Battista Alberti's 1435 treatise *On Painting* contains his famous discussion of painting as a window on the world. According to Alberti, art should act as an extension of the natural world, meaning that it should be illusionistic and mimetic. This demand for illusionistic art resided at the core of artistic production until the mid-nineteenth century. The French phrase for works with immense illusionism is *trompe l'oeil*, translated as "fool the eye." Artists such as Rachel Ruysch painted in this tradition. Her floral still lifes are dazzling arrangements of a variety of flora that

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "image," accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www-oed-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Entry/91618?rskey=B6xlrc&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

sport an occasional creeping insect. The technical execution of these images is so great that the viewer is tempted to reach out and stroke the petals or swat the bug away.

At first glance, Ruysch's still lifes seem to offer us something straightforward: a highly technical and dazzling display of stunning plant life. However, stopping at this surface level blinds the viewer to a fact that has long been acknowledged by art historians: art has never been simply a mirror. The artist—a person or persons formed by a patron's demands, their contemporary economic conditions, class status, personal religious beliefs, and a host of other influences—acts as the filter through which the world is rendered either two- or three-dimensionally.

Although it is tempting to see Ruysch's still lifes as neutral reflections of the natural world, the misleading “outward appearance” mentioned by God in 1 Samuel 16:7, they are refractions; subject matter, ideas, themes, and concepts are filtered through the maker's worldview. Ruysch often combined flowers that did not bloom at the same time of year, a fact that debunks the apparent naturalism and foregrounds their constructed identity. Her seventeenth-century audience would have recognized many of the depicted flora as luxurious and expensive varieties. Her works can therefore be read in terms of a flourishing economic and Protestant religious atmosphere that warned against the fleetingness of mortality. These flowers evoke prosperity, cycles of birth and death that remind the viewer of their own mortality, and the need to live a life devoted to God rather than the accumulation of material wealth.

There are many interpretations these paintings yield, and it is important to note that the meanings of these works are neither static nor determined solely by the maker. Depending on the viewer's experiences and perspective, whether in the seventeenth or in the twenty-first century, the meaning generated during the viewing process will be different. Each viewer brings something different to the work, allowing them to notice what another observer might miss while simultaneously being blinded to other possibilities due to the limits of their own worldview.

My experience in art history has prompted me to further consider how the things I have learned can inform my spiritual development. Viewers will miss the rich nuances of Ruysch's floral still lifes if they fail to consider how her work engages with themes and ideas that were culturally significant to citizens of the Dutch Republic in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather than being limited by personal tastes and predilections, the viewer approaches the artwork with an open mind and unpacks it in an attempt to discover what it can reveal about a certain time and place. The shortcomings of our own vision are reiterated in 1 Samuel 16:7 where we learn that God's vision differs from mankind's in that he looks on the heart rather than an outward appearance. If we are to become like our Heavenly Father, as we have been commanded, then we are to develop this ability for ourselves. Cultural attitudes and stigma are attached to external markers such as clothing and hair styles, ethnic identity, and socioeconomic status. Looking beyond these assumptions, these surfaces that fool the eye, to really engage with the person's subjectivity and acknowledge their divine potential is key to our spiritual progression. These culturally embedded attitudes intervene in our relationship with those around us and, when left unchecked, these perspectives can thwart our spiritual development.

We also need to acknowledge the ways in which these culturally encoded prejudices mediate our communication with the divine. Writing about biblical parables in his book *Figuring*

the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and the Imagination, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur points out that these texts are embedded in other narratives, such as the life of Jesus and the reader's interpretation of the text. Ricoeur calls for his audience to identify these structures of interpretation and consider in what ways one narrative is embedded in another and how this embeddedness influences the generation of meaning. As a result, meaning is not produced in a neutral, straightforward way that results in one correct reading of a text but rather various interpretations that will differ based on the reader's perspective.²

Much like scripture, our engagement with art is embedded within other narratives; these narratives often take the shape of cultural, political, and social attitudes that influence our perception of the world around us. We can extend this thinking to revelation, a form of divine communication that may seem direct or unmediated but really one that is embedded within a structure of understanding that is mortal. Revelation is received and interpreted within a certain framework. The moment revelation enters our minds, the revelation is no longer a reflection of the divine, but it is refracted through our personal worldviews; it enters a world of our own making.

These observations are not meant to douse the reader in despair by pointing out the impossibility of ever communing directly with God or the inescapable limits of our mortal worldview. It is my conviction and personal experience that this knowledge can bring us closer to God and facilitate our spiritual development in several ways. God's ability to see the fuller picture strengthens our understanding that he communicates with us in a way we can understand. He knows how to circumvent these limitations to provide his children with the messages they need to receive. When confronted by questions of faith, we can trust in a God of wisdom whose vision is clear and eternal rather than one "[seen] through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). This observation further confirms the Lord's words in Isaiah 55:8 in which he states, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." Acknowledging the limits of our perspectives and how they are informed, either by ideology, culture, or emotion, allows us to identify ways in which we can close the gap between us and God and come closer to him. Failing to confront our shortcomings can lead to false pride if we think that our answer or perspective is supreme; if we are not self-conscious seekers of truth, we can be blinded to other truth. If we allow divine communication to be limited by our human understanding, then our minds will close to the possibility of truth elsewhere or continuing revelation. Embracing the fact that revelation is embedded in human understanding also tolerates diversity as we learn to keep our prejudices and biases in check. This perspective maintains us in a position of humility necessary to grow spiritually.

Though it may be tempting to view revelation as a reflection of the divine, like we are tempted to view a still life by Rachel Ruysch as a mirror held up to the natural world, there is much to be gained when we acknowledge how both forms of communication are refractions. Highly illusionistic art is a simulacrum, a copy or imitation that, despite its tantalizing *trompe l'oeil* effect, cannot offer you the thing itself. The artwork cannot substitute reality, however that does not mean it cannot help you access the truth or goodness referenced within; it serves as a tool that can guide the viewer toward it. Revelation functions similarly. It is not a direct reflection of the divine, but it nonetheless points us to the divine, playing an integral part in leading us to truth and eternal life.

² Paul Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 144–151.

By studying art history, I have come to appreciate the beauty beneath the surface. Rather than blindly accepting the surface appearance as a reflection, an action that will consistently result in a skewed and incomplete perspective, art history has taught me the importance of interrogating my assumptions about an artwork and to instead consider the multi-faceted nature of the historical moment of an object's creation. In doing so, I examine artworks as embedded within a larger network of ideas, agents, and forces that all influence its production and meaning. This reading of the work is not necessarily grounded in suspicion but motivated by a willingness to discover the artist, culture, and many messages contained in a work of art. As a result of my academic training, I am convinced of the necessity of offering others the same thoughtful and compassion courtesy, though I am admittedly imperfect in my attempts, and I readily acknowledge the limits of my own perspective. Revelation is similarly refracted through an incomplete and mortal worldview, a fact that encourages us to embrace diversity, ongoing revelation, and humility before God. It assists us in maintaining the sacrifice that Christ has asked each of his disciples to make, namely a "broken heart and a contrite spirit" (2 Nephi 2:7). If we are self-aware of how our minds and perspectives are circumscribed by the borders of our worldview, we can begin the process of learning to see how God sees: by looking on the heart rather than allowing our eyes to be fooled by a misleading surface appearance.

Works Cited

- Ricoeur, Paul. "The Bible and the Imagination." In *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, translated by David Pellauer, edited by Mark I. Wallace, 144–151. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995.