



Faith and the Arts

The Place of Arts in the World and in the Church

There is no escaping the influences and attractions of the arts. If you have selected paint colours for your house, matched colours in your furnishings, changed the cut or colour of your hair, chosen a new car or coat or shirt on the basis of its style, had a preference for one eau de toilette over another, and spent money on videos, CDs and magazines, you've made choices in the realm of the arts.

Defining works of art

When I refer to the arts, I am referring to the creativity of all kinds of works of art – the things designed to please, arrest, or move us emotionally to certain ends. References to artists are generally not restricted to those who paint. The term applies to all who create works of art – poets, dramatists, novelists, musicians, film directors, choreographers, sculptors, and so on.

Works of art are creations which enlarge our experiences: refresh, enrich, ennoble and delight us. They can affect our seeing, understanding and feelings. They can move us to higher and nobler sentiments such as worship, compassion and patriotism, or they can move us to rebellion and self-indulgence.

In our contemporary world the arts have been dissolving into entertainment and both have been taken captive to commercial interests. Boundaries between principles and practice have disintegrated. Personal preferences are replacing strongly held principles, style frequently discounts content, and political correctness seeks to silence tradition and Biblical judgment.

Setting the stage with a few quotations:

John Calvin has said, *"It is bad to live under a prince (a government) who permits nothing, but much worse to live under one that permits everything."* This statement could be a precise description of where we, in the Western world, find ourselves today in the realms of the arts and entertainment. It is echoed by Dostoevsky's 19th century comment: *"If there is no God, everything is possible."*

The impact of God and the Word of God in the life of Westerners has been replaced by immersion in a world of materialism, entertainment and sensuality. *"As art museums become more like churches, so churches in their turn become more like museums."*¹ In Britain, Mervyn Bragg tells us, *"more people now work in the arts than in the steel, coal and car industries combined."*

Calvin Seerveld has declared that, though Art has now become both a battlefield and playground, it is still a bona fide calling for Christian activity. Another Christian has put it this way:

*"That the arts corrupt does not mean that Christians can abandon them. On the contrary, the corruption of the arts means that Christians dare not abandon them any longer."*²

A three-stage agenda

There is no escaping the influences and attractions of the arts. A decade and a half ago, Neil Postman published his best-seller, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and it is still essential reading for any who wish to understand how the entertainment industry, and television in particular, have

changed a generation. His major plea is for the regeneration of thought, deep thought, lest consumerism takes us all captive to frivolity and pleasure. He is right. We need to know how to really think. (Which makes me think of Bertrand Russell's cynical comment on the failure of people, including Christians, to think. "*Think!*" he said. "*Why people would rather die than think. In fact, they do!*")

Hard thinking, however, is just the first step two others must follow. We are to *think Christianly*, and we are then to *think Christianly flexibly and discerningly*. This is the bottom line. Until the Christian does this, he/she will not be effective in the current cultural battle.

At the outset, however, we must understand that there is no simple division between the sacred and the secular. As Calvin has reminded us, "*All truth is from God and, consequently, if wicked men have said something that is true and just, we ought not to reject it; for it is from God.*"³ Furthermore, "*The human mind, however fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator ... Men whom the Scriptures term natural are acute and clear-sighted in the investigation of inferior (that is, temporal) things.*"⁴ This means that Christian and non-Christian artist alike will be involved in similar struggles to master their chosen medium, to learn from others and the past, to avoid the trite, and to scrape together a living.

Classifying the arts

Everyone knows that there is a world of difference between songs by the Beatles and the Last Four Songs of Richard Strauss, and between Shakespeare and Rap. The vast differences make it essential to often think in categories, and a number of people have attempted classifying the arts. Nicholas Wolterstorff has suggested a three-fold classification.⁵

- 1) *Works of high art*: Art associated with a cultural elite with respect to how art-works are produced, distributed, and used in society. Members of a cultural elite never think of themselves as such, for they are not tied by heredity, wealth or occupation, though they may have close ties intellectually.
- 2) *Works of popular art*: The works of those outside the elite.
- 3) *Works of the tribe*: Works shared in common between the elite and non-elite, e.g. church groups.

