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## RELIGIOUS MOTIFS IN ANDY WARHOL'S SELECTED VISUAL REALIZATIONS

### Abstract

Commonly associated with pop art and consumerism, Andy Warhol's artistic output is a complex phenomenon, full of ambiguity and binary oppositions. The same could be said about his life in which religion, though not explicitly, played a domineering role. Warhol's ethnic origins, as well as his family background, exerted a profound influence on his art and can be easily seen in his various realizations, with particular intensity in the last decade of his artistic activity.

**Key words:** ambiguity, dichotomy, icon, pop art, transcendence

The aim of my paper is to analyze the selected religious motifs which permeate Andy Warhol's artistic output. I will put special emphasis on the motif of icon, the concept of which was completely redefined in his serigraphic realizations. I will also focus on the idiosyncratic character of religious references which, always present in Warhol's artistic production, started to dominate in his work towards the end of his life.

The complexity of Warhol's approach towards pop art can be proved by the dualism which consistently manifested itself in the binary oppositions that can be observed in his artistic oeuvre: highbrow culture – lowbrow culture, artistic individualism – mass-production, anonymity – fame, the private – the public, the East – the West, the sacred – the profane. Similar dichotomies characterize his religious paintings.

Warhol's involvement in applying religious motifs into his production was a gradual process which actually spanned the whole period of his artistic activity. When analyzing his visual realizations in religious context, one could distinguish four periods during which his works displayed religious or quasi-religious properties: the earliest was the 1950s – the beginnings of Warhol's activity as a graphic designer in New York. It was then that besides the projects of chiefly commercial character, he also produced a series of religious designs, which is best exemplified by the Christmas cards for Tiffany & Co. The next period was the 1960s – the time dominated by creating iconic representations of objects of everyday use

and portraits of American representatives of the world of politics and pop culture. It was also the period that witnessed making the series focusing on such issues as race riots, car crashes, suicides, H-bomb explosions, images of electric chairs, as well as photographs of thirteen most wanted men. The 1970s was the continuation of the above trend with the tendency towards painting artistically sophisticated portraits and producing the series of *Skulls* and self-portraits with skulls, as well as abstract *Shadows*. And finally the 1980s – the decade during which Warhol continued painting portraits and embarked on creating travesties of the classic Renaissance paintings with special regard to Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. It was also around that time that Warhol produced the series of *Crosses* and *Eggs*.

Provocatively dubbed the Pope of Pop, Andy Warhol (1928–1987) became famous as a graphic designer whose artistic output is commonly associated with the serigraphic renditions of Campbell's soup cans and the garish silkscreen portraits of Marilyn Monroe. It goes without saying, however, that his artistic legacy is a very complex phenomenon in which the motif of icon, understood literally and figuratively, constantly recurs. Warhol's artistic oeuvre during his whole life underwent a constant dynamic evolution, which can also be referred to the religious motifs constantly present in his realizations. Looking at the artistic development of the most famous representative of pop-art, one could venture saying that by creating silkscreen icons of pop-culture, in the second period of his artistic activity, he created himself as an iconic character and in doing so effaced the borderline between the truth and fiction.

Although born in Pittsburgh, USA, Andy Warhol remained throughout his whole life under a strong influence of the ethnic culture of his parents: Andrej and Julia Warhola.<sup>1</sup> They were both Carpatho-Rsyn poor immigrants of Lemko origins, who arrived in USA from the village of Miková, which is situated in the present-day Slovakia. Both Andrej and Julia were ardent followers of Greek Catholic religion, regularly attending services in the local orthodox church of St John Chrysostom. Their house was full of devotional items mixed with the products of American mass culture. On the kitchen wall hung a cheap copy of the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, the esthetic counterpoint of which were the cartons of Kellogg's cornflakes, Campbell's soup cans or Coca-Cola bottles. This peculiar iconospheric<sup>2</sup> mélange together with the regular visits at the local church became specific fuel for the artist whose life and artistic output was always characterized by strong dualism, which manifested itself by the aforementioned binary oppositions.

