Sounding the Depths: Towards a Theology of Art

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I. Art and Philosophy

In his article on the social framework of primitive art, the anthropologist Raymond Firth writes:

> It is commonly held that economic activity is a necessity, but that art is a luxury. Yet we can assert empirically the universality of art in man's social history. Paleolithic man ten thousand years or more ago has his statuettes and his cave-paintings, of which some still preserved for us of such aesthetic mastery and dynamic skill that they evoke the admiration of modern artists. Even in the hardest of environments, art has been produced … It is easy, then, to refute the idea that at the primitive stages of man's existence the theme of subsistence dominated his life to the exclusion of the arts.[1]

Artistic makings have accompanied human communities throughout history. There are "no primitive peoples", writes Paul Wingret, "however meagre their cultural achievements, who offered no patronage to the artist."[2] Works of art may be traced back to the most primitive of cultures. As Firth points out, these 'primitive' works of art have the ability to evoke powerful responses and admiration from their modern discoverers.

In the 1990s, the eminent expert on prehistoric art, Monsieur Jean Clottes studied the magnificent Stone-Age paintings discovered deep within the cave at Lascaux, France. This is how he recounts his experience: "I remember standing in front of the paintings of the horses facing the rhinos and being profoundly moved by the artistry. Tears were running down my cheeks. I was witnessing one of the world's great masterpieces."[3] Clottes' response raises many interesting theological and philosophical questions. In particular, it raises questions about the universal appeal of art, their ability to 'speak' to viewers who are so culturally and historically remote from their original creators.

The universality and ubiquity of the arts, however, has not aided philosophers in achieving consensus concerning their intrinsic

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nature. Philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Kant to Clive Bell and Morris Wetz have attempted to define art. But their definitions have not enjoyed universal acceptance. Many modern philosophers, for instance, have refuted Plato's understanding of art as imitation. The well-known paintings of Mark Rothko and Yves Klein, for example, do not imitate anything — they are simply fields of colour. Yet, they are priced as great artistic achievements in the twentieth century.

Some philosophers opine that if a quality common to all works of art were found, the central problem of aesthetics would be solved. Clive Bell, the strongest advocate of this theory, maintains that a satisfactory theory of art must identify the "essential quality in a work of art, the quality that distinguishes works of art from all other classes of objects."[4] But what indeed is that elusive property that is common in all works of art? Philosophers are again unable to arrive at a consensus. The essentialist approach has therefore spawned a great diversity of definitions: Immanuel Kant's "purposiveness without purpose," Benedetto Croce's "intuitionism," Clive Bell's "significant form" and Susan Langer's "symbolic feeling." None of these theories has commanded universal acceptance, and all of them have their critics and advocates. Morris Weitz is probably right in saying that:

> Each of the great theories of art — Formalism, Voluntarism, Emotionalism, Intellectualism, Intuitionism, Organicism — converge on the attempt to state the defining properties of art. Each claims that it is the true theory because it has formulated correctly into a real definition of the nature of art; and that the others are false because they have left out some necessary or sufficient property.[5]

The failure to achieve consensus on the nature of art has consequently resulted in disagreements on what should be included as art. The art philosopher Paul Oskar Kristeller has drawn up a list that includes painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry.[6] Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his now classic *Art in Action* has furnished a longer list that includes music, poetry, drama, literary fiction, visual depiction, ballet, modern dance, film, and sculpture.[7] Interestingly, architecture is included in Kristeller's list but excluded in Wolterstorff's. Drama, literary fiction and modern dance are found in Wolterstorff's list but not in Kristeller's. The status of architecture is especially intriguing. The philosopher Gordon Graham has no problems with viewing architecture as art,[8] while Wolterstorff has difficulty doing so.[9] In his authoritative book, *The Principles of Art*, the expressivist art theorist R. G. Collingwood categorically excludes craft from his list of what qualifies as works of art.[10]

II. Divine and Human Creativity

A Christian view of art must engage creatively and critically with current philosophical debates on the nature of art. But Christian reflection on the arts has a different point of departure: it must begin from the Christian Faith's understanding of the relationship between God and the world. The Bible portrays God as the Creator of the world. The very first sentence of the Bible reads: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen. 1:1). The Christian Faith teaches that before God created the world, there was nothing

except God. The world was therefore created "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*). This means that God did not use any pre-existing materials to fashion the world. As the narrative in Genesis indicates, God simply spoke and the world came into being. Theologians as diverse as Origen in the third century and Bonaventure in the thirteenth have described God as the "supreme Artist" and the world as his *opus*.

