

## *Re-Imagining the Divine in the 20th Century: Arnold Friberg's Triumphs in Religious Art*

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*"Among the living artists who have dedicated themselves largely to religious art, one stands out for his virility and warmth, dramatic understanding and truth. That man is Arnold Friberg."*

-Cecil B. DeMille

Arnold Friberg extensively explored the nuances and grand themes of varied subjects throughout his long career, but no genre would affect his future artistic endeavors quite so definitively as his work with religious art. The above quote was shared by Cecil B. DeMille shortly after the completion of *The Ten Commandments*, an Academy Award nominated film, that Friberg helped create as a pre-production visualization lead and a principal costume designer. DeMille would never get the chance to see Friberg's later triumphs in the Patriotic, Western, and Royal genres that garnered immense critical and commercial acclaim, but he did witness Friberg's mastery at play in the epic religious film that they created together. Friberg had a unique ability to deftly communicate complex ideas and other-worldly drama associated with religious subjects by grounding his compositions in sincere depictions of ordinary people witnessing transformative events. Western religious art can often feel overly staged, with each subject posing perfectly to bear witness to the action or the figures taking on such a celestial attitude that they become inaccessible to the viewer on a human level. DeMille wished to avoid this in his religious epic, so he sought out Friberg's rare talent to set the thematic design language that would breathe life into the legendary tale. Friberg addressed these challenges in the film and his paintings by focusing his compositions on familiar forms, authentic perspectives, and rich, vivid coloration.

One of the most difficult aspects of capturing religious scenes is the lack of real-world context for the events. No contemporary witnesses exist to relay descriptions of biblical episodes, and the religious texts that do exist are scant on characterizing details. Undaunted by these complications, Friberg instead focused on what was knowable, allowing him to construct scenes that feel authentic, natural, and inviting, heightening the intense celestial energy conveyed throughout. *Shepherds in the Field* is a prime example of Friberg utilizing this technique. He forgoes a direct depiction of the angelic host described in the gospels and instead focuses on the nomadic shepherds who are illuminated and bewildered by the scene unfolding before them. Friberg places the viewer on the same level as the shepherds in order to convey the emotional and physical experience of this momentous occasion. One can imagine the still, peaceful darkness blanketing the scene just a moment before the bright flash of light cascades through the field, and the confusion and terror felt by the shepherds who



*Shepherds in the Field*





*Conversion on the Road to Damascus by Caravaggio*

witnessed it. The composition is rendered almost entirely in gray-scale, with small flecks of gold scattered about to reflect the celestial origins of the beam. The intense shading and loose brushwork heighten the effect, as though the viewer's eyes have not yet adjusted to the piercing light. Here Friberg develops ideas first produced in the Baroque period, most notably by Caravaggio, whose late masterpiece, *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, incorporates similar framing. The celestial light emanates from outside Caravaggio's composition as it illuminates the drama of Paul falling from his mount just a moment before.

The pitch-black darkness at the edge of view communicates the blinding nature of the light, similar to a focused spotlight that dissipates quickly in the surrounding darkness. In Friberg's composition, the light is encompassing and the slightly illuminated margins of the background make it clear that the intensity of the light stretches deep into the countryside and beyond the view of the picture frame, enveloping the viewer along with the shepherds and their flock. Friberg's mastery lies

in his ability to draw the viewer into the scene, using these familiar forms coupled with an immersive perspective that allows him to expertly communicate the divine.

Communicating the fulfilling experience of a spiritual moment without directly depicting divinity is a skillful approach to capturing these important spectacles. However, Friberg also proved himself a master of depicting biblical moments with the celestial imagery at the forefront of his compositions. Consider *The Light of Christ*, which portrays a resurrected Jesus as he appears to a group of his followers before his eventual ascension into heaven. Unlike *Shepherds*, this painting is teeming with brilliant colors that possess a deep richness and warm glow, heightening the effect of the soft, illuminating light of Jesus at the center of the composition. The figures in his immediate surroundings are demurred by the purity of their savior, and Friberg takes care to capture a unique reaction for each one. This swirl of light and colorful patterning envelops the scene and draws the viewer into the outstretched arms of Christ.



*The Light of Christ*

Jesus is the tallest figure depicted, with the throngs of followers building up around him in a technicolor mound that culminates at the zenith of his ethereal halo. Once more, Friberg builds upon the techniques of the old masters to create something uniquely his own. Such vibrant, arresting coloration can be found in Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin*, which similarly utilizes energetic figuration to heighten the drama of the scene. In Titian's painting, the



virgin is backlit by a sublime golden hue that illuminates the figures below while brightly colored human subjects at the bottom of the composition react in astonishment as they stretch upwards towards the miracle occurring above them. This vertical force creates a bridge between the mortal and heavenly realms, as one figure stretches out his hand to just overlap with the heavenly mist at Mary's feet. Friberg's composition, in contrast, brings the celestial and mortal worlds together, with Christ welcoming all to draw near. The viewer even has a path carved out from the crowd to step into the scene and join this revelatory moment. The swathes of rich color beckon for a closer look and serve as an invitation to join in the experience of this spiritual tableau.

Friberg's work with DeMille allowed him to hone his already exceptional skill, which he deftly incorporated into the paintings he completed throughout the remainder of his career. Working with one of the great masters of film direction left an indelible mark on his approach towards art, as he began incorporating more figures, deeper colors, and less white in the paintings he completed after his time in Hollywood. This resulted in a greater depth of emotion and vitality in his work that would propel him to the heights of patriotic and royal genre painting later in his career. Given this, it is no wonder that Norman Rockwell referred to Friberg as "the Phidias of religious art." Few artists have had such an outsized impact on the visual language of religious themes in their epoch, and Friberg stands alone in his ability to envelop his audience in vivid recreations of spiritual texts.



*Assumption of the Virgin by Titian*