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WHAT HAS ART TO DO WITH EVANGELISM?

by Sharon Fish Mooney

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SYNOPSIS

If book and movie sales are any indication, an interest in art or, at least, an awareness of art from past generations has increased since the 2009 publication of Robert M. Edsel's *The Monuments Men*, and the more recent George Clooney–directed movie by the same title. In both we are introduced to many works of representational art (art that represents identifiable objects) that includes a broader collection of explicitly Christian art than we might have known existed. These appear not only in the form of paintings, drawings, and sculptures but also as altarpieces, stained glass windows, and illuminated manuscripts. This is a good thing, as art and Christianity have, historically, not always been close friends. Reacquainting ourselves with a biblical perspective on art can be an antidote to either an uncritical acceptance of art or an equally uncritical rejection of it. Art can also be an avenue for evangelism and an opportunity for reflection on our own lives and relationships with God.

THE ANGELUS

Holding his hat, the peasant farmer bows

His head. His wife beside him folds her hands

In prayer. A three-tined fork stands in the land,

Well-tilled, that yields up new potatoes;

Some fill a basket, others lie in rows

Upon the ground. We're meant to understand

The parish bell is pealing as a band

Of larks ascends into a sky that glows

With sunset's rays. The triple stroke repeats

Three times, nine peals to summon faithful folk

To cease from toil and contemplate the birth

Of Word made flesh. Day's work is now complete;

Now Angelus bells prompt them to invoke

The God who blesses virgin wombs and earth.[1]

"Yes, that painting by Millet 'The evening angelus,' 'that's it.' That's rich, that's poetry," wrote Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo in January of 1874. "*Find things beautiful* as much as you can, most people *find too little beautiful*" (emphasis in original).[2]

Francis Schaeffer, founder of L'Abri Fellowship, would have appreciated van Gogh's sentiments. Schaeffer noted that the arts "are not peripheral" to the Christian life but should be used by Christians "to the glory of God, not just as tracts" but as "things of beauty to the praise of God."[3] "An art work can be," wrote Schaeffer, "a doxology in itself,"[4] much as Millet's "The Evening Angelus" is a visual poem of praise.

BIBLICAL PRECEDENTS

Depending on the era (and often one's denominational affiliation), Christians have embraced and promoted the visual arts, called them suspect, or even outright rejected them, citing as justification in the latter case passages such as Exodus 20:4 (the second commandment) and Exodus 32:1–10 (the making and worship of the golden calf). Iconophilia and iconoclasm have played major roles in church history. Schaeffer reminds us, however, that Scripture "does not forbid the making of representational art but rather the worship of it."[5]

God gave specific instructions to engage in artistic endeavors elaborately; for example, the construction and furnishing of the tabernacle (Exod. 25:1–9). Bezalel was

the Bible's first artist, filled by God's spirit to make artistic designs (see Exod. 35:30–35) that included cherubim of hammered gold to grace the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant (Exod. 37:7– 9); even the lampstand in the tabernacle was to be fashioned like a flowering tree, a visual representation of a God-created natural and beautiful world (Exod. 37:17–24). Oholiab, like Bezalel, was also described as an engraver, designer, embroiderer, and a knowledgeable teacher of these arts (Exod. 38:23). If God appreciates fine art and fine artists, should not the Christian do so as well?

Gene Edward Veith, Jr., calls us to "consider the brazen serpent"[6] (Num. 21:4–9). This manmade artifact became a specific instrument for proclaiming both law and gospel.[7] God specifically used this work of art to bring about repentance as the people gazed on it. They acknowledged their own sin and God's judgment, and they were healed as a result. Jesus referred to this same work of art to illustrate His own impending death on the cross (John 3:14–15). Without the metaphor of the bronze serpent, would Nicodemus so clearly be able to understand the meaning of Christ's offering of eternal life?

