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THE INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM IN THE PAINTING OF THOMAS KINKADE

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The work of Thomas Kinkade is the subject of a discussion about contemporary Christian art in general. The artist's commercial success and the enduring popularity of his work have attracted the attention of both art historians and theologians. Among the issues discussed are the place of Christian art in modern mass culture, the role of religious symbolism in secular art, and its rethinking in connection with the spiritual needs of modern society. The most difficult question is the acceptability of the artist's image of "the world without the Fall" in the context of the Christian worldview, which is the central theme in Kinkade's landscapes. The article examines the most common points of view about these problems, analyzes possible approaches to the estimation of the artist's creative heritage in the context of visual theology.

Keywords: Thomas Kinkade, contemporary Christian art, visual theology, Christian symbolism in art.

ТРАКТОВКА ХРИСТИАНСКОЙ СИМВОЛИКИ В ЖИВОПИСИ ТОМАСА КИНКЕЙДА

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Творчество Томаса Кинкейда является предметом дискуссии, затрагивающей современное христианское искусство в целом. Коммерческий успех художника и непреходящая популярность его работ привлекают внимание как искусствоведов, так и теологов. Среди обсуждаемых вопросов – место христианского искусства в современной массовой культуре, роль религиозной символики в секулярном изобразительном искусстве, её переосмысление в связи с духовными потребностями современного общества. Наиболее сложным представляется вопрос о допустимости в контексте христианского мировоззрения предлагаемого художником образа «мира без грехопадения», являющегося центральной темой в пейзажах Кинкейда. В статье рассматриваются наиболее распространённые точки зрения на указанные проблемы, анализируются возможные подходы к оценке творческого наследия художника в контексте визуальной теологии.

Ключевые слова: Томас Кинкейд, современное христианское искусство, визуальная теология, христианская символика в искусстве.

Contemporary Christian art, especially its secular segment, poses a number of questions for researchers. The plots and images that have formed throughout the history of Christianity, their symbolic content and even iconography are rethought, included in the context of a completely new spiritual experience, without excluding the semantic field of Christian imagery. The situation appears when the artist "extracts from the Holy Scriptures other meanings not demanded by cult art" [Tulpe 2001, 180]. When the liturgical art continues to follow the established canon, secular Christian art, – being associated with secular space, everyday human life, – is looking for a new forms of expression of the modern spiritual ideal [Sukhorukova 2019, 59]. It demands the rejection of the established interpretation of plots, and provokes the appearance of new images that are necessary not only for creators, but also for spectators and consumers of art.

In contemporary art criticism, discussions about this phenomenon are conducted in three directions – (1) discussion of the commercialization of Christian art and related quality problems, (2) the formation of new iconographic patterns in secular art, and (3) the correctness of the interpretation of images from the point of view of the Christian canon. All three problems can be traced to the example of the work of Thomas Kinkade, one of the most popular and commercially demanded artists, who constantly turns to religious themes in his work. His paintings evoke controversial reactions from both art critics and theologians, some estimated it as an example of kitsch and "bad" theology or even heretical art, and at the same time, many critics admit that they have at least one object with a reproduction of Kinkade in their homes.

American artist William Thomas Kinkade (1958–2012) is widely known for idyllic landscapes, almost fabulous in their brightness and color palette. The main distinguishing feature of Kinkade's landscapes is the abundance of bright, shining light that permeates the entire image and creates a feeling of fantasy, something unreal. Kinkade not only called himself a "painter of light", but also patented this as a trademark, despite the fact that the term was previously applied to the other artists, in particular, landscape painters of the 19th century. These vibrant bucolic landscapes, magnificent in technical execution and seeming exaggeratedly decorative at first impression, have created the artist's reputation as a "master of kitsch" and made him the best-selling master of modern religious art.

