This essay examines Martin Heidegger’s philosophical reading of Raphael’s painting *Sistine Madonna*. Three explanatory lines of Heidegger’s thought are discussed: the *Sistine Madonna* in the historical transformation of art, a phenomenological analysis of the image, and finally a reading of the painting in light of the close connection between image and Eucharist. Each of these lines contributes towards a hermeneutical appreciation of the image that foregrounds the profound theological dimension of Heidegger’s philosophical approach to Raphael’s painting.

**INTRODUCTION**

The *Sistine Madonna*, an outstanding painting by the Italian renaissance artist Raphael (*Rafaello Sanzio*, 1483–1520), is a frequently commented artwork, yet the grounds for this popularity are not clear. The *Madonna* is certainly one of the more powerful works of art in the Western canon; debate about its origin and inspiration as well as of its content and purpose have multiplied over the centuries. The green background curtain, the Madonna holding the infant Christ stepping from a mysterious origin into the world, two saints, one on either side, the expression of wonder and affection in the eyes and faces of the Virgin and the child – have provoked endless discussion. No small number of philosophers, writers, poets and painters have contributed to the mushrooming dialogue about this fascinating Renaissance painting. From Picasso, Dali, Malevic and Wahrhol in the world of painting, to Dostoyevsky, Florenskij and Grossman in literature, and from Goethe, Hegel and Herder to Novalis, Nietzsche and Shopenhauer in philosophy, the *Sistine Madonna* has become one of the most hotly discussed treasures in Western cultural history. Furthermore, this painting has itself endured cultural vicissitudes over the centuries. Commissioned in 1512 by Pope Julius II for the Benedictine Church of Saint Sixtus in Piacenza, the painting was purchased in 1754 by Augustus III of Poland and ended up first in his private collection, and later in the Dresden Gallery. Rescued from destruction during World War II, it was stored in a tunnel; it was subsequently recovered by the Red Army and transported to Moscow, where it found a temporary home in the Pushkin Museum. After ten years there, as a gesture of goodwill by the Soviets, it was restored to Dresden in 1955, where it is today on public display in the *Old Masters Gallery* of the State Art Collections.1

The *Sistine Madonna* has achieved prominence in Western imagery, generating a multitude of interpretations over the past century. Numerous thinkers have addressed the *Sistine* as an object for philosophical inquiry. It aroused the curiosity of a number of German philosophers of the 20th century, among them Bloch, Freud and Heidegger, who were all intrigued by the symbolic power of Raphael’s canvas. The first emergence of the *Sistine* in philosophical study
cannot be easily ascertained. The painting was read in different contexts and from different perspectives, inspiring continuously novel interpretations. Reflecting the attraction of the Sistine and its provocation to profound reflection, philosophers have frequently dealt with this image. The painting invites an in-depth exploration of its iconic universe. The Sistine suggests something uniquely meaningful that has caused even modern philosophy to meditate upon the possible religious origin of art. Martin Heidegger offered a distinctive approach to understanding Raphael’s painting within the horizon of the philosopher’s well-known hermeneutical approach to art. In 1955, the same year of the repatriation of the canvas, he dedicated a short paper to the painting entitled On the Sistine (Über die Sixtina), which appeared originally in the book by Marielene Putcher. Subsequently; the text has also been published in the complete edition of Heidegger’s texts, Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens.

Here I examine Heidegger’s hermeneutical reading by focusing on his three explanatory lines: firstly, I will establish how Heidegger interprets the historical destiny of the Sistine; thereafter, I will elaborate Heidegger’s onto-phenomenological understanding of the image, relating his interpretation with a thesis he developed earlier in the Origin of the work of art (1935). Finally, I will trace the theological aspect of Heidegger’s interpretation to an intimate connection he opens up between the image and Eucharist. In this study it is the theological impact of Heidegger’s hermeneutical approach that will be highlighted.

I. FROM POETRY TO PAINTING: TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF VISUAL ART

Reflection upon the visual arts occupied Heidegger in the mid-1930s: in the Introduction to Metaphysics (1935), in Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry (1936) and ultimately in The Origin of the Work of Art (1936). For Heidegger listening is a primordial act of the existential being-open of Dasein. His analysis is primarily concerned with the meaning of language, particularly in poetry. The poet, as ‘the shepherd of Being’, brings the word to Being, revealing Being in the order of events (Ereignis). Thinking through the word is the path of original hermeneutics in which a genuine understanding of Being is recognized. In The Origin of the Work of Art Heidegger states that ‘all art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings, is, in essence, poetry.’ Given that poetry is the production of revelation, as he explains, listening is the initial act of our opening to Being. Consequently, poetry (Dichtung), conceived as poieisis or “bringing into being”, is the true essence of art. Heidegger, however, sought an understanding of a work of art embracing the experience not only of listening but also of seeing as an access to Being. In light of the doctrine of ontological historicity, Heidegger thinks of art as the becoming and happening of truth; or, to use his preferred concept, art happens as unconcealment (Aletheia), as the historical disclosure of intelligibility in time. The true historical role of art is the ‘setting-itself-to-work of truth’. From a Heideggerian perspective, then, every great work of art gathers our historical world and so ‘grounds history’. The artwork, then, is established as a ‘happening of truth’ that is capable of an ‘opening up of world’.

