Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XXVII

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
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[331]

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3.4 Examples of the Four Levels in the Visual Arts

I do this with fear and trembling, not so much because of the beautiful pictures and their interpretation but because of the technical problems, to which I am not used, and for which this room is not directly made. [1] Nevertheless I will try.

I distinguished four levels, and I will read them again:

1) Naturalistic style, secular subject matter.

2) Non-naturalistic style, secular subject matter.

3) Naturalistic style, religious subject matter.

4) Non-naturalistic style, religious subject matter.I must have produced a little confusion at the end when sometimes, for "non-naturalistic" I said "expressionistic", or even "religious". What I want to do is to go from one of these levels to the other and start first with the naturalistic style and secular subject matter. Now let me say first a few things in general. This is not a lecture in history of art. Those of you who are students of history of art will be able to correct me and to imagine much better examples. What I want to do is to show you in these four groups a large choice of pictures which can give you an impression of what is going on in all four levels with respect to the relation of religion and art. So it is the main point of the lecture as such, namely the point of relation to religion, relation between religion and culture, which is the point of my interest in showing you these pictures. History-of-art considerations are of course somehow presupposed, but they are not the theme. I will not talk to every picture—that would be much too much because I have the feeling it is good to show you many. Protestantism, |and this [332]
country generally, is not too near to the visual arts—it is much nearer to music and to literature. For this reason I think it would be good to show you not only one example for each, but many examples. So let yourselves slide into the atmosphere of the artistic realm, and something will then come upon you, I hope, and give you a feeling of what I have explained in one of these lectures as artistic symbols, and in some of these levels, then, the relationship to religious symbols.

[1] See Appendix, below, page 344, for list of slides used in Lectures 27–28.—Ed.

I: Naturalistic Style, Secular Subject Matter

We start with the first level: naturalistic style and secular subject matter.

1) *Landscape*, by Rubens—I start the consideration of this realm with landscapes because in them the duality of this level is especially easy to be seen and to be understood. We called this level "naturalistic style and secular subject matter". Nevertheless I want to show you—but it cannot be shown—I want to ask you to try to understand that in such a picture there is something present of the level which art reveals—it isn't a copy of any real landscapes—but the *meaning* of landscape, the essence of landscape, seen through a special artistic patternment, is present in it. And then you can go even beyond it—this is my main point—namely you can feel that in such a picture there is also present *ultimate* reality, because ultimate reality is not a reality *beside* the concrete and finite reality, but it manifests itself *through* finite *less*-ultimate reality. The power of being in such a picture is manifest to everybody who goes into it. And of course, in order to enjoy a picture, one must go *into* it, not into it as if it were a photograph or a landscape, in which you want to take a walk or have a picnic or read a newspaper, but some of the power of reality which reveals itself in this picture. | [333]

2) *Rubens*—I am especially fond of Ruben's landscapes because they show in a very special way, I would say, the difference of the naturalistic level, although the style is naturalistic, from the level which art reveals. Here again the only thing I can ask you to do is to go, not physically but spiritually, "into" it and experience the power of being which reveals itself through the limited power in form and matter of such a picture.

3) *Landscape* by Jacob Ruisdael—Here I wanted to say a few words about that which is most prominent in this picture, namely the tree in the middle. This is *treehood*! Now if you ever are asked in an examination about what a Platonic idea means, then think of this picture. This tree represents *treehood*, *essence* of tree, which repeats itself in every tree, but which of course, in special most powerful trees, is more manifest than in others. Here you have this kind of tree which is of course repeated in many pictures of Ruisdael and other Dutch painters—you have that vision Plato had when he came to his doctrine of ideas, namely of the essential power which makes that every tree again becomes a tree and nothing else, this natural power which is based in an eternal essence, an essence which would remain even if the surface of the earth with all trees disappeared. So think of this tree when you are asked about the meaning of a Platonic idea.

4) *Landscape* by Monet—Here you have something else, and this is an important thing, namely, as you know, Monet is the most representative name, not the greatest perhaps—the greatest is Manet, who is more than any other painter in the 19th century, but Monet is most characteristic for what is called impressionism. I call this style, in my stylistic analysis, subjective naturalism |in contrast to the Ruisdaels and the Rubens, which I [334] would call objective naturalism. It is subjective insofar as the nature which appears here is, as Zola has said, nature seen through a temperament. It is the optic organization not only of man generally, but of the seeing possibility of one great artist, which appears here. Here again I would say, through this subjective naturalism which is present in all the expressionistic pictures, we have the presence of ultimate reality, but now ultimate reality not only in nature but *in our encounter* with nature. And this is the greatness and the beauty of impressionistic art, that it brings in, in a way that was never before, the optical subjectivity of man.