A similar dichotomy can be applied to Warhol's understanding of the concept of icon as a form of religious painting. From his early childhood both at home and

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<sup>1</sup> By sheer coincidence rather than as a result of an intentional denial of his ethnic origins, Warhol dropped the final *a* in his surname, which took place as early as 1942 when he had signed in this way one of his New York drawings (J. D. Dillenger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York, 1998), p. 21).

<sup>2</sup> By the term 'iconosphere' I understand a set of visual, auditory and olfactory stimuli and phenomena which through constant exposition to shape one's psyche and consciousness, the concept postulated by Mieczysław Porębski in his book *Ikonosfera* (M. Porębski, *Ikonosfera* (Warszawa, 1972), pp. 18, 271).

at the local church, Warhol was exposed to the iconic images of saints and religious scenes. Although developed in the times of triumph and hegemony of Abstract Expressionism, which dominated the American artistic scene in the 1950s and was represented by such painters as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning, Warhol's art remained predominantly figurative. The scope of his artistic realizations comprised silkscreen renditions of the American historic heroes, such as general George Custer, two presidents: Theodore Roosevelt and J. F. Kennedy and the Indian chief Geronimo, the icons of American pop culture, such as, among many others, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and John Wayne, as well as the international celebrities of the world of politics, science and literature, which was incarnated in the portraits of Vladimir Lenin, Albert Einstein, Mick Jagger and Gertrude Stein. Objects and products of everyday use were treated in a similar iconic way, which can be exemplified by Warhol's graphic renditions of Campbell's soup cans, cartons of Brillo soap pads and Coca-Cola bottles, to mention just a few. Towards the end of his life Warhol became an icon of pop-art himself, undergoing the evolutionary transition from an artist-producer towards the high priest of contemporary art.

In the process of creating his silkscreen realizations, Warhol drew on the rich tradition of East European religious art. His inspiration derived from the Greek Catholic and Orthodox sacred pictures, popularly referred to as icons, which during his childhood spent in industrial Pittsburgh considerably influenced his iconosphere.

An icon is a cult picture formed in the Eastern Christian art, depicting saints, as well as biblical and liturgical scenes. Its prototypical origins can be traced back to the Fayum mummy portraits from the Coptic period,<sup>3</sup> as well as the Early Christian Catacomb paintings.<sup>4</sup> The main types of icons and the manner of painting or rather writing them were established during the period of Iconoclasm and the period of the Byzantine art influence which it was directly followed by. The idiom of writing icons was defined during the Second Council of Nicea in 787 AD. According to the rules which were established then, the composition of icons could not be based on the artist's invention, but was subject to the strict principles set by the Church and tradition. The icons were, therefore, painted according to the specific canon and the painters were expected to display mystic and ascetic approach towards the rendered subject. Execution of the richly adorned pictures was not performed by a single painter, but resulted from the collective endeavor of two or several artists. The mystic character of the realizations was emphasized by the fact that they were not painted but written, which was meant to only highlight the direct relationship between the artist and the Creator. Painting of icons, having its roots

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<sup>3</sup> The best example of the influence which the Fayum coffin portraits exerted on Andy Warhol is his 1973 portrait of Katie Jones, a member of the multi-millionaire Schlumberger family, who *stares forth with something of the mute appeal seen in the eyes of the ancient portraits from Fayum, Egypt* (J. D. Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 28). The Fayum portraits were done before the death of the subjects, thus they bear strong resemblance to the deceased. The poignant portraits depict the characters whose conspicuous eyes *are riveting, claiming the moment but focused beyond time* (*ibid.*, p. 28).

