

AN AESTHETIC ANALYSIS AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON MARIAN ART: AN INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

One of the intentions of exploring theology and art is developing the ability to engage artistic creations with both theological and aesthetic principles. An aesthetic analysis and theological reflection on the works of Bouguereau and Bourdelle fosters this intention. The juxtaposing of painting and sculpture exemplifies different mediums offering similar perspectives. An interpretive perspective of these artworks reveals how masterpieces emanating from profound religious persuasions form a matrix for theological discernment. In this instance, the correlated roles of Mary and Jesus in Christian tradition.

KEY WORDS: Art, painting, statues, theology, Mary, Jesus, analysis

Introduction

The quest for the spirit may be fulfilled through exploring theology and the arts. This aesthetic analysis and theological reflection focuses on the tension between two works of art. These artworks are William Bouguereau's 'Virgin and Child' painting and Antoine Bourdelle's 'Virgin of the Offering' sculpture. Both works are exhibited in the Art Gallery of South Australia. Their respective social, historical and stylistic contexts, together with that of their creators, will be argued and paralleled from the perspective of juxtaposing artworks.

Analysis of both Bouguereau and Bourdelle's Marian artworks reveals how they stem from deep religious convictions, forming threads within a tapestry of theological truth when viewed through the lens of the interrelated roles of Mary and Jesus.

Accordingly, four criteria for appraising artworks such as these are addressed: (1) what do I see and perceive in these works? (2) What do I know about these works and artists? (3) How do I feel about these works? (4) What is my theological reflection on these

works? An exposition of these works suggests the capacity to engage artistic creations with theological and aesthetic principles is both practical and purposeful.

The first artwork considered is William-Adolphe Bouguereau's 'Virgin and Child' 1888 oil on canvas painting. This is my preferred choice of the two artworks as it engages the emotions and stimulates the mind through clarity and allegory. Accordingly, the aforementioned criteria for assessing aspects of artworks will be presented as follows:

What do I see and perceive in this painting?

I see a most illuminating painting and perceive a call to holiness. The colours are soft, rich, light and edifying. The contrasting body colours differentiate their humanity with the linking halos uniting their spirituality. There are rectangular and round shapes employed. Rectangular shapes, as in the frame, chair and footstool plus round shapes as in halos. These shapes may be seen as definitive borders of earth and life containing the spirit of God manifested in Jesus. Mary is holding Jesus out for the world to embrace, with Jesus welcoming the world into this embrace (See Figure: 1).¹

The overall composition is balanced, rhythmic and reasoned. The subject is matter clearly defined, with the spiritual relationship poised and evoking. The painting is large and lifelike, a 176.5 x 103 cm rectangular oil on canvas work. It is hung in a specific Christian location at the Art Gallery of South Australia, to be compared with other Christ Child 19th century works. The painting's location and lighting are appropriate and it is labelled with a praiseworthy descriptive plaque (See Figure: 5)

What do I know about this painting and artist?

Bouguereau's 'Virgin and Child' painting was one of the Art Gallery of South Australia's first acquisitions, thanks to the Elder Bequest Fund of 1899. As noted on the exhibits plaque:

This superb painting reflects the highest aspirations of the academic art world towards the end of the nineteenth century. Grounded in the idealised ancient Greek and Roman traditions, as well as the Italian Renaissance, Bouguereau's classicism was increasingly at odds with contemporary impressionist and post-impressionist styles. Here, the Virgin is represented

¹ Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1996).67.

as a symbol of perfection; her ideal bodily form and beauty enhanced by her graceful and pious character.²

The artist, William-Adolphe Bouguereau (November 30, 1825 – August 19, 1905), was a popular yet controversial French academic painter of the 19th century.³ Bouguereau was a traditionalist whose realistic genre paintings and mythological subjects were modern elucidations of classical themes with a prominent focus on the female human form.⁴ At the time, Bouguereau's paintings were deemed too idealistic for realist classification. However, the majority of contemporary art historians consider Bouguereau a romantic realist. Significantly, Bouguereau's work unites features of neo-classicism, impressionism, romanticism and realism.⁵

How do I feel about this painting?