Sacred Prototypes

Artists may inspire other artists. Millet was van Gogh's chief inspiration artistically and, to a significant extent, spiritually as well. Kathleen Powers Erickson notes that Millet's peasant figures were, for van Gogh, "sacred prototypes"[8] and the peasants' "simple acts of plowing, sowing, and harvesting...a kind of divine labor."[9]

Van Gogh's "reverence for the piety of the simple, poor and meek"[10] is evident in his own paintings and drawings where peasants are often paired with concrete symbols of their faith. For example, a wooden crucifix is nailed to a tree in an early painting of miners' wives carrying coal; a picture with a cross hangs on the wall in the home of van Gogh's potato eaters; and an elderly man, hands clasped in prayer, gives thanks for his meager meal. All of these paintings reflect a biblical worldview of honest toil and life lived in the context of faith.

ART AS PERSUADER

Prior to devoting his life to painting, van Gogh's chief desire was to be an evangelist and pastor. "Oh, that I may be shown the way to devote my life more fully to the service of God and the Gospel," Vincent wrote to Theo in April of 1877.[11] In letters to friends and family, he often included hymns, Scripture passages, and poems by Christians such as Christina Rossetti, but he also wrote about visual art. To Vincent, art

could not only be beautiful but also persuade and speak to the deepest needs of the soul and spirit, his own needs, and the needs of others.

In response to a print he had requested based on an oil painting by Ary Scheffer (1795–1858),[12] Vincent wrote to Theo, "God is just, so He will use persuasion to bring those who stray back to the straight path....I have my bonds of various kinds, humiliating bonds some of them, and this will only get worse with time; but the words inscribed above Christus Consolator, 'He is come to preach deliverance to the captives' are still true today."[13] Even without the accompanying passage of Scripture, this painting, a signed version of which now hangs in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, speaks volumes. Surrounding Christ are people in need of deliverance, including a woman weeping over her child, an African slave in fetters, and a sixteenth-century Italian poet Torquato Tasso who suffered from mental illness and was confined to St. Anne's lunatic asylum,[14] in much the same way as Van Gogh was himself confined in his later years. It was a painting he could identify with.

Bearing Witness

An article titled "Mission, Evangelism, Contextualization, and the Arts," published by Lausanne World Pulse, states, "To put it directly, art is not a good preacher—it is, by nature, allusive and indirect. The arts should therefore not attempt to evangelize *per se*, but they can 'bear witness' to truth."[15]

One example of art that bears witness to gospel truth is art based on the biblical narrative of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). One of the most noted examples is Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1668) that prompted Netherlands-born priest, Henri Nouwen, to write an entire book about his own responses to it. Nouwen's initial encounter with the seventeenth-century painting was a poster, pinned to a door in Trosly, France. Two years later, Nouwen found himself sitting before the original life-size oil painting in the

Hermitage, a state museum of art and culture in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Nouwen's inductive meditation on the painting led him alternately to identify with all three main characters in the story: the prodigal, the jealous brother, and the father.[16]

Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo also painted the return of the prodigal (c. 1667/1670).[17] Murillo was a member of the Hermandad de la Caridad, a lay brotherhood devoted to acts of charity. Murillo's prodigal is surrounded by his father's arms and offered a robe, new shoes, a ring, and a fatted calf, prompting the viewer to reflect on the father's (God's) prodigal abundance of great love and our own response to clothe the naked and feed the hungry (see Matt. 25:31–46).

The prodigal son of Rodin's bronze statue (c. 1905)[18] comes to God in need. We see him standing all alone, his tormented, naked body arched, with arms outreaching, lips beseeching mercy and forgiveness—the necessary place to be before he could realize reunion with both God and his earthly father. Following a reading of my own poetry in response to Rodin's prodigal, I engaged another poet in a lengthy conversation about the statue but also the parable that prompted it.

Speaking to the Illiterate

Historically, biblically based and biblically themed paintings, sculptures, and other works of art, such as the Ghent Altarpiece described in *The Monuments Men*,[19] were often commissioned by patrons of the arts. They hung in museums but also graced churches and homes. Pope Gregory the Great (590– 604 AD) once described paintings in churches as "the bible of the illiterate";[20] the iconography of the church was viewed as "a profound stimulus to memory" for the traditional but generally unlettered churchgoer.[21]

Today these same works of art may also be speaking to an illiterate audience, a biblically uneducated but also unchurched audience who may have no idea what a work of art might mean, as they have no knowledge of the Scripture source it is based on. Biblically themed paintings hang in most museums and can provide art teachers at all levels, from elementary school through college, with opportunities to introduce their students not only to important cultural works of art but also to the stories behind the art.

