

Margarita Mooney Clayton
Revolutions in Art and Aesthetics
Witherspoon Forum
January 23, 2024
Session 1: Augustine and Ordering Desire
Teaching Notes

Short Course Goals

- We will look at ideas on art and beauty from St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, modern Romantics, and the pragmatist John Dewey.

St. Augustine's Background

- Lived during the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christendom
- Converted to Christianity

Peter Brown on Studying History and Revolutions

- Wanted to study how people understood and responded to times of revolution
- Picked Augustine as he tried to engage with this time of change
- In *Wounds of Beauty*, Peter Brown summarizes chapter 10 of the Confessions: "To take beauty seriously as itself an echo of the good was to make one's way back to a God who was the wellspring of all the beauty in this world."
- In *Wounds of Beauty*, Brown also writes about Augustine. "He came out of an ancient tradition, both stoic and platonic, which saw the cosmos and especially the glowing stars as the supreme example of the joining of the divine with the material. One can follow how, for Augustine, the cosmos, although still majestic, was leeched of its numinous quality by a growing sense that a far more important joining of matter and spirit, human and divine, had occurred in the person of Christ. This also meant that for Augustine, the march of history. The 'order of the centuries' which led with the perfect harmony of a great Symphony, from the creation through the life of Christ on earth to the resurrection- was endowed with the same sense of mystery and matchless beauty as the cosmos had been for ancient pagans."

Debates on the Relationship Between Spirit and Matter

- For Plato, beauty points to ideal forms beyond the material world
- For Aristotle, the order and glory in the cosmos itself is divine
- Augustine fuses these ideas in light of Christian revelation

Augustine on Desires for Beauty

- Sees God as the "physician of our most intimate self" (Confessions, Book X) who knows and loves us
- Reflects on how our desires for material pleasures relate to our desire for God

- The material world can teach us about the nature of the Creator
- Material things, like our passions, can also distract us from God
- Need Christ as mediator between spirit and matter
- Our desires, even when filled with pleasure, reveal a wound in us that only God can
- Material pleasures and beautiful things don't satisfy us for long
- When united with God, all of his dispersed aspirations come together
- Our desires point to an inner wound and incompleteness.
- He finds no safe place for his soul except in God
- “I can find no safe place for my soul except in you. There my dispersed aspirations are gathered together, and from you, no part of me will depart.” (Confessions, Book X)

Augustine's Famous Passage on Beauty (Confessions, Book X)

- We can recognize God in both transcendent spiritual reality and material reality
- The passage is written in the original Latin as poetry, fusing Plato and Christian revelation (Song of Songs)
- “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”

Implications for Art

- How did early Christian art show the immanence of God—his closeness to us—and his transcendence, his otherness? Invites viewer into contemplation, not mere analysis
- *Hodegetria*—Mary and child. The icons of Mary and Jesus show Christ as both human and divine; He’s the mediator. Christ has a halo. He shone with light, anticipating his heavenly existence. Mary has a halo; it’s a sign of her sanctity and that we can attain sanctity, too..
- St. Luke is painting the Madonna & child. Luke has a halo, too. There are partial abstractions. These deviations from natural appearances signify there is a greater perfection to be achieved. This is not photo-realism. You can recognize who is in the painting, but it is stylized. This shows us that human faces are images of God; we need to look beyond the human to complete the human. We are struck with the partial abstraction—as we contemplate the image, our thoughts go from the image to the perfection it points to [God] or heaven
- Shows art and text shed light on each other in Christian tradition
- Knowing God involves both spiritual and sensory engagement

Exercise: First, recall a time you encountered beauty in nature. Where were you? What did you think? How did you feel? Then, slowly copy one of Augustine’s quotes on beauty above by

hand. Finally, reflect on what strikes you about his words. Do they help you understand your own experience of beauty in nature somehow? How so?

