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From *impietas insana* to *dulcissima pictura*: A Historical Analysis of Augustine of Hippo's Writings on Visual Art

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

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Introduction:

Augusitne of Hippo was born in Thagaste, North Africa, in 354, and died in 430 after serving as bishop of the North African city of Hippo Regius for thirty-five years. His writings bear invaluable witness to a tumultuous period of the Christian Roman empire, internally divided along ethinic, cultural, and religious lines, and externally beset by barbarian tribes. In 410 these barbarians sacked the eternal city itself, and eventually overwhelmed the empire's western provinces, including North Africa. In his last summer as bishop of Hippo Regius, Augustine would have heard the harmony of chanted psalms and prayers, but also the discordant noises of war and violence as his city was besieged by vandal forces.

Whether considered as one of the last great voices of ancient Rome or as a foundational mind of the nascent medieval culture, Augustine towers, in part because he was adept and eloquent in his writing and, as a bishop, he was necessarily embroiled in the social, political, and religious world of his time. Scholars have viewed this unique historical figure in a variety of ways, through theological, philosophical, literary, spiritual, political, even psychoanalytic lenses. Several notable scholars, including Karel Svoboda, Emmanuel Chapman, and Robert O'Connell, have paid attention to Augusitne's philosophical writings on beauty, both intelligible and sensible. These three scholars were some the first to identify and grapple with a number of passages in which Augustine writes directly concerning visual art. Being philosophers themselves, they established the trend of interpreting these passages in light of Augustine's metaphysics of beauty. Because of this trend in the scholarship, these passages have largely been divorced from their immediate historical social and religious contexts. In this Thesis, I aim to reorient this particular field of Augustine studies towards a historically grounded analysis of Augustine's texts on visual art by restoring them to their original historical contexts.

This Thesis is divided into three Chapters, the first of which is an analysis of the major scholarship on Augustine's writings on visual art. This first Chapter identifies and analyzes two major errors made in the scholarship of Karel Svoboda, Emmanuel Chapman, and Robert O'Connell. The first of these errors is the linking of Augustine's writings on visual art in their essence to his metaphysics of beauty, an error which ultimately divorces these passages from meaningful relation to their immediate historical, social and religious setting. The second error is the interpretation of these texts as indicating Augustine's personal opinion of visual art rather than as professional or official judgments made by a bishop of the Catholic Church directed towards a specific audience and anticipating a particular response.

The second Chapter presents a reconstruction of the relevant life experiences and cultural milieus which informed and provoked Augustine's writings on visual art. These include his early experience as a Manichee inductee, his adoption of Neoplatonism as a personal philosophy, his conversion to Christianity, baptism, forced-ordination, and elevation to the episcopacy. The Chapter also includes a discussion of the ambiguous relationship between fourth-century neo-paganism and Christianity. This ambiguity was exemplified in shared practices associated with the cult of the dead, such as the veneration of images. Such ambiguity was present within Augustine’s own congregation.

Having laid the foundation in Chapter 2 to better understand Augustine’s particular pronouncements on visual art and their relation to Late Antique culture, Chapter 3 presents a close analysis of these passages on art. Augustine’s treatment of visual art, like his treatment of scriptural interpretation, varied as his intended audience changed. As a bishop, he interacted with two quite different groups of Christians, those who were spiritually advanced and educated, as well as those who occupied a lower spiritual level. In his artistically concerned passages, Augustine made a two-fold epsicopal judgement of art. While he condemned the excess of visual art for its tendency to distract spiritually advanced Christians, he was tolerant of some, though by no means all, spiritual deficiencies in his congregation. The nature of this two-fold treatment of art will become apparent over the course of analysis in Chapter 3.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction:

The writings of Augustine of Hippo well deserve the extensive and diverse studies given to them.[1] The depth of thought and rhetorical power of his works were recognized during his lifetime, and no less in ours.[2] Augustine was an extremely prolific writer and not only a deep but also a broad thinker. Before his conversion to Christianity in treatises, soliloquies, and dialogues he considered learning and the liberal arts, as well as philosophical issues, such as the nature of the good life shared with like-minded friends.[3] After his conversion his new faith seems to have been his central concern, yet even so his writings exhibit an impressive range of ecclesiastical, spiritual, and theological subjects. Within just his theological writings can be found speculative concerns as in the *City of God*, which is both an apologetic work and a theology of history, and *De Trinitate*, an effort to gain some insight into the transcendent godhead. But Augustine's theology was not without its practical side, which is manifested in essays on moral topic such as lying, in treatises on subjects such as the proper treatment of the dead, and in his many pastoral sermons and letters.[4] Visual art appears among the variety of subjects contained in his writings, though never in a single treatise or theory of art. Scholars of Augustine's theology and metaphysics have been eager to link these scattered passages on the visual arts to his theological and metaphysical thought, and even to Augustine's development as a man and a soul.

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[1] The diversity of scholarship on Augustine is truly remarkable, its breadth includes such disparate works as Ernest L. Fortin's *Political Idealism and Christianity in the Thought of St. Augustine*, Villanova, PA: Augustinian Institute, 1972, and C. Klegemann, "A Psychoanalytic Study of the Confessions of St. Augustine", *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, v, 1957, pp. 469-484, as well as the works of the three authors, Brown, Chapman, and O'Connell, whom I take up in this section.

[2] In 391 he was forcibly made a priest and given the role of preacher. He was also asked to preside over a number of Councils in North Africa. See Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. (University of California Press, 1975): 138-9, 141.

[3] See *De Musica*; *Soliloquies*.

The historical study of Augustine's 4th- and early 5th-century writings on art has, ironically, been hampered by those philosophical and theological considerations which Augustine himself promulgated. All too often, scholars have tied Augustine's writings on the visual arts primarily and directly to his metaphysical philosophy on beauty. In doing so, they dehistoricize these writings and fail to pay adequate attention to the social and religious realities and circumstances that helped to shape what Augustine wrote about the visual arts. The result is both a missed opportunity to understand Augustine's statements on this subject in their proper historical context, and a tendency to skew and prejudice our understanding of early medieval western views of the visual arts with the same ahistoricism with which Augustine's relation to the visual arts has been explained. This ahistoricism is found within the writings of Karel Svoboda, Emmanual Chapman, and Robert J. O'Connell, authors of the most prominent treatises on Augustine's relation to visual art.

These scholars are not only prone to dehistoricize Augustine's writings on visual art, but they also tend to ascribe too much of these writings to Augustine's own personal view without adequate evidence to make such an assumption. A cause of this second error may be that for generations and even centuries, the Augustine presented in the *Confessions* has induced readers to imagine that they have become familiar with the psyche, character, and even taste of the Augustine who wrote the *Confessions*. Be that as it may, these two errors are as old and established as this line of inquiry itself, for they were introduced in Svoboda's treatise *L'esthetique de saint Augustin et ses sources* and pervade the later works of Chapman and O'Connell.

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[4] See *De Civitate Dei*; *De Trinitate*; *On Lying*; *On Care to be had for the Dead; Sermones; Epistles*.

Svoboda:

In 1933 Karel Svoboda published the first major study of Augustine of Hippo's aesthetics. Svoboda traces Augustine's aesthetic opinions chronologically through his writings, both existing and lost, as with *De Pulchro et Apto* (c. 380), Augustine's first written work. His thesis is that Augustine's aesthetic philosophy was gradually spiritualized over the course of his life.[5] Svoboda sees this de-senualization of Augustine's aesthetics as the direct result of his increased acceptance of Christianity's anti-materialist doctrine.[6]

Svoboda's treatise is made up of a temporally guided analysis of Augustine's writings, systematically expounding each of their ancient philosophical sources and their contributions to Augustine’s metaphysics of aesthetics.[7] In this analysis, Svoboda is unabashed in directly linking Augustine’s writings on the arts to his philosophy of aesthetics, stating already in his Introduction, “Le sentiment de la beauté des arts était également vif chez Augustin.”[8] This is the first error in addressing these texts which Svoboda makes, i.e. linking Augustine’s writings on visual art in their essence to his metaphysics of beauty and so divorcing them from meaningful relation to their immediate historical, social and religious setting. Though not wholly devoid of considerations of wider religious and social forces, such as the early Christian debates concerning artistic images and idols, Svoboda does not make such historical considerations the grounding for his study. Instead, he interprets these passages on visual art as primarily related to Augustine’s metaphysics of beauty.

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[5] Svoboda, Karel. *L'esthetique de Saint Augustin et Ses Sources*. (Spisy Filosofické fakulty Masarykovy university v Brně = Opera Facultatis Philosophicae Universitatis Masarykianae Brunensis; č. 35, 1933): 195-196.

[6] Svoboda, *L'esthetique de Saint Augustin*, 196.

We find examples of this attitude throughout the treatise, but for our purposes here, one example will suffice to illustrate this error.[9] Svoboda, while discussing the aesthetic and artistic implications of Augustine’s *Contra Faustum* XXII 17, writes “Si Augustin rattache les tableaux au culte des morts et ce culte à la vénération des démons, on ne s'étonnera pas qu'il se montre ennemi de tous les tableaux.”[10] His remark here, regarding the cult of the dead, is to be commended; however, he passes over this essential historical influence on Augustine’s writings all too quickly. While Svoboda is evidently aware of wider social and religious issues affecting Augustine’s writings, this treatise presents such issues as side/afterthoughts, not holding much weight. This error stems from Svoboda’s wish to read an aesthetic system in Augustine’s writings which is complete and self-contained and which includes Augustine’s writings on art as an essential part.[11] However, this wish is both chimeric and anachronistic; Augustine himself never wrote a treatise on aesthetics, let alone art, and the science of aesthetics itself, as well as the assumption that pre-modern visual art must exemplify beauty, is a modern, humanist construction.

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[7] Svoboda, *L’esthetique de Saint Augustin*, 9.

[8] Svoboda, *L’esthetique de Saint Augustin*,4. Svoboda takes art to mean not the fine arts and crafts as well as the liberal arts and practical skills such as medicine and farming, all of which he considers connected to Augustine’s metaphysics of beauty.

[9] For other instances of this attitude, see Svoboda, *L’esthetique de Saint Augustin*, 116, 120 124.

[10] Svoboda, *L’esthetique de Saint Augustin*, 138.

The second error Svoboda makes, which also pervades the subsequent scholarship, is his tendency to interpret Augustine’s writings on art in a personal rather than a professional or vocational light. It is a tribute to Augustine's power of rhetoric that he has made so many moderns feel that they know him. Svoboda is an excellent example of how tempting a trap Augustine’s strong, unique voice can be. At the first of his treatise, Svoboda already directs our attention not to Augustine’s writing or words but to his character, “très impressionnable, passionné,” which Svoboda says inclined Augustine towards aesthetics.[12] Our author goes on to say “Le sentiment de la beauté des arts était également vif chez Augustin,” directly linking Augustine’s aesthetic opinion and the arts. Here and later in the work, Svoboda seems to treat all of Augustine’s writings as indications of his personal views, only giving slight nods to Augustine's greater social and religious concerns.[13] This mistake is understandable in the case of the *Confessions* because Augustine's tone in this work is heavily personal and even proto-autobiographical. However, to read the *Confessions* as a diary rather than a carefully crafted manuscript with a specific audience in mind is irresponsible scholarship. Svoboda has not taken into proper account the offices and vocations which Augustine held and which motivated him to write about the visual arts. If Svoboda had done so, he would not have ascribed these passages to Augustine's personal view and would have avoided a scholarly action inadmissible given the lack of evidence to indicate Augustine's personal opinion of art.

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[11] For other instances of this, see Svoboda, *L’esthetique de Saint Augustin*, 124, 116.

[12] Svoboda, *L’esthetique de Saint Augustin*, 3.

Chapman:

After Svoboda, Emmanuel Chapman was the next scholar to attempt a major reconstruction of Augustine's aesthetic philosophy. In contrast to Svoboda's temporally guided analysis of Augustine's aesthetic evolution, Chapman's *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty* (1939) rejects the idea of any development in Augustine's aesthetic philosophy and instead takes all Augustine's works to be parts of one aesthetic philosophy. As Chapman announces in his Introduction, his aim in this treatise is to gather and re-articulate Augustine's response to the question he posed in the *Confessions*, "What, then, is the beautiful, and what is beauty?"[14] Chapman's work is not a systematic analysis of Augustine's writings but instead an articulation of Chapman's understanding of them, uninterrupted by direct references to specific works, except in the form of endnotes. Nevertheless, the first four Chapters are admirable in their comprehensive treatment of so vast and diffuse a subject; Chapman has had to mine many works of Augustine in order to write with such clarity.

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[13] Svoboda, on 116, makes direct comment on Augustine's personal opion of art, "Augustin n'a pas eu d'égards pour l'ingénieuse apologie de l'art par Plotin et il a penché pour Platon, ou mieux encore pour l'opinion vulgaire suivant laquelle l'artiste ne fait qu'imiter, la nature étant d'une plus grande valeur que son imitation." And again on 120, "On voit donc, une fois de plus, qu'il n'estime pas beaucoup les arts plastiques."

His first Chapter discusses the minimum conditions required for an aesthetic experience in Augustine's philosophy.[15] By citing Augustine's own distinction, in *On Christian Doctrine*, between enjoyment and use, Chapman states, as a firm foundation for his reconstruction of Augustine's philosophy of beauty, that "unless a thing is enjoyed for its own sake and for no other reason, it cannot enter into the aesthetic experience."[16] Chapman goes on to say that not all enjoyment or pleasure constitutes the aesthetic experience, but that delight which pertains to the whole man, body and soul, senses and reason.[17]

In the second Chapter, Chapman explains Augustine's view of the components of beauty, or the "constituents of the aesthetic object," which are number, form, unity, and order.[18] This Chapter becomes crucial for his Afterward, wherein he applies these aesthetic constituents to the development of modern painting. His third Chapter draws together the first two and attempts to articulate the nature of beauty according to Augustine's philosophy.[19] Chapman draws our attention to God, the perfect Unity, as Augustine's highest beauty by an ascent through explanations of the beauty found in material bodies and the beauty found in the soul, both of which are identified with unity or wholeness.[20] Turning from the experience of beauty to the judgement of beauty, the third Chapter establishes that the human mind "judges the beauty of all things according to an invariable law" established by God.[21] At the end of this Chapter, Chapman seems eager to introduce visual art as an example of the sort of beautiful object Augustine has in mind.[22]

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[14] Chapman, Emmanuel. *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*. (New York, London, Sheed & Ward, 1939): xxi.

[15] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 1.

[16] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 2; *De Doctrina Christiana*, I, 3, 3.

[17] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 4-7.

In his last Chapter, titled "The Meaning of Art," Chapman follows Svoboda's error in directly linking Augustine's writings on art to his metaphysics of beauty.[23] This Chapter involves far more extrapolation than the previous four. Firstly, the term "art" is left ambiguous, perhaps to allow a synthesis of Augustine's writings on the liberal arts, such as music and theology, and his statements about the visual arts and crafts.[24] Chapman spends many pages on reconstructing Augustine's (Aristotelian) view of the relation between an artist and his product. Chapman writes, "What is realized exteriorly in the pleasing work is first seen interiorly by the artisan in his art."[25] Under this premise, the Chapter then focuses on the intellectual activities of the artist and the necessity of divine illumination in the creation of art.[26] Art, then, is born of the divine illumination of both noetic order and action.[27] Art is understood as the divine illumination in the mind of the proper "regulation of the mind by the creative rules of the work to be made."[28]

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[18] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 13, 26, 29, 38. Chapman even attempts an afterword titled "Modern Painting in the Light of the Augustinian Aesthetic."

[19] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 45.

[20] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 45-55.

[21] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 63.

[22] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 66.

[23] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 67.

In the middle of his fifth Chapter, Chapman considers the meaning of Christian art and the Christian artist. The Christian artist is one who recognizes the divine illumination necessary for his art and seeks to imitate the Art or Word of God and, further, to purify his soul so as to be a fit recipient of greater illumination.[29] He ends this Chapter with a consideration of morality and art, where he concludes that art is dependent on possessing virtue so that the soul of the artist may be beautiful itself and thus engender, in the material world, its own reflection of the Divine Image in art.[30]

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[24] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 11, nt 4.

[25] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 70-71.

[26] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 73.

[27] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 75.

[28] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 75.

[29] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 78.

[30] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 79.