A number of years ago, I taught a course on Christian meditation. During the course, the college had a special art exhibit titled "Sorrowful Images" that included devotional panels by Belgian artist Aelbrecht Bouts.

I assigned students to go to the gallery and spend a minimum of three hours sitting before a work of art they were drawn to and write down their reflections. Of all the assignments in the course, this one yielded some of the most insightful and personal applications. "Man of Sorrows" (c. 1503) by Bouts made an especially powerful impression.[22] As one student shared with the class after reflecting for several hours on "the beads of sweat that trickled down from his crown" and "his hands, open, not closed, to the nails that violently invaded his flesh and his dignity" and "his tears for humanity": "It is one thing to read a Gospel account and form pictures in one's mind about these horrific events. It is quite another thing to witness in such dramatic and compelling terms an artist's depiction of those who were wronged. The artist's impression makes those events so much more real."

SELF-REVELATION OF GOD

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1), the Psalmist declared. All that God has made reflects and communicates His power, His glory, and His creative genius. In Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, he implies that the proper response to the works of God in creation should be honoring the One who created those works, offering Him thanksgiving (Rom. 1:18– 23). John Stott, in his exposition of Romans, wrote, "The creation is a visible disclosure of the invisible God, an intelligible disclosure of the otherwise unknown God."[23]

Stott identified four main characteristics of God's general self-revelation. It is *general* in the sense it is given to all people rather than to "particular people in particular places, through Christ and the biblical authors"; it is *natural*, "made through the natural order" rather than the *supernatural* involving the "incarnation of the Son and the inspiration of the Scriptures"; it is *continuous*, going on day after day and night after night rather than *final* and "finished in Christ and in Scripture," and *creational*, "revealing God's glory through creation" rather than *salvific*, "revealing God's grace in Christ."[24] I believe these same categories have applications to art as a witness to truth.

Art as Witness

Made in the image of God, people have the capacity to create. All works of art reflect to some degree something of the personality and worldview of their creator. If a person has been redeemed by Christ, there should be a sense in which a person's art will also communicate in some way the truth of a biblical worldview in a "general" sense to all people.

Gregory Wolfe, founder of the literary and arts journal *Image*, quotes Flannery O'Connor's advice for the Christian writer trying to communicate biblical truth to a secular world: "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures";[25] but Wolfe also reminds us that Jesus spoke in parables, revealing His identity through indirection as opposed to direct statements about Himself.[26] We are also reminded in Scripture that God does not always reveal Himself in the strong wind, the earthquake, and the fire, but in the still small voice (1 Kings 19:11–12).

As Christian artists seek to communicate the truth of God to the current generation, it may be as much by the act of indirection as by the easily recognized representational. Art that reflects a biblical worldview does not necessarily have to focus explicitly on the person and life of Christ or specific Scripture passages. Everyday occurrences of life and work in both concrete and abstract forms may also be, like a well-constructed poem, a natural metaphor for spiritual truth.

Art is continuous; as time marches on, art may change with respect to subject and style. Explicitly religious art focusing on Christ's death and resurrection evolved over centuries to include other Old and New Testament biblical scenes. Post-Reformation artists focused on portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. Deborah Sokolove reminds us, however, that art is or should be more than just a didactic tool, stripping art of all its affective qualities; art should speak to our hearts as well as to our minds.[27]

Art can also be explicitly creational, revealing God's glory and aspects of His character as a God of beauty, order, and design. James F. Cooper, director of the Newington-Cropsey Cultural Studies Center,[28] an excellent resource for

all Christians involved in the arts, writes about landscape artist Thomas Cole (1810–1848), founder of the Hudson River school of painters who "saw the mission of the artist as a spiritual one, to spread the Word of God through art devoted to nature."[29] According to Cole, "Art in its true sense is, in fact, man's lowly imitation of the creative power of the Almighty."[30] The art of Christian nature artists might be thought of as re-creational.

