

IMAGERY OF DIVINE LOVE: THE CRUCIFIX DRAWING OF JOHN OF THE CROSS, Graham M. Schweig

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Graham M. Schweig

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The crucifix drawing of St. John of the Cross is unique in the history of Christian art. In this short study, we will analyze St. John's only surviving work of art in order to have something of his experiential, highly theistic religion revealed. Specifically, we are interested in learning what essential message is transmitted through this aesthetic imagery, and how this crucifix drawing relates to John's conjugal mysticism.

First we will be concerned with the drawing itself as an autonomous expression, not to be compared with anything outside its world. Here we are not concerned with the historical details of this work. Rather we will examine the aesthetic composition itself to see how its form gives direct expression to the religious experience of St. John. It will only be toward the end of our analysis that we will relate the drawing to his written work for further supporting our interpretation.

St. John's drawing of the crucifix was executed in pen and ink, on a grainy

parchment. The drawing is in good condition, as can be seen in the reproduction of the work. Having an oval line for a border, it is quite small; the outer edges would not exceed four inches in height and three in width. Despite its small size, it is, without doubt, a powerful religious expression.

The subject matter of the work is quite simple: Christ on the cross. There is no one else in the drawing looking on or praying to or glorifying him, as usually occur in works of art depicting the crucifixion. Furthermore, the background is empty, and there are no symbols accompanying the crucified Christ or the composition as a whole. There is not even a nimbus around the head of Christ. The only figures in the drawing are Christ himself and the cross. Although the work is small and lacks scenery and detail, it is complex in its composition.

The part of the composition that is perhaps its most immediately striking feature is the unusual perspective St. John provides for his viewer. The cross and the figure of Christ have a strong downward, one-point perspective from a three-quarter aerial view. One is virtually looking down from above and slightly in front of the cross, onto the left side of Christ. The effect of this unusual perspective is dramatic: it fills the composition with tension and intensity. This angle of vision of the crucified Christ immediately sets St. John's drawing apart from all other previous representations of the crucifixion in the history of Christian art.

While this angle of viewing establishes the drawing's drama, there are other elements that contribute to its intensity. The cross itself leans so far to the right of the composition that it appears to fall backwards. One struggles to keep the cross upright while viewing it. Most people, seeing the drawing for the first time, are compelled to turn the picture on its left side to compensate for this strained angle.

The strong downward force of the perspective and the weight of Christ's body are accentuated by his knees buckling under him and his head hanging parallel to the ground, and are in competition with the dramatic angle of the cross itself. Thus Christ's body falls forward to the left of the composition, pulling in the opposite direction of the backward-leaning cross.

Christ's outstretched arms add still further to the vexing tension that vibrates throughout the composition. The spikes through the palms are large, with the limits

of strain in the arms portrayed by long, tendon-like lines and the drops of blood falling from them. The tension of the arms is accentuated by the swollen chest, shoulder and back muscles and the pull of the weight of Christ's body as he falls forward.

The radically different angle from which the crucifix is seen emphasizes, perhaps even more than other depictions of the crucifix, the intense suffering of Christ. The angle causes Christ's left hand, with the spike prominent, to be the part of his body that is closest to the viewer. Again, the suffering of Christ is emphasized. Finally, this angle conceals Christ's face. These features, created simply by the angle, leave the viewer with a feeling of deva station.

Aside from the influence of angle, however, there is another powerful element at work, namely, the interplay of light and shadow. The lighting is the most subtle and intriguing aspect of the composition. Light comes from above and behind the cross from the right of the viewer. While the light illuminates the sides and top of the cross, it leaves Christ's form in shadow. His head falls away from the light. This illumination gives the viewer a subtle sense of hope or relief from the utter despair portrayed in the figure of Christ.

One's vision is irresistibly drawn by the angle down toward Christ's darkened form, and is simultaneously drawn toward the light reflected on the cross. The power of this composition lies in the dialectical tension between the impact of the angle of vision and the effect of light on the subject, which produce corresponding feelings of despair and hope.

What is the significance of this vivid and dramatic portrayal of Christ's suffering? Why is the light coming from behind, and what is the source of this light? And why is the viewer placed in this position in relation to Christ?

To answer these questions of meaning, we must treat the work no longer as just an autonomous expression. The full significance of this work must be understood in light of St. John's mystical doctrine of divine love.

In his writings he intricately describes the rigorous ascetic practices of the mystical life and his experiences of divine union with God. This perfection of divine

union is characterized by a marriage between the individual soul, who is always the bride, and Christ, who is the beloved Bridegroom. This "bridal mysticism" is central to St. John's teachings. Given this fact, why does St. John emphasize the crucifixion in this extraordinarily vivid drawing?

St. John wrote detailed and didactic treatises, but he also utilized aesthetic forms for expressing his religious experiences. He produced poetry that communicated divine matters in a way prose could not; indeed, all his longer treatises are commentaries on his poetry. And like his poetry, this drawing obviously was derived from inner religious experience, for its style and composition are unique. But he chose not to express this vision in poetry. Apparently, the subject of this vision was better communicated through a visual representation than through any verbal expression. In addition, this representation was not meant to be a public image or even an icon, for he had given the drawing to a holy nun in his religious order. It was the pure and simple expression of a secret vision, which was to be shared only with his spiritual associates.

If we are to complete our interpretation of this drawing, we must turn to St. John's works. In St. John's prose and poetry, the interpretation of the crucifixion drawing is powerfully aided specifically by several stanzas from the seventh of his "Romances." In the following lines, Christ is speaking to the Father:

I will go and tell the world,

spreading the word

of your beauty and sweetness

and of your sovereignty.

I will go seek my bride

and take upon myself

her weariness and labors

in which she suffers so;

and that she may have life

I will die for her

and lifting her out of that deep,

I will restore her to you.

The essential message of St. John's drawing of the crucifix is revealed by these verses. As these verses plainly express, Christ (the Bridegroom) wants to relieve the soul (the bride) of her suffering by taking it upon himself, and in doing so, restores the soul to the Father.

Thus, this small drawing reveals St. John's specific relationship with the deity. St. John, through his artistic work, powerfully conveys the experience of his relationship with God to the viewer, thus allowing the interpreter direct access to his experience: the viewer of this work is truly the bride, who is looking on from above at the tortured Bridegroom. Compelled in the direction of the light source, the viewer is restored to the Father. The drawing, even more than these revealing verses, conveys the absolute suffering and sacrifice of Christ, expressing his intensity of love for the bride. While the bride experiences feelings of grief and separation, she also possesses a sense of hope because of the element of light that conveys the presence of the Father to whom the bride is restored.

St. John's work, though small and simple, is a complete expression unto itself. And yet, as we saw, the compositional elements of form and light established a complex relationship between Christ, the viewer, and the presence of God. Indeed, certain responses are clearly evoked by the work, whether or not the viewer is familiar with St. John's writings, because it stands today as powerful imagery of divine love. The work commands our attention, as it ultimately reveals the crucifix as an expression of the intense love that the Bridegroom has for the bride as she enters the inner life of God.

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1. http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6_12.html
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3. http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6_14.html
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