Chapman makes an interesting conclusion to his work in his Afterward, titled "Modern Painting in Light of the Augustine Aesthetics." He writes that the Post-Impressionist painters gave artistic expression to Augustine's theory of art and beauty. He sees a congruence between Modernist painters and Augustine, both hold that "works of art are concrete objects which focus the formal aesthetic constituents that shine out in beauty," by which he means number, form, unity, and order.[31] He then traces (roughly) Modern art's expression of Augustine's aesthetic constituents, and also the failure to express these constituents in the post-Cézanne painters. He ends with a glance to contemporary art and his hope that "these fecund Augustinian principles… will inspire many future realizations of beauty."[32]

Chapman echoes his larger work in a later article, "Some Aspects of St. Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty," stating there that Augustine's "concepts [of beauty] never hardened into fixed meanings which remained constant throughout his writings, but were more like seminal ideas which unfolded on different levels of inquiry, not only the philosophical and the psychological, but the theological and mystical."[33] This quote expresses Chapman's chief concerns in both this article and his longer treatise, namely, to gather Augustine's aesthetic theory from his writings and expound upon it in philosophical, psychological, theological, and mystical terms. This quote shows that Chapman has followed Svoboda in his two errors.

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[31] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 86.

[32] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 90.

[33] Chapman, Emmanuel. "Some Aspects of St. Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 1, no. 1 (1941): 46-51.

Even more than Svoboda, Chapman is unconcerned with 4th- and early 5th-century issues surrounding Christian artistic imagery, and the influence these issues had on Augustine's writings. Chapman is given to bold and historically ungrounded extrapolations, such as "[t]he contemplation of beautiful works of art is not a frivolous distraction nor the satisfaction of vain curiosity."[34] This flies in the face of Augustine's concern with the growing cult of the dead and its borderline idolatrous images.[35] The temptation, especially for a philosopher, as Chapman is, to read all writings of Augustine as parts of a unified metaphysical system is understandable. However, as we saw with Svoboda, when such scholars primarily interpret these writings on visual art under a metaphysical framework, valuable insights into numerous historical social and religious issues are lost.

Similarly, Chapman is too inclined, like Svoboda, to ascribe all of Augustine's writings to his personal opinion. He does not take into account the various offices and vocations which directly motivated Augustine's writings, especially those on the visual arts. For example, Chapman extrapolates from a passage in *The City of God*, wherein Augustine uses sculpture as a metaphor to explain the glorified bodies at the general resurrection, that Augustine is of the opinion that meditation on mysteries of the Faith will reveal hidden depths to the visual arts.[36] Chapman does not consider that this metaphor is more indicative of the audience which Augustine had in mind while writing his *City of God* than his own personal opinion of sculpture. This passage certainly should not be interpreted to mean, as Chapman would have it, that Augustine considers visual art to be "the highest natural likeness of activity of God" or that "matter is redeemed" by the work of the artist and "lifted up to a higher existence."[37]

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[34] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 75.

[35] See *De Moribus Ecclesiae* I:75; *Epistula* 102, 18-19.

O'Connell:

While Chapman's work considers Augustine solely under the label of aesthete, O'Connell, in *Art and the Christian Intelligence in Saint Augustine* (1978), sees not only merit but necessity in regarding Augustine as "both artist and aesthete."[38] O'Connell, the most recent of these three authors, is well aware of the efforts of Svoboda and Chapman before him. He announces his divergence from these two scholars in his Introduction, stating that Svoboda erred in interpreting Augustine's writings on art as indicating a spiritualizing evolution, and that Chapman made the error of reading Augustine "through the spectacles of a developed neo-Thomism."[39] By contrast, O'Connell's own reading of Augustine's writings on art is that they gradually gained a more "sacramental" view of the world as he (Augustine) came more and more to embrace the doctrine of the Incarnation or God's presence in the sensible realm.[40] What is at stake for O'Connell is placing this Doctor of the Church on a definite side of the tension between two opposed inclinations, one regarding Christianity as "world-negating asceticism" and the other regarding it as deepening the believer's "appreciation of the world" born out of an understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation.[41]

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[36] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 77; *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 19.

[37] Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 77.

[38] O'Connell, Robert J.. *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1978): 1.

[39] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 3-5.

O'Connell focuses his attention on two works, *De Musica* and the *Confessions*. Falling somewhere between Svoboda's temporal division and analysis of Augustine's works and Chapman's temporally-unconcerned compilation of them, O'Connell conducts an in-depth analysis of these two works and what they reveal about Augustine's changing attitude towards art and aesthetics.

Along with the gradual sacramentalizing of Augustine's aesthetics through a deepening understanding of the Incarnation, the other central argument of O'Connell's work is an exposition of the apparent tension in Augustine's attitude towards art. Augustine condemns the seductive nature of art but also produces the *Confessions*, which are an artistic and rhetorical masterpiece.[42] Distinguishing between theory and practice of art as perhaps indicative of different nuances within Augustine's relationship with art, O'Connell writes,

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[40] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 3.

[41] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 3.

[42] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 116.

> "... the *Confessions* is an undeniably great work of art. As such, it invites another mode of treatment. For as a work of art it may reveal -- or better, betray -- a deeper message about his experience of art, about his practice of art, than Augustine's theoretical understanding might comfortably have countenanced. The theory of art *in* the *Confessions may* be one thing; it is time to ask whether the artistry *of* the *Confessions* may not point toward an entirely different set of possibilities about art, and its relationship to Augustine's deepest understanding of human existence."[43]

This argument, articulated in the fifth and sixth chapters, hinges on an understanding of the term art which includes not just poetry and what today are called the fine arts, but also the liberal arts as well as practical skills, such as medicine. At the beginning of his treatise, O'Connell makes clear the distinction between the premodern notion of the *ars* or *artes* and modern notions of the fine arts. He warns against anachronistically reading Augustine's works, writing, "the twentieth-century reader must beware of thinking that each time the terms *ars* or *artes* appear, they serve to designate what current usage would refer to as the (fine) arts."[44] O'Connell also explains the three usages he has seen of these terms in Augustine's writings, (a) to designate a skill or "know-how," (b) to designate the liberal arts, and (c) to designate "Divine Artistry" or a Christianized concept of the Neoplatonic Forms which are the exemplar cause of all human art.[45] O'Connell's historical and textual awareness is commendable and useful, but proves unhelpful as far as Augustine's writings on the visual arts are concerned.

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[43] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 117.

[44] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 30.

[45] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 30-31.

O'Connell, in his seventh Chapter, "Augustine's Later Aesthetics," says of the plastic arts, "[Augustine's] remarks on painting and sculpture are, despite Svoboda's heroics on both counts, so sparse and elusive as to tell us almost nothing of his opinion of them as art forms."[46] This despair of saying anything definite on Augustine's views of the visual arts is born of the two errors which Svoboda and Chapman also exhibited. Despite his emphasis on the differences between his work and those of Svoboda and Chapman, O'Connell also tends to dehistoricize Augustine's writings on visual art and interpret them in a personal rather than official or vocational light. O'Connell's abandonment of hope, quoted above, stems from these two errors.

O'Connell evidently has the sense to realize that Augustine's passages on visual art have little meaningful relation to any metaphysical theory of aesthetics that can be read from his writings. But this awareness leads him to despair of uncovering any meaning from these passages, when it instead should lead him to embrace a more historically grounded approach. By attempting to primarily interpret Augustine's writings on art as connected to his personal metaphysics of beauty, O'Connell divorces them from meaningful relation to 4th-century social and religious concerns regarding artistic images. [47] By divorcing these texts from their relation to wider social and religious issues,

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[46] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 133.

[47] For instance, O'Connell is aware of Augustine's distinction between the spiritually elite and the spiritually non-elite, the former, with their "sensist" and "carnal" thinking, require more earthly images than the later. However, he never links this to Augustine's role as bishop, spiritual leader of a congregation. See O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 105.

O'Connell not only loses historical richness but also separates Augustine's writings on visual art from a sphere of meaning to which they most certainly belong.

Part of the explanation for O'Connell's apparent oversight of the historical significance of these passages stems from his tendency to take an over-familiar tone when writing on Augustine. O'Connell takes Augustine's *Confessions*, which we have already identified as misleading in its personal style and tone, as a "touchstone" for his theory of art.[48] O'Connell's entire work reads as a highly personal portrait, seemingly laying bare Augustine's soul and accessing deeper levels of consciousness in this historical figure, but especially when analyzing the *Confessions*, O'Connell even tries to separate Augustine's intention from his subconscious additions in style, imagery, and substance.[49] He analyzes Augustine as one might a literary character, as is in keeping with his earlier work *Saint Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul* (1969). And from his wish to access Augustine's deeper consciousness and even his soul stems O'Connell's attempt to align Augustine's written works on the visual arts to his metaphysics of beauty rather than wider social and religious issues.

Conclusion:

Svoboda, Chapman, and O'Connell have each attempted to articulate their own conception of Augustine of Hippo's aesthetics or philosophy of beauty. Each has also attempted to include Augustine's few written passages on visual art within their reconstruction of his metaphysics of beauty. Though their treatises are not wholly devoid of a consideration of wider historical, social and religious issues concerning visual art, they each tend to make two errors. The first is in dehistoricizing Augustine's writings on visual art from their immediate historical milieu. Largely ignoring the social, institutional, and religio-cultural circumstances in which Augustine lived, and apparently little aware of Augustine's various roles, duties, and concerns at various times in his life, these authors instead attempt to interpret these passages primarily in relation to Augustine's metaphysics. Their second error, often tied closely to the first, is in their tendency to read Augustine's writings on art as indications of his personal opinion, psyche, and taste, and not as pronouncements motivated by his office or vocation and occasioned by particular situations and circumstances. These three authors have lost sight of the value in a historically grounded and psychologically distant approach exemplified by the writings of historians of late antique society and culture, especially Peter Brown.[50] In doing so, they have sacrificed not merely a historical richness but also the true sphere of historical meaning to which these passages on the visual arts belong.

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[48] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 93.

[49] O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 93.

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[50] See Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. University of California Press, 1975; Brown, Peter. *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Chapter 2: Relevant Historical Background

Early Life:

Augustine was born in the North African town of Thagaste, about 170 miles west of Carthage, in 354. His parents, Monica and Patricius, were members of the declining Thagaste provincial upper class.[51] Augustine would find himself in various multivalent social and religious contexts throughout his life, and his family home was no exception. Patricius was adamantly non-Christian for most of Augustine's early years, though he would later in life convert to the religion of his wife.[52] Monica, on the other hand, was an ardent Christian woman of Late Antique North Africa, superstitious and determined.[53] In this way, his early household was a reflection of the greater Late Antique milieu, which exhibited an often ambiguous synthesis of non-Christian and Christian cultural identities.

In the western provinces of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, characterizations such as "pagan" and "Christian" were often more rhetorical than realistic. At times, religio-political hostility among communities brought the difference between these two into sharp contrast, such as during the years soon after the sack of Rome in 410. And certainly the religious leaders of the Church attempted to articulate in sermons, letters, and treatises what they saw as an essential difference between Christian and non-Christian.[54] But for the most part, such clear distinctions were projections of an ideal rather than a description of the real religious divides. Christian and neo-pagan communities often had an ambiguous relationship, sharing some practices such as graveside feasting and the veneration of images of the dead.[55] These social and religious practices were ingrained in the Late Antique, Roman culture, as was the political practice of demonstrating loyalty to the Emperor through cult ceremonies.[56] Even the earliest Christian art ambiguously borrowed indigenous pagan themes and motifs, such as the good shepherd (Figure 1) and fish with loaves of bread (Figure 2).[57]

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[51] Brown, Peter Robert Lamont. *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014): 151.

[52] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 30-31.

[53] "The religion of the Christians in Africa, was also drastic. Ecstatic experiences were sought by drunkenness, chanting and wild dances. Alcoholism, indeed, was widespread in the African congregations. Dreams and trances were common: simple peasants would lie for days in a coma; and Monica, as we have seen, placed great reliance on her dreams…" Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 33.

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[54] See Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*.

[55] *De Moribus Ecclesiae*, I:75; Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 26.

[56] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 103.

[57] We know of no distinctively Christian art before 200, and those early 3rd century Christians who did leave art chose to adapt indegenous Greco-Roman iconography in order to assert their Christian identity through visual, material culture. The birth of Christian art came about through the burial of Christian dead in the catacombs of Callixtus (c.216-222), a site of underground burial chambers southeast of Rome. The frescoes painted on the chamber walls feature decorative, symbolic, as well as biblical images, such as the Good Shepherd (Figure 1), fish and loaves of bread (Figure 2), and Jonah and the whale (Figure 3). These frescoes are notable in their aniconic tendency, their exclusion of any direct depiction of the Christian deity. This aniconism stems from a fraught relationship with paganism, an adherence to the Judaic second commandment which forbids idols, and the theological debates concerning the material depiction of an immaterial, invisible God. For this reason, early Christian artworks convey the image of the Christian God through allegory, allusion, and symbol, as the fish and loaves of bread are symbolic of the eucharist, as well as an allusion to the biblical multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and the Good Shepherd is an allegory of Christ. See Finney, Paul Corby. *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 131, 146, 186-187.

And yet both of these images, fish with loaves of bread and the Good Shepherd, were taken directly from pagan decoration and iconography, displaying a fraught and ambiguous relationship between indigenous pagan art and early Christian art. In fact, most of these earliest Christian works of art are indistinguishable from contemporary pagan frescos in their subject matter and artistic execution. Even the seemingly distinct Christian images in the catacombs are often stylistically derived from pagan prototypes, such as the pose of Jonah, which was lifted from the type of Endymion (Figure 4). However, these pagan images and styles take on new Christian symbolism through their inclusion within Christian burial chambers; these images were opened up to Christian interpretation through their juxtaposition with

Augustine experienced this ambiguous relationship between non-Christian and Christian cultures throughout his life and from multiple perspectives, as a Manichee Hearer, as a Neoplatonic Christian, as a priest, and finally as a Bishop. Augustine's later writings were informed by his varied life experiences, as well as the cultural milieu in which they took root. In his treatises, he was able to draw from personal experience when writing of the Manichee hostility to the Christian faith. In the aftermath of the sack of Rome, he was able to answer neo-pagans in the language of their own Roman tradition when accusations were made against Christian neglect of the pagan gods as having precipitated the sack of Rome. To understand the full meaning of his writings on the visual arts, it is necessary to reconstruct the relevant life experiences and cultural milieu which informed and provoked these writings.

Manichaeism:

Always a person of a notably serious character even as a young man, in 373 at the age of 19 Augustine went through an intellectual "conversion" to philosophy, or the search for classical Wisdom, after reading Cicero's *Hortensius*.[58] Augustine was at this

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Christian tombs. This grafting of Christian meaning onto pagan imagery reflects the absence of determinate Christian doctrine regarding art in those early generations, but also likely resulted from the limited artistic languages available to early Christians, and the likely practice of hiring of pagan artists to decorate Christian tombs. See Finney, *The Invisible God*, 146, 187-8, 190, 206. See also Grabar, André. *Early Christian Art; From the Rise of Christianity to the Death of Theodosius*. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1969): 26-27 for a discussion of the possible ambivalence of the early Christian clergy to iconography in burial chambers.

[58] *Confessions*, III, iv (7-8); Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo*, 39-40; O'Meara, J. *The Young Augustine* (London: Longmans, 1954), 58.

Augusitne was characterized, by a one-time fellow Manichee, as "one who loved lofty things, things that shunned the earth, that sought out heaven, that mortified the body, that set the soul alive."Letter time in school at Carthage.[59] He was in training to become a cultivated man of letters, and was already an admirer and imitator of the classical authors.[60] He was moved to tears by Virgil's poetry, an act for which he would later rebuke himself.[61] His search for that classical and ancient Wisdom culminated in his conversion to the Manichee religion.[62]

Manichaeism, in Late Antiquity, was a radical, gnostic religion, a branch of Christianity heretical to orthodox Christian teaching. Its founder and principal martyr Mani (executed by the Persian government c.276 CE) was a visionary called "The Apostle of Jesus Christ."[63] Mani's teaching combined the doctrines of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Chrisitanity.[64] One of the most characteristic tenets of this faith was the dualism between good and evil. In answer to questions on the existence of evil, which they could not admit as proceeding from the principle of good (i.e. from God), the Manichees professed a "Kingdom of Darkness" alongside the "Kingdom of Light."[65]

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written by a fellow Manichee later in life. v. Esp. *C. Faust.* XXI, 1 and 3.; quoted on Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 50.

