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A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF ART

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Peter D. Vaughn

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Name: Vaughn, Peter DeLong

Approved by:

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INTRODUCTION

We all have a sense of what art is supposed to do, even if we cannot put a word to it. We have experienced that song, or story, or image that has made us feel and understand more deeply, resonating with truth in a way that we had not before. As Hegel puts it,

...the task and aim of art is to bring home to our sense, our feeling, and our inspiration everything which has a place in the human spirit. ...Its aim therefore is supposed to consist in awakening and vivifying our slumbering feelings, inclinations, and passions of every kind, in filling the heart, in forcing the human being, educated or not, to go through the whole gamut of feelings which the human heart in its inmost and secret recesses can bear, experience, and produce, through what can move and stir the human breast in its depths and manifold possibilities and aspects, and to deliver to feeling and contemplation of its enjoyment whatever the spirit possesses of the essential and lofty in its thinking and in the Idea—the splendour of the noble, eternal, and true: moreover to make misfortune and misery, evil and guilt intelligible, to make men intimately acquainted with all that is horrible and shocking, as well as with all that is pleasurable and felicitous; and, finally, to let fancy loose in the idle plays of imagination and plunge it into the seductive magic of sensuously bewitching visions and feelings.¹

I would wager that most of us do not experience that with the vast majority of what we know as art. In the English language, we have several different ways that we use the word *art* which we will spend some time exploring. If one westerner speaks to another

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 , 1:46-47.

westerner about art, however, they have a basic mutual understanding—paintings, sculpture, classical music, “you know, ‘the arts.’” This is somewhat surprising because the more one presses for a definition, the more elusive clarity about the nature and bounds of the definition becomes. There is a cloud perpetually obscuring the heights of such an idea from the average layperson. We very quickly feel out of our depth, and most are happy to leave it to those cultured souls that we have a sneaking suspicion hold us in derision. Even if you start questioning the cultured elite about the meaning of art, the experts who have devoted their lives to art, they come with thin definitions to encompass all that has become “art.” In an essay from 2005 inquiring into the nature of art, Michael Karwowski looks to English literary critic Professor John Carey to define art. Looking all the way back to the times of Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer, Carey asserts that efforts to provide an objective criterion for judging a work of art, that it is related to “a mysterious principle underlying the universe,” amount to “a farrago of superstition and unsubstantiated assertion.”² Karwowski continues, “It follows that the only possible definition of a work of art, according to Professor Carey, is that it is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, even if it is only a work of art for that one person. 'If this seems to plunge us into the abyss of relativism then I can only say that the abyss of relativism is where we have always been in reality - if it is an abyss. The ignoramus's attitude to art used to be parodied as "I don't know much about art but I know what I like". But this, it seems, is all any of us can say!'"³ If layperson and expert alike come to the basic opinion that “anything someone calls art must be art”, or maybe to phrase it more exactly “art is a *fine* art in a given society *if in that society products of that art are*

²Michael Karwowski, "What is Art?" *Contemporary Review* 287, no. 1676 (September 2005): 152.

³ *Ibid.*

regularly (though not necessarily exclusively) produced or distributed with disinterested contemplation as one of the primary intended public uses,”⁴ it reveals that our cultural understanding of art has strayed far from what it is meant to be. In comparing our intuitive understanding of how we are supposed to respond to art to our cultural understanding of what art is, it seems that Rousseau’s observation on virtue in Rome rings true for art today: “Romans had been content to practice virtue; all was lost when they began to study it.”⁵

What has happened with art is that we have approached it as if it belonged in a category that it does not. In the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig presents two ways of knowing. He divides human understanding into two kinds—classical understanding and romantic understanding. As Pirsig describes, “a classical understanding sees the world primarily as underlying form itself. ...[It] proceeds by reason and by laws—which are themselves underlying forms of thought and behavior.”⁶ In contrast, “the romantic mode is primarily inspirational, imaginative, creative, intuitive. Feelings rather than facts predominate. ‘Art’ when it is opposed to ‘Science’ is often romantic. It does not proceed by reason or by laws. It proceeds by feeling, intuition and esthetic conscience.”⁷ The categorical problem we find ourselves in with art comes from trying to understand the romantic category through classical thinking. An illustration can come in thinking of a train. You can know all of the details about a train. You can understand the materials used, how the parts fit together, and the physics behind all of the

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, 37.

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts." In *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Malden, MA, 1998), 48.

⁶ Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981, 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*

processes employed to make the train operational. You can even understand the function of trains to mankind, the place they have had in history, and the benefit or harm that they have had to mankind. Pirsig calls this sort of knowledge “Classical,” and the physical representations of this type of thinking would be represented well in schematics or history books. All of that information, however, does not give you a thorough understanding of trains. Until you have felt the thrill of speeding along through the moonlit countryside as you hang over the rail to feel the wind, your knowledge of trains is incomplete. This would fall under Pirsig’s category of romantic knowledge. This type of knowledge is best represented in art. The problem with art today is that we have muddled the Classical/Romantic waters, pursuing the Romantic in art by exploring it in a Classical way. This left a mystical center that became increasingly covered by formal, classical thought. As the classical thought continued, the romantic core was found to be more and more elusive until it was ultimately found not to exist at all. You cannot arrive at romantic knowledge through classical thought.

God created us as humans with both emotions and understanding, and both are apprehensions of Truth. In order to understand trains, and everything else in creation, we have to approach them with a classical and romantic synthesis. Even still, however, we will always come out confused if we do not acknowledge God as the bedrock for all. A classical/romantic synthesis in our knowledge of God will result in a biblical understanding of art, that is, human life in the world.

The application of a biblical understanding of art is a necessary component of human life lived well. The foundation for the concept of man as both artist and art appreciator is found in Genesis. In the beginning, “God made man in His own image,

male and female He created them.” From there, God mandated that man steward the development of culture until it is fully redeemed in the new heavens and the new earth. A biblical understanding of the nature of art is necessary for this purpose. Assuming the existence of God and that the Bible is His authoritative message of Truth to us, and therefore assuming the legitimacy of rationality, emotion, value structures and faith in the existence of a physical world with continuity, in this paper I will explore how mankind’s conception of art has erred to the extent of making it irrelevant. Contrary to how the conception of art has gone astray through the centuries, a biblical definition of art is practical to every Christian every day: following the image of God to the utmost of his ability, every person is to employ himself creatively to the benefit and enjoyment of himself and others, resulting in beautiful culture. The end of this corporate creative effort is to glorify God and enjoy him.

As can be seen already in beginning with quotes from Hegel and Pirsig, I fully embrace the idea that truth is true no matter where it is found. An individual or an entire school of thought can be completely wrong in much of their thinking while still arriving at ideas of merit. The wrongness of their wrong ideas in no way takes away from the rightness of their right ideas. While the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for God’s own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture or may be deduced from Scripture, there is a “light of nature,” by which mankind can arrive at truth.⁸ This “light of nature” is discernable by unredeemed and redeemed alike. Much of the research I have undertaken to develop a Christian perspective on art comes from non-Christian thinkers. They figure so prominently for two

⁸ WCF 1.VI.

reasons: there is a dearth of Christian writing on the subject, and there are many intelligent non-Christians who have ideas on the subject worth considering.

As can also be seen, I am operating from a presupposition that the God of the Bible exists. I will not leave it as a presupposition, however. An argument for the existence of God is a necessary component of making sense of our intuitive understanding of how art is supposed to function.

CHAPTER 1

Art Has Been Separated from God

Everything worthy that mankind *should* put his hand to must find its roots in the nature of God and his instruction to us. The main problem with our modern, western conception of art is that we have divorced it from the idea of God. I mentioned how we have a basic mutual understanding of what art is, and I have intimated that that understanding relates to a category called “fine art,” but we all also have an intuitive knowledge, need and love for good, creative work. It is in this knowledge, need, and love that we can find the basic nature of art. Whether or not we cognitively acknowledge that its root is in God, that it does have a standard of objective, universal goodness, we nevertheless feel the yearning for such. In separating our conception of art from a biblical conception of God, there are at least two problems that follow. The first is that in removing our conception of God from our conception of art, we are removing the possibility of objective evaluation. The second problem is that our conception of art has been isolated to our conception of fine art, removing most of human creative agency from the category.

Removing God from art has removed Objective Standards

There was a Greek philosopher named Protagoras who wrote, “Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not,”⁹ which is commonly summarized as “man is the measure of all things.” The way that Plato argues against Protagoras in *Theatetus* is the way that many Christians argue against relativism today: “If what each man believes to be true through sensation is true for him - and no man can judge of another’s experience better than the man himself, and no man is in a better position to consider whether another’s opinion is true or false than the man himself, but...each man is to have his own opinions for himself alone, and all of them are to be right and true - then *how*, my friend, was Protagoras so wise that he should consider himself worthy to teach others and for huge fees? And how are we so ignorant that we should go to school to him, if each of us is the measure of his own wisdom?”¹⁰ There cannot be an authority saying all perspectives are equal in the same way that there cannot be an absolute statement that all things are relative. One could argue that all of this is considering things simplistically. Considering things abstractly can make simple what is complex in reality. Prof. Joshua Mark nuances Plato’s understanding of Protagoras’ statement: “What Protagoras seems to be saying ... is that the apprehension of Truth is relative to the individual perception and what one recognizes as 'true' will be True to that individual despite any evidence to the contrary.”¹¹ This is closer to how we

⁹ Carol Poster, "Protagoras (fl. 5th c. B.C.E.)," in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://iep.utm.edu/protagor/#SH3b> (accessed 9 4, 2020), §4.b.

¹⁰Joshua J. Mark, "Protagoras of Abdera: Of All Things Man is the Measure," in the Ancient History Encyclopedia, January 18, 2012. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/61/protagoras-of-abdera-of-all-things-man-is-the-meas/> (accessed Sep. 4, 2020), §2.

¹¹ Ibid.

can conceive of the relativism of today. Everyone has their own opinion, and everyone's opinion is equally valid because we have no commonly accepted standard from which to measure them. Whether or not a standard even exists does not even enter the conversation. In the absence of a common standard, there can be no way of speaking of good or bad human creative agency.

In a book arguing for a re-introduction of self-reliance and individual agency to modern mankind, Matthew Crawford writes of the lack of objective standards in which many modern people work: "The craftsman's habitual deference is not towards the New, but toward the objective standards of his craft. However narrow in its application, this is a rare appearance in contemporary life—a disinterested, articulable, and publicly affirmable idea of the good."¹² After many examples that give evidence of a "poignant longing for responsibility" that many people experience in their home lives, Crawford argues that the longing is due to the fact that the world of work has changed. "Those who work in an office often feel that, despite the proliferation of contrived metrics they must meet, their job lacks objective standards of the sort provided by, for example, a carpenter's level, and that as a result there is something arbitrary in the dispensing of credit or blame."¹³ Crawford continues, "...the problem of technology...is that we have come to live in a world that precisely does *not* elicit our instrumentality, the embodied kind that is original to us. We have too few occasions to *do* anything, because of a certain predetermination of things from afar."¹⁴ We have in us a deep-seated need to do good work. If God is removed from work, then likewise the objective standard for evaluation

¹² Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work*. New York: Penguin Books, 2009, 19.

¹³ Crawford, 19.

¹⁴ Crawford, 69.

of that work is removed. We are left with subjective valuations or arbitrary objective standards. The reader may notice a shift in this section from speaking of art to speaking of work. Distinguishing between the two is another casualty of removing God from our conception of art.

Removing God from art has separated most human agency from art

Leo Tolstoy observes, “ Instead of giving a definition of true art, and then deciding what is and what is not good art by judging whether the work conforms or does not conform to the definition, a certain class of works, which for some reason please a certain circle of people, is accepted as being art, and a definition of art is then devised to cover all these productions.”¹⁵ In the early 20th century, Clive Bell was an art critic of the style that gave the world of fine art the reputation that it still enjoys today. Clearly isolating the ability to understand and appreciate art to a select few, he writes, “As often as not, the hardest thinkers have no aesthetic experience whatever. ...One the other hand, people who respond immediately and surely to works of art...are often quite incapable of talking sense about aesthetics. ...I do not blame them. Why should they stop to think when they are not very good at thinking?”¹⁶ This derogatory approach to those who are not on the “in” side of the fine art world comes from a prideful abuse of the nature of specialization. Some specialties, and therefore the practitioners of those specialties, are seen as superior in nature to others. Jean-Jacques Rousseau gives a particularly withering analysis of this tendency: “Happy slaves, you owe [the sciences, letters and the arts] that

¹⁵ Crawford, 69.

