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Artwork in *Origin*

In his newest novel *Origin[[1]](#endnote-1)*, Dan Brown uses the power of artwork as he has in his prior novels. *Origin* takes place in the beautiful cities of Bilboa and Barcelona, Spain. While all Dan Brown novels include a copious amount of artwork, *Origin* differs from the other novels because Brown integrates a lot of modern art into his new novel. By using more modern art in the novel, Dan Brown is able to reach a more progressive, millennial-aged audience than his other books, which included artwork from many traditionally famous artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Bernini, and so on. In Brown’s past novels, artwork has always been used as clues and symbols for Langdon to follow in order to accomplish the main goal of the novel. However, in *Origin*, the artwork pertains most directly to the overarching themes of the novel, rather than to the novel’s plotline. Since *Origin* uses more technological clues for Langdon to follow, Brown connected multiple different pieces of modern art and traditional art to the different themes of the book to reinforce the main ideas being discussed in the novel. While all of Dan Brown books use a multitude of artwork in each novel, *Origin* differs from Brown’s original novels because of the incorporation of more modern art into the story, and his correlation of themes to the pieces of artwork in this novel.

The first piece of modern artwork that Robert Langdon focuses on in *Origin* is *The Swimming Pool* by Yves Klein. Winston, Langdon’s personal audio tour guide for the Guggenheim, describes the artwork as the biggest painting in the Guggenheim’s collection. Yves Klein invented the color that he used to create the painting, International Klein Blue, that Langdon claims gave him the sense that he could dive right into the painting. Another modern piece that Langdon and Winston discussed was *Maman* by Louise Bourgeois. This sculpture depicts a 30-foot-tall, 32-foot-wide female black widow spider carrying an egg-sack, hence the name maman, which means “mom” in French. Langdon immediately dislikes the sculpture because he describes himself as a “classicist”, so this sculpture is rather distasteful in his opinion (O, VI, 38). However, Winston immediately disagrees with him. Winston describes *Maman* to be the perfect example of juxtaposition because the black widow in nature is known for being a lethal and deadly predator, but in this sculpture, she is depicted with having an egg-sack, which gives the notion that she is fragile because she is bringing new life into the world. She is “both predator and progenitor — a powerful core perched atop impossibly slender legs, conveying both strength and fragility,” as described by Winston (O, VI, 38). Winston even goes as far as to compare *Maman* to Michelangelo’s *David*, describing how David’s strong stance and determined eyes juxtaposed against his almost feminine vulnerability of his limp wrist and lose slingshot parallel the female’s spider fierce predator nature but motherly instinct to protect her egg-sac of burgeoning life. While *The Swimming Pool* and *Maman* are pieces of artwork that Brown uses to show his focus on modern art in *Origin,* his other included pieces of artwork all correlate to a theme in the novel.

A modern piece of artwork that Brown uses to portray the themes of science versus religion and the origin of life in *Origin* is Edmond Kirsch’s artwork portraying pictograms carved into a large piece of clay. From left to right, the piece depicts a series of five footprints behind three, large Assyrian markings spelling the word “fish,” and finally an asterisk-like symbol that actually is an old symbol for God. Langdon describes this piece out loud to other viewers by pointing out how “Edmond made footprints in the mud *behind* the fish, to represent the fish’s historic evolutionary step onto land,” and how, “the asymmetrical asterisk on the right- the symbol that the fish seems to be consuming­–is one of history’s oldest symbols for God,” (O, IV, 39). Langdon finishes up summarizing the piece by saying how “it’s a playful version of the Darwin fish — evolution consuming religion,” (O, IV, 39). This is a fictional piece that was created by Dan Brown to incorporate these themes into the novel. The first meaning of this piece shows the origins of life. Edmond put the human foot prints and the ancient pictograms of “fish” to represent how life first originated in the ocean before there was any creature walking on land. Another contributor to this piece’s meaning of the origin of life is the medium that Kirsch decided to create his design on. Kirsch drew his design into mud and created “crudely etched markings” to imitate fossil impressions in mud and early cave-man drawings made by the earliest ancestors of humans (O, IV, 38). The second meaning of this piece illustrates the theme of science versus religion in the novel. Charles Darwin grew up as a Christian, however his scientific voyage to the Galapagos created one of the biggest controversies in the history of science versus religion. He formulated the theory of evolution, a theory that contradicts much of the church’s teachings, which earned Darwin the name, “destroyer of mythical beliefs”[[2]](#endnote-2). By incorporating Darwin’s fish into the art piece, Kirsch reminded the viewers of the biggest struggle between religion and science, and effectively showed science dominating religion by having the fish engulfing the symbol of god.

