

## Art as Christian Calling

An evangelical Christian artist wrote that she was not at all conscious of a caring Christian community behind her work. A sad, but very telling, commentary on the evangelicals' attitude towards the arts.

Evangelicals have neglected the arts, and even considered artistic pursuits worldly and unspiritual. Many question the relevance of the arts to Christian life and witness in these days of world upheaval. As the second coming of Jesus Christ is so near, why bother with mundane and impractical things? Why should time and energy be spent on the arts? The world is in the hands of the Prince of Darkness. Any attempt towards improvement is doomed to failure. The Anabaptist notion of otherworldliness still prevails with the motto: "Therefore come out from them and be separate. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you" (2 Cor. 6:17). Many understand the Christian's calling to consist exclusively in proclaiming salvation through Christ to a lost and dying world. Souls must be saved like "branches cut off the tree." Artistic talents have only value as an aid to the saving of souls.

Since art for art's sake is usually considered impractical and worldly, you'll find many frustrated Christian artists who, after their conversion were told to abandon their worldly art-work. Dr. Frank E. Gaebel, former co-editor of *Christianity Today* and educator, has given a remarkable description of prevailing attitudes of not a few evangelicals. "They are the kind of people who look; down upon good music as highbrow, who confuse worship with entertainment, who deplore serious drama as worldly yet are contentedly devoted to third-rate television shows, whose tastes in reading run to the piously sentimental, and who cannot distinguish a kind of religious calendar art from honest art. For them better aesthetic standards are "egghead" and spiritually suspect."

### WHAT IS ART?

A negative feeling towards art is unreal. Art belongs to life. It is not something optional for those who appear to enjoy it. It is influential and pervasive, and all of us are faced daily with some of its forms and expressions. Through T.V., radio, ads, architecture, the furnishings of our home, we are confronted with it.

Art is not a hobby for an artist, but an expression of his life. He puts in his work his whole personality and emotions. Art expresses the deepest depth of a stricken heart or the height of exultation. This is noticeable particularly in music, literature and paintings.

Art communicates. Since an artist puts into his work his feelings, his philosophy of life, his whole personality, you see him reflected in his work. An artist sees the world with other eyes. He interprets. The art forms of today do reflect the present cultural moods. Much modern music belongs to the spiritual rootlessness and anarchy of our times. How many parents have taken the time and trouble to listen to the words of the songs that capture the attention of their youngsters? Try it!

Dr. H. Rookmaaker has given excellent lectures, available on tape, on Beat-Rock and Protest and Jazz and Protest. (I have found these lectures helpful in coming to understand the mood of our times.)

The visual arts, usually called modern art, are all related to the spiritual alienation of our times. A respected art commentator Harold Rosenberg said that we are already in the "post-art" era. In Rozeberg's terminology, an art object today, say a painting is "anxious." It doesn't know whether it is a masterpiece or junk and in some cases it may literally be both.

The sculptor Mark Prent, a Montreal artist, creates fiberglass tableaux that are both sinister and horrifying. He painstakingly copied an electric chair, complete with victim. The viewer is invited to pull a switch and throw the seated figure into convulsion. His macabre exhibitions appear to be a commentary on man's inhumanity to man, his cruelty, despair and lostness.

Many works of art today would be senseless and junk, but for the fact that they communicate a religious message, interpreting the mood of man and his world. *TIME* writes that recent criticism has taken on a gloom, apocalyptic tone: "The art currently filling the museums and galleries is of such low quality generally that no real critical intelligence could possibly feel challenged to analyze it. There is an inescapable sense among artists and critics that we are at the end of our rope, culturally speaking " (*TIME*, Dec. 18, 1972)

## **REMBRANDT AND RUBENS**

Some years ago I had the opportunity to visit the homes, turned into museums, of two famous painters: Rembrandt's house in Amsterdam and Rubens' in Antwerp. I have also seen their products in museums and churches and have become deeply impressed by their masterful and majestic works of art. Yet, both painters communicated a different message. Rembrandt's (1606-1669) landscape paintings portray the glory of God's creation. Many of his paintings and etchings reflect the influence the Bible had on him. Near my desk I have a little production of his etching "The Descent from the Cross." Rays of heavenly light forcefully beam on the cross. The extra-ordinary light effect shatters the onlookers. Christ is the central figure here. He is the triumphant Christ, even in His hour of death. We can only understand Rembrandt's work in the light of his Calvinistic background. He wishes to see the world in the light of God's Word and searched to achieve in his act a truly Biblical message.

Rubens (1577-1640) is quite different from Rembrandt. He has been called the painter of Contra-Reformation. His paintings impressed me as a mixture of Catholicism and humanism. His view of man is more Greek than Christian orientated. The figures of the apostles in his paintings look, for example, like Greek Athletes.

## **TRUE ART IS GOD-DIRECTED**

Art communicates? What should its message be? Obviously, the artist must work with a particularly world and life view.

Evangelicals have largely shunned the arts as worldly. Reformed Christians should not fall into the same negativism. The bulk of the work being done in the field of Christian art represents Roman and Anglo-Catholic thoughts. Its roots go deeply into sacramental theology and Greek philosophy.

For the late Paul Tillich, a liberal theologian, art was only "a faithful mirror of culture." Art should be more than that. In the arts, the call is to pursuit the glory and excellence of truth. True art is God directed. The Christian artist, a new creature in Jesus Christ, seeks to fulfil his cultural calling in the world. His criteria of work, and this is no different from any other Christian, can be summed up in the great Pauline phrase, "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

Christians have a calling in this world, although they are not of the world. They have a contribution to make with their God-given talents. Christian artists need our encouragement and prayers. The institution for Christian ,art "Patmos" also ought to have a real place in Christian community: Christian artists need a caring and praying church to support their work. They are not stepchildren but children of the Lord and co-workers in His Kingdom.

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