

# **Christianity and the Arts**

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# The Making of a Christian Mind

by Leland Ryken

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This is the final essay in a series that defines a Christian world view and applies that framework to leading areas of intellectual life. We must not allow the final position of this essay to mislead us into thinking that the creative arts are the extraneous “dessert” in a person’s world view, an intellectual delicacy that cannot hope to compare in importance to such staples as philosophy and the physical and social sciences.

Creativity and imagination permeate all human activity. It is important to note at the outset, therefore, that the qualities that I attribute to the creative arts are present in other intellectual pursuits as well. My focus will be on the arts; I leave it to each reader to decide how widely my statements apply to the humanities in general and the social and natural sciences.

## The Place of the Arts in a World View

The creative arts play a crucial role in shaping the world view of every person and culture. They are an implied declaration that a world view consists of more than abstract ideas or theoretical concepts. A world picture is a map of reality made up of images, symbols, myths and stories as well as theoretical concepts. Contemporary psychology has given us such terms as *preconceptual sensing* and *nonverbal cognition* and the right side of the brain to identify what I will call images.

The arts are rooted in the image-making and image-perceiving nature of people. People do not live by ideas alone. They also express their affirmations and denials through the paint on a canvas, the tension and release of sound, and poems and stories. A noted theologian has said that “we are far more image-making and image-using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be and... are guided and formed by images in our minds....Man...is a being who grasps and shapes reality... with the aid of great images, metaphors, and analogies.”<sup>1</sup>

Who can doubt it? People organize their lives and make their decisions partly in terms of such images as heroes and villains, cross and altar, national emblem and patriotic legend, love song and hymn, landscape painting and portrait. These images have an ideational aspect to them but also communicate meanings that do not become focused into the form of theoretical propositions.<sup>2</sup>

By their very nature, therefore, the arts serve the salutary function of reminding people, including Christians, that to regard their world view as being solely the domain of theoretical thought is to invite unawareness about themselves. People may assent to the accumulation of possessions, but if their minds are filled with images of big houses and fancy clothes, their actual behavior will run in the direction of materialism. People may theoretically believe in the ideals of chastity and faithful wedded love, but if their minds are filled with images of exposed bodies and songs of seduction, their sexual behavior will have a large mixture of lust and sexual license in it.

Unless we recognize the powerful role of images in a world view, our world view and the behavior it produces will continue to be the muddled things they often are. We also need to recognize that the quality of our life and character is heavily affected by the quality of the images that we habitually take into our minds and imaginations.

The contribution that the arts make to a person’s world view is rooted in the fact that they all employ a “language” of images. The visual artist, for example, uses physical materials such as paint and stone to produce images that we can see and touch. Music employs physical instruments to produce sounds that we hear with our ears and feel in our muscles. Poets use words to evoke imagined sensations, objects and emotions. And storytellers describe such tangible realities as people performing actions in physical settings.

**The Imagination.** The human faculty or capacity that enables the arts to image forth reality in this way is the imagination. Imagination is what the arts share. By “imagination” I mean simply the image-making and image-perceiving capacity that we all have; I do not have in mind any particular theory of artistic creativity or mental association. Modern aesthetic theory is based on the imagination as the key to everything, and it has stressed two aspects of the imagination.

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1 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1963), pp. 151-52, 161.

2 Michael Polanyi’s way of saying this is that “we can know more than we can tell” (*The Tacit Dimension* [Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1966], p.4).

Imagination implies, first of all, the notion of “image,” that is, sensory concreteness or experiential immediacy. The arts are a *presentational* form. Instead of talking about human experience, they present the experience. The arts show rather than tell. They incarnate their meanings in concrete images of human experience or the external world. Instead of primarily asking our intellects to grasp an idea, the arts ask us to undergo an experience, which may or may not eventuate in a proposition or concept. The fiction writing Flannery O’Connor has said regarding her particular art form that “the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction.”<sup>3</sup> We can view the arts as analogous to a picture accompanying the instructions for assembling an appliance or piece of furniture: if we have a good picture, we may not even need the written instructions.

The second thing that imagination implies is a fictional or imaginary element. Fictional literature is the most obvious illustration of the “made up” quality of art, but in fact all art is an imaginary reconstruction of actual reality. Looking at a painted landscape is never the same as standing in an actual landscape. Music gives us combinations of sounds that we never encounter in real life. Only in poems do people speak in rhyme and regular meter.

The arts are never a mere copy of life. They are always a distillation of some aspect of reality. All artists use techniques of highlighting, omission, selectivity, exaggeration, arrangement and juxtaposition to heighten our perception of some aspect of life. Music, for example, artificially produces arrangements of sounds that awaken feelings of serenity or exultation or reverence. A painting can give us a heightened sense of something as common as flowers and household utensils, as in the still-life paintings of the Dutch realists. Literary tragedy distills the essence of human suffering and silhouettes it with clarity.

The arts, in short, are based on a grand paradox. They are imaginary constructions that “distort” reality in order to increase our awareness of it. In the words of Pablo Picasso, “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.”<sup>4</sup> Or as Samuel Johnson put it, works of fiction “are not mistaken for realities, but . . . bring realities to mind.”<sup>5</sup> The truth that the arts are particularly adept at capturing is enduring, elemental human experience. Whereas the newspaper and history book tell us what *happened*, the arts tell us what happens—the reality that never goes out of date because it is universal in human experience.

