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Memling's Portraits of Christ.
A Cognitive Approach

Abstract

Previous research conducted by the author revealed a clear preference for profile and half profile view in paintings of secular persons. Frontal view (full face or *en face*) was usually restricted to representations of Christ. In this paper, the results will be applied to the study of the paintings of one particular artist: the German born fiftheenth century painter Hans Memling. Adopting methods from traditional art history as well as cognitive psychology, the aim is to show how Memling's systematic distinction between sacred and profane, using the frontal view only for representations of Christ, can be explained by reference to psychological studies on the effects and values usually associated with the frontal view of a face.

Introduction

The German-born Flemish painter Hans Memling (c. 1435-1494), active in the Netherlands and Brussels in the second half of the 15th century, was one of his period's most productive artists. He produced works in various genres, concentrating mostly on religious subjects and portraits. Of the total 36 portraits that he painted, four represent Christ. Of these, three show him full face, while in the fourth he has averted face. In the latter, he also has blood and Crown of Thorns, which is lacking in the rest. In this article, I will seek to show that these two types represent two different aspects of Christ and that Memling, probably unconsciously, relied on an unwritten rule that ordinary people should not be represented frontally in painting. By means of a statistical analysis of material from catalogs of Italian, German and Flemish art from the 14th and 16th century, I will try to show, first, that frontality was far more common in representations of Christ than secular persons and, second, that two quite distinct forms of Christ portraits exist. One is the so-called *Man of Sorrows*, which, depicting Jesus as a humble and suffering person, is based on the secular type with averted face (three quarter profile) that focuses on his human aspect; the other, the *Holy Face*, which is supposed to reveal his divine nature, shows him *en face* – a form that was almost never used in depictions of ordinary people.

In my opinion, the frontal view is an attempt to seize the divine in the nature of Jesus in accordance with St Paul's statement that "now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I will know fully". (1 Corinthians 13:12) The

frontal view is a picture of perfection, of divinity. But if St Paul's *face-to-face* meeting with God is an image of the *Holy Face*, it is hard to find precise instructions about how to depict it in ancient treatises of art.

The purpose of this article is to study to what extent the relatively limited outlook of traditional, humanistic and art historical approaches can be broadened by cognitive and psychological methods. In recent years, the empirical study of art and media has gained new interest due to the arrival of disciplines like neuroesthetics and cognitivism. Adopting methods from cognitive psychology and employing information from the neurosciences concerning the neural bases for the creation and responses to art, these approaches depart from the Marxist, psychoanalytic, and semiotic approaches that dominated humanities in the 1970s and 1980s. Cognitively informed approaches gained support in film studies especially with the introduction of the term "cognitive film theory" by David Bordwell in his book *Narration in the Fiction Film* from 1982. Similarly, in the field of literary theory since 2000 a number of studies have been devoted to research on how the function of the brain is engaged in the formation and perception of narratives. Discussing central problems in cognitive science, linguistics, and neuroscience, Mark Turner launched the theory that the human mind, using simple stories, or parables, to comprehend and organize experiences, is fundamentally a literary mind.[1]

In art history the cognitive turn is discussed in books like *Neuroarthistory* (2005) by John Onians, where attention is drawn to how writers on art from Antiquity to the present day recognised that the mind was a part of human nature. Neuroesthetic aspects have also been addressed by David Freedberg, who sought a new epistemological framework for art history through a study of the neural substrate of responses to art and to images.

Cognitive studies seek to show that our capacity to perceive and understand things is determined by an "embodied mind" that largely draws on the world that surrounds us and the space inhabited by our bodies. In this article, a cognitive approach will be used to study how we use one part of the body, the face, to communicate, and how knowledge of such processes can be used in the study of portraits. One possibility that methods inspired by cognitive psychology offers, is to study portraits as a face. If, as some surveys seem to confirm, we perceive painted portraits and photographs of human faces quite similarly, it is also likely that seeing another person's face in an image resembles a real meeting between people. In that case, a cognitive approach would be appropriate. In psychology, facial perception is a major and important field that studies, among other things, how we use facial expressions to interact with other people. The face-to-face meeting with the Holy establishes a focus for joint attention in a space where we interact across time with historical persons. The way the face is perceived depends on whether or not the gaze and/or face in the image is turned towards the spectator or not. While textual sources confirm, not surprisingly, that suffering, even in the case of Christ, was associated with negative values, recent studies using methods from cognitive psychology show in which way "positive" and "negative" are affected by face direction, confirming the hypothesis that the averted gaze is the pose most suited for the *Man of Sorrows*.

