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Nick Van Til
Dordt College

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Understanding Art

by Nick Van Til
Professor of Philosophy



Mr. Van Til is professor of philosophy at Dordt and regularly teaches a course in aesthetics.

Definition

Susanne K. Langer, a philosopher with a special interest in aesthetics, defines art as "the creation of forms symbolic of feeling."¹ Calvin Seerveld, while maintaining the emphasis on symbol, modifies and expands the definition to read, "Art is the symbolic objectification of certain meaning aspects of a thing, according to the law of coherence."² I would further modify the definition by substituting the word "reality" for "a thing." That would eliminate the possible impression that the symbolization has to be limited to a tangible or ponderable entity. Art is more a symbolization of mood, feeling, and idea, though "thing" in its broadest sense, as opposed to "nothing," might be appropriate. To my mind, Seerveld's qualification, "according to the law of coherence" is an important addition. It would eliminate such chaotic nonsense as John Cage's "chance music" from the catalog of art objects.

Here, I do not intend to review a host of definitions of art for purposes of this discussion. That range of ideas runs all the way down from Plato to the present, with such Existentialist thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. If interested, one can consult an anthology on the

subject.³

Limitations of Art

Many who are involved with art in a casual way as consumers tend to expect things from works of art which by their nature they cannot deliver. For example, while we may attempt to define art as we make a theoretic study, we do not expect definitions from a work of art. It does not make a declarative statement as it symbolizes. It does not posit an assertional relationship between a subject and a predicate. A work of art does not make a cognitive truth claim of the nature of $x = y$.

There is good reason to separate the theoretic study of art into aesthetics as a science, while taking up art appreciation with a different frame of mind. However, it has been my experience that one can scarcely expect to talk about theory without assuming some basic acquaintance with the great objects of art as they have come down to us through the centuries. While in our scientific study we may want to categorize, generally the artist does not. He wants to hold up a bit of reality for us to experience as part of the ongoing ebb and flow of life. Even though the artist's

style may be "abstract," he is not dealing with abstractions as is the scientist. The scientist abstracts a law from a host of individual instances.

At this point one might object, "But doesn't prose very often make statements which are forthrightly declarative?" True, yet it may be the case that in so doing the novelist is being too "preachy." Also, we are left to conjecture as to which character is speaking the mind of the author. Prose is undoubtedly the most assertive of the arts. In that respect it lends itself more to declarative and definitive statements. It is for that reason too that some would deny it a place in the catalog of the fine arts.⁴

Realism

Many people want to limit the spatial arts, like painting and sculpture, to exact replicas of observable models. They impose limitations of the idea of "realism" so restrictive that it would confine the artist to imitation in an effort to attain verisimilitude. For example, several years ago, here at Dordt College, during a lecture an auditor objected that Pete Mondrian's Horizontal Tree was not really a tree. Thereupon, the lecturer, Dr. Calvin Seerveld, intimated that Mondrian was symbolizing a tree. In order to see a real tree, we had but to look out of the lecture hall window and view the tall poplars. If, then, the artist is engaged in presenting reality through the use of symbols, we should not arbitrarily draw the line according to our particular idea of the real.

What constitutes the real? The question can involve us in rather work-a-day distinctions, or it may lead to complicated philosophic concepts and arguments. Some argue that realism is attained by representing or "telling it like it is." This undoubtedly accounts for the popularity of calendar art and the work of men like Norman Rockwell.

We should also consider the fact that what can satisfy the demands of realism in one period may not do so at another time. So, for example, in the history of the novel,

Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie and Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage were considered to be starkly realistic in the late nineteenth-century. Women sometimes fainted when reading Crane's descriptions of Civil War battle scenes. They were realistic by comparison with the circumlocutions of the classic style.

The post-World War I "naturalists" such as Hemingway and Steinbeck found the nineteenth-century style too limiting. They began to introduce obscenities, vulgarities, and profanity. Now, in the post-World War II period, we have seen new elements added in the demand for realism. Authors are no longer content to suggest that a sex act occurred. They invariably include a detailed and explicit description. That is not only the case on the printed page, but it is practiced in movies as well.