Key Quotes from Prof. Mooney Clayton's lecture

- "For Plato, created things are a shadow of this immaterial spirit that is perfect and beautiful. For Plato, we want to encounter something beautiful, a work of art, but then climb up a ladder to pure contemplation of the ideal form, and then the material is left behind."
- "For Aristotle, the beauty we see in the cosmos and the created order is beautiful. The material itself, the order of nature, is the beauty. Plato's idea of Beauty was very other-worldly, and Aristotle is trying to bring us back down into matter, into the world."
- "For Augustine, material things and pleasures, even the most beautiful things in the world, don't satisfy us for long. Our desires point to a wound within us, an incompleteness that only God can satisfy."
- "For Augustine, God is both imminent and transcendent. It only makes sense because Christ is the mediator, the person who is God made flesh, who lived in the world and built the bridge between the material and the spiritual. So for our desires to be set on fire and attain peace, they must rest in God in the right place."
- "Knowing God is not just a spiritual endeavor but also involves engaging with art and the material world, just as St. Luke did."
- "These icons intentionally don't try to create an ideal, perfect human face. Why? Because they want to remind viewers to look beyond the human form to understand the complete human, to recognize the inner soul and the unity of body and soul."
- "For Augustine, this idea of God is, as I mentioned earlier, both imminent and transcendent. It only makes sense because Christ is the mediator, the person who is God made flesh, who lived in the world and built the bridge between the material and the spiritual."
- "Material things and pleasures, even the most beautiful things in the world, don't satisfy us for long. Our desires point to a wound within us, an incompleteness that only God can satisfy. God is intimate and imminent within us, but also transcendent and other. We can know the truth, the unchangeable, the perfect God from the material; we can infer the existence of a creator from the creatures that are made."
- "Then, Augustine describes how God called out to him, breaking through his deafness. God's radiance and splendor dispelled his blindness. He experienced the fragrance of God and longed for more. Augustine tasted God, and now hunger and thirsts for Him. Augustine was set on fire when God touched him to attain true peace."

Readings

Margarita Mooney Suarez, *Wounds of Beauty*, Dialogue with Peter Brown, Chapter 1
Augustine's *Confessions*, Book 10

Suggested Videos

Peter Brown on "Monks, Labor, and the Holy Poor: Early Christian Monasticism Between Egypt and Syria." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qvwlSrLI> (1 hour)

Hodgetria: Mary and Jesus icon,
Theotokos of Smolensk by Dionisius (c. 1500)



Hodgetria: Mother and Child statue, Aidan Hart and Martin Earle, 2021



Luke Paints the Icon of the Mother of God *Hodegetria*, 1400s Russian.



Margarita Mooney Clayton
Revolutions in Art and Aesthetics
Witherspoon Forum
January 30, 2024
Session 2: Aquinas and Art as a Participation in Reality
Teaching Notes

- Recap of week 1: Augustine searched for the ultimate truth - starting with philosophy. His conversion to Christianity—the dogma of the incarnation—changed how he understood the relationship between spirit and matter. Early Christian art tried to convey that God is present spiritually and materially. For Augustine, embodied beauty can help bring us back to God.

Key Points from Week 2

- The Annunciation painting by Fra Angelico shows human cooperation with God's grace. The style is more naturalistic, e.g., single-point perspective. It is an icon in the early Gothic style but still highly stylized. This painting shows human participation in sanctifying matter and bringing order to the world. Art conveyed these incredible spiritual beliefs in material form.

- The Duomo in Florence is an example of an art using mathematics to reflect proportionality, harmony, and radiance - Aquinas' principles associated with beauty. These art forms can connect us to truths beyond the material world. The Duomo imitates forms in nature by extracting principles deeply embedded in the structure of nature and bringing a new structure into being using those principles.

- Aquinas sees art as a *practical* virtue that can reinforce moral virtues (habits that order desire). Nature is fallen, imperfect, but still good. We can direct our nature through the intellect.

- For Aquinas, beauty is not subjective or "in the eye of the beholder." Instead, beauty reveals the splendor and glory of God's creation.

- Aquinas defines beauty as "that which, when seen, pleases." [in Latin "*id quod visum placet.*"] The pleasure is not mere enjoyment but an illumination of the intellect as we perceive the harmony and radiance of forms.

- Aquinas outlines three principles of beauty:

1. Integrity - fullness and wholeness in line with its purpose.
2. Consonance - harmony, proportionality of the parts to each other, reflecting the inner structure of creation
3. Radiance - clarity and luminosity that communicate the first two principles

- These principles are not abstract but experienced through the senses. Yet they communicate something beyond the material to our intellect and spirit.

- Aquinas saw art as a practical virtue that allows us to participate in God's governance and order of creation. Art is a form of imitation of nature and co-creation with God. Since nature is fallen, art imitates but also elevates nature through virtue. Art orders desire and reinforces moral virtue.

