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On the Value of Aesthetics

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Occasionally Christianity Today has published articles on the place of art in Christian experience. Another periodical almost specializes in this subject. These articles, so it seems to me, are usually defective in one or more of three points: first, they exhibit the pervasive ambiguity and meaninglessness of almost all literature on aesthetics; second, even when the first objection is not so obviously the case they either depend on or suggest invalid arguments; and third, they are with virtual unanimity deficient in supporting their contentions by Scriptural norms. Yet anyone who claims to be an evangelical should apply the principle of Sola Scriptura to aesthetics too.

First. In the last few years a gad-fly has been lampooning the pedantic nonsense that emanates from New York's Metropolitan Museum. Theodore L. Shaw and Stuart Publications have produced Hypocrisy About Art, Precious Rubbish, and other titles which are not all hypocrisy and rubbish. The Met comes out as pontifically stupid.

If anyone thinks that this gad-fly should be ignored, do not more serious volumes on aesthetics testify to the unintelligibility of the subject? For example, can anyone deny that there is confusion and meaninglessness in The Art of Painting (chapter four and Appendix I) where Albert Barnes discusses the subject of form? Can the work of Elie Faure, Venturi, or John Dewey be adjudged more intelligible? Or, on music, not the pitiful attempts to define classical and romantic in Grove's five volume Dictionary of Music. Hardly any book on aesthetics defines its terms carefully. Even Plato, when he tried to define Beauty in Greater Hippias, failed. Historical information, e.g. the formulation of the laws of perspective or the development from plainsong to counterpoint, has a proper share of interest and importance – it is also intelligible; but “art appreciation” is regularly repulsive. At best such books say nothing that can be understood.

Now, if Plato himself, who so stressed definition and intelligibility, could do so little on beauty, one may surmise that books on aesthetics are nonsense, not because their authors are otherwise stupid, but because the objects of art themselves have so little to say.

On one occasion when I had been examining Rembrandt's pen sketches in Amsterdam, an art connoisseur remarked that they “said so much.” What they said, he did not say. Similarly music is supposed to be expressive. True, it can, like an ejaculation, express joy or sorrow, but not much else. It certainly cannot express Lincoln's Gettysburg address or the Lord's Prayer. A choir director, a very good one too, exemplified the emptiness of musical jargon when he scolded his tenors and told them that the color of their tone should be more round. Apparently they had been singing red, rectangular notes and he wanted them to sing circular, green notes. Nor have I ever decided whether Mozart's Sonata K55 expresses the chugging of a locomotive up the east slope of the Rockies or the eruption of Old Faithful. And why could not L'Après Midi d'un Faune have been La Soirée d'un Lapin? Contrariwise, one knows immediately what Lincoln's famous speech means.

Second. A recent article bewailed the narrow evangelicalism of George Eliot's parents and without much disguise suggested that this was the cause of her rebellious atheism. Well, evangelicalism is indeed narrow – it prohibits murder, adultery, and theft. Her desire for freedom from such morality is a more probable cause of her rejection of Christianity than a hard childhood and the death of her

mother.

Other articles have made other unfounded charges. The Puritans are constantly described as sour and dour. Ernest Boyd (*Portraits Real and Imaginary*, p. 109) was surely indulging in irresponsible imagination when he wrote, "Pleasure is the enemy, not evil, and so the joys of mind and body are under suspicion."

As for pleasure of the mind Boyd must have been ignorant of the Puritan concern for education; while J. Truslow Adams and Harlen Updegraff unconscionably misrepresent the literacy index in Massachusetts. As for sensory pleasure, particularly the pleasures of art, those who condemn the Puritans not only fail to make allowances for the difficulties of mere survival in an untamed wilderness, but also ignore the exquisite proportions and design of their doorways and everyday domestic tools.

Such then are examples of faulty argumentation. Admittedly such extreme examples do not occur with the frequency of ambiguity and meaninglessness.