I feel enchanted in the presence of Bouguereau's 'Virgin and Child' painting. My response is intense and meaningful. I have admired and upheld this painting for many years as a source of spiritual stimulation. It is an 'icon' for prayer, meditation and contemplation speaking of love, loyalty and life. Moreover, in the presence of this work one feels God's gaze. Jesus' eyes hold you and His outstretched arms embrace you. A feeling of love, life and longing captivate the observer (see Figures: 6).

Hence, one appreciates a sense of God incarnate in this painting and a challenge to respond to its appeal. Our Lady's posture and position suggests a quiet acknowledgement of this appeal and an expectancy of desire for positive response. Here is the Mother reaching out to her children through her son Jesus, and at a time when her pleas so often go unheeded. The connection between mother and child is unique. Many artists across time and cultures have endeavoured to capture this relationship using various mediums. However, Bouguereau achieves this bond in the medium of paint (as does Bourdelle in sculpture).

My theological reflection on this painting

There is a religious setting to this painting, despite Bouguereau's work generally relating to pagan mythology. Bouguereau produced three such paintings in a short period between 1888 and 1900 (see Figures: 2, 3, 4). The terms 'religious' and 'spiritual' apply to

² Art Gallery of South Australia, see Figure: 5.

³ "Bouguereau," *Appleton's Journal of Literature, Science and Art* (September 1870): 284.

⁴ Ian Chilvers, *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).96

⁵ Jonathan Harris, *Art History : The Key Concepts*, Routledge Key Guides (London: Routledge, 2006).160.

this work as its subject is religious and its influence on society is spiritual. There is an intention to instruct and impart comprehension besides pleasure and exhibition. Howe's dimensions of 'didactic' and 'aesthetic' best fit this work because it offers an aesthetic and critical reflection on art, culture and nature.⁶

The theological approach of 'ultimate reality'⁷ (Tillich) assists an appreciation of this painting for it presents Jesus as God and Truth. Jesus' penetrating eyes are the windows of his soul and mirror of his mind challenging any negation of truth. This work bridges the real and surreal, the physical and the metaphysical, the Christ in me with the Christ in you. If a 'picture is a thousand words,' then this painting speaks volumes. If art is the bible of the illiterate then this painting is a bibliography of all Christian literature.⁸ Having considered Bouguereau's art via the medium of painting let us proceed to Bourdelle's art through sculpture, again within the context of theology and art.

The second work of art to be considered is Antoine Bourdelle's 'Virgin of the Offering' bronze sculpture. I have chosen this sculpture of Bourdelle's as it contrasts and supplements the message of Bouguereau's 'Virgin and Child' painting. The aforementioned applied criteria for assessing aspects of artworks, as applied to Bouguereau, follows:

What do I see and perceive in this sculpture?

I see a colossal statement to Christianity and perceive a call to conversion in Antoine Bourdelle's 'Virgin of the Offering' sculpture.⁹ The colours are bronze weathered to grey with greenish hues. The subject shapes are in the figure of a tree trunk with two flowering branches atop. Thus, the overall composition is well balanced with the sculpture representing the 'tree of life' with the images of Mary and Jesus twining into each other as fibre and fruit, mother and child, servant and saviour (see Figure: 7).

The sculpture's size, shape and material are significant. This enormous bronze 250x90x70cm figure is mounted on a tall base with a powerful presence and message. It is located in the court yard bordering the northern wall at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

⁶ Graham Howes, *The Art of the Sacred : An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).11-19, 24-28.

⁷ Course notes, 21/03/11 - Theologians on Art #1 (SD), 3-6.

⁸ Review of *William Bouguereau- Paris*, by Gerald Ackerman. *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 126, No. 973 (April 1984), 247-249.

⁹ P. Cannon-Brookes, *Emile Antoine Bourdelle : An Illustrated Commentary* (London: Trefoil Books, 1983).6,14.

The lighting is natural due to its outdoors setting. The work is signed on the base at the rear but not dated, and a plaque is located at the front (see Figure: 9).

What do I know about this sculpture and sculptor?