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[1] Turner 1998.

The Faces of Hans Memling

The way a portrait addresses the spectator is susceptible to stylistic variations in the same way as his clothing or hair cut. It is possible that the Italian penchant for the pure profile in secular portraits of the first half of the fifteenth century was inspired from Roman coins. Indeed, the three quarter profile was not widespread in Italy before about 1480; it was introduced towards the end of that century probably due to influence from Flemish art where this pose had been common for a while. It is precisely the change from one type to the other (and sometimes back again) that tells us that such variations are of a stylistic kind.

The same can not be said of the use of the full face view in portraiture which, it appears, is less attached to "style" than to "type".[2] This orientation is usually reserved for depictions of Christ, and then principally for one particular aspect of Christ. I will try to explain which aspects through an analysis of some works of the German born Flemish fifteenth century painter Hans Memling (c. 1435-1494). I will focus on four portraits of Christ that Memling painted, beginning with a short description of his works.

Based in Bruges, Memling's works were sold to courts and noblemen in several European countries and his works include a number of large scale compositions with biblical scenes, as well as so-called group portraits – a speciality of Flemish Renaissance and Baroque painting. However, his favoured medium was small scale oil paintings on oak panel. His portraits with landscape background seem to have influenced Italian masters like Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci, and one of his portraits was copied by Domenico Ghirlandaio. According to Dirk de Vos, no less than 36 genuine Memling portraits have come down to us, not including his paintings of Christ and the Virgin and five or six portraits of uncertain attribution.[3] More than a third of his extensive surviving *oeuvre* are portraits.

In addition to his many paintings of secular persons, Memling also executed four portraits of Christ. Of these, three are of the *Holy Face*-type. The oldest is probably the one in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena which is dated 1478 (FIG. 1); a second, painted in 1482, is in the Boston Museum of Fine arts, whereas a third, recently rediscovered, must have been painted around 1485.[4]

The recently discovered painting (now in the Resnick Collection) is distinguished by its peculiar golden background surrounded by dark clouds, but is otherwise of the same type as the paintings in Boston and Pasadena. They all show Christ with his face turned frontally out of the picture and his eyes directed towards the spectator. In all three paintings Christ lifts his right hand in a blessing gesture, whereas his left is placed in *trompe l'oeil* fashion on the frame as if it was a window opening. His long, dark brown hair is parted in the middle and if we look carefully, we discover that even his short beard has a slight partition in the middle. It is as if his hair and beard are made to conform with the rim of the nose in such a way that they emphasize the symmetry of his face.

Except for minor details (and the background in the Resnick panel), the only real difference between the three panels is the colour of the robe. In addition to these three paintings,

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[2] An attempt to define 'type' is found in Panofsky's article "*Imago Pietatis*" – Ein Beitrag zur Typengeschichte des *Schmerzenmanns* und der *Maria Mediatrix*. Panofsky considered his article as a contibution to the study of the "history of types" that sought to determine how form and content together consitute a meaningful unit. Panofsky 1927, 294.

[3] De Vos 1994, 368.

[4] The date of the latter work is quite hypothetical. Cfr. Borchert 2014, 138.

Memling made a fourth portrait of Christ which is now in the Palazzo Bianco in Genoa (Italy). This differs from the other three in being of the *Man of Sorrows* type; the face of Christ is turned away and he also bears the marks of Passion – Crown of Thorns, blood, stigma marks, sad facial expression etc.

As mentioned, besides the four paintings of Christ (and a few of the Madonna and other saints), we have at least 36 surviving portraits of ordinary people from his hand. Some of these are praying, which means that they were originally side panels of a triptych that flanked a centrally placed Christ figure. Their faces are therefore turned in half profile toward a now lost imagined center. What's important, however, is that whereas three of the four Christ portraits that Memling painted are turned full face toward the spectator, none of the numerous portraits of ordinary people that he painted are shown this way (FIG. 2).