¹⁶ Clive Bell, *Art*. Project Gutenberg. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913, §1.1 ¶1-2, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16917/16917-h/16917-h.htm> (accessed September, 2020).

delicate and refined taste on which you pride yourselves; that sweetness of character and that urbanity in mores which makes relationship among you so cordial and easy; in a word, the appearances of all the virtues without having any.”¹⁷

An investigation into the etymology of our English word *art*, however, reveals that the current limitation of what we call art is a more recent development. Our English word *art* is derived from the Latin word *ars*, which has two categories of meaning: art, skill; and craft, power. This definition informs the understanding of all the romance languages. Our modern English word *art* comes from Latin through the Old French word *art*, which means skill, practice, or method. An example of this usage would be Walter of Bibbesworth, in AD 1250 writing, “ore serroit a saver de l’*art* a bresser & brasyer [now would be the time to know the *art* of brewing].”¹⁸ This Old French conception grew into the Middle English understanding. It meant “the foundational knowledge and activities of a field or subject (*either academic or trade*).”¹⁹ This includes applied or practical knowledge. It can mean guile, craft, or an instance of it, and can also mean competency, skill, or “one’s aptitude or ability in a given area or at a given task.”²⁰ In Middle English, “art” can refer to a set of rules for conducting oneself, or the set of things which one has learned about through formal study. In the medieval period, this understanding of art was formalized into the “liberal arts,” which held a prominent position in medieval education.²¹ The disciplines of medieval education were referred to as the “septennium,”

¹⁷ Rousseau, 43.

¹⁸ *Ars* - Wiktionary. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/arts#Latin> (accessed August 28, 2020).

¹⁹ Ibid, emphasis added.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ S. Ijsseling, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Conflict*. (Netherlands: Springer, Dordrecht , 1976), 46.

which was divided in the *trivium*—grammar, rhetoric and dialectics—and the *quadrivium*—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.²²

I delve so deeply into the Middle English understanding of *art* because it not only reveals almost the whole breadth of the modern understanding of the word, but it distinctly leaves out the most common use of the word in our modern understanding. In all of the nuance of the Middle English definition, there is no hint of what we would now understand as *fine art*.

Our modern definition of art displays a distinct shift from the medieval understanding. One of the main understandings of art today is, “The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination..., “ nothing new so far, “typically in the visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.”²³ Here we see the shift to particular art forms and specification of purpose, “beauty or emotional power.” Here lies a crucial shift in understanding that is hundreds of years in the making. They are hundreds of years that not only mark a distinct shift in our understanding of art, but they occur during a movement away from God as the foundation for our system of values and beliefs.

²² Ijsseling, 46.

²³ *Art | Definition of Art by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.com*. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/art> (accessed August 29, 2020).

Definitions

Before we move into an exploration of that shift, it is advantageous to define a few terms as I will be using them in this paper. *Art* can refer to either a category of creative human production or a specific instance of the category. An *artifact* is an object made by a human being in the past. The *traditional understanding of an artwork* is an object made by a human being that belongs to one of the categories traditionally defined as art: poetry, painting, sculpture, music, drama, and to a certain extent architecture.

The *modern understanding of an artwork* is hard to stick a pin in, because there have been such a diversity of understandings (e.g. “Art is mimesis.” “Art is self expression.” “Art is significant form.”²⁴) Nicholas Wolterstorff spends a significant number of words in his book, *Art in Action*, describing the complex way in which art can function in a society, but then points out that the idea is often taken for granted that works of art are intended for perceptual contemplation.²⁵ The explanation for this, he proposes, is, “our thought on these matters has in large measure been determined by the social realities of the role of art in a certain segment of our society. You and I are participants in what I shall call our society’s *institution of high art*. ...In large measure we think as we do about the arts because we consider only the role of the arts in this situation, though in the back of our minds we know that they have other roles in life as well.”²⁶ Since the institution of high art is far from having a monolithic understanding of what is or is not an artwork, I will generalize the *modern understanding of an artwork* to mean an object

²⁴ Wolterstorff, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

or event intended by the creator or distributor for aesthetic contemplation and informed by the historical narrative of the discipline of fine art.

Distinguished from both the *traditional understanding of an artwork* and the *modern understanding of an artwork*, I will be using an expanded understanding of *artwork*. Artwork has a key place in culture, which is a shared system of ideals, beliefs and values, attitudes, and assumptions.²⁷ The understanding of *artwork* that I will be using is far closer to William Romanowski's understanding of *cultural texts*, as laid out in his book Eyes Wide Open. "A culture is communicated through what anthropologists call *texts*. Cultural texts are human actions, events and material works that embody meanings that are widely shared. As the term suggests, a text can be 'read,' or interpreted, to understand its meaning; cultural values find social and material existence in our action and products."²⁸ Hegel writes of how art performs this function: "In works of art the nations have deposited their richest inner intuitions and ideas, and art is often the key, and in many nations the sole key, to understanding their philosophy and religion."²⁹ I resist simply using the term *cultural text*, because it leaves off the most important part of what makes art art. I refer back to our *romantic understanding* that Pirsig was writing about. Hanging off of trains. I will give full treatment to this idea in Chapter 3, but first I would like to sketch how we came to the traditional and modern conceptions of art.

²⁷ William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007, 81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Hegel, 7.

CHAPTER 2

How We Came to a Modern Understanding of Art

The separation of God from art finds its origins all the way back in the Fall of mankind. Mankind has been rebellious from the beginning, wanting to claim for ourselves that which does not belong to us. That is not the worst of the problem. The worst of the problem is that we reject God's affections; we leave off our relationship with him in favor of relationships with other things, things we find more desirable. This has been the path from man's beginning to where we find ourselves today.

Origins of Rebellion Found at the Origins of Man

We see the movement of mankind away from healthy relationship with God towards self-aggrandizement and pursuing our own interests over and over again in the Bible. In the garden eastward in Eden, when Adam and Eve listened to the serpent's words and rebelled from the law God had given them, their first instinct was to withdraw from community with God; they hid (Gen 3:1-10). When men began to multiply on the face of the earth, so too did their wickedness. God saw that "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually," which can only mean that mankind was doing the

opposite of communing with God in his heart continually (Gen 6:1-5).³⁰ After the flood, as the nations divided on the earth, they developed brick-making and decided to build a city, “and a tower whose top is in the heavens” (Gen 11:1-4). In the movement towards urbanization, as cultures were built, people started pursuing religion after their own fashioning. The central feature in southern Mesopotamian cities was the temple complex. Called ziggurats, the structures were created of sun-dried bricks filled with dirt and rubble. Purely designed to hold a stairway, the only room was located at the very top, a place for the deity to stop and refresh himself on his way down to provide blessing to the town. “The ziggurat served as the architectural representation of the pagan religious developments of this period, when deity was transformed into the image of man.”³¹ Right relationship with God was abandoned, and mankind began using his art to pursue fictions of gods after their own image.

This pattern of rebellion from God to pursue ourselves continues in an interrupted kind of way throughout the Bible in Israel, the nation that God specifically chose for himself. To see, however, how this pattern has shaped Western culture’s current understanding of art, we need to look at nations that God leaves to their own devices.

A Brief Sketch of the Rise of the Western Conception of Fine Art

As Hegel noted, the artworks of civilizations past are the primary way in which we can induce the ideals, beliefs and values, attitudes, and assumptions (that is, the

³⁰ Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to the *New King James Bible* (NKJV) (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

³¹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 42.

culture) of those people. And, though stained black with depravity, even so the artfulness of man can cause one to be still in front of it. Unfortunately, this characteristic forms a rebellion feedback loop. If, in rebellion to the truth of Christianity, man can create artworks that can move you to your very soul, it enshrines the rebellion in the place of Christian truth. It is as if to say, "See, it is clear that those experiences you spoke of within your religious system are just as accessible without it and are probably experienced more clearly and freely too." What did the serpent say to Eve? "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God..." (Gen 3:4-5). It is the pride of man that persistently thinks a good thing can be acquired through rebellion. That is the nature of sin.

Greek and Roman Art

The rebellion feedback loop can be seen perhaps the best in looking at Greek and Roman Art. No other art has at one and the same time been so amazingly beautiful and so devastating to human culture because of its rebellion to God. There is good reason why Greek and Roman art achieved the place that it did. It has nothing to do with the depravity or particular giftedness of the culture. Because Greek and Roman cultures achieved the place that they did, where certain members of their society no longer had to worry about physiological needs, safety needs or love/belonging needs,³² they were able to spend time doing "higher" cultural things, like pursuing philosophical discourse (Acts 17:21) or enjoying fine art and architecture. Greek and Roman culture were certainly not the first to come to a level of civilization where they had significant and extravagant

³² A.H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370-396.

artistic output, but there is something unique about Greek and Roman art that has persisted in our culture. In Greek and Roman art the image of man was chosen as one of the primary visual vehicles for communicating the divine; man became the measure of all things.

In Chapter 1, we read how Protagorus held the idea that, to paraphrase, man is the measure of all things. Though there is not a direct philosophical connection between Protagorus' thesis and what Greek and Roman artworks came to represent, there is a distinct agreement. There are a series of steps, though, to get from what is named "Classical" art (i.e. Art of Greek and Roman heritage) and the summary thesis of Protagorus, that man is the measure of all things. Firstly, we must introduce the concepts of the particular and the universal. A particular is a single thing, in contrast to a universal, which is a property or relation that can be manifested in particular instances (e.g. the universal ideal of *yellow* can be manifested in many different particular instances of the color yellow, or the universal ideal of *false* can be manifested in many particular instances of things that are not true).³³ The logical progression follows thusly: Classical art portrays universals through particulars → universals are rationally understood, and so particular portrayals are rationally designed → the more man uses rationality to discern the universal, the more man's rationality is the standard for deciding what is universal and what isn't → man becomes the measure of what is universal, a.k.a. divine.

A perfect example of how the universal is represented in the particular in Classical art can be found in the sculptures of Polykleitos, especially in his sculpture

³³ Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 278, 387.

Doryphoros (Spear Bearer). *Doryphoros* was originally cast bronze, but it is only known now through Roman copies carved out of marble. In those replications you see a perfectly-balanced nude male athlete. He is not doing anything but standing, holding a spear (now absent) and looking slightly downward at about 1 o'clock if he were standing on a clock face. His weight is shifted to his right leg, and his left arm is engaged, holding the spear over his shoulder. His left leg and right arm are relaxed, making a sort of "X" throughout his body: left leg relaxing with left arm, right leg engaged along with left arm. All of this is important, because every decision made by the artist in the composition of this sculpture was intentionally crafted to represent some ideal. As the Jansons note in their history of art, "it embodied not only *symmetria* (proportion, structure), but also *rhythmos* (composition, movement)."³⁴ They go on to explain that the Greeks had a faith in ratio which can be traced back to the Pythagoreans, "who believed that the harmony of the universe, like musical harmony, could be expressed in mathematical terms. ...Plato, too, made numbers the basis of his doctrine of ideal forms and acknowledged that the concept of beauty was commonly based on proportion."³⁵ They write that a contemplation of harmonious proportion was equated with a contemplation of the good, and that they even included a moral dimension.³⁶ Their concluding remarks on this statue lead directly to my point: "Rather than being opposed to naturalism, this moral dimension was linked to a more careful treatment of form that makes the human figure appear more

³⁴ H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art: The Western Tradition*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2004, 138.

³⁵ Janson, 138-139.

³⁶ Janson, 139.

alive as well as more real. Classical Greek sculpture appeals to both the mind and the eye, so that human and divine beauty become one.”³⁷

This is one instance of a confluence that occurs in Greek and Roman art (Greek because they originated it, Roman because they perpetuated it) that contributes to, millennia later, the culture that we have today. This is the humanistic thread leading to relativism. Since the beginning what can be known of God was made manifest in mankind, because God has made it known to us. We can see his eternal power and divine nature (Rom 1:19-20), and they are lovely. When we see elements of God’s nature in creation, we are moved by them both intellectually and emotionally, classically and romantically, whether or not we acknowledge the one true God. You can see this in *Doryphoros*. Polykleitos must have seen small pictures of the nature of God in the amazing order of the universe displayed in mathematics and in the moving beauty of God’s creation. He put these two together in his sculpture by beautifully crafting a particular of God’s creation, the human body, and relating the proportions of that body to mathematical truths. This he did very well, and at just the right time that it would be carried on by the Romans and rediscovered later on, that these concepts would be experienced by others even later. The result is a moving artwork that lasts, that has influence on into the future, because it displays these little pictures of God with it. The problem is that it is created in rebellion to the real God.

Without the real God in comparison, showing how extremely small these pictures of God are in comparison to the glory of the Most High, these small pictures seem divine

³⁷ Janson, 139.

in themselves. They are in human form, communicating ideas humans have had. *Doryphorus* is created in rebellion to God, but because it contains images of God it moves the soul of man who is tuned to respond to the image of God. So, rebellious man, viewing the artwork of rebellious man, is moved by the image of God in those artworks, but worships the created rather than the creator. It attributes the divinity elsewhere, reaffirming and propelling the rebellion. This is the rebellion feedback loop. Rebellion done well creates more rebellion.

