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ART FUNDING.

“ Art has consolidated its status as an independent cult, sometimes more flourishing than the churches themselves.” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749-1832)

Should taxpayers fund art? This question is now a matter of lively debate due to the criticisms being levelled at many government funded arts organisations. In the United States the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been accused of being controlled by a cultural elite that pushes offensive material at taxpayers expense. Martin Mawyer, president of Christian Action Network (CAN), calls the NEA “a federal agency of hate, trash, and anti-religious bigotry.” He accuses it of giving the vilest of the vilest grants to, “people who never would make a living out of such nonsense if they weren’t on public dole.” His criticism is validated by NEA grants to such exhibits as Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photography. New York film distributor Women Make Movies, Inc. received \$ 112,700 for producing films with explicit sex scenes and sadomasochistic violence.

The NEA is also accused of being anti-Christian. Peter Greenaway’s *The Baby of Manon* was referred to by mainstream reviewers as a “corrupt movie,” and “one of the most gratuitously unpleasant and indefensibly nasty films in recent years.” The movie totally degraded and mocked the Christian faith. It was so bad even a description of its contents is inappropriate for this family magazine. No wonder the Catholic League was upset by the film, especially since taxpayers' money was used for it. In a scene from *It's Elementary*, - a film supported partly by the NEA-financed Portland Art Museum’s Northwest Film Center, - a fifth-grader compares Christians with Nazis. Laurence Jarvik, a Jewish scholar who attended NEA council meetings in which conservative Christians were demeaned, remarked, “if the NEA had treated the Jewish community the way they treat evangelical Christians, I don’t think it would be in existence today.”

CANADA IS NO BETTER

The Canadian Council for the support of the arts was founded in 1957. Canadian historian

William Kilbourn gave as reason for its institution that excellence in the performing arts requires subsidies and patrons. He observed that in 1965 “there were few painters with an income tax problem, and no composers. Not a single Canadian playwright or poet could make a living from his work, and none were openly paid to be artists, even by the universities where many of them taught.” But Kilbourn does not discuss the criterion the Canadian Council uses for its support of the arts. For example, in 1996 an eight-minute publicly funded film entitled *1919* made its debut. Its subject was the great General Strike that paralysed Winnipeg that year. *Western Report* contributor John Collison says that this movie is a self-described “gay fantasia” produced by Noam Gonick, a self-professed “queer socialist.” Gonick claims that Winnipeg homosexuals and communists teamed up to plot the overthrow of “the sexually repressed capitalist system.”

ART - THE MIRROR OR OUR CULTURE.

In discussing art subsidies, we must keep in mind that the arts are windows through which we observe the moral and spiritual developments of our century. “Art is a reflection of a society’s most profound aspirations,” observed Joni Eareckson Tada. “Cultures exalt their highest ideals. In the Middle Ages, it was the divine. For the 18th and 19th centuries, it was Man as Promethean hero. Today, it’s the depraved, life as a freak show.” The world has changed since the sixties. We have seen the disintegration of Western culture. The Western world has become increasingly post-Christian, postmodern, nihilistic, and even neo-pagan. The social crisis of our time has deep spiritual roots. Modern man has declared his independence from God. He relishes his freedom and decides for himself what is right or wrong. We are now living in a moral Stone Age, a time of moral confusion. Increasingly, today’s youth know very little about the moral Western tradition. In many classrooms today students learn to be politically correct through “uncovering” the alleged racist, sexist, and elitist elements in great literature. We have become a society of victims constantly calling for financial redresses from the government for injustices suffered. Our culture is sick. Keywords describing the mood of the late 20th century are fear, stress, boredom, despair, rootlessness, decadence, and meaninglessness.

One example of the degeneration of our culture is the renewed interest in the life and work of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Irish dramatist, novelist, poet and wit, whose relationship with Lord Alfred

Douglas resulted in his imprisonment for homosexual offences. He died in exile in Paris. In Wilde's time "gross indecency" could not even be described in court. People still had a real sense of shame.

Recently, *The Judas Kiss*, a play about Wilde's love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas debuted on Broadway. Wilde's life is the subject of three other major new plays, several one-man shows, and an opera. Bookstores have also joined the fray and glutted the mass-market with books about Wilde.

There are two major reasons for this new fascination with Wilde which portray the spirit of our times: his homosexuality and celebrity's status. He is now claimed as "a gay icon".

There is an ongoing revolt against the values, which were shaped by our Christian heritage. One of the most powerful illustrations of this revolt is demonstrated by modern art. Modern art portrays a culture that has left the ancient paths. It celebrates the cult of relentless novelty. The new art is a battle cry against the establishment. And we can't afford to miss its message. It is a call for authenticity, for freedom from society's restraints. The few times I visited a modern art gallery I was struck by the lack of beauty and harmony in the visual art displays. When an artist has lost his standards for truth and beauty and swears at God through his artwork and sees nothing but ugliness in the world, his works can never be graceful. In a time of meaninglessness, the work of art portrays meaninglessness. How can one be inwardly harmonious when one doesn't acknowledge God? When God's presence is no longer felt, the artist can no longer see the world created and touched by Him. When God is dead; man is dead. And this is the theme common in much modern art. In his preface to a collection of essays published under the title *Christian Faith and the Contemporary Arts*, Finley Eversole sums it up well when he writes, "Modern art, with its loss of God and the human image, is the drama of our age. Here we see what *really* is happening to man, to society, and to man's faith in God."

