

AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVALISM AND THE NATURE OF ART: TWO PROPOSALS ATTEMPTING TO DEVELOP A THEOLOGY OF THE ARTS

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The church has been fighting over the arts since the time of Constantine. The Protestant tradition, following the path of the early Iconoclasts, has been very prone to destroy and downplay art. What is the nature of art? Can art provide any sort of knowledge? How should the arts be viewed? This paper is a proposal of concepts I believe could be beneficial to Christians in approaching the arts. I strongly believe that with the correct understanding of what art is and how to interpret art, Christians will be able to enjoy art to the glorification of God and use art to proclaim the gospel.

Nature of Art

The definitions of what art is, or should be, seem to be as numerous as the sand on a seashore. Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus saw art as an imitation of reality. Plotinus also believed that art should be beautiful. Joshua Reynolds held that art was an enlargement, not an imitation of nature. Ernst Cassirer proposed art was symbolic form. The definition I would like to develop belongs to Theodore M. Greene, who defined art as being an interpretation of reality expressed in a distinctive way.¹ Artists attempt to understand reality in ways resembling, as Greene says, a scientist, philosopher, moralist and theologian. Artists not only try to understand reality they interpret their perceptions and express their interpretations in their work. True artists, Greene believes, never strive to copy or duplicate reality. Artistic interpretation of reality is so

¹ *Art as an Expressive Vehicle*, ed. John Hospers *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, (New York: The Free Press, 1969) 78.

important to art that any concepts without it, Greene says, do “violence to its historical character and to rob it of much of its human import.”²

Etienne Gilson said, “Art is not a kind of knowledge.”³ However, when artists perceive and interpret reality they do acquire knowledge. In his book, *Visual Thinking*, Rudolf Arheim’s thesis is reason (thinking) cannot be separated from perception. He goes as far as saying “vision is the primary medium of thought.”⁴ In *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, Dr. Frame supports this argument with scripture. “To see, hear, or touch the risen Christ involves making a judgment about Him, an inference; it involves reasoning.”⁵ Perception is a means of acquiring knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge requires an interpretation. Dr. Frame states, “We have no access to reality apart from our interpretative faculties.”⁶ Knowledge is gained when an artist interprets his perceptions of the world. This knowledge is communicated visually in the artist’s work of art.

What exactly is this reality that the artist perceives, interprets, and passes on in his work? It is the world created by God existing apart from the viewer. Dr. Frame says, “The Christian knows by faith that this world is not of his own making, that there is a ‘real world’ – a world of facts—that exists apart from our interpretation of it.”⁷ Scripture declares all things in this world were created in and through Christ.⁸ Scripture also declares that this world reveals knowledge about God.⁹ This knowledge, according to Romans 1, is knowledge about God’s invisible attributes, which are perceived clearly by all men. God’s revelation in nature is not contrary to scripture, but supplementary. Cornelius Van Til said, “God’s revelation in nature, together with God’s revelation in Scripture, form God’s one grand scheme of covenant revelation of himself to man. The two forms of revelation must therefore be seen as presupposing and supplementing one another.”¹⁰ The nature artist’s perceive and interpret in their work contains nothing less than God’s revelation, which he chooses to reveal.

A work of art is the visual expression of an artist’s interpretation of God’s revelation in nature. Defined in a theological sense, **Art is a theological commentary on God’s revelation in nature.** It is this definition of the arts I would propose Christians should adopt. I believe this definition of the arts would benefit Christians in at least two ways: it will provide Christians a theological lens through which to view arts, as well as making the profession of the artist an important profession for Christians to encourage and pursue. If we adopt this view of the arts, we can agree with Jeremy

² Ibid, 78.

³ Etienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), 9.

⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 18.

⁵ John Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), 334.

⁶ Ibid, 70.

⁷ Ibid, 100.

⁸ Eph. 3:9, Col. 1:16, Rev. 4:11, Rom. 11:36, I Cor. 8:6 & 11:12, Heb. 2:10

⁹ Rom. 1:19-20, Ps. 19:1-6

¹⁰ Cornelius Van Til, (supplemental reading in Dr. Frame’s ST I class), 267.

