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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

A window upon the world

Engaging with painting

by Margaret Wilson

...those beautiful things which are conveyed through men's souls to the hands of artificers, come from that Beauty which is above our souls...¹

I think of art, at its most significant, as...a distant early warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it.²

Summary

Visual creativity is valued in the Bible as an important aspect of human flourishing. Art engages the mind, intuition and imagination; it communicates, provokes and reveals. Painting, in particular, has aesthetic dimensions like shape, colour and composition, and meaningful ones, representing objects, dealing in imagery and revealing underlying belief-systems. By the use of examples, this paper suggests several ways of looking at painting, including engaging in an analysis of Cézanne's *Mont Sainte Victoire*. It concludes that painting is of immense value, both as an aspect of the proper enjoyment of creation, and as a means of communication from and with the surrounding culture.

Introduction

Christians today generally see classical music or a good book as relaxing, even worthwhile, and writers and musicians are appreciated for their creative gifts. But visual art, sadly, has often been viewed as a luxury, irrelevant or even with hostility.

However, the situation has changed within the last 45 years, originating with the distinctive contribution made by the late H. R. Rookmaaker; not only reopening the doorway to disciplines of art, art history and aesthetics both in theory and practice within a biblical framework, but inspiring many to become visual artists and theoreticians.³

Visual art can give aesthetic pleasure, but also conveys ideas about deep issues in society, understandable even though allusive and symbolic. There is much to gain from engaging with this aspect of contemporary life and culture.

Art in the biblical worldview

The image of God

All aesthetic pleasure derives from the character of God himself. He created a world of incomparable design and beauty for us to enjoy, viewing it as 'good' (Genesis 1). Similarly, we have a capacity to create beauty, though not as God did (infinitely and *ex nihilo*) when creating the universe. But as the *imago Dei*, alongside intellect, consciousness and our capacity to love, we have a mandate to cultivate and manage the earth in all areas of life (Genesis 1:28): to discover and rearrange, though merely in a dependent capacity, the material beauty and design surrounding us. The visual arts throughout history, varied and glorious within the civilisations of mankind, wonderfully reflect something of the character of a creative and loving God.

Clearly the Bible does not deal with paintings as such, yet is shot through with creators of art and artefacts; such as designer-embroiderers, potters, goldsmiths, stone-masons, engravers of gems, and etchers.⁴ The New Testament includes tanners, a cloth-trader and, of course, a carpenter.⁵ Both Testaments reflect the multifarious evidence of God's gracious gift of creativity to humanity.

Graven images

Some have taken the Decalogue's command against image-making as prohibiting all visual representation, therefore art *per se* (Exodus 20:3-5). However, whereas the Second Commandment forbids representations of God himself, this cannot include those of other

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1 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book 10, chapter xxxiv, Hackett, 1992.

2 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964.

3 His writings are being republished as *The Complete Works of H. R. Rookmaaker*, ed. M. Hengelaar-Rookmaaker, Piquant, 2002.

4 Exod. 38:23; Jer. 18:2; Neh. 3:8; 2 Kgs. 12:12; Exod. 28:11; 1 Kgs. 6:29.

5 Acts 9:43, 16:14; Matt. 13:55.

earthly or heavenly objects, as these are seen throughout the Bible, despite the strictures of later Judaism and Islam. Rather, the prohibition relates to direct objects of worship, 'You shall make for yourselves no idols...to bow down to them' (Leviticus 26:1). So art itself is not condemned, but only the idolatry to which it might lead. As Francis Schaeffer said, 'to worship art is wrong, to make art is not'.⁶

Representation

In the Old Testament, the artist-craftsman Bezalel was commissioned by God to construct and decorate the sanctuary (Exodus 35:30–35). Many natural objects were represented, like flowers and fruit decorating Aaron's robe. That his garments were 'for glory and...beauty' (Exodus 28:2) suggests God considers the aesthetic dimension important in this glorious world.