In many interviews Thomas Kinkade kept saying that he got inspiration from God. Not all of his paintings are related to religious themes, but a significant part of the landscapes and small sculptures were not only interpreted by the author from the point of view of religion, but also carried direct religious symbolism. Thus, reproductions of landscapes printed on canvas are marked with a fish symbol and/or phrases from Holy Scripture, most often with a quote from the Gospel of John: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

At the same time, Kinkade, like many other artists working in the secular segment of Christian art, avoided depicting religious scenes or symbols, at least in traditional iconographic versions. This avoiding canonical iconography and the formation of a new iconography reflecting the spiritual experience of a secular

person can be described as the main trend of modern religious art. As an example, we can take the image of Christ saving the drowning apostle Peter: if in classical iconography we see what is happening from the point of view of an outside observer, then modern artists – Randy Friemel, Kim Yongsung (fig. 1), and others – put the observer in the place of the drowning apostle who sees from under the water column, the salvation-bearing light of Christ and his stretched hand.



Fig. 1. Kim Yongsung. His Mighty Hand
https://yongsungkimart.com/products/his-mighty-hand-by-yongsung-kim?variant=40677002510501

Artists are not trying to reform the church canon, they are trying to go away from the profanation of the sacred, from the transformation of the iconic image into the sphere of decorative and applied, in fact, functional art that exists in human space in the form of a poster, a postcard, a scheme for embroidery, a magnet on a refrigerator or a print on a T-shirt, but at the same time strive to create a constant visual reminder of Christian values and ideas, above all the idea of salvation. In the work of Kinkade, there are almost no images of Christ and scenes of Holy Scripture, the idea of salvation is most often personified by the landscape itself or its individual elements – small churches in the middle of a fairy forest or the constantly occurring image of a lighthouse. As the artist said in the interview about one of the landscapes, "Conquering the Storm" (1999), a stone cliff with a lighthouse standing on it, which is the center of the picture, symbolizes the inviolability of faith, thanks to which a person receives salvation, and the landscape itself was interpreted by him as an allegory in color, an inspired affirmation of the great gift of Faith, which allows to accept the greatness of the Lord as a source of inner strength[1].

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5c79OGKoTE.

The Kinkade's interpretation of the idea of salvation caused criticism both of theologians and believers. Responding to numerous critics who accused him of the exaggerated, strained pastorality of his landscapes, Kinkade has repeatedly stated that he seeks to portray an ideal world, a world without the fall. American theologian Jerram Barrs formulated three aspects of the content of religious art which place the art object into the space of visual theology: in each image we see Paradise in its original grandeur, Paradise that was lost to humanity, and the promise of the possibility of returning to the light of heaven [Barrs 2013, 26]. It is the contrast between the feeling of loss and the hope of gain that creates an emotional experience, makes a person think about the salvation of his soul and about his own path, which is one of the main tasks of religious art. But if one removes the loss from this system, excludes the fall, leaving only an ideal light, not disturbed by anything, only a sentimental-romantic image remains, which does not have the depth necessary for the visual embodiment of a religious idea.

The artist's landscapes, depicting an ideal world without shadows, conflicts and problems, do not lose popularity due to the fact that it is, in fact, the art of escapism, depicting the reality in which everyone would like, if not to live, then to be from time to time, hiding from everyday problems in a peaceful cottage in the middle of an ever-blooming garden. But Christian art has never been escapist in content, its goal is the opposite – to hurt the soul of a person, to remind of the imperfection of the surrounding world, to encourage him to spiritual growth. As George Hunsinger aptly remarked, grace that does not disturb the peace of the soul is not grace [Hunsinger 2001, 18]. The desire of modern art to get away from conflict, from all disturbing topics reflects the needs of society, but comes into dissonance with the essence of Christian art, which, in relation to the work of Kinkade, gives rise to diametrically opposite points of view – from laudatory assessments of the image of an ideal world, to which every person should strive and which seems simple and achievable, to the direct accusations of incongruity of such an image with the Christian canon.