Heidegger found the significance of the visual arts to be relevant also for the inquiry regarding the ontology of art. Such reflection occurred in encounters with various paradigmatic artworks, commencing with Van Gogh’s painting the Pair of Shoes, the study of which marked the beginning of Heidegger’s philosophical engagement with the visual arts. The encounter with the Sistine Madonna offered a distinct moment for Heidegger, giving him occasion to address a painting not only in artistic terms but also as a theological subject. His remarks on the Sistine Madonna are not only philosophical; they manifest a kind of theological turn in Heidegger’s thought. In his reflections, Heidegger’s religious patrimony emerges once more. In the paper On
the Sistine, Heidegger deals not only with a hermeneutical approach to the meaning of Raphael’s painting, but also with several theological issues inherent in the study of a visual work of art. In fact, Heidegger’s thoughts invite a religious response to a crisis of the age of representation. In this context, Heidegger’s inquiry into the Sistine constitutes one of the most powerful manifestations of his ‘theological thinking’.

An encounter with the Sistine Madonna on display in Dresden’s Gallery, may first provoke a question about its origin; in The Origin of the Work of Art Heidegger clarifies the idea of such origin:

‘Origin means here that from where and through which a thing is what it is and how it is. That which something is, as it is, we call its nature. The origin of something is the source of its nature. The question of the origin of the artwork asks about the source of its nature.’

The origin of art, according to Heidegger, is the source from which its essence originally springs, a sort of primordial leap. Origin implies the question of nature, the question of the provenance of art. Meditation on the origin of the Sistine Madonna provides a unique possibility for philosophical engagement with the source and historical world of the image.

In his initial reflection, Heidegger declares, ‘Around this image gathers all the unresolved issues on art and on works of art’. Philosophical insight is attained through an experience of the work itself. The experience of the Sistine Madonna gains in relevance, because this painting gathers ‘all unresolved issues’ that fundamentally imply the historical transformation of art.

II. THE MADONNA SISTINA IN THE HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATION OF ART

Heidegger calls our attention to the significance of the place of Raphael’s painting, which was originally the Benedictine church of Saint Sixtus in Piacenza. This original architectonic setting is important. The painting as exhibited in the gallery is experienced differently because it is separated from this original place and, consequently, from its true nature of being a ritual-image. The altarpiece, in fact, belongs to the church and, more precisely to the altar of the church. The question of belonging is a fundamental reflection regarding the root of the Sistine, and the specific character of that belonging returns repeatedly in Heidegger’s reading.

According to art historians, Raphael painted the Sistine Madonna between 1512 and 1514. The picture, as it was designed to function as an artificial window, gave Raphael the occasion to anticipate the popular baroque optical illusions. Indeed, the painting shows in its composition another window, with parted curtains, revealing an entrance by the Virgin carrying Jesus in her arms. The original intention of the image was to be a ‘painted window’ (Fenstergemaelde), claims Heidegger - not a ‘painted canvas’ (Taffelbild).

‘The painted window and the painted canvas are here respectively the image in different ways. The fact that the Sistine became a painted canvas and set in the gallery conceals an authentic historical course beginning with the Renaissance. Perhaps the Sistine, in its original form, was not a painted window either. It was, and remains, although transformed, a unique image of its kind.’

This distinction between a painted window and a painted canvas runs through all of Heidegger’s discussion regarding the Sistine and carries us to the question about Sistine’s world. By moving the image from church to gallery, the essence of the image has been profoundly transformed. Proper understanding of the Sistine as a ritualwork focuses on the new historical world of this artwork, which, in Heidegger’s opinion, conceals its authentic form as well as its genuine world. In the modern world of aesthetic representation, the image finds itself having lost or been
deprived of its authentic power to be an opening. The image, transformed in essence into a work of art, loses itself in the strangeness,’ declares Heidegger.12

Heidegger is aware of the status of the image as belonging to an originally sacred world of ritual in which an image can execute an opening into otherness. The initial function of the Sistine was as an image-window in the church of Saint Sixtus. The Sistine now on display in the gallery has been concealed instead by the aesthetic dimension. Consequently, the ritual core of the image has become hidden by an historical transformation of the artwork, by the moving of the image from the church to the gallery, from a religious sense to an aesthetic representation. This process reduces the image to an aesthetic object, which marks the end of its original purpose. The basis for Heidegger’s claim that the gallery has concealed the image’s religious core rests on the transformation of the image from ritualwork to artwork. What was transformed is not the painting itself, but its visual appeal; window and canvas are two different ways the image is portrayed. In the first meaning, the image is an act occasioning and enabling openness; in the second it is an object for aesthetic consideration.