Portraits of secular persons

To find out whether Renaissance artists actually used face and head orientation systematically to express ideas or convey messages about, for instance, the social status and character of his model, I made a survey of a large number of secular portraits from Italy, Germany, and the Flemish regions from the 15th and the 16th centuries.[5] The survey was based on an analysis of 590 portraits gathered from some of the most comprehensive catalogues available: Bernard Berenson, *Italian painters of the Renaissance;* Max Friedländer's *Die altniederländische Malerei*; Ernst Buchner's *Das deutsche Bildnis der Spätgotik und der frühen Dürerzeit*; Werner Richard Deusch's *German Painting of the Sixteenth Century: Dürer and His Contemporaries*, and Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*.[6]

Some of these catalogues contain several volumes and together they present thousands of works of art from the Renaissance period. All kinds of subjects are included, religious as well as historical and mythological scenes. Of these, only a small part of all the works enlisted are portraits. Since portraits – i.e. the head of a person depicted in such a way that he or she would be recognized by a contemporary viewer because of facial likeness with a historical person – may be included in compositions featuring a large number of objects and figures, the category had to be narrowed down to a well defined group. Hence, in my survey only the type of paintings most traditionally acknowledged as portraits – the representation of one person alone painted in oil or tempera on canvas or wooden support – was included. Group portraits or portraits of persons featuring in more complex religious or historical scenes were not included. Donor portraits (persons, often husband and wife, featuring in side panel of polyptychs) were also excluded. Moreover, this survey only included portraits of secular persons, not Christ, the Madonna or saints.

My analysis of this material showed that an overwhelming majority of secular portraits were profile or half profile. Of the more than 200 German portraits reproduced in Buchner and Deusch, there are four full face secular portraits. None of the 172 portraits in Friedländer are shown frontally, whereas among the 196 in Berenson there are two, both by the same master.

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[5] The preliminary results of this research are found in Hodne 2013, 437-450.
[6] Berenson 1959; Friedländer 1924-1937; Buchner 1953; Marle 1923-1938.

True, the mentioned catalogues are not all-inclusive. A number of portraits showing the sitter frontally exist, such as the famous *Self-portrait* by Tintoretto as an old man from 1588, now in the Louvre.[7] In my survey of the above catalogues I also found two such works of the Austrian painter Wolf Huber. A couple of portraits by Hans Holbein the Younger, not to mention the famous self-portrait by Albrecht Dürer in the Alte Pinakothek, could be included among the exceptions as well. Yet, this does not change our impression that the few examples we have of full-face portraits from this period are exceptions to the rule that ordinary persons were to be portrayed from the side or in half profile, not frontally. As far as I can see, most commentators accept this conclusion.

Portraits of the Holy

This survey of secular portraits that I undertook in 2011 and 2012 was followed up in 2013 by a similar analysis of portraits of Christ. The point of departure was images from the 18 volume strong catalogue of Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*. As before, the survey was limited to pictures that show only the face, shoulders, and (usually) the hands of Christ, not the entire upper body. In the first volume there are no pictures of this category, but in volumes II through XVIII there are several. These volumes cover Italian art from more or less the period of Giotto (slightly before year 1300) until the verge of the High Renaissance around 1500.

The purpose of this survey was initially to see whether the percentage of full face portraits in representations of Christ was the same as in representations of secular persons or higher. But given the fact that there are several types of Christ portraits, I took care to define two basic forms, the *Holy Face* and the *Man of Sorrows.* To avoid determining *a priori* what I wanted to investigate, I needed a definition of the two types *(Holy Face* and *Man of Sorrows)* that was independent of pose. Hence, a *Man of Sorrows*, is defined as such by the inclusion of signs from the Passion: stains of blood, stigma marks, Crown of Thorns on Christ's head, and/or a sad facial expression, etc. In contrast, portraits where Christ has a calm expression and signs of passion are absent or, at least, not exposed in any evident way, is a *Holy Face*. Most Christ portraits can be easily defined as belonging to one or the other of these groups.

The number of Christ portraits in Van Marle is not very high. Among the thousands of paintings and portraits in his 18 volumes, there are only 24 portraits of Christ. Of these, 10 are of the *Holy Face* type, whereas 14 are *Man of Sorrows*. Interestingly, when these were divided into sub-groups, I found that of the *Holy Face* type, there was a clear preference for full face, with 7 full face portraits and only 3 half profile. Regarding the *Man of Sorrows* the tendency was even clearer in the opposite direction: of the 14 panels, only one was full face. The others were all in half profile.