***Imagination and the Bible.*** If we now ask how the artistic imagination fares in a Christian world view, it is at once apparent that Christianity affirms the artistic enterprise. The Bible itself endorses both the image-making and imaginary impulses of the arts. There are four main lines of evidence to support this claim.

The first is that God is portrayed in the Bible as a creator of images. A dominant theme throughout the Old Testament is God’s creation of the natural world of created objects. These visible images, in turn, are said to communicate truth about God himself (Ps 19:1-4; Rom 1:19-20). The New Testament counterpart is the Incarnation of Jesus, who is declared to be God in tangible human form.

We should note secondly the literary nature of the Bible. The one thing that the Bible is *not* is what we so often picture it as being—a theological outline with proof texts attached. The bulk of the Bible consists of stories, poems, visions and letters, all of them literary forms. When asked to define *neighbor*, Jesus told a fictional story (Lk 10:25-37). When he wished to teach lesson in servanthood, he washed his disciples’ feet (Jn 13:1-20). Jesus taught religious truth by making up stories about sheep and pearls and seed and fish. Oliver Cromwell rightly said that Jesus “Spoke things.” Jesus trusted the ability of literary images to convey religious truth when he told his disciples to “remember Lot’s wife” (Lk 17:32). The Bible repeatedly affirms the image-making tendency of the arts.

Third, the Christian sacraments of communion and baptism have also been important in attempts to arrive at a Christian aesthetic (philosophy of the arts). The Christian sacraments affirm the sign-making impulse of the arts. The sacraments, after all, use the physical elements of water, bread and wine to express and impart spiritual realities. While the Christian sacraments do not lend sanction to every manifestation of the creative imagination in a fallen world, they do nonetheless confirm the principle that images and symbols can express truth to the glory of God and the edification of people.

A fourth biblical validation of the arts is the descriptions of worship that we find especially in the Old Testament. Worship in the Bible is surrounded by a wealth of music and visual and verbal art.<sup>6</sup> As the Old Testament worshipers approached the Temple in Jerusalem, they saw two gigantic freestanding bronze pillars over twenty-five feet high (1 Kings 7:15-22). These monoliths had no architectural function other than to be beautiful and suggest by their aesthetic properties something of the grandeur, stability and power of God. The pillars were specimens of one prominent type of art in the Temple, namely, abstract or nonrepresentational art.

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<sup>3</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Pablo Picasso, *The Arts*, May 1923.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Charles Kaplan, ed., *Criticism: The Major Statements* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), p. 264.

<sup>6</sup> The best discussions are by Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *The Gift of Art* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1983); and Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1974).

Representational and symbolic art were also present in Old Testament worship. The ten stands of bronze at the Temple were engraved with lions, oxen and palm trees (1 Kings 7:27-37). Sculptures of winged cherubim were prominent in both the tabernacle (Ex 25:18-20; 26:31) and the Temple (1 Kings 7:29). Symbolic art also abounded, with such tangible objects as a golden table for the sacred bread, a golden altar, lampstands of pure gold and basins serving as visual symbols of such spiritual realities as communion with God, sacrifice, revelation and cleansing.

There can be no doubt that the tabernacle and Temple were the Old Testament believer's most intense encounter with artistic beauty. If we doubt this, we need only read the chapters of the Bible that describe the visual properties of these places (Ex 25—31; 35—39; 1 Kings 5—7; 2 Chron 2—4). The descriptions testify to an overwhelming value accorded to beauty. Some of the artistic embellishment in these places of worship awakened the worshipers' awareness of the other great source of beauty in their life—nature, as seen, for example, in the carved flowers about which we read repeatedly (1 Kings 7).

The beauty associated with the tabernacle and Temple included the purely imaginary as well as the realistic. The pomegranates on Aaron's robe were colored blue, purple and scarlet. In nature there are no blue pomegranates. One of the most attractive artifacts at the Temple was a molten sea forty-five feet in circumference, filled with water and resting on twelve statuesque oxen (1 Kings 7:23-26). Where in the real world can one find a sea held up on the backs of oxen? Francis Schaeffer rightly comments that "Christian artists do not need to be threatened by fantasy and imagination....The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars."<sup>7</sup>

Music was as prominent at the Temple as were the visual arts. David appointed four thousand musicians to conduct the music of the Temple (1 Chron 23:5). The Psalms, moreover, are a Temple hymnbook. If we catalog the musical instruments mentioned in the Psalms, they show the same wide use of available art forms that the visual arts in the Temple do.

It is no wonder the Christianity has been the most artistic religion in the world. Much of its doctrine has been enshrined in music, visual symbol, poem and story. The authoritative book of this revealed religion is itself a largely literary work in which story, character and image are the customary ways of embodying truth. For more than fifteen centuries of Western history, Christianity provided the main influence and content for the creative arts. That it lost its dominance is one of the tragedies of both Western civilization and Christendom. That the arts will someday regain their lost place among Christians is a thing to be hoped.

### **Perspective in the Arts**

The main thesis of the entire book—that a person's world view affects all human pursuits—emphatically applies to the creation and study of the arts. The arts by their very nature are value-laden. They embody and express human values. Even the aspects of human experience that painters and composers and writers choose for artistic portrayal are an implied comment about what is important and worthy of attention.

And once they have selected their subject, artists express an attitude toward the subject. The arts are *affective*: they are constructed so as to encourage an audience to share the artist's way of experiencing or perceiving reality. Works of art by their nature awaken attitudes or feeling of sympathy and aversion, approval and disapproval toward the whole range of human experience.

