

The Role of Light in Sacred Art

Throughout the modern world, we see a rise in the number of cities that are holding spectacular light festivals. Interest in works of art using light is steadily growing. Curators often base their themes on the use of this medium; museums are clearly happy to house these exhibitions and conferences, and round table discussions or workshops on the topic have become very frequent. From the second half of the twentieth century, this branch of art developed and changed greatly, and today has become a popular genre, present in both important museums in big cities and public squares at night, in addition to taking a commercialized form in our homes, and in the communal spaces and nightclubs we frequent. Now, at the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, the genre speaks to enormous masses all over the planet.

However, I believe this is not a modern phenomenon. If we look at the history of art, and examine it in terms of where light is present in artworks, as a medium, a technique, a symbol, or a phenomenon, we soon see that in actual fact, since the first buildings created by human hand, to the present day, it has been continuously present in art: for example in cultic calendar buildings, Gothic churches, or contemporary installations. The twentieth century was indeed a turning point, when technical development, the appearance of various possible lighting techniques, neon, halogen, LASER and LED lights, gave an enormous boost to the development, variety, and transformation of the genre. But in reality this is only a technological change and opportunity.

By virtue of its symbolism, and meaning, light has been practically continuously present throughout art history, as an unchangingly intense and captivating element for viewers from prehistory to the present day.

Light is a basic symbol which, since the beginnings of humanity, has influenced our thinking, our faith and beliefs, our image of the world and of nature. By virtue of its very nature, it is inherently sacred, and there is no religion or culture where it is not synonymous with holiness

or some form of divinity. But in what form is it manifest in various cultures? In practice this material, or phenomenon, is the clear basis for life on the surface of the Earth, and in sacred texts it appears as the first element in different creation stories.

Naturally, together with light there is unavoidably darkness too, since one cannot exist without the other. As concepts that exist in opposition to one another, or complement one another, their joint presence makes sight possible. How do various artists form spaces, buildings, and sculptures, with light and shade, and how does this weightless, immaterial phenomenon become one of the most important elements that make up these works?

Another interesting question is what about when the phenomenon of light is only depicted in paintings? We can speak here of the chiaroscuro that lends plasticity to objects, but the focus of this dissertation is rather the depiction of various halos and nimbuses: light as a sacred symbol. The airy and immaterial, as opposed to its depiction in the material of paint.

In my dissertation I shall look for points in the history of art where the physical presence of light, or the meaning of light, plays a key role. Surveying art to the present day, through a few important works, I aim to show how artists, architects, painters, sculptors, and contemporary installation and video artists have had a similar attitude to this medium and at the same time, how broadly and variedly they have used it. Be it Bronze Age or Baroque architecture, or even contemporary installations, works can often be considered side by side and their concepts can very profitably be compared.

In my own artistic career, characterized by a broad use of materials and range of genres, I often notice that my ideas or visions have often been expressed by the artists of other ages and, whether in theory or visually, their works can be seen as pairs to mine.

I often encounter contemporary works which, in terms of meaning, or perhaps visuality, are built in a similar principal as one of my earlier works. I thus had the idea of dedicating part of my dissertation to presenting works that can be analysed side by side. Although they were created in very different eras, light as a material, as a phenomenon or as a universal symbol, appears in a very similar manner. These comparisons include some works made by me, because I too often work with these elements, thus in my work too these ancient ideas are unavoidably reworked.

I know the questions I raise seem almost banal, and often the answer to them is self-explanatory, but in all sincerity I am most excited by and concerned with the most varied use and presence of this immaterial medium.