But there is even more important question posed by researchers to Kinkade's work: is it possible to speak about salvation in the world without the Fall? Just as resurrection cannot be accomplished if there was no death, salvation necessarily presupposes that something to be saved from has already happened. But if there was no Fall, then what to be saved from? If a "world without the Fall" is depicted, then the true context of the religious symbols that appear in the artist's paintings is lost. A striking example is the painting "Sunrise" (1999). The landscape depicts a cross standing on a high cliff over an endless space drowning in a fog. Like in the previously mentioned landscape "Conquering the storm", we see the image associated with Salvation – the main Christian symbol, ascending over the world in the rays of the rising sun. The composition of the landscape and its main elements refer to the famous "Tetschen Altar" ("Cross in the Mountains", 1808) of the German romanticist Caspar David Friedrich (fig. 2), moreover, Kinkade's painting looks like a conscious repetition and a reference to the prototype, but it reads completely differently.

The crucifixion is the center of Friedrich's painting, and the rays of the rising sun, as if radiating from the cross, create a powerful image of atonement for

original sin. In Kinkade's painting, there is no Crucifixion and no Calvary: the cross is framed by a spectacular landscape that does not refer to the symbolism of Christianity, and although the cross itself is perceived by the viewer as a symbol of salvation, this symbol is placed in a world where there was no original sin and crucifixion.



Fig. 2. Caspar David Friedrich. Cross in the Mountains (Tetschen Altar). 1808
© Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

This picture does not show the image of salvation, but one of the images of idyllic world that Kinkade puts in his paintings. We see a similar image in the painting "Walk of Faith" (2011), which depicts Christ and Peter the Apostle walking along the path of a blossoming garden. There is a scene of the handing over of the keys – but a scene in which there is neither drama, nor triumphality, nor the feeling of an insurmountable border between the earthly world and the heavenly world. The ideal landscape, in which the heroes are, is both realistic and infinitely far from reality. The scene that takes place in our imperfect world seems to be moved into the idealized dream space.

Daniel Siedell, an American art historian and critic who deals with contemporary religious art, characterized Kinkade's work as "dangerous", criticizing the artist for the fact that, refusing to deal with the imperfection of our world, he par-

asitizes on the prejudices and expectations of the public instead of expanding the horizon of their experiences [Siedell 2012]. Nevertheless a work that corresponds to our ideas is comfortable for perception, calms and gives a feeling of security and, therefore, fulfills another important goal of Christian art – to give hope and consolation to the audience. The light that fills Kinkade's paintings, thus, can be perceived both as a distortion of the Christian idea, and as a direct appeal to it, and the discussion about this is still relevant.

Speaking about light in Kinkade's landscapes, we note that this aspect of the artist's work causes skepticism among theologians – primarily because here we also see a rejection of the idea that is fundamentally significant for Christian art. The light in the icons or secular paintings always has one source – God. Christ is personified by light and personifies light, and it does not matter whether we face the Crucifixion, Christ walking on the waters, or an allegorically rethought image. The presence of God in the picture always shows where the light comes from. Kinkade's light, evenly scattered throughout the paintings and emanating from many randomly placed sources, breaks this tradition. The world of Kinkade is flooded with light, not because the presence of God is felt in it, but because the artist shows an ideal world that does not know the Fall and sin – beautiful, but at the same time not ours.

It was Kinkade's work, or rather, his commercial success and popularity among believers, that gave new urgency to the question – can the visual preaching of Christian values exist without addressing the imperfection of the world around us? The demand for this painting is evident, because in every fifth American house there is at least one reproduction of Kinkade, but it poses another problem: can art that is religious in content be mass? Or, to put the question differently, can a painting that is visually comfortable and does not evoke emotions and feelings in most people, can be considered religious in content? Can the preaching in which the priest speaks only about what his parishioners want to hear, be effective? The answer depends both on the goal of the author and on the result achieved in each particular case. But there is no doubt that the discussion that began around the work of the popular American painter and extended to all modern art entails changes not only in religious art, but also in its understanding from the point of view of both art history and theology.

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