While the importance of perspective in works of art is probably a truism, it is too often overlooked that the *study* of art, music and literature is just as influenced by perspective,. Critics and teachers of the arts have a bias, too. They even reveal a bias in the works they choose to discuss or include in a course syllabus. And once they have chosen their works, they reveal a perspective in the aspect of a work that they single out for comment and in the attitudes they express toward the topics they have chosen for scrutiny. What critics and teachers of the arts *omit* from discussion can tell us as much about their bias as what they include. It would be a drastic mistake, therefore, to think that what a literature or art teacher says about works of art is any more "objective" than what a teacher of philosophy or biology says.

If art is inherently value-laden, so is the assimilation of art. As readers, viewers and listeners, we assimilate works of art within the framework of our personal experiences and world view. Experiencing and interpreting works of art are subjective activities. The final meaning of a painting or symphony or story is a fusion of what the work itself puts before a person and the content that a person is able to bring to the words on a page or the sound from an instrument or the colors and objects on a canvas.

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<sup>7</sup> Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, p. 61.

If experiencing art is this subjective, we are free as consumers of art to be ourselves when we read and listen and look. We do not need to repress our values or apologize for having a world view when we read a novel or visit an art gallery or attend a concert. We do, however, need to be self-aware about our responses. We should acknowledge the presuppositions that lead us to see certain elements in a work of art, and we need to extend the same charitable privilege to people who do not share those presuppositions and therefore respond differently.

Current aesthetic theory stresses the idea of “interpretive communities” –groups of people who view the creative arts from a common core of interests and assumptions and values. Christians are one such interpretive community. They are not inherently better artists or critics than other people are. But they have their own “agenda” of interests springing from their coherent world view. They also share beliefs and attitudes that they bring to their artistic and critical pursuits. The purpose of this essay is to delineate the Christian principles that have a special relevance to the arts.

As an organizing framework, we should not that artists perform three interrelated activities: (1) they create aesthetic objects and artistic form” (2) they present human experience for our contemplation; and (3) they offer an interpretation of the experiences they present. Perspective affects all three activities, which I will discuss individually.

### **Artistic Creativity in Christian Perspective**

Human creativity is active in all human pursuits, but it has always, and rightly, been especially regarded as an attribute of the arts. For one thing, the arts are the province of the imagination, and the imagination is never limited solely to observable reality. Oscar Wilde once commented that art “has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses....She can work miracles at her will, and when she calls monsters from the deep they come. She can bid the almond-tree blossom in winter, and send the snow upon the ripe cornfield.”<sup>8</sup> Artists are the orators of the imagination. A work of art is a new creation that cannot be fully explained by any previously existing model.

In addition to the creative element of the arts, the related qualities of form, beauty, technique and craftsmanship are an essential ingredient of art. The elements of artistic form that all of the arts share are theme or centrality, pattern or design, organic unity (also called unity in variety or theme and variation), repetition or recurrence, rhythm, balance, contrast or tension, symmetry, harmony or “fittingness,” unified progression and coherence. No single work of art needs to possess all of these, and some are more appropriately applied to one of the arts than the others. Nor should we limit these elements of artistic form to classical or Platonic aesthetic standards. Modern art also possesses its version of these formal qualities, even when artists claim that they are not using them.

The elements of artistic form are what the arts share. They differ in the medium by which they incarnate them. Music presents these elements of form through the medium of sound, literature through words, and painting through color, line and texture.

Artistic beauty or proficiency consists of the skillful composition and manipulation of the elements of aesthetic form. Such proficiency in the control of artistic technique is an important part of the value that we attach to the arts sometimes the creation of beauty is virtually the whole point of a work of art. This is especially true of much abstract or nonrepresentational art. Abstract art like the symmetrical designs of a Persian carpet or an ornamental wrought-iron railing or music without words have as their main purpose to present an artistic pattern for the pleasure of the beholder or listener.

And even in representational art, where part of the attention is focused on some aspect of human experience or external reality, the technical excellence remains an important part of the total effect. “Our primal aesthetical experience,” writes one aesthetic theorist, is “a response of enchantment to ‘beauty’ (in a very wide sense of the term).”<sup>9</sup>

To gauge the importance of creativity and form in the artistic enterprise, we need only note the statements and practices of artists. They attribute creativity to a process of inspiration, however conceived. The revisions and refinements that they continue to lavish on their unfinished works are almost always directed toward a better crafted artistic form and rarely toward the ideational content of the work.

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<sup>8</sup> Oscar, Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” as reprinted in *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.20.

<sup>9</sup> Auriel Kolna, “Contrasting the Ethical with the Aesthetical,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 12 (1972):340. Although the word *beauty* has fallen out of vogue in scholarly circles, partly because it is inappropriate to modern art whose subject is ugliness, I am unwilling to relinquish the term for the simple reason that I have found again and again that it is the term with which ordinary people resonate. Whatever synonym we might choose, we obviously need some term by which to term *beauty* can continue to serve this function has been argued by Guy Sircello, *A New Theory of Beauty* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

The poet Dylan Thomas wrote over 200 manuscript versions of his poem “Fern Hill.” Beethoven sketched and resketched his compositions. Leonardo da Vinci drew a thousand hands. The Christian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins theorized that the purely artistic dimension of poetry exists “for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> And even when artistic excellence is not the main purpose of art, as when art is used in religious worship, for example, the formal beauty of a work enhances its effectiveness.