Theologians have long suggested that just as a work of art reveals something of its human creator, so the world reveals something of God. In the creation there can be found significant vestiges of God, traces that make possible a tacit knowledge of the Creator.

The Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has shown how earthly beauty reflects the very beauty of God, who is in every way perfect.[11] Poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins have described the beauty of nature in light of its Creator who is "beauty so ancient and withal so fresh".[12] Beauty is therefore an important attribute of God's creation. The beauty of the world that God has fashioned attests to the brilliance and splendour of its Creator. Theologians like Origen have used the metaphor "image of God" (*imago dei*) to refer not just to human beings, but also to the whole of creation. The world images God like a mirror because it reflects the glory of its Creator. As *imago dei*, the creation becomes a sacrament, a window to the divine, as it were.

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As the inimitable French Christian writer Simone Weil has put it so arrestingly:

> The beauty of the world is Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter. He is really present in the universal beauty. The love of this beauty proceeds from God dwelling in our souls and goes out to God present in the universe. It is also like a sacrament.[13]

The doctrine of creation has profound implications for the Christian theology of art. According to the doctrine, the world that God has brought into being is characterised by order and purpose. Its existence is not arbitrary. The creation is already imbued with meaning. Thus the view espoused by the British poet William Blake, that the world is but a barren wilderness bereft of significance until the human imagination confers meaning to it, must be called into question from the Christian perspective. The idea that it is human imagination that transforms bleak and barren 'nature' into meaningful 'culture' fit for human habitation is, according to the doctrine of creation, mistaken. Human cultivation, which includes all artistic endeavours, to be sure requires creativity and imagination. But human imagination does not work *ex nihilo*, as if out of a vacuum. As Trevor Hart has pointed out, human cultivation is the sort of activity that "has a respectful openness first to listen and learn from nature, to discover from it something of its prior orderliness; and it will possess a restraint which recognises the limits of what can and ought to be done with and within the world."[14] A Christian theology of art must therefore reject the Promethean

spirit expressed by certain philosophies of art.

According to Genesis, human creativity stems from the fact that man is "created in the image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1:26-7). The long and complex discussion on what constitutes the image of God need not detain us. Suffice to assert that whatever else this metaphor might refer to, it also points to human creativity. Made in the image and likeness of their Creator, human beings are "created co-creators." It was Dorothy Sayers who made this point with her characteristic perceptiveness. In her book, *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers, commenting on the Genesis passage, writes:

> It is observable that in the passage leading up to the statement about man, he has given no detailed information about God. Looking at man, he sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the 'image' of God was modelled, we find only the single assertion, 'God created'. The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.[15]

This brings us to the injunction in Genesis, which theologians have referred to as the cultural mandate: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28). The command to rule over the created order is not a license to exploit nature but an imperative for human beings to fulfil their special responsibility as stewards of God and as created co-creators. It is a command that is directly relevant to the work of human art. Nicholas Wolterstorff explains:

> ***Made in the image and likeness of their Creator, human beings are "created co-creators."***

> The artist takes an amorphous pile of bits of coloured glass and orders them upon the walls of the basilica so that the liturgy can take place in the splendour of flickering coloured light and in the presence of the invoked saints. He takes a blob of clay and orders it onto a pot of canvas and orders them into a painting richly intense in colour and evocative of the South Seas. He takes a piece of stone rough from the quarry and by slowly chipping away orders it into a representation of mother and child. He makes a huge store of words — of sounds and meanings — a selection and puts them into an order so as thereby to inspire his fellow men to 'not go gentle into the good night'. The artist, when he brings forth order for human benefit or divine honor, shares in man's vocation to master and subdue the earth.[16]