- Experiencing and creating beauty can reinforce our pursuit of virtue by ordering our desires towards the good. The virtue of art thus supports moral growth. A Christian understanding of the person synthesizes intellectual (thinking) and practical (doing) into a dynamic cycle of creativity and craft

"Beauty delights the intellect because the form reveals splendor." - Jacques Maritain interpreting Aquinas

"Beauty shines form on matter. Beauty gives us a vision of the inner forms of matter." - Maritain on Aquinas

"For St. Thomas, while both are virtues of the practical intellect, prudence is *recta ratio agibilium*, right reason about things done, whereas art is *recta ratio factibilium*, "right reason about certain works to be made." Fr. Brad Elliott

"Art and morality are two aspects of the human participation in the reason and creativity of God. Art and morality are both ways that the humans imitate their divine creator." - Fr. Brad Elliott on Aquinas

"The two practical virtues of *prudence* and *art* both bring, in two different ways, the irrational parts of the cosmos into the governance of reason and promote it unto a greater share of Divine Providence." Fr. Brad Elliott

Exercise: Listen to a two-minute clip of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Do the harmonies in music resonate with our inner being? What kind of music would you want at your funeral? Or to contemplate eternally?

Margarita Mooney Suarez, *Wounds of Beauty*, Dialogue with George Harne, Chapter 2

Suggested Readings

Margarita Mooney Clayton, "The Art of Virtue and the Virtue of Art," published in the Public Discourse. <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2023/09/90859/>

Bradley T. Elliott, OP. *The Shape of the Artistic Mind*. Chapters 1 and 5.

Jacques Maritain, *Art & Scholasticism*.

Suggested Videos:

George Harne and Margarita Mooney Suarez/Clayton on "Is Art Merely Self-Expression?" (4 minutes) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzGiojURI-o>

George Harne and Margarita Mooney Suarez/Clayton on "How do the Technical and Leisurely Aspects of Beauty Work Together?" (4 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxIVyvJRXh8>

Frangelico, The Annunciation.



Duomo, Florence



Margarita Mooney Clayton
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February 6, 2024

Session 3: Romanticism and the Contradictions of Modern Art

Recap of Week 1: Augustine searched for the ultimate truth - starting with philosophy. His conversion to Christianity—the dogma of the incarnation—changed how he understood the relationship between spirit and matter. Early Christian art tried to convey that God is present spiritually and materially. For Augustine, embodied beauty can help bring us back to God.

Recap from Week 2:

- Aquinas defines beauty as "that which, when seen, pleases." [in Latin "*id quod visum placet.*"] The pleasure is not mere enjoyment but an illumination of the intellect as we perceive the harmony and radiance of forms.

- Aquinas outlines three principles of beauty:

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- These principles are not abstract but experienced through the senses. Yet they communicate something beyond the material to our intellect and spirit.

- Aquinas saw art as a practical virtue that allows us to participate in God's governance and order of creation. Art is a form of imitation of nature and co-creation with God. Since nature is fallen, art imitates but also elevates nature through virtue. Art orders desire and reinforces moral virtue.

- Where we ended in Week 2

Modern art that distorts or rejects harmony and form challenges Aquinas' understanding of beauty as revealing God's splendor.

What forms of art do you want to have at your funeral? Or contemplate for eternity?

Week 3 Lecture Main Points

- There has been a shift from traditional conceptions of beauty and art, which saw them as participating in and revealing divine order, to more modern, romantic views focused on individual self-expression and rejection of tradition.
- Modern art emerged from a revolution in the understanding of the human person and the desire to change civilization as we know it radically.
- An example of this kind of modern art is Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*. It rejects traditional harmony and form, intentionally breaking with the past.

- Boston City Hall exemplifies a rejection of harmony and proportion in architecture.
- Artist [Martin Earle](#) and architect [James McCreery](#) are working with traditional art forms, applying traditional principles but in new ways.
- Schlegel, Wordsworth, Rousseau, Dewey and Adorno promote these modern perspectives, while Aquinas and Augustine represent more traditional views.
- The Romantic view emphasizes finding one's true self, which must be done by breaking from tradition. True enlightenment comes from rejecting the past.
- Romantics celebrate self-expression and reject universal principles in art. Each work is self-contained.
- For Augustine and Aquinas, God works through civilization, including art. Art cannot thus be 'autonomous' but can be unique as a co-creation with God.
- Romantics also focus on the sublime, such as the power of nature. Spiritual forces are present in nature.
- For moderns like Adorno, reality inevitably leads to encountering more darkness and contradiction, while for Augustine/Aquinas, reality has fallen, but there is divine order, so redemption is possible.
- Christian creativity participates in God's creative work. The impact of art on a viewer is not measured in emotion but in what it inspires you to do, regardless of how you feel.
- Missing from Romantics and pragmatists is any notion of humankind's need for God's grace, which we saw in Augustine and Aquinas. For a Christian, the vocation of an artist is to serve their fellow man and the common good.
- For Aquinas, human delight in art isn't only emotional (Romantic), political, or sociohistorical (Adorno); it opens the heart and mind to God. Human happiness from experiencing art comes about most profoundly through forming us in virtue.
- A renewed focus on beauty and transcendence could help with today's problems like distraction, a sole focus on achievement, and a lack of contemplation.
- It is essential to provide students opportunities to experience embodied beauty through art, architecture, music, etc., that help them discover the truth and form a coherent identity. "We need to form our senses in nature, in liturgy, in poetry and recitation and imitation of the masters." (MM Clayton)