Another piece of artwork that Brown uses to portray the theme of science versus religion is *Head On* created by Cai Guo-Qiang. This massive sculpture portrays a large amount of taxidermy timber wolves posed in a such way such that they appear to be leaping across the gallery through the air. However, once they are across the room, they collide violently into a large piece of glass, the impact causing them to create a pile of dead wolves. Winston describes this piece as “ninety-nine wolves racing blindly into a wall to symbolize a herd mentality, a lack of courage in diverging in the norm,” (O, XII, 65). Kirsch describes religion as a system that has systematically delayed human progress and improvement (O, XX, 96), however people still have religious beliefs because it helps keep order in the world and give people hope. People refuse to diverge from the norm of practicing religion because of the fear that chaos could erupt if religion were to end, even if it was killing any significant human progress in the process. This art piece portrays this theme because none of the wolves are willing to leave their pack, even if it means that they die in the end. It’s the fear of the unknown that causes them to stay, same with how it’s the fear of new, revolutionary sciences that deters people from changing their beliefs from the norm.

The theme of “where do we come from” is depicted in *Origin* through the form of artwork were the designs *Panots*, Barcelona hexagonal paving tiles. Each “bore an identical swirling design of seemingly meaningless squiggles, and yet when they were all arranged and rotated as intended, a startling pattern emerged–an underwater seascape that gave the impression of plankton, microbes, and undersea flora,” (O, XLIX, 220). The locals often called these tiles “*La Sopa Primordial*” or “*Gaudi’s primordial soup*,” (O, XLIX, 220). These tiles represent the common themes of the beginning of life and the question of how we got here because of their depiction of the earliest lifeforms on this planet.

One of Paul Gauguin’s famous artworks that Dan Brown includes in *Origin* depicts the overarching theme in the book. The postimpressionist painting is called *D’où Venons Nous/ Que Sommes Nous/ Où Allons*. In English, the title translates to *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* In *Origin*, this theme of what is the origin of life and where are we heading in the future is symbolized completely in Gauguin’s painting. This painting depicts a Tahitian jungle landscape with its native inhabitants going about their daily activities. The painting uses broad strokes, bright colors and looks very primitive at first glance. However, the viewer is supposed to look at this painting from right to left in order to get the full meaning on its content.

On the far right, a new born baby slept on a boulder, representing life’s beginning. *Where do we come from?* In the middle, an assortment of people of different ages carried out the daily activities of life. *What are we?* And on the left, a decrepit old woman sat alone, deep in thought, seeming to ponder her own mortality. (O, LII, 236)

This painting does not correlate with an important event or scene in the book, but the title of this painting represents the overarching theme in *Origin*. The premise of this book is that Edmond Kirsch has made a revolutionary discovery that will undermine all religious beliefs because he discovered the origin of life and the human race’s future destiny. This painting encompasses that theme because it shows all the stages of human life starting from infancy to old age. It represents the time-line of human beings and how it’s just as important to know the beginning of time as well as what the future holds for us.

Dan Brown’s newest novel *Origin* differs from the previous novels in the series because the artwork in *Origin* relates to themes of the novel, whereas the artwork in the previous novels were used as clues that the characters needed to follow in the plot line. In *Angels and Demons*[[3]](#endnote-3), Robert Langdon followed a trail of Bernini’s statues and towering obelisks to follow the Path of Illumination and discover the secret lair of the Illuminati. Each statue either depicted or was located in a place that represented one of the four main elements: earth, wind, fire, air. According to the legend of the Path of Illumination, a scientist who wanted to join the Illuminati had to follow the path of the four elements. While each of Bernini’s statues may not have shown direct references to the Illuminati, they each depicted a specific element and revealed certain clues that were crucial for any aspiring Illuminatus to understand if they wanted to find the secret lair. Therefore, each statue that Langdon visits is another piece of artwork that Langdon uses as a clue to help him advance through the plotline in *Angels and Demons.*