Ezekiel's vision of the restored temple included carved wall panels illustrating palm trees alternating with two-faced cherubim (Ezekiel 41:18 f.). The prophet saw these beings in visions (Ezekiel 10:14), though presumably the artists who engraved them in Solomon's sanctuary didn't; they employed their God-given imaginative faculties in representing them.

Solomon used God's riches to carry out enterprises in the 'secular' area also, like the palace complex for his royal duties (1 Kings 7: 1–12). The House of the Forest of Lebanon was decorated by four rows of cedar pillars reminiscent of a forest: imposing, cool and dark. The large hall was ventilated and lit by lattice windows in three tiers, facing one another on each side: creative, repeated pattern-work.

In the New Testament, Christ's appreciation of the created world's beauty is shown in his eulogising the lilies of the field: 'even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these' (Matthew 6:29). Moreover, he appealed to Moses' bronze representation of a snake to illustrate the power of his own impending death: 'even so must the Son of Man be lifted up' (John 3:14). Christ used a work of art to teach a crucial lesson.

Paul, preaching in the Areopagus to the intellectuals of Athens, saw the Acropolis, covered in the finest works of Greek art and architecture, shrines to their gods. It was their idolatry which provoked him (Acts 17:16). Yet he was conversant with their culture, showing awareness of and accepting that their idols were created 'by the art and imagination of man', condemning the idolatry, not the art. Art reveals both the grandeur and misery of the human condition.

Non-realism

Many consider art 'should' be realistic. Aaron's beautiful, colour-limited robe of scarlet, purple and blue pomegranates alternating with gold bells (Exodus 28:33) would give aesthetic pleasure. But whilst many objects in the sanctuary were their normal colour, the pomegranates, naturally orange-brown, were a non-realistic blue, hinting that beauty and design are important to the Creator as well as 'realism', and suggesting the possibility of non-imitative art generally. Realism was a preoccupation between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries; what Marcel Duchamp called 'a retinal blip'. Before then, artists had other aims; afterwards they realised that, though an option, exactitude is not intrinsic to the nature of art.

Coda

Finally, in this world of design and beauty, God's command to humanity to cultivate and subdue the earth is manifested in areas such as culture, philosophy, and science. Kuyper wrote that the outworking of creation in history involves the progressive unfolding of the unique nature of each social institution and cultural sector.⁷ Therefore culture, including forms of art, is the result of human creativity within God-given structures, and if art is to exhibit God's glory it must do so after its own proper fashion.

It follows that 'art is no fringe...attached to the garment, and no amusement...added to life, but a most serious power in our present existence'.⁸ Areas as divergent as art, politics and marriage are all to be lived as if in the presence of God and, ultimately, through the gospel of Christ, will be restored to his original design.

6 *Art and the Bible*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1973, p.11.

7 Referred to by A. M. Wolters in 'The Intellectual Milieu of Herman Dooyeweerd', *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd*, ed. C. T. McIntire, University Press of America, 1985, p.8.

8 C. G. Seerveld in 'Dooyeweerd's Legacy for Aesthetics: Modal Law Theory', *ibid.*, p.54.

The artist as creator

The artist's creativity

This springs from the *imago Dei*, and expresses itself via the cultural process, worked out in history until Christ returns. So what is the artist doing in creating a work of art, and what goes on in his/her mind? This contains an element of mystery, combining as it does imagination and accident, and causing a change in the artist's consciousness. Any unexpected conjunction of forms or images might spark off the creative process. Picasso could not explain this but said, 'I paint just as I breathe. I couldn't live without devoting all my time to art'. Despite the mystery, three specific wellsprings of creativity are clear.

Intellect There is always a strong intellectual component; the artist has a 'thinking eye'. According to Pliny, 'the mind is the real instrument of sight and observation, the eyes acting as a...vessel receiving and transmitting the visible portion of...consciousness'.⁹

Intuition The artist's aesthetic sense originates in 'the rapid unconscious processing of thought'. Intuition can tap into the rich store of the unconscious mind; the artist's work gestates in a semi-conscious sphere whence ideas emerge fully formed, complete in balance and design.