Begbie when he says art is “a distinctive, particular, but quite genuine means of knowing the world.”¹¹ We might add knowledge not only of the world, but also of God.

This is a radical definition of the arts for Christians and many questions concerning this definition will certainly be asked. There are three questions I feel need to be dealt with at this time.

- How does extremely abstract art fit into this definition?
- How do we handle art made by non-Christians (sadly, the vast majority of art fits into this category) who suppress the revelation they perceive in nature?
- How do we determine truth in art?

Two quotes from Theodore Greene might help clear up the question dealing with abstract art:

When, therefore an artist expresses himself in his art, he simultaneously and necessarily expresses certain aspects of the environment that has formed him.”¹²

Thus even the doctrine of art as self-expression implies that the subject-matter of art is, in any concrete instance, not merely the enduring self of the creative artist but as much of the objective world as the artist has assimilated in the development of his own personality.¹³

All works of art contain some form of subject matter. It may be only a shape, form, or color but it is still subject matter. This subject matter, no matter how distorted or symbolic was influenced by the perceptions of the artist. No artist can create on their own, apart from any outside stimuli, a work of art.

It needs to be asserted that non-Christians do have knowledge of God. It is knowledge that is suppressed, but it is still knowledge. I think that when non-believers perceive God’s revelation in nature and interpret that knowledge in their art, there will still be an element of that revelation in their work. They might be able to suppress God’s revelation, but they can never escape it. Non-believers might distort, mutilate and manipulate God’s revelation in their work, but I believe there will be some elements of truth conveyed.

I believe Van Til’s Analogical Knowledge is useful to show the truthfulness of art. The truer the work of art is, the closer it is to God’s revelation. Van Til says, “One must be a believing Christian to study nature in the proper frame of mind and with proper

¹¹ Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creations Praise*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 217.

¹² *Art as an Expressive Vehicle*, ed. John Hospers *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 81.

¹³ *Ibid*, 81.

procedure.”¹⁴ For this reason it is absolutely important for Christians to be involved in the arts. It is the Christian who will make truly good art that properly reflects and communicates God’s revelation in Scripture.

Perspectivalism in Art

There have been many theories proposed throughout the centuries dealing with aesthetics. However, no one theory has been able to see art in a holistic fashion. Rudolf Arnheim said, “If one wishes to be admitted to the presence of a work of art, one must, first of all, face it as a whole.”¹⁵ I believe perspectivalism can offer a holistic approach to aesthetics. The strength of perspectivalism is its ability to provide stable, guiding, structural norms, as well as taking into account the cultural, historical, and stylistic situation influencing the artist, as well as the existential response of the viewer. The normative perspective will include aspects of aesthetics that pertain to the work of art itself. The situational perspective of art includes aspects that the artist brings to art. The existential perspective includes elements pertaining to the viewer. These three perspectives all influence each other, one cannot be known without the other. Knowledge of aesthetic forms will enlighten the style of an artist creating a response in the viewer. Knowledge of the cultural or historical situations portrayed in art will create emotional connections with the viewer that will allow him to see aesthetic forms clearly. A strong emotional response will encourage viewers to read supplementary material increasing their knowledge of the artist and aesthetics. The Scriptures are the Christian’s ultimate norm leading and guiding Christians in all areas of their lives.

Normative: Forms, independence, and beauty

The Normative facet in aesthetics will include the governing laws or rules works of art generally follow. This perspective includes elements in art that pertain to the work of art itself. The more a work of art possesses these elements, the better it will be. The Formalist theories of art are included in this perspective. The normative perspective can be seen as a perspective itself. The normative perspective (in the normative perspective) is aesthetic form, for forms are the guiding principles and rules art follows. The situational perspective is the independence art achieves from its creation environment. The existential perspective is beauty for beauty, although a normative for art, each individual will have a different understanding of beauty.

Forms

Rudolf Arnheim lays out ten components of forms in his book *Art and Visual Perception*. His ten components are:

- Balance- the state of distribution when all action comes to a standstill
- Shape- two-dimensional area determined by its boundaries.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, (supplemental reading in Dr. Frame’s ST I class), 282. Van Til applies this statement to scientists and philosophers, but I believe that it can also be applied to artists who, as we have seen, interpret nature as well.