As Paul writes about the ungodliness and unrighteousness of man in Romans, his prophecy tells us exactly what will happen when man operates in rebellion to God. “...Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man” (Rom 1:21-23). What Paul describes plays out exactly in Classical culture. Their thinking, though rich, complex and insightful, was futile because it was moving further and further from God. The truth in it was permeated by all manner of falsehood. And their hearts were darkened. The romantic experience of life cannot be understood rationally. The richness of romantic goodness only makes sense in light of the experience of the *shalom* life with God. For this reason, the arational understanding of man’s romantic experience decreased in importance for the classical thinkers of Greece and Rome in favor of what did make sense—literally, rationality. Pirsig called rational thought *classical* in direct reference to Greek and Roman cultures. Greek and Roman cultures became less and less religious, and more and more human-centered, focusing on

human rationality. Both their philosophical systems and the progression of their art bear this out.

The Christian Middle Ages

The Roman Empire gradually declined, and finally disintegrated before endless waves of barbarian hordes. They sacked towns and cities and ended up settling in the areas they had conquered. It would now be centuries before Europe enjoyed the political unity and peace that it knew under Roman rule, and it would also take centuries to rebuild all that had been destroyed, both in terms of infrastructure and cultural achievements like literature, art, and knowledge of the physical world. Toward the end, though, Rome had become a Christian empire after the conversion of Constantine. He set up the Imperial Church of Rome, and so many of the Romans that the barbarians met and settled down among were Christians. Under this influence, the immigrants gradually accepted the faith. Additionally, a good number of the barbarians who were Goths had met Christian missionaries in their homelands, and so had converted to Christianity before they came. The next thousand years after the fall of Rome, as civilization was rebuilt, saw Europe as a primarily Christian continent. This period is known as the middle ages.³⁸

Though we find many things from the middle ages having a powerful impact on the nature of our modern culture, the characteristic of the middle ages that had the most impact was the fact that the civilization that grew, though not politically uniform, was still under the hegemony of the now very powerful Roman Catholic Church. What we

³⁸ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1984, 1:217-219.

will see is that the Catholic church fell short of classical/romantic synthesis as well. They failed, as a whole, to live in relationship to God and to pursue Him in how they administrated his visible kingdom on earth.

This is the reason why much of the modern western world has at least a cultural history of Christianity. Much of the art history of the West is Christian for this same reason. Since it was the church that was the primary patron of traditional artworks, a large majority of them only engage special revelation from Scripture as their principle content. The fact that special revelation is communicated through traditional forms of art is a healthy corrective. The problem comes from 1,000 years of isolating the presence of God to the formal church and to Scripture. How then is it supposed to touch the daily life of everyman, who cannot read and cannot understand the Latin liturgy in the worship service?

Justo Gonzalez notes that, by the end of the middle ages, there are two characteristics that marked the theology of the times. “The first was its constant search for ever subtler questions to pose, and for fine distinctions with which to answer them. This was joined with the development of a dense style and technical vocabulary that were far beyond the reach of the uninitiated. Its second characteristic was the increasing rift between philosophy and theology, between what reason can discover and what is known only through divine revelation.”³⁹ Thomas Aquinas and his contemporaries believed in a continuity between faith and reason. It would follow that, if certain truths were revealed in Scripture, they could also be reached through the use of reason.⁴⁰ The ever increasing

³⁹ Gonzalez, 1:362.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

subtlety of thought in an attempt to explain aspects of God and theology rationally reveals an over-emphasis on classical knowledge to the neglect of romantic knowledge.

The response in medieval theology is a foreshadowing of what would happen in modernity. John Duns Scotus, William Occam, and other scholars of the times, using reason, started to show logical holes in the arguments from natural reason that undergirded the faith in the continuity between faith and reason. In so doing, they ended up proving that all the traditional arguments whereby theologians had tried to prove that a doctrine was reasonable did not have any power.⁴¹ Reasoning that is close to true can hold a whole lot of truth. If there is an error somewhere near the foundation, though, if some “Subtle Doctor” starts reviewing what has already been thought, the whole thing can come toppling down. The sad result is that, often, if we are not careful in assessing what of the thinking had merit, and what of the thinking was misguided, we can end up assuming the whole lot was bad and looking elsewhere.

These theologians were not seeking to disprove biblical truth, rather to praise the glory of God. Human minds cannot comprehend the mysteries of God. They stressed faith. Unfortunately, what remains is that “their subtleties and their insistence on precise definitions and fine distinctions provoked the reaction of many who deplored the contrast between the complexity of academic theology and the simplicity of the gospel.”⁴²

⁴¹ Gonzalez, 1:363.

⁴² Gonzalez, 1:364.

Renaissance Humanism

The preceding section is called “The Christian Middle Ages.” Those who first used the term “middle ages” did not esteem the period, as their usage implies. These thousand years were seen as a “negative intermission between classical antiquity and their own time.”⁴³ “Renaissance” means rebirth, and what was supposedly reborn was classical culture. What was actually reborn was a re-emphasis on what humans themselves can achieve. Constantinople had been the last vestige of the Roman empire in the East, lasting all through the middle ages. Finally, however, it fell to the Turks in 1453. The exiles flooded into Italy, and they carried with them all manner of cultural products from the remains of the Roman empire.⁴⁴ At the same time, Italy was prospering. There were financial resources to erect great buildings and to adorn them with works of art. The church was no longer the only patron. Gonzalez writes, “until recently devoted almost exclusively to religious instruction and to the glory of God, [art] turned its attention to human splendor. In the classical works of Greece and Rome there was an admiration for the human creature that medieval art seemed to have forgotten, and which the painters and sculptors of the Renaissance expressed in paint and stone.”⁴⁵ It was expressed in more than just paint and stone. The emphasis on what humanity can achieve was expressed in the thought of the time.

Renee Descartes published his *Meditations 1 & 2* in 1641. This is almost 250 years after the first rumblings of the Renaissance, around 1400 A.D.,⁴⁶ but he categorizes

⁴³ Gonzalez, 1:365.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1:366.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1:368-69.

⁴⁶ Janson, 402-451.

the trajectory into the future so perfectly that I will focus on him to summarize. Descartes believes in the existence of God, at least as far as his writing displays. He writes, "I have long had fixed in my mind the belief that an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am."⁴⁷ He is aware, however, that he has held false beliefs in the past, and he must undertake to rid himself of all opinions he had formerly accepted, and to rebuild from a new foundation.⁴⁸ Descartes then proceeds to systematically doubt everything he can until he finds something that he cannot doubt. After some examination, he considers, "What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think."⁴⁹

This may seem a solid foundation, to doubt everything until you find something you cannot doubt. This reasoning seeks deductive logic rather than inductive reasoning, proof rather than evidence, because it seems stronger. In thinking that proof seems stronger than evidence, though, lies a tragic shift towards classical understanding only, away from real understanding. It isolates everything to the logical, to what the rational mind can conceive, and leaves off what we can clearly perceive from experiencing creation. One cannot create a logical syllogism for the evidence of God in creation, at least not one that is persuasive,⁵⁰ even though the evidence overflows. What is crucial to perceive from Descartes' thinking is that the foundation for his knowledge shifted to his own rational thought. He forsook a personal familiarity with the Most High God as

⁴⁷ Rene Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 32.

⁴⁸ Descartes, 29.

⁴⁹ Descartes, 36.

⁵⁰ See Anselm's ontological argument, for example

legitimate and finally persuasive evidence of His existence, which inclines one to believe he did not know Him as He Is (Yahweh, I AM). It seems that a burning presence of divinity and one's own thinking are equally difficult to deny.

As classical influences flooded in, European culture remained nominally Christian. There was sincere faith to be sure, but the Fall spares none. For the first hundred years or so, the artworks that the increasing number of artists produced still contained primarily Christian content. Very soon, however, openly pagan images were being created by artists and accepted with relish by patrons. They still claimed to be Christian, so how can we account for this?

What is happening is an emerging awareness of what I mentioned in the Introduction, that in the "light of nature" we can see God's attributes, both his power and Godhead. In nature we can see beauty and truth. Redeemed and unredeemed alike can see this, and it can be seen in our good work. Classical artworks contain both beauty and truth, and in recognizing this, philosophers and theologians of the time were reinvigorated by long-lost thought. Erasmus, for example, studied Scholastic Theology (the theology of the late middle ages) but came to despise the "excessive subtlety and seemingly idle curiosity."⁵¹ He turned to studying classical literature, and became impressed by classical Stoicism and Platonism. He saw the ascetic rigor of their disciplined life. It resonated with his feeling that righteousness was more important than orthodoxy.⁵² He saw the good in Plato and the Stoics and they were the means God used to reorient Erasmus' conception of Christian life. This is a good use of the "light of

⁵¹ Gonzalez, 2:10.

⁵² Gonzelez, 2:11.

nature,” or general revelation. Not all Christian thinkers were as scrupulous in staying true to the Spirit of Christ.

We can look to Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* to demonstrate. Here we have offensive thought and form presented beautifully. Visually, it is an eight-foot-tall beautiful nude woman. In terms of content, this is Aphrodite (Greek)/Venus (Roman), a pagan god. The subject matter of the painting is derived from, among other sources, Homer’s *Hymn to Aphrodite*: “I shall sing of beautiful Aphrodite ... who is obeyed by the flowery sea-girt land of Cyprus, whither soft Zephyr and the breeze wafted her in soft foam over the waves. Gently the golden-filleted Horae received her, and clad her in divine garments.”⁵³ Neither may seem offensive now precisely for the reason that Botticelli could justify painting it and Lorenzo Medici could justify hanging it. Humans have a remarkable ability to adapt to a context and reorient “normal” accordingly, especially given a justification that makes the new thing “ok.” Marsilio Ficino was a priest and a Neo-Platonic philosopher of the time, and the Jansons summarize his justification for *The Birth of Venus* in the following way:

Ficino, who was also a priest, based his thinking as much on the mysticism of Plotinos as on the works of Plato. He believed that the life of the universe, including human existence, was linked to God by a spiritual circuit continuously ascending and descending. For that reason, all revelation, whether from the Bible, Plato, or classical myths, was one. He also proclaimed that beauty, love, and beatitude were united, since they are phases of this same circuit. Thus Neo-Platonists could speak of both the “celestial Venus” (the nude Venus born of the sea, as in our picture) and the Virgin Mary as sources of “divine love” (meaning the recognition of divine beauty). The celestial Venus, according to Ficino, dwells purely in the sphere of Mind. Her twin, the ordinary Venus, gives rise to human love. Of her Ficino wrote to the Medici prince: “Venus ... is a nymph of excellent comeliness, born of heaven and more than others beloved by God all highest. Her soul and mind are Love and Charity, her eyes Dignity and Magnanimity, the

⁵³ Janson, 441.

hands Liberality and Magnificence, the feet Comeliness and Modesty. The whole, then, is Temperance and Honesty, Charm and Splendor. Oh, what exquisite beauty! ... a nymph of such nobility has been wholly given into your hands! If you were to unite with her in wedlock and claim her as yours she would make all your years sweet.” In both form and content, this passage follows medieval odes to the Virgin.⁵⁴

Rather than finding truth in general revelation which aligns with and expounds upon biblical truth, Ficino used the recent drift of theology to give excuse for the negative elements of the painting, creatively and unconvincingly turning them into merits. With justifications like this, Lorenzo Medici and everyone else adapted to the new normal, that pagan imagery and nudity is perfectly acceptable, even good. This is especially easy in works like Botticelli’s because there is such extraordinary beauty in his work, and so many things that are good. Similarly today, as we have interacted with classical nudes for centuries, they have been thoroughly justified by authorities Christian and non-Christian alike, to the point that they are normal. Families walk by the massive sculptures of nude females representing the four seasons in the downtown of my home city, Chattanooga, without thinking twice about it. We are so used to classical nudes that they have truly become innocuous to most, and they are no longer seen as naked women. Since the shift has been effectively made, there is no sense removing all the classical nudes from the world. They are categorically different in our minds than other media that displays nakedness. It is worth remembering, however, that the feeling we would have at seeing an eight-foot-tall photograph of a naked woman is probably similar to the way that Botticelli’s Venus was received when it was first presented.

⁵⁴ Janson, 442-43.

To conclude the section on Renaissance Humanism, I will simply summarize the shift that happened. In relying too much on rationality as the ultimate standard of truth, revelation was deposed. Man became again the measure of all things. Now, with the flourishing of culture, there were amazing artworks that seemed to bolster the idea of man's magnificence. When you have a legitimately powerful romantic experience of a thing in the absence of a standard with which to measure it, you accept the whole thing as very good. The bad gets passed on along with the good, and the rebellion feedback loop continues and intensifies. As a result, the Christian faith waned as the dominant force in European culture. What began to happen was like what happened in Scholasticism. The different cultural strains in play in Renaissance Europe became increasingly nuanced until they were separate entities unto themselves: Roman Orthodoxy, Protestant Orthodoxy, Rational Philosophy, and the unending bifurcations and division of each. I will continue my sketch of how we came to our modern understanding of art along the path of rational philosophy, because this is the path that has most shaped our current secular culture as a whole.