What this shows is, first, that the full face is used much more often in representations of Christ than secular persons. Of the 590 portraits included in the first survey, most (580) were of secular persons. Of these, only seven were shown frontally. Not considering works that were reproduced in more than one catalogue (a very limited number), these seven comprise only about 1.2 percent of the total. For the Christ portraits of the second survey the result was totally different: Of the 24 paintings of this type in Van Marle, no less than 8 – a third – are

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[7] Some such examples are listed in Koerner 1993.

shown *en face*. This impression is confirmed when consulting the catalogue of Flemish art. While neither Buchner nor Deusch included images of Christ in their catalogues, in Friedländer the percentage is even higher than in Van Marle: no less than 7 of 10 Christ portraits are frontal!

The statistical material is scanty. It is, without doubt, possible to extend the survey to include works by masters not found in the catalogues consulted so far; masters active in the Low Countries, such as Gerard David, Joos van Cleve, and Quentin Matsys – all painters who among their *oeuvre* have full-face portraits of Christ – not to mention such Italian masters as Antonello da Messina, Benozzo Gozzoli, Luca Signorelli, and Alvise Vivarini.[8] However, it is my firm conviction that the analysis gives sufficient material to conclude, first, that the full face view is used much more often in representations of Christ than portraits of ordinary people, and, second, that even among Christ portraits there is a distinction: The full face view is used more frequently in representations of the *Holy Face* than in the *Man of Sorrows*.

Methods and approaches

From the above, we may conclude that there was a rule that prevented the full face view from being used in portraits of 'ordinary persons'. In contrast, Christ could be represented either way, *en face* as well as in three quarter profile. But even in the latter case rules applied, for the full face was generally reserved for the *Holy Face*, while three quarter profile was the preferred pose for the *Man of Sorrows*. But what kind of rule is this? Was there an agreement between painters and theologians in the Middle Ages that Christ should be depicted in this way? If this was the case, we will have to examine the documents pertaining to the various debates throughout the centuries about the look of Christ to see whether they also include considerations about the pose of the face.

In the early accounts of Christ, he is not always described as attractive. In *Dialogue with Trypho* St Justin described him as ugly, whereas Tertullian in *Adversus Marcionem* described him as being of twofold nature. According to Tertullian, two descriptions of the Messiah were set forth by the prophets. In the first he appears "in humility" with "no appearance nor glory, and we saw him, and he had no appearance or beauty, but his appearance was unhonoured, defective more than the sons of men, a *man in sorrow*, ...".[9] But it is important to know that their descriptions are part of an argument against heretics who denied that the son of God could have been a being with a carnal body. Since only beings which have a body can suffer, the suffering of Christ before his execution on the cross was by Justin and Tertullian considered as a proof that he actually was a human being with body and flesh. The ugliness they describe is therefore not a description of Christ as such, but an account of how he appeared to those who witnessed him suffer. Indeed, this is exactly what is stated in the prophecies about the Messiah in Isaiah, who says that his appearance was "disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness" (Is 52, 14) and that "he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a *man of sorrows*, and familiar with suffering" (Is 53:2-3).[10]

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[8] Hodne 2013.

[9] Tertullian 1972, III, 7, 189.

[10] My italics.

But whereas he appeared disfigured and humble to Jews and unbelievers, Tertullian emphasized that believers will see him in a different way, for "these tokens of ignobility apply to the first advent, as the tokens of sublimity apply to the second",[11] for then "he will have an honourable appearance, and beauty unfading, more than the sons of men".[12] Similarly, in Psalms the King is described as "beautiful above the sons of men" (Psalm 44 (45):2). That this was read as a prophecy of Christ is proved by the *Epistola Lentuli*, a letter allegedly written by a certain Publius Lentulus, Roman Governor of Judea, but in reality a forgery of the 13th or 14th century.[13] In this document – the most important source in the Late Middle Ages to how people believed that Jesus looked – Christ is described as being "the most beautiful among the children of men", having "a face without wrinkle or spot".