Imagination Creative artists seem able to 'catch' and hold their imagination in a singular way, powerfully envisaging and representing objects, people and the world, in a way they may be potentially but are not yet. Klee said, 'Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible'.¹⁰ Koestler, the scientist and writer, considered that all creative activities have a basic pattern – connecting previously unconnected frames of reference, making us experience reality on several planes at once. As Medawar stressed of scientists, 'a creative imagination is the privilege of the rare spirit who achieves in a blaze of intuition what the rest of us can only do by rote'.¹¹ Seurat commented that others saw poetry in his paintings, but all he did was apply his scientific method. Both 'intellectual illumination and emotional catharsis – are the essence of the aesthetic experience'.¹²

The artist's aims

Those who consider that art 'does nothing for them' misunderstand what the artist is trying to do.

Artists are *communicators* of their reactions to people, situations, ideas, conveying their experience to others in their community. They are also attuned to life and express the different emotions of others: love, joy, grief, anger, disillusion, even despair. 'They become... painters or musicians...by living in a society where these languages are current...they speak to those who understand'.¹³

By critiquing society, artists may be *provocateurs*, visual terrorists, even; stirring up viewers' reactions, causing them to see the world differently because 'art is meant to disturb'.¹⁴ However, except incidentally, 'art is not...propaganda; it is a form of truth'.¹⁵

Artists may also be *revealers*, though neither artist nor viewer is fully aware of what is happening. The artist 'tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts...they need him [since] no community altogether knows its own heart'.¹⁶

Engaging with painting

Painting is generally able to give the viewer two kinds of insight, relating to aesthetic values and meaning.

Aesthetic values

Pleasure is experienced when the viewer sees balanced arrangements of particular shapes and colours. A number of 'pictorial elements' may be involved (see illustrations):

Pattern The building (Plate 1) is composed of many repeated varying shapes, arched windows and different levels divided into blocks, creating interest yet variety.

9 Quoted by E. H. Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*, Phaidon, 1960, p.15.

10 P. Klee, *The Inward Vision*, Thames and Hudson, 1958, p.5.

11 P. Medawar, *Pluto's Republic*, OUP, 1982, p.45.

12 A. Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, Hutchinson, 1976, p.328.

13 R. G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, OUP, 1938, p.317.

14 Georges Braque, *Pensées sur l'art*.

15 John F. Kennedy, address at Amherst College, Amherst, Mass, 1963.

16 Collingwood, *op. cit.*, p.336.

Shape In the Madonna (Plate 2) shapes are simplified (minimal detail), exaggerated (strange, almond-shaped eyes, long nose) and distorted (long, thin fingers), all increasing the impression of 'other-worldliness'. This icon was created before painting was thought to be about realism.

Composition The viewer's eye is led around in a circular movement (Plate 3), the composition is beautiful and flowing, adapted to the circular painting. Many shapes focus on Mary: angels holding the crown and pointing to the book, the baby gazing up at her face.

Perspective Extraordinary soaring pillars (Plate 4) lead the eye to the focal/vanishing point in the central height of the ceiling.

Rhythm Repetition of the curving lines of sea, sand, and sails of the ship (Plate 5) give a sense of movement and transitoriness.

Light and shadow Contrasts between strong darkness at the front left, and lighter, stormy sky at the right (Plate 6) suggest a depressive mood.

Solidity Lines expressively drawn around the bold, dark forms (Plate 7) create simplified three-dimensional masses, giving a feeling of weight and momentum.

Colour Plate 8 will be analysed below.

Together these pictorial elements can convey to the viewer aesthetic pleasure or delight, like perhaps that of the Creator when he saw that the world was good. The viewer experiences feelings similar to those the artist has expressed in his painting. In this present, fallen world these may include sadness, pain or outrage.

But is painting just aesthetic form, beauty for its own sake, or does it carry further meaning?