III. Art and Meaning

Human art, however, is not just about making beautiful things. Human artistic makings are in fact fundamentally variegated expressions of the human quest for meaning,

instantiations of human curiosity that probes the 'why' of things. Put differently, human art is meaningful because it is a mark of human self-transcendence. Human beings are capable of responding to God, to each other and to their environment through the medium of their artistic creations because as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, they are capable of personal relationships. As theologian Paul Jewett has pointed out, although human beings inhabit the world like the animals, we "do not experience creaturely finitude in the way the animals do."[17] Humans therefore are capable of a certain "openness to the world" that other animals are not, enabling them to reach beyond the immediately given to discover the "broadest horizon of meaning that embraces all finite things."[18]

If works of art may be understood as expressions of human self-transcendence or the human quest for meaning, then they may also be said to be carriers of meaning in some significant ways. Put differently, we may say that works of art — implicitly or explicitly — are bearers of meaning because they are expressions of ultimate human concerns.

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Perhaps this is why art has the ability to 'speak' across time and culture. Of course, every work of art is situated within a particular historical and cultural milieu and therefore must 'speak' from the particularity of that context. As Paul Tillich has pointed out, the artist "cannot help but betray by his own style his own ultimate concern, as well as that of his group, and his period … in every style the ultimate concern of a human group is manifest."[19] So inextricably rooted is the artist that he discloses his social and historical locations even if he attempts to mislead or deceive. Furthermore, because art is a form of human engagement with the context, every work of art may be said to have a socio-political dimension.[20] It is better to say that art has a socio-political *dimension* rather than political *purpose*, because to speak of purpose in this context would reduce art to propaganda. Thus, behind every work of art there is a 'world'.

Not only is there a 'world' behind every work of art, art itself may also be conceived as a form of 'world projection'. Art may be seen as an attempt to present a world that is quite distinct from the actual world, a world created by human imagination. The artist — be he a novelist, composer or painter — fictionally projects a 'world' in his art that is distinct from the real world. Even when there are strong correspondences between the world depicted in the work of art and the actual world, the two worlds are still quite distinct. *Macbeth*, for instance, is fictional world projection even though some of the things in the world of that Shakespearean play have close correspondences to the real world.

Wolterstorff presses the point even further when he writes: "even when the world of the work is not incompatible with the actual world, that is, even when everything constituting the world of the work actually occurs, still the world of the work is only a segment of the actual world, never the whole of it." "To think of the artist simply as one who holds the mirror up to nature," he adds, "is to get things seriously

skewed."[21] However, in creating this imaginary world, the artist is in fact making a claim about the actual world. For example, in his famous tale, "The Ass and the Grasshopper," Aesop creates an imaginary world in which an ass once talked to grasshoppers. But in fictionally projecting a world consisting of a talking ass, Aesop is asserting a truism concerning the real world, namely, that one man's meat is another man's poison. There is therefore a parabolic aspect of art that says something about reality.

Because human beings are created for fellowship with God, they are irreversibly religious beings. Even the fallen human being is *homo religionis* because sin has not totally defaced the image of God in him. In light of this, we may say that every work of art has a religious or spiritual dimension. All works of art therefore, even demonic art, reflect something of the religious nature of human beings. If this point of view is sound, then all human art may be seen as sounding the depths, as expressions of human religiosity. Richard Viladesu therefore concludes that human art is an appropriate text for theology because "it embodies and expresses the 'spiritual situation' of a particular culture."[22] And as Paul Tillich has shown, art has the ability to portray the spiritual situation of a culture more immediately and directly than other human enterprises, like science or philosophy:

> Art indicates what the character of a spiritual situation is: it does this more immediately and directly than do science and philosophy for it is less burdened by objective considerations. Its symbols have something of a revelatory character while scientific conceptualisations must suppress the symbolical in favour of objective adequacy.[23]