Third. An evangelical theory of art, so far as art is amenable to meaningful statement, must be based on the teaching of the Bible. What is not based on Scripture, even if it should miraculously escape unintelligibility, could hardly be called an evangelical view. The fact that the Bible says so little about art, whereas its intellectually conceptual theology is voluminous, indicates that there is really very little to say. However, a Biblical student should try to collect that little. Such a summarization can be divided into material on utensils and architecture (combining useful and fine art), painting and sculpture, then music, and finally literature. Naturally the following is not exhaustive.

The construction of utensils and musical instruments seems to have originated among the rebellious and ungodly (Gen. 4:21-22). Later these forms of art were used in the worship of God (Exodus chapters 25-28). Still later great artistic skill was expended on Solomon's Temple and palaces (I Kings, chapters 5-7). From what is said, Solomon's Temple must have been an artistic triumph, surpassing even Hagia Sophia. Thus there is no Biblical prohibition against imposing architecture. That evangelicals should build such expensive structures does not logically follow, but it would seem that some groups ought to pay more attention and avoid crudities in building.

The Bible has virtually nothing to say about painting, and its reference to sculpture links it to idolatry. Therefore the Reformed churches do not exhibit a statue of Peter for the faithful to kiss its big toe. Painting must also be included, for the commandment prohibits any likeness being used in worship. Outside the church property, however, Rodin's *Thinker* seems to be unobjectionable, and his repulsive, shriveled, old woman can teach a moral lesson to majorettes and home-coming queens.

The Bible explicitly commands music, vocal and instrumental. Therefore some people must take time to learn composition, other people must achieve the skill to manufacture instruments, and all people no doubt should improve their voices – circular green notes instead of rectangular red. The requirement of vocal music emphasizes the fact that music is an accompaniment for words. By itself music is not very expressive. Note that hymn books sometimes use the same music for two or three hymns, or even two stanzas of one hymn. But defective as music is in this respect, the Bible commands instrumental music.

But the highest form of art is literature. It is only in words that meaning can be expressed. The cliché, "one picture is worth a thousand words," is basically false, though it is true enough in a blueprint. But, as suggested above, how many pictures would be required to express the Lord's Prayer or the

doctrine of justification by faith? In comparison with these the importance of art pales.

Of course art has a certain measure of importance. Embellishments of prose, and sometimes poetry, help to enforce the literary message.

I say sometimes poetry because, although prose can also be nonsense, nonsense seems to be an occupational disease of poets. It was with pleasure that I read a letter to the editor in the Eutychnus section of ChristianityToday, which complained of the poems recently published. But what could be greater nonsense than the esteemed John Keats' Ode to a Grecian Urn? Consider:

“Truth is beauty and beauty is truth – that is all
One knows on earth and all one needs to know.”

Now, Keats' lines are not nonsense in the sense of being meaningless. They are nonsense in the sense of being ridiculously false. As a corrective to Keats and the poetry of Christianity Today, permit me to offer an Ode to a Quartz Crystal.

Electrified, vibrating crystal sone
Thou foster child of science and slow time
Thou geologic witness with a tone
That tells a tale more rhythmic than our rhyme:
When old age shall this generation waste
Thou shalt remain and oscillating go;
Thy message e'er repeating without haste-
Space is time and time is space – that is all
One knows on earth and all one needs to know.

It is unfortunate that literary embellishment is in these two Odes used to inculcate falsehood. It should enforce truth. Crabbed language can express thought quite accurately, and even by its ugliness can sometimes jolt a person into understanding. Further, it is better to have unembellished truth than embellished falsehood. Nevertheless, artistic literature aids one's memory to make the comprehension of a doctrine of permanent acquisition.

The designer of the Delaware River Bridge at Vine St., Paul Cret, told his students, “Ornament construction; do not construct ornament.” This is a good view of art, not only for a great architect, but particularly for a Christian. The principle of art for art's sake is pagan, suitable to its depraved exponent, Oscar Wilde. For a Christian art is subordinate to a higher purpose, and only insofar as it serves that purpose is it justified.