Furthermore, a window is primarily a spatial concept that offers access to openness; it is also, Heidegger insists, a notion that is linked to the phenomenological aspect of the image. The window recalls something more primordial, and emphasizes the image as a margin between being open and concealing. Yet in the gallery the opening of the painted window is ignored, and the image is itself disengaged from its primary performance of opening a place. Heidegger has elaborated this same idea in The Origin of the Work of Art:

‘The “Aegina” sculptures in the Munich collection and Sophocles’ Antigone in the best critical edition are, as the works they are, turned out of their own essential space. However high their status and power to impress, however well-preserved and however certain their interpretation, their relocation in a collection has withdrawn them from their world. Yet even when we try to cancel or avoid such a displacement of the work – by, for example, visiting the temple at its site in Paestum or Bamberg cathedral in its square – the world of the work that stands there has disintegrated.’13

In the same passage, Heidegger argues that the genuine world of the work of art has been lost:

‘The works are no longer what they were. The works themselves, it is true, are what we encounter; yet they themselves are what has been. As what has been they confront us within the realm of tradition and conservation. Henceforth, they remain nothing but objects of this kind. That they stand there before us is indeed still a consequence of their former standing-in-themselves. But it is no longer the same as that. Their former self-sufficiency has deserted them. The whole of the art industry, even if taken to extremes and with everything carried out for the sake of the works themselves, reaches only as far as the object-being of the works. This, however, does not constitute their work-being.’14

To illustrate this point in the case of the Sistine, Heidegger argues with art historian Theodor Hetzer, who speculated that, when Raphael’s painting had arrived in Dresden, it became clear that the Madonna was at ‘home everywhere’. According to this interpretation, Madonna, due its universal character, could not be linked to a particular church.15 Heidegger proceeds by reminding us of the poetic environment to which the painting belongs – to the church and to the altar – and he declares: ‘Wherever this image can still be displayed, it has already lost its place. It remains to be denied the ostentation of its inaugural essence, namely, the determination of this place.16

In this regard, Heidegger’s revision of Madonna leads to the elucidation of its historical destiny by the transformation of the ritualwork into an aesthetic object. In its transformation from the altar piece to the art piece, Madonna succumbed to a process of decline, which means
essentially that Madonna can no longer open up or bring forth its truth. Although Heidegger saw this as decay or disenchantment, he did not argue that Madonna had lost its greatness; however, with the displacement of the painting to the gallery for exhibition, the image ceased to do the work it once did, having been deprived of its ritual world. Even if the gallery preserves the aesthetic currency of Sistine, the environment in which it is exhibited reduces this by unavoidably concealing its uniqueness. ‘The aesthetics of the museum is a form of representation that reduces all works to their “position” within an exhibition-space. This space conceals the site the painting in its own Bildwesen unfolds.’17 The true work of art is obscured behind the modern re-presentation. The task of one who would understand Sistine would be to trace the image to the time before this historical shift took place through the emergence of the modern, merely aesthetic mode of attention.

Skepticism regarding the claim that museums or galleries are the places in which to set images that have lost their original place colors Heidegger’s entire argument. He reaffirms his vision of the museum as a locus that reveals the poverty of the modern historical position of art: ‘The museum display shows everything in a uniform exhibition. In this there is only order, no places. The Sistine belongs to the church in Piacenza, not in an historical and antiquarian sense, but in its essence as a picture. According to this, the image will always require to be in that place.’18

Heidegger’s invocation of the original place – the church – as the true place for the work and its power is followed by his critique of the modern museum aesthetic as a typical product of a rationalized structure of representation. ‘The “museum” recalls one essential phenomenological indication of the being of art in this epoch.’15 Heidegger is alluding to a reconceptualization of the notion of art as a medium of aesthetic delight. The public collection and exhibition of artwork reveals the tendencies leading towards a reduced recognition of aesthetic value, which limitation Heidegger perceived to be pervasive in the cultural landscape of modernity. As such, the gallery embodies the historical condition of modernity – re-presentation. Before the emergence of modern aesthetics, art was in the service of ritual; it was oriented outside itself. In a museum, art became an object of aesthetical consumption. The museum offers engagement with the work of art, not with the ritual work that ends up lost in this historical change of location. The very essence of the work is, therefore, concealed within the viewer’s engagement with each work’s limited representation. The museum homogenizes all works in the same exhibition-space.20 The inner logic of the work of art ends with the emergence of another reason behind its presentation, of another sensibility, i.e., aesthetic exaltation, and of another disposition, i.e., the museum as a social institution. What remains of the image is only the exhibition-value of the painting, not the image in its essential being-opening and being-ritualwork.