IV. The Purpose of Art

What, then, is the purpose of art? This question has generated considerable debate among philosophers of art. As we survey some of their proposals, we must remind ourselves that for the earliest human societies, 'art' as we know it today did not exist. To be sure, our ancestors did produce images and ornaments of great beauty. But for them, these productions are not considered as 'art' as we understand it today. Whatever purposes those early carved figures and paintings may have served, they were not "objects that were owned and admired as commodities of the affluent leisure class."[24] Not until recently in the history of human civilisation were there art museums or galleries, or art exhibitions and festivals. It is not unreasonable to surmise that early artistic productions were created to serve a certain function in the social and cultural life of the community. In many ancient cultures, art is related to their religious practices and customs. One example is Egyptian funerary art, where the figurines function as stand-ins for the dead, should their bodies decay despite elaborate attempts at their preservation. Another example is the art associated with the tabernacle of Israel.

The purists would argue that art is denigrated if some purpose other than itself is attached to it. "Art for art's sake!" shouts their slogan. Karen Stone is perhaps closer to the truth when she says that, "Art answers any number of problems, fulfils a multitude of needs, meets an infinity of intended purposes, because images are at once tangible and immaterial and because human beings likewise are equally of

nature and apart from it."[25] Art therefore is not directed at a single (penultimate) purpose, but responds to a number of motivations and serves a variety of goals.

From the Christian perspective, however, the true purpose of art is to glorify God. As we have seen, as bearers of the divine image human beings are created co-creators. In his artistic creations, the artist glorifies God by mirroring the work of the Creator. Thus, like all human enterprises, the ultimate goal of art is not self-glorification. Christians must therefore take exception to the popular slogan, "Art for art's sake" because it urges art to be self-absorbed and indulgent. As Philip Graham Ryken has rightly pointed out, art that is "seen to exist only for its own sake and not for a higher purpose" very easily becomes idolatrous.[26] The slide to idolatry can be averted when the artist acknowledges that his artistic ability is a gift from God, and seeks to glorify God with his art.

Human art that brings glory to God must in some ways bring to expression what philosophers and theologians have called the three transcendentals: Beauty, Truth and Goodness. Human beings as self-transcending creatures have the ability to perceive and appreciate beauty in nature. Created beauty, as we have seen, images the divine beauty because it reflects the splendour of the Creator. To be attracted to the beauty of the created order is in some sense to be attracted to the divine beauty itself. But the lure of beauty is such that we are never satisfied with only viewing it from afar. As C. S. Lewis has so eloquently put it, "We do not want merely to see beauty … We want something else that can hardly be put to words — to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it."[27]

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That is why drawing from Plotinus, the sixth-century mystical writer Pseudo-Dionysius could say that the Greek word *kalon* (the beautiful, the fine and the good) is always linked to *kalein* (to call). Beauty bids all things to itself. The artistic creativity aroused by beauty therefore in some sense 'speaks' of its divine exemplar. Beautiful art has the depth and authenticity that allows it to reflect the divine glory. Gerardus van der Leeuw expresses this well when he writes:

> All music that is absolute music, without additions, without anything counterfeit, is the servant of God: just as pure painting is, whether it treats religious subjects or not; and as true architecture is, apart from the churches it builds; and as true science is, even when it has little to do with theology, but busies itself with gases, stars and languages.[28]

True beauty is always accompanied by truth and goodness. When beauty is pursued at the expense of truth, we end up with sentimentality. Because beauty is always wedded with truth, it can never be a mere idealisation of reality. Beauty that speaks the truth does not deny the ugly and the offensive. Beauty therefore opposes kitsch, which Milan

Kundera has provocatively defined in his novel, *The Unbearable Likeness of Being* as "the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word." He elaborates: "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass. It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch."[29] Kitsch is an enemy of the Christian faith. It has no place in the Christian understanding of art. The imitable British philosopher Roger Scruton has argued vigorously for true art to disabuse itself of kitsch in his provocative book on beauty:

> For art cannot live in a world of kitsch, which is a world of commodities to be consumed, rather than icons to be revered. True art is an appeal to our higher nature, an attempt to affirm that other kingdom in which moral and spiritual order prevails … [true art] is the real presence of our spiritual ideals. That is why art matters. Without the conscious pursuit of beauty we risk falling into a world of addictive pleasures and routine desecration, a world in which the worthwhileness of human life is no longer clearly perceivable.[30]

To be attracted to the beauty of the created order is in some sense to be attracted to the divine beauty itself.