Meaning

Panofsky has an illuminating way of understanding meaning in painting, involving three levels, illustrated below from Plate 1.¹⁷

Level one is the viewer's realisation that the shapes or motifs in a painting represent humans, animals, or manmade objects. In the centre of the painting is a triangular yellow-tan tower, red at the apex, adjacent to a green-blue triangle of sea.¹⁸ Leading to it at the bottom are two diagonals, one travelling left past a group of figures, the other bounding the sea towards the right. Further up are darker areas of green-brown countryside, the whole intersected by a horizontal line dividing the painting into land and sky. Every angle and colour leads towards the massive dominating tower.

Level two deals with the imagery or group of motifs representing Genesis 11:4. Here, the viewer identifies the tower as The Tower of Babel (or 'Confusion'), men's blasphemous attempt to build an edifice 'whose top reached the heavens'. The presumptuous king arrives with architect and courtiers, to inspect his work. Architecture and rocks seem fused in the tower's unstable construction; at ground level one side is higher than the other. Man and nature will ultimately fall together into confusion. The lowered horizon increases the tower's vastness; already reaching the sky, its judgement is imminent. Human folly and pride are dominant themes in Breughel's work.

Level three is more specialised. Today's belief-system is secular and the meaning of such imagery may be lost; Breughel's, by contrast, was supernatural, accepting the relevance of biblical events to all periods. This level of 'worldview' is the painter's understanding (often unconscious) of principles underlying basic attitudes of a nation, period and religious/philosophical belief. Such imagery is symbolic representing 'something else', expressed here by the 'meaning' of size and colour. The overwhelming tower symbolises this event's dread significance in humanity's history. Both its colour of human skin and red at its crooked top are like lacerated flesh. Blood-colour down its right-hand side and pallid green-blue sea suggest a body fatally wounded and decomposing. Relationships between rocks, tower and colour symbolise God's judgement on usurpers of his authority by confounding their languages, and the natural world as subject to death and decay. Catholic Spain occupied Breughel's Netherlands, and he feared persecution as a member of a 'heretical sect'. So painting manifests circumstances, the culture and worldview.

These three levels demonstrate how painting expresses meaning; the viewer's engagement therewith gives insight into profound issues of past and present culture. But in terms of artistic creation there is no

17 E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, Harper & Row, 1962, p.3.

18 Pieter Breughel, *Tower of Babel*, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

division in the painter's mind or the viewer's eye between form, imagery and symbolism; they are a unity.

Nevertheless, in contrast to aesthetic elements which are permanently valid,¹⁹ imagery expressed in a particular time and place is temporal, reflecting the painter's personality and culture. Both style and subject-matter of painting undergo change following shifts in ideas and belief-systems. A time-gap of a hundred years is needed before the public's understanding catches up; strangely, that perspective is enough to ascertain which works are 'great'. It is easier to comprehend *past* paintings. In order to understand and benefit from engaging with paintings, there is a language to be learned, a need to think about *ways of looking* at them.²⁰

Two ways of engaging with particular paintings

As an example, two approaches are illustrated below, first by comparing pairs of paintings, then analysing one.

A change in worldview leads to changes in imagery

The Eastern Church considered that icons (Plate 2) were a glass to view the supernatural world, and should be painted according to strict rules.²¹ The figures are simplified, the enthroned Mary looking at Christ who faces the viewer, hand raised in blessing. The colours are symbolic: red robes indicate Mary's centrality; the blue, heaven; the gold space, divinity. Worshippers saw Mary as 'Mother of God', 'Queen of Heaven', even *Mediatrix*, praying to her Son for sinners.

But in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Renaissance fostered a rediscovery of classical civilisation and a new emphasis on the dignity of natural man. The style of imagery changed and Mary became increasingly human (Plate 3), just a beautiful woman with a baby, similar to any other, set in a landscape.²² The subject matter also changed. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* portrays a secularised Madonna, hair flowing free, wafted in from the sea by Zephyrs: the same model was used to portray the reborn pagan worldview.