5) *Railroad station [La Gare]* by Monet—This means that the same Monet was able to make a picture of the technical world, the second world man has created above nature, and in this world we have also not only the objectivity of the technical things, which

constitute a railroad station, but also the optic reception, the subjective receptive side, which, like the impressionists, he always put into the center. The technical world is in this way able, through the artistic symbol, also to become a symbol for ultimate reality, not directly in a religious sense—it is secular subject matter—but indirectly, through the power of being which is revealed also in these creations of man.

6) *Unloading the Cargo* (Monet)—It is a mixture of technical and natural elements, and what I said about both of them is here repeated in this very beautiful work of impressionist art. We will call this realm, which is now finished, nature—and technic[s] and its relation to nature.

Next we will have another realm of naturalistic style and secular subject matter: human relations, social relations: | [335]

7) Carpaccio: *Exorcism of a Demon*—Yes, now, this sounds religious—[*laughter*]—I didn't choose it for that purpose, but it was one of the few pictures available about the behavior of Renaissance society. This is a very secular society, and the subject matter doesn't make it religious at all. So we can take it actually as a picture which has not only a naturalistic style, but also a secular subject matter. Now look at it, and I go on and will then speak about another one in the same realm.

8) Ostade: *Tavern*—This is one of these very not only naturalistic but also realistic pictures, by one of the great Dutch naturalists. While the first also has most of the Italian Renaissance painters in the idealistic shadow or idealistic color, let us say, of naturalism, this is more in the realistic form. Both are naturalism, the one more idealistic (idealizing beauty), this more realistic, making a picture out of something which in itself is ugly.

9) Jan Steen: *Loose Living*—About Steen, I must tell you a personal story. When I first was asked to give a lecture on religion and art in the National Gallery in Washington, [2] I walked through the Gallery there, which is one of the first galleries of the world—"first" in the value sense—and thought, "Now, what will I see?" I simply let myself go—not my mind, but my foot, was driving, and I was driven to a familiar picture like this—it itself was not available—but they are all very similar. And I asked myself. "Now what about the religious character of such a picture? It is on the extreme side of the non-religious, in *some* way". And then I was ashamed of myself, |that I didn't immediately realize that [336] in these peasant scenes, pointed by the Dutch painters, there is one element of power of being, which I always praise in my lectures, namely vitality, besides rationality or intentionality. It is an expression of life, vitality, in its not destructive but uninhibited self-expression. And for this reason, I showed this picture at that time, and now I show a similar picture to you, in order to feel what perhaps the artist felt when he painted it, namely his joy, *joie de vivre* (as the French call it), his ecstatic joy about this kind of ecstatic togetherness. It is the same in the two others I showed you. In all these cases it is the vitality of social interrelations shown uninhibited by conventional repressions. And this is the profounder meaning of these pictures.

[2] This presumably refers to Paul Tillich's lecture on religion and art given in connection with Salvador Dalí's (1904–1989) painting "The Sacrament of the Last Supper" at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Tillichs view of the picture was also reported by *Time Magazine* 1956: "Tillich deplored Dali's work as a sample of the very worst in 'what is called the religious revival of today.' The depiction of Jesus did not fool Tillich: 'A sentimental but very good athlete on an American baseball team. The technique is a beautifying naturalism of the worst kind. I am horrified by it!' Theologian Tillich added it all up: 'Simply junk!' In Spain, Artist Dali seethed under the misimpression that Tillich had said 'drunk.' Retorted he, with mustaches atremble: 'I have drinking mineral water exclusively for more than ten years!'" (*Time Magazine* 19. November 1956 https://archive.org/details/time-1956-09-10/Time%201956-11-19/page/46/mode/2up).

10) Rembrandt: *Descent from the Cross*—Here we come to another kind of vitality—something soldierly—perhaps his most famous, most understandable picture of Rembrandt,

11) the *Night Watch*, it is usually called, and is something which gives, in the same way as the others (but on a level of a not festival directly, but anyhow something very near to it, although it has a soldier element in it) the same kind of vitality expressed in the tremendous power of light and shadow, as used by Rembrandt in most of his great pictures. It is as if the philosophy of light, which was the great philosophy of nature of the Middle Ages and is not so far removed from some of our present-day philosophies of nature, as if this power of being which we find in the miraculous phenomenon of light is brought into the surface of such a picture. | [337]

12) Rembrandt: *Anatomy Lesson*—Now here these men, with great seriousness, study medicine. This was an unheard-of picture, at that time, to show such a scene of which certainly you would say it is not beautiful in the ordinary sense; it has all the ugliness of the reality, of disorganization of bodies. But at the same time, in the community of the teacher, with the men who are learning from him, there is again in this secular scene, ultimate reality communicated.