Philosophically, the discussion of realism is often carried on in a kind of "appearance vs. reality" context. Some, who might concede to Mondrian the right to paint symbolic trees, might still object when Mondrian insists that he can symbolize reality by his painting Pluses and Minuses. Mondrian would counter by suggesting that he is getting down to basics: he is presenting the nub or core of reality. Some argue that all reality reduces to physics, and electromagnetic force reduces to positive and negative charges. These are conventionally symbolized by "+" and "-" signs. So Mondrian has a point.

Plato would be in strong disagreement with anyone who presumed to argue that a painter is presenting reality, no matter how exactly he approached a likeness of the model. Plato would insist that the best of representations are twice removed from reality. Reality for Plato resides in eternal, immutable, perfect Ideas. They are the prototypes for all material entities. Plato said that Ideas are real but do not exist, whereas matter exists but is not real. Let's assume that an artist is busy with a portrait. His model is a replica of a more nearly perfect Ideal man, which is real as an eternal subsistent in the realm of forms.

The painter gives a good imitation of his model, but it is twice removed from reality. The order of reality is Idea, man, painting. The painter is limited to making imitations of the Real. Small wonder that artists were not highly esteemed by Plato.

By now, it should be obvious that we can eliminate much of the dispute about realism if we again remind ourselves that the artist is busy with symbolization. He is more concerned with the presentation of impression or expression than with statements that give practical advice or intend to state a scientific law. He may want you to mourn with him, rejoice with him, contemplate the sublime, or perhaps, even rage with him. None of which can be packaged in a statement to be rated true or false. That does not mean that he is not presenting a truth. In fact, it is of the nature of art to let us feel the force of truth in more powerful ways than statements can provide.

Ars Gratia Artis: (Art for the Sake of Art)

There is one sense in which I would go along with the claim that art must enjoy a kind of autonomy. This idea is sometimes expressed in the statement that beauty is its own excuse for being. The mere sensuous enjoyment of a work of art is all that we should want from it in most instances.⁵ For example, we do not have to ask concerning some paintings, "What is the artist trying to say?" We can be content with the enjoyment of the lines and colors. To be a bit more technical, the experience of the aesthetic surface is all that we want when we are experiencing a work as it is a subject in the "aesthetic sphere," using the language of Herman Dooyeweerd here.

Kant suggested that the non-practical kind of disinterestedness which should characterize the aesthetic attitude towards a work of art is "purposiveness without a purpose."⁶ The work of art is there for our aesthetic use and not in order to do some kind of practical job. Dooyeweerd would say that in any other sphere it operates as

object with an economic value. In that kind of interest, one might accurately assess the going price of a work of art without entering into an appreciation of its aesthetic worth.

Warren Steinkraus in his book *The Philosophy of Art* speaks of keeping a "psychic distance" in relation to a work of art.⁷ In so doing, we do not participate in the work "biographically." Losing psychic distance may cause us to miss the aesthetic quality in favor of some other consideration. Loss of psychic distance can be nicely illustrated by the following anecdote. During the presentation of a play at Sioux Center's Te Paske Theater for the Performing Arts, a stage-hand ignored the "No Smoking" sign, causing the smoke sensor to set off the fire alarm. Later in the play when the scenario called for a cigar to be lighted, the audience cautioned, "Don't do it. Don't do it." They had entered into the situation biographically.

The non-practical character of art can be illustrated further in connection with nude art. It is a controversial subject, but there are those who contend that a viewer can contemplate a nude figure with sufficient psychic distance, non-biographical involvement, or non-sexual use. By way of example, one might suggest the difference also in the obvious intention of the artist as to the *Birth of Venus* by Botticelli or *Bethsheba* by Rembrandt over against a *Playboy Centerfold*, though the latter might show some qualities of art in the photography. I will not enter into the moral question of nude art but only append the Biblical caution, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (New International Version).

Though it may be acceptable to give art a kind of autonomy in the respect just discussed, it does not follow that art is autonomous in the sense that it stands outside of the context of life in general, either as to producer or consumer. Artists, among the Ancients and, more recently, among the Romantics, have often taken the attitude that the "muse" in bestowing

its gifts, also bestowed some moral immunities. They often assumed that they stood above the moral prohibitions accepted by society in general. Poetic license gave a complementary moral license. Lord Byron comes to mind as a notorious example. We don't have to cite Scripture in order to prove that there is no warrant for any such deviation as far as the Christian artist is concerned.

