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Religious Symbolism in Salvador Dalí’s Art: A Study of the Influences on His Late Work

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

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Preface

Salvador Dalí was an artist who existed not long before my generation; yet, his influence among the contemporary art world causes many people to take a closer look at the significance of the imagery in his paintings. For the most part, Dalí is categorized as a Surrealist artist, yet in this essay, I also plan to explore other possibilities of influence that surrounded Salvador Dalí’s generation and inspirational background. Around 1941, Dalí’s work began to shift away from Surrealism and, instead, moved toward a more Classical style that contained many religious themes, a style which he called “Nuclear Mysticism” (Taylor 2008, 8). My interest in this subject stemmed from a visit to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta to see the exhibition “Dalí: The Late Work.” This exhibition contained highly regarded paintings such as Christ of Saint John of the Cross (1951), The Persistence of Memory (1931), and The Madonna of Port Lligat (first version, 1949). Seeing these paintings caused me to consider the possible situations, groups, and events occurring in 20th-century Spain and elsewhere that could have caused this transformation in Dalí’s art. In most of our minds, Dalí was an artist who painted amorphous figures and objects that would only exist within his dreams and unconscious state; yet, Dalí’s subject matter after the 1940s showed a remarkable consideration of figures and objects that are symbolic to the fundamentals of the Catholic tradition.
Chapter 1
Dalí’s Childhood

Growing up in the small town of Figueres, Spain, Salvador Dalí experienced the ideal childhood lifestyle. Idolized by his parents, Dalí believed he was the reincarnation of his brother, who had died from meningitis. Dalí then convinced himself that he was an answered prayer for his parents’ suffering: “My brother died at the age of seven from an attack of meningitis, three years before I was born. His death plunged my father and mother into the depths of despair; they found consolation only upon my arrival into the world” (Dali, The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí 1993, 2). Blessed with the gift of another child, Dalí’s father and mother allowed him anything he desired, except for entering the kitchen.¹ He admits, “I wet my bed till I was eight for the sheer fun of it. I was the absolute monarch of the house. Nothing was good enough for me. My father and mother worshiped me” (Dalí, 1993, 1). I would presume that Dalí took this permissibility of his behavior in hopes that he could take advantage of others, as well. In his memoirs, he shares a story about pushing a boy off a bridge at the age of five and kicking his little sister in the head when he was six (11-12). Dalí’s self-centered childhood, however, dissolved after meeting his wife, Gala. He gives an elaborate description of her beauty:

One single being has reached a plane of life whose image is comparable to the serene perfections of the Renaissance, and this being happens to be precisely Gala, my wife, whom I had the miracle to choose. She is composed of those fleeting attitudes, of those Ninth-Symphony-like facial expressions, which, reflecting the architectonic contours of a perfect soul become crystallized on the very shore line of the flesh, at the skin’s surface, in the sea foam of the hierarchies of her own life, and

¹ Dali notes that “going into this part of the house was one of the few things categorically forbidden me by my parents. I would stand around for hours, my mouth watering, till I saw my chance to sneak into that place of enchantment; and while the maids stood by and screamed with delight I would snatch a piece of raw meat or a broiled mushroom on which I would nearly choke but which, to me, had the marvelous flavor, the intoxicating quality, that only fear and guilt can impart” (Dali, The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí 1993, 1).
which, having been classified, clarified by the most delicate breezes of the sentiments, harden, are organized, and become architecture in flesh and bone (Dalí, 1993, 4).²

Dalí’s parents strongly encouraged his artistic desires; he attended drawing school as a teenager, and his father arranged for his charcoal drawings to be exhibited inside their home. At the age of eighteen, Dalí moved to Madrid and began studying at the School of Fine Arts. He shares an early story of when he began seeing things differently than other people: “We had the assignment to paint a Gothic statue of the Virgin directly from a model. . . the professor had repeatedly emphasized that we were to paint exactly what we ‘saw.’ Immediately, in a dizzy frenzy of mystification, I went to work furtively painting, in the minutest detail, a pair of scales which I copied out of a catalogue” (15). Dalí’s connection between the scales and the Virgin does not appear evident to the professor, but this begins Dalí’s future of enigmatic compositions.