[59] *Confessions*, III, i (1); Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 38.

[60] *Confessions*, I. xiii (20-21).

[61] *Confessions*, I. xiii (20-21).

[62] *Confessions*, III. vi (10); Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 40; 43-44.

[63] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 44.

[64] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 44-45.

[65] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 47.

They held that a principle of evil existed separate from but equally powerful, coexistent, and coeternal with the principle good.[66]

They believed this dualistic world-system was manifest in the microcosm of the struggle in each man between his flesh and his spirit.[67] Further, this internal struggle was also believed to be reflected outward onto visible reality.[68] The Manichees posited a connection of self to the visible world which was unparalleled even by the pagan religions. They regarded the visible world as a direct reflection of the perfection and evil within themselves; the visible world became to them a literal externalization of inner spiritual conflict, not just an image but an effect of the battling forces of Light and Darkness within each Manichee's soul.[69]

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[66] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 47; O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 69.

[67] Though such dualism, between flesh and spirit, is made more opaque by the Manichee belief that spirit was in fact just a rarified form of matter. See Gilson, Etienne and trans. Lynch, L.. *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*. (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1967): 228. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 85. Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 10.

[68] O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 74.

[69] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 56-57.

Unlike the Neoplatonists, the Manichees held that though the principle of visible reality was rooted in the spiritual struggle of the Kingdoms of Light and Darkness, still visible reality is not to be regarded as a falling away from that spiritual struggle but a reiteration of it. Physical substance is not less real than spirit, for spirit itself was only a rarified form of material and even the great Maichee deity was a corporeal being. Whereas, the Neoplatonists regarded sensible, corporeal reality as a falling away from the intelligible Forms of the One and, therefore, necessarily of less value and containing less reality. See *Saint Augustine, Confessions*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick, (Oxford 1991), 67 n.28; Gilson, Etienne and trans. Lynch, L.. *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 228. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 85. Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 10.

The Manichees were persecuted for their beliefs in much of the West; their missionary efforts were far more successful in the East, extending even into China.[70] Augustine's writings on his early attraction for and induction into Manichaeism, as well as his later episcopal writings against it, serve as primary sources for the study of this religion.[71] It appears that what drew the young Augustine most to Manichaeism was its promise of a religion based purely on logic and rational thought. The Manichees claimed that their doctrine was opposed to the blind faith and irrationality of the Christian religion.[72] They took issue with many Christian teachings, notably arguing against passages of the Old Testament which appeared to them inconsistent or unintelligible, such as the two different accounts of creation in Genesis.[73] Such criticisms of Scripture apparently resounded with the young scholar Augustine and he converted to the Manichee religion around 373 while a student of the classics in Carthage.[74]

While criticizing some orthodox Christian scriptural interpretation and teaching, the Manichees did not sever themselves entirely from Christianity, but adopted and altered Chrisitan doctrine as they saw fit.[75] However much Augustine would later set Manichaeism in stark contrast to Christianity, part of the reason for his early attraction to this religion appears to have been its similarities to Late Antique North African Christianity. Peter Brown writes, “to become a Manichee was by no means to cease to be a Christian.”[76] Radical ascetic branches of Christianity were by no means uncommon in the Mediterranean world at this time.[77] The Manichees proclaimed themselves Christians, adopting the Bible as their holy writings, alongside the works of Mani.[78]

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[70] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 46; van Oort, Johannes. "The Young Augustine's Knowledge of Manichaeism: An Analysis of the 'Confessiones' and Some Other Relevant Texts." *Vigiliae Christianae* 62, no. 5 (2008), 443-444.

[71] van Oort, "The Young Augustine's Knowledge of Manichaeism," 443-444.

[72] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 48; O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 63.

[73] O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 69.

[74] O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 64-69. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 53.

As a Bishop he would return directly to these Manichaen arguments against the Old Testament, as in his *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees* and his *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*.

This likely made Augustine all the more comfortable with this religion, which he took up as a Hearer (a Manichee inductee) for nearly a decade of his life, absorbing their teaching from countless written and oral sources.[79] Johannes van Oort even believes Augustine’s language in the *Confessions* indicates his familiarity with and the existence in the West of the famous Manichee “Picture Book,” *Ardahang* in Persian, an illustrated pedagogical work conveying Manichee doctrine through images.[80]

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[75] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 52-54.

[76] Brown, *Eye of a Needle*, 158.

[77] Brown, *Eye of a Needle*, 158.

[78] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 47, 54, 56.

[79] *Confessions*, IV. i (1).

Augustine’s choice of the Manichee religion over paganism stemmed from the ties Manichaeism had to Christianity, the prevalent religion in his family’s household and community. See Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 158.

[80] van Oort, “The Young Augustine's Knowledge of Manichaeism,” 449-450.

For further reading on this, see Gulácsi, Zsuzsanna. *Mani’s Pictures: the Didactic Images of the Manichaeans from Sasanian Mesopotamia to Uygur Central Asia and Tang-Ming China* (Leiden, Boston; Brill, 2015). Also see van Oort, Johannes, Otto Wermelinger, and Gregor Wurst, eds. *Augustine and Manichaeism in the Latin West*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001). Also Coyle, John Kevin. *Manichaeism and Its Legacy* (Leiden, Boston; Brill, 2009).

Augustine was ultimately not satisfied with the Manichee religion. His frustration seems to have stemmed mainly from the lack of coherent explanations and logical arguments, even in his dialogues with prominent Manichee leaders such as Faustus of Milevis.[81] The Manichees had promised Augustine a religion based on reason over faith but they had failed to fulfill that promise for the now young teacher of the liberal arts and admirer of the classics.[82]

In the retrospective account provided in his *Confessions*, Augustine portrays his early induction into the Manichee religion as an intellectual impediment to his later acceptance of Catholic doctrines of the Incarnation and God's immateriality.[83] The Manichees held that their God was a material being, though of a more rarified material.[84] They considered Him to be present throughout the cosmos, permeating the universe like fluid through a sponge.[85]

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[81] *Confessions*, V. iii (3); Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 58.

[82] *Confessions*, III. vi (10); *Conf.* V. iii (3); Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 48; O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 63.

[83] "I loved beautiful things of a lower order, and I was going down to the depths. I used to say to my friends: 'Do we love anything except that which is beautiful?'… I wrote *On the Beautiful and the Fitting* in two or three books, I think… My mind moved within the confines of corporeal forms… I turned then to examine the nature of mind, but the false opinion which I held about spiritual entities did not allow me to perceive the truth. The truth with great force leapt to my eyes, but I used to turn away my agitated mind from incorporeal reality to lines and colours and physical magnitudes of vast size."*Confessions*, IV xiii (20) - xv (24); translation by Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, 64-67.

[84] Gilson, trans. Lynch, *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 228. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 85. Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 10.

[85] Gilson, trans. Lynch, *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 228; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 85; Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 10.

The true extent of Augustine's early adherence to the doctrine of the Manichees is an issue which has been subject to much scholarly debate. Hesitation to suggest that this Church Father was truly a gnostic heretic when younger has not been uncommon among scholars, and it is true that though Augustine's lifelong Neoplatonic character has been thoroughly investigated, the literature has generally shied away from spotting the influence of gnosticism in the Church Father's later, theological writings.[86] But the fact remains that for nearly ten years of his early intellectual development Augustine was imbibing the doctrines of the Manichees. As a Bishop he was even accused by the Donatists of never fully abandoning his Manichee beliefs.[87] Though the full extent of his heretical beliefs is still questionable, the importance of Manichaeism in moulding Augustine's early experiences and writings cannot be ignored.[88] Augustine's familiarity with the Manichee religion would also set him up well for his position of Bishop, in which role he not only wrote treatises against the Manichees but also entered into face-to-face debates with their prominent intellectual figures.[89]

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[86] The study of Augusitne's Neoplatonic influence is extensive and thorough. The research currently is lacking in more focused studies of the lifelong influence of gnostic doctrine on Augustine's thought and writings. Johannes van Oort has called attention to this gap in the scholarship, which he himself is seeking to correct. See van Oort, "The Young Augustine's Knowledge of Manichaeism," 442.

Among the prominent works on the Neoplatonic influence on Augustine's writings are Gilson, Etienne and trans. Lynch, L.. *The Christian Philosophy of St Augustine*, (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1967.); Dobell, Brian, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and R. O'Connell, *Saint Augustine's Platonism* (Philadelphia: Villanova University Press, 1984).

[87] O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 63.

[88] Johannes van Oort was one of the first scholars to bring this element of Augustine's thought into the scholarly foreground. See van Oort, Johannes. "The Young Augustine's Knowledge of Manichaeism: An Analysis of the 'Confessiones' and Some Other Relevant Texts." *Vigiliae Christianae* 62, no. 5 (2008). Also, van Oort, Johannes, Otto Wermelinger, and Gregor Wurst, eds. *Augustine and Manichaeism in the Latin West*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001). Peter Brown has also stated, "His religion inspired the first book he ever wrote." Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 59.

Neoplatonism & Conversion:

In 384, through Manichee friends, Augustine procured the prestigious position of professor of rhetoric at Milan.[90] There, the recently ex-Manichee agreed to become a catechumen of the Catholic Church under Ambrose, likely in 385.[91] This small step towards Catholicism, still far from a full conversion and baptism, was likely inspired by his mother's promptings as well as the culturally-dominant conviction that Wisdom was not to be found apart from Christ in some form.[92] However, the sermons of Ambrose, famed rhetor, likely also inclined Augustine to a favorable view of the Church. The Bishop's sermons spoke directly against Manichee attacks on Catholic doctrine and scriptural interpretation.[93] These sermons presented the Christian faith as logically defendable, internally consistent, and founded on reason as well as faith.[94]

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[89] See Augustine, *Contra Faustum* and *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees* and *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*.

[90] Augustine. *Confessions*, V. xiii (23). Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 9.

[91] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 81; *Conf.* V. xiv (25).

[92] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 81; Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 10.

[93] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 84.

[94] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 84.

Ambrose's sermons exhibited an anti-materialist doctrine which was radically other-worldly, similar only to that of the Platonists.[95] These sermons started to correct the young Augustine's faulty understanding of orthodox Christian doctrine, particularly his misconception of the Christian God's essence and the doctrine of the Incarnation. Augustine had, before this time, considered Christian belief in the Incarnation to bind God to the form of the human body.[96] In comparison to the crude materialism of this misconception, the more advanced materialism of the Manichees --which claimed that God was a rarified material being who permeated the universe like fluid through a sponge-- appeared more believable to the young Augustine.[97] His early acceptance of the Manichee doctrine made it at first difficult for him to fully conceive of Ambrose's teachings on God's immateriality.[98] Though Augustine was drawn to the Bishop as a learned source of accurate Christian doctrine, Ambrose was a busy man and had little time to spare for discussions with his catechumens.[99] Thus, Augustine was left to search for what other sources he could find which might help him understand these glimpses of

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[95] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 84-85.

Bishop Ambrose himself encouraged the veneration of the saintly relics of Gervasius and Protasius which he had unearthed, carried triumphantly to his newly finished basilica, and placed in a magnificent sarcophagus. See Ambrose, *Letters*, 22; also Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 82.

[96] *Confessions*, VII. xviii (24) - xix (25); Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 85.

[97] Gilson, trans. Lynch, *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 228; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 85; Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 10.

[98] Gilson, trans. Lynch, *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 228; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 86; Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 10.

[99] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 82. *Confessions*, VI. xi (19).

Wisdom he had gained from the Bishop's sermons. He would find this external source in the books of the Platonists.

In moving to Milan, Augustine entered a community on fire with what would later be called a Christianized Neoplatonism. The intellectuals of this city viewed the works of Plotinus as a synthesis of those of Plato and Aristotle; they also saw Plotinus' philosophy as embodied and fulfilled in the Chrisitan religion.[100] Milan was one among many intellectual centers of the western half of the declining Roman Empire which lacked a vocal community of pagan intellectuals or 'Hellenes', which were still present, though dwindling, in the eastern half.[101] In the third century, Plotinus and his pupil Porphyry were among that late strand of this culture, hostile to Christianity's rise, and instead worshiping the ancient philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.[102] But by the time of Augustine, a rising group of Christian intellectuals stood as the "unchallenged heirs" of the ancient philosophers, especially Plotinus, despite this philosopher's adamant hostility to Christianity.[103] The language, poetic imagery, and concepts exhibited in the writings of

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[100] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 93-94.

Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus were, historically, in literary (and physical, in the case of Plato and Aristotle) dialogue with one another, i.e. Aristotle with Plato, Plotinus with both. Augustine, by reading and drawing from the philosophies of all three, became one of the vehicles through which these prominent philosophers came to influence western european thought on visual art for centuries. The writings of each of these three thinkers present a complex and often messy philosophy. Often they disagree with and contradict one another. At times they even contradict themselves across different writings. Notwithstanding this, the Late Antique Milanese interpreted these philosophies as interconnected, seeing Plotinus as the synthesis of Plato and Aristotle. This interpretation is outlined below.

Augustine came to know the radical anti-materialist and other-worldly character of Plato's philosophy while in Milan. Seeking to understand, as the Pre-Socratics before him, the reason why there appears to be a multiplicity of similar things in the world, Plato (c. 428 - 348 BCE) posited what we now know as the Platonic Forms. These first principles of all earthly things exist in a super-sensible realm, understood or perceived only by the mind of a philosopher. See *Phaedrus*, 249e. The Forms are the first causes of and the truths behind the things of this earthly realm, which (earthly, sensible) things are merely shadows or reflections of those which they derive from, incomparable in being. Thus a multiplicity of sensible things is explained as illusory images that have fallen away or emanated from the true reality, which is the realm of undivided Forms existing separate from them. See *Republic*, Bk VII 514a to 517a.

Though incomparable to the reality of the Forms, sensible things are, however, not wholly devoid of reality, truth, or goodness. Because they derive from the Forms, the Forms emanate their goodness, truth, intelligibility, and beauty into the sensible things of this earthly realm; this path of descent the philosopher may then follow (intellectually) back to the truly real Forms. Plato's attitude towards the sensible world is herein conflicted. While it is only by moving through the sensible that the philosopher can reach a contemplation of the super-sensible (intelligible), Plato sees this passage through the world of sense as a necessary evil rather than a good in itself. The things of this realm are not *per se* but only *per accidens* good, true, and beautiful, and, therefore, are not worthy of contemplation except insofar as they are the only means to Plato's end of the contemplation of the Forms. See *Symposium*, 210a - 212c.

Aristotle (c. 384 - 322 BCE) rejected the Platonic Forms on the grounds that they do violence to nature, separating what he would call the material and formal aspects bound up within a sensible thing. See *Physics*, 194a1. He instead proposed that every sensible being has two aspects, material and formal, and that its existence comes about through the joining of these equally necessary components. For Aristotle, the multiplicity of similar sensible beings is explained through identical essences combining with different matter, giving rise to sensible particulars identical in essence yet distinct in existence. See *Physics*, 190b23. Never separating the essences of sensible particulars from the particulars themselves, Aristotle does not see sensible reality as a reflection or illusory image of something else existing outside it.

Known to us today as the leading Neoplatonist, Plotinus (203 - 270 CE) was far more richly eclectic in philosophies than this title implies. But in the Late Antique Milanese interpretation, he synthesized the teachings of Plato, the Stoics, Aristotle, the Pythagoreans, and many others. Though he drew from the entire wealth of the Greek philosophical tradition, Plotinus considered himself first and foremost a Platonist, primarily developing and drawing out the teachings of Plato, whom he held to be the greatest philosopher. And yet, his writings show the innovations which are distinctly Plotinian. His main innovations were gathering all the Platonic Forms into a unity, called the One by Plotinus, and laying out a doctrine of the descent of the soul into matter more determinately than Plato. Plotinus maintains with Plato that the One is the reality of which earthly things are diverse shadows or images. With this, Plotinus also still maintains that the emanation of the One into matter is an evil that must be overcome. From here he derives a more definite formula than Plato for the ascent of the soul, escaping out of matter, returning to the Forms or the One. *Enneads*, VI. 9. 2; V.1.8; III.6.7; I.6.7-9; I.6.8; II 4. 16, 3–8. See ed. Fitzgerald, Allan, ed. *Augustine Through the Ages: an Encyclopedia*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans. 1999): 654-658. See Gerson, Lloyd P. *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 17 -19.