When we ask how the high value that the arts place on creativity and artistic form fits into a Christian world view, it is apparent at once that the two are in total accord. In contrast to much of the prevailing cultural climate of our time, biblical Christianity asserts that human creativity and artistry are not only desirable but indispensable.

**The Doctrine of Creation.** The starting point for thinking Christianly about creativity and beauty is the doctrine of creation, especially as described in the first chapter of the Bible. We learn in these verses that God himself is a creator who pronounced his handiwork “very good” (Gen 1:31). Equally important is the precise kind of nature of world that God created. It is a world that is beautiful as well as functional.

From a purely utilitarian point of view, God need not have created a world filled with symmetrical shapes and beautiful colors and pleasing sounds and varied textures. What we find in the visible creation is evidence not only of a functional mind but also an artistic imagination.

What kind of environment did God intend people to inhabit? Genesis 2:9 tells us: When God created Paradise, he “made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” The conditions for human welfare are double—aesthetic and functional. Along with nature, the human arts have been the largest source of beauty in people’s lives.

Not only did God create a universe filled with beautiful forms. He also created people in his own image (Gen 1:26-27). Exactly what does this mean? Theology has rightly stressed human rationality, morality and holiness as the things that people share with God. But in its narrative context in Genesis 1, where we first hear about God’s image in people, something else is even more obvious, namely, the idea of creativity.

The classic study of what the image of God in people means to aesthetic theory is Dorothy L. Sayers’ book *The Mind of the Maker*, where we read this regarding the Genesis statement about God’s image in people:

Had the author of *Genesis* anything particular in his mind when he wrote? It is observable that in the passage leading up to the statement about man, he has given no detailed information about God. Looking at man, he sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the “image” of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, “God created.” The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.”<sup>11</sup>

The image of the creative God in people is the theological reason why people create.

The doctrines of creation and the image of God in people affirm human creativity as something good in principle. Abraham Kuyper once wrote,

As image-bearer of God, man possesses the possibility both to create something beautiful, and to delight in it....The world of poetic ideas, can have no source other than God; and it is our privilege as bearers of His image, to have a perception of this beautiful world, artistically to reproduce, and humanly to enjoy it.<sup>12</sup>

Can a Christian in good conscience do something as nonutilitarian as spending an afternoon at an art gallery or an evening at a concert? Can a student justify the time spent taking a course in fiction writing or painting or music composition? In a Christian scheme of things, the answer is clear: to be artistically creative, and to enter into the creativity of others, is to exercise the image of God within oneself.

**The Doctrine of Stewardship.** The Christian doctrine of stewardship leads to the same conclusion. A steward is a person put in charge of the resources of his or her master. Christian stewardship means serving God with the talents with which he has endowed us (see especially the parable of the talents in Mt 25:14-30). A duty of cultivation attaches to every ability and capacity that we possess.

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<sup>10</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Poetry and Verse,” as quoted in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The major Poems*, ed. Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1979), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (1941; reprint ed., Cleveland: World Publishing, 1956), p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 10.

What, then, are the talents with which God has endowed the creative artist? The classic answer is given in Exodus 31:3-5 in the description of the building of the tabernacle. We read that the Lord filled Bezalel “with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every craft.” These are the gifts of the artist. To cultivate them is to exercise stewardship. It is worthy of note, too, that “God called Bezalel” to exercise his creative ability (Ex 31:2). The creation and study and dissemination of art is a calling. The “creation mandate” that God gave to Adam and Eve when he told them to exercise dominion over the creation (Gen 1:26-30) is by extension also a cultural mandate to rule human culture in the name of God.

It is evident from what I have said that thinking Christianly about the arts involves rejection of the utilitarian mindset that scorns aesthetic form and beauty. The nonutilitarian aspect of the arts is not a mark against them. God did not create a purely utilitarian world. He filled his creation with much that is simply beautiful and delightful. When he created the perfect human environment, it included every tree that is pleasant to the sight (Gen 2:9). The garments of Aaron were embellished “for glory and for beauty” (Ex 28:2). We should note that well: beauty is worthy in itself, just as truth and goodness are.

The embellishments of the Temple served no architectural weightbearing function. They simply beautified the place. As H. R. Rookmaaker writes in his monograph *Art Needs No Justification*,

God gave humanity the skill to make things beautiful, to make music, to write poems, to make sculpture, to decorate things.... Art has its own meaning. A work of art can stand in the art gallery and be cherished for its own sake. We listen to a piece of music simply to enjoy it.<sup>13</sup>

Art nearly always has a gratuitous, more-than-functional quality to it. By its very nature it involves a willingness to go beyond the purely utilitarian.

While it is an overstatement to attribute automatic moral effects to the arts, one of the virtues that the arts tend to foster is an inherent rejection of the materialism and acquisitiveness that are always threatening to overwhelm the human race. Because the enjoyment of artistic beauty is essentially nonutilitarian, it draws a boundary around human acquisitiveness and clears a ground in which people can recover and celebrate distinctively human values. Any world view that finds a place for artistic delight has a built-in curb against the purely acquisitive mindset that sees value only in practical activities that serve a utilitarian function.

*Creativity and the Fall.* We must, of course, not overstate the case for artistic creativity. Human creativity did not escape the effects of the Fall. Artistic creativity, too, is subject to moral and intellectual criticism. A painting or song or novel has no claim to our reverence or admiration simply because it is the product of human creativity. We must differentiate between noble and ignoble manifestations of the creative impulse.

One criterion is the purpose or *telos* that governs an artist’s effort. Art composed to feed an artist’s greed for fame or wealth has a less noble purpose than art designed to serve one’s fellow humans or to glorify God. Art that caters to the coarse taste for pornography is less worthy than creativity that aims to dignify and refine human taste.

