

Formal Analysis Paper: *Massacre of the Innocents*

Many religious depictions in artworks attempt to capture the emotion and mood of the moment. Although encapsulating the emotions and significance of religious scenes is difficult, artists and sculptors use stylistic choices to show emotion behind stories. A majority of stories deriving from the Bible contain despair and death – including the illumination from the Codex Egberti titled *The Massacre of the Innocents*. This painting is 4x5” and originated in Chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew. The story shown in this painting involves the former King of Judea ordering the murder of infants living in Bethlehem. This emotional scene is depicted throughout multiple paintings, however, the stylistic choices differ specifically in the gospel. Instead of using hyper-realistic figures and styles, the artist stylized this artwork in a very abstract way. Although some would argue that naturalistic paintings can capture emotions better than stylized artworks, abstract work can evoke more thought and help the viewer dissect the scene to their ability. This artwork was created to show the emotions of the scene and it can do this through the composition, poses, and space.

The composition of an art piece relates to how the components are configured within. It can highlight the focus of the painting or identify important figures. In the case of this painting, the composition is important because it guides the viewer. The figures inside this painting are composed intentionally to steer the viewer toward what is important. For example, in the center of the painting, you can see the massacre which is the main focus of this painting. Since this scene is in the center, it's the first thing that the viewer will notice. It provides the viewer with an initial idea of the painting. You can also see the king with soldiers behind him and in front of him. Signifying his stature and how he is protected in comparison to the right side of the

painting. On the opposite side, you can see the mothers grieving. There is significance in having the king give orders on the left and the mothers on the right. In film, this is known as panning the camera and the movement from left to right can create illusions of motion and guides the viewer through the scene. This same effect can be observed in this painting which gives the effect of action as you look from left to right. Composing a painting like this is important in capturing the emotional elements of a scene.

The next element to be noted within this painting is the pose of the figures. This element holds importance in all stationary depictions of moving events. Since an artist is unable to show physical actions and emotions, the poses can depict this. On the left pole of the painting, you can see the King positioned nonchalantly – crossing his legs and pointing toward the soldiers to order them. This position allows the viewer to see that the king has little remorse over what he is carrying out. Instead of looking nervous or upset, he is composed and sure of his decision. The crossing of the legs signifies comfort and confidence. Opposing the king's calmness is the grieving of the mothers. They are all posed in positions describing despair and helplessness. Three of the mothers are facing away from the scene, showing how powerless they are. The last mother is reaching out towards the child, while the kid looks back at the soldier. This shows signs of bargaining and asking for sparesness, however, the soldier remains unfazed and his position does not differ. The way each individual is posed in this painting gives the viewer the tools to depict the emotion of this event.

Lastly, the space within this painting serves as an important element in the artist depicting the chaos of the scene. Since this incident is chaotic, the artist utilizes almost all the space within the picture. The king is crowded with soldiers, giving the effect that he is “untouchable” and

signifying his power. The artist also chooses to crowd the children, indicating the scale of this event. The excess amount of characters provide the viewer with an idea of chaos.

The point of this piece of art was to portray an emotional scene. Although people might think depicting raw emotions using realism is easier, the artist chose to use a more abstract style. The composition of the figures is a tool that the artist used to show power and guide the viewer's attention to the right places. Along with this, the poses of each individual can tell us what emotion each character is feeling. Lastly, the crowded use of space creates feelings of chaos. These three elements subconsciously impact the viewer and help them understand the emotions within this scene.