



ArtWay

It is the lack of self-denial and self-discipline that explains the mediocrity of so much devotional art. *Thomas Merton*

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**ARTWAY:
OPENING EYES,**

Articles

Artist's Freedom & Responsibility - Seerveld

The Freedom and Responsibility of the Artist

by Calvin Seerveld

If we Christians seriously intend to exercise the basic service of art in the world today, we urgently need to become both ingenuous and wise about it. For centuries vain art, couched in luxury, has misled its thousands. Now, through the mass-reproduction of images and sound, and the spread of affluence and education, vain art easily has the potential to kill its ten thousands. It would be an ironic disaster if Christians, jumping into the artistic fray at this point, simply perpetuated these same age-old mistakes, or lurched off in some idiosyncratic direction. The fall-out from art is more serious now than ever.

We know that the whole panorama within which we explore our artistic service is praise for God. We know that the blood of the saints - be they artists, production managers, designers or theorists - is precious in God's sight (cf. Psalm 72:12-14) and we can count on God's promise about the artistic task (cf. John 16:12-15). Nevertheless, unless you are protected by the holiness of a biblical innocence and by genuinely wise, critical antennae, then performing or composing or receiving art in the secular city is as dangerous as jaywalking. We need to think about what we are doing and look where we are going. We need to formulate that biblical dove-and-snake policy on the arts with fear and trembling (cf. Philippians 2:12-16) because the very cultural and conceptual air we breathe is neutronic and kills people but leaves the artefacts standing.

Angles and responses

As we formulate a Christian arts policy for our times, we Christians need to learn from each other in the loving communion of saints in the art profession. There are a number of different but equally valid ways of considering a work of art. An artist, a theorist of art, a critic and a spectator, not to mention a buyer, all have a different angle on the common artistic task.

To show at what a basic level this is true, when I first spoke of this theme in Berkeley, California, I showed some of the various responses people could have to the poster which advertised the series ('Art: Luxury or Necessity' by Keith W. Cross, 1981). My point is that each person comes to the same matter with a different focus, legitimately so. And it helps communication and trust to be aware of these various approaches and to realize that they can most naturally be complementary to each other rather than in opposition, fighting for superiority. Just because a theorist gives prominence to critical self-consciousness in his work, more so than is good for an artist, does not mean that the artist does not think. And just because an artist does the art, does not mean he or she has a monopoly on its interpretation. And just because the critic or he public usually has the last word about art in our society does not mean they are right.

It would not be good to wish for a charismatic guru or papal figure to lay down the law for art today by edict, be they artist, theorist, patron or critic (not to mention politician or cleric). That would preempt the responsibility of each believing person to consider the artistic task for themselves as artists, critics, theorists or audience, and would tend to keep each one immature in their particular office. In loving communion, the saints who are in the art profession each need to contribute according to their

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training and holy insight so that there may come a communal sense of the Christian artistic task.

There is a history of bad blood between artists, critics, theorists and public, because each always calls the others to task. This should not be so among Christians, although equally we are not just to pat one another on the back, condone whatever is current, and muddle through. An artist who designs the fashion of clothes, or writes novels, or plays a set in a club, is called to the norm of eagerly presenting yourself to be approved by God, a professional who will not be ashamed of the performance because you have been sharing the truth in your ministry (cf. 2 Timothy 2:15). A critic is called to the norm of discerning excellences and testing whether the spirit of the piece be from God or not, so that those who follow your lead remain uncompromised up to the judgement day (cf. Philippians 1:9-11; 1 John 4:1).

A philosophical aesthetician is called to the norm of pointing to commands of the Lord which hold for art and the art-world, of humbling every proud art-world, of humbling every proud art theory that obfuscates the knowledge of God, and capturing every thought about art and its praxis and bringing it captive to Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:3-6; Colossians 2:6-10). And the public who view paintings, play songs, read poetry, glance at advertisements, go to the cinema, and wear clothes are called to the norm of growing up to be sensitive to the difference between what is good and what is evil artistically and of correcting gently those who do wrong (cf. Hebrews 5:12-15; Galatians 5:25-6:5). Theorists should not pontificate and usurp the conscience of the artist, artists should not pose as geniuses beyond the reach of critique, and critics should not lord it over the artist or play Pied Piper to the public.