Another criterion for judging the worthiness of human creativity is the effect of art on its audience. We rightly admire art, music and literature whose effect is to make people more sensitive, moral or humanly refined. And we should judge negatively art whose effect is to encourage people to behave selfishly, immorally or coarsely.

Yet another standard by which we can judge artistic creativity is aesthetic excellence. Poorly executed paintings or musical compositions or stories might be the products of someone’s creativity, but they do not for that reason merit our admiration. Technical excellence, on the other hand, is one of the very aims of artistic creativity. In fact, the lack of artistic excellence detracts from the impact of the Christian content.

Artistic creativity is a great gift, but it is not inherently sacred or good. For at least a century now, non-Christian enthusiasts for the arts have tended to find in art a substitute for the Christian religion. Nietzsche virtually deified free creativity. The romantic poets regarded the imagination as the religious faculty by which we have contact with the supernatural. Such people elevate the imagination to a religious role that the Bible reserves for a person’s “heart” or “soul.”

Artistic creativity can never hold such an esteemed place in a Christian world view. There is wisdom and beauty but not salvation in a sonnet. Art can satisfy some of the same longings that religion does. It speaks to the human capacity for illumination, mystery, order and

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<sup>13</sup> H. R. Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), pp. 38-39.

beauty. But a Christian finds the ultimate satisfaction of these longings in God, not in art. It is this conviction that lies behind the statement of C. S. Lewis that

The Christian will take literature a little less seriously than the cultured Pagan....The unbeliever is always apt to make a kind of religion of his aesthetic experiences....But the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production and preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world.<sup>14</sup>

The Christian religion encourages a balanced view toward artistic creativity. To a technological world that values only what is utilitarian, Christianity declares that whatever is beautiful, whether it is a tree or a sonata, has worth in itself because a creative God has conferred the capacity for artistry on his human creatures. To enthusiasts for the arts who make an idol of the imagination and its products, Christianity asserts that God the Creator is always separate from his creation, whether nature or culture.

### **The Portrayal of Human Experience in the Arts**

The arts take human experience as their subject. They are above all the expression of human *response* to reality. When a painter paints a landscape, he or she is suggesting something of the human response to nature. Music is particularly adept at expressing the inner weather of the human emotions or condition.

Literature is even more comprehensive in its ability to present the contours of human experience in the world. The novelist Joseph Conrad wrote, “My task...is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.”<sup>15</sup> So rooted are the arts in reality that the oldest and most influential of all aesthetic theories has regarded the arts as an imitation of reality.

Creative artists are sensitive observers of reality. “The writer should never be ashamed of staring,” writes novelist Flannery O’Connor.<sup>16</sup> The American painter Andrew Wyeth once told an interviewer, “I love to study the many things that grow below the corn stalks and bring them back into the studio to study the color. If one could only catch that true color of nature—the very thought of it drive me mad.”<sup>17</sup> The creative artist’s vocation is to stare the created and human worlds and to lure the rest of us into a similar act of contemplation.

The arts stay close to the way things are in the world. The knowledge that they convey is an experiential knowledge of the physical and human worlds. Whether or not this is a knowledge worth having depends on one’s values and world view. Plato viewed such knowledge as rather frivolous, a knowledge hardly worth having.

A Christian viewpoint disagrees with this denigration of physical and human reality. It does so partly on the basis of the doctrine of creation. Things are real because God made them. And because he made them, they are worthy of study and celebration and love. Not only did God make things. He created people in such a way that they perceive them as much through their physical senses as their minds. The color and smell of a rose are not irrelevant or illusory.

The Christian doctrine of Incarnation points in the same direction. When Jesus took on human form in order to redeem people, he demonstrated that earthly, human experience is of immense worth. Christianity is not escapist. It does not substitute a heavenly world for the earthly one. It brings a spiritual reality into the earthly order.

Simply at the level of subject matter, then, the Christian doctrines of creation and Incarnation have far-reaching implications for the arts. Visual artists are assured that their preoccupation with the scenes and people and colors that they paint or mold are worthy of such attention. Musicians need not doubt the significance of the human feelings and attitudes embodied in their sounds. Poets and storytellers and dramatists can be convinced that their portrayal of the whole range of human experience in the natural and social worlds is a worthwhile endeavor. Christian artists can take all of life as their subject, just as the writers of the Bible did.

**Values and Reality: The Artist’s Perspective.** We might think that the mere subject matter of an artistic work is philosophically neutral and that perspective enters only when artists add their interpretive slant to the subject of portrayal. But the world view of creative artists emerges even from the subjects they select for portrayal. The details that an artist includes in the limited confines of a single work carry a

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<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> From the preface of Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Virginia Stem Owens in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 380.

burden of meaning larger than themselves and are understood to be representative of a bigger sense of life. Artistic subject matter implies a statement about both values and reality.

In the realm of *values*, artists imply what they regard as worthy of human attention whenever they put brush to canvas or pen to paper. Why did the French painter Courbet shock the artistic norms of his day by painting common stonebreakers and a peasant burial? Because his very choice of such subject matter implied that true worth resides in people of humble social standing instead of people with aristocratic status. Bach wrote church music on sacred themes because he valued supremely the worship of God. Wordsworth's nature poems, simply at the level of subject matter, express his attitude toward what is important in human experience.

