

# Jesuit Art: *to delight, to teach, and to move*



Little is known of the life of this Flemish painter, except that he lived primarily in Brussels and painted frequently for the Jesuits. This scene, inspired by Herman Hugo's devotional emblem book *Pia desideria*, is an allegorical representation of the popular Jesuit theme of the spiritual journey. The Soul (symbolized by the female figure on the left) is accompanied by Divine Love (the angelic figure) on its earthly pilgrimage.

▲ Figure 2  
Anton Sallaert,  
*The Allegory of Christian Life*.  
Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 68.1 inches.  
Haarbrouck, Musée municipal.

Few religious orders were as enthusiastic as the Jesuits about the fine arts. From the earliest days of the Society, art was treated as a priority, both in Europe and on the worldwide missions. Ignatius of Loyola himself made great use of images in his personal meditations. Saint Francis Xavier also contributed to the worldwide spread of Catholic devotional images. He set out on his first mission in 1542 with a suitcase full of sacred pictures, taking advantage of the power of images to overcome his linguistic deficiencies. He used icons when he preached and gave them away to appreciative local potentates as gifts.

Given the amount of attention paid to images by these early Jesuit leaders, not to mention the extensive Jesuit artistic contribution to late Renaissance and Baroque Italy, the Jesuits have often been credited—or blamed—with creating their own style. But there never was a monolithic Jesuit style, since one of the most salient characteristics of Jesuit art patronage was adaptability. The Society wanted their churches and paintings to fit in with the surrounding community, whether Venetian or Filipino, and so, chameleon-like, they took on the styles and techniques of the region.

The Jesuits gave such pride of place to the visual arts because they believed that these

could serve their ministry. In fact, they felt that images possessed affective powers. Following the tradition of classical rhetoric, the Jesuits envisioned art as the visual equivalent to sacred oratory. The Jesuits realized that like preaching, art had an extraordinary ability “to delight, to teach, and to move” (*delectare, docere, movere*). By harnessing art's pictorial realism, expressive power, and emotive capabilities, the Jesuits felt that they could move non-Christians to abandon their faiths for Christianity and lead Christians at home to live a more pious life.

Jan David's *Veridicus Christianus*, (Figure 7) its frontispiece a delightful pun on the imitation of Christ, illustrates this latter role of art. A group of Christians are gathered around a figure of Christ on Golgotha, who serves as their model. Each Christian, perched before an easel, paints his own version of what he sees—rightly or wrongly.

Going back to Ignatius, the Jesuits also stressed an image's potential for meditation, an emphasis deriving from the Spiritual Exercises, which exhorted its followers to meditate by forming mental images with the senses, or “composition of place.” This intellectual exercise was as important for the spiritual formation of the Jesuits themselves as it was for their congregations.

The propagation of the faith took many forms, and it brought the Jesuits to the ends of the earth. One of the most celebrated ways in which even the earliest Jesuits tried to communicate the basic truths to be lived and practised by Christians was through the visual arts. Architecture, painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts were used to serve as a vehicle for catechism, teaching, and other ministries, and as a mirror for good behavior.

—John W. O'Malley, S.J. in *The Jesuits II: Culture, Science, and the Arts, 1540-1773* (University of Toronto Press, 2006)



Mignard's iconography, showing the Virgin dictating the *Spiritual Exercises* to the Jesuit founder, is unusual. Mignard (1610–95) had studied for many years in Rome, where he came to specialize in devotional painting, particularly in a kind of image of the Madonna that became known as a *mignarde*.

▲ Figure 3  
Pierre Mignard,  
*Apparition of the Holy Virgin to Saint Ignatius during the Exercises*.  
Oil on canvas, 109.5 x 65.7 inches. 1693.  
Paris, Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice.

Images also played an important role for memory by fixing the often very complex ideas and events of Christianity in the mind. In accordance with both classical and Renaissance theory, the Jesuits taught adults and children alike to use pictures to store and retrieve information. This mnemonic function is brought out most clearly in Nadal's Gospel, whose images are itemized with letters keyed to captions below.

Art was especially vital on the overseas missions. Like the Early Christians, to whom the Jesuits often compared themselves, the Jesuits recognized that images served as an essential tool for overcoming the language barrier. Pictures allowed them to express complicated doctrinal concepts in a pithy, convenient package.

Finally, the Jesuits used art to celebrate themselves. Beginning around the time of the 1609 beatification of St. Ignatius, the Jesuits commissioned artists to celebrate the lives of St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier in art.

—Cassio Alexander Bailey in *Ratio Studiorum: Jesuit Education, 1540-1773* (John J. Burns Library, Boston College, 1999)



▲ Figure 4  
Anton Sallaert,  
*The Glorification of the Name of Jesus*.  
Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 53.9 inches.  
Brussels, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

This canvas is an example of a kind of contemplative image that was common in Flanders from the 16th and 17th centuries. In this case the theme is the glorification of the monogram IHS, a specifically Jesuit devotion. Surrounding this motif are separate scenes from Christ's life and Passion, including the Nativity, Agony in the Garden, Christ at the Column, the Crowning with Thorns, the Way to Calvary, the Raising of the Cross and the Crucifixion.



Figure 5: ▶ Antonio Raggi, two of the four stucco angels over the entrance of the Church of the Gesù, Rome. Through an interaction of illusionistic painting, sculpture, and architecture—which often crossed boundaries into the space of the others—the artists allowed for a revolutionary play between fantasy and reality.

Jesuit art is very much an international phenomenon. Art, artists, ideas, and the Jesuits themselves moved across borders with remarkable frequency. . . . Ignatius's apostolic vision for the Society encompassed the entire globe. The Jesuits were truly among the first Catholic groups to articulate a coherent worldview, or *Weltanschauung*. Perhaps this universalism is the key to their appeal.

—Jeffrey Chipps Smith,  
*Seminar Worship: Jesuits and the Art of the Early Catholic Reformation in Germany*  
(Princeton University Press, 2002)



After 1622, the cult of the Jesuit saints Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier assumed a prominence in Jesuit church interiors. Although much of the imagery associated with the saints had been developed outside Rome, in Antwerp, Madrid, Lisbon, and other places, Italian painters such as Guercino helped establish it in Rome.

▲ Figure 6.  
Guercino,  
*Saint Gregory the Great with Saints Ignatius and Francis Xavier*.  
Oil on canvas,  
c. 1625-26, 115.4 x 82.3 inches.  
London, Sir Denis Mahon Collection.