Finally, we must recognise that beauty is also wedded to goodness, even though it is difficult to speak of morality in art. Suffice to say that the work of art, like everything else produced by human hands, is not value-free. Perhaps one way of envisioning the morality of art is to enquire how art serves man, how it humanises man against the forces and influences that corrode his dignity. Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford, sums up this discussion well in his thoughtful book, *Art and the Beauty of God*: "When goodness, truth and beauty are combined we have glory. When boundless goodness, total truth and sublime beauty are combined to a supreme degree we have divine glory."[31] Beautiful art that speaks the truth for the good of all reflects the divine splendour and brings glory to God.

V. Conclusion

In his book, *Art and the Bible* Francis Schaeffer describes a mural in an art museum in Neuchatel by the Swiss artist Paul Robert thus:

> In the background of this mural he pictured Neuchatel, the lake on which it is situated and even the art museum that contains the mural. In the foreground near the bottom is a great dragon wounded to the death. Underneath the dragon is the vile and the ugly — the pornographic and the rebellious. Near the top Jesus is seen in the sky with his endless hosts. On the left side is a beautiful stairway, and on the stairway are young and beautiful men and women carrying the symbols of the various forms of art — architecture, music and so forth. And as they are carrying them up and away from the dragon

to present them to Christ, Christ is coming down to accept them.[32]

The mural depicts powerfully the redemption of the arts as the men and women offer human art to the returning Saviour. Reflecting on this, Schaeffer writes, "if these things are to be carried up to the praise of God and the Lordship of Christ at the Second Coming, then we should be offering them to God now." This indeed should be the goal of Christians involved in the arts in its various forms to restore them to their true purpose by creating "art that can anticipate the beauty previewed and promised in Jesus Christ."[33] ■

Endnotes

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[2] Paul Wingret, *Primitive Art* (New York: Meridian Books, 1975), 18.

[3] Monsieur Jean Clottes as quoted by Bruce Crumley, "Archaeology: Cave Art in France," *Time* 145, no. 5 (30 January 1995).

[4] Clive Bell, quoted in Gordon Graham, *Philosophy and the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 150.

[5] Morris Weitz in A. Neill and A. Ridley, eds., *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 183-4.

[6] Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1995), 165.

[7] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 6.

[8] Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 131ff.

[9] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 7.

[10] R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937).

[11] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982).

[12] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in W. H. Gardner and W. H. Mackenzie, eds., *Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 66.

[13] Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (New York: Fontana, 1959), 120.

[14] Trevor Hart, "Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth," in Jeremy Begbie, ed., *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 19.

[15] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (Cleveland: World, 1956), 142.

[16] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 77.

[17] Paul K. Jewett, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human. A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 60.

[18] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 76.

[19] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 70.

[20] Hans Küng, *Art and the Question of Meaning* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 22.

[21] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 123.

[22] Richard Viladesu, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Musice, Art and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 154.

[23] Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, quoted by Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 48.

[24] Karen Stone, *Image and Spirit: Finding Meaning in Visual Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2003), 36.

[25] Stone, *Image and Spirit*, 36.

[26] Philip Graham Ryken, *Art for God's Sake: A Call to Recover the Arts* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2006), 48.

[27] C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 31.

[28] Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty. The Holy in Art*. Trans. By David E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinhart and Winston, 1963), 277.

[29] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Likeness of Being* (New York: Faber, 1985), 243.

[30] Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 192.

[31] Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding* (London: Mowbray, 1993), 54.

[32] Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 30.

[33] Jeremy Begbie, "Created Beauty: The Witness of J.S. Bach," in Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands and Roger Lundin, eds., *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 44.