What an artist chooses to portray is a comment about *reality* as well as values. Artists create out of the habitual furniture of their minds. What they exclude is as important as what they include. Writers whose poems or stories never portray God, spiritual reality or Christian values exhibit, simply at the level of subject matter, a secular world view. We can tell by looking at the table of contents of the works of Mendelssohn and Handel that their view of reality was Christian. Flannery O'Connor theorized that "it is from the kind of world the writer creates, from the kind of character and detail he invests it with, that a reader can find the intellectual meaning of a book." 18

We might think that abstract or nonrepresentational art and music are free from perspective, but they, too, are an implied comment about reality. A symphony in which organization dominates the composition conveys a different sense of life from a symphony in which disorganization dominates. A vastly different world view emerges from the intricate harmony of a Persian tapestry and most modern abstract art. When a graduate student who works in abstract sculpture recently had his work critiqued by his department, he was asked why his nonrepresentational sculptures possessed an order and gracefulness and clean lines so atypical of prevailing contemporary trends. His answer was that his sculpture expressed his Christian view of the world as ultimately orderly.

Artistic content is inherently laden with perspective. Christians have a picture of reality and a value system stemming from their Christian world view. As they assimilate works of art, therefore, they should self-consciously assess the adequacy of artistic pictures of the world in terms of a Christian framework. The central tenets in that world view are the existence of God and an unseen spiritual world, the worth of physical reality, the value of the individual person and social institutions, the fact of human evil and fallenness, the availability of God's redemptive grace, and a view of human history as being under God's purposeful providence and headed toward a goal.

As Christians look at the subject matter of artistic works through the lens of their convictions, some of what they see come into focus. Other objects remain out of focus. In either case, art has served its useful purpose: it has furnished the recipient with an occasion to exercise intellectual discrimination on questions of values and reality. Some value systems and views of reality are wrong, but Christians have an obligation to understand the world in which they minister.

### **The Interpretation of Reality in Works of Art**

Artists do more than present human experience; they also *interpret* it from a specific perspective. Works of art make implied assertions about reality. This is simply one of the conventions with which people approach the artistic enterprise, whether as creators or recipients. The primary convention of the arts is what aesthetic theorist Jonathan Culler calls "the rule of significance," meaning that we should look on works of art "as expressing a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe."<sup>19</sup> Artists intend meanings, and audiences can scarcely avoid looking for them.

**Art's Implied Assertions.** Works of art make implied assertions, just as history and science and philosophy do. For convenience, we can say that the arts make implied claims about the three great issues of life:

1. Reality: what really exists, and what is its nature?
2. Morality: what constitutes right and wrong behavior?
3. Values: what really matters, and what matters most and least?

For purposes of illustration, I turn first to a pair of nineteenth-century English painters, Constable and Turner. They both chose nature as their paintings convince us not simply that physical nature is an important part of reality but also that it is something of great worth in human experience.

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18 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 75.

19 Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 115.

But along with these similarities we notice obvious differences in how Constable and Turner interpreted nature. What do we see as we look at Constable's famous paintings of Salisbury Cathedral? We see the beauty and harmony of nature. We see nature in a religious light and as the friend of people. The human and natural worlds are unified. Constable himself said that he painted nature as benevolent because he sensed God's presence in nature.

Turner offers quite a different interpretation of nature. His colors are more intense, his brush strokes much broader and more passionate. There is an element of terror in many of his nature scenes. One of his paintings shows a gigantic avalanche ready to overwhelm a matchbox cabin under its furious weight. In such a painting nature is not nurturing, as in Constable and the Dutch realists, but hostile. The one is not necessarily more Christian than the other, though we should not minimize how artists select details that suggest their overall view of human possibilities in the universe.

For a literary illustration, consider the following sonnet, entitled "God's Grandeur," by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights of the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bring wings.

The subject of the poem is the permanent freshness of nature. The perspective from which we view that reality is the grandeur of God. What really exists? According to this poem, the physical world of sun and trees and the spiritual world that includes the triune God are equally real. What constitutes moral and immoral behavior? To live morally is to live in reverence before God's creation. To desecrate nature in pursuit of selfish acquisitiveness is immoral. What values are most worthy of human pursuit? God's nature.

**The Audience's Responsibility.** If works of art are thus laden with meaning, what are the implications for those who constitute the audience of the arts? It is today a commonplace that we appropriate works of art in terms of our own values, morality and view of reality. A Christian world view asserts specific ideas in all three areas. To assimilate the arts in a Christian way means to interact with their implied assertions within a framework of Christian doctrine, as derived from the Bible.

Because the three big subject areas of the arts are God, people and nature, it is especially crucial for Christians to have a grasp of Christian truth about these topics whenever they encounter works of art. In a Christian view, God is the ultimate reality and object of devotion. God is the one who has created everything that exists in the universe. Several important corollaries follow. One is that God is transcendent over reality and never to be equated with the creation. Another is that since God is the ultimate source and end of reality, everything else derives its identity from God. Thus people are the creatures of God, moral goodness consists of doing God's will, history is the outworking of God's purposes, human institutions such as state and family are ordained by God, and so forth.

Christianity postulates a threefold view of people: good and worthy in principle because God made them in his image, evil or fallen by virtue of their sinful actions, and capable of restoration by God's grace. Judged by such a standard, any view of people is inadequate if it sees them as *only* evil or *only* good. In a Christian scheme, people are evil by their inclinations but good as they participate in God's grace. In either case, human choice is both possible and necessary. A lot of art is *truthful* without telling the whole *truth*. It accurately portrays part of the truth about human nature, but still falls short of a Christian perspective because it fails to do just to the comprehensive balance in a Christian view of people.