[101] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 72, 77.

[102] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 72-3.

"The 'Hellenes' created the classical language of philosophy in the early Middle Ages, of which Christian, Jewish and Islamic thought, up to the twelfth century, are but derivative vernaculars. When the humanists of the Renaissance rediscovered Plato, what caught their enthusiasm was not the Plato of the modern classical scholar, but the living Plato of the religious thinkers of Late Antiquity." See Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity*. (London: Thames and Hudson LTD, 1971): 73.

[103] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 77.

the intellectual circles of Milan, even when speaking to the common people, as Ambrose did in his sermons, is an excellent example of this trend.[104]

Augustine's deep appreciation of ancient authors, such as Virgil and Cicero, went back to his youth, but he was not yet familiar with the tenets of Platonism. Still, he appears to have been intrigued by this Milanese attempt to reconcile the ancient philosophers with Christianity.[105] Ambrose himself was at home in this intellectual atmosphere. He often employed arguments from the ancients to defend or explain Christian doctrine.[106] In Milan, it was only a matter of time before Augustine, a tenacious young philosopher, would be led by his intellectual friends and acquaintances to the *libri Platonicorum*, books of the Platonists.[107]

In 386, perhaps during the summer, Augustine was introduced, by "a man puffed up with monstrous pride," to "some books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin."[108] These works, though unnamed in his *Confessions*, had profound effect on Augustine's writings.[109] For the next few years, Augustine gave himself over to the reading and study of these works.[110] Though exactly what these unnamed translations were is yet under debate, it is commonly accepted that Marius Victorinus' translations of Plotinus' *Enneads* (compiled by Porphyry) must have featured prominently in the collection.[111] The influence these works had on Augustine's intellectual development can hardly be overstated, and the degree to which he imbibed them shows throughout his writings. Peter Brown has noted that "it is possible to trace literal borrowings from Plotinus in the bishop's [Ambrose's] sermons. For Augustine, however, Plotinus and Porphyry are grafted almost imperceptibly into his writings as the ever present basis of his thought."[112] This young philosopher, who knew little to no Greek, became a master of Neoplatonism "with an originality and independence of mind unequalled in an age in which many far better educated men prided themselves on being 'Platonists'."[113]

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[104] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 85; 92-95.

[105] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 94.

[106] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 85; 92-94.

[107] *Confessions*, VII. ix (13).

[108] *Confessions*, VII. ix (13). *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick, (Oxford, 1991), 121.

[109] *Confessions*, VII. ix (13). Translation by Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, 121.

The Manichee religion, with its teachings on God's materiality, though an advanced materiality, could hardly have been characterized as spiritualism.[114] The works of the Platonists and their teachings of the Forms and the One, were Augustine's first introduction to a spiritual doctrine. Judging by his later reflections in the *Confessions*, it appears that in these works he "found the unchangeable and authentic eternity of truth to transcend [his] mutable mind," and that he came to a conceptualization of the Christian God through the works of the Platonists.[115] This realization was possible only because of the particular circumstances in which Augustine found himself at that time. In the intellectual atmosphere of Milan, it seemed not only justifiable but natural to interpret Platonism in a Christian way, an attitude to which Augustine's writings bear witness.[116]

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[110] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 95. On the note of how many *paucissimi libri* Platonists works really is, O'Connell speculates that Augustine's characterization of *paucissimi* can only be taken to mean his initial encounter with the works of the Platonists. Robert O'Connell suggests that we ought instead to understand that, after having read even just a few books, Augustine's heart was set on fire and he then sought out as many as he could find. O'Connell, *Saint Augustine's Platonism*, 23.

[111] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 94. Brown also suggests that a work of Porphyry featured in these works.

[112] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 95.

[113] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 95.

[114] Gilson, trans. Lynch. *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 230.

The Platonic teachings on the relation of the changing material realm to the unchanging spiritual realm, as well as the necessity of the soul's ascent back to the One, seem to have resonated particularly with Augustine. He writes in the *Confessions*, "[b]y the Platonic books, I was admonished to return into myself… I entered [my innermost citadel] and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind."[117] He tells us that through them he learned "to seek for immaterial truth."[118]

In 387, before the death of Monica that same year, Augustine was baptized into the Catholic faith.[119] As it is later related in his *Confessions*, he had undergone a conversion from a life of earthly enjoyment to a life of asceticism and theological contemplation spurred by his readings of the Neoplatonists and the Pauline epistles.[120] Augustine writes of his belief that God meant for him to read the works of the Neoplatonists in preparation for his conversion and subsequent deepening in faith. As Allan D. Fitzgerald writes in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, “Here, as elsewhere, it may be said that…Augustine could not have been a Christian philosopher without his Platonic schooling.”[121]

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[115] Augustine, *Confessions*, VII. xvi (22). Translation by Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, 127.

[116] And, vice versa, a Neoplatonic interpretation of Scripture and Christian doctrine was the norm among many Milanese intellectuals at this time.

[117] *Confessions*, VII. x (16). Translation by Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, 123.

[118] *Confessions*, VII. xx (26). Translation by Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, 129.

[119] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 124; 129.

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[120] *Confessions*, VII. xx (26); VIII. xii (29). Though it is important to remember that Augustine, now a Bishop, framed this account of his life with a specific audience and goal in mind.

[121] Ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, “Neoplatonism” in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 591. See also *Conf.* VII. xx (26).

However, the Bishop Augustine later wrote that though the books of the Platonists served him as a guide towards Christianity, they were also deceptive, feeding his pride and even leading him into heresy. Augustine writes later in life that the Platonic works did not convey a true understanding of Christ as mediator and redeemer but instead fed his pride. “I sought a way to obtain strength enough to enjoy you; but I did not find it until I embraced ‘the mediator between god and man, the man Christ Jesus’... To possess my God, the humble Jesus, I was not yet humble enough.”*Confessions*, VII. xviii (24), translation by Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, 128. See also Gilson, trans. Lynch. *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 227.

He also states that his early conception of Christianity, even at the time of his baptism, was heretical. In his *Confessions*, he characterizes his understanding of the Incarnation at this time as like that of Photinus. *Confessions*, VII. xix (25). Augustine writes, “I thought of Christ my Lord only as a man of excellent wisdom… But the mystery of the Word made flesh I had not begun to guess.” *Confessions*, VII. xix (25), translation by Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, 128. Augustine thus swung from one heretical extreme as a Manichee, believing that Christ only appeared to be human but was not actually bound by human form, to the opposite heretical extreme, that Christ, though unparalleled in his wisdom, was not God at all but merely a man. He reports that he came to such heresy partly through the books of the Platonist, “learning from them to seek for immaterial truth” but not learning the necessary humility of the Incarnation and Crucifixion. *Confessions*,VII xx (26). Translation by Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, 129. See Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 17. See also Gilson, trans. Lynch. *The Chrisitan Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 227.

The extent of his early heretical holdings has been the subject of much study and debate. Robert O’Connell is of the opinion that Augustine, though heretical to a certain degree in his early years as a Christian, still “Augustine’s presiding intention is from the first sincerely Christian.” Goulven Madec agrees and states that Augustine, from even this early stage, should be characterized as a “Neoplatonizing Christian” rather than a “Neoplatonic Christian.” He is also of the opinion that Augustine’s early heretical opinions did not last beyond his repeated and correcting interactions with Simplicianus. However, Brian Dovell defends the position that not until 395 will Augustine be able to distinguish from orthodox Catholic doctrine and the heresy of Photinus. See O’Connell, *Saint Augustine’s Platonism*, 6. See also Madec, Goulven. *Connaissance de dieu et action de grâces essai sur les citations de l'Ep. aux romains 1,18-25*

Platonism & Visual Art:

Among the issues which, in Augustine's writings, show the influence of these *libri Platonicorum*, are the issues surrounding visual art. The question of the nature of visual art and its proper place in society was important to the ancient philosophers. Their particular opinions on art were born out of their general philosophies on reality, the nature of being, human knowledge and action, and the diversity of things. Particularly influential on Augusitne's writings on art was the Platonic view of art as a doubly false image. This concept would influence the way in which Augustine eventually wrote on art, specifically art connected to the cult of the dead.[122]

Plato is famous for his condemnation of the falsity of art, which stems from his fraught relationship with sensible reality more generally.[123] Natural sensible things, such as beautiful people, are images of the Forms that can be traced back to their source and, hence, are our only means of reaching the Forms.[124] But, productions from visual artists are twice removed from the Forms. Visual art, in imitating the appearance of things, is an image of images of realities and thus "is at a far remove from reality."[125] Plato regards

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dans l'œuvre de saint Augustin. (1959): 282; 135-16. Also see Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*, 23.

[122] Augustine, *De Fide et Symbolo*, 7; *De Moribus Ecclesiae*, I:75.

[123] See ftnt 100 above.

[124] *Symposium*, 210a - 212c.

[125] *Republic*, Bk X, 598a-c; translation from Plato. *Republic, Volume II: Books 6-10.* Edited and translated by Christopher Emlyn-Jones, William Preddy. Loeb Classical Library 276. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, 403-404. See also *Republic*, Bk X, 605a.

painting and the other visual arts as, at best, a playful pastime, practiced without any serious purpose.[126] At worst, he sees them as dangerously deceptive, banning them and the other imitative arts from his invented Republic in the dialogue of that name.[127] This is due not just to their illusion or unreality, but also to their distracting, dangerous charm, pulling men away from the contemplation of the Forms by leading them deeper into a cave of shadows and darkness, images with no reality.[128]

However, this doctrine was tempered in the writings of Plotinus on visual art. At first glance Plotinus appears to agree with Plato in holding that visual art is "of later origin than soul; it is an imitator, producing dim and feeble copies -- toys, things of no great worth."[129] In his division of the arts, he calls "painting, sculpture, dancing, pantomimic gesturing… [all] earth-based," following sensible models, and states that "they cannot therefore be referred to that higher sphere except indirectly, through the Reason-Principle in humanity."[130]

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[126] *Politics*, 288c.

[127] *Republic*, Bk X, 595a; It should be noted here that not all art is banned from Plato's Republic. Music, though censored, is admitted into the Republic as it can be used to order the passions of the youth being educated (376e). This admittance of music is quite similar to Aristotle's view of art generally as useful in provoking catharsis and reminds us of Augustine's choice to write on music after his exposure to Neoplatonism.

[128] *Symposium*, 210a - 212c. *Republic*, Bk VII 514a - 517a.

Various historic as well as contemporary scholars have attempted to argue for an interpretation of Plato's writings less hostile to the visual arts. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) gives one of the earliest arguments in his "An Apologie for Poetrie," in which he points towards the paradox of Plato's verbal condemnation yet implicated praise of the arts, implicated in his frequent reference to them for metaphor. See Sidney, Philip, and Edward Arber. 1966. *An Apologie for Poetrie. 1595*. New York: AMS Press, 1966. For a defense of Plato's view of visual art as useful and good see Also Tate, J. "Imitation' in Plato's Republic," Classical Quarterly. vol. XXII (1928), 16-23, and Tate, J. "Plato and 'Imitation'," Classical Quarterly, vol. XXVI (1932), 161-6. Tate challenges the basic understanding of Plato's term "imitative" when applied to the arts. Tate posits that by imitative Plato does not mean representational but rather the product of an artist who has no scientific knowledge of the things he depicts. Similarly, See Charles Karellis' argument in "Plato on Art and Reality." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 3 (1976): 315-21. There Karelis challenges the two premises from which Plato argues to the danger of visual art, (a) that painters produce appearances of three-dimensional particulars and (b) that these appearances are two degrees removed from the reality of Forms. Karelis argues against both of these premises as false even in Plato's view. Similarly, George Kimball Plochmann, in "Plato, Visual Perception, and Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no. 2 (1976): 189-200, argues that Plato does not condemn all art but only that which does not rely on the intellect but instead seeks only to please the senses. But even he, Plochmann, ultimately admits that Plato does hold to the unreality of the imitative arts, even if that is not the main source of their danger. Though Erwin Panofsky was less concerned with justifying Plato's view of art, his work *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (originally published in 1924) was foundational for the modern application of Platonic philosophy to the study of art.

And yet, in *Ennead* V. 8.1 Plotinus contemplates a statue, not a portrait from life but a design from the artist's mind in imitation of nature. He praises the artist's ability to bestow beauty upon matter, writing, "Now it must be seen that the stone thus brought under the artist's hand to the beauty of form is beautiful not as stone --for so the crude block would be as pleasant-- but in virtue of the form or idea introduced by the art."[131]

Plotinus, in agreement with Plato, does admit that in the One's fall into matter, all qualities are diluted, so all beauty of visual art, in that it is sensible, is less beautiful than Beauty in the super-sensible realm.[132] And yet Plotinus goes on to say, in complete divergence from Plato's opinion of art, that

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[129] *Enneads*, IV. 3.10, translated by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page. Plotinus. in *The Six Enneads*. (London: P.L. Warner, published to The Medici Society, 1917-1930).

[130] Plotinus, *Enneads*, V. 9.11, translated by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page.

Still again he compares the lifelessness of a painting to the infinite separation between sensible things and the One, thus degrading the status of art due to its lifelessness. See *Ennead*, VI. 2.7 And elsewhere he similarly states, "Why are the most living portraits the most beautiful, even though the others happen to be more symmetric? Why is the living ugly more attractive than the sculptured handsome?" *Ennead*, VI. 7.22, translated by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page; this opposes Aristotle's claim in *Politica*, 1281b10 that art has the power to be more beautiful than reality.

[131] Translated by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page.

[132] *Ennead*, VI. 7.36; II 9.16.

> [the visual arts] give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Ideas from which Nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight.[133]

Plotinus places great power in the hands of visual artists, the power to convey in their art a vision of the essence of things, taken from the super-sensible realm. Indeed, Plotinus holds that beauties of this sensible reality can and do lead man back to the truest beauty of the One.[134] This would include the beauty of visual artworks, such as the statue of Zeus sculpted by Pheidias, a claim which Plato would never have admitted.[135]

Plotinus' aesthetics is "an aesthetics of flight," flight back to the realm of the One, but an aesthetics in which visual art is recognized as one valuable path of transcendence.[136] In this, the learned Milanese of Augustine's time would have seen Plotinus as synthesizing the philosophies of both Plato and Aristotle. He seems to hold with Plato that all natural things are images of the One, but his can also be interpreted as holding with Aristotle that the form which the artist imparts to matter can endow that matter with a sensible and intelligible articulation of beauty and truth, recalling the One to the spirit of the viewer.[137] Plotinus can thus be interpreted as synthesizing a Platonic doctrine of the Forms with an Aristotelian doctrine of material-formal dualism and artistic agency, at least to those Milanese Christian intellectuals.[138]

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[133] *Ennead*, V. 8.1, translated by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page.

[134] *Ennead*, II. 9.16.

[135] Plotinus also takes issue with Plato's generalization of likenesses, stating that there is, in fact, a great difference between a painting and a shadow or reflection in water. While the latter is dependent on the physical presence of the thing of which it is a likeness, the former, once produced, exists separate from its archetype, and so holds more reality. See *Ennead*, VI. 4.10. Further, Plotinus does not condemn the arts for their imitation of natural things, pointing out that natural things themselves are imitations of the true realities of the super-sensible realm, a point which Plato must concede. See *Ennead*, V. 8.1.

[136] Tatarkiewicz, Władysław, and Jean G. Harrell. 2016. *History of Aesthetics.* "Vol. I: Ancient Aesthetics," Chapter 12: "The Aesthetics of Plotinus," 323. Similarly H. M. Kallen writes, "[t]he Plotinian philosophy was utterly a philosophy of escape and salvation, of self- liberation from the world. It turned its back upon doing and the control of doing and sought beatitude in aesthetic contemplation." Kallen, H. M. *Art and Freedom* (New York, 1942), I, 78.

Like Plotinus, Augustine would eventually make a dual condemnation and admittance of visual art. But, unlike his Alexandrian ideal, Augustine was not a solitary philosopher separated from the social world.[139] On the contrary, he would become very much embroiled in the social, religious, and political world of Late Antiquity, and his particular pronouncement on art will depend greatly on his intended audience. These pronouncements were necessitated by his later role as Bishop of Hippo. His *Confessions* (written from 397 to 401) presents each of his life experiences, including his Manichee conversion, reading of the Neoplatonists, and conversion to Christianity, as part of a divine plan to bring him to that eclesiastical office.[140] It is certainly likely that Augustine's adoption of Neoplatonism in the intellectual circles of Milan pushed him towards a full conversion to the Christian Church.[141] Having converted, his ordination and elevation to the episcopacy soon followed. This elevation would spur him to write directly concerning visual art. When he does eventually write concerning visual art, the Neoplatonic philosophy which Augustine adopted in Milan would influence the language with which he attacked the practice of image-worship among his congregation.[142]

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[137] *Ennead*, II. 9. 16.

