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*St. Catherine of Alexandria: A Cross-Section of Culture, Religion, and Art*

It is late September— the 18th, to be exact—which, for the rest of the country means cooler temperatures. But in Atlanta, Georgia, this just means that one can step outside without being suffocated by humidity. In the center of the city is the High Museum of Art. And nestled in a corner on the second floor are a number of striking pieces of art. Golden gilt frames and backgrounds against a deep red wall, these paintings represent some of the oldest pieces in the museum's collection, and are remarkably distinct from their neighbors. Among these pieces is Niccolò di Segna's *St. Catherine of Alexandria*. Painted circa 1340, this painting— done in tempura on a wooden panel— was originally part of a paneled altarpiece created for a church in Siena, Italy. It depicts the Christian St. Catherine of Alexandra, as the name would suggest, as the only figure.<sup>1</sup> She is central, framed within the piece by decoration around the edges, and at the upper corners. The piece stands out to the casual viewer for its use of color— it is almost entirely done in shades of gold and blue— and for its highly reflective surface. The combination of these things makes the piece appear ornate and expensive, and sets the subject as an object of attention from the outset.

This piece exists within a complex cultural, artistic, and religious framework: it is not only a work of art, and can be analyzed and appreciated as such, but also the depiction of a

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<sup>1</sup> "St. Catherine of Alexandria." High Museum of Art, <https://high.org/collections/st-catherine-of-alexandria-2/>.

sacred religious figure, as well as a reflection of the culture it was created in. As such, it must be considered from a variety of perspectives in order to form an accurate picture of the piece and to strive to understand it well. When considered from each of these perspectives, however, it can be concluded that this piece draws from earlier, and culturally diverse, traditions of Christian art in order to show devotion and esteem towards a particular figure.

The piece itself tends naturalistic, but is also highly stylized. The figure of St. Catherine is remarkably realistic; she is dressed as she might have been were she a living woman at the time of the painting's composition, and is largely proportionally accurate. It is extremely decorated, however. Not in the earlier Christian tradition of the Byzantine Empire or even in the tradition of the Medieval church, where objects of art were encrusted with jewels or done in ornate mosaics. Rather, the painting retains its naturalism by ornamenting using color choice and gold gilding. The colors chosen, specifically blue and gold, are key colors in early Christian art. The gold, of course, is used to demonstrate authority and emphasize importance, while the blue is used to represent purity and a degree of association with the Christian heaven. These choices, of course, are entirely consistent with the figure being depicted— a saint. Not only is this a person of esteem and worth within the religious framework of the time, but it is also (likely) a person deceased, and so there is natural desire to demonstrate both moral purity— as the reason for the individual being estimable— and an association with heaven, where this individual is now presumed to reside.

Aside from the obvious compositional elements that one might consider when examining the piece as art, when one examines it as a religious object, it can also be understood as a later iteration of the early Christian and Byzantine tradition of iconography. The purpose has changed

slightly— instead of being a focus of worship or a catalyst for prayer, the depiction of St. Catherine is equally devotional and ornamental, as this particular piece is meant to serve as part of a greater altarpiece at the front of a church. But this does not make it entirely separate from the earlier traditions. There are still nods to the earlier icons: the centrality of the figure, the quill in her hand to indicate identity and vocation, and the mandala around her head are all reminiscent of earlier icons from various European Christian traditions.

Not only does the piece exist within the artistic and religious contexts, it also exists within a cultural context. This piece comes just at the end of the Medieval period— a period saturated with religious art, iconography, and ornamentation. Its very existence is a testament to the priorities of the culture in which it exists. The fact that time, money, and skill was spent creating this painting— as well as the degree of skill and thought that went into its composition — shows how saturated the culture was in both the Christian religion and also in this particular naturalistic, decorated artistic tradition. Reality and the supernatural coexisted naturally for the creators and consumers of this piece. A real woman could be in heaven, and could be communicated with through prayer and devotional practices.

For me personally, this piece was striking because of how distinct it was. Although it was once part of a church, it is a full and complete work of art on its own. From a color perspective, it was rich and overwhelming in a way that other pieces were not. The colors were what made it clear to me that it was a devotional, religious piece. The figure of Catherine herself was natural. I could have believed her to be any medieval woman of some importance or education. But the rich gold tones stood out— they marked the piece as important. And the blue of St. Catherine's

dress pulled her away from the background and truly made her seem as though she were from another place— heaven even.

This interplay between the artistic, the religious, and the cultural is what makes this piece significant. There are so many layers to interpreting it, and layers to understanding it. And yet, it is a skilled enough piece of work that it can be striking and beautiful on its own, without taking the time to understand its various contexts. Understanding these contexts only deepens it, it does not define it.

## Works Cited

“St. Catherine of Alexandria.” High Museum of Art, <https://high.org/collections/st-catherine-of-alexandria-2/>.