The Christian view of nature runs parallel to the view of people. Nature was created by God and it is under his providential control. This means on the one hand that nature itself is not divine and on the other that it is worthy of love and reverence. A lot of artistic portrayal of nature errs in either overvaluing or undervaluing it. Medieval painting and music were so preoccupied with heaven and angels and

Madonnas and grace that they suffer from an unbiblical denigration of nature. The reverse has been true of the arts during the last two centuries.

At the heart of the Christian world view is a balance or tension between good and evil, hope and despair, optimism and pessimism. Is a work of art unchristian in its viewpoint if it portrays only a sense of despair or discord? Isn't the Fall a keystone of Christian doctrine? If so, why should Christians not endorse the protest music and literature and painting that are so dominant in the twentieth century?

The best framework that I have seen for grappling with this issue is Francis Schaeffer's commonsensical suggestion that Christianity consists of two themes.<sup>20</sup> One is the pessimistic fact of sin, despair and lostness in human experience. The other theme is the hope, meaningfulness and redemptive potential in life. A Christian world view embraces both halves of this tension. The sense of life that emerges from artistic works is less than Christian if it omits either side of the tension. The garbage can behind the house and the rose bush in front of the house are equally real.

To summarize, artists inevitably offer a perspective on such basic human issues as what really exists, how people should act and what values are worthy of human devotion. The obligation of Christian artists is to convey a Christian viewpoint in their stories and paintings and musical compositions. The task of all Christians is to discern and evaluate the perspectives that artists offer for their approval whenever they read or look or listen.

### **Truth in Art**

We are now in a position to consider the question that inevitably arises when art is considered in terms of world view. Do the arts tell the truth? There is no single answer to the question because there are various types or levels of truth in art. There is a range of ways in which a work of art can be true or false. I will discuss them under the headings of human values, representational truth and ideational or perspectival truth.

**Human Values.** To begin, the arts as a whole tell us the truth about what is foundational in human experience. Simply at the level of content, the arts keep calling us back to bedrock humanity. The arts are probably the most accurate index to human preoccupations, values, fears and longings that we possess. If we wish to know what people want and do not want, we can go to their stories and poems and songs and paintings.

This is why we often feel that we have learned more from art than from life. In real life the essential patterns and values are usually obscured by the sheer complexity and pressures of living. The arts, however, awaken our awareness of the central realities of human experience—realities such as nature and God and family and love and pain. A work of art is a distillation of experience in which the irrelevancies are stripped away. The knowledge that the arts give us is rarely new information but rather a bringing to consciousness of what we already know but to which we become oblivious in daily living.

The arts are therefore a great organizing force in human life. When people say that they arts help them to understand or make sense of life, they usually mean the ability of the arts to cut through the clutter and put them in touch with what is enduring in human experience. This, then, is one level of truth in the arts: truthfulness to the fears, longings and values of the human race. The arts possess such truth regardless of the philosophical perspective of an artist. Such knowledge about human experience is a type of truth that Christians need; it is one of their bonds with the human race.

**Representational Truth.** A second level of truth in the arts is representational truth, by which I mean truthfulness to the way things are in the world. Artists are sensitive observers of reality. They present human experience in their chosen artistic medium. Whenever a writer or composer or visual artist accurately captures the contours of human experience or external reality, we can say that the resulting work of art is true to reality.

A work of art can be true at this level even though the perspective from which the subject is viewed might be wrong. As with the previous level of truth (art as a truthful repository of what is most essential in human experience), we can make very large claims for the truth of art in its faithfulness to reality. We have all looked at paintings or read stories and poems that struck us as false to reality, to the way things are, but the overwhelming majority of art is true to reality.

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<sup>20</sup> See Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, pp. 56-59.

Of course the arts are not “photographically” real. They use artistic techniques of highlighting, selectivity, omission, juxtaposition and distortion in their portrayal of reality. There is a certain indirection to art. Thus the “truthfulness” or a painted portrait of a person is not measured in terms of photographic realism but in terms of whether it captures the reality of grief or serenity or the beauty of the human face. Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* contains such fantastic elements as ghosts and surrealistic landscapes and an albatross with supernatural powers. But these elements of fantasy accurately suggest such realities as sin, guilt, alienation and renewal. The imaginative details in a work of art are a lens or window through which we look at life.

*Perspectival Truth.* The third level at which the truthfulness of a work of art needs to be tested is the level of perspective or implied assertion. I noted earlier that artists inevitably offer an interpretation of the human experiences that they portray. Not all art forms are equally laden with perspective. Literature, because it consists of words, is the most consistently perspectival. Music, being the most nonrepresentational, is least likely to bear ideational perspective. The visual arts fall somewhere between the two.

The perspectives or themes embodied in artistic works range from a general sense of life at one end of the spectrum to very specific assertions at the other. At the general end, artistic perspective consists of such attitudes as order or lack of it, hope or despair, the presence or absence of a supernatural reality, meaning or futility. As works of art become more explicitly laden with perspective, they embody specific ideas about God, people, society and nature, or about what constitutes good and bad behavior, or about what values are worthy and unworthy of human devotion.

As people assimilate a work of art, they do so in terms of their own world view. They measure the perspective in works of art by their own convictions. The more committed they are to a standard of truth that they regard as authoritative, the more consciously they are likely to assess what they encounter in art in terms of their own world view.