This sculpture is a copy of the original figure and was installed at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1941. It was one of four casts made by the artist from the first mould. The initial commission in 1919 was from Bourdelle's student Leon Vogt as a symbol of thanks for the survival of their home through World War I. Here the Virgin appears to be offering her child as a sacrifice. Many families who lost loved ones in that war identify with this offering due to their firm faith and tragic social experiences.¹⁰

Bourdelle's Bronze work titled, '*Virgin of the Offering*' (1922) reflects a captivation with monumental religious sculpture. Notably, Bourdelle's works present extravagant, rippling surfaces blended with the flat, decorative simplicity of Archaic Greek and Romanesque art. His style hosted a fresh vitality and talent into sculpture of the early 20th century.¹¹

The French sculptor Emile-Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929) was a pupil of Auguste Rodin and worked mostly in bronze and marble (see Figure:8).¹² Bourdelle sought to return monumentality to sculpture via the eclectic, drawing from both ancient Greek and medieval works.¹³ Concerned over the low public profile of sculpture, Bourdelle sought to restore sculpture to its traditional outdoor and architectural settings.¹⁴

How do I feel about this sculpture?

One feels moved in the presence of his Bourdelle sculptural, for it speaks in a sphinx like way of power and purpose; sphinx, as it is statuesque, and enigmatic. Yet, there is a purposefulness here driven by Mary, presenting her soldier son to the world for mission. In the presence of this sculpture you feel humbled by its enormity and poise, and overawed by its message of reign, resolve and religiosity. Here, there is the impression of a God and Holy

¹⁰ Sarah Thomas and Angus Trumble, *Vive La France: Hidden Treasures of French Art (1824-1945) from Adelaide Collections* (South Australia: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1998), 11.

¹¹ Keith Aspley, Elizabeth Cowling, and Peter Sharratt, *From Rodin to Giacometti : Sculpture and Literature in France, 1880-1950*, Textxet (Amsterdam ; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000).49-55.

¹² Ruth Butler, *Rodin in Perspective*, Artists in Perspective Series (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980).144.

¹³ Robert John Goldwater and Marco Treves, *Artists on Art : From the Xiv to the Xx Century*, 3d ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958).405.

¹⁴ Aspley, *From Rodin to Giacometti*, 55-60.

Family of impregnable intent and tenaciousness. Moreover, a humbling stimulation for deeper and broader levels of theological thought and inspiration prevail (Figure: 10).

My theological reflection on this sculpture

The classifications of sacred, religious and spiritual all relate rigorously to this work due to its powerful presence and purpose. It was commissioned through a tragedy of war and is a sacred signal for adhering to Christ's message of world peace. As with Bouguereau's painting, Graham Howes' 'didactic' dimension of religious art best fits this work as it is designed and intended to teach, convey, instruct and inform.¹⁵ The term 'experiences of God'¹⁶ would again best describe my theological response to this sculpture as it transcends an appreciation of truth, life and death. Moreover, I have a particular appreciation for this work as a religious person. This, perhaps, is because its location in our South Australian Art Gallery speaks to me of Our Lady and Jesus in the context of daily life, apart from its supplementing my assessment of Bouguereau 'Virgin and Child' painting.

Conclusion

An interpretative aesthetic analysis and theological reflection of these two artworks has shown how the comparing of different artworks assists comparative depictions and reflections. Moreover, how comparison supports the specific focusing of attention. Bouguereau and Bourdelle's works complement each other by taking the observer beyond instruction and the iconic. Hence, the two dimensions have the potential to create a third (spiritual) dimension.

Accordingly, both artworks have been reviewed personally with the same analytical criteria applied. These criteria sought answers to what I saw, perceived and knew regarding these works and their artists. Furthermore, how I felt about these works, together with a theological reflection. Consequently, from this expose of Bouguereau and Bourdelle's works it has been shown how an ability to engage artistic creations with both theological and aesthetic principles can be practical and purposeful through the specific focusing of attention.

Comparing these artworks has fostered my analytical skills for artistic appreciation and enhanced my faith. This has been achieved through engaging artistic creations with both the theological and aesthetic principles of painting and sculpture. Significantly, it has

¹⁵ Howes, *The Art of the Sacred : An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief*.11-19.

¹⁶ Course notes: 04/04/11-Theologians on Art #2 (SD), 1-2.

enhanced my appreciation for the role of art in the study of theology and the broader aspects of knowledge and learning, through the contemplation of Marian Art.