<sup>4</sup> K. Onasch, A. Schnieper, *Ikony. Fakty i legendy* (Warszawa, 2013), pp. 14–17.

in the Hellenistic East, developed in the area of the Byzantine culture influence, particularly in the territory of Greece, the Balkans region and Ruthenia. Its heyday fell on the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. From the beginning of the seventeenth century its popularity started to wane. The decline of the genre was caused by the growing influence of the Western culture.<sup>5</sup>

When discussing the iconic character of Andy Warhol's artistic output, one should be aware of the distinction between the concepts of the icon and iconicity. The prototypical meaning of the word icon as a religious picture still remains the same. However, the very concept of an icon has undergone a semantic evolution, particularly in recent years. Derived from the Byzantine civilization, a contemporary icon is still a figurative image, often assuming the form of a symbol, which can be best exemplified by the easily recognized icons that appear on computer screens. Iconicity, defined in functional-cognitive linguistics, as well as semiotics, as the conceived similarity or analogy between the form of a sign and its meaning, can also be referred to a set of characteristics attributed to a particular person or object.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, there appear iconic sportsmen, artists or even politicians. The contemporary iconostases are also decorated with the commonly worshipped trademarks, names of companies or simply objects of everyday use (Smorań-Różycka, p. 65).<sup>7</sup> In the case of the realizations of Andy Warhol, who was the flagship icon of pop art himself, the distinction in question is blurred. His serigraphic renditions do not depict saints, or religious scenes, which was the original purpose of the Byzantine icons, but the characters associated with the household names, instantly identified in the world of mass culture. The same refers to the objects of everyday use, which in the epoch of mass consumerism are also endowed with the cultic attributes. The artist is no longer a mystic high priest, resembling the Orthodox Church painter, Andrei Rublev, but becomes a producer chiefly interested in his own income and fame. The difference between the sacred and the profane ceases to exist. The fake replaces the original. All these properties can be found in Warhol's artistic output. By redefining the concept of an artist and his work, Warhol becomes somehow the precursor of Postmodernism in which the notion of artistic religiousness assumes a new, previously unknown form, the definition of which is full of ambiguities and contradictions.

Despite instigating and being involved himself in numerous social and artistic scandals and excesses, Andy Warhol remained a devout Catholic and towards the end of his life became an exceedingly and deeply religious person. It was emphasized in the funerary speech delivered by the art critic, John Richardson during the mass celebrated after Warhol's death at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1987. The beginning of Richardson's eulogy goes as follows:

Besides celebrating Andy Warhol as the quintessential artist of his time and place – the artist who held the most revealing mirror up to his generation – I'd like to recall

<sup>5</sup> *Słownik Terminologiczny Sztuk Pięknych* (Warszawa, 2002), s.v. „Ikona”, pp. 156, 157.

<sup>6</sup> A. Burzyńska, P. M. Markowski, *Teorie literatury XX wieku* (Kraków, 2007), p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> M. Smorań-Różycka, „Andy Warhol tworzy ikony”, [in:] *Warhol Konteksty* (Kraków, 2012), p. 65.

a side of his character that he hid from all but his closest friends: his spiritual side. Those of you who knew him in circumstances that were the antithesis of spiritual may be surprised that such a side existed. But exist it did, and it's the key to the artist's psyche.<sup>8</sup>

Warhol himself hardly ever admitted to his religious side as it stood in contradiction to the image of an emancipated artist he was very willing to be compared with. In the interview he gave to Lee Radziwiłł for the *Interview* magazine in March 1975, he explicitly, but slightly ironically, mentioned his visits to the church of Saint Vincent Ferrer on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where he regularly participated in the liturgical observances. Here are a few excerpts from this interview:

“Lee Radziwiłł: Did you go to Church today Andy?

Andy Warhol: Yes, but I only stayed a minute.

Lee Radziwiłł: Why?

Andy Warhol: Because I thought I was going to be late. I got there right before it started and left right as it was starting. [...]

Lee Radziwiłł: This is pretty personal, but do you ever take Communion?