The Development of Aesthetics

In the 18th century there were some pivotal developments in our modern understanding of art. One of which is the codification of the formal categories of art that I referred to using the label *the traditional conception of an artwork*. According to Wolterstorff, "in the long history of human use of the arts and reflection upon them, only modern man has found the grouping compelling...it was in the eighteenth century that writers first began to group together painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and

poetry.”⁵⁵ Another of the developments of the 18th century, which led to the codification just mentioned, was the founding of the discipline of aesthetics.

As a greater number of people in Europe had financial resources beyond what is necessary to provide for their physical necessities, luxuries became more prevalent. One of these luxuries was artwork. Leo Tolstoy describes the evolution of the artworld this way: “While art was as yet undivided, and only religious art was valued and rewarded while indiscriminate art was left unrewarded, there were no counterfeits of art... But as soon as that division occurred, and the upper classes acclaimed every kind of art as good if only it afforded them pleasure, and began to reward such art more highly than any other social activity, immediately a large number of people devoted themselves to this activity, and art assumed quite a different character, and became a profession.”⁵⁶ The question that comes when purchasing art is, what is good art and bad art? Judging art became a matter of *taste*, which figured prominently in the discussions of aestheticians.

Tolstoy pinpoints Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten as the founder of aesthetics. Considerations of taste prompted Baumgarten to write Aesthetica. In Aesthetica, Baumgarten writes that Truth is the object of logical knowledge, and Beauty is the object of aesthetic (i.e. sensuous) knowledge. He goes on to define Truth as the Perfect (the Absolute) perceived through reason, and Beauty as the Perfect recognized through the senses.⁵⁷ There are several things to note in Baumgarten’s thinking. Firstly, God is present, but is only known as an impersonal attribute, “The Perfect,” or “the Absolute.”

⁵⁵ Wolterstorff, 6.

⁵⁶ Lyof N. Tolstoi, *The Kingdom of God is Within You: What is Art?* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902, 446-47.

⁵⁷ Tolstoi, 361.

Baumgarten recognizes the presence of an objective absolute in both his thinking and in his sensuous experience, but it has become completely divorced from revelation. Man is still the measure of Truth. Notice, too, that Truth belongs only to rationality, and Beauty is the absolute that the senses perceive. Beauty is not tied to truth, it is tied to experience. In Baumgarten's writing, however, the Beauty that we experience is still unchanging and objective. It really exists "out there" somewhere. Contrast this to the idea that logic and beauty both reveal the truth of God. Finally, notice that there is something other than logic here. Experience and sensation also give an apprehension of the absolute. It is not a logical understanding, it is an experiential understanding. What we have is a recognition of what we have been calling classical knowledge and romantic knowledge.

Baumgarten certainly was not the only aestheticist. There were very quickly two different traditions, both having to do with how to judge taste. Baumgarten and Georg Friedrich Meier were from the "rationalist" tradition, in which the judgement of taste consists in the recognition of some object being objectively property. David Hume, Frances Hucheson, and Edmund Burke were from the "empiricist" tradition, in which a judgment of taste is an expression of feeling without cognitive content.⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, however, brought about a pivotal conceptual shift.

Georg Wilhelm Hegel summarizes Kant's intellectual move in this way: "Kant took self-related rationality, freedom, self-consciousness finding and knowing itself as inherently infinite. This recognition of the absoluteness of reason itself, which has occasioned philosophy's turning-point in modern times, this absolute starting-point, must

⁵⁸ Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, February 13, 2013, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/> (accessed May 7, 2020), §2.2.

be recognized, and...this feature in it is not to be refuted.”⁵⁹ In his class lectures on Kant, Prof. John Frame described how Kant showed that, even though things do exist in themselves, we only know them as they are filtered through our mind. The mind must also exist in itself because it filters raw data into categories with which we can make sense of things (e.g. spatial or temporal categories). Apart from things in themselves (what Kant calls the “noumenal” world), there also therefore exists pure reason. Since we only know the noumenal world through the categories of pure reason, pure reason must be the foundation of our knowledge.⁶⁰ It is in this way that Hegel was saying that, in Kant, we find that self-consciousness is infinite, and that pure reason must be identified as an absolute starting point.

In contrast to pure reason, practical reason is how we live in the world. It engages with things as they appear to us (the phenomenal world), not things as they are in themselves. It is through practical reason that we can unite particulars into common features and arrive at concepts like the laws of nature.⁶¹

Judgement, separate from pure reason or practical reason, becomes very important because it occupies a middle place between pure reason and practical reason. If we know of something (practical reason) we have to experience either pleasure or pain (judgement) before we can desire that thing (a function of pure reason).⁶² This feeling of pleasure or pain does not stem from cognition, but from experience. And it does not register in our

⁵⁹ Hegel, 1:57.

⁶⁰ John Frame, "Kant and His Successors," Class Notes, History of Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, May 2014.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Project Gutenberg, entry posted March 8, 2015, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/48433/48433-h/48433-h.htm> (accessed April 2020), Introduction III¶4.

mind, it registers in our imagination. Kant writes, “In order to decide whether anything is beautiful or not, we refer the representation, not by the Understanding to the Object for cognition but, by the Imagination ...to the subject [to me], and its feeling of pleasure or pain. The judgement of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetic...”⁶³ Aesthetic judgement is something immediately apprehended through our subjective feeling of pain or pleasure, but Kant still holds that it must be objectively valid. Others ought to agree with what you find beautiful if they are adequately cultured. Hegel describes this trait in Kant, “The beautiful, Kant says, should be that which is put before us without a concept, i.e. without a category of the Understanding, as an object of *universal* pleasure. To estimate the beautiful requires a cultured spirit; the uneducated man has no judgement of the beautiful, since this judgement claims universal validity.”⁶⁴ In claiming that judgements of beauty have both a basis in feeling and a normative claim to everyone’s agreement, Kant can be seen as reacting equally against the two opposing traditions of 18th century aesthetics.⁶⁵

Hegel came 50 years after Kant, and though respected him greatly, differed greatly from Kant’s thinking. One of the distinctions is that, while Kant treated aesthetic experience primarily in relation to nature, Hegel interacted with aesthetics primarily from the perspective of art.⁶⁶ Hegel writes clearly, “the beauty of art is higher than nature.”⁶⁷ Additionally, in Hegel’s thought he specifically references beauty found in nature and in art as manifestations of God. His religious beliefs, however, take man’s rationality as the

⁶³ Kant, §1¶1.

⁶⁴ Hegel, 58.

⁶⁵ Ginsborg, §2.2.

⁶⁶ Paul Redding, "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. January 9, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel/#AbsSpi> (accessed 9 7, 2020) §3.2.3 ¶2.

⁶⁷ Hegel, 2.

foundation for understanding God, as can be seen in his affirmation of Kant's "absolute starting point" of pure reason. For Hegel, art was extremely important in life. Art manifested God, and, along with religion and philosophy, it "is the means ...of bringing to consciousness and of expressing the deepest problems of humanity and the highest truths of the spirit."⁶⁸ In connecting to art, you could connect to God.

The reason I focus on Baumgarten, Kant and Hegel to discuss the rise of aesthetics in the 18th century is that there are concepts represented in their thought that persist even today. First, they propel forward the idea that man's rationality is the foundation for belief. Second, they demonstrate a belief in an absolute which is the location of both truth and beauty, but it is not the God of the Bible known through special revelation. Third, they give credence to the idea of experience giving rise to absolute truth, though they may not agree with that terminology. Fourth, we see art holding the capacity to bring consciousness of and express "the deepest problems of humanity and the highest truths of the spirit." Art has a special capacity to inspire and communicate emotion. Fifth, it requires familiarity with high culture to be able to appreciate art, and to discern good from bad. This familiarity is called "taste," and it belongs to the cultural elite. Finally, there is a rare breed of individual, known as an artist, who has a special gift for communicating the absolute.

I did not touch on the last point in introducing these thinkers. Kant venerates the artist. He writes, "Genius is a talent for producing that for which no definite rule can be given; it is not a mere aptitude for what can be learnt by a rule. Hence originality must be

⁶⁸ Tolstoi, 368.

its first property.”⁶⁹ He continues in writing that *Spirit* is the faculty of mind that constitutes Genius. It is the faculty of presenting aesthetical ideas. Aesthetical ideas represent the imagination, occasioning much thought, but without its being definite thought. He writes, “The imagination ...is very powerful in creating another nature, as it were, out of the material that actual nature gives it.”⁷⁰ Artists have a unique ability to experience powerful aesthetic experiences and then to communicate the experience of their imagination to others. Kant has a mechanical way of describing it (“occasioning much thought, but without its being definite thought”), but I believe he is trying to describe *wonder*. Hegel also gives a special place to man’s art. He explains his view that beauty in art is higher than in nature through the progression that art is born of the spirit of man, and as far above nature is the spirit of man, so to is the beauty of art above that of nature. The idea of the artist as a sort of prophet has had its place prior to the eighteenth century.

The ideas of the special genius of the artist, the superior tastes of the cultural elite, and the faith in man’s rationality as the only legitimate foundation for thought appeal to man’s pride. It is no wonder that they are ideas that have persisted and come to a place of prominence in our culture, even as the structures of those thought have eroded away. The story of that erosion is the story of Modernism and Postmodernism.

⁶⁹ Kant, §46 ¶4.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Modernism

In his anthology of primary sources tracing the path from Modernism to Postmodernism, Laurence Cahoon traces all the way back with Descartes. If you look to the traditional visual arts, however, you do not see the ideas of modernism gathering enough of a hold to create a visual shift until the late-18th and 19th centuries. At the time there were two main veins of art being created. One was neo-classicism, which was brought about by an increasing sentiment that human affairs ought to be ruled by reason rather than by tradition and established authority.⁷¹ This position was advocated by many leading voices in the West, and it manifested in violent revolutions in France, America, and later in Russia. Tradition and established authority were considered to be the aristocracy and the Church. The rebellion from what were considered systems of control, and which generally were used that way, was called The Enlightenment. What better visual imagery could there be for this than Classicism, which represents the heights that autonomous man can attain?

The contrast to Neo-Classicism is Romanticism. According to the Jansons:

The enlightenment, paradoxically, liberated not only reason but also its opposite. It helped to create a wave of emotionalism... The word *Romanticism* derives from the late-eighteenth-century vogue for medieval tales of adventure (such as the legends of King Arthur or the Holy Grail), called 'romances' because they were written in a Romance language, not Latin. This interest in the long-neglected 'Gothick' past was the sign of a general trend. Those who shared a revulsion against the established social order and religion—against established values of any sort—could either try to found a new order based on their faith in the power of reason, or they could seek release in a craving for emotional experience.⁷²

⁷¹ Janson, 672.

⁷² Janson, 690.

The common goal of the romantics was a return to nature, in which it was believed mankind would experience freedom from tyranny and the evils that civilization has wrought on mankind. Initially Romanticism was seen through a shift in subject matter (an increased focus on pathos, dreams, nature, and the exotic), but rebellion from the rules that had been handed down from old authorities soon resulted in entirely new ways of approaching painting. Impressionism arrived and no one knew what to make of it. It was a totally new thing! These visual and conceptual revolutions continue ever after at an amazing rate.

Rather than outline all of the visual and conceptual elements in Modernism, an impossible task here, I am going to focus on several of the ideas that make Modernism distinct. To start with, there is the belief that, free from tyranny and guided by reason and the artistic spirit, mankind is progressing. The second concept is the development of the idea of art for art's sake. Next, we will look at the development of the idea of artist as prophet.

The breathtaking development of new technologies, ideas and visual forms of the time of the industrial revolution, which coincides and spurs on the modern movement, is captured well in the brief moment of Futurism. The Futurists were young Italians, none of them over 30, who were led by Filippo Marinetti. In "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," he writes with palpable energy, using machine imagery of speed, power and violence, communicating the desire to destroy museums and libraries in favor of re-making the world. "We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! ... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created

eternal, omnipresent speed.”⁷³ The youthful idealism of spurring on towards the future does not last, especially as most of the Futurists die in World War 1.⁷⁴ The almost frenetic preoccupation with “progress,” however, continues even now, though instead of progress towards anything, it has manifested in a relentless need for novelty.

The first example of the idea of art for art’s sake that I found was in an essay by Edgar Allen Poe published in 1850. He writes, “there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified — more supremely noble than this very poem — this poem per se — this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem’s sake.”⁷⁵ Though they didn’t use the phrase, both Kant and Hegel refer to the idea. Kant writes, “[Beautiful art] is a mode of representation which is purposive for itself, and which, although devoid of [definite] purpose, yet furthers the culture of the mental powers in reference to social communication.”⁷⁶ Summary: Art is devoid of definite purpose, but has purpose in itself because it furthers the ability to relate to others. Hegel also addresses the issue of art’s purpose: “...art’s vocation is to unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition just mentioned, and so to have its end and aim in itself.”⁷⁷ Setting forth truth through the senses is the internal purpose of art. Its purpose is in itself. This concept works its way out powerfully in the visual arts in modernism by becoming one of the motivating forces of abstraction. Vassily Kandinsky, the first artist to create a painting that had no external

⁷³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism.” In *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, edited by Lawrence Cahoon, 185-191. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 182.