13) *Comedians*, by Watteau—This is Rococo, the middle of the French 18th century, and is painted by the greatest of the French artists of the 18th century, and the greatest artist of any of the 18th century, namely Watteau—the title is *Les Comédiens*, or Comedians.—Now go to the next, because there I want to say a few other things.

14) *Love in an Italian Comedy*, by Watteau—Here again, comedians. Now look at these faces. Here I will say something which leads to our second level, and where I will come back to the second level, namely the forces of the comedians, of the *Pierrot*, of the harlequin, of the clown. They will reappear again and again. And they represent some ultimate reality in a very special way: they represent *also*, like the *Comédiens français* in the picture before, and the other scenes, and in the Dutch way, the *joie de vivre*, the joy of living, the power of vital self-realization. But at the same time, they show an element of tragic sadness, in their faces, and that is something which shows that even in the seemingly most secular and most naturalistic forms of thought, something comes through, inescapably, from the underground of life, from the demonic underground, from the tragic, in this case. We have seen something of it in the one picture of Ruisdael, and here |it appears again. We will see later on how much that means for our modern art, [338] this duality of the tragic *and* the vital self-affirmation of man.

Questions from students:

Question: What do these naturalistic pictures signify because they have been represented in artistic symbols as over against what they would signify just as they exist before they were painted?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Excuse me, I was not able to understand.

Question: What is added to the subject matter of these pictures by their having been painted?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Oh. Have you ever seen comedians like that in such a landscape, in such a kind of oscillating light and darkness, in some atmosphere of mist which is natural and non-natural at the same time? You remember from my lecture about the symbols of art: they are taken from nature, from the world as we encounter it, but then they lead, by a special way of using this material, into a level which is not the level of our ordinary encounter with reality. That is what the artist does, beyond that which happens.

This is the first step. Now I go one step beyond this: I say that in this way something which we also can have often, in meeting nature, reveals itself in a special way, namely ultimate reality in *non*-ultimate reality. And here the traits of non-ultimate reality come out in the unity of the comic and the tragic, which we see especially in this picture. But before we come to this analysis, the *first* step has to be made, namely the step to the artistic symbols, *as* artistic symbols, which use the material but make something new out of it, and *now*—perhaps this is one of the reasons for your question—we are able, with our eyes (which are educated by the history of art), to see with the eyes of Watteau a reality which we encounter in |our daily life. Now I hope you all had this experience. [339]
When you came from a gallery and were under the strong impression of a great artist, now you saw, with his eyes, the ordinary nature ... in the woods, and in the faces of men. This has happened to me very often, and not only with visual arts by but also with novels, etc. reality is opened. And now if it is opened, we can see this reality *also* with the eyes of the artist in our ordinary world, i.e. we do the same thing then *without* painting it—but we *see* it also. And that is one of the great things of the education by art, that even in the ordinary life the vision of the artist comes out.

Question: Is it essentially the artist who teaches us to see these things?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Yes. I think that the history of art has educated the eyes of mankind in all *all* periods of history, and in all countries.

Lecture (continued):

13) A Roman painting of the Hellenistic period—I come to the portrait, another group of the naturalistic.

14) Another Roman painting from Pompeii—this shows how old naturalism is, and it is not only an invention of the Renaissance; and how old portraits are which tried to be as near to life as possible.

15) Roman painting, 3rd century—

16) Greek painting, Hellenistic period—

17) *Portrait*, by Bronzino—We come to the Renaissance, not only because it is a beautiful picture but also because I want to say something about it, about this whole realm. This whole realm of the portrait is a very interesting one. For me this has much to do with the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which of course I understand symbolically, but as a true symbol. And the symbol is true because man is a whole, and, as a whole, the bodily existence participates |in the spiritual, and vice [340]
versa. They are expressions of the one reality which is man. This makes it possible to recognize the identity of every individual person in his face-expression. This is something very miraculous, if you ever think about it, that the cells of the body, the cells of the face, are able to express the spirituality which is in you. And this is the importance of the portrait. Now the portrait had the same problem, where somebody might ask, "Why not the reality itself? Why a portrait? What is changed?" What is changed is the following, that in a creative portrait the *whole* of this human being is expressed in the moment in which the painter brings it into existence as a picture. We will find something of it more characteristic later on, but it is something which is very decisive for the art of the portrait itself. Perhaps we go on, because I must say more about it.

