

## Council of Trent, Catholic Reformation, and impact on the arts

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) stated that religious figures were to be portrayed respectfully, with nobility, fully clothed, and absent of frivolous displays of emotion. The church, however, did not assiduously enforce the rules of the Council of Trent; the study of anatomy (meaning primarily the study of the nude) was an integral part of any artist's training, and could not be completely forbidden or done away with. To Michelangelo, as well as other Renaissance artists, the nude human form was the physical manifestation of God's holy will; men and women were created in the likeness of God, as proclaimed in the Bible. Even so, the church established an iconographical program for religious art that restricted depiction of the nude to the realm of antique mythology. A clear-cut separation between the religious and the profane was stressed. This program also placed new emphasis on Old Testament heroes (David, Judith), repentance (St. Paul), martyrdom (St. Peter), saintly visions/ecstasies (Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross), and the childhood of Christ.

Art in the 1500s/16th century was enlisted to fight heresy and show devotion to God using prescribed formulas. Protestants were smashing statues, slashing paintings, and burning crucifixes; their churches were whitewashed and devoid of decoration. In the face of such destruction, the Catholic church needed to preserve the sanctity of its images; these circumstances made them even dearer. The church was referred to as an "image of heaven on earth" and required decoration with what is most precious. Images of the Virgin had even been known to perform miracles.

The Council of Trent saw the potential of religious art as a support for religious teaching, and recommended that images:

- appear as clear, simple, and intelligible.
- show a realistic interpretation of a Biblical subject or story.
- appeal to the emotions as a way to stimulate piety, including the depiction of martyrdom, brutality, and horror as they existed, not in the idealized form of the Renaissance. Demands for realism were tempered by decorum, however, and the acceptable portrayal of religious figures often followed the example of tradition and previous works of art.
- do not inspire viewers to worship them! Protestants were accusing the Catholic church of idolatry; this is why they were destroying religious works of art. (Note: Martin Luther was against the destruction of images; his main complaint was that there was too much emphasis on saints; they should not be worshiped.) Obviously some changes had to be made; but the debate continues even today about whether art and artists were able to conform to the church's dictates.