⁷⁴ Janson, 815.

⁷⁵ Edgar Allen Poe, “The Poetic Principle.” *The Edgar Allen Poe Society of Baltimore*. n.d. <https://eapoe.org/works/essays/poetprnd.hm> (accessed July 11, 2020).

⁷⁶ Kant, §44 ¶4.

⁷⁷ Hegel, 55.

referrant, made paintings whose sole subject matter was the artist's inner reality and the formal aspects of painting, especially of color.⁷⁸ Painting itself can become the subject matter of painting.

If art is to become the subject matter of art, who is it that will look at the artist as prophet? A passage in a letter from Paul Gauguin, a Post-Impressionist who abandoned his career and family at the age of 35 to devote himself to art, reads, "Some advice: do not paint too much after nature. Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it, and think more of the creation which will result than of nature. Creating like unto our Divine Master is the only way of rising toward God."⁷⁹

Wolterstorff argues that the image of the artist as creator like unto God is our most pervasive image of the artist.⁸⁰ Wolterstorff uses quotes from Hans Hoffman, Paul Klee, and Picasso, all world renowned artists, to argue his point, but gives particular attention to Barnett Newman. Newman looks back to Genesis, and views man's eating of the Tree of Knowledge as man seeking the creative life, seeking to be like God. Artists now are striving to return to the Adam of the Garden of Eden, "for the artists are the first men."⁸¹ In striving in their work, the artist is striving towards perfection.

When you have artists occupying the role of Divine Originator, you can no longer question what they make. Seeking liberation from all aesthetic norms limiting the artist, Newman writes, "...here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer, by completely denying that art has any concern with the

⁷⁸ Janson, 807.

⁷⁹ Wolterstorff, 51.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Wolterstorff, 53.

problem of beauty and where to find it.”⁸² John Cage, a music artist from the mid-20th century, writes, “value judgements are not in the nature of this work as regards either composition, performance, or listening ... ’mistake’ is beside the point, for once anything happens it authentically is.”⁸³ One of the predictable results of the ever-specializing refinement of art, of artists making their own way independent of any sort of evaluation structure, is that the number of individuals who understand the field enough to be able to participate in it becomes amazingly small. This too is reminiscent of Scholasticism. The artworld, like the Medieval Scholastic world, gets completely divorced from the daily existence of most people. Additionally, because beauty held such a place in aesthetics, it is part of what needs to be rebelled against. All of these characteristics of Modernism bring us inevitably to the point of Postmodernism.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is notoriously hard to define. There is good reason for this. It is not a particular idea, it is simply what happened after Modernism collapsed. Modernism collapsed similarly to the way the Scholasticism collapsed. As thinking developed, and immense, elaborate systems of thought were constructed, others started poking holes in those systems and they came falling down. The effort to build thought structures on the power of man’s rationality can only be fruitless, because the true and false, yes and no, good and bad must be absolute. They must exist outside of man. Otherwise, any “truth” that we speak can only be opinion because another person may think differently. Or, to

⁸² Wolterstorff, 54.

⁸³ Ibid.

describe it a different way, rather than building thought structures, we can view it as gradually questioning elements of our thinking and removing what is not essential. In peeling back the layers, getting at the essential nature of art, it is found that there is nothing left. If artists are our prophets, what happens when we discover that they are not leading us anywhere?

Friedrich Nietzsche, writing squarely in the time of Modernism, anticipated what was “realized” (it is in quotation marks because it is untrue) through Modernism. In The Will to Power, he beautifully, terribly, and thrillingly describes the world as an endless cycle of all the natural forces of the universe continuing on in their cycle. Where is mankind in the description? He does not figure until the very end, where Nietzsche describes him as “the will to power—and nothing besides!”⁸⁴ All of man’s thought, all of his cultural product, morals, logic, beauty, love—none of it figures into the infinite cycle of the universe. All that is left is for people through strength of will to make their way. This is still Modernist thought because Nietzsche continues to look to the ultimate even if it is not there, and he is still presenting the necessity of forging ahead. There is a notable similarity in tone to Marinetti’s manifesto.

Postmodernism moves beyond looking to the ultimate and the idea of mankind nobly forging ahead. To use metaphors, if Modernism is a ruined city, Postmodernism would be the vines and undergrowth that reclaim the ground in a vibrant and tangled mass. The idea of ultimate truth is gone, but there are still endless amounts of thoughts, emotions, social constructs, relationships, new ways of viewing things, re-evaluations of

⁸⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 30.

history, etc. to explore. There are a lot of intriguing ideas, but without a framework to build on, all of the separate strands remain separate. There is no unified goal. To really look and evaluate everything, you see how incredibly complex everything becomes. It is as if everything in the universe that occurred before x went in to making x be just so. The very idea of knowledge becomes daunting.

Looking at Postmodernism brings us to our culture today. What are we left with from what we have seen?

Formal structures of rationality are out. Because logic actually exists, everyone works from a more intuitive sense of rationality. It is more of a functional rationality that cannot come to absolute truth. We cannot comprehend all about all, and so we must acknowledge that different data sets arrive at different conclusions. Every person has their own data set that they have built up since birth, and so their conclusions could be just as valid given their data set as mine are with mine. It matters little that the conclusions are contradictory. They are both functionally rational in their given context and so are equally legitimate.

Art is still isolated to an extremely small artworld that does not touch the life of most. The cultural esteem of art, though, is residually very high, even though we are not very sure why. Residual conceptions of the cultural elite and the artist as prophet persist as well. The difference is that we have no way of evaluating good art from bad, so we look to artists and critics to tell us what is good and how much it is worth. We even look to artists and critics to tell us what *is* art. Though all of the traditional categories of art specified in the 18th century are still considered art, the categories have expanded their definitions and multiplied so much that it would be easy not to recognize something as a

work of art that is actually considered priceless unless you were told. This is why I differentiated the *traditional understanding of an artwork* from the *modern understanding of an artwork*.

There is a poverty that comes when art does not have its proper place in life. Pirsig identifies it well, “All that talk about technology and art is part of a pattern ...it isn’t just art and technology. It’s a kind of noncoalescence between reason and feeling. What’s wrong with technology is that it’s not connected in any real way with matters of the spirit and of the heart. And so it does blind, ugly things quite by accident and gets hated for that. People haven’t paid much attention to this before because the big concerns has been with food, clothing and shelter for everyone and technology has provided these. But now where these are assured, the ugliness is being noticed more and more and people are asking if we must always suffer spiritually and esthetically in order to satisfy material needs.”⁸⁵ Tolstoy argues that art needs to be given back to the majority, “it cannot be said that the majority of people lack the taste to esteem the highest works of art. The majority always have understood, and still understand, what we also recognize as being the very best art: the epic of Genesis, the gospel parables, folk-legends, fairy-tales, and folk songs, are understood by all. How can it be that the majority has suddenly lost its capacity to understand what is high in our art?”⁸⁶ What is needed is the reintroduction of a solid foundation from which to build. God needs to come back into the equation as the very foundation of everything, filling everything—thought, practice, and soul. We need to come to a biblical understanding of art.

⁸⁵ Pirsig, 149.

⁸⁶ Tolstoy, 432.

CHAPTER 3

A Biblical Understanding of Art

There is no unity in your thinking save by a well-ordered philosophical system, and there is no system of philosophy which does not ascend to the issues of the Infinite. In the same way there is no unity in your moral existence save by the union of your inner existence with the moral world-order, and there is no moral world-order conceivable but for the impression of an Infinite power that has ordained order in this moral world. Thus also no unity in the revelation of art is conceivable, except by the art-inspiration of an Eternal Beautiful, which flows from the fountain of the Infinite.⁸⁷

Abraham Kuyper

I mentioned at the beginning of the brief sketch of the rise of the Western conception of fine art that, though sinful, the artfulness of man can cause one to be still in front of it. This is the nucleus of art. The artfulness of man causes us to be still in front of it because it is the image of God, dim and dusty though it is. And when we do behold God, what can we do but be still: “Be still and know that I Am God” (Ps 46:10). This knowledge of God, or ‘yada’ in Hebrew, can include knowledge that comes through instruction, but it is primarily a knowledge that comes from direct experience and

⁸⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, 151.

perception.⁸⁸ This is romantic knowledge of God, and good art is a liturgical vehicle for it. Good art is meant to make us worship.

So that we do not fall prey to the same troubles we saw in the history of the Western conception of art, it is important to begin a biblical understanding of art with God. Art has no content without him. With a solid foundation we can look to defining art biblically. Moving beyond a personal interaction with art, the purpose of art regarding our neighbor leads us to culture building. Once the nature and purpose of art is understood, it is easy to see the role that the Gospel must play in art. This chapter concludes by observing how art divides into different categories with different purposes when it is considered on the scale of entire cultures.

God

There are absolutes that we intuit to exist. Value judgements are first among them. The reason I say this is that, for any absolute we look to, the response is bifurcated into yes and no. A line of thinking is either logical or illogical. A statement is either true or false. A moral decision is either good or bad. These are value judgements. I begin a discussion of God with a discussion of value judgements because value judgements refer to the nature of God. Every absolute, if it is truly absolute, must be a component part of God. God is above all and through all (Eph 4:6), and so there can be no absolute thing that is distinct from him. Absolutes exist because they are qualities of God. He is logic, he is truth, he is beauty, he is goodness. Value judgements relate us to God as the

⁸⁸ "H3045 - Yada' - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NKJV)." *Blue Letter Bible*. https://www.blueletterbible.org/nkjv/gen/1/1/s_1001 (accessed August 29, 2020).

foundation for all. We must start with an understanding of God's existence before we can build any sort of definition, or we will inevitably end up in the same place as the long experiment of building the entirety of human thought on man's rationality.

How can we know the existence of God, though, except through rational arguments? The key comes in the fact that God is personal. He is not an abstract force. He is more than rationality. In our natural rebellious state we are futile in our thoughts and our hearts are darkened (Rom 1:21), but God comes to seek and save that which is lost (Luke 19:10). He is the one who makes us able to see him (Luke 24:31). The only way to truly know God is to ask him to reveal himself to us. This is a full romantic knowledge of God, and it is thoroughly convincing.

We cannot stop there, though. We need teaching. We need truth. In fact, we need both romantic knowledge of God and classical knowledge of God to keep in right relationship to him. Left to our easily deceived intuition we will stray from truth. It is through truth that we remain true to our faith in God. "The goal of instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim 1:5). On the other hand, if we confine ourselves to a classical knowledge of God, our fate will be the same as the Pharisees, who had right thinking by a wrong heart. Jesus says, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ...[you] appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt 23:27,28).

We do not need to look only to scripture in our classical knowledge of God to stay in agreement with it. Using our reason gives powerful evidence to the existence of God. We cannot operate as people without notions like logic, truth, love, morality, and beauty operating as absolutes. If they are not absolute, they are no longer meaningful. Together

they build a mountain of evidence for the existence of God. Pirsig gives a useful thought experiment in this regard. He says that a thing exists if a world without it cannot function normally. He is arguing for the existence of Quality as an absolute value judgement independent of the God of the Bible, but we can use the same argument considering value judgements as relating a thing to the nature of God. In considering a world without value judgements, he sees that Fine art disappears. “If you can’t distinguish between good and bad in the arts they disappear. There’s no point in hanging a painting on the wall when the bare wall looks just as good.”⁸⁹ Poetry disappears, and so does comedy. “No one would understand the jokes since the difference between humor and no humor is pure Quality.”⁹⁰ Sports disappear. “Scores would no longer be a measurement of anything meaningful, but simply empty statistics, like the number of stones in a pile of gravel.”⁹¹ Many more things are impacted, including many people out of work and supermarkets selling only basic necessities for survival. His experiment breaks down when he writes that pure science, mathematics and philosophy would have no change,⁹² but he is mistaken. None of them can exist without truth being better than untruth, and logic being better than the illogical. The world would definitely not operate normally if we were forced to live as if there were no God and therefore no value judgements.

God knows that he is supremely foundational. His existence is the starting point for everything. He takes his existence for his very name, יהוה, Yahweh, “I Am” (Exo

⁸⁹ Pirsig, 193.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Pirsig, 194.

⁹² Ibid.

3:14). Taking God's word for his own existence, we will move on to look at how this bears out in the nature of art.

Art

As we look at the definition of art, we must look at why art exists and some of the ways that it functions. We will look first towards defining art.

