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The Secularization of Western Art through the Protestant Reformation,  
the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment

Fifteen hundred years ago, artists did not have nearly as much freedom as they do now. Creating art would have been nigh impossible without the generous patronage, and yet strict guidelines, of the Catholic Church. While the Church and Christianity have both contributed much to western art, some of the most brilliant and well-known works of all time were produced under their influence, western art could not truly have blossomed until artists gained the freedom to create as they please. Over the years there have been many events that have challenged the authority of the Catholic Church, such as the Protestant Reformation, the revelations of the Scientific Revolution, and the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Along the way, artists inspired by these events have formed their own revolutions. The Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment all contributed to the separation of religion and art, or the secularization of western art.

Two paintings that chart this shift from religious art to secular art during the Protestant Reformation are *Four Apostles* by Albrecht Dürer and *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. According to *Experience Humanities*, “[n]ear the end of his life, Dürer became a Lutheran, and some of his last paintings indicate his new faith” (361), *Four Apostles*

being one of them. Barbara Pitkin writes “John on the left and Paul on the right dominate the composition, larger and lighter than Peter and Mark in the background . . . [Peter] was also . . . the predecessor of the Pope. He is here subordinated to John and reads in John’s Gospel for guidance” (Pitkin 2011). This painting is a carefully organized statement that John, who, here, stands for Protestantism, indicated by his adherence to the gospel, is superior to Peter, who stands for Catholicism, being considered the predecessor of the Pope. It also reveals the waning influence of the established Catholic Church, and, while still being Christian art, marks a step in the direction of more secular, personal religion, and secular art in general.

*Experience Humanities* also states that, during this period, “Protestant iconoclasm had taken its toll, and the demand for religious art had markedly diminished” (365). As such, the works of Pieter Bruegel the Elder “were often devoid of overt religious content and presented simply as secular art” (Matthews et al. 365), one example being *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The British Library states that the painting “shows the Greek mythological figure, Icarus, plunging into the sea” (2017). The fact that a painting depicting a landscape with pagan characters and no Christian imagery exists during a time when the Catholic Church still had a large influence in Europe marks an important milestone for the proliferation of secular art. These paintings reveal that the Protestant Reformation made great strides for secular art.

Two pieces of art that describe the shift from the religious to the secular during the Scientific Revolution are the frontispiece of Voltaire’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Newton* and Charles-Nicolas Cochin’s frontispiece for Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*. The frontispiece of *Elements of the Philosophy of Newton* depicts Isaac Newton as a heavenly figure, who sits upon a cloud bestowing “light and truth” onto a mirror held by Truth (Schmidt 2014).

James Schmidt says that light became a popular metaphor for intellectual enlightenment during the Scientific Revolution; it came to belief that “truth is achieved through various artificial “preparations” . . . that place the truth in the proper light” as opposed to truth being “the bestowal of a gift that demands nothing more from human beings than that they wait for a light that descends from above” (Schmidt 2014). However, historically light had been a metaphor for God or Christian divinity and was a common trope in Christian art. This frontispiece sees the transformation of light from a religious metaphor, God-given wisdom, to a secular metaphor, knowledge achieved by man, and shows a godlike depiction of Isaac Newton that would otherwise have been seen as blasphemous.

Charles-Nicolas Cochin’s frontispiece for Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* also makes use of traditionally divine imagery for a more secular, scientific purpose. According to James Schmidt:

[T]he veiled figure at the apex of the composition is Truth, while the figures lifting and pulling away the veil are Reason and Philosophy . . . to the right of Truth we see a separate shaft of light, descending from the clouds and illuminating the kneeling figure of Theology . . . one [light source] radiates out from the figure of Truth at the top of the image to enlighten the various disciplines that behold her while another . . . provides a separate illumination for Theology (and is ignored by the figures that sit [on] her left, busy reading sacred texts and apparently oblivious to everything else that is going on (Schmidt 2014).

In this piece, Theology, who is ignored by her disciples, is portrayed kneeling, in a subordinate position to Truth, who is shown enlightening her disciples. Additionally, Cochin has implied that Truth is revealed through Reason and Philosophy, while Theology has no such basis. Both of these frontispieces show the prevailing influence of the scientific method in the arts, and the waning influence of religion; now overtly secular, moderately anti-religious works are now being produced.

Two paintings that outline the final separation of religion from art during the Enlightenment are *The Death of Socrates* by Jacques-Louis David and *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* by Joseph Wright. According to Boston College, *The Death of Socrates* “depicts the closing moments of the life of Socrates. Condemned to death or exile by the Athenian government for his teaching methods which aroused scepticism and impiety in his students, Socrates [heroically] rejected exile and accepted death from hemlock” (2001). Like him, the Europeans of the Enlightenment embrace scepticism and religious impiety and are willing to become martyrs, hence the many revolutions that took place during this era; they have found a new messiah in Socrates, celebrating great thinkers and scientists like him over the Christian saints of old. This painting signifies that the secular has completely replaced the religious in western art; *The Death of Socrates* marks the death of all-encompassing church influence.

According to the National Gallery, *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* depicts “[a] travelling scientist . . . demonstrating the formation of a vacuum by withdrawing air from a flask containing a white cockatoo” (2008). The author of the painting’s article goes into further detail, stating:

The bird will die if the demonstrator continues to deprive it of oxygen, and Wright leaves us in doubt as to whether or not the cockatoo will be reprieved. The painting reveals a wide range of individual reactions, from the frightened children, through the reflective philosopher, the excited interest of the youth on the left, to the indifferent young lovers concerned only with each other. The figures are dramatically lit by a single candle . . . On the table in front of the candle is a glass containing a skull. (2008)

Suffocating a bird before frightened children, a human skull, baroque lighting; the imagery is melodramatic. The man becomes almost a caricature of a mad scientist, and he has taken his work too far. This painting constitutes a proto-romantic piece, preceding the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment, and a cautionary tale warning of the consequences of morality divorced from science for the sake of knowledge and progress. The Enlightenment sees the free separation of religion and art and celebrates it, but only now begins to examine the consequences of this removal.

These six artworks demonstrate that the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment all led to the secularization of western art. This happened through Protestant iconoclasm decreasing the demand for Christian art, the transformation of light as a divine metaphor into a secular metaphor, and through celebrating scientists, philosophers and their accomplishments instead of religious figures. Now that artists are free from church patronage, they can choose to free themselves from other boundaries and social norms and push the limits of their mediums, or to embrace them in order to challenge themselves and revitalize age-old ideas.

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