

# Art and Death: From Crucifixion to Lethal Injection

In early 2005 I was visiting the National Gallery in London and found myself looking at *The Mond Crucifixion* by Raphael. I was transfixed by the beautiful handling of paint, the delicate portrayal of skin and fabric, and the sensitive expressions on the faces of the subjects. And I found myself thinking over how universal images are of people being put to death in western culture and how many of these have their root in the execution of Christ.

Raphael's 1503 *Mond Crucifixion* conveys a sense of deep calm. At the feet of the central figure of Jesus kneel Saint Jerome to our left to whom the painting is dedicated and opposite him Saint Mary Magdalen. Behind Saint Jerome stands Saint the Virgin Mary and behind Mary Magdalen, Saint John the Baptist. In attendance two angels catch Christ's blood in chalices as it issues from his wounds and in the sky above, the Sun and the Moon appear as silent witness to one of the most famous events in history.

This painting is modelled in the classical tradition. The composition of the figures is arranged into a formal rhombus design which helps establish a sense of balance and order. Elsewhere the use of atmospheric perspective in the background landscape and a rich use of colour all contribute to present a scene which radiates a feeling of immense beauty. Artists of the Renaissance, like Raphael, employed geometrical principles to help compose their paintings so that the mathematical order observed in the movement of stars would be reflected upon the earth. In this way, the adoption of the golden section rule, Fibonacci sequence and Euclidian geometry were engaged to mirror the divine order of heaven upon the world, which in turn placed the human actions depicted at the center of a celestial symmetry.

Whilst Raphael's painting is rooted in a specific historical event, we see his portrayal of it is deliberately set at a far remove from reality. The horror of a public execution has been transformed into a scene of serenity, where Christ, who we witness from the discharge of his blood in the picture, remains alive yet apparently free from physical agony. As viewers, Raphael leads our emotions to experience his work in quiet reverence. We accept the tableau we witness as one of God's grace enacted on human drama, where heavenly order triumphs over the chaos of emotion, where our own pain is removed and death is finally defeated. We are offered peace.

In presenting capital punishment as salvation, Raphael uses painting as a metaphor of deliverance from sin and transforms despair into hope. Yet the same event depicted by the hands of another artist who employs an alternative approach, can convey an entirely different message. An interesting example of this is found in the Russian artist Nicolai Ge's 1893 painting *The Crucifixion*. Here Ge

presents us with a brutal counterpoint to Raphael's vision of order and beauty, which is perhaps one of the most accurate depictions of a Roman crucifixion ever to have been painted. Gone for Ge are the richly dyed robes worn by Christ and his attendants and in their place are no more than a few tattered rags. And where the crucifix in *The Mond* painting stands, judging by the height of the figures, at around 11 feet tall, the same structure in Ge's image has a much shorter and more practical height of around seven feet, which, unlike Raphael's skilfully constructed cross, is comprised of no more than a roughly hewn post set in the ground with a beam secured across the top. We also notice that the feet in Ge's painting are not nailed together one over the other, resting on a small platform, which was an artistic invention, but are nailed instead through the ankles on either side of the post.

All colour in this painting has drained away to leave us with a starkly monochromatic vision. This lack of vibrancy creates a joyless impression of an unfeeling society which is carrying out its legal sanctions on the criminally guilty. Gone are the angels, the sun and the moon and the soothing mandate of heaven with its calming use of geometrical proportion. The portrayal of the contorted figures at an angle to the flat of the picture plane only heightens the sense of dramatic tension, leaving us in no doubt about how we should feel when we look at his painting - repelled. This approach to portraying the death of Christ has rarely been adopted by other painters, who by and large favour the course taken by Raphael.

Ge's realism offers us a vision of excruciating pain and desolation. His is not a divine Christ, but a human Jesus. And when we compare the two alternative approaches Raphael and Ge take to explore the same event, we realise that by adopting different compositional techniques, colour palettes and model expressions, painters are able to influence the way we as an audience feel about what we are looking at. The artist becomes the author of our emotions.

Aside from Ge, many artists have depicted realistic images of people being put to death in the name of the state, though usually with a secular theme. When they do it is common to find the subject adopting a cruciform pose, as it is a pose which has come to represent both universal human suffering and salvation. Such examples are found in Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, Edouard Manet's *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, Robert Capa's *The Falling Soldier* and in Nick Ut's 1972 Vietnam war photograph *Trang Bang after a South Vietnamese Air Force Napalm Attack*. What we notice when looking at these pictures is that we tend to identify personally with the distress of the subject. Their pain metaphorically becomes our pain. This is in part because of the way the images are composed, with the main character being the focus of the core narrative around which all the other components revolve. This emotional identification with the suffering of individuals at the hand of the state is a signifier of liberal thinking and a desire to limit the extent of the power of government over the individuality of the citizen.