Defining art

As is true for everything that is good, we find the meaning of art originating from the nature of God. We can see God as consummate artist in his work of creation (Gen 1:1-2:7). All of the elements found in the art of man are found first in the art of God. There are several things to notice about God as artist: the creative act, the created product, aesthetic contemplation, value judgement, its having been designed for community, and its purpose— to glorify God.

In the first 10 words of the Bible, we find a mystery. The creation account in Genesis has several creation actions of God described, but the first creative action is that God “created.” Gesenius describes the usage of this verb as “to produce by making.”⁹³ So what exactly was God doing here? The same word is used in vs. 21 regarding “great sea creatures and every living thing that moves, with which the waters abounded ...and every winged bird...,” and again in vs. 27 regarding man. The usage in vs. 21 is clarified in vs. 20, where it says that God spoke. Vs. 27 is clarified in vs. 2:7, that God fashioned as a

⁹³ "Gesenius's Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon - Study Resources." *Blue Letter Bible*. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/lexica/gesenius/index.cfm> (accessed Sep. 8, 2020).

potter does to clay.⁹⁴ There is no clarification in vs. 1. I would assume that God spoke the heavens and the earth into existence as on the next four days, but clarifying the actual action is obviously not the point. The emphasis in vs. 1 is on the creative action itself. So far in arriving at a biblical definition of art, we have followed the pattern in Genesis 1:1—In the beginning God (that is section 1 of this chapter) created (this is how we begin section 2). It is an important concept.

After the creative act, there is obviously a created product. This is the purpose of the action. In Genesis, the products were the heavens and the earth and all that was in them. I had an art professor in my undergraduate career who posed the question “What is Art?” as the theme for his entire class. During one class period, a student asked, “if God made everything, then isn’t everything art?” This was a secular university, so I was intrigued to hear the professor’s response. He responded not against religion, but in saying that if there is nothing outside the category, then the category does not need to exist, so everything cannot be art. Psalm 90:2 tells us, though, that “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.” There is something that exists outside of creation that is not art, and that is God himself. He is not art, he is the artist. The created product is distinguished from the creator, it is his artwork. God’s artwork leads to the remaining four components of creation.

The next two elements of art go hand in hand. After God created, he saw, and he recognized it as good. God’s looking at his creation is aesthetic experience, and then

⁹⁴ "H3335 - yatsar - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (KJV)." *Blue Letter Bible*.
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H3335&t=KJV> (accessed Sep. 8, 2020).

recognizing it as good is judging the value his artwork. Judging as good is recognizing God in it. Together these two steps form the practice of aesthetic appreciation.

Appreciation is not simply intellectual recognition. God did not only intellectually assent to the goodness of what he made. Appreciation is the recognition *and enjoyment* of good qualities. There is a thrill that comes from the immediate sensation of something good. Kant was barking up the right tree when he wrote that aesthetic appreciation is the immediate enjoyment of a subjective sense of pleasure. It is not a function of the mind but of the imagination, the intuitive sense. The result of the imagination's immediately sensing something good is *delight*.

It is important to note that God is not the only one who appreciated his artwork. There was a target audience. "The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed" (Gen 2:8). Adam and Eve also experienced God's creation as pleasant and good (Gen 2:9). God's artwork was not simply for his own pleasure, but for the pleasure of others as well. God's artwork was to build community and experience goodness together. If the fall broke community (Gen 3:8), it can only follow that there was perfect community with God before.

Finally, the end result of God's art is rightly for his own glory. "The heavens declare the glory of the Lord, and the firmament shows his handiwork," says the psalmist. The first question of The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "what is the chief end of man?" The answer is, "to glorify God and enjoy him forever."⁹⁵ Romans 11:36 tells us, "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever.

⁹⁵ WSC Q/A 1.

Amen.” The end of art is to bring God glory, and man experiences that in praising and enjoying him.

The final act of God’s creation as recorded in Genesis is to create man, male and female. These two, he created in his image (Gen 1:27). What does that mean at this point of the narrative? So far we have only seen God as creator and creation appreciator, artist and art appreciator. Mankind reflects his image in that he cannot help but think aesthetically. We have five senses, and we are capable of being impressed by all of them. The world is full of sounds, smells, sights, textures, and flavors, and he has tuned us to resonate with what is good in all of them. Each can move us emotionally, which is a peculiar thing unless their purpose is to cause delight and worship.

We can see how God intended aesthetic experience as a vehicle for worship in how he prescribed the structure of tabernacle worship. God did not give just a program of worship; he commanded specific elements that engaged all the senses. Vibrant colors of red, blue and purple stand out from the stark tan of the desert. Rich materials of gold, bronze and silver adorn everything, cast and hammered with decorations of cherubim, almond blossoms and pomegranates. The head priest glittering in precious stones, elaborate clothing, and turbans for “glory and beauty” (Ex 28:40). To atone for sin, the sinner must place his hand on the head of his living, breathing offering, at the door of the tabernacle, in the glory of its golden and blue-robed splendor, with the smell of that sweet tabernacle incense wafting out the door, and must kill the beast before the Lord. What a vivid drama! Imagine this being the experience day in and day out as you travel your entire lifetime. Every day you awaken to the smell of the roasting meat of the daily offering, reminding you of God interacting with His people, how he forgave you. You

hear the jingle of the priest's bells and it reminds you. Well-worn pathways of liturgical action make the presence of God immediate to you. God does not delight in sacrifices; what he wants is a broken and contrite spirit (Ps 51:16-17). The elaborate structure of tabernacle worship is designed as an aesthetic experience to bring about an immediate sensation of the pleasure of knowing God. It is meant to bring us to that contrite spirit. God knows we are art appreciators, and he uses aesthetic experience to bring us to art appreciation, which is to worship him.

So then, the question comes, should all aesthetic experience bring us to worship no matter where it is found? It should. It is true that in a fallen world, aesthetic experience is frequently intermingled with the fleeting satisfactions of rebellion, but aesthetic appreciation, i.e. worship, comes with that crucial step of evaluation.

So far we have only discussed man in the image of God as art appreciator. God's image as art creator extends to us as well. In *Calvinisme en Kunst*, Kuyper states: "as image-bearer of God, man possesses the possibility both to create something beautiful, and to delight in it. This 'kunstvermogen' [art-capability] is in man no separate function of the soul but an unbroken (continuous) utterance of the image of God."⁹⁶ This art-capability is present in every man, and it is inextricable from the concept of community and glorifying God. Hegel has a unique perspective on this. He writes of the "the variously particularized subjective existence of the Deity."⁹⁷ If God is effective and living in the sense, heart, and spirit of individual persons, we advance from knowing God personally to worshipping God as a community, because he is living and present in each

⁹⁶ Kuyper, 142, footnote.

⁹⁷ Hegel, 83.

individual consciousness.⁹⁸ This must include the creative act, because aesthetic appreciation does not communicate, it is an internal movement. To communicate ideas to another, we must create some sort of vehicle for communicating the idea. Telepathy just does not work. God communicated his nature to us in creation, and likewise we communicate our natures to others through our artworks.

Art has many functions, as we will soon see in the section on art and culture building, but the capacity of art to communicate is one of its more powerful functions. Art's ability to communicate is so powerful that it led mankind to consider communication its central function. The traditional forms of art were the means of communication that were available. For communication to occur, internal, non-physical thoughts and emotions become physical through some shared code of signification, which is then sensed by another, deciphered according to the same code and then understood, at least if there is no break in the system. What is amazing is the amount of information that can be communicated, the type of information, and the creative ways we can use our shared experience to communicate. Straightforward language to communicate thought is maybe what we think of first, but other art vehicles can communicate completely different things in completely different ways. Tolstoy writes, "the business of [traditional forms of art] lies just in this, —to make that understood and felt which, in the form of an argument, might be incomprehensible and inaccessible. Usually it seems to the recipient of a truly artistic impression that he knew the thing before but had been unable to express it."⁹⁹ In John Keats' poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he shows how a static depiction of

⁹⁸ Hegel, 83.

⁹⁹ Tolstoy, 433.

meaning and emotion-packed human circumstance and action – like love and religious exercise – can capture those fleeting emotions and preserve them beyond the actual experiences, even beyond the lifetime of the one feeling those emotions, to be felt by future generations. The emotions are actually preserved and carried to new audiences, who, through the artful description of the original feeler, can experience them themselves. There is a communication of the intangible truth of experience. Hence the concluding line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."¹⁰⁰

We see static representations communicating emotion-filled experiences happening in the Bible even before the Bible was written. Monuments were frequently established to remember events, like the altar at Bethel, the Tamarisk of Beersheba, and the stone tower at Gilgal. When God cut off the waters of the Jordan to allow the ark to pass through as Israel left their wanderings and entered the promised land, he ordered Joshua to set up stones at Gilgal so that the children of Israel would remember forever (Josh 4:6). Imagine the emotional power of that moment! Generations later, when Israel rebelled from the Lord and he strengthened Moab to rule over them in response, Ehud was elected to bring the tribute money to Eglon, the king of Moab. Ehud handed over the tribute money, and was returning home, but something happened when he got to the stones at Gilgal. The Bible does not tell us specifically, but something moved deep inside Ehud to turn around, alone, go back to Eglon in his palace, and run him through, delivering Israel and leading them in peace for 80 years (Judges 3:12-30). What is at

¹⁰⁰ John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn." *Poetry Foundation*. n.d. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn> (accessed Sep. 9, 2020).

Gilgal except for the memorial to God's faithfulness as the king of Israel? He is the one who gave this land to Israel to rule. The triumphant experience from generations before filled Ehud and inspired him to things he would not have done otherwise.

Communication is not the only function of art. In fact, the image of God as creator in man should extend to almost anything we do. In anything that we put our effort into, we should be exercising our creativity towards the created product, whether tangible or intangible. If we do our work well in right relationship to God, we will experience him in the exercise, and it will end up blessing our neighbor as well as bringing God glory. It is easy to aesthetically appreciate any sort of work that is well done, and to see God in it. Rather than being a program of uncountable separate instances of the image of God in man, they all end up working together to build culture. Good culture redeems the times. Good culture pushes back the Fall.

Art as Culture Builder

When God created man, he had a purpose for him. Genesis 2:15 tells us that God put man in the garden to “tend it and keep it.” The word for “tend” here is **עָבַד**, ‘abad. Several dozen times in the Bible it is used to mean “till,” “work,” “do,” “dress,” or “labour.” 227 times, however, it is used to mean “serve.”¹⁰¹ The benefit in this is not to the laborer, but to see what he is laboring on to flourish. Combine the conception of service for flourishing with the parallel language in vs. 1:28, “subdue” and “have

¹⁰¹ "H5647 - 'abad - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NKJV)." *Blue Letter Bible*. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H5647&t+ NKJV> (accessed Sep. 9, 2020).

dominion,” and we can see that men and women are to work to bring order for flourishing. Wolterstorff notes, “man is not to impose form out of infatuation with seeing the imprint of his own self on the world around but is to do so *for human benefit*. His imposition of order is to be for the sake of human livelihood and delight.”¹⁰² The task of continuing on in creation is passed on from God to men and women, and the focus is not benefitting one’s self but all of humanity. The communal nature of man is laid out well by Kuyper,

...the impulse to form states arises from man’s social nature, which was expressed already by Aristotle, when he called man a “ζωον πολιτικον.” God might have created men as disconnected individuals, standing side by side and without genealogical coherence. Just as Adam was separately created, the second and third and every further man might have been individually called into existence; but this was *not* the case. Man is created from man, and by virtue of his birth he is organically united with the whole race. Together we form *one humanity*, not only with those who are living now, but also with all the generations behind us and with all those who shall come after us...¹⁰³

God put us into families with a leadership structure, which organize into clans with a leadership structure, which organize into tribes with a leadership structure, which organize into nations, which organize into civilizations. In each of those structures, the work of the individual is for the benefit of all. With more and more people working for the benefit of all, barring the too great imposition of the Fall, the group is able to meet their needs and achieve more beyond them than the individual is able to do on their own. This is what each one’s work, each one’s art, is meant to accomplish.

Each individual working for the good of the whole can come through coercion, but it is meant to come through each individual’s free devotion to God. “Love the Lord

¹⁰² Wolterstorff, 76.

¹⁰³ Kuyper, 79.

your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ...Love your neighbor as yourself' (Matt 22:37,39). Culture's vector is decided by each individual cumulatively. God has certainly worked all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph 1:11), but he has done so for a great deal of it through the culpable means of man's agency (Is 10:12). The decisions each man and woman makes as they live their life continues culture and guides it. Andy Crouch explains it by writing, "culture is not just what human beings make of the world; it is not just the way human beings make sense of the world; it is in fact part of the world that every new human being has to make something of."¹⁰⁴ The double entendre indicates that an individual must both come to an understanding of the culture they have inherited, and then decide where it should go with their own work. Because God knows the constitution of man, has defined it, man's desire and agency align with all that God has planned from the beginning.