Western Christianity was both revitalised and divided in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and visual imagery increasingly diverged. Because it is powerful, painting demonstrates (even strengthens) a worldview, and the Catholic Church wished to restore its authority particularly by visions of deeds and glory of the saints (Plate 4).²³ The ceiling is a vast disorganised panorama of figures in motion, stabilised in a rigorous architectonic structure through which they float upwards. Beatified as a reward for educating the young and combating Protestantism, the black figure of Loyola ascends on a cloud towards Christ in the centralised light space.

In Holland, by contrast, the triumph of Reformed Protestantism produced a very different approach to imagery. Painters held up a mirror to nature and life in a world broken, but significant because created and loved by God. Few attempted biblical subjects, except Rembrandt.²⁴ In Plate 5, figures connect each receding stage; first across the light sand on the right, darker sea on the left, towards a church in mid-distance on the dark right-hand hill.²⁵ Then towards a sailing ship, finally snaking right in the direction of the distant headland. Dark clouds descend forming, with the waves, a 'v' focused on the church, the symbolic centre. Painting does not copy nature, but portrays reality in a human way. Dutch artists often allegorised: life as a road the soul travels; the place of temptation a forest; the 'vanitas' of life a skull.²⁶ Landscapists realised that, like great music without words, painting without a 'grand theme' stands in its own right, when beautiful *within God's creation*. This idea had repercussions later in Cézanne's work (Plate 8).

19 For aesthetic values applied three dimensionally, C. Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*, New York: OUP, 1979.

20 Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon, 1995, esp. p.37: vital for further investigation. Also *From Renaissance to Impressionism: Styles and Movements in Western Art, 1400-1900*, ed. J. Turner, Grove, 2000.

21 Altarpiece of the *Enthroned Madonna and Child*, ca. 1200, Constantinople(?) now in Washington.

22 Botticelli, *Madonna of the Magnificat*, 1481/2, Uffizi Museum, Florence.

23 Andrea Pozzo, *Apotheosis of Ignatius of Loyola*, 1691-4, Church of St. Ignatius, Rome.

24 H. R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, Inter-Varsity, 1973, p.17.

25 Ruisdael, *Shore at Egmond-an-Zee*, 1675, National Gallery, London.

26 See Karel van Mander, *Lives*, Vol.3, ed. Hessel Miedema, Davaco 1996, p.254, referring to Breughel.

In the early nineteenth century new 'scientific' thought-forms seemed to challenge supernatural mentalities. Constable made carefully observed scientific studies, beginning a process of painting in colour patches, based on an empiricist worldview, believing only what the eye sees. By contrast, Plate 6, painted in the late 1820s, seems realistic, yet it allegorises nature in the 'old' way.²⁷ While the cathedral overarched by the rainbow (sign of covenant peace) symbolises God's presence, Constable's wife's death had left him desolate, and his earlier colour-schemes with vivid greens and blues became darker, menacing and lowering, a dead tree on the right symbolising his wife, others blown by the wind.²⁸ These later stark paintings show a struggle to keep his faith, and a warning of the desolation of unbelief beyond.²⁹

But by the mid-nineteenth century, a powerful anti-supernaturalist current was running through Western thought. Daumier reinforced this, ridiculing classical myths such as Ovid's 'Pygmalion', whose stone sculpture of a beautiful woman came alive when he prayed to Venus. Her portrayal as hideous put an end to such ideas. So, no longer believing in old thought-forms, Daumier's imagery portrayed mainly contemporary events, often caricaturing humanity, removing its dignity, rendering it absurd. But, inconsistently, he also painted great themes from the past. *Refugees* (Plate 7) portrays stooping, monumental figures hustled through a ravine against a storm-cloud – of persecution?³⁰ Simplified figures, fugitives from anywhere fleeing across Europe or dispossessed by war in Africa, constitute imagery so powerful it transcends time and space. This is the universality of great art.

Analysis of a painting

Cézanne's work, climax to a long development in landscape painting, was radically new (Plate 8).³¹ In late nineteenth-century France, photography undermined the realistic portrayal of the world. Previously, painters employed many aesthetic elements, like line and chiaroscuro; Cézanne, a great colourist, used patches of colour alone, observing nature without preconceptions. Sedlmayr describes this as the mind unfocused on waking, the world appearing like a coloured web or tissue, a 'chaotic space created by colours...inextricably mingled'.³² So the most ordinary scene acquires an original freshness and intensity.