16) Titian, *The Duke of Urbino*—another Renaissance portrait.

17) Here I want to stop for a moment. Here you see what I said much more realized than in the two others, namely you see here the history of this old woman embodied, represented, in every trait of her face. It is not a photograph of her in her 70th year, or

whatever it may be, but it is a reproduction and concentration of the spiritual pilgrimage of this human being embodying the ultimate meaning of such a being in the dimension of the eternal.

For this reason, secular portraits can, in spite of the fact that they are not religious, mediate ultimate reality by their power to bring into our vision something about a person which otherwise we never would be able to realize in this way. | [341]

18) Frans Hals—Here we are again in the more joyous element of Frans Hals, also a Dutch painter who preceded Rembrandt and who is nearer to the Renaissance pictures I gave you before. Here the vitality is seen.

19) Now here is Sargent, the American painter *[Portrait of Henry James]*—What has happened, when you compare him with the Renaissance or Rembrandt pictures you saw? We are in the industrial society now, and I will start with this when we are through with the whole relation of religion and art. In the industrial society, even the human face gets a technical element *[some laughter]* not in itself, perhaps, but in the way in which it is reproduced. This picture is an approximation to photography, and photography is an invention of the industrial age. Now many people may say today, "Why portrait at all? We can have that much-nearer to the truth when we have good photographs". This is a complete misunderstanding of the meaning of a portrait. If you want me to say it in a little bit paradoxical religious term, I would say: if God regards a man in the totality of his being, he might see the Rembrandt portrait, but he would not see the modern photograph—because the modern photograph is that which is transitory, in this moment, here and now; the portrait, if it is a great portrait, is the *whole* of the reality of this human being, which is seen in one moment by the artist, as God so to speak symbolically sees it from the eternal, in one moment of time. This is the meaning of portrait, and therefore portrait has a very special religious dignity, according to the fact that the individual person has a very special religious dignity. | [342]

Questions from students:

Question: To what extent is modern so-called art-photography not photography?

Answer (Paul Tillich): It is applied art, I would say. It is first of all photography, but then the photographer has learned to see faces through the eyes of the previous artistic works and is able to give to the photographs twists which are at least quasi-artistic, but they never can replace the art because they are bound to the moment, and the highest thing they can do is to bring out, in an impressionistic way, a special moment with artistic elements. The substance of photography remains photography.

Lecture (continued):

The transition to the second realm:

II: Non-naturalistic Style, Secular Subject Matter

20) *Toledo*, El Greco—Now we come to that which I call non-naturalistic style and secular subject matter. You can all see this in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Here you have a nature in which obviously the uncanny, the dark, the terrifying shines through not by the fact that he has painted a thunderstorm—that can be done in a quite different way—but by the art in which the naturalistic elements of a city are transformed into a visionary reality.

21) Goya, *City on a Rock*—This also is obviously not naturalistic, it is a fantastic imagination, and the fantastic element is increased by the three demonic animal figures

on the right upper part which go around this city, which *itself* is neither heavenly nor hell, but is in some way between them, and gives us a feeling of something which is trans-naturalistic, as Mannerism and Baroque were.

22) Cézanne—Now we are in the modern period—we start with 1900, Cézanne, and we start with *Still Life*. I will show you first a few more still lifes. Go through them.

23) Braque, [*The Mantelpiece*]—Cézanne is more important, in the development. | [343]

24) Braque—

25) Braque—The slide was upside down ... it is not much different!—Now what does a still life since 1900 mean? This is a tremendously metaphysical question, and I must answer it at the end of this hour metaphysically, because we want to go on there, then, next Tuesday. When I was in Paris two years ago, there was an exhibition of still lives from the 16th century on. [3] And the nearer one comes to the 20th century, the more the importance of still lives increases. Today, when you go through exhibitions with abstract non-representative ... art, you can call almost everything "Still Life". Now that means the artistic vision is gone—following the industrial analysis of our world—to the elements. But in doing so, in showing the cubes and forms which are the elements of natural reality, in contrast to the organic forms, it gives to these elements a depth-dimension which they have neither in reality nor even before in art. The cubistic tendency, which is of course expressed most fully in the so-called cubistic style, but which is much larger than a special style, means going down to the elements of reality, to the non-organic elements of reality, and to find there the power of being. They become cosmic representatives. They are not simply pieces of stones or planes or cubes, as you can see them in the mathematical realm, but they are expressions of ultimate reality in going below the surface of things and then finding in the deeper levels representatives of the ultimate reality in the non-organic realm. That is the meaning of cubism, and I will speak more about it. We must stop now. So I can promise you we will use the whole hour on Tuesday, but then we will be through. |[The following is the listing of slides in the "Religion and Art" section.–Ed.] [344]