Andy Warhol: Well – I never feel that I do anything bad. But I do take”<sup>9</sup>

There were also revealed some facts concerning Warhol's charitable activities. It was possible to meet him in New York's poorhouses and kitchens for the homeless, particularly in the shelter run by the Church of the Heavenly Rest. Waiting on the poor and needy, it was in these places that Warhol cast off the mask of a celebrity.<sup>10</sup> The religious side of Andy Warhol is best revealed by the motifs which started to weave their way with particular intensity in his late realizations, one of the last of which was his serigraphic travesty series of the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. It is worth mentioning that a photograph copy of the Renaissance masterpiece was used by Julia Warhola as a bookmark in her prayer book. The above facts only confirm the complexity of Warhol's psyche, remaining in opposition to the commonly known iconic, though sometimes outrageous even by today's standards, image of the artist who was popularly dubbed Drella. He was a man full of moral ambivalence, bearing at the same time the traits of Dracula and Cinderella.

Jane Daggett Dillenger postulates that there were several reasons which may account for Warhol's involvement in religious issues. Apart from the family background, which was of crucial importance, they may be traced back to the early days of his childhood. As a child, Warhol suffered from three attacks of St. Vitus Dance, also known as Sydenham's chorea, a nervous disorder, marked by spasmodic movements of the limbs and facial muscles and by lack of coordination. The illness resulted in his long confinement to bed, which finally contributed to his

<sup>8</sup> Quoted after Dillenger, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> L. Radziwiłł, “Communion sometimes”, *Interview*, 3 (1975).

<sup>10</sup> V. Bockris, *Andy Warhol. Życie i śmierć* (Warszawa, 2012), p. 556.

social isolation, subsequently augmented by the speech disorder he tried to conceal by being silent or reducing his answers or comments only to laconic utterances. It was during those long periods of idleness that the strong bond between the eight-year-old Andy and his mother developed. A devout Rusyn Byzantine Catholic, Julia nursed her youngest son with great affection. She also became his first artistic collaborator, which is best exemplified by the whimsically illustrated books on cats.<sup>11</sup> The intimate relationship was embodied in Warhol's portrait of Julia in which her face bears a strong resemblance to her son's features.<sup>12</sup>

Warhol's preoccupation with religious issues is often linked with the motif of death. The recurrent death themes are also deeply rooted in his infancy.<sup>13</sup> At the age of fourteen, having undergone a long period of convalescence, he was exposed to yet another traumatic experience. His father had tuberculosis as a result of which he was housebound from 1939 until his death in 1942. Drawing on Warhol's elder brother Paul's recollection, Dillenberger gives the following account: "[...] when his father's body was brought back from the hospital, Andy, terrified, hid under his bed and refused to look at the body, which was laid out, as was the custom of the Rusyn Byzantine Catholics in the Warhola home."<sup>14</sup> Warhol's obsessive interest in death motifs intensified in his adulthood, particularly after June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968, which is the date of the attempt on his life perpetrated by Valerie Solanas, a deranged feminist and script writer. Although declared dead at one point, Warhol survived and, according to his collaborator, Bob Colacello: "promised God to go to church every Sunday if he lived and he kept to the letter of that promise."<sup>15</sup>

It is worth mentioning that even before the aforementioned nearly fatal accident, Warhol displayed excessive interest in the concept of death. When working on the quintessentially Pop series *Campbell's Soup Cans*, he embarked on a new chapter in his artistic output by "launching a new era in the history of art."<sup>16</sup> The event which became the catalyst for adopting this approach was the photograph that he saw in the copy of *New York Mirror* on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1962. It depicted the wreck of the plane which crashed, killing 129 passengers. It was from that moment on that Warhol began to be preoccupied with morbid subjects and, according to Klaus Honnef, became "a true artist"<sup>17</sup> by reconciling his commercial activity with producing pictures rendered in a serious vein.

The series of *Death and Disaster* marks the beginning of the period in which Warhol reached maturity as an artist. Simultaneously produced, his Pop works remained in dramatic contrast with the macabre renditions of the pictures of violent death. The series was based on the photographs culled from the tabloids, *Life* magazine and the popular press. They presented the wrecks of the car bodies

<sup>11</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–22.

