



Visual Arts and the Christian

From poetry in moss¹, hyper-real woodcarving², and digital print of gigantic proportions³ – to surreal scenarios⁴, oil miniatures⁵, delicate mezzotints⁶ and very much more – there is a lot of diversity in the visual arts that often goes beyond the “visual”. But in a field where God-honouring Christian voices seem to be the exception rather than the norm, is it valid or even worthwhile for a Christian to be interested in the arts?

Visual arts, and creative industries related to them, have been inseparable from the human condition through the ages

The need to make tangible things that express our perceptions has always been part of human history. I think it is part of our being made *“after the image of God”*. What artists and designers do is ultimately modeled on God’s creation work. But as His creatures, we do not make things out of “nothing”. Even if one does not acknowledge the Creator, human creativity cannot but draw from God’s created world and thus always reflects it in some way. Starting with Adam’s first task of coming up with names for the animals, the use of human skill and imagination is acknowledged in the Bible as a God-given part of life. God’s directions for building the tabernacle and the artistic creativity He commanded are recorded in intricate detail in Exodus: (31 vs 3-5) *“...and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs ... to work in every craft.”*

The passage reminds us of the God-ordained validity of craftsmanship. It also states that He is the true source of creative inspiration: artistic talent is bestowed by Him, and so is the calling to exercise it.

Why bother with art?

John Piper verbalized the thought of many Christians when he said *“The production of art is not efficient ... Art probably feels more superfluous to us ... there are so many more **urgent** things...”*⁷ This common opinion is worth a response. When we are asked why art is necessary, it is certainly possible to describe the ways art has an important function in human life. Through the ages, works of art have fuelled changes in political or cultural ideology – or served as focal points for them. Examples of creativity are very present in real, everyday life, and fill our lives and thoughts. Art is certainly something that cannot be dismissed as superfluous, for we rely greatly on creative expression to articulate certain things that just can’t be conveyed through words alone. It is part of how God made us, and He provides for us and communicates with us accordingly. In His wisdom and power, God created a natural world that expresses His glory not only through functional design, but also through beauty and variety.

In the extensively detailed accounts in Exodus of God’s instructions for the tabernacle and items for service, great concern was shown for their external representation. From cherubim of gold to jewels on the high priest’s breastplate, the artwork commissioned by God in Exodus 25-28 encompassed a plethora of representational, non-representational and symbolic artwork.

Much expense as well as time would have gone into this making of God’s house. 1 Kings 6-8 contains another wealth of material description about the temple. It is a reminder that among God’s many glorious attributes, pragmatism and utilitarianism are strikingly absent. As Francis Schaeffer has aptly said, *“There can be no question. God is interested in beauty.”*⁸

Some qualities in art that make it a special part of human life

Art influences how we experience our lives and how we perceive.

It is **reflective**. Artwork forms a platform for contemplation, as well as being a product of it.

It is **expressive**. It articulates intangible aspects of life and human experience in a tangible form. This is through the use of representation, symbolism; or actual physical material and the associations, suggestions and qualities extracted from it.

It is **communicative**. It conveys something of its maker's thought, whether he/she is conscious of intending to or not.

These qualities make the thoughtful, biblically-based consideration of art conducive to reflective appreciation. It also helps us take more interest in life, to observe it better, and can lead us to glorify God more fervently.

Because it concerns aesthetic and sensory qualities, art also requires us to make conscious use of our perceptive faculties – indeed encourages us to. In conjunction with sensitivity and lively responsive thought, this is a frame of mind that leads us to:

1. Enjoy God's goodness in life exultantly and worshipfully

The goodness and beauty of God are displayed in His creation and actions. A well-known line from the Westminster Shorter Catechism describes the purpose of man: "...to *glorify God and enjoy Him forever*." One important way to do so is through considering His works, in nature and in the world around us. Art considers some aspect of earthly life, and thus can provide a platform for thinking about God and His works. It's the product of reflection that arises from time spent observing both physical or abstract realities. The artist's observations are displayed in his work – and that allows other reflections and emotions to arise in viewers who think about it. In a way, it's much like writing a piece of prose, poetry or music – there's a capturing of insight and emotion into tangible form.

2. **Cultivate a sense of God's transcendent greatness** – beyond our own logic, reasoning and control.⁹ This goes against the ingrained ethos of humanism, in which we are the centre of the universe – all things must fit within the bounds of our own reasoning, and all should be subject to the control and demands of our wishes. When utilitarianism rules all, the universe becomes reduced to systems of business and institutions of human construction. Art may remind us of God's glory in nature and providence, make us aware of human constructions by questioning them, or simply stir up compassion and understanding for various conditions of humanity. Whatever its message, it remains separate from the structure of reality in the sense that *it looks upon it*.