¹⁵ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 8.

¹⁶ Arnheim mentions two different kinds of shapes: physical and perceptual. The definition listed is the physical shape definition. He defines perceptual shapes as the interplay between three things: physical object, light acting as the transmitter of information, and the viewers’ nervous system.

- Form- visible shape of content.¹⁷
- Growth- refers to the development of principles and tendencies in art, such as the development of perspective and depth in art.
- Space- element interacting with shapes, lines and colors giving them definition
- Light- cause of all visual perception, in art it can refer to the brightness of object, illumine objects, and create space
- Color- element in art often providing the most pleasure, distinguishes boundaries of objects.
- Movement- strongest visual appeal depicting objects moving in space over time
- Dynamics- visual forces influencing perceptions
- Expression- modes of behavior¹⁸ displayed in the appearances of perceptual objects.

These elements Arnheim says, “can be seen by everybody.”¹⁹ He also said, “the visual form of a work of art is neither arbitrary nor a mere play of shapes and colors. It is indispensable as a precise interpreter of the idea the work is meant to express.”²⁰ These elements are the basic building blocks to a great work of art. Each element has principles governing their use. Following these principles and elements will produce a visually pleasing work of art.

Independence

Dorothy Sayers, in her book *The Mind of the Maker*, writes about the need for works of art to function independent from their creator. She says, “The more genuinely creative he [artist/creator] is, the more he will want his work to develop in accordance with its own nature, and to stand independent of himself.”²¹ The art world has often raised the question of whether or not a work of art should be considered art based only on the artist who created it. In 1954 William de Kooning painted the seats of his three-seater outhouse in a “marbleizing” effect as a joke before a party. When the house was sold the seats were ripped out and sold as an authentic de Kooning painting. Rita Gilbert asks, “Is a row of toilet seats, painted just for fun, a work of art because a master artist painted them?”²² Works of art need to be considered individually, and need to develop on their own. I believe a work of art needs to stand on its own apart from its creator in order to be considered a great work of art. It is for this reason that the independence of a work of art should be considered a norm.

¹⁷ Form and shape are similar concepts. He uses Wittgenstein example of a triangle to distinguish: A line drawing of a triangle (shape) can be seen as a triangular hole, a solid, a geometrical figure, etc. (forms)

¹⁸ Organic and inorganic behavior

¹⁹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 7.

²⁰ Ibid, 460.

²¹ Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1987), 130.

²² Rita Gilbert, *Living with Art*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 21.

Beauty

Nicholas Wolterstorff said, "A necessary and sufficient condition of a work's being aesthetically excellent is its being beautiful."²³ Wolterstorff finds four properties making an object beautiful: Consonant, bright, perfect, and pleasant. The more an object conforms to these properties the more beauty an object will possess. This concept of beauty should not be understood pertaining only to the visual appearance of an object, but the object as a whole, for true beauty does not lie only in appearance. Wolterstorff points out that using beauty as a standard to judge works of art as been almost all together lost to aestheticians and theorists while been kept most tenaciously in the common, public realm. However, Curt Ducasse said, "beauty is a perfectly legitimate standard in terms of which to evaluate works of art; that it is the standard most commonly and spontaneously used;"²⁴ It may still be argued that beauty, though a norm, is relative to the eyes of the beholder. I believe this statement needs to be slightly modified to "the understanding of beauty is in the eyes of the beholder." Christians, however, do have an ultimate norm guiding (or should be guiding) their theories and understanding of beauty, God. Frame states, "God's beauty serves as a norm for ours."²⁵ Dr. Frame also says, "The beauties of the earth and of human art are significantly analogous to the beauty of the creator of all."²⁶ Our understanding of beauty guiding our interpretations of the arts *must* be based on and guided by God's normative attribute of beauty. Etienne Gilson said, "Beauty is the splendor of truth."²⁷ The beauty of art should be a reflection of the beauty and truth of God in all His complexities.