[138] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 93-94.

[139] On the necessity Augustine felt for holding teaching to be more proper to his office than philosophical contemplation of truth, see *De Civitate Dei*, XIX.41; *De quaestionibus Dulcitii*, III.6; and especially *Epistolae*, CXCIII, IV.13, where he writes,

"Ut ergo discamus, invitare nos debet suavitas veritatis; ut autem doceamus, cogere necessitas charitatis: ubi potius optandum est ut transeat ista necessitas qua hominem docet aliquid homo, ut simus omnes docibiles Dei; quamvis hoc simus, cum ea quae ad veram pietatem pertinent, discimus, etiam quando illa docere videtur homo."

[140] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 162.

Ordination & Eclesiastical Elevation:

Before his baptism, in 387, Augustine had held a prestigious position of professor of rhetoric in Milan, and his mother had arranged for his betrothal to a wealthy Christian heiress.[143] However, his baptism in 387 brought with it an upheaval of these plans. Instead of pursuing an academic career and his intended marriage, Augustine decided to retire from public life, with ideals of living as a hermit.[144] But upon returning to North Africa in 388, he once again redirected his efforts now to the formation of a pseudo-monastic community.[145] Perhaps inspired by accounts of Egyptian monasticism, in 390 he gathered around him a group of likeminded Neoplatonic Christian lay friends, not quite monks but *servi Dei*, servants of God.[146] This community was dedicated to contemplation, the striving towards moral perfection, and the cultivation of Christian friendship.

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[141] Ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, "Neoplatonism" in *Augustine Through the Ages,* 591. See also *Conf.* VII. xx (26).

[142] Augustine, *De Fide et Symbolo*, 7.

[143] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo,* 116.

[144] *Confessions*, X, xliii (70).

[145] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 132.

[146] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 132, 136.

It was an accepted practice in North Africa in the 4th century to virtually 'press-gang' learned Christian men into Church offices.[147] For this reason, Augustine was careful to avoid areas in Numidia which were in want of a bishop.[148] Despite his efforts, in 391, while in Hippo Regius, Augustine was singled out by Bishop Valerius during mass. On the spot, he was forcibly ordained a priest and given the role of a preacher, a position jealously guarded by most bishops at the time.[149] Augustine accepted this forced ordination as vocational direction from God, embracing his new role as priest and preacher.[150] Four years later, in 395, he was made Bishop of Hippo Regius.[151] The price Augustine paid for this vocational calling was great, he sacrificed a life of withdrawal, philosophical contemplation, and close intellectual friendship for an active life of service and responsibility in the public sphere.[152]

Though it was not the elite law profession which his father Patricius had imagined for him, Augustine's role as Bishop of Hippo did place him among the intellectual,

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This community would eventually become a seminary, a seedbed of future Bishops of Old Numida. See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 143.

[147] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 139.

[148] Augustine. *Sermons*, 355, 2. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 138.

[149] *Sermons*. 355, 2. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 138-9.

[150] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 139.

[151] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 144.

[152] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 202.

cultural, and spiritual elite of North Africa, with a good deal of social and political as well as religious authority. This profession also allowed him to exercise his love of classical culture. At the peace of the church in 313, Christianity had become a religion prepared to assimilate the whole of greco-roman culture to itself.[153] Augustine was one of the most prominent fourth-century figures to claim classical culture as the inheritance of Christianity.[154] And, finally, the role of preacher allowed Augustine to exercise the rhetorical skills which brought him to Milan in the first place.

He had entered formally into public life through his ordination as a priest, his preaching, and his elevation to the episcopacy. This elevation involved not only assuming moral and spiritual leadership over a Christian flock, but also administering a diocese in which over half the population was made up by heretics or pagans.[155] Even among just his Christian flock, Augustine had to navigate the cultural distance between Punic-speaking mountain villagers and Latin-speaking city dwellers.[156]

As a bishop, he necessarily became embroiled in the social and political spheres of the old Numidia.Visual art became a more central concern for the Bishop both as a Christian himself with a community of friends striving for spiritual and moral perfection, and as the spiritual leader of a congregation. We can read in his writings that his attitude towards art was, at this time, spread along a complex web of moral and social concerns.

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[153] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 82.

[154] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 95.

[155] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 139.

[156] Brown, *Eye of the Needle*, 327.

These would include not only Neoplatonic concerns but also concerns with the growing cult of the dead and his need to articulate a strict differentiation between pagan and christian practices in his diocese.

Chapter 3: Augustine's Writings on Art

Spiritual Levels of Distinction:

Augustine rarely wrote directly concerning visual art. The passages which do exist from him on this topic were written largely in his capacity as the Bishop of Hippo Regius. Augustine was characterized, by a one-time fellow Manichee, as "one who loved lofty things, things that shunned the earth, that sought out heaven, that mortified the body, that set the soul alive."[157] Given this characterization, it is hardly surprising that his pen rarely dwelt on the visual arts when younger. However, through his role as Bishop of Hippo, Augustine became (ironically) more embroiled in certain aspects of the culture of Late Antiquity than he had been before his ordination. He was now called upon to make ecclesiastical pronouncements on a host of different subjects on which he had not written previously, including visual art. These pronouncements cannot be taken as indicative of his personal opinion of art, even when made in his *Confessions*. Through a historical analysis of each passage in which Augustine does speak of visual art in the capacity of priest or bishop attending to determinate pastoral or administrative responsibilities, we can reconstruct the meaning of these passages in light of the relevant social and religious concerns of the fourth century.[158]

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[157] Letter written by a fellow Manichee later in life. v. Esp. *C. Faust.* XXI, 1 and 3.; quoted on Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 50.

[158] Philosophers, such as O'Connell, have at times despaired of reconstructing a wider meaning from these passages, see Chapter 1. However, a more historical analysis will reveal the meaning of these passages.

In *On Chrisitan Doctrine*, Augustine distinguishes between two classes of Christians, characterizing one as those who have attained "a higher grade of spiritual life," and the other as those who "are still in the lower grades."[159] He advocates for a nuanced treatment of Scriptural interpretation, varying between literal and figurative depending on the education, proficiencies, and needs of his audience.[160] His training in rhetoric must have instilled in him an awareness of the appropriate and opportune as well as an ability to accommodate various audiences. These skills and habits also show themselves in Augustine's treatment of visual art, for what he said about this subject also varied depending on the level of spiritual preparation and development, or, so to speak, the spiritual literacy of his intended audience.[161]

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[159] *On Christian Doctrine*, III. 25. Augustine, "On Christian Doctrine," trans. James Shaw in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series,* Vol. 2. ed. Philip Schaff, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, III. 25.

[160] *On Christian Doctrine*, III. 25.

[161] I take the terms "spiritual literacy," "spiritually literate," and "spiritually illiterate" from Conrad Rudolph in "Inventing the Exegetical Stained-Glass Window: Suger, Hugh, and a New Elite Art," *The Art Bulletin*, 93:4, (2011): 399-422.

Though the meanings of spiritual literacy and illiteracy would eventually be applied to different levels of spirituality in the ranks of monks, in its early form, "this spiritual hierarchy tended to be expressed in terms of a simple dichotomy of the uninitiate (the layperson) and the initiate (the monk) in which the claim to elite knowledge was central." The illiterate would be "spiritually uneducated beyond a simple understanding of a handful of stories from the Bible, the most basic doctrine, and the sacraments that most pertain to the layperson." See Rudolph, "Inventing the Exegetical Stained-Glass Window," 406.

Augustine differentiated most strongly between the lower spiritual level of unconsecrated laypersons and the higher level of those spiritual initiates, either *servi Dei* or those who had taken holy orders. However, it is important to note that he also differentiated between spiritual levels in the soul of a single person, as he recognized in himself a rotating rhythm of spiritual progress and decline. See, for example, *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (52), in which he, a spiritually literate man, still recognizes that he currently occupies a lower spiritual realm.

Augustine's knowledge of these two groups was both personal and professional. Augustine's own life changed dramatically with his baptism in 387. Before that event, he had enjoyed a prestigious academic career and looked forward to an impending marriage, arranged by his mother, to a wealthy Christian heiress.[162] However, with a startling change of heart, he abandoned this plan in 388, while staying at Ostia, trading secular career and marriage for a life of philosophical retirement and asceticism, with aspirations of becoming a hermit.[163] He returned to North Africa later that year, a man on fire with the ideal of a solitary life dedicated to contemplation and writing; however, his enthusiasm for solitude rapidly cooled as he recognized the comfort and benefits of community.[164] In 390, he gathered around him a community of like minded Neoplatonic Christian lay friends, not quite monks but *servi Dei*, servants of God.[165] Together they dedicated their time to contemplation, the striving towards moral perfection, and the cultivation of Christian friendship. However, the friends eventually felt impelled to let go of their dream of a pseudo-monastic community because of the urgent demand for priests and bishops in North Africa. Many of these men, including Augusitne, took eclesiastical offices, and this meant that much of Augustine's network of connections was personal as well as professional.[166] It is to these men as well as other spiritually elite members of the Church that Augustine directed a number of his writings, including his *Confessions* and *The City of God*.

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[162] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 116.

[163] *Confessions*, X, xliii (70).

[164] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 132.

[165] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 132, 136.
This community would eventually become a seminary, a seed bed of future Bishops of Numida. See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 143.

In addition to maintaining his relationships, personal and professional, with the spiritual and institutional elite of the Church, Augustine also developed professional ties to the spiritual non-elite. Although Augustine had been virtually press-ganged into his ordination, he accepted and embraced this ministerial service, and his subsequent elevation into the episcopacy, as vocational direction from his God.[167] His duties as Bishop involved not only assuming moral and spiritual leadership over a Christian flock, but also administering a diocese in which more than half of the population were heretics or pagans.[168] The lines demarking these groups were not sharply laid out in the early fifth century. Despite Augustine's frequent use of labeling terms such as pagan, heretic, and Christian, in works such as *The City of God*, in fact, these late antique identities were often ambiguously related. Even within Augustine's Christian congregation he found practices which he considered vestige of pagan habits, such as feasting at gravesites.[169]

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[166] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 326; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 143.

[167] *Sermons*. 355, 2; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 138-9.

[168] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 139.

[169] Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 26.

His own writings show that in reality his congregation could at best be called spiritually illiterate, at worst heretical or even semi-pagan.[170]

Augustine's writings on visual art vary in their content, tone, and meaning depending upon the occasion and upon his intended audience. His pronouncements range from strong discouragement to tolerance. On one side, he challenged readers and listeners who belonged to the elite group of the spiritually and institutionally advanced, that is, those who could bear the struggle, to fight against dependence on artistic images (and even mental images of God).[171] On the other side, realizing that the steepest, narrowest path was not suited to all pilgrims, he was tolerant of some (though by no means all) spiritual deficiencies of his congregation, writing in *On Christian Doctrine*, "that which cannot be raised to a higher state must be cared for in its own state."[172] And yet his tolerance had its limits, as his writings against visual art in connection to the cult of the dead and biblical fictions attest.

Art as a Distraction for the Spiritually Literate:

The two works in which Augustine directly addresses visual art as a distraction for spiritually literate Christians are his *Confessions* and *The City of God*. Augustine began his *Confessions* in 397, the year following his acceptance of an ecclesiastical position. It is a work designed to directly appeal to not just a learned late Roman audience, but an audience also possessing a high degree of spiritual literacy in the Catholic faith.[173] As the title suggests, this is a work incorporating not only a confession of past sins but also a confession of or witnessing to the glory of God.[174] Through the narrative of his life, including his adoption of Manicheism, his encounter with Platonic writings, his conversion to Christianity, and the fleeting beatific encounter which he and his mother Monica experienced at Ostia, Augustine traces for his readers the continual, guiding presence of God's hand in his life.[175] Augustine also employs the Neoplatonic themes, such as the wandering soul, tragedy of man, and return to the One, to articulate and analyze his own experiences.[176] O'Connell has hailed it an "Odyssey of soul," in which Augustine attempts to make sense of his life-journey in ancient epic terms.[177]

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[170] For instance, Augustine announces in *De Moribus Ecclesiae*, I:75, "I know that there are many worshippers of tombs and pictures" even amidst his Christian congregation. Translation by Richard Stothert in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 4. Edited by Philip Schaff. Buffalo, (NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

[171] See *De Fide et Symbolo*, 7.

[172] *On Christian Doctrine*, III. 17, 25.

But it would be a mistake to read this complicated text as a straightforward autobiographical work, or to imagine that it opens a window to its author's "true inner self." Instead of a proto-autobiography, Augustine's *Confessions* was written as an extended prayer, incorporating the language of the Psalms frequently throughout.[178] As historian Peter Brown puts it, the *Confessions* are a "prolonged exploration of the nature of God, written in the form of a prayer, to 'stir up towards Him the intellect and feelings of men.'"[179] The *Confessions* takes up complex theological issues intellectually accessible only to the spiritual elite, issues such as the mystery of the Incarnation, the origin of evil, and the agency of God's grace upon an individual's will, and in the last three books, Augustine guides his readers through an extended meditation on the opening of Genesis. [180] Through this work, Augustine intends that his audience should be "led into Wisdom." [181] What one finds in this text is an account carefully adapted to the intended audience of spiritually advanced Christians at this time. Even when Augustine is speaking of his own life experiences, he is speaking in his capacity as an ecclesiastical official. That is to say, the *Confessions* presents Augustine's official outlet, not his personal opinion.

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[173] But, as Peter Brown has pointed out, it also appealed as a semi-evangelical work, to those potential Christians with whom Augustine's manichee years and Neoplatonic language would resonate. See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 160.

[174] *Confessions*, X, i (1).

[175] *Confessions*, III, vi (10); VII, ix (13); VIII, xii (29); IX, x (23-25).

[176] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 168.

[177] O'Connell, Robert J. *Saint Augustine's Confessions: the Odyssey of Soul*. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969).

In the *Confessions*, Augustine speaks of visual art as a spiritual distraction for the spiritually elite. In Book X, Augustine makes confession to the mercy of God by enumerating common sins of the flesh from which God continually saves him.[182]

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[178] For an extended analysis of the use of Psalms in the *Confessions*, see Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 174-176.

[179] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 166; quote from Augustine's *Retractions*, II, 32.

"The Confessions was a book for the *servi Dei*, for the 'servants of God'; it is a classic document of the tastes of a group of highly sophisticated men, the *spiritales*, the 'men of the spirit'." Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 160; see also *Conf.* V, x (20).

[180] *Confessions*, VII, xix (25); VII, v (7); VII, iii (4-5); Bks XI - XIII.

[181] Quote from Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 176.

[182] *Confessions*, X, xxix (40) - xxxv (56).

Proceeding methodically in an enumeration of the sinful pleasures of the senses, Augustine reaches the pleasure of the eyes, in which section he includes not only the allurement of the natural world but also the entrapment of the visual arts. He writes:

> Quam innumerabilia variis artibus et opificiis in vestibus, calciamentis, vasis et cuiuscemodi fabricationibus, picturis etiam diversisque figmentis, atque his usum necessarium atque moderatum et piam significationem longe transgredientibus, addiderunt homines ad inlecebras oculorum, foras sequentes quod faciunt, intus relinquentes a quo facti sunt et exterminantes quod facti sunt. at ego, deus meus et decus meum, etiam hinc tibi dico hymnum et sacrifico laudem sacrificatori meo, quoniam pulchra traiecta per animas in manus artificiosas ab illa pulchritudine veniunt, quae supra animas est, cui suspirat anima mea die ac nocte. sed pulchritudinum exteriorum operatores et sectatores inde trahunt adprobandi modum, non autem inde trahunt utendi modum. et ibi est et non vident eum, ut non eant longius, et fortitudinem suam ad te custodiant, nec eam spargant in deliciosas lassitudines. ego autem haec loquens atque discernens etiam istis pulchris gressum innecto, sed tu evelles, domine, evelles tu, quoniam misericordia tua ante oculos meos est. nam ego capior miserabiliter, et tu evelles misericorditer aliquando non sentientem, quia suspensus incideram, aliquando cum dolore, quia iam inhaeseram.[183]

Augustine makes his official position clear at the first of this passage, namely, that the makers of excessive visual art not only lead others to sin but destroy their own dignity by making visual art.