God has grand plans for the work of man. Perfection at the beginning was a wilderness. God told man to subdue that wilderness, to cultivate it and subdue it. Perfection at the end is a glorious city where man will live in perfect communion with God forever (Rev 21). Following the pattern of Exodus, where God gave the plans for the tabernacle and gifted man to build it, I think mankind's artistry will be perfectly employed in building the heavenly city.

The idea of a heavenly city built by the redeemed brings about an interesting question. Will there be running water in the heavenly city? Will there be perfect modes of transportation? Will we need structural engineers to figure how to build a city that is as

¹⁰⁴ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling*. Downer's Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2008, 25.

high as it is wide (Rev 21:16)? The line of questioning brings us back to the here and now. Is there a hierarchy of value, with some good, creative work being more valuable than other good, creative work? Should the sculptors and poets humbly acknowledge that their work is indeed higher than the plumber and the car mechanic? By way of an answer, I will communicate a personal anecdote. My wife and I purchased a dilapidated house to renovate in an extremely affordable area of town. One of the first things we needed to do to the house was to get the water functioning. This house had three full bathrooms and, at one time, two kitchens. All of the pipes had to converge at the hot water heater in order for their supply, but the intermediate owners, in “protecting the property through winterization,” had cut off indiscriminately all pipes in a six foot radius around the heater. It was a chore tracking down which pipes were supposed to be hot water and which pipes were supposed to be cold. It took even longer to reconnect everything because they were copper pipes and needed to be soldered together. When all was reconnected, however, I enjoyed a time of aesthetic appreciation as I looked at all of the gleaming pipes, neat and tidy. Functioning. Good. Soon after this time of marveling at my own artistry, I found myself at Covenant College, a university just outside our town. Their main hall is a grand building that used to be a resort hotel dating to the 1920s. I was walking through the basement to an office, and along the ceiling the systems supplying the main kitchen and the 200 rooms, each with its own bathroom, were hanging efficiently ordered and wonderful. I was awed at the sight. I experienced that this was *very* good, the work of a master. We must categorically deny that any calling is intrinsically better. There are certainly gradations of the quality of the artwork, which we will look to later, but in terms of intrinsic worth, all jobs that serve our neighbors and are

performed in worship to God are equal. As C.S. Lewis writes, “ I reject at once an idea which lingers in the mind of some modern people that cultural activities are in their own right spiritual and meritorious—as though scholars and poets were intrinsically more pleasing to God than scavengers and bootblacks. ... The work of Beethoven and the work of a charwoman, become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly ‘as to the Lord’.”¹⁰⁵

Art and the Gospel

There is no denying that we live in a fallen world. And even though some may have a classical understanding that we are all fallen, we all have a much deeper romantic knowledge of the fact. The Fall obscures the good, makes it so we cannot see it clearly. The truth is still present, but even the redeemed can only see it dimly, as in a mirror (1 Cor 13:12). If the end of culture is a heavenly city, but what we are living in is the abandoned city of modernism that has been taken over by the jungle of postmodernism, then the creation-tending that needs to be done is bringing culture back to order, which means bringing people back to a knowledge of God. Our primary cultural purpose until the second coming is to share Jesus with the world. He is the only one with the power to tame the weeds when they are really the unruly hearts of people. The commission Jesus gives, recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, is therefore a continuation of the cultural mandate as it exists in a fallen world: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the

¹⁰⁵ C.S. Lewis, "Learning in Wartime." In *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1949, 48-49.

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Notice the last clause. Jesus is with us to the end of the age. It is no longer we who live, but Christ lives in us (Gal 2:20). This is the romantic understanding of God. It is the immediate sensation within us of Jesus, quickening our own Spirit with his own. It is with this sort of oneness with Jesus that we are to go about all of our tasks.

It may sound as if I am arguing for an approach to cultural production that has typified the thinking of evangelical Christianity for the past century or so, that all Christian art should be explicitly Bible-centered with an aim towards evangelism. If this is our approach, then we are actually ceding territory to the evil one. C.S. Lewis addressed the students at Oxford in 1939 just as the fall term had begun. World War II had also just begun. In considering the point of studying in the midst of a war, Lewis pointed out the more dire situation of spending time studying this or that degree program while a significant number of people are heading for damnation every day. He writes, “[every Christian] must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell, to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology. ...’How can you be so selfish as to think of anything but the salvation of human souls?’”¹⁰⁶ The response is that if we sought to suspend culture building in favor of evangelism, we would not substitute worse cultural life for better. Lewis continues, “You are not, in fact, going to read nothing...; if you don’t read good books you will read bad ones. If you don’t go on thinking rationally, you

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, 44-45.

will think irrationally. If you reject aesthetic satisfactions you will fall into sensual satisfactions.”¹⁰⁷ Because of the artistic nature of man, we will seek out aesthetic experience. In the absence of very good culture, we will participate in fallen culture. We can easily see this in our own lives in the movies, television, and music that we consume. As Christians, we generally just tolerate the bad so we can still have the aesthetic experience of the good, though to be honest sometimes we are delighting in the bad as well. To avoid scavenging for cultural food to barely sustain our need for aesthetic experience, we need policemen, architects, plumbers, and musicians to plant gardens of rich cultural produce to feast on as each still answers the call to share the gospel at every opportunity. It will make the good news all the more meaningful to see the fulness of life that lives in knowing Jesus.

Categories of Art

To review, we have seen that art is mankind continuing the creation act of God in his image and for the benefit of others, and the result is good culture. Good culture is part of redeeming mankind into a right relationship with God. To deeper understand the nature of art, we have to see that it is not monolithic. It serves different purposes and operates in different ways. If we break art up into categories, it will help us to understand the ways and purposes. There are four categories of art that we will explore: practical art, popular art, traditional art, and fine art. Each one operates as both a worship vehicle and a culture builder.

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, 46.

Every action of man is done in the presence of God. If Christ is living in us, which is how it would be for everyone if we were not so rebellious, then he is right there with us in the most minute detail of every day. This should motivate us to perform every act in the light of his presence, loving our neighbor, to God's glory. This is self-rewarding behavior, because that is the fullness of life and will bring joy and abundance. This is practical art. The art of everyday. When we make eggs for our children, or draft school compositions, or legislate laws, or fix flat tires, we are contributing to the operation of the culture as a whole. We can either do these things in a way that, when they are looked at, is revealed to be good, and therefore revealing the nature of God, or we can see that it was done in rebellion to our role as world cultivator and ruler. Practical art is carrying out our everyday with skill and knowledge, like the conception of the art in the middle English. Far from being mundane, there are people with specialties in practical art that elevate it to the realm of mastery. They exhibit exceptional artistry. With the complexity of the division of labor, and the complexity of some of the tasks within that division of labor, sometimes we could be right next to the genius of a master artist and never even know it. If you have ever tried laying block, you will marvel when you see a professional mason laying clean, uniform, level lines with a rapidity utterly inconceivable to you. Understanding practical art ennobles everyday tasks, even done in obscurity. Jesus tells us that there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known (Luke 12:3). This is terrifying to those who are not washed in forgiveness, but it is also encouraging that one day the unrecognized good work of millions will be seen for what it is with thanks.

Practical art makes up the vast majority of the creative energy of man. It is the bulk of the category of art. We should learn to appreciate practical art aesthetically, and seek to become excellent in our own craft. When we recognize the good work of others or feel it for ourselves, we see God in the work, and it should move us to worship. Practical art's primary function, though, is to fulfill its practical purpose in the world. The remaining three categories of art can fulfill various functions, but, distinguished from practical art, their primary function is aesthetic appreciation. They largely conform to the traditional categories of artwork, or descendants of them, because they are the means of communication that we have available to us. They don't have a real-world utility, it is more of a soul-utility. It is easy to understand something as pleasurable to the soul, but what makes something useful to the soul? Things useful to the soul show us our goal. Lewis writes of when we get a glimpse of glory, "we usually notice it just as the moment of vision dies away, as the music ends or as the landscape loses the celestial light. ...For a few minutes we have had the illusion of belonging to that world." Beauty has smiled at us, but we realize that she has only looked our way for a moment, and we do not belong to her world yet. This is what aesthetic appreciation of romantic experience does for us, it gives us little tastes of glory. Popular art, traditional art, and fine art are useful to our soul because they give us flickering experiences of life in glory with God. They make us more noble and call us to things that are higher.

If we remember the constituent parts of aesthetic appreciation, it involves both aesthetic experience and judgement of value. Popular art is the least conducive to aesthetic appreciation because it does not come ready equipped with a standard like the other two do. There is no tradition of popular art to look to. Aesthetic experience is

codified and shared, and it is easy to leave off the step of value judgement. Popular art occurs when an artist, in a moment of intuitive creative lucidity, creates a product that is able to communicate that lucidity to others. Because it is not part of a tradition and it is intuited, it cannot be planned. It simply happens. There are comedians that just “get” their cultural place with mirth, and are able to communicate that mirth in a way that, though the audience has never heard before, immediately recognizes with joy. There are musicians that contrive a melody or a lyric that is the perfect means of expressing a common sentiment from their time and place, and it resonates. Some artists can do this over and over again, and some artists only do it once. Because culture is always in flux, popular art has a transient nature. What resonated incredibly powerfully in one time and place can pass completely unnoticed in others, though it can experience rebirth if a different time or place is ripe for it. Popular art ministers for a time and then leaves to make room for the next manifestation of the times.

Traditional art has a vastly different character. It thrives on aesthetic appreciation because it invites a value comparison to a certain tradition of excellence. Traditional art has far less to do with innovation than with the passing on of established portals of glory. There are some musical traditions, like bluegrass music or the training of classical musicians, that remain remarkably unchanged, which resist change. Regardless, they continue to inspire appreciators and artists to join in passing them on through generations. Values can be maintained through traditional art. Traditional art carries the riches of heritage. Many stories have moved the hearts of man for millennia because the skill of the storyteller today communicates the truth of it as well today just as the skill of the

storyteller communicated it generations ago. Masters of traditional art tend to be particularly gifted at learning and have an uncommon adeptness to their skill.

Finally, we turn to the category of fine art. Fine art is traditional art with movement. Fine art comes with an awareness of the tradition from which it comes, of the narrative that it is in, and each new artist contributes their voice to move the tradition onward. Novelty has a role to play, not as a motivating force, but as a natural result of the union of classical reflection and romantic experience in different individuals. One unique manifestation leads to another leads to another. Often fine art can move us more deeply than the other categories because it is more reflective. There is more original creative effort and innovation put into each work. Master fine artists have the intuitive cultural insight that popular artists have, but it is as if they are looking at culture from much further away. Instead of speaking to man in a particular time and place, their art is speaking to mankind. Because it can transcend cultures, we preserve it to share with other cultures and successive generations.

Each category of art serves its unique purpose. You cannot value one over another. The fact that they have all always been integral to human culture testifies to the necessity of each and God's plan for them as component parts of human life designed to draw us to himself and to each other.

Malleability of Categories and Levels of Impact in Art

Art can be split into neat categories in the abstraction of theory, but in practice there is often no neat separation. Fine cooking moves beyond practical art into categories like traditional or popular art. There are instances of popular art that have so strummed

the heart of man that they have become fine art, becoming part of the tradition even if the artist had no contact with it. Traditional art had to at one time be popular art. The categories are useful to describe how art functions in our culture, and they will factor into the discussion of evaluating art, but they stop being as useful if they start becoming prescriptive rather than descriptive.

Additionally, there are differing levels of impact for different artworks, but that does not necessarily reflect on their value or how good they are. Skateboard videos resonate with an incredibly small portion of the world population, but does that mean that the technical mastery, graceful movements, and thrill of witnessing someone pressing the bounds of an artform are any less good than when we see it in ice skating? We can certainly evaluate artworks to recognize bad elements, but once they are filtered out and conceptually isolated, what is good is good.

CHAPTER 4

A Biblical Understanding of Art in Practice

Now that we have looked at the current state of our culture and contrasted it with what culture should be as a result of the whole mass of people individually producing their art for the good of others in devotion to God, there needs to be a program of how to put the biblical understanding of art into practice in a fallen world. This involves three activities: interpreting art, evaluating art, and creating art.

Interpreting Art

Art interpretation has always been a daunting task because of the conception of art that we have as a culture. With the definition of art eaten away, but retaining the “culturally elite” artworld and the modern understanding of an artwork, attempting to interpret art has been a pointless effort to the majority of people, including many who consider themselves patrons of the culturally elite art world. Once we understand how art is supposed to function, however, and the different categories in which art exists, it becomes a more manageable task. While engaging with today’s fine art in an interpretive capacity might be beyond those who have not specialized in the field, we can now see that the vast majority of art is available to us. We see the work that those around us are doing. We can hear the songs that are created and see the shows. These artworks are

accessible. Not only do we have the data necessary to consider these artworks and the mental frameworks with which to understand them, we have the duty to understand them. Because art has such a formative power to move us, we have to understand what is at work shaping our cultural perspective.

