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Art

Freshman

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“Saint John The Baptist In The Wilderness”

1168 words

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Viewing “Saint John The Baptist in the Wilderness”

Anthony Van Dyck was one of the most important Flemish painters of the 17th century. He was greatly influenced by his mentor, Peter Paul Rubens, and other established Italian artists. He directed a majority of his work towards painting mythological figures and European royalty (Andrews 2). As Van Dyck became known as a successful portraitist and painter, he was invited to the English Court to create flattering paintings of King Charles I (Wittkower 1). While Van Dyck portraits were popular, he had a passion for painting mythological and Biblical figures. One of his best-known portraits, inspired by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, is titled “Saint John The Baptist in the Wilderness” (Andrews 4). Van Dyck painted this religious and historical portrait in Sicily between 1624 and 1625. When he arrived in the city of Palermo, he was struck by The Plague, causing him to be immobile for about two years. During that time, he decided to depict John the Baptist, the Christian martyr, in a novel way: as a youth (Andrews 1). “Saint John The Baptist In The Wilderness” by Anthony Van Dyck allows the viewers to interpret this Christian figure literally, historically, symbolically, and emotionally.

During an important ceremony on June 2, Houston Baptist University unveiled "Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness," the 17th century masterpiece by Anthony Van Dyck, in the Belin Chapel in the Morris Cultural Arts Center on the HBU campus (Villarreal 1). The painting was a donation from William and Sharon Morris. At the ceremony Sharon Morris expressed that "It is our deepest wish that this painting will touch the lives of people who see it and promote more meditation on God's Word" (Villarreal 1). The Morrises donated this painting in hopes that it would bring HBU students closer to Christ and allow them to revel in the joy of God's goodness, grace, and holy power (Villarreal 2). Today, the painting still sits at Houston Baptist University as a showcase piece worth several million dollars in the Fine Arts Museum. The

presence of "Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness" at HBU reflects the goals outlined in the eighth pillar to "Expand Our Commitment to the Creative Arts." In honor of this eighth pillar, HBU encourages everyone to explore and admire the arts and take part in its beauty (Villarreal 3).

Van Dyck painted "John The Baptist in the Wilderness" using oil paints on a 141 x 115 centimeter canvas. The oil paint used to depict John the Baptist is significant because it gives depth and texture to the painting (National Gallery 2). The details allow the audience to see John as youthful and innocent. By using a large sized, Van Dyck creates a unique representation of symbolism and historical context (National Gallery 3).

To fully understand the painting, "Saint John The Baptist In The Wilderness," one must be informed of the historical context. At the time Van Dyck painted this masterpiece it was towards the end of the counter reformation (Counter Reformation 2). In opposition to the Reformation, the Counter Reformation was a time where the corruption of the church was exposed. Thus, art was aimed to reveal the true essence of religion and The Church. Artists began to depict biblical things from a new, truth based perspective. In response, paintings became more gruesome, provocative, and individualized (Counter Reformation 3). With the counter reformation in mind, Van Dyck's depiction of John the Baptist makes more sense. John was painted in a provocative sense; his nudity emphasizing his innocence and vulnerable. He is young, seemingly blameless, and full of life. There is a surprise quotient because it forces the viewer to rethink how they see John The Baptist (Villarreal 4).

From a religious point of view, traditional paintings of John the Baptist mainly depict John as an old man or decapitated. However, Van Dyck completely diverges from the status quo, capturing John in a new, authentic, historical, and thought-provoking manner. John's Youthful

presence is not permanent. Through biblical context, the audience knows that John will face hardships, be persecuted, and will ultimately die a gruesome death (Villarreal 4). Therefore, the youthful beauty of John reflected in this painting is ironic. This factor elicits an emotional response from the audience. John's depicted innocence almost makes the painting that much more depressing and horrifying because the viewers get to see what was destroyed (Counter Reformation 2). It was a handsome, joyful, and hopeful man that was lost. He will die a horrible death, and all the splendor he once had, will be gone. Van Dyck does an excellent job at creating a thought-provoking piece that digs into historical and biblical background (Andrews 3).

The symbolism in the painting "Saint John The Baptist In The Wilderness" creates a complex story and captures deep significance. In the painting, a handsome man is depicted. His partial nudity, as previously mentioned, represents his youthfulness. Also, the lamb symbolizes John's innocence (Wittkower 1). Lambs, from a biblical perspective, are often seen as pure creatures of sacrifice. In the same way, John will be like a lamb, innocent and blameless, when he faces his future death. In the background of the painting, there seems to be a dark storm approaching in the distance. This storm is an accurate symbol for the hardships and tragedies John will face later in his life (Villarreal 2). He will come across major persecution, loss, and death. The bible and the cross symbolize that Christ is the center of John's life. He will live for Christ, spreading the gospel, and will make large sacrifices for the sake of his faith. The rich biblical symbolism Van Dyck uses deepens the significance of the painting as a whole (Andrews 2).

"Saint John The Baptist in the Wilderness" by Anthony Van Dyck encompasses ample symbolism, historical and religious background, and stirs emotional responses within the audiences who view it. The painting is deeper than a physical piece of art, its significance and

layers of meaning create a beautiful story that is just as rich as reading a novel. The fullness and complexity of Van Dyck's masterpiece ultimately points the audience back to the Creator who is the Almighty King (1143).

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