'After the End of Art'

A Kairos Moment for Christians in the Arts

By David K. Naugle, Th.D., Ph.D.

In his famed *Lectures on Calvinism*, the Dutch polymath Abraham Kuyper said that human beings as the image-bearers of God have the capacity both to create something beautiful and to delight in it.[1] On the basis of insights such as this one, along with other important biblical teachings, the Church of Jesus Christ in the better moments in her history developed and supported a vision for the creative process that left an indelible mark on Western culture.

This is true for several reasons. First of all, this single spiritual tradition provided a theological foundation for artistic activity and appreciation in the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Second, it validated and defined the nature and scope of the artistic calling in the life and work of Bezalel (Ex. 31:1-11; 35:30-36:1). Third, it suggested a set of viable aesthetic principles rooted in the beauty of God and in the design-structure of creation. Fourth, it presented suggestions for the subject matter of art, not only in the narrative and doctrinal content of the Scriptures, but also in the objects in the created world around us, the tragic realities of a fallen universe, and the blessed hope of Christian redemption, which is both "already" and "not yet." Fifth, the Bible itself as a work of art embodies a variety of art forms set forth as worthy of pursuit, including poetry and literature, the visual arts, music, sculpture, dancing, and storytelling. Sixth, the Christian aesthetic tradition also makes it quite clear that art is a relative good and should never be made into a religion or an idol. It sets proper limits on what art ought to be and do.

Overall, the Christian worldview is remarkably enthusiastic about the human creative impulse and supports it wholeheartedly. The former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, is

exactly right when he says in his book, *The Creators*, that the Bible is the greatest contribution to the idea of creativity that the world has ever known (cited by Jerry Eisley in his article below). Yet this grand Judeo-Christian aesthetic tradition has been cast aside in the last two or three hundred years. Something happened, especially in the twentieth century, that has all but destroyed this historic perspective on the arts. It has produced, in the words of David Goa below, a "culture of [aesthetic] amnesia."

In brief, what happened was "modernism" with its alternative vision of the cosmos and human life within it. It is a point of view grounded in scientific naturalism and promoting a thoroughgoing secularization of human life. This metaphysical shift in the West has had profound consequences for how we understand and pursue art. Overall, the consequences have been devastating and degrading in just about every field of aesthetic endeavor. It has, indeed, created a "monster" (to use Crystal Downing's image from her article below).

But as Arthur C. Danto points out in his book *After the End of Art*, this modern ideology with all of its artistic implications has just about exhausted itself. The postmodern critique of the modern project has opened the door to new aesthetic possibilities, even Christian ones. That, in brief, is what this new edition of *Findings* is all about. The Christian vision of the arts has perpetual appeal, but it would be foolish for the Church to fail to take advantage of this open cultural window. Taking their cue, therefore, from Danto's work, as well as the catastrophe of September 11, 2001, the authors of the articles below show that this *kairos* moment in human history is the time for Christians to strut their aesthetic stuff in both theoretical and practical ways. The purpose, of course, is not egotistical ("we have better art and aesthetics than you do"); rather, the goal, as always, is to take great delight in the divinely given creative process, to edify people with truth through art, and to honor and glorify God with the works of our hands.

But before we get to the articles themselves, a brief overview of each is in order so that readers will have some idea of the terrain that lies ahead.

In "Art after 9/11," Gene Edward Veith is somewhat hopeful that the tragic events of that fateful day will serve as a catalyst for desperately needed change in the established arts community that has for too long given itself to aesthetic silliness and has lost contact with real life. In particular, he thinks that we can get hints about what the future of the arts may be like from how 9/11 will be memorialized. The two huge beams of light that have already shone into the night sky from Ground Zero are positive signs, suggesting the themes of illumination and transcendence. For Veith, one thing is sure: "Artists who know transcendence, who know God and understand Him as the source and foundation for all truth, goodness, and beauty, can step into the void and find an audience hungering and thirsting for what they can show them."

In "Is Art Dead or Just Missing? The Triumph of Iconoclasm in the Twenty-First Century," Jerry L. Eisley attempts to answer a question that a friend asked him as they toured the seat of the old Holy Roman Empire and stood before a life-size sculpture of the Last Supper in a cathedral in Frankfurt, Germany: "What happened in the twentieth century?" That is, what happened to the Christian heritage and its rich artistic tradition that was rooted in the Incarnation and spoke meaningfully about real history and the authentic lives of human beings? The answer, he argues, can be seen in the alternative artistic visions of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin in response to the nonmaterial spirituality and self-referential mystical vision of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists and intellectuals.