Interrogation of the Sistine becomes even more exceptional if, as Heidegger indicates, we consider the paradigmatic shift during the Renaissance, which essentially consists in moving ‘from cult images to the cult of images’, a transformation of the image from something that ‘formerly had been assigned a special reality and taken literally as a visible manifestation of the sacred person into the work of the artist and a manifestation of art’.21 In this sense, Heidegger declares ‘The fact that the Sistina became a painted canvas displayed in the gallery hides in itself the actual historical course of the western art starting with the Renaissance’.

This historical course starting from Renaissance is the move into modernity, which replaces the encounter with ritual images with an admiration of the aesthetic value of the image. The result of this process is estrangement of the image from its original self. Re-living the art is linked to the exaltation of its artistic status, which must be collected, ‘restored’, and finally exhibited. This is what Heidegger is alluding to as the historical transformation of art: in galleries and museums, artworks are estranged from themselves and subordinated to evaluation.
according to an aesthetic criterion. In the eyes of the modern spectator, the *Sistine* is not the same as it once was in the eyes of the Benedictine monks in the church of Saint Sixtus.

The thesis that the *Sistine* has lost its religious significance, mediated by ritual, has been recurrently stated. Heidegger’s idea appeals in this context, not only through the observation that museums deprive works of art of their original setting, but also by the surprising charge that the works have suffered the eradication of their true core – the Eucharist. Heidegger’s sceptical view of the museum’s power to preserve and exhibit artworks is based on an implicit presupposition that museums make evident the modern reorientation of the image from rite to art. Because of this reorientation, Heidegger holds, we can no longer identify the original *Sistine* immersed in its liturgical context. In this case, present in the background of Heidegger’s thinking there remains the appeal to an authentic experience of the *Sistine*, an appeal to which I will return in the course of my analysis as one of the most important issues that arises in Heidegger’s interpretation. Since the question of the image is closely connected with the question of lived experience, it is necessary to examine the place and issue of *seeing the image*, following the direction of Heidegger’s reflection.

**III. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY OF IMAGE**

What is the *Sistine* in its being-image? What emerges from this remarkable picture that challenges the eye and the mind? The dispositions and dilemmas of the *Sistine* relate to matters of history that cannot respond regarding the complete truth of this image. The significance of the *Sistine* lies beyond the cultural legacy or its aesthetic value. The art-historical analysis is not enough to discover the essential, which arises from its original world. Hence, the image initiates an existential appropriation, a search for an essential knowledge that leads to comprehension of the profound resonances of being-work.

Thus Heidegger expands his interpretive horizon and integrates into his hermeneutics the counterpoint of phenomenological recognition as the essential step in order to reach the meaning of the image beyond its historical transformation. The *Sistine* as a liturgical image, now profanely abducted into a secular context, points back to the uniqueness of its iconic character (*Bild*). Heidegger’s first step in elucidating the meaning of the *Sistine* is devoted to a re-evaluation of its symbolic features; Heidegger grounds his account of the *Sistine* in a phenomenological description. A phenomenological return upon the image intends to restore its world and work, which are closely tied to its origin. The question he asks is: what is the fundamental act of the image?

From the question of performing emerges the conception of the *Sistine* as an image: ‘The word “image” ought to mean only this: countenance in the sense of glance as advent’. Countenance (*Anlitz*), glance (*Engegenblick*) and Advent (*Ankunft*) constitute three reciprocal moments that characterize the image in its original movement. The image, conceived as reciprocity, executes an opening according to its essence. In Raphael’s painting, Heidegger recognizes the event of arrival in the sense of a visage, which arrival intersects the spectator’s glance in a reciprocal opening. Yet, before the distinction between ‘window’ and ‘canvas’, the image is originally an interplay of opening in the act of a glance. In configuring the openness, the image keeps a spectator’s glance open to an arrival, and within this dynamic of openness, the work become the face of otherness, the aspect of God’s shining. In this sense, the image is a communion, not merely representation of sacred figures, stories or dogmas, but their offering shining-forth.

The image is therefore viewed as a gaze. The image allows for the visibility of an entrance as well as the visibility of a human receiving. This phenomenological description of what happens
in the experience of the image is highlighted in Raphael’s painting. The depiction of the vision makes visible the reciprocity between human and divine gazes. Such an image, conceived as the event of face and glance, accomplishes a reciprocal transformation of the spectator.