The first statue that Robert Langdon found on his journey on the Path of Illumination was Bernini’s statue of *Habakkuk and the Angel*. *Habakkuk and the Angel* portrays two figures intertwined, with each figure pointing in opposite directions. The clue that revealed that *Habakkuk and the Angel* represented the element earth is that the statue is located in a chapel decorated in wood, which was very peculiar for a chapel from that time period. A second clue is that Habakkuk was also said to be the “prophet that predicted the annihilation of the earth” (A&D, LXXVI, 295). The second statue on the Path of Illumination was a marble stone relief in the ground of St. Peter’s Square called the *West Potente*. This statue clearly indicated that it represented the element wind because of the five gusts of wind blowing out of God’s mouth. Another indication that the relief revealed that it was tied to the Illuminati was the eclipse shape of the stone, a reference to Galileo’s heliocentric astronomical observation. Galileo, who was allegedly an original Illuminati, presented this observation that depicted the sun as the center of the universe instead of the Earth. The third Bernini statue that marks the Path of Illumination was *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* in the Santa Maria della Vittoria. This statuerepresented fire because the statue was described as an angel plunging its fiery arrow into St. Teresa. The final location, The Piazza Navona, is an eclipsed shaped piazza where Bernini’s *Fountain of the Four Rivers* was located. *Fountain of the Four Rivers* obviously depicted water because the fountain honored the Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Rio Plata river. Dan Brown’s use of artwork in this novel clearly differs from his use in *Origin* because here in *Angels and Demons*, Bernini’s statues marked a literal pathway that an aspiring illuminatus must take to be initiated into this elite, secret society.

Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci[[4]](#endnote-4) Code* differs from *Origin* because Brown uses the artwork in *The Da Vinci Code* to help Langdon identify the alleged Holy Grail instead of using the artwork to identify the theme in the novel. Robert Langdon discovers that the Holy Grail is not a chalice, but it’s actually the holy bloodline that Mary Magdalene kept secret from the world. According to Dan Brown, the Dead Sea scrolls revealed that Mary Magdalene was actually the wife of Jesus. Also, not only was she the wife of Jesus, but she also had his child which would have started a royal bloodline of Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown uses multiple paintings to show proof that Mary Magdalene is the Holy Grail. However, the main painting that Brown uses to support that argument is *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. In the novel, after Langdon escapes the Louvre and the Bank of Zurich, he finds himself in the home of his friend Leigh Teabing, a Holy Grail enthusiast. Teabing claims that the Holy Grail is actually shown in *The Last Supper*. By using paintings, such as *The Last Supper* in *The Da Vinci Code,* Brown is identifying a piece of artwork with a specific clue in the plotline instead of assigning each piece of artwork a theme like he does in *Origin*.

One of the first things Leigh Teabing points out is how the person to the right of Jesus is not Peter the apostle, but in fact Mary Magdalene. Teabing indicates how the negative space between Jesus and Mary Magdalene actual makes the letter “V,” important because it is an ancient symbol for a chalice or a woman’s womb. Another detail that Teabing stresses is how Mary Magdalene is wearing a blue dress and red robe while Jesus is wearing a red gown and a blue robe. Mary and Jesus are represented as inverses of each other in this painting, just like male and female are inverses of each other. This suggests that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were a married couple, implying that it was very possible that they could have started a royal bloodline. A final detail that Teabing uses to show that Mary Magdalene does represent the Holy Grail is because of the letter that Jesus and Mary make if they were viewed “as compositional elements rather than people” (DVC, LVIII, 244). Viewed as compositional elements, Mary and Jesus actually outline the letter “M,” for Mary Magdalene. Through this painting, Teabing was able to explain that the Holy Grail was not a religious icon, but actually a person. Dan Brown’s use of artwork in *The Da Vinci Code* clearly differs from his use in *Origin* because in *The Da Vinci Code* the artwork is used as a mechanism to introduce the true identity of the Holy Grail, not as representations of the themes.

Dan Brown’s *Inferno*[[5]](#endnote-5) differs from *Origin* because Robert Langdon follows a trail of Dante Alighieri related icons to locate the virus that the creator, Bertrand Zobrist, calls Inferno. The first significant piece of artwork that Langdon uses to begin his adventure to find the virus is Botticelli’s “La Mappa dell’Inferno,” or “The Map of Hell.” “The Map of Hell” depicts the nine circles of hell that are described in Dante’s *The* *Divine Comedy[[6]](#endnote-6),* where Dante and Virgil travel through hell, into purgatory, and finally into paradise. Each layer depicts the punishment for a sin that a person committed during his or her life. The layers of inferno are as follows; first lust, then gluttony, greed, wrath, heresy, violence, fraud, then finally treachery. However, the map that Robert Langdon discovers in the Faraday pointer had been rearranged so that each layer was in an incorrect spot. Also, a letter had been digitally edited into each layer so it read “catrovacer” from top to bottom. “Catrovacer” had no actual meaning, but when the layers of the map were rearranged into correct order, the letter spelled out “cerca trova,” which means “seek” and “find” in Latin. After discovering this first clue on the map, Langdon was able to remember that while “cerca trova” may not have any specific meaning, the phrase does appear on a banner in Vasari’s painting “Battaglia di Marciano.” With that clue in mind, Langdon and Sienna visited the Hall of the Five Hundred to examine the painting in closer detail. This clue that Langdon deciphered was the first major clue that Langdon used to follow the path of Inferno.