RESOURCES ON ART

Not all art is good art, and art by Christians is no exception to this rule. It behooves Christian artists to know their craft well. Appreciators and patrons of the arts should expect no less of the contemporary Christian artist than the earlier admirers did of their own then-contemporary masters, such as Rubens or Rembrandt. These were artists who knew not only what to paint but also how to paint, because they had mastered the techniques of their discipline.

One of the most comprehensive websites for reflecting on art with an underlying biblical worldview is ArtWay, whose editor-in-chief is Marleen Hengelaar Rookmaaker, the daughter of noted art historian Hans Rookmaaker. ArtWay's website informs us that Christian art is "not merely art that deals with Christian religious themes, but all art that is rooted in a Christian view of life." It advocates "a thoughtful engagement with art and culture over against an uninformed rejection or uncritical embrace." The website offers a weekly visual meditation on art by well-known or contemporary Christian artists. ArtWay also posts an extensive list of websites and organizations of interest for Christian artists and patrons of the arts, books and articles on art and Christianity, and many helpful resources for churches seeking to integrate art and faith.[31]

There are also a number of journals for the artist concerned with faith integration including *Image* journal and *Ruminate* magazine. Both have websites and submission

guidelines for print and visual artists and many other resources to encourage contemplation on the interface of the arts and Christianity.[32]

The annual VERGE conference sponsored by Trinity Western University, Canada is also an excellent resource for Christian artists.[33] Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) is an organization for Christian artists. Founded in 1979, their website notes that CIVA's purpose is "to cultivate an incarnational presence in culture, equip artists in their vocational calling, and nurture the relationship between the visual arts and the Christian faith.[34]

SEARCHING FOR ANNA

Five years ago I discovered Rembrandt's *Anna*. This was hanging in the Rijksmuseum, the Dutch national museum located in Amsterdam.[35] What struck me at the time was the light, as always a prominent feature of this artist's oeuvre. But this light seemed different from his other paintings. It seemed to rise from within the painting itself, from the book that Anna was holding, open to a page of Hebrew script, perhaps from the prophet Isaiah. Here was a light shining out from the darkness of the painting, revealing the face of Anna, rapt and anticipating the fulfillment of the prophecy of Word that became flesh.

I sat on the visitors' bench before the Rembrandt painting for several hours, getting reacquainted with the Anna I had read about in Luke's Gospel, the elderly widow who never left the temple but served God day and night with prayer and fasting, inspired by the words her vein-lined wrinkled hands were now so lovingly tracing on these illuminated pages. Anna was one of the first evangelists who spoke of Jesus at the time of His purification to "all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36–38).

Four years later, I returned to the same but newly renovated museum and was caught up in the group of weekend tourists viewing Rembrandt's famous *Night Watch* and several of his self-portraits. But where was Anna? No one in the museum seemed to know. After an hour's searching, I finally found her in a small, dimly lit room, next to Rembrandt's portrait of Jeremiah, and I was once again sitting before her alone, far away from the crowds in the other well-lit gallery.

Rembrandt's portrait of Anna draws me closer to the gospel, the *euangelion*. As I get older and begin to look more (and probably feel more) like this aged widow myself, I find myself wanting to spend much more time sitting in museums like the Rijksmuseum gazing on paintings like this one, praying their message might speak to me and to others. Anna calls me to examine my own life as a Christian, in particular my life in the Word. How eager am I to read this good news and then to share this good

news, this *euangelion*, with friends and family, with the students I teach and colleagues I teach with, and with strangers I may come in contact with each day? How dramatic, how compelling, and how real is the event of God's incarnation to me?

Sharon Fish Mooney, PhD, teaches nursing research online for Regis University and Indiana Wesleyan. Her book of ekphrastic sonnets after the art of Vincent van Gogh, titled *Bending Toward Heaven*, is from Wipf and Stock Publishers.

NOTES

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