To articulate an account of epiphany, Heidegger thinks of the image as an act of opening that invokes the Entrance, the arrival of the highest radiance.

‘Regarding the painted window we shall ask: what is a window? Its border frames the limitlessness of radiance to gather it across the boundary of a freely giving appearance. The window, conceived as an openness to the access of the imminent appearance, is the gaze in the Entrance.’

Such phenomenological insight becomes clear through focusing on the theme of the Sistine—the appearance of the Entrance, which suggests a sort of inversion of the figures: ‘Mary brings the child Jesus in the way that she is herself brought into the light of His entrance which, every time it is viewed, brings the secret hiddenness of its provenance.’

The act of bringing remains focal for Heidegger. Phenomenological explication discovers that it is at the same time an act of revealing and of concealing. It reveals the advent of Mary and Jesus, but it hides its secret provenance. The bringing into the ‘light’ not only carries metaphysical significance, that essentially implies ‘the radiance of truth’ or the ‘splendor’ of manifestation. Such radiance springs from the modality of the image as a ‘heavenly window’ characterized by openness. Raphael’s painting is dominated by the act of bringing as a manner of appearing and a radiance of the Entrance. The Christophanic Entrance fills the entire scene, suggesting an upwelling into presence. The distinguishing trait of the image must be conceived as a visible encounter with the otherness that it affords. The image is, rather, assessed by the particular mode of coming into presence that is enfleshed in the gaze meeting the Entrance: ‘the manifestation of God making himself man’.

The image becomes a source of perceiving the Entrance, the locus of an epiphany-like disclosure involved by the unexpected radiant appearance. In this meaning, Heidegger emphasizes the ‘crossing gaze’ (das blickende Schauen) that gathers in the contemplation of the Entrance. Far from being an aesthetic object or a representation of the divine, the image, according to its nature as work, emerges as the illuminating event in itself, majestic and intimate, sublime and immanent. In its manifestation, the image appears to move towards the spectator, giving the sensation of being within its event. The image expands beyond its boundaries and brings the spectator into the event. Heidegger points out that the Sistine is experienced as an act of bringen: the bringing of Jesus by Mary, but also the bringing of the spectator into the image-event. So bringen becomes not only the theme of the image, but the image in itself. This action conveys not only the argument of this particular image, but also the sense of an entire overarching mode of religious representation, marked by an epiphany erupting into presence. Madonna, as Hans Belting observes, ‘is stepping into the world of the observer’.

Because the image is essentially revealing, as made prominent by Heidegger, the Sistine’s parted curtains capture the image in its phenomenological performance. The image appears to be a kind of phenomenological vision. Raphael, in fact, has painted a vision, as is argued by art historian Hans Belting:

‘The painting presents itself as a vision, which culminates in the quiet gaze the Virgin bestows on the beholder. The way that the curtains are apparently attached to the picture frame turns the painting into a sacred theatre of art, while the elevation of the painted vision to a celestial region intensified the ecstasy of their aesthetic experience.’

According to Heidegger’s pronouncement, previously formulated in The Origin of the Work of Art, the vocation of art is unconcealment. The resonance of this meaning to his analysis of
the *Sistine* is evident. The *Sistine* is recognized as a site of unconcealedness. Heidegger holds that art makes *open*, thereby visibly providing an experience of disclosure.

‘Much of his later work was concerned with reviving an experience of the work of art as a world-disclosive experience, a project he pursued through repeated reflection on Greek architecture, the paintings of Raphael, Van Gogh, Klee, and others, and the poetry of Hölderin, Rilke, Trakl, and George.’

In thinking about the *Sistine* as revealing, Heidegger has established a sophisticated analysis that involved a range of topics starting with the historical condition of art, then the nature of art as disclosure, and finally an appreciation of the image as sacramental event. Exploring this, the most far-reaching thesis, I shall in what follows take a closer look at Heidegger’s final and crucial interpretation of the *Sistine*.

**IV. FROM IMAGE TO EUCHARIST: SACRAMENTAL EMANATION OF THE SISTINE MADONNA**

Heidegger’s analytic approach, concerned to highlight what makes the *Sistine* a work of disclosure, was profoundly inspired by the claim that art, properly so called, is a ‘happening of truth’. Reflection upon an interaction of the image with experience and thought mobilized successive observations on features of the image. Heidegger’s analysis aims to trace the lived experience, not an aesthetic response to the painting. Following this programme, the *Sistine* is a particular source of experience that provides an encounter with the ‘happening of truth’. However, Heidegger’s final reflections on the *Sistine* contain distinctly theological elements that open the way towards a new level of appreciation of the disclosure of the image – as Incarnation and Eucharist, these being the *world* and the *act* that identify the image as coming into presence.

