

Reflections of David and the Modern Church

One of the greatest masterpieces by the Renaissance artist Michelangelo is the sculpture of David as a young teen before slaying the giant Goliath. This era defining work can be found in Florence, Italy at the Accademia Gallery Museum.



The line and crowds outside of Accademia Gallery Museum

The excitement to see and experience the talented hands of Michelangelo is felt even before you enter the doors of the museum. There are pictures of the statue and artisan re-creations on the street and plaza nearby. In fact, the buzz created outside renders any marketing efforts by the museum almost obsolete. Once through the doors you are consumed with such anticipation of seeing David that you run the risk of missing the other great pieces of art the museum offers.

Accademia seems built to draw you to Michelangelo's David. However, to get there you must walk down a long hallway that is flanked by marble statues in various stages of completion all at the hand of Michelangelo. Your mind can easily drift to a vision of Michelangelo in his studio in the early 1500s in Florence, him making cuts and standing back, knowing that each strike matters to the final product. Then your mind goes to the mentality of a person that can think so many steps ahead. Michelangelo could see his final work in a solid block of marble he referred to as "freeing" the sculptures from their imprisonment. Walking down the corridor, you are so close to the marble that you can see the chiseled markings and rough edges. The massive blocks would be an incredible, engaging display of art in any museum in the world and would be a valued exhibit coveted by any curator. However, the masterpiece looms so large in the distance that you cannot help but be distracted.



Photo via the Accademia Gallery Museum website

In many ways the crowds miss the genius of Michelangelo because David emerges so impressive in the distant rotunda. The architects used the environment to a master precision. Your eyes are almost too distracted by the masterpiece to not break your focus. It is like when you see the mountains in the distance. The majesty of creation can become so overwhelming that the horizon is all you can see.

David does not disappoint! It is one of the few times in life where the hype lives-up-to the experience. David is massive and every angle gives you a new perspective of greatness. The details, the perspective, the talent, the grace, and accuracy are almost too overwhelming to take in at one time. It is likened to

going from a dark room to full sun. The details slowly come into focus until you are smacked with brilliance.

Obviously, the crowds from each corner of the world all have the same experience. Surrounding David with locked-in stares, it is almost impossible to break the visual engagement. You cannot get enough of what you are seeing or experiencing. With eyes-fixed you find yourself slowly working your way around the masterpiece.



You can see David and be completely distracted. So much so, that you might miss the mix of Medieval and Renaissance art that hangs on the walls outside of the rotunda housing David. Since my college years I have found medieval art and history to be most fascinating. Mostly, the religious imagery grabbed my attention, but understanding the reasoning behind the art and the practical uses fascinated me even further.

Medieval religious art was created for the purpose of teaching the Gospel message and omnipotent power of God to a population that was illiterate. While the Gutenberg Bible was printed in Latin in 1455, towards the end of the medieval era, the populous only had less than a 10% literate rate. Mostly priests and monks made up the largest group of the educated public. The wealthy wanting to carry favor with the church would commission religious art and donate it to the church and communities. It would be another 75 years before the average person had the opportunity to learn to read. So, religious art played a particularly important role in the Spiritual growth of believers. Cathedrals throughout Europe are uniquely adorned with art so that the masses may visualize the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. In fact, the printing of the Bible in native languages and the increase of a literate population led to the Reformation that we as Presbyterians celebrate.

While being thoroughly impressed by David, I became completely enthralled and surprised by the medieval art that I was too distracted to notice at first. The masterpiece of Renaissance art completely



faded into the background as my eyes gained a new feast to devour. Immediately, I found myself fighting the current of people to see the art I studied all those years ago. It was a wonderful and emotional experience. I walked away from the crowd staring at David to begin the visual reading of the Gospels.

The small handful of people that diverged from David had the space and time to take in all the details. I began to realize that I was looking at a private collection versus the more public religious art I studied in college. The Gospel story was more subtle but very present.

A short distance from David, was another large room that housed traveling Gospel message art used by the church during the medieval era. You could tell it was commissioned for public use because of the simple story lines and gilded details.