The references to a Christ of the First and the Second Advent as having different appearances, and the use of the epithet *Man of Sorrows* clearly indicate these as likely sources for the Late Medieval and Renaissance representations of the suffering Christ. Conversely, the "honourable appearance" described in these passages must apply to the *Holy Face*. In fact, the oldest paintings of the *Holy Face* that we know often had verses from the mentioned chapters from the Bible inscribed on the frame. This can be seen in a couple of works that once were attributed to Jan van Eyck, the one who invented the *Holy Face* as a genre of Christ portraits independent of the Medieval *Vera icon*. On the frame of a sixteenth century copy, now in the Groeninge Museum in Bruges, there is a number of inscriptions which include, in addition to the painter's (false) signature ("Johannes de Eyck me fecit et aplevit"), two quotations from the Gospel according to John, and, most important in the present context: the words *Speciosa forma pfiliis hominum*.[14] This must be a misspelling of "Speciosus forma præ filiis hominum" from Psalm 44 (45):3 ("you are beautiful above the sons of men") which, as we saw, was quoted in the *Epistola Lentuli*.

Even though, as we have seen, the Bible and the writings of the Fathers were valuable sources for Renaissance painters when they created their image of Christ, we must bear in mind that these were supposed to be descriptions of Christ himself, not instructions for how to paint him. The written sources therefore focus on his facial traits, his "physiognomy", so to say. Physiognomy has been known since Antiquity as a quasi-scientific discipline that aims at assessing a person's character or personality from his outer appearance. A new method for tracing the outline of the profile of a person's head with exactness gave physiognomy a boost in the 18th century, but it was also popular in the Italian Renaissance, as is documentet by Giambattista della Porta's *De humana physiognomonia* from 1586. However, it is not known (perhaps even unlikely) that Memling made use of such knowledge. He would probably have more use of physiognomy's sister discipline pathognomy. Pathognomy is the study of how the state of mind of a person was expressed by outward tokens like the gestures of the hands and facial mimic. As a quasi-scientific discipline, pathognomy reached its climax with the *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* of Charles le Brun (1619-1690). Pathognomical knowledge of how emotions are transmitted by facial expressions could have been

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[11] Tertullian 1972, III, 7, 189.

[12] Tertullian 1972, III, 7, 189.

[13] Koerner 1993, 103; Chavannes 2003, 37.

[14] Koerner 1993, 104 ff.

important as inspirational source for depictions of the *Man of Sorrows*, but would it be useful for the *Holy Face*, which is the absence of any kind of emotion?

Frontality and the sacred

In my view, the most valuable thing about the written accounts from the Bible and the Apocrypha is their tendency to sort things in binary oppositions, describing Christ as either suffering or triumphant, ugly or handsome, human or divine. In fact, whether his face elicit positive or negative emotions seems to depend on whether it is his divine of human side that is revealed to us. We know that the distinction between human and divine was essential when the artist (or his patron) laid out the scheme for the decoration of the medieval basilica (church). All available wall surface was covered by frescoes or mosaics according to a well organised structure: The walls of the nave of the church, which was the place where ordinary people would be situated, were usually decorated with scenes from Genesis and/or the Gospels, whereas the semi-domed apse behind the main altar was often decorated with scenes from the Book of Revelation. This is a contrast between past (history) and future; between Christ's life on earth, on one hand, and his celestial glorification, on the other. As I demonstrated in a previous study, the frontal view of Christ's face is strictly reserved for his Second Advent.[15]

Although the images found on the walls of medieval churches usually show the whole body of Christ, it may very well be exactly these images that served as models for Early Renaissance portrayals of him, like those of Memling. The *Man of Sorrows* contains all the essential elements that we would expect to find in a passion scene. In this scene he is abundantly adorned with signs of Christ's suffering: the Crown of Thorns, blood stains, stigma marks and so on. These elements help us recreate the original scene. The other elements that pertain to the story – the Cross, the attending crowd, the Roman soldiers and the Jews – are left out, but we don't miss them since we know the story. Our knowledge of the story helps us identify with the represented persons. Christ's averted gaze makes us aware that his space is not limited to what is represented within the frame of the painting, but extends beyond it, including objects and persons that we cannot see, but we know are there. The focus for our joint attention is thus located in a purely imaginary space where we interact across time with the real eye witnesses by means of an advanced blending that compresses "a mental network to create perceptible elements for attending to what is otherwise not in the environment".[16]

Although both may serve devotional purposes, the *Man of Sorrows* and the *Holy Face* function differently. None of them are narrative, strictly speaking, but the presence of the Instruments of Passion in the *Man of Sorrows* impels our "narrative imagining" – according to Mark Turner, "the fundamental instrument of thought"[17] – to tell stories. Moreover, by presenting Christ as alive, the image induces us to empathize with the suffering.[18] The relationship between narrative and devotional images is the topic of Sixten Ringbom's study *From Icon to Narrative*. With reference to previous studies by Wilhelm Pinder and Erwin Panofsky, Ringbom defined devotional images as an attempt to enhance the lyrical element of

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[15] Hodne 2004, 37-40.