Does artistic inspiration give aesthetics an autonomy? I think not. I think it can be argued Biblically that the gifts which have been given to the artist are gifts of God through His Spirit. This does not mean that the inspiration of the artist should be equated with the infallible inspiration given to those men who wrote the autographa of the Scriptures. We must test the spirit which the artist manifests in his work. Because the artist in his work is subject to sin, he has no warrant to "let it all hang out" with respect to his feelings and ideas. His feelings may have to be tempered and purified by the Word before they are fit for the empathetic response of his fellowman.

Aestheticism

Ever since the time of Plato, there have been those who would enroll themselves in a kind of cult of Beauty. Plato proposed the notion that one might belong to a special class of the rational elite who might make their way back to the realms of the pure Idea, the realm of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. They might do this if they possessed a special sensitivity with respect to the appreciation of sensuous, here-and-now, material, worldly beauty.

In Plato's Symposium, the model of earthly beauty was the female form. The hoi polloi, that is, the general crowd of men, in viewing such a form would respond with feelings of lust and sexual desire. By contrast, the rational elite upon viewing the same form, would be carried by rational transports to contemplate the Idea world of beauty, where beauty, goodness, and

truth coincide. It seems obvious that the poet Keats was touched by such delusions when in his "Ode to a Grecian Urn" he exalted, "Beauty is truth, and truth is beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Plato's suggestion concerning beauty conveys the impression that some men are specially qualified by superior gifts of reason. They can transcend the degrading pull of matter to reestablish contact with the perfect and eternal realm of Ideas. This constitutes a kind of rationalistic way of salvation. The rational may escape the entrapment of another round of reincarnation whereby the soul would take another turn through the material world. The second time around, one might ensoul a tree or, perhaps, a pig. But for the elite, the disinterested contemplation of sensuous beauty can begin a rational kind of contemplation that for Plato, had a saving efficacy. It was a thinking man's way of salvation.

Cultic devotion to beauty has also beset liberal Protestantism. When holiness through the vicarious work of Christ is no longer appropriated as the Way, beauty is used as a pointer in the direction of sublimity. Sublimity in turn must inspire one to noble thoughts and deeds and provide moral purgation. Beauty once more gives saving grace. The chief reaction to the Sunday morning service then is, "My, wasn't that a beautiful service." So the holiness of beauty has been substituted for the beauty of holiness.

Christian Art

In times past there have been some who were ready to equate Christian art with the use of Biblical themes or characters. The artists of the Italian Renaissance thought they were producing Christian art when the subject was taken from the Biblical narrative. By contrast, H. R. Rookmaaker, Professor of Art History at the Free University of Amsterdam, disputes that claim. I think he does so rightly. For example, the Madonnas, which were pro-

duced in profusion during the time of the Renaissance, were related to the life of Mary the mother of Jesus. Rookmaaker affirms that many of the Madonnas were produced to exemplify Mary the mediatrix in the context of Roman Catholic Mariology. Rookmaaker offers Duccio's Madonna With Child⁸ as a rendering which would give Mary a more-than-human status. And so it becomes non-Christian, at least to the Reformed Protestant viewer.

If art using Biblical themes or subjects is not ipso facto Christian, what then characterizes Christian art? I think that in his 1969 Banner article "Christian Art,"⁹ Calvin Seerveld over-simplified the answer. At that time Seerveld insisted that a work of art would have some readily detectible motifs which through obvious symbolization would qualify a work as Christian art. By the same token, one would be able to brand some works as non-Christian when the requisite motifs were missing.

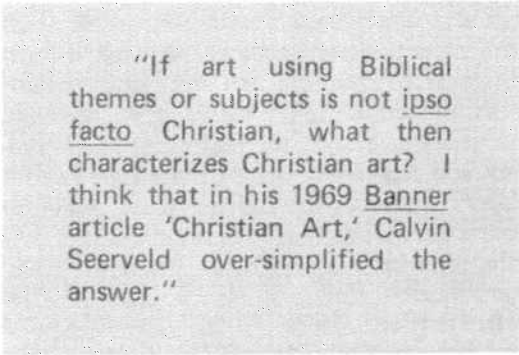
Using his specified criteria, Seerveld wanted us to see Rouault's Two Nudes as a work of Christian art because we should

biographical knowledge of Rouault, viewers rarely saw an obvious lesson associated with the Two Nudes. Recently, several in a rather select audience felt that Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. 1945) created a greater revulsion against the idea of prostitution than did the work of Rouault. That would create the anomaly of a non-Christian creating Christian art. Avignon was the street in Barcelona which harbored the redlight district. Picasso obviously wanted to present it censoriously, though he did not have a Christian respect for the Seventh Commandment as was evident by the six women who served as his paramours throughout his long life.