> Quam innumerabilia variis artibus et opificiis in vestibus, calciamentis, vasis et cuiuscemodi fabricationibus, picturis etiam diversisque figmentis, atque his usum necessarium atque moderatum et piam significationem longe transgredientibus, addiderunt homines ad inlecebras oculorum, foras sequentes quod faciunt, intus relinquentes a quo facti sunt et exterminantes quod facti sunt.[184]
>
> To entrap the eyes men have made innumerable additions to the various arts and crafts in clothing, shoes, vessels, and manufacturers of this nature, pictures, images of various kinds, and things which go far beyond necessary and moderate requirements and pious symbols. Outwardly they follow what they make.

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[183] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53).

[184] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53).

> Inwardly they abandon God by whom they were made, destroying what they were created to be.[185]

Augustine's condemnation of the visual arts here is directed against those artists who make excessive visual allurement rather than the viewers of these art works. Well aware of the delight and fascination viewers are apt to take in novel, delux, or gorgeous visual display, the makers of pictures and images are more apt to overdo than to restrain their work. From just this passage, it appears that Augustine does not categorically reject image making but instead condemns making images beyond what is necessary and appropriate. Augusitne ends this thought by expressing that by externally going "far beyond necessary and moderate requirements and pious symbols" artists and crafts persons destroy the dignity with which they were endowed by their creator.

After condemning excess in the visual arts, Augustine admits a certain goodness in the visual arts, notwithstanding the entrapping nature of artistic excess. He writes,

> at ego, deus meus et decus meum, etiam hinc tibi dico hymnum et sacrifico laudem sacrificatori meo, quoniam pulchra traiecta per animas in manus artificiosas ab illa pulchritudine veniunt, quae supra animas est, cui suspirat anima mea die ac nocte.[186]
>
> But, my God and my glory, for this reason I say a hymn of praise to you and offer praise to him who offered sacrifice for me. For the beautiful objects designed by artists' souls and realized by skilled hands come from that beauty which is higher than souls; after that beauty my soul sighs day and night (Ps. 1:2).[187]

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[185] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53); translated by Henry Chadwick, 210.

[186] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53).

[187] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53); translated by Henry Chadwick, 210.

Augustine here notes that even these artistic entrapments echo the Beauty of God. He finds in images and pictures reason to praise God even when contemplating provocations of sin. However, it should be noted that this passage does not include any admittance of a practical use for visual art. Though he states that visual art unquestionably derives from God's beauty, Augustine does not here suggest that art has the power to lead men back to God's goodness.

After this admission of the derivative goodness of visual art, Augustine moves on to repeat his official position on art, that is, condemnation of excess.

> sed pulchritudinum exteriorum operatores et sectatores inde trahunt adprobandi modum, non autem inde trahunt utendi modum. et ibi est et non vident eum, ut non eant longius, et fortitudinem suam ad te custodiant, nec eam spargant in deliciosas lassitudines.[188]
>
> From this higher beauty the artists and connoisseurs of external beauty draw their criterion of judgment, but they do not draw from there a principle for the right use of beautiful things. The principle is there but they do not see it, namely that they should not go to excess, but 'should guard their strength for you' (Ps. 58: 10) and not dissipate it in delights that produce mental fatigue.[189]

Augustine here writes that this echo of higher beauty is in practice drowned by the excessive character of visual art. Whether it is inherent to visual art that it always miss the target of proper use (utendi modum) or whether this error happens only in some instances Augustine does not address. But this passage gives the marked impression that visual art is intrinsically both a product of, and an encouragement to excessive and therefore transgressive human behavior.

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[188] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53).

[189] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53); translated by Henry Chadwick, 210.

Augustine ends this passage by refocusing upon his own sinfulness and God's merciful rescuing. He writes,

> ego autem haec loquens atque discernens etiam istis pulchris gressum innecto, sed tu evelles, domine, evelles tu, quoniam misericordia tua ante oculos meos est. nam ego capior miserabiliter, et tu evelles misericorditer aliquando non sentientem, quia suspensus incideram, aliquando cum dolore, quia iam inhaeseram.[190]
>
> But, although, I am the person saying this and making the distinction, I also entangle my steps in beautiful externals. However, you rescue me, Lord, you rescue me. 'For your mercy is before my eyes' (Ps. 25: 3). I am pitifully captured by them, and in your pity you rescue me, sometimes without my realizing it because I had suffered only a light fall, and sometimes with a painful wrench because I became deeply involved.[191]

Augustine's enumeration of the sins of the lust of the eyes thus ends with a confession of the agency of God in rescuing Augustine from "beautiful externals." His admission here, "I also entangle my steps in beautiful externals," should not be mistaken for an autobiographical disclosure of Augustine's personal inclination towards the distractions of the visual arts. His ambiguous language in this passage contrasts with the very specific language he just previously used in admitting the sinful delight he takes in viewing the colors of the natural world.[192] Thus, to judge precisely what he means here by "beautiful externals," other than the natural colors of which he has already spoken, is not possible given his lack of specificity. Further, there is a possibility that Augusitne may be framing himself as prone to "pleasure of the eyes of [his] flesh" in order to make himself a relatable character for his readers.[193]

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[190] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53).

[191] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (53); translated by Henry Chadwick, 210.

[192] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv (51-52).

What this passage does reveal to us is the official attitude Augustine took towards visual art as a learned Christian bishop offering spiritual guidance through his *Confessions* to a group of spiritually elite Christians. Excessive visual art plays upon the weakness of fallen human nature, the tendency to become enthralled by lavish or stunning images and pictures. While image makers exploit this weakness, the educated and self-aware readers should recognize and control this lust of the eyes. His words are ultimately a warning against the spiritual distraction of visual art and a condemnation of those artists who abandon God in the creation of visual art that is excessive and harmful in its relation to the spiritual growth of the spiritually literate. It is impossible to tell from just this passage whether Augustine considers non-excessive art acceptable for the spiritually elite. However, his omission of a direct statement concerning acceptable visual art, either in his *Confessions* or *The City of God*, suggests a condemnation of visual art generally for the spiritual elite.

We read more about the excessive and superfluous nature of the visual arts in *The City of God*. On August 24, 410 CE, the city of Rome fell under the conquest of Alaric and his Visigoth troops who burnt the city for three days. As news of the sack of Rome spread across the Mediteranian, Bishop Augustine in Hippo Regius, found himself faced with a congregation and community deeply shocked and disillusioned.[194]

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[193] *Confessions*, X, xxxiv; translated by Henry Chadwick, 209.

Was the sack of Rome due to the neglect of the city's pagan gods and so the fault of the Christians? Hostility mounted as educated neo-pagan elites from Rome sought refuge in Carthage, a few hundred miles away from Hippo Regius. Displaced neo-pagans blamed the fall of Rome on the Christians' neglect of their idols, further holding that the Christian religion was uncultivated and unintelligible.[195]

Likewise, the Christian community itself began to doubt its own religion. Had the chief Christian martyrs buried in Rome, such as Peter and Paul, been powerless to protect their city?[196] What is more, Chrisitan theologians, such as Eusebius and Orosius, had held the Roman empire up as an image or foreshadowing of the heavenly Jerusalem. This concept, the *Roma aeterna*, was crushed at the fall of the city.[197] Even beyond these concerns, the city of Rome had stood as the symbol of an entire civilization, ancient and sophisticated. The sack of this city represented the collapse of a way of life, the fall of civilized culture to the barbarian Visigoths.[198]

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[194] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo,* 288-290.

[195] *Retractions*, II, 69 (1); Oort, J. van. *Jerusalem and Babylon: A Study into Augustine's City of God and the Sources of His Doctrine of the Two Cities*. Supplements to "Vigiliae Christianae", V. 14. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991): 60-61.

This hostility magnified the difference between pagan and Christian communities in a way which was less evident under normal circumstances.

[196] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 289.

[197] van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 157-160.

[198] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 289.

Augustine, as bishop and scholar, found himself the designated respondent of these contentions against and doubts about Christianity surrounding the sack of Rome. He responded immediately in sermons and letters and, a bit later, in his work *De Civitate Dei* or *The City of God*, written between 412 and 426/7.[199] This work became one of his central theological treatises and has enjoyed wide fame throughout history. Augustine himself called it his "magnum opus et arduum."[200] The audience of *De Civitate Dei* is mixed. As Augustine tells us in his retractions, the first ten books are an apologetic work in defense of the Christian Church, addressed to those neo-pagans who blamed Christians for the sack of Rome and believed paganism to be the true religion.[201] But the last twelve books are addressed to those Christians adequately prepared for the complex theological exploration contained within; these later books are addressed to the spiritual elite.[202]

The City of God is composed of twenty-two books, the first ten of which are a refutation of the pagan practices of worshiping the gods for earthly and heavenly happiness; the last twelve are a discourse on the theme of two coexisting yet opposed *civitates* or cities, the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena*.[203] Four of the last twelve books deal with the origins of these cities, four with their historic unfolding, and four with their ultimate fates.[204] These two cities, the city of God and the earthly city, are similar in that they both are made up of not only men but also angels; however, the similarities stop there, for the cities are diametrically opposed.[205] Augustine defines a *civitas* as "a multitude of rational beings joined together by common agreement on the objects of their love."[206] The city of God is united by love of the eternal good, the earthly city by love of earthly goods.[207] These loves dictate the ultimate heavenly or hellish fate of the citizens and give the cities their names.[208]

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[199] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 290.

[200] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, I, praef. Cited on Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 62.

[201] *Retractions*, II, 69 (1).

[202] *Retractions*, II, 69 (2).

[203] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 303-4.

Occasional scholars, such as Heinrich Scholz, have held that Augustine only meant these two cities as allegories for belief and unbelief, but this position has been refuted by Johannes van Oort and most scholars agree that Augustine meant their existence literally. See Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 117; see also Scholz, Heinrich. *Glaube und Unglaube in der Veltgeschichte: ein kommentar zu augustins de civitate dei*. (Forgotten Books, 2016): esp. 70.

Intermingled through they are in the course of history, the two cities are separate in origin, character, and ultimate destiny. As Peter Brown writes, "the dividing-line between the two 'cities' is invisible, because it involves each man's capacity to love what he loves."[209] And yet, from their foundation, these two cities are set as opposites, the

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It ought to be noted that by "earthly" city Augustine does not mean a city on earth but instead a city bound by earthly desires as opposed to heavenly desires. See *De Civitate Dei*, XIV, 1, 2. Both earthly and heavenly cities are composed of citizens existing in the temporal realm as well as those in hell or heaven (respectively) and also those not yet born. See *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 1. See also Loetscher, Frederick William. "St. Augustine's Conception of the State," *Church History* 4, no. 1 (1935), 23. This means that while in the temporal realm, what Augustine calls the *saeculum*, the two cities are intermixed. At Judgement Day the cities will once and for all be separated, but until that time, a great deal of temporal intermixing and even swapping of citizens takes place between the two. See *De Civitate Dei*, XX, 25.

[204] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 303-4.

[205] *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 1. See also Loetscher, "St. Augustine's Conception of the State," 23.

[206] *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, 24; Translation from Babcock, William trans. *The City of God*, (New City Press, Hyde Park, NY, 2013): 385.

[207] *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, 14.

[208] *De Civitate Dei*, XIV, 28; XIX, 1, 28; also libri XX; XXI; XXII.

[209] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 323.

intermediary of which does not exist; one is either a citizen of the city of God or the earthly city. F. E. Cranz states that the "fundamental thesis" of *The City of God* is that there are no more than two cities.[210] Augustine finds the first clear scriptural division of these two cities in the founding of the earthly city by Cain after the murder of his brother Abel. By contrast, Seth, Cain's younger brother born after Abel's death, does not establish a city, as it is said that Cain does. This is due to the fact that the city of God is not of human origin but divine, founded by Christ at His death and resurrection and ruled by Him alone.[211] In Him is the loyalty of the citizens of His city entirely bound up.

Within the temporal realm or *saeculum*, the city of God is, as Augustine calls it, also the *civitas peregrina*, or pilgrim city.[212] The city of God is called to be on the earth for a time, but not of the earth, that is, not conformed to the world, not earthly in its desires.[213] Peter Brown identifies this theme, a *civitas peregrina*, as Augsutine's response to the crisis of the Chrisitan community at the sack of Rome, one of its most holy cities and symbol of Christian civilization. Augustine responds to his community's demoralization by articulating a collective identity for its members, giving them a sense of belonging and a city to be loyal to, the city of God and not Rome or Carthage or any other temporal city.[214]

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[210] Cranz, "De Civitate Dei, XV, 2, and Augustine's Idea of the Christian Society" in Markus, R. A. ed. *Augustine; a Collection of Critical Essays*. [1st ed.]. (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1972): 408. See also Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 116.

[211] *De Civitate Dei*, XV, 17-19. See also Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 320. For a discussion of what may be called Augustine's "theology of the saeculum" see Markus, Robert Austin. *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine.* (Cambridge, Eng: University Press, 1970).

[212] *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, 14, 27.

[213] *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, 14, 27.

In the final book, Augusitne discusses the eternal reward of *civitas peregrina*, contrasting this bliss to both the miseries and goods of the *saeculum*.[215] The purpose of Augusitne's enumeration of the goods of the *saeculum* is to contrast the fleeting nature of these goods, which are merely consolations and proper to the earthly city, to the eternal good which is the reward of those citizens of the city of God who persevere to the end.[216] Amidst these fleeting goods Augustine discusses the visual arts. He writes,

> Praeter enim artes bene uiuendi et ad inmortalem perueniendi felicitatem, quae uirtutes uocantur et sola Dei gratia, quae in Christo est, filiis promissionis regnique donantur, nonne humano ingenio tot tantaeque artes sunt inuentae et exercitae, partim necessariae partim uoluptariae, ut tam excellens uis mentis atque rationis in his etiam rebus, quas superfluas, immo et periculosas perniciosasque appetit, quantum bonum habeat in natura, unde ista potuit uel inuenire uel discere uel exercere, testetur? Vestimentorum et aedificiorum ad opera quam mirabilia, quam stupenda industria humana peruenerit… quae in fabricatione quorumque uasorum uel etiam statuarum et picturarum uarietate excogitauerit et impleuerit… Loquimur enim nunc de natura mentis humanae, qua ista uita mortalis ornatur, non de fide atque itinere ueritatis, qua illa inmortalis adquiritur.[217]
>
> For, quite apart from the arts of living well and attaining eternal happiness --which are called virtues and are given only by the grace of God, which is in Christ, to the sons of the promise and of the kingdom-- there are the many and wonderful arts discovered by human ingenuity, some serving our needs, some serving our pleasures. Even when it turns its desire to superfluous or, worse, to dangerous and harmful things, this extraordinary power of mind and reason shows what a great good it has by virtue of its nature, the good that enables it to

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[214] Brown. *Augustine of Hippo*, 313.

[215] *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 24.

[216] "And all these [goods] are only consolations for the wretched and condemned, not the reward for the blessed." *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 24; Translation by William Babcock, 541.

[217] *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 24.

> discover, to learn, and to practice such arts. What wonderful, what astounding heights human industry has reached in producing clothing and buildings… What artistry it has contrived and achieved in making pottery of all sorts, as well as in the varieties of sculpture and painting! … we are now speaking about the nature of the human mind with which this mortal life is adorned, not about the faith or the way of truth by which that immortal life is attained.[218]

In this passage, Augustine marvels at the ingenuity of the human mind, even when it turns its efforts towards "superfluous or, worse, to dangerous and harmful things." Though Augustine, in this passage, does not clearly pronounce the visual arts to be pleasing or superfluous, or even harmful, when this passage is paired with that from his *Confessions*, his official position is revealed. As a bishop writing for the benefit of the spiritual elite, Augustine writes of these arts as, at best, superfluous or, at worst, harmful, but, nevertheless, exhibitive of a praiseworthy ingenuity. Human ingenuity and artistry, which facilitate and adorn man's earthly life, manifest the goodness and glory of the creator of the human mind which is the agent cause of these crafts and arts.