Situational: Intent, Style, Subject Matter

Erwin Panofsky said, "The 'naïve' beholder differs from the art historian in that the latter is conscious of the situation. He knows...his cultural equipment"²⁸ The Situational of aesthetic perspectivalism is broken down into another perspective: Artist intent (normative), style of the artist (situational), and subject matter (existential). I believe functions as the normative perspective because the intent of the artist will often determine how the artist picks his subject matter as well as determine how the artist will use his/her style. The style of the artist usually derives from the community the artist belongs to as well as the immediate situations affecting the artist during his work. I believe subject matter is the existential perspective, for the artist will have certain subjects that he likes or dislikes affecting his portrayal of subject matter in his work.²⁹

²³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 161.

²⁴ *The Subjectivity of Aesthetic Value*, ed. John Hospers, *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 292. It needs to be noted that Ducasse believes and illustrates that beauty, though a norm in art, is relative to the individual.

²⁵ John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 443.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 443.

²⁷ Etienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 25.

²⁸ *On Intentions*, ed. Morris Weitz, *Problems in Aesthetics*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 290.

²⁹ There are many cases when the subject matter, not the artist's intent, seems to function to function as a normative. However, I still believe that the Artist's intent in his work as well as his personal attitude toward the subject matter will determine how he/she portrays the subject matter. I will confess that my placement of the subject matter in the existential perspective results from my own experience in creating art.

Intent

The intentions of the artist in making a work of art need to be taken into account. In the Student Show at Northwestern Bible College in the year 2000, a student submitted a work of art that was misunderstood because the jurors of the show failed to realize the artist's intent. The student attempted to show the depravity inherent in all men by making a portrait of Hitler and titling it *Self Portrait #1*. The jurors of the show placed this piece in the self-portrait section of the show. Needless to say, a few students were confused, for the "self portrait" of their classmate did not resemble him at all. While this piece stood on its own formally and was enjoyed, the depth of meaning was lost when students failed to understand the intent of the artist. In order to have a fuller understanding, deeper knowledge, and insight into a work of art, it is necessary to know the purpose the intended purpose of work of art.

Style

There have been many different periods and styles in the development of art, each with its own goal, agenda and achievements. Understanding the objectives of a particular style will aid in aesthetic interpretation. Styles have their own characteristics and these characteristics are not arbitrary but portray content and meaning. Paul Cézanne's paintings take on new life and meaning when it becomes known that he was trying to present individual objects situated in space. The Impressionists preceding him lost three dimensional space as well as individual objects in their desire to see the world as a color spectrum. Cézanne's heavy outlining of objects and his large blocks of color are not arbitrary, but attempted to distinguish individual objects from one another emphasizing the uniqueness of objects. Andre Malraux said there is no "neutral style" for, "no such literal copy has ever been made."³⁰ Distinct styles emerge in art whenever anything is created and interpretation takes place. No interpretation will be a perfect regurgitation of the original.

Subject Matter

Rudolf Arnheim said, "Subject matter is neither arbitrary nor unimportant."³¹ The artist picks and chooses his subject matter to serve his own purpose and portrays the subject matter in a way serving his purposes. There have been many paintings of the Madonna over the centuries, the meaning intended in these many paintings of Madonna is not necessarily found in the Madonna herself, but in the way she is portrayed. The meaning invoked in Giotto's *Madonna Enthroned* is far different from Andres Serrano's painting of Madonna made out of elephant dung.

Existential: Instrumental Theories, Empathy, Pleasure

The human response to works of art must not be forgotten. Every person will approach art with certain presuppositions. The Existential perspective includes elements dealing with the response of the individual viewer. I have included the Instrumental theories of art in the normative perspective for they strive for a consistent experience in viewers. Empathy functions as a situational perspective for the viewer

³⁰ *Style*, ed. Morris Weitz, *Problems in Aesthetics*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 263.

³¹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 460.

becomes attached to the situation. Pleasure functions for our existential perspective for it focuses on the sole satisfaction of the viewer.

Instrumental Theories

The Instrumental theories of aesthetics define art as a means of improvement, indoctrination, education or emotional expression. Leo Tolstoy believed art was only art if it transmitted a clear, sincere feeling.³² Monroe Beardsley says an object has aesthetic value if the object has the “capacity to produce an aesthetic effect” and if the produced effect has value.³³ This is the non-subjective element in the existential perspective for it focuses on the work of art’s ability to produce the experience in the viewer. Beardsley believes that art can possess levels of capacity, art has a greater or lesser capacity to produce experience. The object with greater capacity might not have its capacity actualized as much as a work with a lesser capacity. This is similar to parables. Parables have a greater experience capacity than direct commands, however, the experiential depth of a parable is seldom reached by the masses.

