

How Should Christians Be Stewards of Art?

A Surreponse to Nathan Jacobs

Calvin Seerveld
Professor of Aesthetics, Emeritus
Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto

I thank Professor Jacobs for trying to clarify our apparent and real differences on the nature of artistry as we try together to reach wisdom on how Christians should be stewards of such concrete matters. He has difficulty understanding me, I think, because we subjectively set up our vision of God's world quite differently.

Professor Jacobs is a committed philosophical realist who *believes* that such “intellectual realities” such as “the beautiful” and “the sublime beauty of high-classical artwork” is grounded in reason. He seems to state that if you are not an ontological realist, you must be an antirealist nominalist who “accepts perpetual skepticism” and makes “bald assertions” without “a systematic position on the metaphysical grounding of art.”

This dilemma posed as exhaustive between either embracing ontological realism or holding on to antirealism is a logical fallacy, I think. *Tertia datur*.

My own philosophical position is to ground art-making in a scripturally led understanding of God's world as a theatre of historical operation for which the covenantal Lord God, revealed in the Scriptures, has posited various creational ordinances for us humans to obey if we would live in shalom. Because our God-ordained created world also reveals God's will, the task of humans who would be obedient to the Lord, is to discover the DNA ordinance for genetic flourishing, for example, and God's creational ordinance of just-doing for governing and policing societal affairs, and also God's ordinantial call for us humans to be imaginative. God's multisplendored ordinantial criteria for the varied facets of our creatural lives are neither “noetic reals” (*noetá*) nor “archetypal ideals” and not “moral mandates in Scripture”—Professor Jacobs' apparent roster of

logical possibilities—but are the redeeming Lord God’s creational injunctions for obedient care of creatural life in its many dimensions.¹

Mortals may reason that we should rule politically under the absolute criterion that “might makes right” (Thrasymachus), or “preemptive strikes are legitimate” (The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002, art. 5), but such reasoned directives will distort and impoverish governance of civic society, says a follower of Jesus Christ, in my judgment (keeping both Revelation 13 and Romans 13 in mind). To obey God’s will for instituting a redemptive political peace in society so prone to the evil doing of exercising power without the limits of restorative justice is a challenge fraught with our human failings. That is our Christian calling: to be faithful in responding to God’s creational ordinance for right-doing, backed up by a consciousness that is oriented by biblical eyeglasses.²

Similarly, I believe God calls all humans to be imaginative,³ and if some are gifted to develop the skill to become “professional imaginers,” that is, bonafide artists, they are called by God to be presenting offerings of “metaphoric simulations” (to repeat my defining jargon) that thank God for dappled things and finches’ wings and strengthens one’s neighbors’ playful well-being. This project is what *any* artist is called to produce in God’s world; God is not just Lord of the Christians.⁴

For genuine artwork, artists, art critics, and art patrons also to meet the Lord God’s injunction to be stewardly in our art-making and art-receiving, I mentioned the need to be thrifty and generous. Professor Jacobs takes the matter of stewardship more broadly as “meeting ... moral/spiritual obligations” to “cultivate the potential with which [one] has been entrusted, all with a view to the glory of God.” Those sentiments sound pretty close to mine, but because he boxes me into holding “an uneasy mingling of realism and antirealism,” he judges me to “oscillate among artistic objectivism, moralism, and elitism.” Too bad.

If Professor Jacobs thinks there be no subjectivity among surgeons (and aesthetic judgments), why do medical professionals often recommend getting a second opinion on a potential talus bone graft? If “morality” is an “objective-sphere” for Professor Jacobs, does that mean no subjective discernment enters into determining if and when an abusive marriage should end in divorce?

When I affirm the subjectivity of art critics, I am not proposing subjectivism. Because I deny there to be ontically an absolute intellectual (?) real BEAUTY, it does not entail that I be a relativist. Every person remains subjectively responsible for one’s ethical, aesthetic, and, yes, surgical judgments, which are always made and enacted relative to a specific good creational call from God that orders (grounds) that kind of activity. The embrace of the Creator’s abiding injunctions

are willy-nilly assumed, consciously or not, by various communities of ethical, aesthetic, and medical pace-setting leaders. If the norms posited subjectively by a given generation are skewed, then living and dying under their aegis will likely be lackluster, bitter, or worse.

If a medical establishment were to phase out treating women and men as persons with (psychosomatic) diseases into being primarily instantiations of a malady primed for scientific research, there would be a dehumanizing hell to pay. If marriage devolves under general cultural pressure from being an ethical-binding covenant into a legal dissolvable contract, family cohesion will suffer extra debilitating tensions. If Christian bookstores continue to make good profits from selling *Precious Moments* merchandise, they are unfortunately contributing, I am afraid, to the anesthesia of their many customers who may prefer artistic sweets to roughage.

