

## Christian Art?

What do we expect to see when we visit an art museum – the visual arts – such as paintings and sculptures? How well prepared are we before we begin our adventure through an art museum? Do we know what to look for in art, or how to recognize it when we see it, or how to distinguish the real thing from an imitation? Does it make a difference in our appreciation of the arts, whether we are Christian or not? A work of art can become either an instrument of sin or an instrument for the glory of God. When you are no stranger to modern art, you wonder when you see a portrait of a woman whose forehead and cheeks are green and a painting of a landscape with blue horses. Obviously these works are in conflict with nature. Instead of portraying the beauty and wonder of creation, they symbolize the disintegration of creation. Colours speak because God made them. Green expresses youth, beauty, and fruitfulness. Green also has a spiritual connotation. Prov.11:28 says, "The righteous will thrive like a green leaf."

Contemporary art refuses any set form, content, or medium. It is in full flight from God. It insists "religion" has to go. The Art Institute of Chicago's James Elkins argues in his book, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, that the art world "can accept a wide range of 'religious' art by people who hate religion, by people who are deeply uncertain about it, by the disgruntled and the disaffected and the skeptical, but there is no place for artists who express straightforward, ordinarily religious faith." And Elkins states: "To fit in the art world, work with a religious theme has to fulfill several criteria. It has to demonstrate the artist has second thoughts about religion....Ambiguity and self-critique have to be integral to the work. And it follows that irony must pervade the art, must be the air it breathes." He dismisses off hand the work of Christian artists. He declares that "committed, engaged, ambitious, informed art does not mix with dedicated, serious, thoughtful, heartfelt religion." So much for neutrality in the arts!

### **Kitsch – Aesthetically Bad Art**

Confronted by objects or movements in art which do have religious content, we must begin by asking, "Is it art?", "Is it Christian?" The simple fact that a Biblical hero is painted in colour does not give a satisfactory answer. But what about the art works for sale in a Christian bookstore? Have you ever wondered whether they truly are Christian? I suggest they belong to a type of art known as "kitsch." The dictionary describes it as "art or literature of a cheap, popular, or sentimental quality." In other words, kitsch can be judged as aesthetically bad. Many of the prints and sculptures that are sold in Christian bookstores reflect worldviews that have nothing to do with Christianity. The figurine or plaque or picture that give us a warm feeling because of its cuteness and emotionalism may have more to do with Romanticism than Biblical Christianity. Kitsch also includes plaster lawn ornaments. It is art of poor quality, which nevertheless manages to be enormously popular in appealing to some sentiment of association. It reflects today's obsession with positive thinking and feeling good about ourselves. It often trivializes what is great art, e.g., as in an ashtray modelled after the Cathedral of Cologne, Germany. Although such work and those who buy it may certainly be sincere, Christians should try to develop their taste in art as well as in other areas of life. In his book *State of the Arts – From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe*, Gene Edward Veith Jr. observes. "Christianity is not a sickly sweet religion, contrary to the saccharine plaques and greeting cards that clutter up the bookstore. The anaemic figurines of Jesus Christ are poor testimonies to His deity and His Lordship."

## **Bible and Art**

But is a visit to an art museum not a frivolous way for a serious Christian to spend his time? I am told that some new Christians just drop their artistic career because they think that painting and other art forms today are incompatible with being a real Christian. If art has a function at all, it is for evangelism. But art is more than a means to spread the Gospel. Hans Rookmaaker comments: "Many fine Christians who have a talent or an interest in the arts are forced to defend their involvement by saying that art is an excellent means of evangelism. When art is used as a tool for evangelism, it is often insincere and second-rate, devaluated to the level of propaganda. I would call it a form of prostitution, a misuse of one's talent."

Scripture has a different perspective. It sanctions the arts, describing the gifts God has given to artists, recounting, in loving details, works of art that were ordained by God to reveal His glory and to enrich His people. God is revealed as the Great Artist who works with a blueprint. In Hebrews 11:10 we read about Abraham who was looking forward to the city with a foundation, "whose architect and builder is God." In the Bible, then, art stands on its own. It has its own sphere. It is not an afterthought. Exodus tells the story of the tabernacle built according to divine instruction. God, the designer and maker of the universe, clearly places great value on details of design, construction, and artistic skill.

The Bible through the Holy Spirit gives the inspiration for the creation of art. The Lord chose Bezalel to build the Tabernacle, and "filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze (Ex. 31:2, 3). The Bezalel mandate also indicates that being an artist can be a vocation from God. He is also the first person described in Scripture as being filled with the Holy Spirit. God gave him a measure of understanding, of reason, of common sense. The work assigned to Bezalel suggests a purpose for all of the arts – to glorify God and to manifest beauty. The Exodus account also warns that art can express falsehoods as well as truth. While Bezalel was empowered to build the Tabernacle for the worship of the true God, Aaron used his artistic talents to manufacture an idol, a golden calf, a work of art that displaced the true faith and led the people into the grossest sin.

When Israel was permanently settled in the promised land, Solomon built the temple – an improved, lasting tabernacle. God's concern for beauty is amply documented in the specifications for Israel's temple. Though the temple remained ever devoid of anything resembling an image of the Lord, things cleverly carved and woven, things of wood, precious stone, brass and gold proclaimed His praise. It was also filled with the sound of music. The public worship commanded by God "included musical instruments of all kinds, and a trained choir of a thousand voices." The whole worship service in tabernacle and temple reflected beauty. Angels were depicted, as well as objects from the natural world. Precious stones were placed in the temple for the purpose of displaying beauty (2 Chron. 3:6). In *Art and the Bible*, Francis Schaeffer notes, "There was no pragmatic reason for the stones. They had no utilitarian purpose...God is interested in beauty."