[16] Turner 2015, 41.

[17] Turner 1998, 16.

[18] Panofsky 1927, 280.

the Gospel story by isolating the emotional center from its surrounding context. In this way an *Ecce Homo* can be extracted from a *Flagellation* and a *Salvator Mundi* (a type of *Holy Face)* from a *Majestas Domini*.[19] Devotion is connected to the capacity to focus one's attention towards one particular aspect like, for instance, the frowns on Christ's face. A devotional image is therefore similar to a historical subject; actually, it may very well derive from it (being cut out from it). Hence, although a devotional painting may be little less than a face, in many cases it arose as a detail cut out from a larger composition showing an episode from the life of Christ.

Scholars disagree on whether certain kinds of paintings function better as devotional images than others. Defining it is a purely functional term, Ringbom sided with Rudolf Berliner and Hans Aurenhammer who both thought that Panofsky was wrong in thinking that only the dramatical close-up could have a devotional function.[20] In any case, no one, and certainly not Panofsky, who wrote an important article on the *Imago Pietatis*, doubted that the archetypal *Andachtsbild* was the suffering *Schmerzensmann*. From this we must conclude that the frontal view not functions better for purposes of devotion than the averted face.

The *Man of Sorrows*, suggesting the existence of a space that stretches beyond the frames of the painting, invites the spectator to engage in an action – in this case the Passion of Christ. This means that the *Man of Sorrows* works very well for devotional purposes. This comes as no surprise. As is well known, the most famous devotional image, the Crucifixion, just like the portrait of Christ, has two versions: One that shows Christ at the Cross triumphant with wide open eyes; the other weeping and with the head inclined towards one side. It is important to remember that religious images in earlier periods served several purposes. Images were useful not only as didactical illustrations of the biblical story, but had an important role in private devotion and prayer. As such, they were media that facilitated meditation and religious fervor for people who sought spiritual contact with God. Many of the Christ portraits and *Holy Face*s that we discuss here must have been painted as objects of private devotion. Images could guide the devout in his or her ambition to get in contact with the holy; seeing the face of God was like a "beatific vision",[21] a foretaste of paradisiacal life. What mattered was the feeling of contact and the paintings' ability to convey emotions.

Portraits and face perception

In the preceding chapter we learnt that the *Holy Face* emerged as a devotional image by being literally cropped from a *Majestas Domini*, but the disagreement among scholars demonstrates that we still know little about from where it draws its power to convince as a faithful representation of God. It is possible that a psychological test can provide information on the perception of gaze and face orientaion that can be used in studies of portrait paintings. As regards the direction of eyes, behavioural studies have demonstrated a connection between gaze contact and face recognition. Faces are more easily remembered and identified when the target looks directly ahead than when it looks away, but this effect is not stronger for frontal faces. In fact, there is evidence that faces are most easily recognized when direct gaze is

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[19] Ringbom 1984, 54.

[20] Ringbom 1984, 54-55.

[21] In Christian theology seeing God "face to face", associated with salvation and the communion of saints, is termed "beatific vision". Cfr. Rahner 1968, 151-153.

combined with deviated head orientation[22] – one of the most common poses in Renaissance portraiture, Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa being a prominent example.

How face and gaze direction work together is the topic of an article by Per Olav Folgerø *et al.* called "Effects of Facial Symmetry and Gaze Direction".[23] This research was based on three experiments that used images where the direction of face and gaze were manipulated. Two of the experiments used portraits from different photo databases, whereas the final used manipulated images from Renaissance portraits.

The persons from the databases where photographed from different angles. For each 'head' a frontal view and an approximately three quarter view was used. Eyes were then manipulated in such a way that for each position there was a 'direct glance' and an 'averted glance'. This means that the test persons had four alternatives to choose from: direct face/direct gaze, direct face/averted gaze, averted face/direct gaze, and averted face/averted gaze.