Empathy

Vernon Lee³⁴ describes empathy as the projection of our thoughts, emotion, and ideas on objects. These projections allow viewers to describe and enjoy qualities of objects that “inert” objects do not contain. She uses an analogy of the phrase “The mountain rises.” The mountain is not really rising; it is in fact shrinking due to erosion and weather. We say the mountain is rising because we project to the mountain our thoughts, emotions and ideas of rising that we feel looking at it. Empathy, she believes, is not the transfer of the ego, oneself; onto the object nor is it sympathy toward an object. However, I believe that sympathy needs to be included. People will have sympathies toward certain subject matter or artists that will influence their enjoyment of art. Christians will have greater emotions produced by Grunwald’s *Crucifixion* than Muslims due to their differing sympathies toward Christ.

Pleasure

George Santayana thought aesthetic pleasure was sought with no other pleasure in mind, a response to art of objectification of pleasure. Jerome Stolnitz said, “On occasion we pay attention to a thing simply for the sake of enjoying the way it looks or sound or feels.”³⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff talks about pleasure in contemplation of art. There is satisfaction in contemplation. This satisfaction arises in contemplation.³⁶

³² *Emotionalism*, ed. Morris Weitz, *Problems in Aesthetics*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 617. Tolstoy held this theory so strongly that he declared the song of a peasant woman real art and Beethoven’s 101st sonata an “unsuccessful attempt at art.”

³³ *The Instrumentalist Theory of Aesthetic Value*, ed. John Hospers *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 318.

³⁴ Vernon Lee is the pen name for Violet Paget.

³⁵ *The Aesthetic Attitude*, ed. John Hospers *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 19.