THE ARTIST

When we discuss art, we must obviously focus on the artist. What is an artist? Who decides what is art? What standards are used, if any? Never in any time in history has been more junk been produced, which has been described as art, than in our time. Anything can be called art as long as it testifies to creativity. Some of the excesses of modern art are idiotic. It seems that an artist is a person who calls himself or herself one. For example, in the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Elizabeth Murray

features some ballpoint pen drawings selected from a sketchbook. In an interview about her art she says that she never knows exactly how it's going to go. "I don't have an image in my mind when I start it - I have a wish, may be." She notes that every idea that comes to her head she'll jot down. As I studied her artwork, I wonder what was in her head. Her drawings are scribbles. They resemble more the scribbles of my two and half year old granddaughter than the work of a mature adult. When you criticise this type of art, you are told that you just don't understand its profound meaning, and you are not in tune with the times.

Modern art is purely subjective. It reveals the inner feelings of the artist. When God is no longer present, man's only point of reference is himself. He is totally self-centred. The German expressionist Max Beckmann (1884-1950) confessed in his lecture *On My Painting* that art is the quest of our Self that drives us along the eternal and never-ending journey we must all make. Beckmann is right. This is exactly what modern art is - the artist's revelation of his inner feeling. Modern art is the opening up of feelings rather than the painting of an object. A picture is an event. The style of painting is the key to artwork. Inward turmoil and feelings are splashed on a canvass. Pure subjectivity is seen in landscape paintings that are no more than a few streaks of colour on a canvass. In the name of freedom of expression, beauty disappears and the absurd is the norm.

The "avant-garde" artist illustrates this preoccupation with the self and feelings. Dating from before World War I, "avant-gardism" undertook to destroy all the commonly accepted features of art. Its aim was to tear down the old and pursue the new. I will mention only two "avant-garde" artists who made a deep impression upon our culture and reflect the rebellious spirit of our times. Paul Jackson Pollock (1912-56) created a new fad as an action painter. In the last stage of his painting, he fixed a canvass to the floor or wall and poured, splashed, or dripped paint on it, covering the whole canvass without giving any resemblance of meaning to the picture. He often used sticks, trowels, and knives instead of brushes. Pollock opened the world for countless irresponsible doodles. He commented about his art form:

"I don't work from drawings or colour sketches. My painting is direct.... The method of painting is the natural growth out of a need. *I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them* (italics are mine) Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement. When I

am painting I have a general notion as to what I am about. I *can* control the flow of paint: there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end."

The Dutch artist Karel Appel (b.1921) called himself a "rebel with a cause." He wrote that the world revolved around him, "I am the most important person in the world." He commented that he painted as a barbarian in barbarian times. Like Pollock, he also called his art "action painting"; this means that he paced up and down in front of his canvass and splashed it with paint. He confessed that the ordinary citizen would never understand his art. His painting *Vryheidskreet* (cry for freedom) symbolises modern man's feeling of liberation from all norms.

After he gave up on "avant-gardism" and converted to Christ, the German writer Franz Werfel said he had seen many kinds of pride, but there was no more insolent, mocking, and devilish pride than that of the "avant-garde" artists and radical intellectuals, whose aim is to hurt and to defame. Werfel confessed that he was one of the willing stokers of purgatory.

THE ARTIST AS PROPHET

Is an artist a prophet for his time? Does he have special insights into the mood of his age? No, he is just another person who has to deal with ethical questions like anyone else. He is also led by his own personal insights and worldview, so his art is never neutral. Through his work an artist can either lead people astray or point them to God.

The history of the arts shows the different ways various art forms have been used to lead the public astray. In Revolutionary France the theatre was made an instrument of government propaganda. Actors were told that no comedy should contain any aristocratic heroes or sentiments. When in 1793 the Theatre de la Nation produced a play salted with satire and ridicule of the Revolutionary leaders, the whole troupe was arrested. The unsuccessful artist Adolf Hitler conceived of Nazism as an artistic endeavour. His favourite architect was the imaginative Albert Speer. The carefully choreographed Nuremberg propaganda rallies were designed by Speer as grand theatrical events. Historian Modris Eksteins describes the events in *Rites of Spring*:

"The enthusiasm was kindled by meticulous attention to detail: high precision parades, forests of banners, carefully rehearsed catechetical speeches. At the end came Hitler. His concluding oration was timed to end as night fell. The rally would close under the magical spell of Speer's 'cathedral of ice': hundreds of searchlights pointing to the sky."