Test persons were then asked to respond to the faces according to a choice of pre-selected descriptive adjectives.[24] The adjectives selected for the test were common words that we often use in every day speech as descriptions of personality traits that we infer from how a person looks at an observer. The adjectives consisted of a 'positive group' ('harmonious', 'trustworthy', 'caring', 'inclusive' and 'respectable'), and a negative group ('authoritarian', 'monitoring', 'evasive', 'intimidating' and 'dominant').

The results of the tests based on photographs showed that people gave frontal faces with direct gaze high scores on attributes from the positive group, but three quarter views with averted gaze were also generally ranked positively. The findings were even more pronounced for the test that used ancient portrait paintings, which showed a consistent overrepresentation of positive adjectives for direct face/direct gaze. The overall reaction to this group of paintings showed that they were regarded to be more caring, trustworthy, harmonic, inclusive and respectable than the corresponding images with averted gaze and face.

The aim of the present study is to discuss whether there may be a cognitive explanation for the choice of the frontal view of the face for representations of the divine. Although our tests demonstrate that there is a connection between frontality and positive values, it is not possible to conclude directly that positive adjectives mean that a face is perceived as an image of God. One route from 'positive' to 'divine' might pass through the concept of 'self'. A study by Lobmaier and Perrett on the interpretation of attention in face perception revealed a connection between perceived 'happiness' and direction of gaze. When participants were asked to judge the direction of attention from faces with covered eyes, targets with a smiling expression were generally judged as more 'attending-to-me' than fearful, angry and neutral faces. The same study also suggested that the positive evaluation of the face that looks directly at me may be related to the so-called 'self referential' bias, according to which we tend to judge the self more positively than we judge other people.[25]

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[22] Conty, Tijus, Hugueville, Coelho and George 2006, 529-545.

[23] Folgerø, Hodne, Johansson, Andresen, Sætren, Specht and Reber 2016.

[24] The respondents were 36 females and 16 males in the first experiment, and 39 females and 10 males in the second. Most of them were students from a Norwegian university.

[25] Lobmaier and Perrett 2011.

From this and similar studies it appears that the positive evaluation of direct faces must be connected to the fact they are related to – and in a certain sense indetified with – the spectator. This also seems to be the conclusion of a study by Jackson, Hester and Gray on how American Christians visualize the face of God. Overall, Americans see God as a man of quite young age and of Caucasian origin, but perceptions vary according to the persons' background and political convictions. Liberals see God as gentle and loving, even feminine, and sometimes African American, while he to conservatives is older, more powerful and severe. "All participants see God as similar to themselves on attractiveness, age, and, to a lesser extent, race".[26]

In the study of Jackson et al. participants were confronted with a frontal view of the face, but as the above examples demonstrate, our perception of the face depends on whether the target is directed towards us or not. Recent studies by Kobayashi and Koshima note that the accurate detection of gaze direction depends on the contrast between the dark iris and white sclera, which distinguishes the eyes of humans from other primates.[27] This enables humans to communicate with the eyes in a way that would be impossible for other species. Looking directly at other persons can signal care or the wish to communicate. It has been demonstrated that staring activates the social network that neuroscientists call the Theory of Mind (ToM)-network, which is the apparatus through which individuals analyse another person's intentions.[28]

Although shared attention is established by the joint effect of face and gaze direction, most studies focus mainly on the latter, the direction of the eyes. In contrast, the mentioned article by Folgerø et al. convincingly addresses how gaze and face direction work together in the transmission and perception of human emotions. It is important to emphasize the importance of *both* eye contact and head direction when we discuss face perception, since the *Holy Face* is defined as the frontal view of the head with eyes and face turned in the same direction. In fact, the *Holy Face* corresponds perfectly to the direct face/direct gaze alternative of the 'Effects'-test.

The *Man of Sorrows* will not fit quite as easily into a pre-defined category. In most paintings of this type Christ has averted face, and the gaze is often averted too, but not always. However, the fact that a pose that predominantly signals positive values is chosen systematically for one particular image of Christ which is explicitly associated with strength and confidence is striking. The similar results from tests using photographs and the test with paintings clearly indicate that the choice of pose for Christ in paintings that focus on his divine character has a cognitive basis.

