



Lahuerta, Juan José: Religious Painting. Pablo Picasso and Max von Moos. (Edition Voldemeer). ISBN: 978-3-11-041169-019, 95 € (De Gruyter, Berlin 2015)

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Numero di parole: 1613 parole
Pubblicato on line il 2016-09-28
Histara les comptes rendus (ISSN 2100-0700).
Link: <http://histara.sorbonne.fr/cr.php?cr=2558>
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The book is one of the first critical examination of Pablo Picasso's use of religious imagery; it is structured in two major sections: the first is the transcription of a talk presented by the author at the Kunst-museum in Luzern, whose aim was to propose an interpretation of an article by Max von Moos entitled "Religious Painting of Our Time", which was written in 1938 during the Spanish Civil War and one year after Picasso painted Guernica; the second section contains the full text of the article by Max von Moos translated by John S. Southard.

Juan José Lahuerta analyses the article by von Moos, which discusses his idea of modern religious painting specifically focused on particular Crucifixions painted by Pablo Picasso. This essay addresses some of the critical issues then confronted by church art: issues of communication and expression, realism and abstraction that turn out to offer surprising insights into Picasso's art.

The theme of Crucifixion was not only present throughout Picasso's career as an artist, but in his private life as well. Though Picasso was an avowed atheist, his work employs spiritual themes—and, often, traditional religious iconography. Early in his career, Pablo Picasso created a variety of paintings with religious themes; he painted his first Crucifixion at the age of 10 (1892), immediately followed by two other works (1896-97 and 1902) produced as academic exercises in the manner of El Greco. Yet Picasso painted the first great Cubist Crucifixion in 1917. The development of cubist motifs is more evident in another of Picasso's Crucifixions, which dates from the same year (1917): it looks like a theatrical composition in which every detail is functional to the description of the scene. The cubist motifs are evident, for example, in the disproportionate exaggeration of the anatomy of Christ or in the exacerbation of the details of suffering. Juan José Lahuerta takes into account also another Crucifixion painted by Picasso in 1929: Picasso paints a tumultuous scene in which the sinuosity of the lines reinforces the idea of tumult.

There is another Crucifixion painted by Picasso in 1930 in which it is possible to find the same tumultuous and fragmented atmosphere of the 1929 Crucifixion. As Juan José Lahuerta argues in his book, the Spanish Civil War caused a considerable revival of certain themes of religious art. In particular, it intensified Pablo Picasso's lifelong preoccupation with the subject of the Crucifixion. The dramatically broken characters of this Crucifixion and the use of fragmentation in an attempt to reconstruct a reality without transcendence, anticipate the affected characters of Guernica.

According to Lahuerta in the 1930 Crucifixion the holy story degenerates into profane anecdote; in it Picasso attempts to desacralize religious imagery: but this idea was already present in the text that Max von Moos published in 1938. In that article Max von Moos looks back at the history of religious painting identified with the Passion of Christ. His review of this history centres on various phases, starting with a primitive Dutch painter, in which the narrative never degenerates into anecdote. The second phase suggested by von Moos is about Rubens and his use of vehemence in his paintings, separated from reality by what von Moos calls the "artistic space": for Rubens God's salvation plan takes place nowhere but in the world of art. In the third phase the chosen example is Cézanne: for him religion, myth and society cease to count for painting and move into the sphere of the purely visual, towards abstraction; von Moos in his article gives some examples of Cézanne's idea and after that he compares a great painter like Cézanne to a minor painter of religious themes, Melchior Paul von Deschanden.

After this historical review, von Moos' reflexions reach the final section which deals with the subject announced in the title of the article: the situation of religious painting in his time. In this section von Moos raises some questions for the reader about what he defines as the Picasso "phenomenon" and about modern trends in religious painting.

The Picasso phenomenon is particularly interesting. According to von Moos, the work of Picasso recapitulates 200 years of the history of painting in which it is possible to find an essential idea: all the aspects of a society in decline are manifested in Picasso's work by a constant recourse to the grotesque linked to the brutal materiality of his painting. This also happens in religious painting, as demonstrated in the studies for a Crucifixion Picasso realized in Boisgeloup between September and October 1932, which occupy three pages of the first issue of the journal *Minotaure*, published in June 1933. This one was an issue that strongly featured Picasso: he realized the illustration on the front cover and the frontispiece. In this same issue we can also read an article about him by André Breton (*Picasso dans son élément*).

Up to this point Juan José Lahuerta considers Max von Moos's article alongside the religious painting of Picasso. But one should not forget that von Moos was not only a writer but a surrealist artist too; he painted two works inspired by the Spanish Civil War, entitled Alcàzar and Toledo in which the compositional structure of religious painting is plain: Toledo is a *sacra conversazione* and Alcàzar is plainly a Crucifixion. These works and their titles bear in mind that he legitimizes the government of the Republic rather than the rebels contrarily to what happens, for example, in Guernica.

Moving from that Juan José Lahuerta also finds a parallel between the two works by von Moos and The Laocoon and The Vision of Saint John by El Greco. Despite the fact that this particular comparison is a bit of a stretch, it could represent nevertheless a new reading perspective for the works by von Moos. Thanks to this hypothesis Juan José Lahuerta establishes a line of continuity between von Moos and Picasso, assuming that El Greco was the favourite model of the young Picasso in Barcelona and Paris.

It is interesting that von Moos places Picasso in the admiring sights of his article describing him as unique and unattainable. It is possible, according to Juan José Lahuerta, that Max von Moos might have seen the aforementioned Crucifixions published in the first issue of *Minotaure* (the journal was widely distributed in Europe), but it is rather unlikely that he also saw the one dated 21st August 1938, at the moment he wrote the article.

This Crucifixion is a return to the drama, free of tumult, with a reduced number of characters and with a way of arranging them so that they repeat the form of the cross. In August 1938 the Spanish Civil War reached its peak of horror and might explain the only way Picasso could have interpreted the Crucifixion at this time: as a negation of divinity and an exaltation of humanity.

The book by Juan José Lahuerta offers surprising new insights into Picasso's art - if not into modern art altogether and gives us a great opportunity to discover a subject (religious painting), which was no longer central in the art of the 20th century. The debate about religious aspects in 20th century art was developed in particular during the 1930s in France and Switzerland; there were some attempts to reconcile modern art and religion and maybe the most important of them were the publications hosting these debates included in the journal *Art Sacré*, one of the most influential European journals.

Starting from a specific article, the author also argues that, in the Spanish territory, the Civil War caused a considerable revival of some themes of religious art; in particular, as already mentioned, Juan José Lahuerta focuses on Picasso's preoccupation with the subject of the Crucifixion. The new reading Lahuerta proposes of the article by Max von Moos triggers an extremely interesting reflection on the theme of the Crucifixion in the art of Picasso: though Picasso occasionally portrayed the crucifixion, such works were always remarkably devoid of religious conviction. His interest in the crucifixion was an interest in anguish. Picasso's only answer to the problem of suffering was beauty.

In terms of structure, the volume is well organized; images and tables help the reading and facilitate the comprehension of the texts. The book is a quick and enjoyable read filled with full-color reproductions, encouraging readers to mosey rather than rush their way through its pages.

What is missing is an updated bibliography about these themes and a more detailed analysis of the historiography and the art criticism. Furthermore, some parallels and comparisons may appear forced, although they are functional to the investigation and they illustrate to the reader a quite exhaustive panorama of the matter.

Finally, there is also a very interesting juxtaposition proposed in the volume between the article by Max von Moos and the interpretation Juan José Lahuerta suggests, as in this way the reader can compare the two texts whenever he feels the need and can better understand where the original article ends and where Lahuerta's paper begins.

The texts in the volume may represent a good starting point (but also an additional element) for a complete understanding of an important, and yet complicated, theme such as religious painting in 20th century art.

Contents

Juan José Lahuerta, Religious Painting: Picasso and Max von Moos, 9

PLATES, 37

Max von Moos, Religious Painting of Our Time [1938], 77

Stanislaus von Moos, Post scriptum, 85

Credits, 87

Biographical Notes, 91