

WHAT IS ART? Part 1

Written by Calvin Fox
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WHAT IS ART? A BIBLICAL ANSWER Part 1

The recent Emmys Award show leads me to re-post one of my [Essays about Art](#) [There are several other Essays on the Subject posted under the Category of The Arts listed in the column printed to the Left of the front page. [The second group is about Iconology.](#)]

There are many books about Art and Aesthetics. This Paper is about only what we can derive directly from the Bible about these topics. Non-Biblical material and insights may be very helpful, but they are not my concern here. In fact, by beginning with the Bible, we will analyze and judge the non-Biblical material from its perspective (not the other way around). Contrary to popular belief, deciding what makes Art truly good is not a matter of personal taste or feelings, nor it is determined by “community standards” and absolutely not by what the Art dealers or Critics say it is. It is common for Christians who write on this subject to derive standards for good art from Phil. 4:8-“...whatever is true, ...honorable, ...just, ...pure, ...lovely, ...commendable, (has) excellence, ...worthy of praise ...”. These are admirable, desirable qualities for anything, but what do they mean exactly? How and by what other standards are these qualities defined? Ambiguity undermines this yardstick.

The Starting Point: God as Artist

A Biblical Aesthetics begins with what we learn from God’s work as an artist. Extrapolating from Genesis 1-2, we have the following basics:

The Purpose of Art

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Being created in the Image of God, it is in every humans being's DNA to be artistic or creative. Being an artist is part of being human. Human beings are artists by nature and that faculty must not be separated or treated differently than the faculties for spirituality, rationality, morality and communality. In fact, a person who is fully human will combine and develop all these faculties together. In this [he] is like God. Art is any endeavor to shape, form, fashion or create anything (including architecture, furniture and crafts, music, dance, painting and sculpture). The finished work is to be judged by whether it glorifies God and gives Him pleasure. Art will do that if it is good. This then is the purpose of Art: to be good and thus please God. And to the Christian, this is the ultimate standard for good Art.

This means that Art does not exist for the sake of Art, let alone for mere decoration or as a status symbol or an investment. It is good in itself, but that "goodness" is inseparable from its God- given, God-serving function.

Good Art

Art is good when it is very well done with technical excellence (unity and balance of composition, content, form, materials, etc) and reveals or reflects the nature or character or the work of God. The natural world as He made it reveals or reflects God, so Art is good when it represents that natural world. Art is good when it benefits human life and does not harm or destroy it. Such Art is to be valued and enjoyed. This means that good art is also moral art. It will have moral or ethical content and purpose. It must also be faithful to reality, not deceptive, misleading or false or phony. Biblically speaking, Art which does not accomplish these very basic functions is not good Art. We reject views of Art that deny or reject all of this.

Art as Self-expression

The Model God gives is Art as a means of self-expression- literally. God's work manifested, revealed, reflected Himself, His Mind and Heart. An artist today can use [his]

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work to intentionally reveal himself to himself or to the world. That would be following God's Model, but doing that is not the highest function of Art. True Art is definitely not about the irresponsible freedom of the self-absorbed Artist to do whatever [he] wants by whatever means [he] wants, without regard to any meaning or purpose other than that. On the contrary, the highest function of [his] art work is to set aside [himself] and faithfully represent God. With the one exception of God, Art is not about the artist. A Christian artist will gladly agree and lose [himself] in his art work for the sake of God