

Dear Students

Most modern people tend not to think much about art at all. They typically accept as the art of their own preference those things imposed upon them by the mere circumstances of place and time. They are unable to see that the art they think they have chosen, say Hollywood cinema or glossy magazines, has been chosen in the way one chooses his first language—unaware that there were other options. The amputee may instinctively reach out with a hand he no longer has, but the maimed from birth will not make such a gesture. For the worldling, however, there is more at work than mere ignorance. The worldling has every incentive to avoid art, or at least good art, so that he will not encounter the glory of a God who reveals Himself in all He has made. For good artists discuss, through their art, God's articulate creation. In the same way that a non-believer who wishes to stay a non-believer will avoid sermons from scripture, so too will he avoid sermons on nature—which is all the best artworks really are.

Christians, on the other hand, have great motivation for looking at art and thinking about it. Where artists succeed, they describe through their various visual languages something about the world around us, whether in the detail of a still life or the pathos of abstract expressionism. Christians are taught to listen to sermons from early youth, but we've had less help viewing these sermons about nature we call art. Happily, the latter skill is easier to acquire than the former and we have similar motivation for doing so. We find it easy to listen to a sermon because we care about the passage preached upon and because God's Spirit works in our hearts to make that passage effective. The same goes for art. We are interested in its content and we believe that, by God's Spirit, its content can instruct us about His character. Ironically this instruction, which sometimes may come from a believer, is as likely to come from a non-believer who, self-deprived of God's special revelation in scripture, has spent all his spiritual inquiry on God's general revelation in nature—though, of course, he would not call it that.

Whether from believer or non-believer, the instruction comes to us like all instruction—in a language that is familiar to anyone willing to learn it. The building blocks of this language do not require flash cards or declension charts, for they are readily apparent in the natural world. Form, colour, composition and line are all parts of God's general language in creation and He has been teaching this language to us since birth, provided we've been faithful not to shut our eyes. The artist employs these same elements to recreate or discuss the visual world around him. As he does, he rehearses truths about the nature of things, and this in turn teaches us, as Paul puts it, “what can be known about God” (Rom 1:19).

As ever

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