If communion of the saints means anything in bringing healing and shalom to the art world, as we seek to discover more surely and to be faithful in the Christian artistic task, we should wash each other's feet with the water and towels that each of us has analysis, performance, interpretation, informed attention.

A Concerted blessing

Now, finally, the tough part. If the people of God really intend to pray that God will make Christian art a concerted blessing to our society, rather than the hobby of a few educated people here and there, or a solo achievement by a few supremely gifted individuals who shoot by like occasional meteors across the media sky, are there particular considerations to which we should be giving priority?

If you are going to stay alive culturally and carry out your dove-and-snake cultural responsibilities in a secular world where the cultural air is neutronic, you need some fresh air to breathe. A crucial step must be to unite as a Christian organization of artists, based on a statement of faith and a statement of purpose. Such an organization is not a church to hold worship services and administer the sacraments, and neither is it in competition with the church. The communion of saints is not just a Sunday-only institution but is a specially called peoplehood (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10) during the week as well, at their jobs. Christian artists, scattered like sheep in a thousand studios, schools and offices, belong together professionally in trying to be faithful in having the Lord's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. They should recognize that truth openly by organizing themselves as a part of the body of Christ bound to together by a common, biblical, Christian confession. With members at different stages of having their personal and professional lives brought into line with their Holy-Spirit-filled hearts, they are able to build one another up in artistry, not just in prayer breakfasts and fellowship meetings but also in actual, professional Christian art edification.

In our secularly dominated culture, the institutional church cannot, and I believe should not, lay down the cultural law for art, work, schooling, political action or such like. Instead, church people and their leaders need to develop the vision that for the kingdom of God, the Rule of Jesus Christ, to go forward beyond the boundaries of the institutional church, the church needs to give its blessing to organisations such as Christian art groups, Christian schools, Christian political groups.

Too often the church has wanted to be the sum of Christian culture rather than its resting place. We should instead honour the specialized responsibility of artists, not as wards of the institutional church, but as maturing sons and daughters of the church called to wisdom as a community of Christian artists before the Lord. The church should be supporting Christian artists to work together to deepen, not first and foremost church art, but Christian art.

Eschewing propaganda

A second important consideration for those involved in communal Christian artistic activity in our secular society is to resist the temptation to become partisan and propagandistic. Such an attitude injures the art and it carries a militancy which abuses the free offer of salvation that is central to the biblical message. Whenever Christian art, however well-intentioned, begins to lobby for its point of view without at least some self-effacing humour, it loses its artistic and its Christian authority. I have made it a practice to attend events on the borderline between art and a hard-sell for some ideology or other, because I have noticed that both Marxists and conservative Christians tend to err on this point, probably because their respective faiths and dogmas are so important to them. A Christian arts group should not go the way of agit-prop theatre and proselytizing tracts full of bravado, for then you leave both art and love behind.

However, as I have experienced the cultural guerrilla warfare of these [minority groups such as homosexuals and militant feminists], despite the offence of their shameless, often godless effrontery, I have been fascinated and touched by the singleminded intensity of their commitment which they try to embody in art. Why do we Christians in art seem so effete by comparison? Is it a measure of our comfortable, urbane, passion-less faith in Jesus Christ? With the artistic talent that the Lord has given to God's people, should not the eyes and ears of unbelievers tingle apprehensively at the artistic sounds and sights and stories that we could make together, the way unbelievers trembled centuries ago when the Huguenots marched the city streets singing Genevan psalms?

You cannot bludgeon people with Christian art into accepting Jesus Christ. But neither should you settle for just being as dispassionately good as the secular professional artist, adding: 'I do it for Jesus, you know.' It is the crux of your task as a communal body of fellow Christian artists to fire your art until it emits sparks that warm, or burn, those it reaches. As Paul says in a different context (cf. Romans 11:11), in your artwork make the audience, believer or unbeliever, jealous of the power and richness and wholeness of life that is captured so convincingly and compellingly in the allusive forms you have fashioned. And then let God's Spirit spring your artistic trap.

