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📖 GOLDEN SEA: A Painting For A Time Between Times | Essay, by Roberta Ahmanson

This essay, by Roberta Ahmanson, first published in the *Golden Sea* monograph, was in response to Makoto Fujimura's painting *Golden Sea*, which will be featured in Howard and Roberta Ahmanson collections exhibit which opens February 12, 2016.

Ahmanson Gallery
 17512 Von Karman Avenue
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We live in a time between times. Human history is filled with such times, when one way of understanding and organizing the world breaks up and others vie to occupy that space. The 410 A.D. sack of Rome by Goths was such a time, memorialized by Augustine in his classic *The City of God*. Another was the fall of Constantinople in 1453 when Islam at last controlled the capital of the Christian Byzantine world. The drive to make sense of these changes is as old as Homer and as new as a recent song by Bob Dylan. Poets, historians, artists, regular folks all join in the project.

Makoto Fujimura's painting *Golden Sea* marks this particular time between times, this uncertain and fungible time in which we now live. He joins consummate historians, such as the late Jacques Barzun and John Lukacs, whose recent works document the turning point we've reached. And, indeed, like Bob Dylan's recent song "Tempest." Mako's work is an artistic evocation of the end of the West as it has been understood for at least a thousand years.

Today the West (by that I mean the world created by Europe and its empires in the past thousand years) is golden indeed. Wealthy still. Wanting for little compared to most of humankind throughout most of history. But the gold, like the gold in Mako's painting, is being washed with a sea of change. The gold is there, but it is washed over with blue and green, with azure and verdigris.

Bob Dylan's new song "Tempest," also the title of his latest album, evokes the sense of loss and wonder at the change we find ourselves in the middle of. His metaphor is the sinking of the great

ship Titanic in 1912. At 11:40 p.m. on April 14, the steamer hit an iceberg. By 3 a.m. one of the largest ships ever built was on its way to the bottom of the Atlantic. Dylan sings:

The pale moon rose in its glory
Out on the Western town,
She told a sad, sad story
Of the great ship that went down.

It was the fourteenth day of April.
Over the waves she rode,
Sailing into tomorrow
To a golden age foretold.

Mako's painting captures not only the gold of the age but also the silver of the moon and the blue of the night sea. The watchman, without binoculars, had missed the iceberg. Dylan tells his tale as if it were a dream. Memories and images from the Bible layer through his mind, much as the layers of Paint sweep across Golden Sea. But, just as the minerals in Mako's painting are solid and real, so was the sinking of the Titanic. The reality cannot be escaped. Dylan continues:

In the dark illumination
He remembered bygone years,
He read the Book of Revelation,
And he filled his cup with tears....

The news came over the wires
And struck with deadly force.
Love had lost its fires.
All things had run their course.
The watchman he lay dreaming
Of all the things that can be.
He dreamed the Titanic was sinking
Into the deep blue sea.

I first saw the painting Golden Sea in Mako's red-barn studio near Princeton right after Superstorm Sandy hit, canceling his scheduled opening at Dillon Gallery on November 8, 2012. Damage in the artists' communities in Chelsea and Brooklyn was severe. Mako lost fifty paintings and prints.

As I took in Golden Sea, I couldn't help but think of a much earlier natural disaster washed by time and the sea. It was the year 79 A.D., another time between times.

Julius Caesar had brought a violent end to the Roman Empire in 44 B.C. and his adopted son Octavian, later Augustus Caesar, quite literally set it in stone at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Cities clustered around the Bay of Naples south of Rome, much like cities line the coast of Southern California today. The sea was on one side, regal mountains on the other. Pompeii was a colony founded for retired soldiers, a seaport with all the services sailorsexpect. Nearby was the lavish resort town of Herculaneum, a playground for wealthy Romans much like Palm Beach or Malibu. On August 24 the idyll ended. Vesuvius erupted. Pliny the Younger, who watched from across the bay, wrote later that the first blast was the shape of an umbrella pine. Pompeii was covered in ash; the sky darkened, so black was the air. Fire and ash. And then came mud, as the lava rushed seaward. As the ash smothered

the people of Pompeii, mud covered the beach villas of Herculaneum. Today you can walk into them just as they were. Skylights. Bronze and wood furniture. Tiles. Colorful wall paintings and mosaics. You can stand at the door where the inhabitants heard the news and ran, all preserved by the relentless, all-enveloping mud.

It was forgotten for nearly 1700 years. But in the sixteenth century, Pliny's letters had been found, and in 1748 excavations began. Immediately, bodies were found as they fell in Pompeii, but none surfaced in Herculaneum, not then. Where the mud preserved its seaside mansions it seemed not to have captured the citizens. In recent decades, however, archaeologists have managed to uncover parts of the beach itself, and there, at last, bodies have been found, caught by the mud in the moments they were trying to flee to their boats and the sea. The end of an age.

Just as the gold in Mako's painting is washed with blues, grays, silver-effects only Nihonga can capture-the sea washed over the sparkling mosaics and lively tiles of Pompeii and Herculaneum. A wistful, aching sight.