Though Dalí’s entrance into the Surrealist world did not occur until around 1927, he still became highly regarded as an avant-garde Spanish artist. His style experimented with Cubism, which he also paired with an array of subject matter such as portraits, still-lifes, and dream-like objects placed within a never-ending state of enigmas. Such images include his Figure at a Window (Figure 1), Portrait of my Father (Figure 2), and Still Life by Moonlight (Figure 3). Felix Fanés describes this painting as “Mediterranean,” which is found “not only in the landscape, but in the woman herself—once again Dalí’s sister—with her well-rounded curves. She is a heavy figure, endowed with the solidarity of certain archaic statues, embodying myths of fertility and of the earth” (Fanés 2007, 23). Though this

² Dali regards Raphael as one of the greatest painters in history, a man whose forms represent a certain standard other artists should strive to achieve. In this section, Dalí compares Gala’s beauty to that of a painting by Raphael: “And so, as I watch her from the corner of my eye during the long hours I spend huddled before my easel, I say to myself that she is as well painted as a Raphael or a Vermeer” (4-5).
painting could certainly be considered a Realist piece in comparison to Dalí’s Surrealist paintings\(^3\), Dalí’s decision to leave the figure’s expression absent from the viewer’s image conveys a more abstract meaning to what the figure is looking at or imagining. This abstraction is heightened during the next several years of Dalí’s life as he joins the movement of Surrealist artists.

\(^3\) The Realism referenced in this section relates the subject matter of Dalí’s *Figure at a Window* to a painting by Caspar David Friedrich entitled *Woman at a Window*. These paintings exhibit similar compositional layouts and figures with non-descriptive glances toward naturalistic settings.
Chapter 2
Surrealism

Around 1927, Dalí became heavily involved with the ideas and style of the Surrealist movement of artists and poets. The founder of Surrealism, André Breton, wrote the *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924, but later added to it with a *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* and the *Political Position of Surrealism*. In the 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton describes the significance of imagination:

> To reduce the imagination to a state of slavery—even though it would mean the elimination of what is commonly called happiness—is to betray all sense of absolute justice within oneself. Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what can be, and this is enough to remove to some slight degree the terrible injunction; enough, too, to allow me to devote myself to it without fear of making a mistake (Breton 1969, 4-5).

This element, imagination, is one that comes to dominate much of Dalí’s work towards the end of the 1920s. In Dalí’s most famous painting, *The Persistence of Memory* (Figure 4), his “soft watches” become noteworthy for their reference to the insignificance of time. Dawn Ades wrote that "The soft watches are an unconscious symbol of the relativity of space and time, a Surrealist meditation on the collapse of our notions of a fixed cosmic order" (Ades, Dali 1995). The imagination in this painting continues with the formless dreaming figure in the center of the painting as Dalí’s notion of the “imaginative” reinforces Breton’s idea that imagination grants freedom to paint, to write, and to create anything that exists within one’s mind.

Dalí’s work often referenced the dream-like or unconscious state of figures and things that could not possibly exist otherwise. The other-worldliness of Dalí’s surreal paintings compare to his later works in which he becomes interested in symbols of the
spiritual world. In Christ of Saint John of the Cross (Figure 5), The Madonna of Port Lligat (Figure 6), Asummpata Corpuscularia Lapislazulina (Figure 7), and Santiago El Grande (Figure 8), Dalí is looking at images that come from this world, the spiritual world, and the dream world. Particularly, in The Madonna of Port Lligat, Dalí uses ordinary objects such as a seashell, an egg, and some lemons, but their arrangement within the composition lends us to consider the painting’s dream-like quality. Dalí has also created a religious painting with his decision to paint Gala as Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus. I would certainly assume that the Surrealist phase of Dalí’s career set him up for unlimited possibilities of subject matter. But what could be more dream-like than that of the Christ-child floating above the lap of Dalí’s own wife?

Though these paintings were not created during Dalí’s Surrealist phase, they, nevertheless, lend apparent acknowledgement to Dalí’s consideration of objects and figures that can no longer be visually seen outside of dreams and art. Breton references dreams several times in his Manifestoes of Surrealism: “The mind of the man who dreams is fully satisfied by what happens to him. The agonizing question of possibility is no longer pertinent. Kill, fly faster, love to your heart’s content. And if you should die, are you not certain of reawaking among the dead? Let yourself be carried along . . . .” (Breton 1969, 13). Breton’s discrediting of limited possibilities brings to mind exactly what becomes of Dalí’s art: the ability to paint and sculpt anything that could be imagined, despite its relevance or irrelevance to others. Surrealism, for me, is the ultimate attainment in the world of art; allowing the simplicity of child-like imagination to run wild without judgment. Is not this similar to the way that Dalí paints popular religious symbols? It seems obvious that the way he sees the Virgin Mary and the Christ-child differs greatly from our standardized
vision of them embracing, surrounded by angels, and adorned with gold leaf. In fact, Dalí mentions in his autobiography a time when he was studying at the School of Fine Arts and his teacher asked them to paint a statue of the Virgin. Dalí’s painting of scales caught the attention of the teacher and the students, and he said, “Perhaps you see a Virgin like everyone else, but I see a pair of scales” (1993, 16). This gives us an idea of the way in which Dalí chose to view the world. It would be but another ordinary portrait of the two significant religious figures had Dalí been a painter during the Renaissance, but his influence from the Surrealist movement lends us a far more interesting representation.
Chapter 3