No sharp line divides these groups. One shades into the other. Over time, some works shift from one group to another. Jazz originated as popular art but now, generally, belongs to the art of the tribe. Seldom, though, does a work of high art become a work of popular art or of the tribe. Kenneth A. Myers suggests a slightly different classification:

- 1) *Works of high culture*: These are rooted in antiquity, and in every age has convictions about absolutes, truth and virtue.
- 2) *Folk culture*: While simpler in manner and less communicable from one folk to another, folk culture has the virtues of honesty, integrity, commitment to tradition, and perseverance in the face of opposition, e.g. Negro spirituals.
- 3) *Popular culture*: This has its origins in distinctively secularised movements which is now becoming the consciousness of society as a whole as it establishes its own manners and emotional habits.

Both classifications alert us to the tensions between the more traditional, values-laden works of art and the values-levelling popular works. And, whether we like it or not, all artists and consumers are caught up in this tension. Sound values are always levelled by political correctness and the profit motive.

The trickling, dumbing-down effect

When high art is turned into money-making, a trickling, dumbing-down effect takes place. This has happened widely since the Sixties and, in particular, over the last ten years as all the arts have been affected by the impact of TV and satellite communication. The chief players are now often entertainers themselves and corporate management driven by competition, profit and greed.

The trickling, dumbing-down effect works like this. A work of art is created by an ideas person, the initiator. This initiator, be he artist, film director, choreographer, or whatever, expresses his ideas through a chosen physical form. Next, technicians and developers make this work available to a wider audience through duplication and distribution. Then follow a host of imitators and popularisers who, with little concern for quality as such, alter the original, giving it a spin to boost sales. Finally, there come the vultures – unprincipled opportunists who milk the market for all it's worth with an endless supply of paraphernalia linked with the original, e.g. T-shirts and miscellaneous merchandise, linked foods, special offers, glossy magazines, stickers and labels of all kinds, etc. The vultures feed on mob mentality and the secret longing of people to somehow be linked to the rich and famous, or, at the other end of the scale, to be linked to society's detractors.

The place of the arts in the world

The Greeks, the Egyptians and the people of the Middle Ages had no equivalent word for what we now call art. Their art simply served a function: to draw attention to a subject beyond itself. In the Middle Ages, art, music and architecture were considered spiritual works because they were mostly used in the service of the Church. In the Reformation which followed, Calvinists demanded of art, simplicity, sobriety and measure, and this was evident in the architecture, church furnishings, congregational music, and even in the Geneva gown worn by the pastor. The end of art was in the service of something beyond and greater than art.

In the Renaissance, for the first time, names of artists began to be associated with particular works of art, though artists were still regarded as servants of patrons, the greatest being the Popes and the Roman Catholic church generally. It was only in the 18th century that writers began to group together painting, sculpture, architecture and music. It was then, also, that the first museums and galleries were built. They were built as *public* halls – public spaces where works of art could be contemplated in quietness. Prior to this, quiet rooms had existed in the homes of the nobility and in cathedrals and chapels. Works of art referred to the refined activities of the leisured classes, and the defining characteristic of the arts was their beauty. Beauty, in its turn, had its own characteristics: order, harmony, unity in diversity, symmetry, proportion and balance. While high art was largely the preserve of the wealthy, skilled craftsmen prided themselves in making commodities that were attractive as well as useful.

By the end of the 18th century, the conception of art was clearly changing. The French Revolution which called for a sweeping away of all traditional power and authority, had opened a Pandora's box for the liberation of everything, including the works of art. Art was becoming Art with a capital A, and nature was Nature with a capital N. At the same time, 'man' with a small m was being transformed into Man with a capital M.

The Romantics of the 19th century brought a new emphasis in the arts and a new meaning to the word artist. The new emphasis was that of the sublime – an emotion of awe and veneration "*something far more overwhelming and undefined than the measured classical idea of beauty.*"⁶

The new artist came to celebrate a new self – a creative, free, sensual being unfettered by God, society or family. The words of the mid-19th century poet, Walt Whitman, sum up the spirit of the new man:

I celebrate myself...
I am the poet of the Body;
And I am the poet of the Soul.
Walt Whitman am I, of mighty Manhattan the son,

*Turbulent, fleshy and sensual, eating, drinking and breeding;
No sentimentalist – no stander above men and women, or apart from them;
No more modest than immodest.
I believe in the flesh and the appetites; Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part
and tag of me is a miracle...
If I worship one thing more than another, it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part
of it.*

Such humanists viewed themselves as virtually a separate race of great souls, with greater sensitivity, insight, enthusiasm and passion. They attacked traditional morality and traditional concepts of art, refusing to be subject to old boundaries. When Wordsworth defined poetry as “*the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings*”, the flood-gates of subjectivity opened. Artists were no longer satisfied with *imitating nature*; rather, they would liberate and express the “noble savage” *within* them. Artists like Keats, Byron, Shelley and Wagner, to name but a few, began to live lives as dramatic and unfettered as their art. They lived by their own game plan, and for some, like Andy Warhol, their *life* was their main work of art.