## **Man – the Artist**

The Creator is the living God, the fountain of life. Here lies the borderline between the art of God and the art of man. Art is possible because we are made in God's image. He invited

Adam, one of His creatures, to share in the process of "creation" with Him (Gen. 2:15). He called us to exercise our creative capacities to the fullest possible extent. Art is the ability to make something beautiful (as well as useful), just as God made the world beautiful and said, "It is good." A Christian artist, therefore, is the imitator of God (Ps. 104). Dorothy Sayers observes, "The characteristics common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things" (Ps. 8). Therefore, we may not neglect an artistic gift. For the Christian artist, his work is his mission. He is not only an artist, but also a servant and a Christ confessor. He is called to preach with his brush. Artists are not made, but born. The Spirit gives, also in the field of art, according to everyone as He wishes. When one lacks creativity, the ability to be a good artist will not come. It is not something that can be taught or caught. But an artist with a God given talent should not hide it under a bushel. In his *The Creative Gift – Essays on Art and the Creative Life*, Hans Rookmaaker argues, "If God has given us talents we must use time creatively – or rather, we must use them creatively. A Christian artist is no different from, say, a Christian teacher, minister, scholar, merchant, housewife, or anybody else who has been called by the Lord to specific work in line with his or her talents. There are no specific rules for artists, nor do they have specific exemptions to the norms of good conduct God has laid down for man. An artist is simply a person whose God-given talents ask him to follow the specific vocation of art."

When does an artist create something? When a thought is turned into a deed. Of course an artist does not create something out of nothing. He works with the powers and talents God has given him. He uses his imagination, the impressions of what he sees in his mind. He idealizes what he sees or degenerates it. His view of the world, his religious orientation, is reflected in his work. Let us not forget: Art is a part of culture and culture is closely connected to one's worldview. Dorothy Sayers notes, "If we commit ourselves to saying that the Christian revelation discovers to us the nature of all truth, then it must discover to us the nature of the truth about art among other things." The task of a Christian artist who takes his faith seriously will have a difficult time in our world with its little respect for God and His law. How then can a Christian artist keep his focus in our confusing times with its many conflicting views on art? By living according to the Word of God (Ps. 119:9). It is impossible to keep a clear perspective on art apart from studying God's Word. The artist who draws his inspiration from the Bible will not promote abstract art. All that the Bible teaches him is concrete, the divine and the human, the good and the evil.

Art is possible because of Jesus Christ. He is the mediator of creation. He is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb.1:3). All things exist in Him (Col. 1:17). Every sphere of life is under His authority. For the artist it is imperative to know the world has been created by God. As image bearer of God he is equipped for creative work of beauty (2 Tim. 3:17). As a Christian artist, he has a prophetic and priestly office. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q.32) asks: Why are you called a Christian? "Because by faith I am a member of Christ and thus a partaker of His anointing, in order that I also may confess His Name, may present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and with a free conscience may fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter in eternity reign with Him over all creatures."

## **Christian Art**

Art, great art, has a special reserved place among human endeavours. What a delight when we can stand before a great work of art, meditate on it, and be blessed by it. In his

*Confessions*, Augustine noted that God's truth is never the private property of a philosopher: "Your truth," he says to God, "does not belong to me or to anyone else, but to us all whom you call to share it." And throughout the ages Christian artists have shared their work. They exercised an enormous influence on art, and at certain times in the West practically everything that was painted was explicitly "religious." In some real sense, therefore, we can speak of *Christian art*.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of style is the artist's personal way of looking at things. Every great work of art is a commentary on life, not just a statement of fact, but an interpretation. One of the greatest periods in art history was the Reformation. The idea that Calvinism has been the death knell of the arts is refuted by the history of the "golden age" in the Netherlands. In Reformed Holland artists became the world's first painters of landscape, portraits, and still-life pictures. Numerous Dutch painters became famous for their scenes of the country side with its canals and windmills. When we still lived in Amsterdam, my father often took us to the Ryksmuseum with its magnificent collection of art works. And, of course, we viewed the paintings of Rembrandt (1606-1669). Rembrandt did not look for beauty, but for truth. As a committed Christian he received light from the Father of lights. He sought light in God's light. His paintings show that he was really in love with light. Besides flawless drawing and use of colour, Rembrandt used light expressively and symbolically. He shrouded his canvases in obscure brown shadows, and set his face flowing against them with golden light that captures deep traits of characters.

His greatest paintings are his self-portraits of those bitter years when nobody valued his pictures, while his great Biblical paintings consoled his spirit. In his short book, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, Willem A. Visser't Hooft describes Rembrandt's art as truly Christian: "As Rembrandt deeply understood the mystery of the Incarnation he was able to, in the passion story, express the whole tension contained in the gospel between God's wrath and his mercy. Some painters have represented the crucifixion more eloquently. But their very eloquence is suspect. Rembrandt does not omit anything of the biblical story. In the second version of the Three Crosses we feel all the human and cosmic horror of Golgotha. But he does not add anything either; for we cannot add anything where 'all things are accomplished'." Is Christian art still possible? Yes, it is. A Christian artist, therefore, has the high calling to glorify God in all his work.

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