In the end, Heidegger reconceives the essence of the *Sistine* in light of its original setting in the liturgical world. The initial argument about the place of the image, as well as about its original form as a window, leads us to regard the image as rooted in the event of the Incarnation and in the sacrament of the Eucharist. What constitutes the authentic essence of the *Sistine Madonna* is the setting of its sacred world, not the environment of a gallery. The historical transformation of the painting into a purely aesthetic phenomenon has not completely concealed its ritual nature. Despite the reductive tendencies of modern aestheticism and its procedure, the *Sistine* has preserved traces of its liturgical function and world. With the purpose of identifying where the *Sistine Madonna* was founded, Heidegger proposes two notions. The first concerns the *world*-ground of the image, and the second concerns the work-act. In fact, the *Sistine* opens up in its own sacred world by bringing forth the truth of *Incarnation* and by its performance as a ritual work. Its function emerges from ritual practice and is participates within the liturgical memorial. Heidegger foregrounds the incarnational and Eucharistic identity of the *Sistine*: ‘An image such as this shows the manifestation of God making himself man; it shows the transformation which takes place at the altar as “transubstantiation”, as the most proper part of the Sacrifice of the Mass’.

From this theological perspective, since the *Sistine* is understood as an act of disclosure, namely, as the unveiling of the Incarnation, it shows itself constitutively rooted in the event of Revelation. The image, therefore, represents the sacramental emanation of the event; it is the face which makes visible the sacramental coming into presence. Heidegger argues that the image and the Eucharist open two complementary paths of the disclosure. The image reflects the event in the gaze, the Eucharist makes the event present in the act of transubstantiation. The image does not explain the sacred performance. It glances at what happened in the sacrifice, because the image is a sort of a symbolic mirror. Furthermore, the image is the opening whereby
the event emanates or comes into presence. What we may see is essentially rooted in the Eucharistic transformation (Wandlung). The image is neither a copy (Abbildung) nor a sign (Sinnbild) of the sacred transformation; rather, the Sistine is ‘the schein of the play of time-space as the place where the sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated’. The Sistine is therefore an altarpiece in a ‘very deep sense’, as Heidegger proposed, because the Sistine is not a mere depiction, but becomes an epiphany through the ritual act of consecration.

Heidegger’s fundamental strategy in discussing the Sistine Madonna is to rethink the image on the basis of its original place and performance – the church and the Eucharist – and from there to re-formulate the Sistine as a ‘Eucharistic image’ that reveals the event of the Incarnation. This intention, surprisingly, is not generated from an exclusively philosophical notion; another source is Heidegger’s adherence to a form of theological thinking. We here encounter the contribution of theological meaning, particularly in the association of the image with the Incarnation and its Eucharistic explication. By re-appropriating the liturgical identity of the Sistine Madonna, Heidegger foregrounds its disclosure; the essence of the ritual act therefore turns out to be identical with the substance of the image. Coming into presence, which happens in the ritual act of consecration, is revealed in the shape of the image.

With regard to the ground, the main thesis about the rootedness of the image in the event of ‘God making himself man’, and the reconsideration of the image as the ritualwork of consecration, can be further illuminated by Heidegger’s reflection on the Greek temple and the sacred image in the Origin of the Work of Art. What makes the temple the place of gathering is the coming into presence of the divine.

‘A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. (...) The building encloses the figure of god and, within this concealment, allows it to stand forth through the columned hall within the holy precinct. Through the temple, the god is present in the temple.’

The temple is therefore established by the coming into presence of the god. The temple does not represent the god, but it is a place of the unconcealment of the god’s presence. The sculpture or the image, therefore, “is not a portrait whose purpose is to make it easier to realize what the god looks like; rather, it is a work that lets the god himself become present and thus is the god himself.” In a similar way the question of the setting of the Sistine in the church arises, but that setting is essentially different from its placement in the exhibition. In fact, the purpose of the image in the genuine sense is not to be a representational object, but a luminous disclosure of the epiphany. The setting of the Sistine establishes the place of coming into presence of the Sacred.

‘The setting up we refer to is an arousal in the sense of dedication and praise. Here, “setting up” no longer means merely putting into place. To dedicate means to consecrate (heiligen), in the sense that, in functional establishment, the holy (Heilige) is opened up as the holy and the god is called forth into the openness of its presence. Praise belongs to dedication as doing honour to the dignity and splendour of the god. Dignity and splendour are not properties beside and behind which there stands, additionally, the god. Rather, it is in the dignity, in the splendour, that the god comes to presence.’