"From first to last," Eksteins notes, "the third Reich was spectacular, gripping theater. That is what is was intended to be."

The French Revolution and Hitler used art to advance their demonic cause. Others in history have used their artistic talents to proclaim the Gospel. For example, the German painter and engraver Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) used his craftsmanship in woodcutting and copper engraving not to draw attention to himself but to his Creator. When Durer carved his thorn-crowned Christ, he did it as a witness. He viewed his work as a sermon. Through this art expression he proclaims the Gospel even today.

ART SUBSIDIES

If art has a message either for good or evil, why should it be subsidised by taxpayers? If artists want funding for their work, why not seek private money, approach patrons and ask them to finance their projects or exhibits? Revival of the arts should not depend on government handouts. Artists are not paid civil servants. Nobody can maintain that the growth of the arts has depended on a government organisation. Art depends on personalities. Historically, men and women who felt the urge to write or to paint went ahead and used and developed their talents. They did not wait for a government handout to proceed with their work. Few became famous; others never saw fruit for all their labours. Historically, most artists had a difficult life. They were usually poor, suffered from misunderstanding by family and society. They struggled with inner fears, doubts, and temptations. The celebrated Dutch painter Rembrandt (1606-69), whose works are now priceless, loved life yet lived as an outcast. Yet his work has been described as manifesting prophetic character. Rembrandt felt terribly lonely, misinterpreted, and reviled. But he did not become bitter. Instead, he had great sympathy for all who were troubled like him, for all the helpless and wretched. In his suffering he had inner peace as he knew the Lord. Through

his own personal tragedies, he received a greater insight into the sufferings of Christ and those of his fellowman. His paintings clearly demonstrate this understanding.

Since art is neither religiously nor morally neutral, I am convinced that no government support should be given to either art exhibits or to artists. Why should Christians have to subsidise artwork which subtly either undermines their faith or ridicules it? Why should financial support be given to people who preach rebellion through their art? Why support visual or literary assaults against traditional values? Of course, a call to stop government funding of the arts is usually greeted by the cry “censorship.” But this is not censorship at all. Nothing stops the artists from doing their work. When we talk about government funding, we talk about monies which must be dispensed with the whole community in mind. If this is true government money, collected by the force of law, it should not be spent by politicians in a way that a majority of their constituents find obnoxious and in conflict with their own values. For example, if “avant-garde” artists are by their own definition opposed to the values of society, they should not expect support for their activities.

CHRISTIAN ART

The current cultural malaise lends a great opportunity for Christian artists. I am not referring to art used strictly for evangelistic purposes, but art for art’s sake, dedicated to the glory of God. Christ reigns as King in every sphere of life, including the arts. Art is also in the service of God’s Kingdom. A Christian artist has a unique challenge in our culture that has turned away from God. When the artist takes up his brush or sits behind his computer to write a story, his or her standards are derived from Scripture and the work is done from the perspective of eternity. After God finished His work of creation, He looked at it and saw “all He had made and it was very good” (Gen. 1:29). God delights in the beauty of created reality. There are many references in the Bible to the importance of beauty and the arts. The tabernacle is described as a marvellous structure with precious stones and colourful fabrics. It was quite an intricate engineering project (Ex. 25-28). The tabernacle testified to God’s love for beauty in the middle of a barren desert. Of course the real worth of the tabernacle was not in the sublimity of its material but in the greatness and majesty of the Designer. Even in a fallen world, there is still so much beauty to enjoy. The wonder of nature itself is to praise God (Ps.19). The Christian artist sees the world

as created reality. He recognises beauty as a “good perfect gift” which comes from “the Father of the heavenly lights.” There is beauty and truth for whoever wants to see it. (Jam. 1:17) For example, 17th century Dutch artist Jan van Goyen, possibly the greatest of all landscape painters, portrayed the reality and beauty he witnessed in what he saw. His *Landscape*, 1646, depicts a calm sea, some boats in the distance, and boats lying alongside the harbour jetties, a painting with great depth and beauty. The late Dr. Hans Rookmaaker, professor of the History of Art at the Free University of Amsterdam, observed that as a true Christian artist van Goyen sang his song of praise of the beauty of the world here and now, the world God created, the fullness of reality in which we live - if we only open our eyes.

To be a Christian artist can be costly. This is why Mahalia Jackson died relatively poor. She was internationally known for her marvellous rendition of gospel songs and Negro spirituals. But to the dismay of many, she refused to sing the blues. She said, “Anybody that sings the blues is in deep pit yelling for help, and I am not in that kind of a position.” She refused many lucrative offers because she refused to sing in any place where liquor was sold. She took the lordship of Christ over her life and work seriously. She was a committed Christian, who did not separate her art from her Christian faith.

Government should not support the arts. However, reformational Christians should be encouraged to support Christian artists in their work. They also serve God and their neighbour in their calling and show that there is life before death. In this generation that breathes so much negativism and ugliness the Christian artist can enjoy the abundant Life, which our Lord came to give and through his work enrich the lives of others.