

State of the Arts
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In this clear examination of the arts, Gene Edward Veith Jr. argues that we cannot escape the arts, nor should we wish to; Christians especially ought to participate in and seek to redeem art. Veith argues that art—like all things human—needs to be redeemed, and that Christians cannot abandon the arts to the secular world, but can use them to display God's glory.

Introduction

- Art has become a big business, a political issue, and a fashion statement
- Art has become more and more superficial and elitist
- Appreciating the arts has become a sign of social status and intellectual sophistication
- Many people are ashamed of their ignorance and don't know how to analyze art or pick out good art from bad art
- Many have a fear of being thought of as uncultured or unprogressive... so they will hide their preference for wildlife paintings over abstract Modern and Post-Modern art such as Jackson Pollock's paintings.
- Aesthetic excellence in art has become less important than commercialism and social status

- Christians might think that the confusions in the art world aren't a concern for them, but the arts are important. They permeate our lives and culture. The arts influence us and our children, whether we are aware of it or not.
- The ideas, concerns, and imagination of the times are expressed and communicated through the arts. So, the question isn't if we will live with art or not. Rather, the question is will we live with good art or bad art?
- Just because the arts are corrupt doesn't mean we should abandon them, but art, like all human things, needs to be redeemed. Artists alone cannot revive the arts. Their works must find an audience. So, we have a job to do. As a Christian audience, we can develop a taste for artistic excellence and spiritual depth and reject the superficialities of both pop culture and the art world. Then, by patronizing artists of merit, we can strengthen the church and the arts and influence the culture.

- The arts are a gift from God and should enrich our lives. The Bible describes the gifts God has given to artists. Art should manifest God's glory and enrich His people.
- We have to discern between good and evil, truth and falsehood, and aesthetically good and aesthetically bad art.
- Christians need to recover their artistic heritage and also develop an informed and sophisticated taste that is discerning and appreciative of what is excellent.
- Art reflects the worldview of its creator.
- Art should glorify God and display beauty. Art can glorify God directly (by expressing His Word or biblical stories) or indirectly by celebrating His creation.

- Art that doesn't glorify God can be thought of as bad art. And art that falls short of displaying the beautiful and fails aesthetically is also bad art.

Chapter 1

- The art world had acquired unparalleled status and influence, but its aesthetic achievements are undercut by a philosophical and spiritual bankruptcy.
- Contemporary art is full of outrageous and repulsive works (from Warhol's Campbell soup cans, to sexually perverted performance pieces, and a crucifix in a jar of urine). Yet the art world uncritically accepts such art.
- Who says what is art? Who are we to question the work of creative artists?
- The art world has lost its criteria for making aesthetic judgments.
- Relativism – that moral values and truth itself have no objective basis and are “relative” – has paralyzed the intellectual world, and the art world.
- Artists such as Mapplethorpe want to shock people. But the art patrons refuse to be shocked. They get to experience the exquisite pleasure of feeling sophisticated, belonging to an elite group who “gets it,” while looking down on those who don't.
- Art has become a religion. Art is considered sacred, the source of values and means of transcendence. But this is idolatry and may be the biggest competitor to Christianity.
- But Christianity with its biblical worldview gives a stronger, more vital basis for the arts than competing worldviews of materialism, existentialism, and humanism.
- The standard of shock has replaced the standard of beauty. Beauty, order, and meaning are challenged by new aesthetic theories in favor of ugliness, randomness, and irrationalism.
- Art has become defined as “whatever an artist does” – and so the work of art has become less important than the artist.
- The intellectual world has lost its conceptual basis for truth, and the artistic establishment has lost its conceptual basis for beauty. A Christian view can supply both.
- 2 extreme responses to arts: Iconophiles: made art central to their religious and devotional lives; they confused aesthetic experience for true worship. Iconoclasts: rejected art and even destroyed art they thought was idolatrous. Both extreme responses have some grounding in biblical truth. Iconophiles were right in valuing art (although they took it too far). Iconoclasts were correct in refusing to worship art, but this was also taken to an extreme.
- Problem today is that many accept art uncritically, without considering the quality or significance. They welcome it as decoration, as part of the background, but give no attention or scrutiny. Many know very little about art and don't know what to look for or how to read a visual image. And many Christians have become fine with bland, mass-produced decorations rather than supporting fellow Christian artists.
- Many Christian artists don't fit in- they sacrifice professional success for their beliefs, and the local church doesn't support their work or affirm their gifts.
- Some of the world's greatest art has been inspired by the Christian faith.
- Today, our cultural landscape is in desperate need of Christ.
- Art forms of popular culture heavily influence us (music, videos, tv, etc.)
- Art of high culture has a profound effect on the intellectual climate. Christians need to become critics and makers of art.
- God created every detail of the universe and values art. But the Bible also warns against misuse of art with condemnations of idolatry.
- The fact that Christianity has inspired icon makers and icon breakers suggests that both extremes are grounded in some biblical truth. The Bible set boundaries for art, and it also gives space for beauty.
- Aesthetic experience (the perception of beauty) is valuable. Art can open our eyes to the beauties of creation. Christians have expressed their faith in aesthetic forms for centuries (amazing architecture, worship music, art and symbolism in churches, etc.)

Chapter 4

- The thoughts and ideals of a time and culture are reflected in the arts. As culture changes, art also changes. Walking through an art museum is a walk through the history of culture.
- Studying art helps one to understand culture (the events, politics, values, and worldviews of the time).
- The achievements and blind spots of each era are also evident in the arts (for example- exaggerated rationalism of the Enlightenment can be seen in paintings of that time).
- Artistic literacy is the ability to read works of art and understand their significance, and to be able to respond to them with judgment and taste.
- **Middle Ages/Medieval art**
 - o Art was mostly Christian. The church was the major patron of the arts. Artists were commissioned to show mysteries such as the Incarnation and Resurrection in a tangible way
 - o Medieval art strove to depict Jesus as divine and also human; true God and true man
 - o Medieval art is symbolic rather than realistic. Artists were interested in meaning over appearances, so they weren't as interested in realism. The artists preferred rich symbolism, golden backgrounds, two-dimensional perspectives, and stylized figures
 - o The most important figures were often drawn the largest. This was to express their importance, strength, and authority. They wanted to portray eternity.
 - o Some medieval paintings show an entire narrative in a single view by having the composition showing a series of simultaneous images in one painting. Several moments in the composition convey a single story.
 - o Nonrepresentation design also flourished (seen in tapestries & illuminated manuscripts)
 - o The use of art in prayer was to help the worshiper focus on God/Christ. However, the icons themselves became adored. Some icons became sacred and people ascribed miracles to them, leading to idolatry.
- **Reformation**
 - o There was a drop off of religious art. Paintings now were realistic and of this world; more secular. Figures were real people rather than stylized symbols and backgrounds were realistic and detailed natural landscapes.
 - o In northern Europe artwork now depicted people at their work (farming, shopkeepers, etc.) and portraits. In Italy there was still some religious art, and then classical mythology. The golden backgrounds are gone. Figures are more realistic and three-dimensional, and things were now set in a natural landscape.
 - o With the Reformation, people worked to restore the gospel and put the Bible at the center of Christian life. The reformers attacked the idolatry of the medieval church; then was the onset of iconoclasm (the destruction of graven images/icons and religious images). The resulted in a rechanneling of art.
 - o And since we are made in the image of God, there was the new idea that if one wanted to see the image of God, they only needed to look at a human. Portraits depicted living images made by God not by the hands of men.
 - o Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn (of the Baroque) was one of the greatest Protestant painters. In his portraits, he depicted the depth of personalities. The dignity and value we have from being created in the image of God can be felt in his paintings. One can get a sense of a complex and unique personality in his portraits.
 - o Dutch art also showed the blur between sacred and secular vocations. Reformers believed that all vocations can be a means of serving God (one didn't have to be a priest or nun).
 - o There was an explosion in education as Christians were encouraged to read the Bible.

- The Reformation also had an explosion in music; one of the greatest composers being Johann Sebastian Bach.
- **Renaissance**
 - Rebirth of classical tradition; influence of ancient Greece
 - Most Renaissance thinkers and artists were Roman Catholic and lacked the biblical view of the Reformation
 - Renaissance art stressed ideal forms, spatial organization, rational analysis, and a humanistic perspective. Humanism (man is the measure of all things) was central.
 - Figures were beautiful and idealized, but they were ideal forms, not individuals. They lacked naturalistic imperfections
 - Development of linear perspective along with the use of foreshortening gave art heightened realism
 - Renaissance perspective presented reality from a human's point of view; they had a human-centered point of view. This is opposite of medieval art that tried to present images from the viewpoint of God.
 - Since the Renaissance, reality has often been interpreted according to "how I see and how I see" rather than what I know to be true by reason or faith. Self is the center of the universe. The Renaissance marks the beginning of modern subjectivism. Human perspective came to replace God's perspective. Secular humanism started here-making humans the measure of all things, reducing moral and religious issues to a subjective preference rather than objective truth.
 - However, on the other side of this was the Reformation's insistence on a personal relationship with God and the individual's rights to the Bible.
- **Mannerism**
 - Painting are darker, have odd colors, elongated and distorted figures
 - Compositions have a sense of movement and are no longer static
 - El Greco's paintings are a great example. They are distorted yet passionate religious paintings, with a dreamlike and mystical quality.
- **Baroque**
 - Baroque art has dynamic motion, emotion and energy. It is ornate, busy, intricately detailed, ornamental
 - The Counter-Reformation began a revival of Catholic spirituality seen in the arts
 - Baroque art balances the spiritual and physical, the emotional and rational
 - This spiritualization of the flesh goes along with Christian ideas such as Christ coming in the flesh, the Incarnation, bodily resurrections, etc.
- **Enlightenment**
 - Artists stressed reason, idealism, and there was a suppression of feelings
 - Portraits of aristocrats; Neoclassicism
 - Secular movement
 - Age of reason, scientific discovery, and human autonomy
 - Biblical system of absolutes gave way to utilitarianism – something is good if it works and makes things run more smoothly. (This led to justifying slavery and even abortion)
 - Little emotion in the art. Art stressed order of nature.
 - Achievements were valued. There was emphasis on self-sufficiency, pride, rationalism, and the illusion of self-sufficiency.
 - Portraits are shallow. Humanism resulted in the loss of the human

- **Romanticism**
 - Art stressed the wildness of nature. Paintings depicted storms, violent battles, and emotionally charged portraits
 - Art stressed feelings and emotions and was charged with the artist's personal vision and expression
 - Albert Bierstadt of the American "Hudson River School" painted beautiful landscapes to inspire awe, mystery, and the sublime.
 - God's immanence was stressed, and they found the divine in nature – creation testified to God's glory
 - Romantic artists wanted to evoke emotions in the viewer
 - They glorified nature and the self. They were concerned with fulfilling self.
 - *Realism* was a movement that came in reaction to Romanticism. Artists depicted reality, realism, social realism, and ordinary life... especially for lower classes in society
 - *Pre-Raphaelite* artists such as Rossetti wanted to return to ideals before the Renaissance. Their paintings depicted scenes of fantasy and emotionalism
- **Impressionism**
 - Impressionists painted according to how the eye actually perceives objects; an optical impression
 - Things look out of focus as they try to capture effects of light and color
 - Claude Monet tried to show reality as it appears to the observer, not an objective reality
- **Expressionism**
 - Expressionist paintings had bold colors, violent brushwork, and anguished figures. Artists such as Gauguin and van Gogh expressed emotions and passion with imagination
 - Edvard Munch and his artwork such as *The Scream* and *The Cry* show horror, panic, and anguish. These works honestly reflected the spiritual void that characterize post-Christian culture.
- **Modern Art**
 - Early 20th c.
 - Artists such as Paul Cézanne were concerned with objective form. He wanted to analyze ideal forms that make up physical objects. He intentionally violated rules of perspective, paving the way for Cubism
 - Picasso was the leading artist of Cubism. He tried to show his subject from all sides at once. The body is broken down into patterns of geometric shapes. His paintings became obscure and hard to understand.
 - This was a turning point in art history. Art became cut off from ordinary perception and was dependent on theory. The works of art could no longer stand alone. They needed an explanation – making art become increasingly elitist.
 - Objective forms are broken down and manipulated. Picasso's paintings reduced humans to objects. He worked with fragmentation to break down his objects in art.
 - Both Renaissance optimism and 20th century modern despair fall short of the Christian synthesis that humans are valuable and depraved, and existence is ordered by God.
 - From this point on, art movements attempt to reinvent art.
 - Futurist artists glorified energy, motion, and the machine.
 - Surrealist artists rejected external order for the subconscious world of dreams and nightmares.

- Dada artists tried to violate all artistic norms. Much of their art was “anti-art,” as they tried to outrage the artistic establishment.
- Abstract art with fields of color or pure, nonrepresentational forms flourished. These artists dismissed the objective world as meaningless and turned to purely human constructions. Reality was seen as a projection of the self. Wassily Kandinsky was the first to abandon all references to the external world.
- The art world suffered of Gnosticism. They interpreted salvation as knowledge given to an elite few. The self-absorption and elitism of modern art are related to its spiritual bankruptcy.
- Then the art world turned back to realism. But this realism was condescending... they presented shallow, meaningless, and a cruelly absurd reality.
- Today, artists want to break down the barriers between the artist and the viewer. They try to get a response from the viewer by offending them.
- Today, it seems that all possibilities in art have been exhausted. Everything has been tried. This explains the experimentalism of contemporary art.
- If art has reached a dead end, it isn't because there is nowhere else to go, but because it has taken a wrong turn. Art could find new life when the artists find a new life.
- Artistic expansion has always depended upon a philosophical expansion. Today the art world is becoming a victim of its own narrowness of vision and shallowness of spirit. Art needs inspiration; something to awaken art from its despairing cynicism. It is spiritually paralyzed. Whereas Christianity is a view of the world that is whole and complex, transcending and energizing all of these passing styles.