The second significant piece of art that Landon deciphers is a clue from Dante’s death mask. While the front of the mask just depicts the sad, dead face of the poet Dante Alighieri, the back of the mask looked a little peculiar to Langdon. The back of the mask was whiter than it should have been for its age. After examining the mask for a couple of minutes, Langdon realized that the back of the mask looked whiter because it was actually newer. Someone had applied white, water soluble gesso to the back of the mask to hide another clue. Written on the top of the gesso were seven uppercase “P’s.” The “P’s” were actually a reference to Dante’s *Inferno* where they represented the seven deadly sins. In the epic poem, when Dante arrived at the entrance of purgatory, seven “p’s” were drawn on his forehead in blood. A “p” was erased from his forehead every time he climbed to another terrace, showing that he was being purged of his sins. Knowing this, Langdon wiped away the gesso from the back of the mask, which revealed a long lines of clues. This poem then pointed Langdon in the next direction on his search to find the virus Inferno. Once again, *Inferno* differs greatly from *Origin* because the pieces of artwork used in *Inferno* held literal clues that Langdon needed to decipher in order to find the virus.

Following the theme of his earlier books, Brown used artwork in his novel *The Lost Symbol* [[7]](#endnote-7) to portray different clues that Langdon uses to discover the true Masonic Pyramid and the actual mission of the Freemasons. The first piece of artwork that Brown uses as a clue to reveal the true mission of the Freemasons is *The Apotheosis of Washington* by Constantino Brumidi. *The Apotheosis of Washington* is a fresco on the ceiling of the Rotunda that depicts George Washington “rising to the heavens in glory, flanked by female figures representing Liberty and Victory or Fame” (Beyer, 66)[[8]](#endnote-8). Apotheosis means to raise someone up to have the same power of a god. The Freemasons were said to be keeping an ancient source of power, which the villain of the novel, Mal’akh, was after. This fresco is the first clue that Brown gives in regard to this godly power being the main goal for Mal’akh because it shows a glorification of George Washington in a way that makes him resemble Zeus, the Greek king of the gods. Not only is Washington depicted as Zeus in the fresco, but other Greek gods were surrounding him as well. Another art piece that held an important clue for Robert Langdon in *The Lost Symbol* is *Melencolia I*. Robert Langdon looked into this painting after finding the numbers 1514 A.D. underneath the lid of a box. Langdon and Katherine, the heroine from this novel, figured out that A.D. actually were the initials of the artist Albrecht Dürer and that the number 1514 was the year that Dürer not only finished the engraving, but also the number that is hidden in the painting. *Melencolia I* is the next clue on Langdon’s search to find the lost symbol because the engraving exhibits a magic square in the corner that correlates with an earlier clue that Katherine and Langdon had found earlier. After deciphering the clue, it gave the next clue that was supposed to lead Langdon and Katherine in the direction of the next location. However, they do not fully understand the meaning of the message until later on in the story. Once again, this novel greatly differs from *Origin* because Brown used artwork in *The Lost Symbol* to hide clues for Langdon’s journey to find the lost Freemason symbol, instead of correlating the themes of the books to the artwork.

Dan Brown always incorporates a multitude of artwork into his novels, and *Origin* is no different. Dan Brown included pieces such as *Maman*, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?,* and the Barcelona *Panots* into *Origin*. However, *Origin* artwork differed from his other novels because of the inclusion of more modern-styled pieces instead of the traditional paintings made by Leonardo da Vinci and Botticelli. *Origin* also differs from his other books because each of its main art pieces corresponds with a theme, instead of a clue to the next location. While there were many differences between the artwork of all the books, each piece of artwork was included to create a more cultural experience for the readers and help increase the appreciation for all of these masterpieces.

1. Dan Brown, *Origin*. (Doubleday:2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Andrew Norman. *Charles Darwin: Destroyer of Myths*. (Skyhorse: 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dan Brown, *Angels and Demons.* (Doubleday: 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code.* (Doubleday: 2003) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Dan Brown, *Inferno*. (Doubleday: 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy.* (1321). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol*. (Doubleday:2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Thomas R. Beyer, Jr., *33 Keys to Unlocking* The Lost Symbol*: a Reader’s Companion to the Dan Brown Novel*. (Newmarket Press: 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)