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- Appendix -

Figure 1
'Virgin & Child'



Bouguereau, Adolphe-William

'Virgin and Child'

Oil on canvas, 1888

176.5 x 103 cm (69 1/2 x 40 9/16 in.)

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Source: Google Images - Art Gallery of South Australia

Figure 2
Virgin & Child



Adolphe-William
Bouguereau
1888

Source: Google Images

Figure 3
The Virgin of the Lilies



Adolphe-William
Bouguereau
1889

Source: Google Images

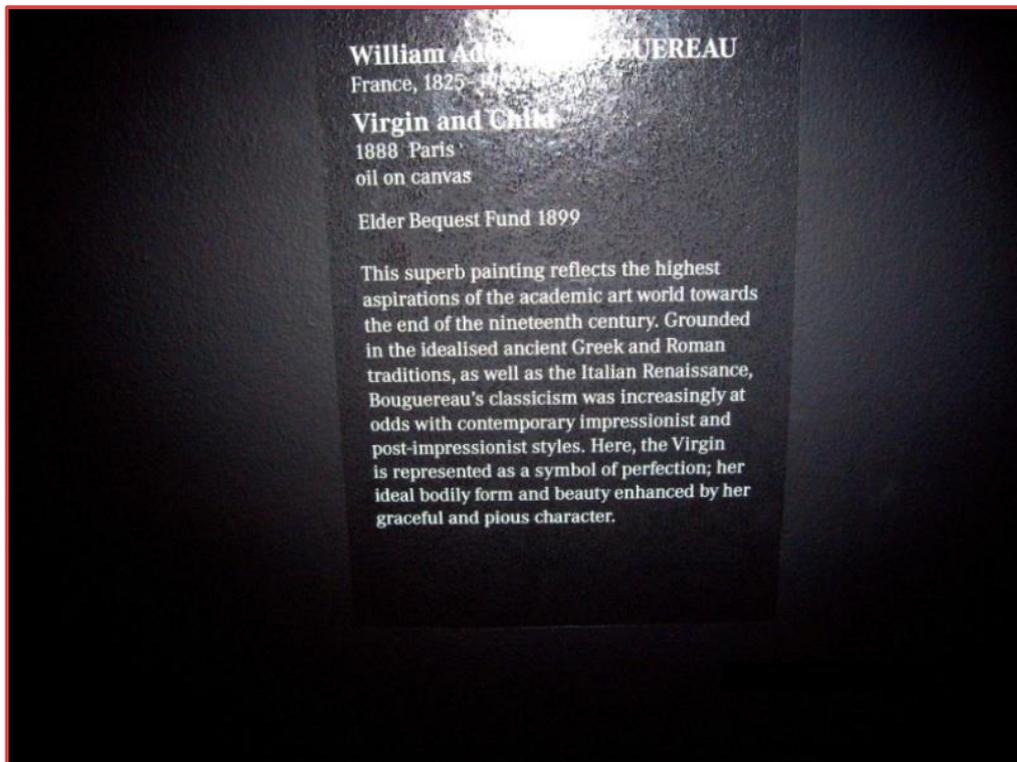
Figure 4
Virgin with Angels



Adolphe-William
Bouguereau
1900

Source: Google Images

Figure 5
William-Adolphe Bouguereau's 'Virgin and Child' 1888 Plaque



Source (Figures 5, 6): Roger Porter - May 2011

Figures 6
'Virgin and Child'
(Three perspectives)