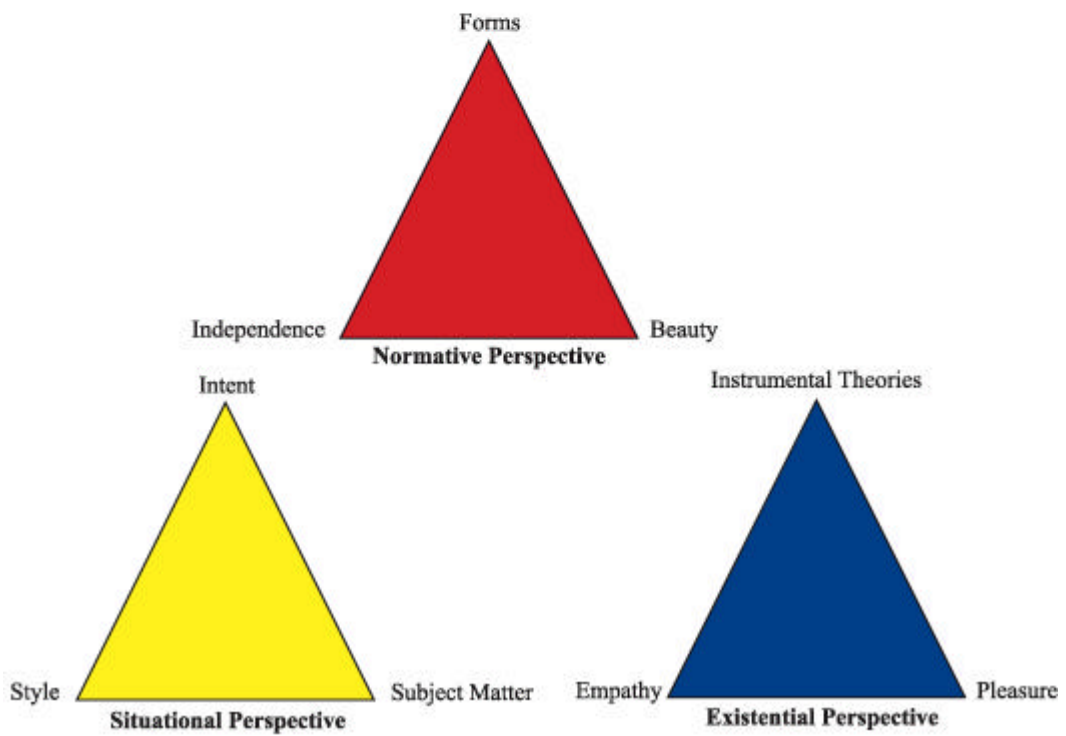
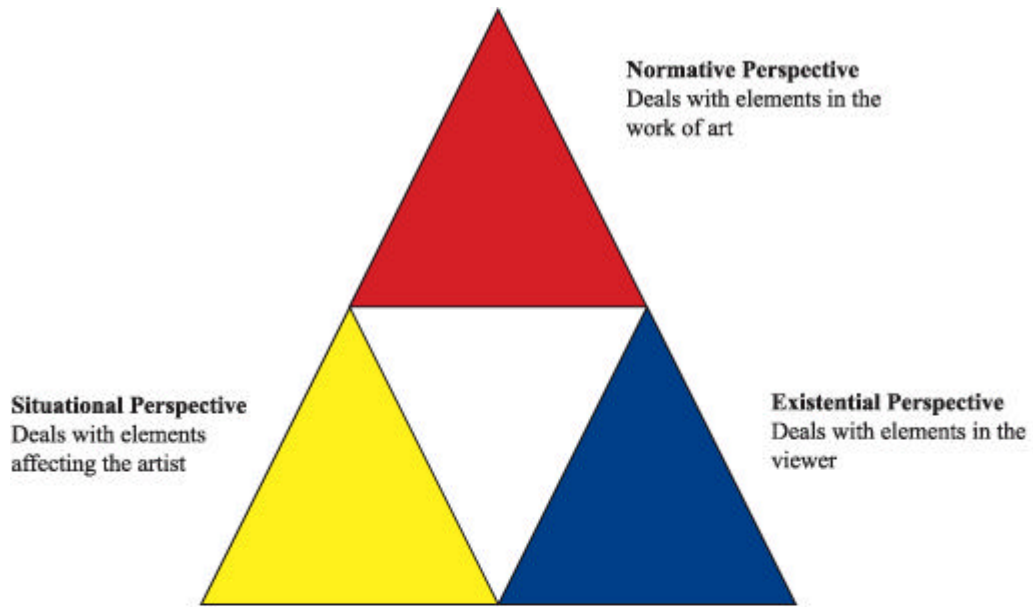
³⁶ The word “in” is important in Wolterstorff view. Satisfaction occurs *in* contemplation not *as a result of*. He believes “disinterested contemplation” to be a major component in aesthetics. I agree with his point that this makes art autonomous and important for its own sake, however I am doubtful that many people can actually contemplate art “disinterestedly”, for there are very few things that can be done *for its own sake*. See pages 34-39 in *Art in Action* for his development of this idea.

There is pleasure in viewing art, pleasure that should be enjoyed and encouraged. Often this pleasure results from the beauty of art. “The presence of the beautiful,” Etienne Gilson said, “is known by the pleasure that attends its apprehension.”³⁷ While there are many “worldly” pleasures that should be avoided, finding pleasure in viewing beautiful art that reflects God’s revelation in nature should be encouraged.

Conclusion

Rudolf Arnheim believes that “art is the most concrete thing in the world.” Indeed, the second commandment warned Israel of making any image to represent God. Images are powerful. They have this ability to open up levels of the soul and convey a depth of understanding. It is this powerfulness that makes images dangerous. Israel was quick in re-imagining God into the figure of a calf. However, the same God who forbade images of himself, commands Israel to make a beautiful temple covered in imagery of flowers, pomegranates, and palm trees. The Ark of the Covenant was not a bland wooden box, but a gorgeous golden creation with seraphim adorning the cover. The image is powerful, but Christians must not neglect it. I believe that the theories laid out above, while far from comprehensive or perfect, can provide Christians with a proper view of the arts and aesthetics. Allowing Christians not only to freely enjoy the arts but as a means to glean theological truths.

³⁷ Etienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), 23.



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