But where is the imagery? There are foreground trees, elements of trees and houses in the middle, a mountain behind; minimal composition, but *no great imagery or symbolism*, just a landscape. Earlier in life Cézanne tried painting the old themes but, unlike Daumier, recognised it was no longer possible, there was no relationship between man and nature, no underlying meaning – an unconscious result of believing the 'new' Enlightenment worldview.³³ In the Renaissance, humanity was 'the measure of things', and in biblical thought humanity is significant by virtue of being in God's image. But to Cézanne his wife was no different from an apple; and in *The Bathers*, the human body was distorted to fit into the design. Humanity was of no more significance than anything else in nature.

The sky *should* be the most distant element, yet extraordinarily, can also be seen near, pulling the eye forward to the foreground. Consequently the canvas looks entirely different, all the colour-

27 Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1829, Tate Britain.

28 Compare brief discussion in R. Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, Thames & Hudson, 1988.

29 See Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, Hollis & Carter, 1957, influential on Rookmaaker.

30 *Les Émigrés*, illustrated in Jacques Lassaing, *Daumier*, Hypérior, 1946, p.41.

31 *Mont Sainte Victoire*, 1904–6, Private Collection, Philadelphia.

32 *Op.cit.*, p.131.

33 View discussed in T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, Yale University Press, 2001.

patches being perceived as equidistant from the picture-plane. After his death this spatial ambiguity led to the picture-space becoming two-dimensional, and much mainstream painting being *only* colours on a flat surface. The window on three-dimensional nature was closed. Although Cézanne's painting can be seen both ways, he refused to abandon nature completely, valuing the creative tension between the two. Yet, opening the door to the non-representational exploration of colour, he is universally acclaimed as the father of modern art.

Outworkings

As argued above, painting gives scope for enrichment through aesthetic pleasure and heightened self-awareness, and also raises thought-provoking issues.

So how may Christians respond? Even for those lacking aesthetic awareness, engagement could be valuable; McLuhan's idea of art as an early warning system indicates art's importance.³⁴ Opening a window on society, it can enable the sensitive viewer to understand the contemporary worldview and where it may be heading.

Then painting, though God's gracious gift, is also a human activity in a fallen world, and may sometimes 'disturb' by portraying falsehood including subjects like the occult. Where distortion becomes perversion, personal contamination may occur. Christians, however, need to train themselves to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:14), discern ideas being expressed, and evaluate them at the bar of biblical truth, while avoiding what may cause them to stumble. Discussing such paintings in groups can be valuable.

It is also important to relate to creative people, otherwise they may have little opportunity to engage with a biblical worldview. For our neighbours' sake the Christian needs to have interests, be able to sustain conversations and form friendships. Involvement in society as 'salt' is another challenge, helping prevent corruption and possibly influence the powerful forces of aesthetic taste and public opinion. Not that secular agenda should dictate to Christians, but society's concerns can be used as a starting-point for presentation of the gospel, as Paul did on Mars Hill by employing Athenian culture and poetry to build a bridge in his preaching.

So 'we are not to behave as though [God] had lost interest in this age, but serve Him within [it]...accepting...the things He gives us richly to enjoy'.³⁵ Visual creativity has limitless potential in the cultural outworking of God's purposes; his original design will be restored and brought into the glory and beauty of the new Jerusalem. Consequently art is full of meaning. As Rookmaaker put it: 'Christ came and died...to restore our humanity...giv[ing] meaning back to God's creation...[which is]...groaning to see the fulfilment of that work. And this is true in the arts as well'.³⁶

34 See above, n.2.

35 D. Kidner, *The Christian and the Arts*, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1959, p.10.

36 'Art needs no Justification', in *The Complete Works of H. R. Rookmaaker*.

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Plate 7



Plate 5



Plate 8



Plate 6



Plate 1



Plate 4



Plate 2



Plate 3