Even though the twentieth century essentially followed Gauguin's humanistic model, Eisley tells the recent story of an art exhibition titled *Anacostia: A Place of Spirit* which stands in the van Goghian and Christian traditions. Sponsored by the Washington Arts Group, with which

the author himself is affiliated, this exhibition seeks to establish connections between art and real life, especially as it illustrates the dynamic community of the Anacostia neighborhood in the shadow of our nation's capital. It has been on display not only in ordinary venues in Anacostia, but also in Union Station in Washington, D.C., and in The Hague. It will also be presented in May 2003 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Its genius is simple: It infuses painting with meaning and connects art to life. It reveals transcendence. It declares the glory of God. Such is the task of twenty-first century art: to hear this kind of message, as van Gogh did, and pass it on to others.

In "The Public Square and the Culture of Amnesia," David J. Goa presents an overview of the fortunes of the Christian tradition in Western art and describes how our current postmodern cultural context provides an opportunity to recover aspects of that virtually forgotten tradition, which had been jettisoned under the hurricane forces of modernity.

Capitalizing on this spirit of promise, Goa, even before he read Arthur Danto, organized an exhibition in France and North America titled *Anno Domini: Jesus through the Centuries*. In sum, it was an attempt to reconnect museum-goers to their true cultural heritage. For this exhibition, Goa borrowed artistic works from over thirty-five museums and galleries worldwide, presenting Jesus from a variety of perspectives so that people would see Him not only as they, but also as others, would see Him.

Much of Goa's article is devoted to telling the story of this exhibition, the reactions to it that betray our cultural amnesia, and how it is an attempt to restore meaning to art. Overall, he hoped that it would "open the core story of Western Civilization, the story of Jesus through the centuries and do so in a public museum, in the public square."

In "After the End of the Monster," Crystal Downing employs the image of a "monster" as a reference for the modern, secularized aesthetic process. She shows how British author and

Christian apologist Dorothy Sayers, even before the "monster" passed away (Danto's point), was developing an alternative theory of artistic creativity rooted in the doctrine of the "Trinitarian God who created humans to create."

The bulk of Downing's article focuses on Sayers' Trinitarian aesthetic theory. Just as God is three-in-one, so is the artistic process that consists of "the interrelationship between Idea, Energy, and Power: the Idea (like the Creator God) originates the artwork, the Energy (like the incarnated Christ) brings it into physical existence, and the Power (like the Holy Spirit) is manifested within the receptivity of its audience." Downing suggests that this model is manifested in Sayers' own literary work, and shows how it finds remarkable parallels in the aesthetic theories of Roman Ingarden, Hans Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and R. G. Collingwood. She concludes "the Trinitarianism which informs the theory of Sayers led her to conclusions similar to those of innovative scholars in the last half of the twentieth century who were challenging the [monster of the] modernist paradigm."

In "Dauntingly Dantoid: A Philippic on Art of the Last Century," Karen L. Mulder undertakes an exercise in making distinctions between "art-as-such" and our expectations of what art should be. In the course of her deliberations, she examines a variety of possibilities regarding the nature and definition of art itself.

Mulder herself seems to be enamored of Arthur Danto's propositional understanding of art as something that "gives embodiment in a sensuous medium to a thought." Within this framework, Danto can appreciate Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964) as a work of art since it "incarnates, expresses, whatever idea it does express, hence is idea and mere thing at once, a box transfigured if only into the idea of a box" (and Duchamp's *Fountain* attains to the same status). While C. S. Lewis may have scoffed at such so-called "art objects," he still insisted that

extraordinary effort is required to really see "art" and that a viewer must get him/herself out of the way and surrender to it. In any case, there is always a necessity to rely on God—I AM THAT I AM—who made people to be creative as His image and likeness. Thus contemporary self-expression is not evil, but a manifestation of our nature, if not carried to excess. For indeed all artistic endeavor, Christian or not, reflects a beginning, an alienation, and a restoration, that is, the creation, fall, redemption motifs of the biblical narrative.

Finally, as in each issue of *Findings*, editor T. M. Moore anchors our discussion in *terra biblica* by considering the role of the arts in theology and, more importantly, of theology in the arts. Moore believes that each discipline could do with a little more of the other, and this would only help to promote the cause of Christ's Kingdom during this postmodern window of opportunity.

Now on to the articles themselves. As an image-bearer of God, each author below has created something beautiful. Now let us also, as *imago Dei*, take great delight in what we are about to read!

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Notes

1. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 157.