This means that the preference for frontal face with direct gaze for the *Holy Face* aspect of Christ was, most likely, not determined by mere convention. Artists who obeyed the model of the *Holy Face* in their depictions of Christ, did not do this because it was a rule established by religious authority (although they may themselves have felt that this scheme represented a kind of canon). If this was the case (the model established by tradition), the types could just as well have been the opposite of what they actually are – the *Holy Face* being a depiction of an averted face and the *Man of Sorrows* direct. What the tests show is that the results from

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[26] Jackson, Hester, Gray 2018, 1.

[27] Kobayashi and Koshima 1997.

[28] Perrett and Emery 1994.

photography and the results from paintings are quite similar, and that, moreover, the pose typical of the *Holy Face* – Christ as God – is the one that gives highest score on positive values.

Conclusion

As we saw, Ringbom confirmed that the *Man of Sorrows*, even though it is a devotional image, can be perceived as part of a narrative. Historically, it derives from a larger Passion scene, of which it once constituted a minor detail. Divested of most elements that we usually consider as integral to the *Passion*, the *Man of Sorrows* maintains some of the qualities that we usually associate with a history scene due to the averted gaze of Christ that creates a focus for joint attention outside the picture frame, thus opening up a story that is not visible in its entirety to the spectator.

The *Holy Face* is in many ways the opposite of this. Here, we see no instruments of Passion and the facial expression is calm, gentle and controlled. Nevertheless, the meaning of this kind of image is not constituted by being antithetical to the *Man of Sorrows*; rather, its power is drawn from a different source, namely the psychological effect of the direct face-to-face confrontation. Empirical surveys demonstrate that the frontal view of the face is associated with positive values. This result is consistent with the oldest sources we have about the appearance of Jesus, namely that he has two completely different aspects, one human and one divine, and that the divine is associated with positive values. In this way the *Holy Face* functions as a devotional image without evoking feelings of compassion with Christ's passion.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that giving a full explanation to the question of how gaze and face direction in such an effective way can be linked to the notions of the sublime and noble in art, is outside the aims of this paper and the capacities of this author. While verbal language can provide us with concepts, images use impressions that trigger emotions. Language and vision are not equivalent. Although tests demonstrate that the full face view typical of holy portraits is associated with 'trust' and 'care', it would be too hasty to give them a final definition as referring 'holy' or 'divine'. While traditional art historical methods like iconography reach a limit where texts lack, cognitive approaches meet obstacles when responses to tests are interpreted in terms of concepts. However, what I believe to have demonstrated in this paper, is that methods usually not associated with humanistic research can work together with traditional approaches to elucidate how, in this case, relatively vague descriptions in textual sources regarding the look of the historical Christ, in art are transformed into strict rules.

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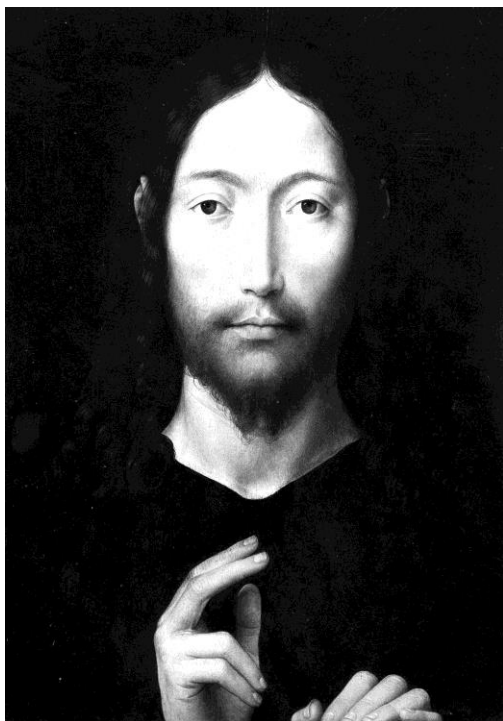Turner M. 2015: "Blending in the Evolution of Art", *AESBL journal* 11 (2), 39-41.

F<small>IG</small>. 1 – Hans Memling. *Holy Face.* Norton Simon museum, Pasadena.

F<small>IG</small>. 2 – Hans Memling. *Portrait of Maria Portinari*, Metropolitan museum, New York.