This interpretation of this passage is confirmed by two reminders which Augustine finds necessary to include. The first, appearing in the passage quoted above, is a reminder that Augustine here is not speaking of "the way of truth by which that immortal life is attained."[219] That is, the art he has in mind is profane art, or art for the present, earthly life. The other confirmation comes at the end of this enumeration of the earthly goods, where Augustine writes, "Et haec omnia miserorum sunt damnatorumque solacia, non praemia beatorum" or "And all these are only the consolations for the wretched and condemned, not the rewards for the blessed."[220] As in the *Confessions*, then, here too Augustine does not entirely condemn visual art, but instead condemns it for its superfluity, its harmfulness, and (ultimately) its earthly vanity.

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[218] *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 24; Translation by William Babcock, 539.

[219] *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 24.

These words were written for a learned, spiritually literate Christian audience, one in need of heartening amidst external hostility and internal doubts in the face of the sack of Rome. As was true in the passage of the *Confessions* reviewed above, it would be a mistake to take the passage of the *City of God* under consideration now as a text indicative of Augustine's personal opinion of visual art. They instead convey his professional or vocational position on visual art, namely, that, for the spiritual elite, it is a distraction and eventually a hindrance to spiritual growth. As he writes in the *Confessions*, when one's "heart becomes the receptacle of distractions and the container for a mass of empty thoughts, then too [one's] prayers are often interrupted and distracted."[221]

Art as a Permissible Spiritual Aid for the Spiritually Illiterate:

Though Augustine strongly dissuaded his spiritually literate audience from the distraction of visual art, he was also tolerant of the use of visual art in the spiritual formation of his spiritually illiterate congregation in Hippo. This concessive element in

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[220] *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 24; Translation by William Babcock, 541.

[221] *Confessions*, X, xxxv (57); Translation by Henry Chadwick, 213.

Augustine's thought on visual art is likely related to an important event in the ecclesiastical and civic history of Milan in 386. Augustine, while a catechumen in Milan, had been present at the time of Bishop Ambrose's acquisition of the saintly relics of Gervasius and Protasius.[222] Ambrose himself encouraged the veneration of these saintly relics which he had unearthed, carried triumphantly to his newly finished basilica, and placed in a magnificent sarcophagus.[223] Like Ambrose, whom he greatly admired, Augustine eventually employed the power which physical saintly relics and attending visual art could confer.

Around 415, Augustine acquired what he took to be the relics of St. Stephen, first Biblically recorded martyr of the Church, who had been stoned to death in Jerusalem.[224] In a sermon on St. Stephen and the miracles that his newly acquired relics had performed, Augustine stated, "Latuit tanto tempore corpus ejus, processit quando Deus voluit, illuminavit terras, tanta miracula fecit… orationes ejus ut beneficia impetrentur, quibus novit ea dari debere." Or, in translation, "His body lay hidden such a long time, it came to light when God willed, it shed its light on many lands, worked many miracles… [Stephen's] prayers ensure that favors are obtained for people he knows they should be given to."[225] Augustine commissioned a side chapel for his church in Hippo as a place to house the relics of Stephen.[226]

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[222] Augustine records this in his *Confessions*, IX, vii (15-16) and *De Civitate Dei*, X, vii, and Ambrose in *Letters*, 77.

[223] Ambrose, *Letters*, 77. 7; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 82.
Ambrose is himself interred alongside Gervasius and Protasius in the crypt of Sant'Ambrogio.

[224] Acts 7:54-8:1.
415 is the year given for the discovery of the relics by Lucianus in a field outside the Roman settlement of Caphargamala. See Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 91.

Though the specific art which decorated this chapel is unknown, the existence of visual art within the chapel is attested by one of Augustine's own sermons. Augustine not only allowed visual art within his newly constructed chapel for St. Stephen's relics in Hippo, he even drew upon these artistic images as a spiritual aid in his sermons.[227] He referred to this work of art in these terms, "Dulcissima pictura est haec, ubi videtis sanctum Stephanum lapidari, videtis Saulum lapidantium vestimenta servantem."[228] In translation, "Such a lovely picture this is, where you can see Saint Stephen being stoned, can see Saul keeping the coats of those doing the stoning."[229]

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[225] *Sermons*, 319. 6; Translation by Edmund Hill, *Sermons, III. 9*. Ed. John E. Rotelle, (Hyde Park, NY: New York City Press, 1994): 153. See also Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 91.

[226] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 91.

[227] *Sermons*, 316. 5.

[228] *Sermons*, 316. 5.

There is some debate concerning whether Augustine's words in this sermon are referring to a physical artwork present in his church in Hippo, or whether "pictura" refers to a mental picture or an imagination rather than a physical artwork. O'Connell takes the latter stance, writing "In Sermon 316, 5, Augustine qualifies as dulcis the picture of Saul, the future apostle, guarding the cloaks of those who were stoning Stephen, the first martyr… the pictura in question is quite conceivably the word painting of the scene that Augustine has just finished reading from the Acts of the Apostles." Though O'Connell's suggestion is persuasive, the language Augusitne uses, particularly the verb "videtis" is more suggestive of a physical seeing than the seeing of the mind's eye. See O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in Saint Augustine*, 223 nt23.

[229] *Sermons*, 316; Translation by Edmund Hill, 140.

Here Augustine is addressing a spiritually illiterate audience. The sermon centers on an in depth description and explanation of the biblical scene of Stephen's stoning and Saul's relation to it.[230] The passage in Acts reads as follows,

> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him [Stephen]. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. They cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting to his death.[231]

It is this text which Augustine is expounding and this text which the picture on his church's walls was meant to accompany. No high theological arguments are being made in the sermon. Rather, Augustine presents Stephen and Saul (later called Paul) as figures to whom ordinary people could relate and as examples of virtue which average members of his congregation might imitate.[232] The sermon also includes a lesson about the importance of intercessory prayer.[233]

Augustine presents Stephen as an imitator of Christ at his death and, thus, a less intimidating model for his congregation to follow than directly imitating the Word of

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[230] *Sermons*, 316.

[231] Acts 7:54-8:1; Translation from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version,* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006): 106.

[232] *Sermons*, 316. 3-5.

[233] *Sermons*, 316. 3-5.

God.[234] Saul too appears as an accessible model for emulation, because, though guilty of aiding Stephen's murders, he eventually experienced repentance and conversion, going on to become a vessel of grace partly through the intercessory prayer of Stephen.[235] The lesson conveyed seems to be that even the very sinful may still have hope for redemption, especially with the aid of intercessory prayer. Saul's imperfection bears sympathetic similarity to Augustine's congregation, and Augusitne's intention seems to be that his congregation should identify with Saul, perhaps more readily accessible than Stephen, let alone Christ.

At the end of the sermon, Augustine turns to the artwork in his church in order to make the presence of the saints Stephen and Paul felt by his congregation. Such a turn was in keeping with antique rhetorical theory, which gave attention not only to vivid verbal description but also sensible demonstration as a means of emphasis.[236] He describes the picture of the stoning and of Saul watching the murderers' cloaks as "most beautiful." From his language here, including "pictura" and "videtis," it seems that the biblical scene he has just described was also pictured on a wall of his church at Hippo. From gazing on the painting, Augustine moves to addressing saints Stephen and Paul directly, stating "Cum eo quem lapidasti, eum Christo regnas. Ambo ibi vos videtis;

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[234] *Sermons*, 316. 3.

[235] *Sermons*, 316. 4.

[236] See Hunter-Crawley, Heather, and Erica O'Brien. *The Multi-Sensory Image from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. (Routledge, 2019).

ambo modo sermonem nostrum auditis; ambo pro nobis orate."[237] Through the picture, Augustine makes his congregation feel the immaterial presence of the saints. In this instance Augustine referred to the image itself as a means of making his sermon more vivid, immediate, and forceful for the members of his congregation. In this case he was prepared to incorporate the image in his effort to inform and sway a spiritually illiterate audience. And yet, though Augusitne was tolerant of his congregation's reliance on visual art as an aid to proper worship, he did not condone art when it interfered with proper worship. He writes vehemently against visual art as connected to the cult of the dead and biblical fictions.

Art as Impermissible When Provocative of Idolatry:

As was said above, Augustine permitted his own church to participate in the cult of saints, including the use of visual art to impart a more vivid sense of presence to the saints whose relics which were interred in his chapel dedicated to St. Stephen.[238] However, he did not tolerate among his congregation those practices which he considered not to be in keeping with acceptable Christian observances, especially those that seemed openly pagan, such as graveside feasting and the worship of images connected to the cult of the dead.[239] He held art to be impermissible when provocative of idolatry, as he found it to be when used to venerate the dead.[240]

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[237] *Sermons*, 316. 5.

[238] *Sermons*, 316.5.

Surrounded by the culture of late roman paganism, Augustine adamantly fought to drive the spirit of superstition idolatry away from his Christian congregation, though not always successfully. He states, "I know that there are many worshippers of tombs and pictures" even among Christians.[241] His condemnation of visual art in this context stemmed from the ability of art to create a presence which invited the localization of the holy in connection to the growing cult of the dead.[242] He writes,

> Illa maxime causa est impietatis insanae, quod plus valet in affectibus miserorum viventi similis forma quae sibi efficit supplicari, quam quod eam manifestum est non esse viventem, ut debeat a vivente contemni.[243]
>
> The principal cause of insane, blasphemous idolatry is this: a form resembling that of a living person —a form that by its lifelike appearance seems to demand worship— is more powerfully persuasive to the emotions of its wretched suppliants than the plain fact that it is not alive and ought to be scorned by anyone who is.[244]

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[239] Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 26; Augustine, Ep. 29, 9.

Peter Brown suspects that Augustine was more concerned with the privatization of the holy than the propagation of pagan superstitions. See Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 35.

[240] Augusitne's wish to banish "pagan" practices from his congregation is indicative of the ambiguous and often synthetic relationship between Christian and non-Christian communities of Late Antiquity.

[241] Augustine, *De Moribus Ecclesiae*, 1:75; Augustine, "On the Morals of the Church," trans. Richard Stothert, 1:75.

[242] Rudolph, Conrad. "Resistance to Art in the West, c.33 to c.1200," English translation of "La resistenza all'arte nell'Occidente," *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, ed. Enrico Castelnuovo and Giuseppe Sergi, 4 v. (Giulio Einaudi Editore, Turin, 2002-2004) v. 3, 20-21.

[243] Augustine, *In Psalmos 2*, Psalm 113.5.

[244] Augustine, *In Psalmos 2*, Psalm 113.5; Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms, 121-150*, trans. and ed. Maria Boulding, and Boniface Ramsey, (Hyde Park, N.Y. : New City Press, 2004.); see also *De Moribus Ecclesiae.* 1, 75; *Epistula.* 102, 18-19; *De Civitate Dei*, 4, 23.

Idols are "devoid both of feeling and of life… '*Eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not*. [Psalm 135:16]'"[245] Yet visual art has the power to portray living beings "as if present" and, thus, to lure idolatrous worship from the "weak minds" of the spiritually illiterate multitude.[246] Augustine's condemnation of visual art was likely also informed by his lingering Neoplatonic philosophy.[247] The power of visual art to create presence must have been particularly offensive to his Neoplatonic concept of artistic images as not just unreal but twice removed from reality.[248]

Like the image of Stephen and Saul in the chapel, funerary images of the dead engage viewers and create a vivid sense of presence. In both cases Augustine seems to anticipate a certain (and perhaps not dissimilar) viewer response to such images. But in the more open, less regulated cemetery, the fascination of the image of the dead person seemed to present a greater inducement to superstitious or even idolatrous behavior. By contrast, in the chapel during the holy liturgy and in proximity to the altar, it seems Augustine judged images less provocative of unacceptable Christian behavior, especially when Augustine himself can guide his spiritually illiterate congregation in the acceptable use of such images, as he does in the sermon reviewed above.[249] The saints Stephen and Paul are worthy of veneration, rather than deceased family members, but even this veneration by the faithful must be ordered towards seeking intercession and not towards pantheonic idolatry. Peter Brown attributes this contrast to the difference between the "public" space more easily under the control of ecclesiastical authorities, and the "private" space of grave sites, more difficult to oversee and regulate.[250]

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[245] Augustine, *Epistula* 102: 18-19; Augustine, "Letters," trans. J.G. Cunningham in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 1. ed. Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 102: 18-19.

[246] *Epistula* 102: 18-19; Augustine, "Letters," trans. J.G. Cunningham, 18-19.

[247] Rudolph, "Resistance to Art in the West, c.33 to c.1200," 20-21. Augustine writes, of images of God, "For it is unlawful for a Christian to set up any such image for God in a temple; much more nefarious is it, [therefore], to set it up in the heart, in which truly is the temple of God, provided it be purged of earthly lust and error." *De Fide et Symbolo*, 14. Augustine, "De Fide et Symbolo," trans. S.D.F. Salmond. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 3. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 14.

[248] Plato, *Republic*, Bk X, 598a-c.

Whether or not Augustine expected his congregation to take his admonitions against the worshiping of pictures and graveside feasting to heart is ambiguous. He considered himself battling against two powerful inducements to superstition and idolatry, one natural, one supernatural. Augustine realized that images do more than create a sense of presence. He speculated that the worshiping of images stemmed from "the human heart, especially when regret for the dead led to the making of likenesses, and so to the use of images."[251] Alongside the (fallen) human emotion of regret for the death of a loved one, Augustine also identified demons as the origin of the idolatrous worship of images.[252] These two origins of idolatry were by no means incompatible in

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[249] *Sermons*, 316.

[250] Brown, *Cult of the Saint*, 32, 34-35.

[251] *Contra Faustum*, XXII 17; Augustine, "Contra Faustum," trans. Richard Stothert. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 4. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

[252] *De Civitate Dei*, XVIII, 24.

Augustine's logic. As is so often the case is his theological worldview, the consequences of the Fall also become an opportunity for new sin and temptations from demons.

Art as Impermissible When Propagating Biblical Lies:

Les insidious but no less serious than those gravesite images which are inducements to idolatry is another mistake that images may occasion. Augustine also identifies as harmful to the spiritual growth of those spiritually illiterate art which depicts biblical fictions. In *De Consensu Evangelistarum* (c.400), he addresses this ability of images to mislead persons without strong biblical knowledge. Seeing representations "painted on walls" of the apostles Peter and Paul with Christ, the spiritually illiterate were "misled by the painters" and came to imagine Paul knew Christ during His lifetime. [253] Augustine blames not only the misleading painters but also of the folly of these spiritually illiterate people, writing, "Thus to fall most completely into error was the due desert of men who sought for Christ and His apostles not in the holy writings, but on painted walls."[254] By contrast, Augusitne's sermon which references art in his own church first directs his congregation's attention towards scripture, using visual art only to illustrate the Holy Word.[255]

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[253] Augustine. *De Consensu Evangelistarum*. 1:15-16; Augustine, "Harmony of the Gospels," trans. S.D.F. Salmond in *Saint Augustin: Sermon on the Mount; Harmony of the Gospels; Homilies on the Gospels*. ed. Philip Schaff, (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2005): 142-143.

"For when they made up their minds to represent Christ to have written in such strain as that to His disciples, they bethought themselves of those of His followers who might best be taken for the persons to whom Christ might most readily be believed to have written, as the individuals who had kept by Him on the most familiar terms of friendship. And so Peter and Paul occurred to them, I believe, just because in many places they chanced to see these two apostles represented in pictures as both in company with Him. For Rome, in a specially honourable and solemn manner, commends the merits of Peter and of Paul, for this reason among others, namely, that they suffered [martyrdom] on the same day. Thus to fall most completely into error was the due desert of men who sought for Christ and His apostles not in the holy writings, but on painted walls. Neither is it to be wondered at, that these fiction-limners were misled by the painters. For throughout the whole period during which Christ lived in our mortal flesh in fellowship with His disciples, Paul had never become His disciple."

Augustine notes that such biblical fictions are commonly represented in the visual art of Rome, the seat of the relics of Peter and Paul. During his travels to Rome, Augustine would likely have seen the apse mosaic of Old St. Peters Basilica (c.322-329). Though demolished along with the structure in the 16th century, the original apse mosaic is recorded in manuscripts and seems to have depicted Christ as the Word of God, sitting, full-bodied and dressed in imperial robes, on a throne between saints Peter and Paul (Figure 5). Augustine's condemnation of visual art which depicts biblical fictions is evidence that though lavish public church art was common in Rome during the 4th century, the proper place and degree of visual art within churches and monasteries was still a heavily debated topic. Augustine never spoke out directly against images of Christ as God, as the Early Christian aniconists had, but nor did he suffer the content of public church art to mislead the spiritually illiterate.[256]

In this passage of *De Consensu Evangelistarum*, then, Augustine insists that the inspired words and literal meaning of Sacred Scripture must have priority over all pictures and images. Even art which is intended to edify viewers and assist in spiritual growth must be judged acceptable or unacceptable in light of the words of the Bible. It appears that tensions between image and logos must be resolved through the latter.