*Two-Stage Criticism.* Christians surely fall into the category of people committed to a standard of truth. The methodology for integrating one’s encounter with works of art and one’s Christian faith has been succinctly summarized in T. S. Eliot’s theory that the criticism of artistic works

Should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint....It is... necessary for [Christians] to scrutinize... works of imagination with explicit ethical and theological standards....What I believe to be incumbent upon all Christians is the duty of maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world; and that by these criteria and standards everything...must be tested.<sup>21</sup>

Notice that Eliot envisions a two-stage process of criticism. First we must receive the work on its own terms and allow it to say what it really says. Then we must exercise our prerogative of agreeing or disagreeing with the artist’s interpretation of reality and experience.

What are the “explicit ethical and theological standards” by which Eliot thinks Christians should assess the truth content of art? They are based ultimately on the Bible, the only final authority for belief in what is, after all, a *revealed* religion. The insights of Christian creeds based on the Bible and Christian thinkers who are gifted to codify and state the implications of biblical doctrine become important elements in a person’s understanding of a Christian world view. In the application of Christian doctrine to specific artistic assertions about life, biblical revelation obviously needs to be supplemented by human reason in any Christian critique of art.

Judging the truthfulness of the implied assertions of art is a form of intellectually testing the spirits to see if they are from God. The criteria by which the ideational or perspectival truth of art is judged are the same intellectual standards as apply to the other disciplines. The arts, for all their beauty and delightfulness and imaginative power, do not allow us to take a holiday from the mind. The task of completing artistic criticism with a Christian assessment of an artist’s perspective or world view needs to be informed by insights from philosophy, theology, ethics and psychology. It can never rest solely on aesthetic considerations.

*Common Grace.* The truthfulness of a work of art does not depend on an artist’s Christian orthodoxy. The doctrine of common grace asserts that God endows all people, believers and unbelievers alike, with a capacity for goodness, truth, creativity and so forth. All truth is God’s truth. It is not suspect if it happens to be expressed by non-Christian artists.

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<sup>21</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” reprinted in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Ryken, pp. 142, 153.

The Bible itself affirms that unbelieving artists can express truth. In the New Testament, Paul several times quotes with approval from pagan Greek poets.<sup>22</sup> When Solomon needed visual artists who could express the beauty of holiness, he hired the best available artists, who happened to be pagans.<sup>23</sup> As John Calvin wrote regarding the application of the doctrine of common grace to the arts, “All truth is from God; and consequently, if wicked men have said anything that is true and just, we ought not to reject it; for it has come from God.”<sup>24</sup>

Does art tell the truth? There is no single answer to the perennial question. A lot of misleading eulogistic overstatements and denigrating understatement have been made about the truthfulness of art by people who ignore the range of ways in which art can be true and false.

Virtually all art tells us the truth about the foundational preoccupations, values, fears and longings of the human race. Most art is true as a representation of some aspect of human experience or external reality. At the level of intellectual perspective or interpretation of reality, most of the world’s art, music and literature has not measured up to a Christian standard of truth.

Of course it is possible to state the theme of a work of art so broadly that virtually no one, including Christians, would disagree with the statement. But when pressed more specifically at the level of implied philosophical assertion, most art through the centuries has deviated from Christian doctrine, despite the predominantly Christian tenor of European culture during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Not all art is Christian in viewpoint, but it is always of interest to Christians because it clarifies the human situation to which the Christian faith speaks. Encountering the moral and philosophic viewpoints of artistic works is an avenue to understanding the people with whom we live and the culture that is our daily environment. Measuring those viewpoints by a Christian norm serves as an invaluable catalyst to a Christian’s thinking about human issues.

### **Why Christians Need the Arts**

The arts serve many functions in human culture. They are functions that Christians should welcome and that they avoid to their own harm.

One of the functions of art can be summed up under such related words as refreshment, recreation, entertainment and the enjoyment of artistic form or beauty. The arts are a celebration of life. The goal of our excursions into the realm of imaginative art is to send us back to real life with a renewed zest for it. The arts awaken us to the hidden beauty of the world and are themselves an extension of that beauty. The arts affirm the humanness of humans. Even when the subject of art is human evil suffering and ugliness, the artistic skill with which the subject is rendered is a tribute to human achievement.

The arts are useful as well as delightful. They are a great ordering force in human culture. As the arts present human experience for our contemplation, they intensify our involvement with life, heighten our awareness, expand our range of experiences, and enlarge our human sympathies and compassion. The arts sharpen and reward the senses and do justice to the emotional and imagining side of human nature. They give shape to our own experiences, thereby satisfying the human urge for adequate expression of insights and feelings.

Because the arts are interpretive in nature, they speak to our intellect. They offer a diagnosis, definition and explanation for the human condition. With their implied assertions about life, the arts force us to think, ponder alternative views of life, to commit ourselves to our own convictions of truth. They provide the materials for us to exercise and expand our own angle of vision.

These are the gifts of art. They are even more important to Christians than to non-Christians because to the human reasons for art a Christian can add an even more ultimate rationale—the glory of God. This, indeed, is the appointed consummation of the arts. The person who can revere the ultimate source and end of human creativity has an added reason to cherish the ability of the arts to intensify human awareness and compassion, to enhance human enjoyment and understanding.

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<sup>22</sup> The passages include Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; and Titus 1:12. For commentary on the importance of this data for aesthetic theory, see my book *Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 161-63.

<sup>23</sup> See Veith, *The Gift of Art*, pp. 57-58, for the details.

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 300-301.