War

Dalí, like other artists during the early twentieth-century, was deeply affected by the devastation of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. After the Spanish Civil War, Dalí fled to Italy for several months to escape “the disasters of war and revolution in which my country was plunged” (Dali, 1993, 361). From Dalí’s native Cadaques, he received news that several of his friends had been shot by anarchists, and shortly after returning home to Spain, another World War had begun (361). After the onset of the Second World War, Dalí left Europe to find refuge in the United States. It was then that Dalí’s art once again transformed. In his memoirs he describes his need for a new start:

To live! To liquidate half of life in order to live the other half enriched by experience, freed from the chains of the past. For this it was necessary for me to kill my past without pity or scruple, I had to rid myself of my own skin, that initial skin of my formless and revolutionary life during the Post-War Epoch. It was necessary at all costs that I change skins, that I trade this worn epidermis with which I have dressed, hidden, shown myself, struggled, fought and triumphed, for that other new skin, the flesh of my desire, of my imminent renaissance which will be dated from the very morrow of the day this book appears (393).

Until Dalí left for the United States in August of 1940, his art became a reflection of his “fears that the war in Europe would escalate into a catastrophic global conflict that could lead to the collapse of Western civilization and untold human suffering” (Taylor 2008, 4). Taylor notes that Dalí responded by “replacing the Oedipal psychosexual dramas that had characterized his Surrealist paintings of the late 1920s and 1930s” with “complex allegories of war and devastation” (4). Dalí sought a more traditional kind of painting, relative to the work of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods, containing the “techniques and iconography of the old masters” (5).
The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima also affected Dalí’s artistic output. These events “led him to embrace the serene perfection and order of Italian Renaissance painting” (7) that can be seen in his “Sacrament of the Last Supper” (Figure 9). During this period of evolution in Dalí’s painting, he became highly engaged with religious imagery of the Roman Catholic Church; yet, Dalí remained interested in science (7-8). Dalí formed these interests into a new style which he termed “Nuclear Mysticism.” This style becomes prominent in his Asumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina, which will be discussed more in Chapter 5 (Figure 7). Though Dalí’s paintings of the spiritual and religious drew so much attention from the modern world, his sincerity and integrity (or complete lack thereof) were called into question as a result of his past association with the anticlerical Surrealist movement and his often deliberate self-aggrandizement” (9).

Dalí’s interest in religious painting might have been his way of searching for peace in a world that had suffered so much hurt. Or perhaps Dalí’s intentions were thought to be disingenuous, merely seeking commissions from the Church (9). Before looking at the symbolism regarding Dalí’s new artistic style, I think it is important to look at the changes taking place within the Catholic Church after the 1940s. This period of modernity caused the religious world to face tribulation with judgment or to become tolerant of the ever-changing audacity of new ideas.
Chapter 4
Catholicism

For any organization or group to continue to thrive, whether it is religious or secular, change is inevitable. Though fundamental ideas and beliefs may not change, their response to the growth of modernity must. Gilkey states that modernity has caused us to attribute issues of politics, economics, society to “historical destiny and human creativity” rather than God (Gilkey 1975, 5). To compete with all that the world has to offer, religious institutions must continually work to attract and retain members. Before this change occurs, they must meet several requirements:

1. “The major reflective requirement for creatively dealing with such radical change is to understand the causes and anatomy of the process, and thereby the possibilities for valid re-evaluation, reinterpretation, and reformulation of traditional symbols and structures so that they may live again.”

2. “The major political requirement essential to dealing with such change is to direct the process so as to remain loyal to the deepest levels of tradition and yet also to be open to experiment with new and creative forms.”

