

Banksy v's Raphael: A Comparison Study

If you had been driving along the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem back in July 2003, you could not have helped but witness the recent completion of the first continuous segment of the Israeli West Bank barrier. However, what you might not have noticed, just before you reached Bethlehem, was the appearance of graffiti on the side wall of a small petrol station on Ash Salon Street, in Beit Sahour. Graffiti is generally illegal and has usually been painted by disenfranchised teenagers with nothing better to do than defile the urban environment they find themselves in; bored, alienated and marginalised by their society. In many ways this new artwork on Ash Salon Street was no different, a call to anyone who cared to see that someone, somewhere was sensing social separation and estrangement. Only there was something different about this one, something a little special - it had been painted by the British artist Banksy and it became one of the most reproduced artworks in the world. It is titled *Rage, Flower Thrower* and shows a young man wearing a baseball cap with a mask over his face to help hide his identity. His arms are outstretched and his legs have adopted a wide stance to help his balance, because he is poised to throw something. At first glance we assume this will be either a brick or Molotov cocktail because it is styled to look like a 20th century newspaper image of a rioter. Given the location and moment this work appeared it has been widely interpreted as a criticism of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. However, Banksy's angry young man does not hold a petrol bomb, instead he aims to throw a brightly coloured bouquet of flowers, which we interpret as a call for peace. It is an act which seeks to stem feelings of aggression and hate and replace them with love through the offering up of something beautiful.

Beit Sahour is believed to be the place described in the Christian Bible, (Luke Chapter 2 verses 8-20) where an angel appeared to a group of shepherds who were living in a field and tending their sheep, and announced to them that the baby Jesus had just been born in Bethlehem. The grazing land they were living on is located just behind the Ash Salon Street garage and it now houses the Chapel of the Shepherd's Field. In many senses it marks the physical location of the first announcement of the birth of Jesus to a general population. As a result, this small community is 80% Christian, yet since the Six-Day War of 1967, they have lived under Israeli occupation, with claims that many have been driven out of their homes due to subsequent court rulings that Christian houses are illegal and consequently subject to demolition.

While this might lead many to commit acts of violence, Beit Sahour has become a symbol for peaceful resolution and dialogue with the establishment in the town in 1988 of the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement between Peoples (PCR). This is a non-profit and non-religious organisation which operates in the field of human rights to help stimulate dialogue between Palestinians and non-Palestinian peoples with the aim of enabling peaceful solutions to issues of Palestinian nationalism.

In this broader context Banksy's painting seems to be very purposefully placed and presents as a call in support of liberal ideals, which do not seek to condemn governments, but asks instead for them to aspire to higher ethical principles. The *Flower Thrower* is globalist, he appears on his own as an individual, yet is linked to other individuals around the world by a belief in tolerance and the promotion of social inclusion.

Exactly 500 years before *Rage*, *Flower Thrower* appeared in Beit Sahour, the renaissance master Raphael was commissioned to paint the *Mond Crucifixion*. While these two works of art appear on the surface to be very different, they share a number of similarities and can offer us an interesting comparison on how painters from different centuries and backgrounds are able to utilise beauty as a means to promote messages of hope and peace. Aside from the geographical identification of the two works, where *Rage*, *Flower Thrower* is physically located outside of the city of Jerusalem and the crucifixion of Jesus occurs just outside the walls of and same city, both present the image of a man with his arms outstretched as a direct result of an act of defiance of the state. For Banksy this is in defiance of social intolerance and policies of exclusion while for Raphael, it is an act of defiance against the State of Rome and traditional Jewish teaching.

Where Banksy undertook his work in secret and for free, Raphael was commissioned to paint the *Mond Crucifixion* as the altarpiece for the side chapel of the Church of St. Dominic, in the small Italian city of Città di Castell. Those who appointed Raphael to undertake this painting expected him to transform the visual horror of the execution of Christ into a vision of beauty and majesty. The painting itself is dedicated to Saint Jerome, who tamed a lion when he pulled a thorn from its paw, which in some small way reflects the way Raphael visually removes the image of pain and presents a comforting image of crucifixion. Saint Jerome appears in the work, kneeling to our left, behind him stands the Virgin Mary and opposite them both are Mary Magdalen and Saint John the Baptist. In attendance two angels catch Christ's blood in chalices as it issues from his wounds and in the sky above, the Sun and the Moon appear as silent witness to one of the most famous events in history. Raphael's work is modelled in the classical tradition, with the composition of the figures arranged into a formal rhombus design which helps establish a sense of balance and order. Elsewhere the use of atmospheric perspective in the background and a rich use of colour all contribute to present a scene which radiates a feeling of immense serenity. Artists of the Renaissance, like Raphael, employed geometrical principles to help compose their paintings so that the mathematical order observed in the movement of stars would be reflected upon the earth. In this way, the adoption of the golden section rule, Fibonacci sequence and Euclidian geometry were engaged to mirror the divine order of heaven upon the world, which in turn placed human actions at the centre of a celestial symmetry.

As viewers, Raphael leads our emotions to experience the scene we view as one of God's grace enacted on human drama, where heavenly order triumphs over the chaos of emotion, where our own pain is removed and death is finally defeated. Raphael uses beauty in painting to reframe capital punishment as salvation, and in doing so creates a metaphor of deliverance from sin and transforms despair into hope.