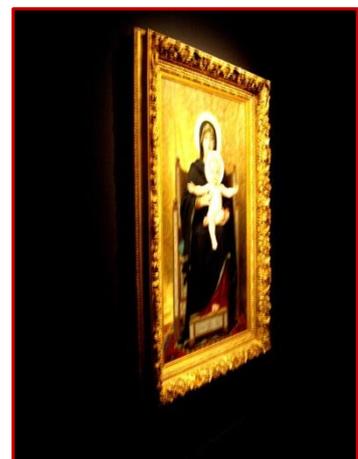
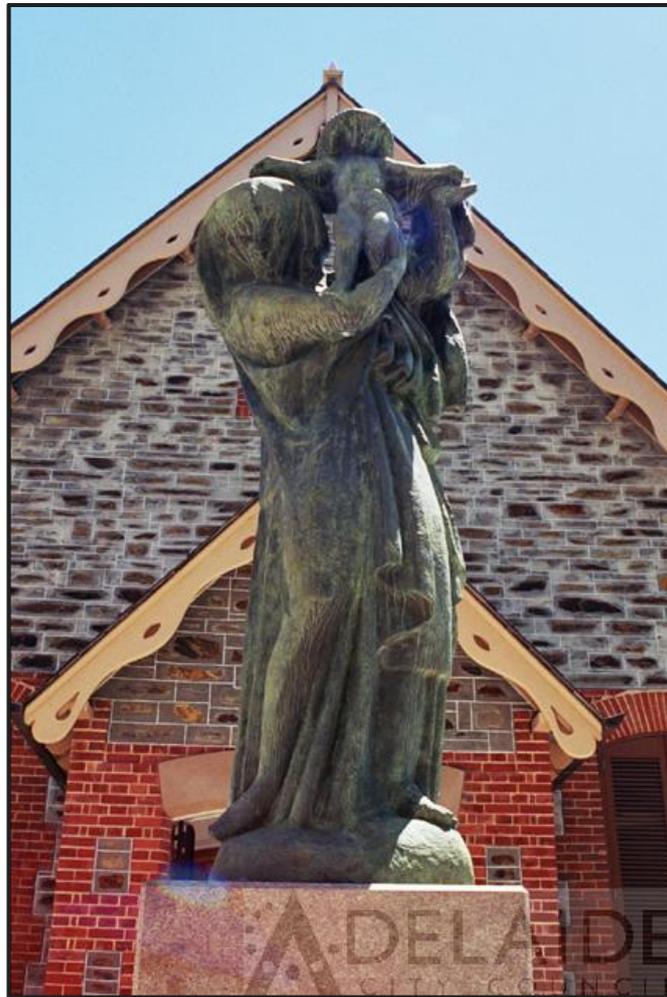


Figure 7
'Virgin of the Offering'



Source: Google Images - Art Gallery of South Australia

Artist Name(s): BOURDELLE Emille Antoine

Material: Bronze

Art Form: sculpture

Date of Fabrication: 1921

Date of Installation: 1941

Owner: Art Gallery of South Australia

Label: signed on base, rear 'ANTOINE BOURDELLE', not dated

Further Sources: Trumble, A and Thomas, S, 1998 *Vive La France: Hidden Treasures of French Art (1824-1945)*, p.11. All information Edited by Lisa Picciau, from original form

Location: North Wall, Art Gallery of South Australia

Figure 8
'Virgin of the Offering'



Émile-Antoine Bourdelle nearing completion of the *Virgin of Alsace* (aka *Virgin of the Offering*) prior to it being transferred to its place on top of the mountain Niederbruch in Alsace.

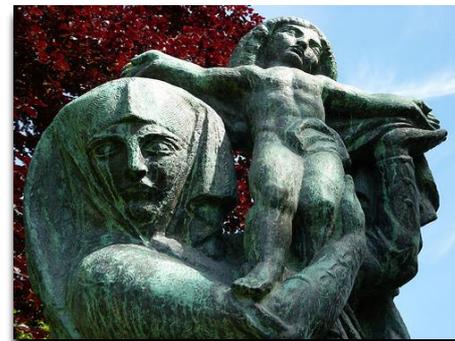
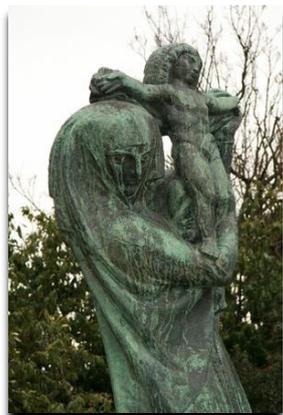
Source: Google Images - <http://www.mountharmonyfarm.com/GH-4Generations.html>

Figure 9
'Virgin of the Offering' Plaque -



Source: Roger Porter - May 2011

Figures 10
‘Virgin of the Offering’
(Three perspectives)



Source: *The Virgin of Alsace*, by Emile-Antoine Bourdelle, Dean, Edinburgh, Scotland, GB

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