Reflecting back on my time at Accademia Gallery Museum and my experience getting drawn to the “lesser” art made me think about the parallels we are experiencing in our church during the COVID pandemic.

Our church is in many ways like Michelangelo’s David. A shining example of the pinnacle of modern Christendom. We have well trained pastors from seminaries of note. An Elder class that has management experience and better theological understanding. Our Deacons have money and talents to help the community and members. Our sanctuaries ring out with well trained and practiced musicians. We can easily go from traditional music to contemporary songs. Some churches offer multiple services moving from traditional liturgical to high emotional contemporary. Our worship has excellent use of multimedia integrations. We spend energy and money on high quality children’s education. We see our youth groups developing Christian leaders. Many churches have completed and paid off capital campaign building projects. Technology and social media have made it easier to reach out to a vast

audience and make connections with our own shut-ins to those “unchurched.” Our churches can fundraise with little effort for mission experiences and members are able to be sent all over the world in the name and love of Christ. We are certainly at the peak of modern Christendom.

Like David, our church has benefited from the culmination of centuries of development and skill applied to a concrete theological realization of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While the modern church has faced challenges like changes in culture, family priorities, denominational shrinking numbers, and personal free-time evaporating. With all these challenges and many more, the church, like David, remains the focus and center of our society and developing worldviews.



Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence Italy. The center of the city.

However, 2020 happened. We saw, and are still experiencing, a global pandemic. A virus that attacks our most vulnerable without regard. Consequences from infection seem to be random with no symptoms to death. Travel shut down. Restaurants closed. Quarantining is now normal. Masks are worn outside of the home. No more handshakes or hugs or any human contact. No family Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners or gatherings. Churches closed and opened, only to be closed again. It’s not safe to sing as a congregation anymore. 2020 most certainly happened and is bleeding into 2021.

As a Moderator of a Presbytery, I heard tons of groaning and pointed questions throughout 2020. Many comments were fear-driven because the status quo was no longer being met. We somehow convinced ourselves that the “building” is the same as the church. In the easiness of the modern Christendom, we forewent going out and loving our neighbors, because we could do that in our buildings with our structured programs and engaging worship. We leaned on our relational traditions and built a family that centered around a building where we could share our lives, study the Bible, and worship God in a climate-controlled environment. Pastors and Elders could not look at **The Book of Order** to find answers to the polity conundrum of “being the church” when the church cannot gather in a building.

The fear first felt by church leaders centered on, “how do we do worship now?” As if “church” is only worship. The reality started to sink in. With all the learning and achievement, none of us are prepared to be a Christian community without our basic amenities like gathering, Sunday engagement, Sunday school, committee meetings, and small group themed Bible studies.

The leaders found ways, albeit major quality differences, to deliver a worship experience. However, Elders and Pastors soon began to realize how exhausting it was to produce virtual worship. Especially, in comparison to the normal live worship to which we became accustomed to. Leaders began to realize that the building no longer mattered, and the church is now sprinkled around in homes throughout the community. All-of-a-sudden, fear and fatigue grew like a snowball at the bottom of the hill.

In one meeting I attended, via Zoom of course, after several hours of conversation with leaders a general comment rang in my ears that was upsetting on many levels. “The church has never faced a challenge like this before, so what can we do?”

This comment and defeated attitudes made me realize that we have been staring at David for too long. Our training has become too sophisticated and absent of what Jesus asked the 72 to go and do. Our church became accountants of people, programs, mission, and ministry.



Danza Macabra's Dance of the Death

If we change our gaze to the right, we can see a church that communicated the Gospel to a people that could not read, attend worship, or even have enough for food or shelter. Our historical church found ways to take the Gospel to people where they were, and in a way they could understand. It was not learning a new language, it was realizing that God's children were out there, so they needed to be out there as well. The church found its soul by showing the love Jesus has for His people.