3. “The major spiritual requirement is to be balanced and open, serene and confident, amidst the anxieties, even the terrors, of this experience of radical change in structures that previously have borne our security in time” (6-7).

Gilkey also writes that “one of the main issues for contemporary Catholicism concerns the status . . . of precisely [the] cumulative deposit of traditional doctrine, dogma, and theology, that has defined Catholic belief” (85). As science has “challenged the historical validity” of the events within the Bible and the religious world, it has caused the Church to synthesize
the traditional and contemporary: belief in the stories and symbols, along with scientific and philosophical analysis (85). When looking at Dalí’s art after his Surrealist phase, we see a shift towards the well-known Biblical stories that are transformed into modern compositions, as well as, an interest in the techniques of the masters of the Italian Renaissance. Concerning this transition, Taylor writes: “Dalí’s engagement during the postwar era with the art and techniques of Italian Renaissance painting went hand in hand with his newfound concern with the imagery and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Although never a true believer, he painted religious subjects throughout the 1940s and 1950s that reveal his interest in the mystical” (Taylor 2008, 7). I would speculate that part of Dalí’s interest in the Catholic Church and the religious became a personal quest to somehow reconcile the differences between the modern world’s scientific discoveries and the religious world’s traditions and beliefs. As a former member of the Surrealist movement, this combination was entirely possible to Dali’s notion of imagination. To understand the symbols that define the Catholic tradition, we must look at the center of the religion itself: God. As Gilkey explains, “This unavoidable character of modern theology, as growing out of and confined to the range of our own total experience, means that theological understanding is set in terms of our dynamic, changing, and interrelated experience” (89). In other words, the religion (not just Catholicism, however) must change because we change. Gilkey goes on to say that,

God, if he exists at all for us, is thus dynamic, related, and changing; he is in process, if he is to be ground, ruler, and redeemer of our process. This dynamic, active, related character of modern theological language—required by the cognitive limits of modern experience and our modern sense of the reality and value of the contingent creaturely world to which God is related—is the reason the biblical rather than the Greek view of God has been and continues to be so congenial to theologians both Protestant and Catholic in our time (89).
Gilkey then summarizes the relationship between the modern, dynamic view of God and the use of symbols:

I am suggesting that modernity has inescapably related God and our talk about God to experience, that as a consequence any meaningful and valid concept of God must be set in dynamic, active, related terms. And, finally, if in this situation the divine ultimacy and transcendence, in its paradoxical relation to our changing life, is to be expressed, story language, the symbolic language of “myth,” the dynamic language of activity, creative work, guiding and ruling, as well as the language of intentional promises and purposes, must be used. The fundamental symbols expressive of the universal activity of God in creation and in providence are thus symbols expressible only in dynamic, active, related, and intentional forms of speech, the language appropriate for purposive actors in a dramatic story (90).

I believe that this is something that Dalí considered in his efforts to fuse the fundamental religious symbols with the modern and dynamic interpretations of God. In Christ of Saint John of the Cross, for example, Dali changes the perspective of Christ which merges with the horizon and portrays for us a more perfect image of Christ. This painting shows that Dali recognized a need for change, not only in his art, but in modern art in general.
Chapter 5

Nuclear Mysticism

I would speculate that Dalí’s growing interest in religious symbols in art was his way of reconciling the differences that are otherwise obvious between the scientific and religious realms. Dalí’s success as an artist was in part due to his ability to recognize a need for change and a willingness to change according to new ideas and discoveries. One of the biggest changes of his career became known as “Nuclear Mysticism;” a “hybrid combination of nuclear science and Catholic doctrine” (Taylor 2008, 9). This new style that Dalí became enveloped in can be seen in paintings such as Christ of Saint John of the Cross (Figure 5) and The Madonna of Port Lligat (Figure 6). Ironically, Taylor notes, “Dalí produced some of the most powerful spiritual and devotional images of the modern era yet failed to secure a single official commission from the Catholic Church, which perhaps feared that the scandalous publicity often accompanying his work would overshadow such a project” (9). Taylor also notes that “Dalí’s sincerity and integrity (or complete lack thereof) were called into question as a result of his past association with the anticlerical Surrealist movement and his often deliberate self-aggrandizement” (9). In Christ of Saint John of the Cross, Dalí has eliminated the nails, crown of thorns, and blood, perhaps as his way of improving the image of Christ on the cross, rather than the blasphemous piece some critics dismissed it as (9). On the bottom of his studies for the painting, Dalí explained its inspiration: "In the first place, in 1950, I had a 'cosmic dream' in which I saw this image in colour and which in my dream represented the ‘nucleus of the atom.’ This nucleus later took on a metaphysical sense; I considered it 'the very unity of the universe,' the Christ!” (Descharnes 2003). When discussing the significance of some of Dalí’s late works, Elliott King, curator for Dali: The
Late Work at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, elaborates about the significance of Christ of Saint John of the Cross:

In 1950, Dalí was shown a drawing by St. John of Cross, a sixteenth-century contemporary of St. Theresa of Avila. This drawing, created in a state of mystical ecstasy, showed Christ’s crucifixion as seen from above. After seeing this drawing, Dalí was so moved that he reported experiencing a series of dreams in which he envisioned Christ as ‘the nucleus of the atom,’ and heard voices urging him to paint this Christ. His original intention was to include the traditional nails and crown of thorns, however, Dalí described later having a dream of Christ without these attributes and he consequently omitted them and consequently they were omitted from the finished painting. The result is a more spiritualized Savior who, rather than being nailed to the Cross, hovers ethereally against it (Photo-essay: Exploring Dali’s late work for the first time 2010).

In regards to this painting, I think Dali’s version of Christ, although significantly different from the traditional depiction, allows the viewer to simply observe the act of Christ’s sacrifice, and appreciate the centrality of the figure. Another significant work of art from Dalí’s later paintings is Asummpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina (Figure 7). Before the exhibit at the High Museum in 2010, this painting had not been publicly exhibited since 1959. In this painting, Dalí’s Nuclear Mysticism becomes highly evident:

the artist juxtaposed a recent event of the regarding the Church with contemporary physics: anti-protons had only just been discovered in 1952, when it was found scientists learned that protons had an associated antiparticle with the same mass and opposite electric charge. As in other particle-antiparticle pairs, protons and anti-protons can annihilate one another in a burst of energy. When Dalí theorized that the Virgin ascended through the “very strength of her antiprotons,” he insinuated that a subatomic reaction had taken place in which colliding protons and anti-protons had created enough energy to rocket the Virgin into Heaven. Once in Heaven, he continued, the Virgin’s body was “reintegrated” and held in place by “cosmic glue,” a notion he credited in 1952 to physicist Enrico Fermi, who he said had given him the idea for a “gelatinous universe” (Photo-essay: Exploring Dali’s late work for the first time 2010).

This combination of scientific and religious elements allowed Dali to take modern art in a direction it had yet to go. As discussed earlier, Dali’s idolized status from his parents, his
Catholic upbringing, and the effects of war became highly influential in the transformation of his artwork. Dali’s dream-ridden interpretations of popular religious stories are now grounded upon scientific discoveries. This style invites a much broader audience and a more unique approach to rendering the holy figures of Christ and his mother, the Virgin Mary. In his paintings after 1940, Dali is looking much further than simply re-creating the iconic images from our religious upbringings; he is challenging our understanding of them by constructing images that marry science and religion: two ideologies that typically oppose each other. I believe Dali’s later paintings have caused the art world to look at subject matter in a way that conveys new meaning to familiar concepts.
Conclusion

Dalí's decision to paint religious and spiritually symbolic images was highly influenced by the events and people that surrounded his artistic career. His childhood, Surrealism, war, science, and religion all played significant roles in the transformation and direction that his art would take. Growing up, Dalí's parents placed him atop a high level of worship after suffering the death of their first born son, also named Salvador. Dalí's parents encouraged his interest in the arts, eventually leading him to become a part of the well-known group of Surrealist artists. After experiencing the terrors of war, Dali turned to subject matter that combined his interests in the nuclear science and Catholic doctrine, which was reinforced by his mainly Catholic upbringing. This style, developed by Dali in many of his later painting, became known as Nuclear Mysticism. He explored various different interpretations of iconic religious “stories” such as Christ on the cross and Mary the Virgin Mother of Christ. His unique rendering encourages artists to push the boundaries of subject matter in terms of composition. Dalí's later works have taken a place in the realm of art history for their revolutionary attempt to combine two distinct ideas about the creation of the world.
Figure 1

Dalí, *Figure at a Window*, 1925, MNCA Reina Sofia, Madrid, http://www.virtualdali.com
Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Dalí, *Asumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina*, 1952,
http://www.virtualdali.com
Figure 8

Figure 9

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