Art became many things. No longer was there one defining description, and no longer was art primarily for contemplation and delight. For some, like Oscar Wilde, it was art for art’s sake. For some it was anti-art for, as the Dada group was to declare at the time of the First World War, ‘*Art has no meaning as life has none*’. For a number in the 20th century, art was political propaganda. For some, like Andrew Wyeth, art is a striving to overcome odds. For others, art is the new and to be new is to be continuously trying to shock. Now art is also being taken captive to commerce and consumerism.

Matthew Collings’ extensive survey of postmodern art entitled *This is Modern Art*, (with an accompanying TV series) reveals contemporary art as a kaleidoscope of styles and opinions. Just one sentence from it sums up six leading aspects of art since the end of the 1980s: ‘*It was glamorous, mysterious, sexy, soulful, macabre, gloomy, quirky, kinky, and funny – and it wasn’t going away.*’ *Postmodernism thrives on paradox, fragmentation, and impossible juxtapositions of styles, techniques and imagery.*”⁷

The place of the arts in the Church

The church’s relationship with the arts has changed over the centuries, and has varied widely not only between denominations but within them. In the Middle Ages, the works of architects, sculptors and artists served the church in highly anonymous ways. They were more akin to the Old Testament craftsmen who considered it an honour to create to the glory of God alone. In the Middle Ages, their works were visual signposts pointing souls to God – and not infrequently paying homage to Mary. The Church called all the tunes and commissioned the craftsmen. In a two hundred year period in France, eighty cathedrals and at least five hundred sizeable churches were built. They were the art centres of their day – combined places of worship, theatre, art gallery, school and library. But some believed that their emphasis on visuals contributed to a lesser understanding of doctrine.

Calvin and Luther both approved of and appreciated good music. Luther thought so highly of it that he was of the opinion that no man should be admitted to the ministry without marked competency in music. Calvin declared, “*Next to God, music deserves the highest praise*”, but in the church he did not want anything distracting attention from the Word of God. “*For music has a secret and incredible power to move our hearts*”, he said. “*When evil words are accompanied by music, they penetrate more deeply, and the poison enters as wine through a funnel into a vat.*”

Over the history of Protestantism that followed, all too frequently it was the perils of the arts that were emphasised rather than their delights.⁸ The Bible, however, endorses the arts in principle, steering a middle course between over-valuing and under-valuing them. Christians have held both the classical view that art is an imitation of reality and the view that it is the imaginative element in any created object of use.

Aesthetic considerations, however, have always been integral to liturgies in the service of doctrines. Hymn singing played an important part in the Methodist revival. Music was central also to the Salvation Army movement, and Negro spirituals were the lifeblood of the American deep South, while choruses have been a characteristic feature of the Charismatic movement.

The Reformed churches generally have displayed a greater wariness in the use of the arts compared to many other churches, being more alert to the dangers of their drawing too much attention to themselves, as well as being capable of introducing undesirable worldly elements into the church. Just how much works of art feature, and should feature in places of worship, rests with denominations and separate congregations. The balance between what is demanded by people and what is acceptable, rests with synods or the local eldership, or a mix of both. There is no doubt that the place of the arts in the life of the church today is increasingly a point of keen debate – and this point of debate is set to continue as schools at all levels are developing programmes and demanding new facilities to accommodate these programmes. Increasingly, too, governments are endorsing and encouraging the arts as never before with substantial inducements and handouts.

Whatever the future, Christians in the past have played a major role in the development of the arts. One cannot imagine a world without the great works of the likes of J.S. Bach, Vivaldi, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Bernini, Vermeer, Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Mozart, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Van Gogh, Dvorak, T.S. Eliot, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, to mention but a few. The list is endless those who, in one way or another, were concerned to glorify God rather than man.

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Endnotes:

¹ Hilary Brand & Adrienne Chaplin Solway, *Art & Soul Signposts for Christians in the Arts* (Paternoster, 1999)

² Gene Veith

³ John Calvin, commenting on Titus 1:12

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk 2, ch. 2.

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*

⁶ Brand & Solway, *Art & Soul*

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid