

THE LITURGICAL SCRIPT OF THE CHURCH

ART – MEREDITH SHIMIZU

Study Guide

Session #2 | Michelangelo's Adam & Eve

INTRODUCTION

For centuries in Europe, most art was Christian art. Painters, sculptors, and illustrators created artwork to decorate churches and prayer books, convey biblical stories and theological ideas, and bring glory to God. Christians used these objects as a regular part of their devotional lives. The images guided their daily prayers, encouraged their worship, and deepened their relationship with God. In our own time, we have lots of art, but rarely do Christians integrate it into their personal spiritual practice. The next five lectures explore how we can participate in this tradition by engaging with visual art in study, prayer, and worship.

We'll start big! When Pope Julius II asked Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in 1508, he could not have known that the artist would create the most spectacular ceiling painting in Europe. That's just what Michelangelo did. The painting is huge, visually complicated, and theologically dense. So dense, in fact, that art historians are still puzzling out all the themes. For us, the ceiling provides a wealth of imagery that invites rich theological reflection, especially on the power of God, the nature of humanity, the relationship between humanity and God. We only have to stop and look.

NOTES

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Take a longer look at Michelangelo's Creation of Adam. What parts of the painting that were discussed in the lecture are grabbing your attention now?
2. Now, take a longer look at Michelangelo's Fall and Expulsion. Pay attention to the emotions you feel as you're looking. In what ways can you relate to his depiction of Adam and Eve?
3. How does Michelangelo's depiction of these stories enhance your understanding of the creation and fall of humanity? How about your own relationship to God?

HOMEWORK

1. Read Genesis 1 and 2 while looking at the center panels of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling—specifically the three panels that show God creating the earth, sun, moon, and waters. How does Michelangelo use God's body and God's gestures to convey parts of the story? In particular, consider how he expresses the power of God. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/smithandjones/23869822365> (click image to zoom in)
2. Take a long look at the mosaic in the cathedral in Monreale that shows the creation of Adam. How does this artwork compare to Michelangelo's? How does this artist express the same ideas in different ways? Think more about God's power and idea that Adam was made in the image of God. https://orthodoxwiki.org/File:Monreale_creation_Adam.jpg

3. Look at the painting of Adam and Eve by Lucas Cranach (Courtauld Gallery). What is the focal point? How does Cranach use vertical lines to divide up the painting? Now, read Genesis 3. How does Cranach's painting highlight certain parts of the story? How does it compare to Michelangelo's depiction of the Fall?

<https://courtauld.ac.uk/highlights/adam-and-eve/#&gid=1&pid=1>

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

For this week, pick one of the artworks from the lecture or homework. And spend several minutes looking at it each day. Start by asking God to guide your looking, your thoughts, your heart. Then, allow God to direct your attention to a specific area of the artwork. Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings as you look. What parts of the creation story is God inviting you to reflect on? How does it connect to your own experience or your own relationship to God. Then end with a gesture toward God.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In what ways do Michelangelo's paintings reflect the biblical texts? What parts of the paintings don't seem to match the texts? Talk about why he makes these choices.
2. Which of these artworks have been particularly compelling to you? How so? How have they prompted you to think differently about a biblical story or idea?

RESOURCES TO GO DEEPER

If you want to learn a lot more about Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel, read Michael Unger's book *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*. It is a big book, but it is full of information that can foster rich theological reflection.