Therefore, the ritualwork, like the temple or the sacred image, is a form that enacts the presence of the sacred. In gathering the human and the divine within ritual celebration, the temple provides the opportunity for persons to participate and to dwell in the essence of their own being. The temple provides a place for the Holy. The greatness of the work lies in its form as manifestation of the sacred world brought forth. Fabricated and consecrated, the work sets up a place for the opening up of the sacred. The Sistine Madonna, first conceived as a ritualwork of consecration, as a window gathering an Entrance, is now seen more as an act of coming into presence than as the dwelling of the divine. Heidegger wishes to show how the Sistine
authentically has worked as an epiphanical opening, or disclosure of epiphany. As a work of celebration, it has the qualities of glorious radiance. In sum, the Sistine, immersed into a festive mood, is a liturgical work or, more precisely, the Sistine itself is a solemn ritualwork of praise.

Thinking about the Sistine as a ritualwork, rooted in the sacramental act of the Eucharistic transubstantiation that, in its turn, is founded in the Incarnation-event, brings Heidegger to associate its philosophical perspective with the classical theological formulation of this dogma. Transubstantiation in this view is seen to be the core of the image, as transubstantiation is the core of the Eucharistic sacrifice. In his concluding remarks, Heidegger returns once more to the sacramental roots of the Sistine, foregrounding its role in making the sacramental world of presence.

‘The place is always an altar of a church. This belongs to the image and vice versa. The single occurrence of the image corresponds to its necessary separation from the unremarkable place of one of many other churches. This church, again - and that is every single church of its kind - calls for the unique window of this unique image: it establishes and completes the construction of the church.’

The Sistine belongs inherently to the world of the sacred, to the world of the church, and the church belongs to the image as its symbolic window that opens towards the ground and completion of its world. The Sistine belongs to its church at Piacenza ‘not merely in a historical-antiquarian sense, but according to its pictorial essence’. Here the church is not only a place, nor is it only a church in Piacenza, but the sacred world established and completed by the Eucharistic work. In the Sistine, as a most proper symbolic mirror, one glimpses a world absorbed into the Entrance. The essence of the Sistine is revealed in its ritualwork, in its function of transporting us into the coming presence. The same gesture that is embedded in the ritualwork – coming into presence – emerges as the essence of the image. The image is associated with Eucharist not only by an external link; rather, it belongs to the Eucharist. The parallelism between function and world and Incarnation and Eucharist is more than obvious. The hermeneutical circle moves from art to work and vice versa according to an intrinsic relationship that links them. What the Sistine is, derives from its work; hence, what the image invokes in its presentation – God’s embodiment – is renewed in the Sacrifice of the Mass. For this reason the Sistine always invokes its place and its world, because only within these can the Sistine reveal its truth. The Sistine remembers its ritual world; and it is only by following the path of thinking toward its authentic ritual world that the image is opened up in its truth.

The truth of the work turns out to be the fundamental question. The image and the truth belong to each other according to an intimate reciprocity. By truth Heidegger primarily means unconcealment (Unverborgenheit); works of art make manifest that which has been concealed. Through the work occurs the disclosure or the a-letheia that Heidegger, in the conclusion, explicitly attributes to the Sistine.

‘So, the image constructs the place of the unveiling of the hiddenness (of the A-letheia), because the image is essentially an unconcealment. The way of its unconcealment (and its truth) is the hiding appearing of the provenance of the God-man.’

Considering the question of how truth is established in the Sistine, Heidegger claims as its fundamental theological aspect the event of Incarnation. He calls this truth a-letheia ‘to foreground the idea of the foundation of truth as consisting in a coming-out-of-oblivion’. An image such the Sistine discloses and sheds light on the truth of the Incarnation. By searching out a different concept of truth, Heidegger poses the thesis that truth is rather the most essential, uncovered sense of being. Furthermore, Heidegger uses terms such as ‘unveiling hiddenness’ or ‘hiding appearing’ to emphasise the dialectics of revelation. Truth as a-letheia is explicitly linked with the Incarnation as its original provenance. The image is, then, the unexpectedness of
the radiant-appearing of the Incarnation in the order of Eucharist. The image enables the ontological regime of Eucharistic visibility by being the epiphanical disclosure of the Incarnation.38

Hermeneutically conceived, the Madonna consists in a Eucharistic enactment that includes participation in this disclosure. What takes place is self-presentation as the occurrence of the work. The work is now understood as an event that involves the spectator in the epiphany of truth. Indeed ‘the truth of the image is its beauty’, claims Heidegger, concluding his reflection.39

Truth becomes visible in beauty, and beauty now appears to be the most proper essence of the Sistine. The truth put to work reflects the beauty. Heidegger here relates the meaning of the being-image to beauty in a traditional way, namely, truth as the gateway to beauty, and beauty as splendor formae. The experience of the truth gives the experience of beauty. Heidegger’s conception of the beauty and the truth of the Madonna becomes clearer in light of his reflections in the Origin of the Work of Art:

‘Truth is the truth of beings. Beauty does not occur alongside this truth. It appears when truth sets itself to work. This appearing (as this being of truth in the work and as the work) is beauty. Thus, beauty belongs to the advent of truth.’40

From this perspective, being beautiful in the Madonna is established in the act of coming into presence. The greatness of the work of the Madonna which lights up the world is beauty. The Madonna’s ‘stepping into the world’ is beauty, because it is the appearance of ‘truth in the work and as the work’. The beauty of the Madonna Sistina is the way in which truth occurs; but what the essence of the work is remains both revealed and concealed within transubstantiation.