Appendix

First Group (Naturalistic style, secular subject matter)

Rubens: *Landscape with Women*
Rubens: *Stormy Landscape*
Ruysdael, J.: *Edge of a Wood*
Monet, Claude: *Zaandam*
Monet, Claude: *La Gare. St. Lazare*
Monet, Claude: *Unloading the Cargo*
Carpaccio: *Francesco Quirini, patriarch of Grado, exorcises a Demon*
Ostade, A.J. van: *Tavern Brawl*
Steen, Jan: *Loose Living*
Rembrandt: *The Night Watch*
Rembrandt: *Dr. Tulp's Anatomy Lesson*
Watteau: *Les Comédiens français*
Watteau: *Love in Italian Comedy*

[3] Based on the date of the lecture (Feb. 16, 1956), the trip to Paris would have taken place in 1954 (such a trip is documented according to the timetable in EW 5, 319). However, it is not clear which exhibition he meant. A famous exhibition titled "La Nature morte de l'antiquité à nos jours" (The Still Life from Antiquity to Today), organized by Charles Sterling, had already taken place at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris in Paris in the spring of 1952. It is unclear whether Tillich was referring to this particular exhibition. That exhibition took place from April to June 1952 at the Orangerie des Tuileries; Tillich was in Europe that summer for his lectures in Berlin.

Roman painting, Hellenistic, Fayoum mummy, 3rd century A.D.
Roman painting, Pompeian—Paquius Proculus and his wife
Roman painting, 3rd century, Portrait group on glass
Greek painting, Hellenistic, "Aline" from Hawara
Bronzino, A.: *Portrait of Eleonora (da Toledo) de Medici*
Titian: *Francesco Maria della Bovere Duke of Urbino*
Hals, Frans: *Lady Governors. Hospital for the Aged, Haarlem.—Detail*
Hals, Frans: *La Bohémienne*
Sargent, J.S.: *Portrait of Henry James*

Second group (Non-naturalistic style, secular subject matter)
El Greco: *View of Toledo*
Goya: *City on a Rock*
Cézanne: *Still Life*
Braque: *The Mantel-piece*
Braque: *Still Life*
Braque: *Nature-morte*
Braque: *Man with a Guitar*
Kandinsky: *Composition No. 8*
Leger, F.: *Breakfast*
Picasso: *Guernica*
Rouault: *Circus Trio*
Chirico: *Melancholy and Mysteryof a Street*
Second group (Cont.)
Tanguy: *Heredity of Acquired Characteristics*
Chirico: *The Consoler*
Moore, Henry: *Family Group*
Moore, Henry: *Reclining Figure*

Third group (Naturalistic style, religious subject matter)
Giotto: *St. Francis and the Birds*
Piero della Francesca: *Resurrection*
Masaccio: *Tribute Money*
Bellini: *Madonna and Child*
Raphael: *Madonna Colonna*
Reni: *The Magdalen*
Uhde, Fritz von: *The Christ with the Peasants*
Manet, Edouard: *Ecce Homo (The mocking of Christ)*

Fourth group (Non-naturalistic style, religious subject matter)
Greek Sculpture: *Apollo*
Archaic female figure from near Erechtheurre
Greek Sculpture (Archaic): *Hera of Samos*
Mosaic, Constantinople, 10th Century
Byzantine School, 15th Century, *Resurrection*
Painting, Italian, 12th Century, *Crucifix*
French, 15th Century, *School of Avignon*
Brueghel, Pieter, the elder, *Adoration of the Kings*
Brueghel, Pieter, the elder, *Triumph of Death*
Bosch, Jerome: *Altarpiece of Temptation*
El Greco: *Coronation of the Virgin*

Rembrandt: *Christ Crucified between Thieves*
Rembrandt: *Descent from the Cross*
Nolde, Emil: *The Last Supper*
Grünewald: *Isenheim Altarpiece*
Grünewald: *Isenheim Altarpiece (right panel)*
Rouault: *Crucifixion*
Rouault: *Head of Christ with Thorns*
Picasso: *Crucifixion*
Sutherland: *Crucifixion*