<sup>12</sup> Bockris, *op. cit.*, p. 427.

<sup>13</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> K. Honnef, *Warhol* (Köln, 2007), p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

together with the distorted corpses of the casualties. The pictures were jolting in their immediacy and the effect they produced had a wrenching impact on the viewer.<sup>18</sup> The same refers to the silkscreened paintings of suicides, the atomic bomb explosions, the electric chairs and race riots. Dillenberger compares the *Death and Disaster* series to a contemporary dance of death, reminiscent of similar realizations rendered by the sixteenth century German painter Hans Holbein.<sup>19</sup> According to Honnef, the *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* portraits, the pictures that come from the FBI's criminal records, represent the same category as the *Death and Disaster* series. What is more, Honnef links them to the serigraphic series of Marilyn Monroe's posthumous portraits.<sup>20</sup> The same reference is made by Warhol's biographer, Victor Bockris.<sup>21</sup> The pictures in the series *Suicide* (Fallen Body) are meditative and elegiac in their tone. When it comes to *Electric Chairs*, the series based on the photograph of the execution chamber in Sing Sing state penitentiary in New York, Dillenberger asserts that the somber monochromatic images of the death-dealing instrument evoke religious associations. In her opinion "the chair is transformed from a grotesque instrument of death into a numinous object, suggesting transcendence, much as the cross, which was used for a particular cruel kind of execution, is seen in Christian art as a symbol pointing to salvation."<sup>22</sup>

The motif of the skull as a *memento mori* heralds yet another series which testifies to Warhol's obsessive interest in the concept of death. Drawing on the long tradition of similar representations in the history of art, in the seventies Warhol made a series of self-portraits with a skull. The rendition of the topic in its form resembles Frans Hals's *Young Man Holding a Skull*, the portrait made in the seventeenth century. By doing so, Warhol inscribed his work in the series of depictions called *vanitas*, the paintings which were reminders of the transience of life and inevitability of death, the issues that Warhol was fully aware of at the time.<sup>23</sup> In 1976 he produced a series of paintings entitled *Skulls*. Dillenberger asserts that the very topic echoes contemporary concerns, such as the rampant spread of AIDS and the increasing threats of nuclear and ecological disasters.<sup>24</sup> She also points to the relationship between the skulls and the fetal-shaped black shadows that they cast. The striking juxtaposition seems to remain in accord with the recurring theme of the transience of life. The resurgence of the motif of death is

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<sup>18</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> Honnef, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Bockris, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

<sup>22</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 70, 71.

<sup>23</sup> The execution of the paintings took place nearly eight years after the assassination attempt by Valerie Solanas. The two bullets fired at close range penetrated Warhol's stomach, spleen, oesophagus, and both lungs. As a result of it, till the end of his life, he had to wear the surgical corset. In Richard Avedonow's picture taken after Warhol's convalescence, he stands, in the pose resembling Christ, exposing his wounds, the corset having been pulled down (Bockris, *op. cit.*, p. 376).

<sup>24</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

also exemplified in a group of Warhol's last works depicting four skeletons stitched together. The black and white pictures were commissioned by the Swiss art journal *Parkett* and were originally meant to symbolize the spirit of Switzerland. The scope of works produced during the decade also comprises Warhol's most enigmatic abstract paintings titled *Shadows*. The realizations were executed in the manner of abstract expressionists, such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, both of whom addressed religious issues by trying to express the idea of the Sublime in their paintings. Dillenberger claims that meditation on the series "evokes the eschatological question of mortality and the end of time."<sup>25</sup>

The religious character of the aforementioned works of art is clearly apparent. Being a direct reference to the hill of Golgotha, the place of Christ's crucifixion, the motif of the skull is deeply rooted in the history of European iconography. In Warhol's case, seen in the context of the assassination attempt that he miraculously survived, it is also a reminder of the fragility of human existence. The *Death and Disaster* series focuses on the meaning of life as contrasted with sudden death. The *Electric Chair* paintings through the juxtaposition of death and salvation symbolized by the electric chair compared to the cross imply transcendence. The *Shadows* touch upon eschatology.