In an earlier work A Christian Critique of Art,¹⁰ Seerveld maintained that one could judge some works of art as non-Christian by their obvious deficiencies. So he faulted Mozart's music by maintaining "what is lacking in Mozart's music is any shaft of Isaiah 53." I think it would not be facetious to ask, "How does one go about getting shafts of Isaiah 53 into a piano sonata?" Is Mozart's music not a reflection of the fact that the redemptive power of God in Christ maintains good in the common life of man, even in the ungrateful as well as in those who accept the beauties of Mozart with joy and thankfulness?

In contrast to Seerveld, Karl Barth was convinced that Mozart's music had a sanctifying and sanctified beauty. He not only delighted in it, but intimated that he expected to hear strains of Mozart filling the corridors of heaven. But Barth was wrong, too, was he not? While music may have the lyric melodies and motions that give the feel of transcendence, it is still of the earth and can never leave the created order. It can symbolize but it cannot literally transport. This is not to exclude analogous or recreated vehicles of praise in the new heavens and earth.

Because it is so abstract, music acutely complicates the problem of labeling in terms of Christian or non-Christian assessment, assuming that such judgment is apt or necessary. By ignoring the German



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see that the painting "with a compassionate cry reveal(s) the wasting devastation and emptiness of sin." In other words, a look at the painting should immediately force the conclusion that the Two Nudes are prostitutes and that they show the deleterious effects of sexual excess.

Using the Two Nudes as a kind of test case, I found that without any prior

text of the words, an acquaintance of mine was enjoying the choral part of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as a Christian Oratorio until he was informed that it is a hymn to man and not a hymn to God. Obviously, it is the music of praise.

Most people who regularly listen to Handel's Messiah would rate it as lofty sacred music. They would be considerably disturbed to learn that the "And He Shall Purify" was lifted bodily out of one of Handel's secular works where it bore the title "Life is Like a Flower." Similarly, "For Unto Us a Child Is Born" was earlier entitled "No, I Won't Trust You, Blind Love, Cruel Beauty." In similar fashion the "Ossana" in The B Minor Mass by J. S. Bach first made its appearance as a serenade to the German prince who ruled the area where Bach was living at the time. On this basis, then, one would have to conclude that music becomes sacred on the basis of context, intention, and use and not by the tune in itself. All the while we should remember that certain types of music are particularly suited to certain feelings or moods, while others are not.

Can we hope to find in works of art some unmistakable marks by which we can attach labels to specific works of art? Again, I would say "No." Judging by more recent conversations and correspondence, I think Dr. Seerveld would now also say "No." This is not to say that the totality of a man's work does not show his hand, or rather, his mind and his heart.

The Christian Artist

Sharing the same order of creation, a Christian and a non-Christian painter might produce virtually identical landscapes, seascapes, or dunescapes. The same aesthetic laws hold for both, and there is no such thing as a Christian or a non-Christian brush stroke. This is not to say that a Christian and a non-Christian will not interpret what they see differently. But if they use the same general style, that difference of interpretation may not be obvious in their view of a landscape.

It is often suggested, however, that it was Rembrandt's Christian view of man as a creature from the hand of the Creator that distinguished his ability as a portrait artist. His portraits depict man as having been created "a living soul." Yet, one might ask, "Would we be able to see that in Rembrandt's works if we had no biographical knowledge concerning the artist?" I think not. At least, I would suggest that the Negro Head 1779, a detail from the painting Watson and The Shark, by John Stapleton Copley, compares favorably with Rembrandt's Jan Six.¹² Copley was in no way distinguished for his Christian view of creation and life in it, yet Copley's work portrays a wonderfully vital, vibrant life shining with charisma from the eyes of a handsome black.