Some Student Questions

- Don't many Romantics like Emerson talk about truth and contemplation? Yes, but Romantics tend to focus on perfection in nature before 'civilization'—the goal is to get as close as possible to following our instincts. Romantics don't generally acknowledge our fallenness or need for God's grace. A Christian understanding is that God is both immanent (close to us) and transcendent (beyond us). We depend on God for our existence, and our happiness consists of conforming to God's truth, beauty, and goodness through grace.
- Can representations of suffering and violence in art lead us to the truth? Evil is always a privation of something good. That's why art based on nihilism, critical theory, or any theory that says the basis of all reality is evil or a contradiction will not be able to lead people to the good. Provoking an emotional response to suffering is not sufficient. We enter the darkness not to give in to despair but to envision the possibility of our redemption from evil. "Without a vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29).

Key Quotes

“Most people, when asked why something is good, end up answering in more or less utilitarian terms. Something is good only insofar as it serves to bring about a good feeling. Goodness is not merely suspected because of the feeling it produces, but rather it is itself reduced to a sentiment or a feeling in oneself.” James Matthew Wilson in *Wounds of Beauty*, p. 77

“We animals that are made for contemplation. To see what is intrinsically good and then to dwell within it,” James Matthew Wilson in *Wounds of Beauty*, p. 79

“The role of the arts in particular, whether visual or literary or otherwise, is to communicate the fact that things are good in themselves. By drawing attention to the formedness of the thing, the artist leads the eye of the mind through this particular formed thing into a deeper encounter with mystery—which is a deeper encounter with the fact that there is *something* rather than nothing, that things simply are, that things are formed, and that they are intelligible and desirable, and yet they are always a part of something bigger and greater than themselves. They exist, not merely in themselves, but always in relation to other things, and to the cosmos. Beauty is what we see; wisdom is what we obtain when we see it fully.” James Matthew Wilson in *Wounds of Beauty*, p. 87.

“Creation has deeper mystery to itself, and the mystery is not the unknown. Mystery in the Catholic sense, a mystery, is a truth that is inexhaustibly deep.” James Matthew Wilson in *Wounds of Beauty*, p. 98

Quotes from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Article on [19th Century Romantic Aesthetics](#)

“Not art and artworks make the artist, but feeling and inspiration and impulse.” (F. Schlegel lived in Germany from 1772 to 1829.

“Poetry is passion.” (Wordsworth, “Note to the Thorn” in LB: 136). Lived 1770-1850

“All good poetry [originates in] the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” (Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), paragraph 26, in LB)

Quotes from John Dewey

Scientific truth replaces religious truth or revelation

“The significant bearing for my purpose of all this is that new methods of inquiry and reflection have become for the educated man today the final arbiter of all questions of fact, existence, and intellectual assent. Nothing less than a revolution in the ‘seat of intellectual authority’ has taken place. This revolution, rather than any particular aspect of its impact upon this and that religious belief, is the central thing. In this revolution, every defeat is a stimulus to renewed inquiry; every victory won is the open door to more discoveries, and every discovery is a new seed planted in the soil of intelligence, from which grow fresh plants with new fruits. The mind of man is being habituated to a new method and ideal: There is but one sure road of access to truth—the road of

patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection.” John Dewey, *Common Faith*,

Rejection of religious doctrine and liturgy

“In the discussion I shall develop another conception of the nature of the religious phase of experience, one that separates it from the supernatural and the things that have grown up about it. I shall try to show that these derivations are encumbrances and that what is genuinely religious will undergo an emancipation when it is relieved from them; that then, for the first time, the religious aspect of experience will be free to develop freely on its own account.” John Dewey, *A Common Faith*

“Just because the release of these values is so important, their identification with the creeds and cults of religions must be dissolved.” John Dewey, *A Common Faith*

Readings:

Margarita Mooney Suarez, Chapter 4 in *Wounds of Beauty*, Dialogue with James Matthew Wilson

John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (selections)

John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (A Common Faith)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Article on 19th Century Romantic Aesthetics](#)