My husband, Howard, likens the West in the past 125 years to a super nova, making one last burst of light and energy and then exploding, scattering light, heat, and matter all over. To him the West's last burst of energy was its intense late colonization of Africa between 1875 and 1917, its explosion into pieces the two twentieth-century world wars. John Lukacs analyses the process in *At the End of an Age*, and Jacques Barzun tells the story in his 1999 best-seller *From Dawn to Decadence*. As he sees it, the technology of printing not only made the Protestant Reformation possible, but also ushered in what we call modernity. He argues that modernity has run its course. Where we are headed next is an open question.

There is now a clear shift in the imagination that permeates everything from our universities to popular television. In an essay called "On the Reading of Old Books," British writer C.S. Lewis observed that every time, every age, carries certain assumptions that go unquestioned because they are simply part of the air everyone breathes. Imagination informs what is possible, what is to be hoped for, to be dreamed of, to be expected as future reality. From the fourth century into the twentieth, a Christian imagination shaped the West. Laws were rooted in biblical understandings of justice. Care for the poor is mandated in the Bible from the Pentateuch to the teachings of Jesus. The Book of Revelation described the world as it ought to be: a world where death and tears would be no more, where sickness, hunger, thirst, and poverty have ceased to exist. At its center is Jesus Christ ruling in justice and love, and nearby grow the trees of life "for the healing of the nations." That imagination no longer reigns.

In his 2011 book *The Swerve*, Harvard professor Stephen Greenblatt celebrates the 1417 discovery of Roman philosopher Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*. That find, Greenblatt claims, was not only the hinge of the Renaissance but also the harbinger of the imagination that dominates the West today. We are now awash in a Lucretian world, a world first imagined by the fourth century B.C. Greek philosopher Epicurus. Quite simply, it is an imagination that says only matter is eternal. There is no God.

Human beings have no particular purpose. All matter is equal. The greatest good for any human being is to maximize personal pleasure. This is no easy hedonistic formula. Pleasure here includes development of intellectual and more capacity and the formation of serious relationships. However, evil, if such term could be used, consists in anything that inhibits an individual's deepest pleasure. There is no transcendent morality, no code beyond pleasure in its deepest personal sense.

C.S. Lewis writes about the difference between this mind. This imagination, and a Christian one in a 1946 essay called "Man or Rabbit?" The Christian, he says, believes that God created the universe. Human beings are going to live forever and they can only do that by being united to God. However, we got "badly off the rails" and had to be put right by the Son of God Himself coming to earth, dying, and rising from the dead. The materialist, such as Lucretius or Epicurus or Stephen Greenblatt, believes, on the contrary, that the universe and human beings are the result of the blind workings of inanimate matter. Our deepest happiness can be achieved by social services and political organizations. Everything else, Lewis says, such as "vivisection, birth-control, the judicial system, education," is to be judged good or bad simply by whether or not it "helps or hinders that kind of happiness." Where the Christian and the Materialist might agree on all sorts of things from efficient sewers and hospitals to a healthy diet, Lewis argues, that one major difference remains.

That difference itself leads to another difference. Even if human happiness in a Lucretian sense is critical to the individual, the individual can (and, as bioethicist and materialist Peter Singer has asserted, must) give way when his or her existence inhibits the happiness of others. This is the world we live in now.

I kept on thinking on these issues as I spent time with Golden Sea. Such tensions are captured in those carefully laid layers of gold and silver azure and copper. Like those layers of paint, varied winds of thought and understanding wash across our days, inhabit our arts and our media, our businesses and our leisure. In coarse minerals literally washed onto the silky Japanese paper, the painting embodies the upheaval of such a time, of such a tempestuous sea. Gold washes over gold. What will remain? The painting is descriptive. It catches a wave.

The gold is significant. In Japanese art, gold stands for that which remains. It's still there in the mosaics of Pompeii and Herculaneum. And, for Mako, I suspect it is key in this work. Mako is a Christ-follower. We may be in a sea of change, our world upended and uncertain as to where it will land. But, there is gold, there is that which will last.

In the late nineteenth century, writer and educator Matthew Arnold could see the beginning of this sea change. The British Empire was at its height, but Arnold could see it ending. He stood on the beach at Dover and watched the sea, perhaps a Golden Sea. And he knew it brought change. But Arnold had lost his faith. In "Dover Beach" he laments the loss and concludes with an almost nihilistic sigh:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled
 but now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Arnold's sea brought Greenblatt's world. But men like C.S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Augustine see another possibility. Mako does, too, and Golden Sea is a painting about such a possibility. Christ-followers live in the already and the not yet, the already of Christ's victory over sin and death and the not yet of his return to restore all heaven and earth at the last day. In Four Quartets, Eliot wrote that we live in a world of hints and guesses. But, he wrote:

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is
 Incarnation.

And the gold, the hint, underneath the ever-moving sea in Makoto Fujimura's Golden Sea painting bears witness that this artist, born of two worlds himself, stands with them.

Roberta Green Ahmanson is a journalist, prolific art patron, and lecturer based in California.

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