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[254] *De Consensu Evangelistarum.* 1:15-16; Augustine, "Harmony of the Gospels," trans. S.D.F. Salmond, 142-143.

[255] *Sermons*, 316. 5.

[256] See Chapter 2 for a discussion of early Christian aniconism and the ambiguous relationship early Christian art held with pagan art.

Conclusion:

Despite the rarity of Augustine of Hippo's written passages on visual art, a study of these texts shows that they possess a sophisticated coherence of thought, not uncharacteristic of this historical figure. Though previous scholars have of course seen and noted the existence of these passages on visual art, none have made a detailed historical analysis of them. In fact, most scholars have attempted to interpret these texts in light of Augustine's metaphysics of beauty. By doing so, they divorced these passages from the historical, social and religious contexts which give them meaning.

By contrast, I have here made an analysis of Augustine's writings on visual art, historically grounded in social and religious issues directly relevant to these pronouncements. These issues especially include the Late Antique Milanese trend of Christianized Neoplatonism, the ambiguous relationship between fourth-century neo-paganism and Christianity which was exemplified in practices associated with the cult of the dead, as well as the distinction even among Christian communities between those more advanced and those less advanced in their spiritual preparation and education.

Diverging from previous scholarship even further, my study made it clear that it would be an error to interpret these passages as indicative of Augustine's personal opinion of visual art. It is a credit to the rhetorical power of Augustine's words that they have made so many readers feel they know the "true inner man" of their author. However, even when included in the *Confessions*, Augustine's pronouncements on visual art were never intended to indicate a personal opinion but were rather a professional or official judgement.

We know of no extant writings of Augustine directly concerning visual art before his elevation to the office of bishop. With his eccelsiastical elevation, Augustine was ironically required to embroil himself more in certain social and political aspects of the Late Antique world than before his ordination and even his baptism. He was called upon to make pronouncements on a host of subjects upon which his pen had not dwelt before, including visual art.

As a bishop, Augustine interacted with two quite different groups of Christians, the spiritual elite of the Church as well as his spiritual non-elite or spiritually illiterate congregation. Augusitne's writings on visual art present a two-fold ecclesiastical attitude, his treatment of this subject differs as his intended audience changes. In his *Confessions* and *The City of God*, Augustine condemns visual art as a distraction for the spiritual elite, accusing artists and crafts persons of exploiting human weakness of the lust of the eyes to entrap viewers. And yet, Augustine is also tolerant of some spiritual deficiencies of his congregation, particularly their reliance on artistic images. In his Sermon 316, he directly employs visual art to make his verbal exposition of the biblical story of the stoning of Stephen more vivid and present, invoking a piece of art within his own church which sensibly illustrated this scene.

Inside the walls of his church, Augustine had control over the ways in which his spiritually illiterate congregation interacted with visual art. But outside his church, at places such as the gravesites, Augustine had apparently little power to forbid the seemingly idolatrous veneration of images of deceased loved ones. He spoke out adamantly against the use of visual art as connected with practises of the cult of the dead, which practices he associated directly with paganism. Augustine, though never overtly aniconic, also spoke out against visual art which confused the spiritually illiterate through the depiction of biblical lies, such as paintings in Rome of Peter and Paul with Christ. In his own church, Augustine appears to have made sure that visual art never conflicted with Holy Scripture, but instead directly illustrated it. By contrast, the artistic depictions of Paul with Christ are a blasphemous departure from the word of God. For Augustine, image must always conform to logos and, even then, images are only permissible in assisting the spiritual growth of the spiritually illiterate.

This is far from the last word that needs to be said on the subject of Augustine of Hippo's writings on the visual arts and their connection to the Late Antique, Early Medieval world. However, I hope it may help to redirect the scholarship as we move forward in this particularly rich, though challenging, field of Augustine studies.

Figures:

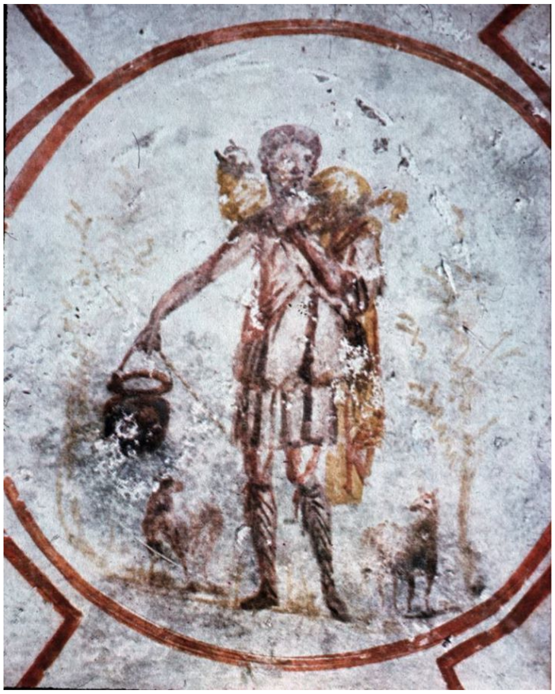


Figure 1 - *Good Shepherd*, early 3rd century, Catacomb of St Callixtus, Rome.

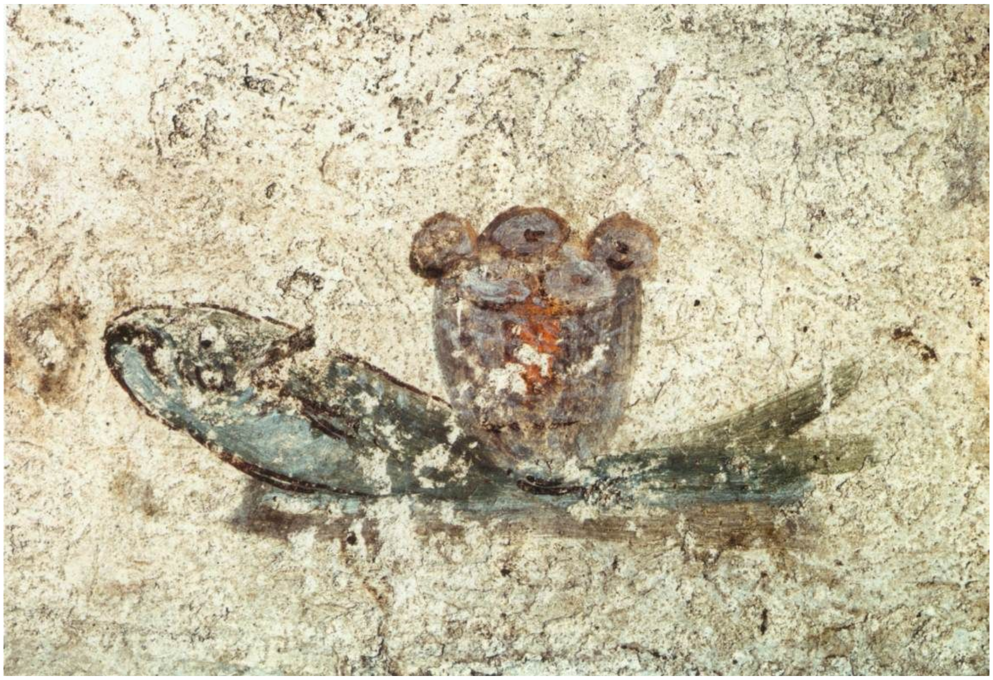


Figure 2 - *Fish and bread*, c. 200, Crypt of Lucina, Catacomb of St Callixtus, Rome.

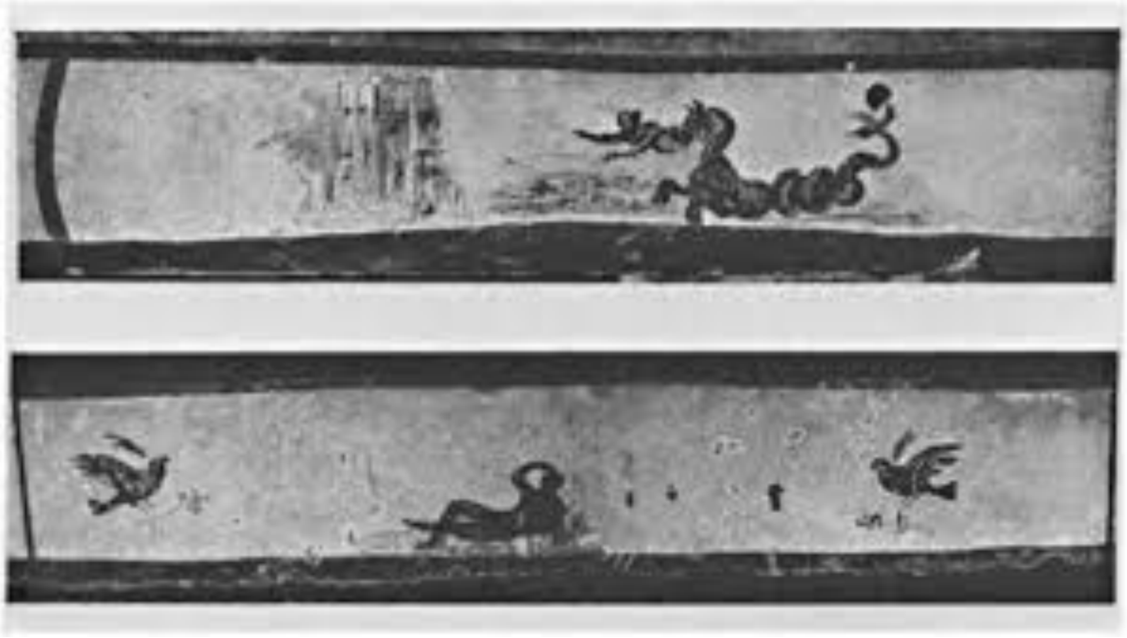


Figure 3 - *Jonah and the Whale*, early 3rd century, Catacomb of St Callixtus, Rome.

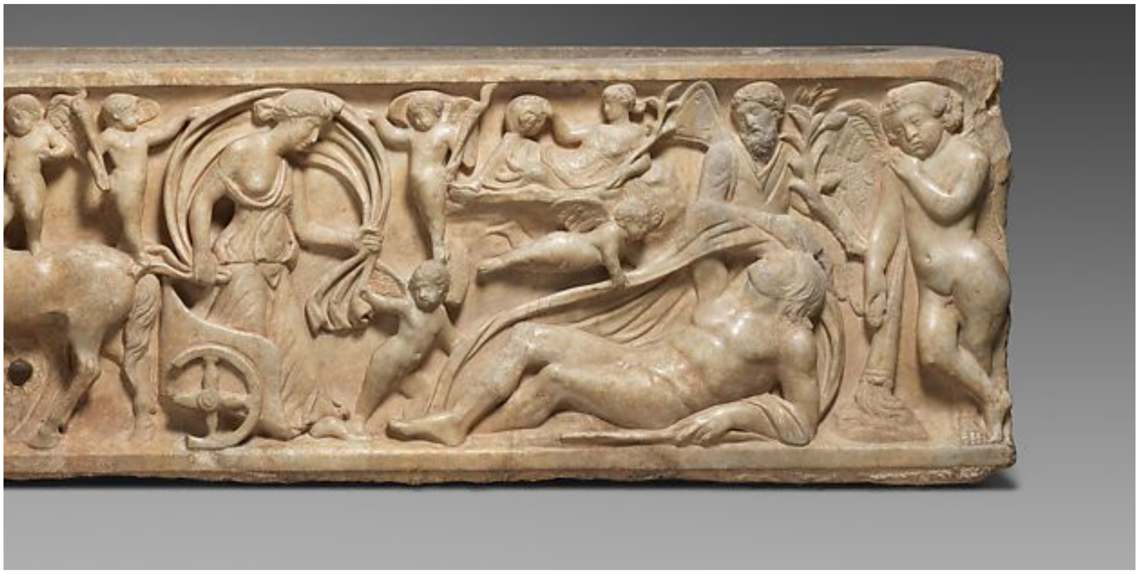
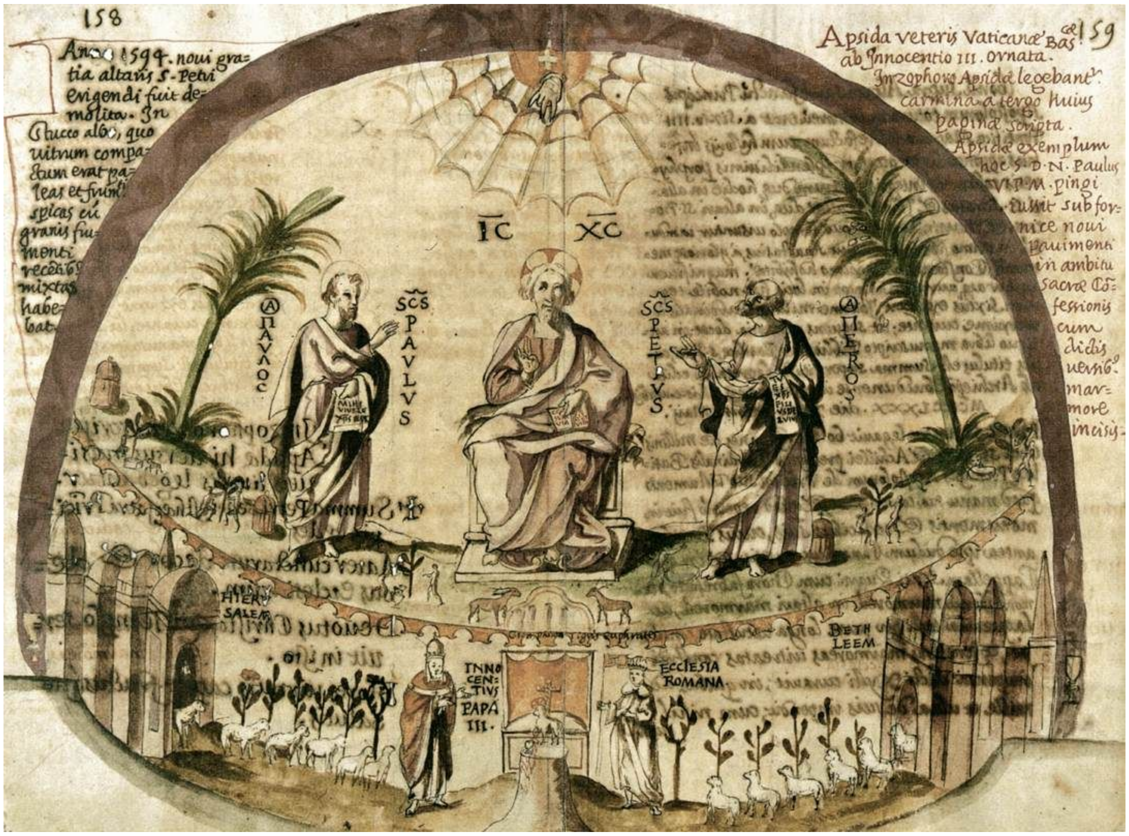


Figure 4 - Detail of *Marble sarcophagus with the myth of Endymion*, mid-2nd century C.E., Rome, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.


158
Anno 1594. noui gratia altaris S. Petri erigendi fuit demolita.
Apsida veteris Vaticanae Bas. ab Innocentio III. ornata.
159
IC
XC
SCS PAVLVS
SCS PETRVS
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BETH LEEM
INNOCENTIVS PAPA III.
ECCLESIA ROMANA

Figure 5 - Grimaldi, Giacomo. *Apse from the Old St. Peter's*, 1594, watercolour, Biblioteca Apostolica, Vatican.

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Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana.*

Augustine, *De Fide et Symbolo.*

Augustine, *De Moribus Ecclesiae.*

Augustine, *De Musica*.

Augustine, *De quaestionibus Dulcitii*.

Augustine, *De Trinitate*.

Augustine, *Epistles*.

Augustine, *In Psalmos 2*.

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