In the 1980s, which is the last decade of Warhol's activity, he embarked on producing a series of travesties of the selected works of European Renaissance, such as Piero della Francesca's *Saint George and the Dragon* and *Saint Apollonia*, Raphael Santi's *Sistine Madonna*, Paulo Uccello's *Madonna del Duca da Montefeltro*, as well as Leonardo da Vinci's *Annunciation* and *Last Supper*. The series, which was titled *Details of Renaissance Paintings*, echoed Warhol's early Pittsburgh years, when by attending art classes in the Carnegie Institute of Technology, he developed his interest in traditional European painting, particularly the Old Masters. Towards the end of Warhol's life, his concern with religious issues considerably deepened. Dillenberger claims that "it was during those last five years that most of his religious works were done."<sup>26</sup> Apart from the aforementioned figurative travesties, in 1982 he also made a series of paintings of the cross, as well as a series of graphics, using eggs as a motif.

The element of the cross appears in one of Warhol's juvenile paintings, which is titled *The Warhola Livingroom*. In the picture, the interior is deprived of the icons which originally hung on the walls. What strikes the viewer is the cross put on the mantelpiece. It is the cross used during his father's funeral, which only confirms that for Warhol "art and religion were linked from an early age."<sup>27</sup> The conspicuous carved New Mexican crucifix also appears in the photograph of the bedroom of his New York residence at 57 East 66<sup>th</sup> Street into which he moved in 1974. Set against a velvety background, the 1982 Warhol's image of the scarlet single cross levitates before the viewer. Its insubstantial character seems to deny any links with the cross of crucifixion. In another realization, commissioned for the exhibition in

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Madrid, entitled "Guns, Knives, and Crosses," two-dimensional crucifixes are randomly put in rows. They are reminiscent of the crosses seen in the military cemeteries of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>28</sup> The egg as a symbol stands for immortality or resurrection. The tradition of painting Easter eggs, so called *pysanky*,<sup>29</sup> is practiced by Catholics, including the followers of the Rusyn Byzantine Church. The practice was instilled into the young Warhol by his mother, and, during his boyhood years, he would often give egg designs as presents to friends and customers at Eastertime. The paintings of 1982 introduce the eggs which balance freely against the black background, and in the context of religious imagery can be perceived as a kind doxology.<sup>30</sup>

The travesties of the Renaissance paintings focus on the selected details of the original pictures. They were made in 1984 and 1985, that is a few years before Warhol's death. In the case of Leonardo's *Annunciation*, it is the upper part of the masterpiece that attracted Warhol's interest. In his rendition of the painting he eliminated the figures of the Virgin and the Archangel Gabriel. Instead, the viewer can see only their hands set against the landscape dominated by a violet mountain and the red sky. Their hands may convey the idea of communication between the heavenly messenger and the earthly recipient of the divine message.<sup>31</sup> The same ploy was applied in the travesty of Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Duca da Montefeltro*. The viewer sees neither the Madonna nor her entourage. Warhol's attention is riveted on a Renaissance niche from the top of which an ovoid object, resembling an egg, hangs. The surrealist element implying an egg in a womb can be associated with the serigraphic images of Easter eggs. It is also a cropped detail that interests Warhol in his translation of Paolo Uccello's *St. George and the Dragon*. This time it is a marginal element which was cut out from the original painting. The dragon's wing and its spiky tail together with the head of the princess bear a strong resemblance to a comic strip, implying that heroic saints were replaced by pop culture characters in the contemporary iconography.<sup>32</sup> Warhol's playful interpretation of the *Sistine Madonna* by Raphael is another Renaissance painting that he turned to. It is noteworthy that the image was used as a cover for the Warhol Memorial Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1987. The rendition looks forward to Warhol's serigraphic series based on Leonardo's *Last Supper*. The contours of the characters and the obtrusive price tag herald the ideas developed extensively in the last of his realizations. Warhol manipulates the elements of the original by placing them freely within the frames of his design. The final result is jolting. The motif of the Virgin with Infant Jesus recalls similar realizations, such as *Modern Madonna* and *Mother and Child*, which are reminiscent of similar topics addressed in Byzantine icons.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Probably thanks to Ukrainian immigrants, the word *pysanka* is commonly used in the American and Canadian dialects of English.