The Maesta by Duccio

In this pandemic, the pre-COVID church's shadow looms large like Michelangelo's David at the Accademia Gallery Museum. But, that does not mean the light of Jesus is not sprinkled in homes throughout the community casting their own light in the shadows. While David is impressive and awe inspiring, the other art hanging, changed a generation of people through the stories told. What we can learn from medieval religious art is significant to help the church navigate the plague waters of today. The medieval church loved and cared for a community during the bubonic plague. That church created a way forward for hearing and experiencing the love found in Jesus Christ. In fact, the rest of society ran away from the masses because of fear. Leaving only the church to care for the population. What makes us believe that we cannot simplify ourselves to the basic building blocks of the church? We can be the church where we quarantine. We can be involved with mission and ministry. We can have collective worship experiences that are equal to the majesty and worth of the God we serve.

When Jesus sent the 72, He told them to declare the Lord. If the community accepted that message then the disciples were to stay, eat, and drink what was put before them. With the members of our church carrying the light of Jesus in our homes, we are already out in the community. Since "the church" is already there, we need to find our unique avenues to declare the Lord to those around us. The church must examine our talents and gifts, and with a loving heart find opportunities to show our neighbors and strangers that Jesus loves them. This is all of us. No one is excluded. Each one of us has been given gifts and talents that can express the unique language of Jesus' love. If you can draw breath, you can be God's called messenger in this world. The purpose and mission of the church is at our "freshly washed and disinfected" fingertips. Maybe it is baking bread for someone who is hungry or



A lesser traveled alleyway in Florence, Italy

being distracted by David's beauty. Because that is what God is calling us to do. In those moments of refocus, we will see the wonder and calling before us. The Gospel message will become clearer to us. Just like staring at medieval art, you begin to see the story unfold.

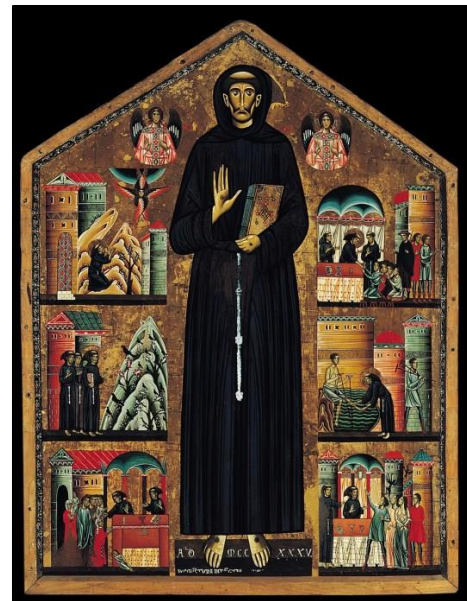
The church has faced times like these before. We now recognize that our training has not prepared us for a pandemic world, but the love God has for us has never wavered nor changed since creation. This is a challenge that can only be solved by the Holy Spirit, and us using those gifts. We have all been equipped to service and showing of God's love. It might take us longer to find the pathways forward, but those pathways exist. Today's church is ready to live out our calling without walls and from the light that we have in our homes. It is now upon our shoulders, individually, to be the church and live out the Gospel from our front porches, places of business, grocery stores, or wherever we find ourselves in God's creation. Take heart, friends, this pathway has been traveled before. Together, we can find the path forward and be the church we have been called to be.

RE Jeffrey Black, Moderator

shoveling snow for an elderly neighbor. It could be building a ramp or calling a friend to just talk. We can show love in so many ways and be the church from where we are situated. Our actions and attitudes are what is needed in this COVID infected world. That is how we can be the church.

Looking at Michelangelo's David is impressive, but it can lull you into a sense of comfort and familiarity. This is where the church has lived for the last 100+ years. The era previous to the Renaissance was dirty, and the art was not as impressive with its unrealistic approach to the environment. However, the medieval time used the art for a higher purpose of sharing the message of Christ directly to the people. This pandemic has given us rough lines and unsymmetrical views of community and people. Still, in many ways, it has unmasked the needs of people and the opportunities for churches to have collisions with the challenges.

Let us fix our gazes on the parts that are less appealing, and stop



Bonaventura Berlinghieri's *Saint Francis of Assisi*