Videos

Margarita Mooney Suarez and James Matthew Wilson, “Goodness, Truth and Beauty”, (5 minutes) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTXt_7Sbltw

Margarita Mooney Suarez and James Matthew Wilson, “How Does Beauty Manifest”, (3 minutes) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9iyekeleY0>

Margarita Mooney Suarez and Tim O’Malley “John Dewey, Religion and Modernity,” (6 minutes) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kg8WkHDxSBg>

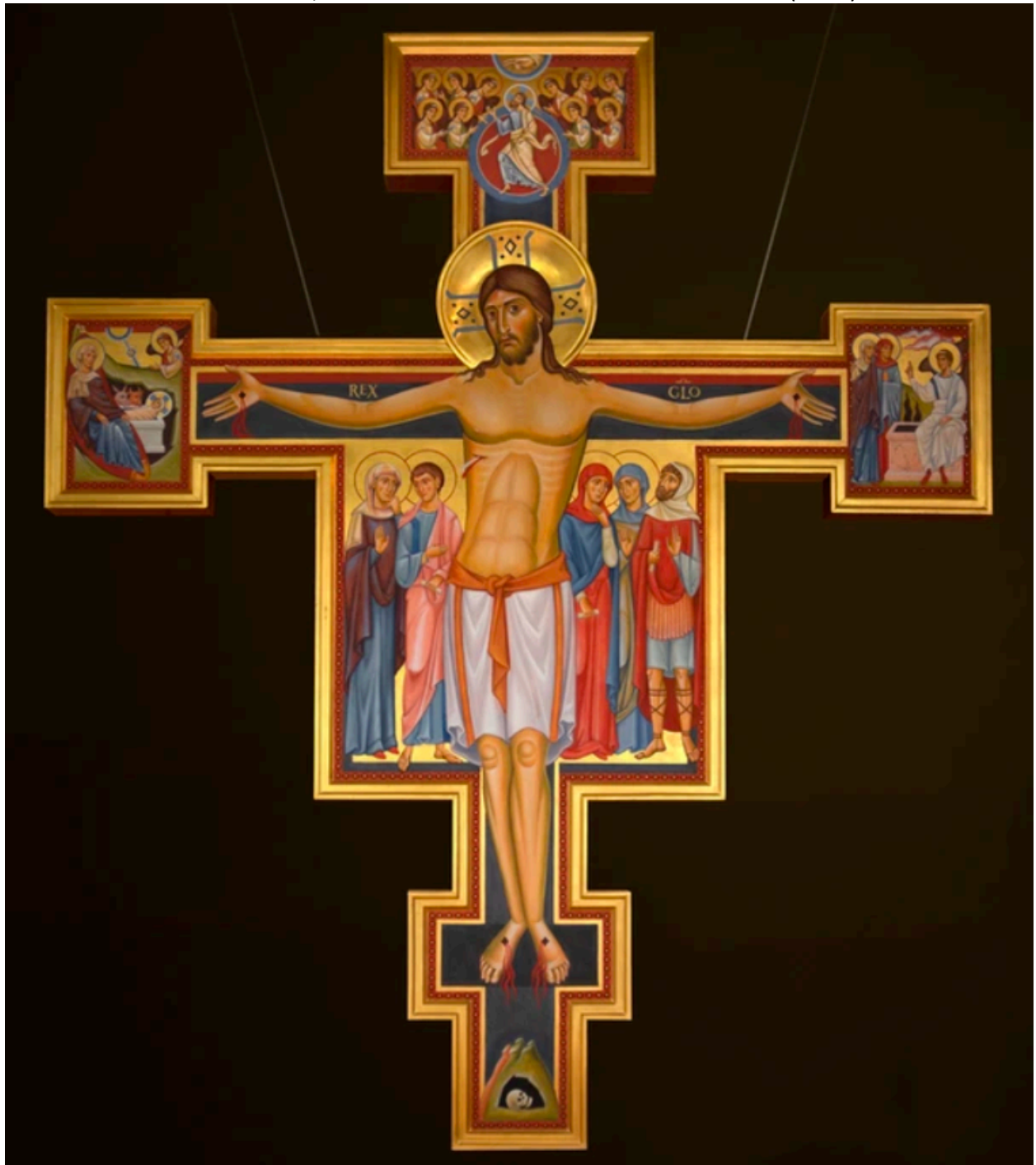
Picasso. Demoiselles d'Avignon



Boston City Hall



Martin Earle, Crucifix for Catholic Cathedral of Aberdeen (2023)



James McCrery, Architect