<sup>30</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

To prove how deeply set in the religious context Andy Warhol's selected works are, let me carry out a brief analysis of one of his last renditions, that is his travesty of the aforementioned the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. The Passover meal that Jesus had with his disciples has always been a popular motif in art. Its earliest images date from the fifth century. As a result of referring to the subject, Warhol produced his own interpretation of the Renaissance masterpiece fresco. It resulted from the commission the idea of which was hatched by the Paris gallerist, Alexandre Iolas, who also arranged for the Milan bank Credito-Valtellines to sponsor the enterprise in 1984. A suite of paintings based on the theme was meant to be exhibited in the Palazzo Stelline in Milan, which is situated in the close vicinity of the church Santa Maria delle Grazie, where the dilapidated original is kept. Devoting a year to its realization, Warhol considerably exceeded the scope of the order by creating over a hundred painterly interpretations of the *Last Supper*. Through his involvement he revealed his nearly obsessive interest in the theme. He mediated da Vinci's ideas by working on a cheap, popular, black and white photography of the engraving of the original, which was popular in the nineteenth century. He also applied a schematic outline drawing, which he found in the 1913 *Encyclopedia of Painters and Painting*. The photograph was used as a model for screenplays and the picture was applied as a medium of tracing the contours of the selected details of the original painting.

By drawing on the pop-cultural iconosphere, Warhol covered da Vinci's painting with the trademarks of some distinctive products of everyday use, occasionally labeling them with their price tags. In doing so he seems to have endowed them with religious properties. Dillenberger affirms that the Wise Potato Chips logo, which resembles an owl and rotates before the viewer, obscuring the Apostles on Christ's right hand, that is John, Judas and Peter, symbolizes divine wisdom.<sup>33</sup> In the canvas entitled *Las Supper (The Big C)* the imagery is even more explicitly religious. "The Big C" stands for the slogan "Can the Mind Act as a Cancer Cure?" It appears that for Warhol, who, due to his childhood, as well as adulthood experience, was very much anxious about his health, "The Big C" is synonymous with Christ.<sup>34</sup> In the *Last Supper (Dove)* Warhol used the religious imagery even more extensively. In his translation of the original he put the figure of Christ between the following two logos: Dove from soap packages and GE from packaged light bulbs. His intention seems to be obvious. The dove symbolizes cleanliness, whereas electric light is associated with power. GE is the symbol for the creator, the dove epitomizes the Holy Spirit. Together with the sketchy figure of Christ they constitute the concept of the Holy Trinity.<sup>35</sup>

In the decomposed and transformed original Warhol outlined the contours of the details which he subsequently exposed in the multiplied series of images. Although the dominant colors are bright, the figures are black, evoking the connotations of death, especially that of Jesus. As it was typical of his idiom, in

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<sup>33</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

another version, Warhol shocked the audience with several punching bags adorned with the outlined images of Jesus Christ and the inscriptions attributed to Jean-Michel Basquiat, which had the word *Judge* as their focus. Finally, he overlaid one of the versions of the figurative original with an abstract camouflage. This was a direct reference to the series of his abstract realizations which he produced towards the end of his life, drawing on the ideas postulated by the representatives of Abstract Expressionism. In his own specific way, Warhol presented da Vinci's work in a new context by treating it as a product which can be multiplied or rather mass-produced and sold in large numbers in the form of tacky copies. By incorporating the pattern of camouflage and shrouding the *Last Supper* with it, Warhol might have intended to make an attempt at defining himself as a man full of contradictions, always appearing in disguise and masking his real self. He might have as well recalled the camouflages that appeared on the uniforms of American marines which, fascinated with the modern electronic mass-media, he could see on the TV screen. Another interpretation of using this specific cover-up might have been his ambiguous stance on religious issues.<sup>36</sup>