If we cannot with precision put works of art into the segregated categories Christian and non-Christian, should we not then logically conclude that the Christian artist has no responsibility by way of reflecting a Christian world and life view? I would say, "Yes" he does not have that responsibility if it means that we expect every work to do a bit of evangelizing, but "No," if we mean that the total impact of the artist's work may repudiate rather than reflect an understanding of the great Biblical themes of creation, fall, and redemption.

We could use Picasso as an example in judging Christian motives and motifs. As was suggested earlier, Picasso's cubism lends itself quite readily to the creation of a revulsion to prostitution in his Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, perhaps more graphically than Rouault's Two Nudes. Furthermore, there is hardly a more lucid artistic statement against man's inhumanity to man than Picasso's Guernica, which he painted during the Spanish Civil War as a protest against the indiscriminate bombing of the little Basque town of Guernica. But while we feel the impact of the evil, Picasso had no knowledge of ultimate redemption, so his works in totality reflect nihilism. He had some bright periods in his life when he was mellowed by a new love. So his blue period was followed by a rose

period; but when his marriage soured, then in his paintings he "began to rip the human body apart, dislocating arms, noses, breasts, mouths...Picasso saw everything in terms of some anxious nightmare."¹³

For Picasso, there was no source of love in the world but human love. He usually began that kind of association on a sexual basis and when it ended, love ended. Having no abiding faith, he had no abiding love. As a result, the Time magazine art critic could rightly say in assessing Picasso's art at the time of his death, that, while he was responsible for important innovations in art, he also produced a lot of junk.

The Christian Community and Art

A final word should be said about our general communal responsibility towards art as a medium of communication. If we take the cultural mandate seriously, then it seems to me that we cannot remain indifferent to the development of artistic ability in our community or indifferent toward art appreciation. But much more than that, we ought to see the possibilities of using art to communicate to a secularized world. More and more, it seems to be true that in our day we are deserting the printed page as a means of communication. We are left with the need to communicate by more graphic means. As Marshall McLuhan has suggested, the media becomes the message, and the message becomes a message. People want to be reached through their feelings, rather than through their reason. So the Christian message has to compete for their feelings in order to gain the attention of the mind. Art, then, has a vital place in the total effort to convey the Christian world and life view and confront man with the message of the Gospel of recreation in Christ the King of all Creation.

Footnotes

1. Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and

Form, Charles Scribner, NY, 1953, p. 40.

2. Calvin Seerveld, A Christian Critique of Art, The Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, 1964, p. 39.

3. Peyton E. Richter, Perspective in Aesthetics: Plato to Camus, Odessey Press, NY, 1967. A good work with which to begin a survey of aesthetic theory.

4. De Witt H. Parker, The Principles of Aesthetics, Appleton, Century, Croft, NY, 1946, p. 185.

5. I have chosen to use the word "sensuous" as distinguished from "sensual." The latter generally has been associated with sex and eroticism, though nowadays "sensuous" is used to emphasize physical attraction. I use "sensuous" to indicate anything which can come to us through our organs of sense. The hearing of music, then, is a sensuous experience.

6. Richter, Op. cit., Immanuel Kant, "Aesthetic Judgement," pp. 137-138.

7. Warren Steinkraus, The Philosophy of Art, Beziger, Beverly Hills, CA, 1974, p. 12.

8. H. R. Rookmaaker, Modern Art and the Death of a Culture, Invervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill., 1970, p. 11.

9. Calvin Seerveld, "Christian Art," Banner, Oct. 10, 1969, pp. 4-5. I trust the reader will not be left with the impression that I am carrying on a vendetta against Seerveld's view. It is mostly the case that he is the only one who has expressed views on art in the Reformed community. We are currently waiting with eager anticipation for the promised work from the pen of Nick Wolterstorff.

10. Seerveld, A Christian Critique of Art, p. 56.

11. Alfred Frankenstein, The World of Copley. Time-Life Library of Art, NY, 1970, p. 148.

12. Robert Wallace, The World of Rembrandt, Time-Life Library of Art, NY, 1968, p. 135.

13. Lael Wertenbaker, The World of Picasso, Time-Life Library of Art, NY, 1967, p. 118.