After viewing the *Mond Crucifixion* and these 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century examples of cruciform suffering, I became interested in exploring just how an artist might engage with the theme of execution in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As an artist, I had recently completed a set of paintings of empty hospital interiors and

was struck by how similar they are in appearance to American lethal injection facilities, and so I decided to use these as my starting point. In undertaking the 'Hospital' series I had been drawn initially to the way medical environments are designed to perform their function with a matter of factness which overrides our emotional concerns by soothing them. Sealed from the outside world, like an airport or underground station, they disconnect us from everyday life. Gone is any sense of natural light, season or time of day. Gone too is the chaos of nature and any regional reference which might establish an awareness of place. This has the effect of creating an environment with a surreal quality which is detached from the every day.

In the painting *Operating Theatre*, which I produced in 2004, I sought to deepen the sense of the surreal already apparent in the surgical setting by removing the human figure. The specific operating theatre in question was located on the outskirts of London, in Kent, and in painting it I further softened the shadows cast by the rooms' lights, removed labels, simplified the equipment, and enhanced the muted colours of the floor and walls. These actions were designed to heighten an already amplified sense of calm.

Around the operating gurney we can see plenty of space for a medical team to perform their duties without being constrained, and we also notice how most of the equipment is mounted on castors to help keep things fluid and easily at hand. This is a space in which all life to be cared for is valued equally and, no matter who you are, medical care for those at the receiving end provides an experience without hierarchy. It simultaneously presents a view of the best and worst place we could ever expect to find ourselves in, because we are presented with an environment dedicated to preserving our physical being, yet one which we would hope never to need. This is a theatre where the performance of real life is played out with ordered professionalism. A place where the patient relinquishes control of their body to the authority of the surgeon, so that the chaotic sensations of fear, pain and human frailty may be washed away by the cool order of scientific reason.

When we look at *Operating Theatre's* counterpart, the painting *Lethal Injection Gurney* we find many similarities. I undertook this painting in 2007, and it depicts the interior of the execution facility at The Walls in Huntsville, Texas. Like the operating theatre it presents us with an enclosed interior removed from daylight, nature or any reference to its geographical location. Beautiful turquoise wall colouring, soft fawn curtains, subdued lighting and a crisp white sheet stretched over a soft thin mattress for the comfort of the condemned, show us that here the iconography of the hospital has been deliberately adopted. And just as with the operating theatre, we can see that all life which is subject to 'treatment' is handled without hierarchy. On the right-hand side we glimpse a windowed room where witnesses sit, and to the left a two-way mirror behind which the guards who administer the lethal injection sit, so that they might see without being seen.

The overriding impression here is one of a calm disconnection from reality which helps steer our feelings as far as possible from any sense of physical and emotional trauma connected to the executions which are carried out. This is not for the benefit of the person being put to death, but for

our benefit. It is we the viewers who do not wish to be distressed by what we witness, a sense further enhanced by the knowledge that events are going on in private, behind closed doors.

By stark contrast, Nicolai Ge's depiction of Roman crucifixion presents a spectacle designed to be as public and as painful as possible, with the condemned being positioned along a busy road outside the city gates where they might form a powerful public display. This demonstrates the Roman consensus for the death penalty, when enacted by crucifixion, to be seen by men, women and children, and to be preceded by the torture of the body.

What conclusions then can we draw from these observations?

It would appear that our emotions are subject to external influences, and in understanding this, an artist like Raphael can choose to paint a picture of suffering and death and present it to us in such a way that we feel a sense of tranquillity when we view it. And that just as an individual like Raphael can guide our emotions, so too can the state.

*The Mond Crucifixion* is one of Raphael's earliest works and it was commissioned as the altarpiece for the side chapel of the Church of St. Dominic in the small Italian city of Città di Castell. Those who assigned Raphael to undertake this painting would have wished him to transform the visual horror of the death of Christ into a vision of visual majesty. A story about Saint Jerome, to whom the painting is dedicated, is often referenced in art of how he soothed an aggravated lion when he pulled a thorn from its paw and tamed it in the process. Which serves to remind us how Raphael has presented a comforting image of crucifixion by utilising a sense of divine symmetry to remove all of its pain and so restage it as an act of grace.

Robert Priseman, 2014

The series 'No Human Way to kill' is held in the permanent collection of the Mead Art Museum, Massachusetts