In a specific and laconic way Warhol renounced such interpretations, which can be best exemplified by the fragment of the last interview he gave to Paul Taylor in April of 1987:

PT.: "In America, you could be almost as famous as Charles Manson. Is there any similarity between you at the Factory and Jesus at the *Last Supper*?"

A.W.: "That's negative, to me it's negative. I don't want to talk about negative things" [...]

PT.: "Does the *Last Supper* theme mean anything in particular to you?"

A.W.: "No, it's a good picture"<sup>37</sup>

It seems that the spiritual tone of Warhol's last realization is in contradiction with his words. Although it is hard to acknowledge Andy Warhol's interpretation of the *Last Supper* as his artistic credo, it needs to be admitted that it constitutes the quintessence of the complexity of his style by referring directly to his religious beliefs. There had always been a serious or even tragic streak in Warhol's realizations, be it a series of electric chairs, plane and car crashes, burning cars and street riots or portraits of the most wanted men. Even the serigraphic images of Jacqueline Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe bear the stamp of death. The former was rendered right after J. F. Kennedy's assassination, the latter the day after Monroe's death. The idiosyncratic idiom of Warhol's various realizations and constant presence of binary oppositions of which his artistic oeuvre was always full emphasize the intriguing ambiguity of his works. The same refers to his renditions of religious themes, which his travesty of Leonardo's masterpiece is the most prominent example of. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Warhol is

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<sup>36</sup> Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> K. Goldsmith (ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews 1962-1987* (New York, 2004), pp. 384-385.

referred to as a “prolific, enigmatic, and complex artist, whose importance defies the test of time.”<sup>38</sup>

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## Motywy religijne w wybranych projektach wizualnych Andy'ego Warhola

### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza wybranych motywów religijnych w twórczości Andy Warhola (1928–1987), ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem ostatniego dzieła artysty, którym była serigraficzna trawestacja *Ostatniej Wieczerzy* Leonarda da Vinci. Prowokacyjnie mianowany przez media papieżem pop-artu, Warhol zasłynął jako grafik reklamowy, którego twórczość powszechnie kojarzona jest z seryjnymi obrazami puszek zupy Campbell i przejaskrawionymi sitodrukowymi portretami Marilyn Monroe. Artystyczna spuścizna Warhola to jednak zjawisko bardzo złożone, w którym symbolika religijna, w tym motyw ikony, rozumiany w sensie dosłownym i przenośnym, jest stale przewijającym się wątkiem. Twórczość artysty w ciągu całego jego życia podlegała dynamicznej ewolucji. Dotyczy to również wątków religijnych stale obecnych w jego realizacjach, zwłaszcza w drugiej fazie życia artysty. Patrząc na życiową i artystyczną drogę najbardziej znanego przedstawiciela pop-artu, można by zaryzykować stwierdzenie, że tworząc serigraficzne ikony popkultury, w drugim okresie swojej działalności artystycznej sam wykreował się na postać ikoniczną, zacierając tym samym granice między prawdą a fikcją. Życie i twórczość artystyczną Andy Warhola charakteryzował zawsze silny dualizm przejawiający się w binarnych opozycjach: Wschód – Zachód, kultura wysoka – kultura masowa, sfera prywatna – sfera publiczna, introwertyczność – ekstrawertyczność, twórczość – produkcja. Podobna dychotomia cechowała Warhola w jego rozumieniu koncepcji sacrum – profanum, czego artystyczna trawestacja wybranych motywów religijnych w jego twórczości jest najlepszym potwierdzeniem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dwuznaczność, dychotomia, ikona, pop art, transcendencja

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<sup>38</sup> Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*, p. 120.