So how do we begin the task of interpretation? It is not practical to engage in a thorough analysis of every instance of human artistry that we come across. So we have to be selective. What should we take the time to give some thought to? Start simple:

- Artworks that interest you
- Artworks that interest others around you
- Artworks that those for whom you are responsible are consuming
- Artworks that you find yourself spending time consuming
- Artworks that are guiding the direction of your culture

What should you ask in interpreting the artwork?

- What category of art is this?
- What is the context of this artwork? —When? Where? What culture?
- Who is the artist?
- What is the purpose of this artwork? —communicate a specific message? Share an emotion? Decorate a wall? Practical function?
- Who is the intended audience? —the artist only? Peers? The public?
- What does this artwork communicate? —every artwork communicates something from the artist, if only, “I cared about this” or, “I did not care about this”
- Does it make you feel a certain way?
 - How does it make you feel?
 - Why does it make you feel this way?
- How do other people respond to this artwork?

If an artwork is seen to communicate a more substantial meaning than a cursory examination can cover, you can get into more penetrating questions. Try to set aside your assumptions and perspective for a moment.

- What assumptions is the artist making about the world?
 - Are those assumptions different than those of the culture in which they are operating?
 - Are those different than my assumptions?
- What values are being presented?

- Are there different levels of communication beyond the literal?
 - Does what is being presented actually refer to something else?
 - Does what is being communicated tell you anything about the author?
- How do you respond to the meaning?
- Is this artwork operating within a tradition?
 - How is it situated within the tradition?
- Are there any peculiarities that seem intentional?

There are an infinite number of questions that could be asked of different artworks, but with a few starter questions that can be asked of most artworks, you can progress a long way towards understanding what is being communicated in an artwork.

Evaluating Art

We evaluate artworks, but we need to ensure that we are evaluating with a measure of intentionality. We naturally give an intuitive evaluation of a lot of the artworks that we use or consume. There is a measure of legitimacy to intuitive evaluation, but objective value is often confused with personal preference, positively or negatively, if we leave it at that. Because the goodness of an artwork is tied directly to whether or not God can be seen in it, there is an objective standard for evaluation. If an artwork is good, all should see it as good. If there are some good elements, all should be able to appreciate those good elements. If there is no merit to a thing, all should recognize that.

The difficulty of evaluating art lays in a vast spectrum, and it is a complicated one, too. The simplest works of art can be some of the most difficult to parse out, while some of the most complex works of art can immediately cause you to tingle with goodness. There is no rubric to follow, but there are a few steps that can be followed after or in conjunction with interpretation to help arrive at a reasonably sound judgement.

The first step in interpreting art is also the first step in evaluating. The different categories of art function so differently, and the value of an artwork so depends on how it functions, that there is no getting started without distinguishing which category you are encountering. The method of evaluation then differs by category, so we will look at each in turn.

Evaluating Practical Art

As was described, practical art functions in our culture. It has a particular purpose. Purposiveness has some nuance to it when it comes to evaluation. You have to consider what is the purpose? Is it a good purpose? Does it accomplish its purpose? Is there a better way to accomplish the purpose given the knowledge and circumstances?

Returning the example of a block-layer can help to illustrate the point. If there is a mason who builds the concrete block structure for a school efficiently, neatly, soundly, and for a fair price, this would be good art. There is the image of God in that. If the same mason, of his own volition and knowledge, built a cell in a kidnappers basement to keep people against their will, it would be bad art, even if it was still efficient, neat, sound and fairly priced work. Knowingly enabling evil to flourish is bad art. Back to building schools, say our block-layer was tasked with building the school to accommodate a certain function, and the way that he built the school actually made that function difficult. There would be a limit to the good in that work. Mistakes happen, perhaps intentions were good, maybe he should have consulted, was it negligence? It becomes complicated discerning the magnitude of the limit to the good, but there is a definite amount of good there that could be discerned given all the information, and it is certainly not a complete

good. Consider a last scenario. There are two block-layers, both tasked with building schools to accommodate a certain need. Both masons build schools that accommodate the need efficiently, neatly, soundly, and for a fair price, but the second mason's solution to the problem accommodates the need better. They are both good art, worthy of thanking God for, but the first block mason should humbly acknowledge the superiority of the second mason's solution and do it that way in the future. The second solution is better art because practical art is tied to the objective standard of the carpenter's level, so to speak.

Beyond the practicality of the solution, there is an element of beauty that comes into play in practical art. As long as the artwork still accomplishes its task in the best way, the more beautiful the better. Take spreadsheets. Whether or not they fulfill their purpose is pretty cut and dried. For cultural needs that require spreadsheets, usually economy of time is part of the equation. If in a couple of clicks I can receive a spreadsheet with a more attractive layout, I will have a higher aesthetic appreciation. If, however, I receive a spreadsheet with a layout that exceeds my wildest expectations, but it took twice as long as it needed to take to accomplish what would have been accomplished with a default layout, my aesthetic appreciation will be far lower. That would be worse art even though it was more beautiful.

Evaluating Popular Art

The approach to evaluating popular art and the other art categories is significantly different from evaluating practical art because of the significant difference in their purposes. Popular art seeks to resonate intuitively with the appreciator. There is an emphasis on romantic understanding. In evaluating popular art, there must be an urgency

to evaluating the art to enable aesthetic appreciation instead of leaving it at just aesthetic experience. We have to make the effort to incorporate classical understanding because we are so vulnerable to manipulation when we allow ourselves to be moved without reflecting on it. In the seat of the heart sits desire for both righteous goodness and sensual passion. Both compel, and we are likely to be consumed by the more flashy and audacious of the two if we are unthinking.

The first step to evaluating popular art is to simply gauge your own interaction with it. If it speaks nothing to you, that is a strong sign that it may not be worth considering further. If, however, you do resonate with it, or if many other people are resonating with it, it is worth going to the next step to gauge its merit. The next step is to discern what is being communicated and how. Why are you or others resonating with it? If it is because it appeals to base impulses, then it is bad art, even if you can find trace redeeming elements. If there is discernable good, then comes the task of evaluating the good to bad ratio, for it is rarely all good. You have to make the effort to try, but it is usually not hard to discern what it is that reflects the nature of God, and what is bundled in for mass appeal. Gauging sincerity has its place, but it is not everything. Overly simplistic and barely touched by the Fall, Hallmark movies can still have a positive function when serving to counterbalance a consumer-driven Christmas season. They have made me tear up before.

We love good popular art because it very frequently enables us to experience over and over again some of the sweetest and most common of human emotions: love, joy, longing, anger, grace, etc. These are good emotions to relive, and good popular art can

bring us to the place of worship because of them. God has written these emotions deep into the story of his faithfulness and love.

Evaluating Traditional Art

Because traditional art operates within a tradition of excellence, it is easier to evaluate. One of the ways that our souls are impressed by the image of God is through skillful craft, and that is the heart of traditional art. There is beauty to be sure. There is communication. But craft distinguishes traditional art. To evaluate, we should look to our own impressions of the work, but we should also look to the impressions of those who are experienced in the tradition. Often they can serve as reliable guides. I trust a guitarists' gauge of a good guitarist better than my own. To gauge the value of traditional art, we need to situate the artwork within its field and compare it to what is all around. That is not the end of the evaluation, though. There may be the greatest fiddle player alive somewhere in the world, but I prefer one that is actually close enough for me to listen to. There is a purpose to art, and it is not all about merit. The purpose is to build community through the craft and honor God through that. All of the good local musicians can give the very few best musicians of the world a run for their money in that regard.

Evaluating Fine Art

Interpretation takes a much more prominent position in fine art than it does in any other. It also combines the mass appeal metric of popular art and the excellence-in-the-field metric in traditional art. Fine art can have such a complex system of motivation and influence that it is often the hardest to discern what is good as opposed to what is evil. The fullest diligence in interpretation is often required to suck all of the fatness from fine

art, but also it can be some of the fullest and most good of human creations. It can push both hearts and minds to worship, and it can even be hard to discern why. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* makes me weep every time I read it, but I still have a hard time explaining why. Interpreting and evaluating fine art takes diligence and insight as well as a receptive spirit, but it is a labor that is sweet when the art is good. Above the other categories, it refines the passions, sharpens the understanding, and elevates the appreciator to a fuller understanding of God, life and the world. Special attention should be taken if it not only moves you, but others in the same way. Even more attention should be given if people resonate cross-culturally or in successive generations.

Appreciating Art

In many cases, aesthetic appreciation comes naturally. We either immediately enjoy a work of art, or, as we interpret, our appreciation grows. There are, however, times when there will be good art, art that many people appreciate and that reflects the glory of God in a particular way, but we still find no appreciation for it. I submit that it is worth trying because we may grow through it.

The ability to ascertain truth is not diminished by lack of education, which part of the world one grew up in, or in what time period one lived. The amount of truth one is familiar with can grow with study and exposure to new things, but every man has a baseline innate ability to recognize good and appreciate it. So, if there is a significant number of individuals that are devotees of a particular type of art that you do not appreciate, no matter who the individuals are, it may be that their cultural perspective has equipped them to see a particular good that yours has not equipped you to see. Maybe

they have a different set of value emphases. If you willingly suspend your disbelief, take the effort to try to interpret the art, trying to understand what it is that these people are appreciating, and then try to share their appreciation as you are experiencing the artwork, you may broaden your cultural repertoire and come to a richer place as a person.

When I moved to the South, I despised country music. My wife, however, worked in a workplace that played it all day long. She grew to appreciate it after much listening, and started playing it at home. Over time there were some superficial characteristics that I began to appreciate, a particular riff or a melody. The longer country music was present, the more I began to appreciate it on a deeper level. One of our children, when he was an infant, would calm down and drop off quickly during midnight wakings if we turned on country music. This resonated well with the emphasis on family values and the romantic communication of the longing type of love parents can have for their children that you find in many country songs. There were songs that resonated with hard times of life. There were country songs that resonated when home systems broke and we did not have the money to fix them, so I would spend a weekend digging trenches to lay new field lines for the septic systems. After 15 years, country music is now a regular part of what I listen to. Some of it moves me very deeply. Now, imagine the depth of romantic education I would have if I were able to learn to appreciate the values and music, let alone all the other forms of artistic output, that exist all around the world. Impossible in this life, yes, but it is still worth stretching ourselves towards. We will have time to get there in glory.

To conclude this section, it is also important to note that it is ok not to be able to personally appreciate a good artwork. So much goes in to making us the way that we are,

to shaping our particular pattern of thinking and feeling, that there can be components of our life history that are simply too big to adjust for the sake of appreciating this or that art that grates against it.

Creating Art

There are two primary exhortations in creating good art, and they apply to all categories. The first is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. The image of God shines through fallen man like sun beams flicker through a forest canopy, but the less and less sin obscures the image, the more and more it is like a vaulted sky of scattered clouds over the plains, illuminated by the spectacle of the rising sun. The more of God we see, the more utterly devastating the art. “Woe is me, I am undone! ...For my eyes have seen the King...” (Isa 6:5). The second exhortation only works if it follows the first, and that is to work in sincerity. Be informed by your context, but then honestly produce what your heart desires to produce. God has filled each person with a different conglomeration of gifts, and the less we feel compelled to follow a set path that all men must follow, the more we are free to exercise our dominion, to fill the earth and subdue it, to create the art that God designed us to create. That is how we are going to build the glorious city.

One last thought on creating art. It is certainly possible that there are redeemed individuals seeking to glorify God in what they do, but they are working in jobs in which they have a difficult time seeing the good. “Where can I see the image of God in my job?” I suspect that such jobs are unfulfilling for that very reason. If possible, I would suggest finding an occupation in which you can see God’s image. Far better to adapt to a less extravagant lifestyle and have a job that you can sincerely feel honors God than to

struggle away at a job that gnaws at your soul in order to have more wealth. Not everyone has the luxury of options, however. As long as the job is not blatantly immoral, there is a reality to the honor that comes in providing for one's own basic needs, and there is a nobility to working hard, even if the job is distasteful, in order to provide for those who depend on you. You can still honor God in your work by doing the best work that you can do. "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord..." (Col 3:23).

CONCLUSION

Our current conception of art has been millennia in the making. There can be no immediate shift in popular understanding. The best that we can hope to accomplish is that, one by one, we will shift our thinking to realize, “I am an artist. I sculpt culture.” Along with reforming our habits of production, we will each reform our habits of consumption. We will become art appreciators because we know how to be art critics. This also is redeeming the times. In all that we do, we will follow the image of God, and to the utmost of our ability, we will employ ourselves creatively to the benefit and enjoyment of ourselves and others, resulting in beautiful culture. The end of this corporate creative effort will result in enjoying God and bringing him glory. We must also never forget that this is a mandate, the first command God gave to mankind. It is at the very foundation of what it means to be a human made in the image of God. He commanded that we be art creators and art appreciators because he loves us, because he wants a relationship with us, because he enjoys the work that we do in honor of him, and because he seeks for our supreme good.

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