Rethink assumptions

In the Fine Arts, as with any other specialized field, one needs to be informed in order to consider the artwork from more points of view than that of purely personal opinion. Though opinions about "what art is" differ, it's an undeniable fact that contemporary art has made itself a reputation for alienating or shocking the "lay person". The media is quick to pick up on sensationally disturbing or controversial works, and what's publicized and enshrined in institutions of art is often antagonistic to Christian values. Much art does indeed depict fallenness.

Despite citing "contemporary" work above, this situation is nothing new – consider the lavish cultures of the Babylonians and Chaldeans, the snare of whose worldly glory is mentioned by God when He admonishes Israel's infatuation with foreign gods and cultures. We can be sure that every kind of immorality was already present in the world at the time of the Flood and after, as well as being represented and expressed. However, as those who create art cannot but be products of their society, spiritual chaos and despair in the arts merely reflect a society bereft of the light of

God. As John Piper mentioned in an interview about art, *“The secularisation of the modern world has meant the co-opting of many art forms by the world for themes and focuses that are abhorrent to the church.”*¹⁰

Fine Arts are definitely not the only arena in which this principle applies. Much of the popular media that infiltrates daily life promotes decidedly unbiblical values. Greater damage may even be caused by them, as these channels of worldly influence are part of “normal” life. It should be no surprise if the art valued by the world promotes or describes fallenness, since every other worldly medium has its share in doing so. Yet all is not lost, as many artworks also demonstrate God’s glory by making people capable and desirous of creating art. Excellence in creative skill consistently evokes wonder and a sense of things larger than self. There are many artists, some of whom are professing Christians, whose carefully crafted work is well worth thoughtful appreciation.

A Christian artist or art-viewer need not confine his thoughts to what is currently lauded in the world at large. We have the richness and fullness of a Christ-dependent worldview that forms a secure point from which to explore and consider the scope of the creative arts from both past and present. As Hans Rookmaaker has written: *“If ... our world began to change in the eighteenth century as its inner direction was set on a humanistic track, where mankind is the master, and pleasure (through money) and power are the ultimate values, where were the Christians? ... In concentrating on saving souls they have often forgotten that God is the God of life and that the Bible teaches people how to live, how to deal with our world, God’s creation. The result is that even though many people became Christians, nevertheless our world became totally secularized with almost no Christian influence.”*¹¹

It is very important, then, that Christians called by God to work in the creative industries strive to be diligent and passionate in their work. By developing their God-given abilities and by being strong voices in the creative community, they can provide an alternative culture to that which is mainstream, simply by doing their work *out of* a Christian worldview.

This definitely need not mean an external, kitschy “Christianising”. Consider instead how the richness of salvation and belief in God makes way for much conceptual freedom. An artist’s upholding of different values than the world’s will also show in his or her creative output – one’s choices, opinions, aims, focus and influences, if flowing out of a strong personal relationship with God, will be expressive of a biblically Christian worldview.

One exhortation above all applies: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”* (Deut 6:5)

So long as God remains our first love, art is worthwhile and beautiful to work in and to explore. Christians in the visual arts have every reason to work hard in the field of their calling, and seek with their lives and their work, to *“glorify God, and enjoy Him forever.”*

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 - Veith, Gene Edward. *State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe* (Turning Point Christian Worldview Series). Leicester, England: Crossway Books, 1991. Print.

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Notes

¹ Anna Garforth, Sporeborne/Shakespeare projects.

² Yoshihiro Suda, plant sculptures.

³ Gottfried Helnwein, print installation in Waterford city.

⁴ Cai Guo-Qiang, sculptural installation work.

⁵ Shahzia Sikander, miniature oil paintings.

⁶ Vija Celmins, spiderweb mezzotint "*Untitled* (Web 2)" 2001.

⁷ John Piper, interview with Bob Allen, "*What is the Value of Art in the Church?*".

⁸ Schaeffer, Francis A. "*Art And the Bible*", chapter 1, pg 26.

⁹ In various of his writings, Jonathan Edwards describes the beauty of God displayed in His attributes.

¹⁰ John Piper, in an interview with Bob Allen, "*What is the Value of Art in the Church?*"

¹¹ Hans Rookmaaker in *Art Needs No Justification*, Chapter 2 – "*The Church's Response*".