CONCLUSION

Heidegger’s remarks on the Sistine Madonna raise significant issues pertaining to the authentic sense of the image, the historical transformation of art, and reservation about the reduction of religious art to the level of aesthetic object. In his detailed writing Heidegger exposes these concerns by reflecting critically on different aspects of the Sistine as exhibited artwork, as well as its origin and its structure. Heidegger recuperates several aspects of the religious image that are related to essential aspects of Christianity itself. Addressing what has be richly provided in Heidegger’s analyses, let us conclude by emphasizing two significant points:

First, the Sistine, conceived as window intimately related to its Christological Entrance, returns one to an appreciation of the painting in its original being-world. Heidegger’s discussion of Raphael’s masterpiece is intended to call back the origin of the historical-being of the image. The Sistine belongs to the world of the sacred, and brings that world forward with itself, despite a displacement of the image from this sacred world due to an extraction from the ritual place and the Eucharistic celebration.

Heidegger fundamentally refuses modern aestheticisation and offers an answer to this approach by giving a more complete view of the image, explicating phenomenologically its chief aspects, such as window, visage, glance and radiance, as emergent features of the image as event. Recognition of this self-emerging and self-presenting event reveals the two central pillars of its sacred world – the Incarnation and the Eucharist. The phenomenological reading of the Sistine Madonna offers a view of the image as a path for the appearing-radiance of the Incarnation. The association between Incarnation and the image is not purely nominal; Heidegger’s reflection is based on subtle yet profound theological reasoning. Heidegger does not ignore or flee before the theological dogma, as one might expect from a resolutely secular, or at least non-religious, thinker such as Heidegger, but precisely foregrounds a dogmatic fact that casts important light on the Sistine. In fact, the appearance of the divine in Christ shows itself as a self-
emerging event. The identical self-presentation that articulates the event of Incarnation validates the event of image. In this incarnational view, the visibility of the Sistine Madonna belongs to the same embodied visibility as the Word made flesh.

A second motif that merits mention is that a theological emphasis on image-worship appears to be the central point in Heidegger’s reflection. He raises a concern of how the essence of the Sistine can be appreciated after its transferal to a museum, given that this modern approach hides the original significance of the work behind an aesthetic re-orientation. He argues that the embedded character of the Sistine in the liturgical context is still evident, even after its transformation into artwork, by tracing its transition in the age of aesthetic representation. We noted that a significant retrieval of the liturgical environment went further than an allusion, to recognizing the inherent sacramental pattern of the image – the Eucharistic transubstantiation. In Heidegger’s view, the Sistine reveals the Incarnation and radiates forth the Eucharist. Throughout this account, Heidegger shares his insight into the invisible face of image, recovering its original sacramental act distinguished by presence. The act of sacramental embodiment establishes the Sistine an icon of Incarnation; the work consequently reveals the event of Incarnation within the continued act of Eucharist. Access to the truth of the image is acquired by recognizing a Eucharistic embodiment, itself rooted in Incarnation. This recognition is what both inaugurates the image and springs forth in its radiant disclosure: the truth of the image is made possible through Incarnation and Eucharist, sacraments that elevate our study toward the sacred origin of the Sistine Madonna.

Notes


2 Marielene Putscher, Raphaels Sixtinische Madonna. Das Werk und seine Wirkung (Tübingen: Hopfer, 1955), pp. 284–308. The occasion for the writing the reflection upon the Sistine Madonna was the invitation of Mariene Putcher, the former student of Heidegger, who wanted to honor her professor by publishing, in the first part of her study about Raphael’s masterpiece, Heidegger’s short essay.


4 Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 72


6 M. Heidegger, The Origin of the Work of Art, p. 44.


9 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 119.


11 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 119.

12 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 120.


15 Theodor Hetzer, Die Sixtinische Madonna (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1947), p. 69.

16 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 120.
18 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 119.
22 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 119.
23 ——M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 119.
24 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 120.
25 ——M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 120.
26 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 121.
29 M. Heidegger, The Origin of the Work of art, p. 46.
31 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 121.
33 M. Heidegger, The Origin of the Work of art, p. 22.
34 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 121.
35 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 119.
36 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p. 121.
39 M. Heidegger, Über die Sixtina, p.121.