In contemporary western politics, Christianity is generally regarded as representing a right wing, conservative political view point and is often tied to ideas of national identity. *Rage*, *Flower Thrower* and other works produced by Banksy support the promotion of social diversity, a core underpinning of left-wing liberal belief, which promotes a globalist equality of all people before the law, regardless of wealth, class, religion, sexual identity and orientation. Where Christianity represents faith and accepts inequality as a part of life we must bare, liberalism grew out of the Enlightenment and replaces beauty with reason and a call for equity for all.

Both works of art share similar iconography, yet they do so for differing philosophical ends. Raphael utilises beauty to soften the visual appearance of suffering and create a calming sense of transcendence from pain, which acknowledges pain as a part of life yet transforms it to a universal message of hope. Banksy offers a rebellion cry against social injustice, calling for an end to the sorrow which is acquired through an emotional identification with the angst and distress of individuals at the hand of the state and a desire to limit the extent of the power of government over the individuality of the citizen.

While Banksy is anonymous, so too is his *Flower Thrower*, which is significant because it means he can be viewed as Christian or Muslim, Palestinian or Israeli. Being open to interpretation like this allows us to approach the image with more of an open mind. The same could also be said of Jesus, because historically there are no descriptions of his physical appearance in the bible. The earliest images of Jesus depicted him as a beautiful clean-shaven youth, because in the early years after his death, Romans believed only someone with who possessed beautiful features and charisma could attract a large following. Later his image morphed at the hands of artists to become that of a 'Man of Sorrows' such as *The Man of Sorrows*'s of 1493 by Albrecht Dürer or *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, by Lucas Cranach the Elder which show him with a crown of thorns. This changes again with later images portraying him with a golden crown where he is presented as 'King of the World' whilst what was ultimately settled on as the most established image is 'Christ as Philosopher', where Jesus appears with beard and long hair similar in style to ancient Greek thinkers.

What this tells us is that art adapts its method of presentation to reflect the social interests of the time. In presenting crucifixion as salvation, Raphael uses painting as a metaphor of deliverance from sin and by utilising concepts of beauty manages to transform despair into hope. By the 19th and 20th century this morphed with many artists depicting realistic images of people being put to death in the name of the state, though usually with a secular theme and increasingly with the abandonment of beauty. When they do, it is still common to find the subject adopting a cruciform pose, as it is a pose which has come to represent both universal human suffering and salvation. Such examples are found in Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, Edouard Manet's *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, Robert Capa's *The Falling Soldier* and in Nick Ut's 1972 Vietnam war photograph *Trang Bang after a South Vietnamese Air Force Napalm Attack*. What we notice when looking at these pictures is that we tend to identify personally with the distress of the subject. Their pain metaphorically becomes our

pain. This is in part because of the way the images are composed, with the main character being the focus of the core narrative around which all the other components revolve.

Even if an artist doesn't hold a religious belief, what they do have is a desire to make something and put it out into the world in order to create a new perspective for others to see and consider. Making art in this broad sense is an act of faith. What we see in Christian art is a desire to take the suffering of Christ and the saints and use beauty as a way of transcending suffering. With liberalism we move away from beauty towards the physicality of human suffering at the hands of the state with the focus of attention shifting fundamentally from the idea of a heaven towards a humanist understanding of the world. What underpins this is an ethical motivation to point to a wrong and call on government to act better, to relieve human suffering on earth by calling for a moral approach to statehood. Where renaissance artists accepted suffering and applied beauty to create transcendence and the redemption of heaven, liberal artists from the late 19th century placed their focus on the material quality of the world and the exploration of the human intellect and a belief in equality.

What makes the subject of Banksy's *Rage, Flower Thrower* so interesting is that he locates as a civil rights activist, planted firmly in the world of human politics. He is bleak, black and white and presents as urban graffiti, yet at the same time he holds a bouquet of flowers. The flowers are offered in colour and suggest beauty as a universal bridge we can all cross together in unity and hope. In doing this Banksy once again asserts that beauty can and does have a role to play in the world of art. It is transformative. Yet justice itself is never what we imagine it to be, because the greater the injustice visited on the individual the less effective any form of compensation can be. If we trip on a side walk, fall and break our arm, we might expect a few thousand dollars in compensation. We can get our arm re-set in plaster and over time it will heal, the bone might not be as strong as it once was, but life returns and we have money for the inconvenience. On the other end of the spectrum, anyone who has lived through a genocide and survived but lost family members can never replace what is lost, no amount of healing, no amount of money can ever compensate for such a tragedy.

Beauty acknowledges that our suffering cannot be compensated and offers us an alternative to the focus we place on our pain. Instead, it helps us re-frame our thinking, it offers us hope for a future just beyond the place we happen to be. We cannot see the heaven Raphael assures us of in the *Mond Crucifixion*, and neither can we see the destination for Banksy's bouquet of flowers, which lies somewhere just beyond our sight. What they offer is a promise, a promise of a better time, a time of peace, harmony and love.

Robert Priseman, February 2021

Evolved from a series of interviews with Lucy Cox.