

# Apple and the religious roots of technological devotion

September 11 2013, by Brett Robinson

---

"We sign our work." Apple's ad campaign, rolled out this summer, makes a big deal about it: "This is our signature. And it means everything. Designed by Apple in California."

It is a telling tagline. Products that bear the Apple imprimatur do possess a certain cultural authority.

It is not unlike the great Florentine artist Michelangelo, whose Pieta sculpture was once mistaken for that of a rival. His cultural authority in question, Michelangelo slipped in at night with a chisel and marked his masterpiece: MICHAEL. ANGELUS. BONAROTUS. FLORENT. FACIEBAT. "Michelangelo Buonarroti, Florentine, made this." It was the only piece of art Michelangelo ever signed.

Like Michelangelo in the 15th century, Apple in the 21st has captured the cultural imagination by combining signature design with lofty ideals. Michelangelo (and his Renaissance artist competitors) commanded popular taste by producing beautiful objects that mediated the religious ethos of the era. Today, Apple (and its competitors) makes beautiful objects that mediate the technological magic of our age.

Apple has never been shy about claiming its role as artist and shaman. Links between religion and art and the promise of technology are frequently revealed in the company's advertising campaigns. The 2007 ad that launched the iPhone, for example, shows the glowing device floating against a black background. A solitary finger reaches out to

touch the haloed screen, and the tagline reads, "Touching is Believing."

The copy is a biblical reference (among other things; it also referenced the way the new phone had been kept under wraps), and the visuals refer to a 17th century painting by Caravaggio, "The Incredulity of St. Thomas." Caravaggio's painting shows the apostle Thomas placing his finger into the wounded side of the risen Christ to confirm that he has truly risen from the dead. Thomas touches so that he may believe. Apple's parody of sacred art pairs technology with transcendence.

Connections between the science and technology of the day and the imponderable questions humans grapple with are nothing new. The Greeks compared their cherished technology, the potter's wheel, to the motion of the universe. Theologians in the Middle Ages credited the design of the universe to a master clockmaker.

What is new is the way the relationship is now reversed. Once upon a time, technology provided metaphors to help us understand what could only be guessed at. Now grand philosophical constructs and religion provide the metaphors for expressing scientific ideas. Think of the recent experiments to isolate the subatomic "God particle." God stands in for that which is sacred to science.

Apple portrays a series of moments in "Designed by Apple" ads that are made sacred - elevated and enhanced - by technology. The ponderous voiceover accompanies images of Apple users in moments of delight. A woman immersed in music on the subway train: "This is it. This is what matters." Two lovers snapping a romantic photograph in the rain on a picturesque bridge: "Will it make life better?"

What Apple has done so successfully over the years is shift popular conceptions about technology from the instrumental to the aesthetic, perhaps even the sublime. The iPhone becomes not just a tool for doing

things but a means of feeling something special. Apple's lead designer, Jony Ive, has said of Apple products that "there is a profound and enduring beauty in simplicity. ... It's about bringing order to complexity." Apple's "signature" has been its ability to co-opt the rich aesthetics of art and religion to represent and market its cause. According to the ads, it is all about "The experience of a product. How it makes someone feel."

There are easy-to-see links between Apple and religion - the talk of a "cult of Apple" or the comparison between the Apple logo and Eve's forbidden fruit. But such obvious examples distract us from the deeper connection between religion and digital technology. Both provide aesthetic experiences that put us in touch with something larger than ourselves. As Apple's new ad proclaims, "We spend a lot of time on a few great things. Until every idea we touch enhances each life it touches."

Still, personal technology is the popular art of the feel-good culture; it is a far cry from the pathos of Michelangelo's Pieta. The image of a mother holding the body of her deceased son is a haunting reflection on hope in the face of great tragedy, that strange sort of beauty that both attracts and repels.

The tourists who visit the Pieta armed with their iPhone cameras are not unlike the tourists who visited Michelangelo's then anonymous sculpture five centuries ago. They aren't confused about who made it anymore, but they may be at a loss for what it represents. No longer seen universally as an embodiment of spiritual truth, it becomes another aesthetic moment to be captured and enjoyed through the miracle of modern technology.

The spirit of the new Apple ad campaign suggests something troubling about life in the technological age. By mediating sublime experiences of romance, natural beauty and art with digital devices, we alter our relationship to the real. Our new tools of perception substitute electronic

eyes and ears for our own senses. As a result, our sense of the world around us, including what is sacred, has changed.

©2013 Los Angeles Times

Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: Apple and the religious roots of technological devotion (2013, September 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2013-09-apple-religious-roots-technological-devotion.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.