A final consideration is relevance: if our Christian art is irrelevant, it defaults on the basic service that it promises. Art, like anything else, is relevant if it supplies what is needed. Art that is popular is supplying what is wanted, but not necessarily what is needed, and may not therefore be relevant. Art that is first-rate may be out-of-date or esoteric, hardly intelligible, and will also therefore not be relevant: it fails to meet the need. Of course what people need will vary, and what is relevant is relative to the occasion. And being relevant does not mean becoming trendy and throwing away the past. In fact, in judging what is the best future direction for the arts, knowledge of the history of art may be as crucial for us as sensitivity to the current cultural malaise. Beethoven's Ninth took on a new relevance in the twentieth century when it turned up as the soundtrack for *A Clockwork Orange*, revealing in a disturbing way that the piece cannot be played as a civilizing tonic. The fabulous treasure of Renaissance and Baroque music with its bright, playful, dancing melodies is wonderfully relevant to us in clearing out the clogging, thick sonorities of the nineteenth century that have encrusted our artistic hearing.

For Christian artistry to be relevant in our day, I believe it will need to honour the way in which in our civilization the primary arts have each become specialised, and yet at the same time it will need to conceive and practise these arts for a wider audience than the restricted circle of experts.

That means that the Christian community should plan to support Christians becoming professional jazz musicians or professional short story writers or professional painters, rather than restricting them to being just gifted amateurs who can turn their artistic hand to many things. And it means that Christian artists have to be prepared to stoop to the weakness of God's out-of-date people, but without crawling on all fours.

It is a tall order to be relevant. It means Christian artists have to know thoroughly what they are doing artistically. They have to have been able to decide not to sell out to the roulette of the glamour world nor to join the lodge of avant-garde art initiates. 'Christian art' will not be Christian, i.e. redemptive, if it is indistinguishable from what else is going on. Nor will it be relevant if its painting is mere devotional icons, its novels lapse into born-again hagiography, and its film-makers produce travelogues like tourists 'doing' Golgotha. How could such art venture into the murderous gap between the esoteric devotees of aleatory music, concrete poetry and conceptual art and the indiscriminating mass market who follow the pop stars? Christian artists need instead to be professionally probing, with exquisite finesse, the hurts and hidden charms, the atrocities and wounded glories of people's lives in our day that will command the respect of both secular specialist, TV addict and God's own people. They need to be inventive, able to explore and experiment in 'new' art forms, but taking people with them, not setting people against them, and having the professional sureness and dove-and-snake wisdom to see when an artistic norm is being violated.

Christian artistry will benefit from experience over time, and we need many more second-rank artists among God's people in my generation so that the next generation will have ones of the first rank. I cannot, as a theorist, spell out what art must do to be relevant in my day, but I can say that God wants artists to be free to lead God's people, and any secularists with eyes to see and ears to hear, into the surprises of professional Christian art - art seen as a calling worthy to be mastered, art professing God in Jesus Christ as the Lord of all creation, and art asking all historical and fantastic sights and sounds and creaturely experiences picked up in the arts to be presented to God and the neighbour with consummate consecration.

They need not. Because if they look again at the Jesus who gave them the commission, they will discover that he most often taught in exactly that way. Jesus used stories - sometimes explained, often not. His teaching is sometimes obvious, often paradoxical or ambiguous, occasionally quite baffling. He taught as much by what he did as what he said. Meetings with tarts and lepers and quislings and little kids became flesh-and-blood images of encounter with Father God. Familiar objects like wine goblets and loaves and donkeys and towels and bowls of water became symbols of a spiritual dynamic. He turned his audience into part of the storytelling - inviting a small boy with loaves and fishes up on stage to be part of the act. He subverted traditional myth - enacting the triumphant Messianic entry in the knowledge that the ending would be all too different.

In many ways, Jesus is an amazing model for the Christian artist in a postmodern age. Like him, we can take our raw material from the everyday world around us. Like him, we can take the familiar stories and images of our day and subvert them into something unexpected. However, this does not mean the artist's job is retelling Jesus' parables - or his life - or even trying to give them a new gloss by setting them in our time. In fact, it is not even telling parables, full stop. Parables as such are the tools of teachers, not artists. They are stories told with the clear aim of communicating a specific message. Art, by contrast, expresses the perceptions and experiences of our inner and outer worlds, irrespective of whether or not this conveys a specific message. Christian artists are not preachers. Our task is to fund the imagination, to open up the possibility of wonder, not so much providing answers as reminding the world of questions it has forgotten to ask. We are sowing seeds, confident that human minds are still fertile soil and that God will never fail to provide water and sun.

This is an excerpt from *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves*, Piquant - Carlisle, 2000 (www.piquant.net) and Toronto Tuppence Press - Willowdale, ON, 2000 (www.seerveld.com/tuppence.html).

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