It is not elitism, in my book, as a teacher of aesthetics, to offer prospective receivers and interpreters of artworks, including theologians, help to mature in their subjective reception of artworks and artistic events. Following the lead given by Hebrews in matters of faith (Heb. 5:11–6:3), my life work has been to coax and urge to discover what those who are involved in the blessing-and-curse artistry can bring to human life—to grow up from being milk-drinking babies to those able to chew and digest solid artistic food. So I can get angry with those who *sell* kitsch (not with those who have it and do not know better) because the suppliers are keeping people imaginatively immature, thus blighting their aesthetic life.⁵

To oppose elitism to a (postmodern) democratic leveling of literature to *écriture* is a misformed dilemma, as Murray Krieger argued long ago.⁶ Opposing only two possibilities (e.g., realism/antirealism) usually oversimplifies matters. Granted, the Sotheby & Christie-run auctioneering art world is a corrupt charade as far as *artistry* goes, as debunking business economist Don Thompson has carefully shown:⁷ the millionaire art-buying circuit is uneconomical casino capitalism at its worst, riveted upon money and prestige. Maybe the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art with its current ArtPrize is caught on the horns of this dilemma? “We offer Big Money too (US\$250,000) for a new artwork in Grand Rapids, but we are not elitist because the prize will be decided by the votes of the common man and woman on the street, no matter whether they understand art or not.”⁸ It would seem more stewardly wise to me to have the art knowledgeable curators of UICA prospect for and sponsor several city-friendly sound young artists to make site-specific artworks, and then have a public confirming vote for additional honor and prizes.

There is one bone I need to start picking with Professor Jacobs on the matter of beauty and artistry, and it goes back to realist philosopher Plato who also believed that beauty is “part of the real” other world behind the visible world we bodily inhabit. The fact that Christian theologians have adapted and long held to the trinity of the good, the true, and the beautiful as (Platonic) idea-structures (now in God’s mind?) does not make it right, anymore than the long acceptance of a rock-bottom, infallible reason saves it from being challenged by Bible-believing Christians as a bogus concept.

I have space only to say this: exaltation of the invisible perfection of (real) Beauty has indeed long handicapped a sound grasp of the place and task of human artistry because art by its creatural nature is sensible, with a ludic quality, in this lived world. Plato’s *Symposium* epitomizes the misconstrual; seekers of Beauty to achieve immortality are encouraged to rise from pederastic love of physical beauty to soulful beauty on to beautiful learning until finally you reach contemplating beauty itself (209e5–212a7). This ladder from sensible beauty up to supersensible, purely mental beauty confines artworks to the lower rungs one seeks to surpass. Many theologians have indeed adopted this paradigm, modified and christened its ascent to end with a *visio dei*. The Orthodox and Catholic Church sacerdotal tradition employs and justifies art this way in its ecclesial settings, especially since the Council of Trent (1545–1563), for this very instrumental purpose: art is to focus believers for rising to an experience of celestial mysteries.

If I am not mistaken, I detect that this paradigm underlies Professor Jacobs’s weeping nostalgia for the likes of Solomon’s temple.⁹ I shall try to honor the faith in that grand sacramentalization of artistry, to which many evangelical Christians are accommodating themselves today, but I must confess I come from the other side of the tracks and with Hans Rookmaaker believe artistry needs no ecclesiastic liturgical justification.¹⁰ I am sorry Professor Jacobs will not help me raise the money for the stewardly placement of the *Cathedral of Suffering* (which he finds “a ghastly proposal”). I am still intent on placing somewhere its powerful artistic, ambiguous symbolic testimony to the atrocities we followers of Christ are allowing to happen so that the theologians, realist philosophers, aestheticians, and the simple people (*laos*, laity) Jesus particularly loved, will not pass by in the fast-lane side of the road on the way to their Crystal Cathedral, but shall stop in their tracks (indeed, aghast!), called to repentance by such stewardship in artistry to do something concretely merciful for our destitute and violated neighbors.

Notes

1. Cf. Dirk H. T. Vollenhoven, *Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. John H. Kok (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2005); and Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained, Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (1985; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).
2. This is John Calvin's fine image in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.6. Cf. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).
3. Professor Jacobs says I did not define the term, but I did briefly define "imaginativity" in footnote 7. Professor Jacobs is also in error when he states that I claim "there is no difference between artistic events and/or products and ordinary life"; that is precisely what I *rejected* as "a bad faith mystification" promoted by Warhol's pop artistry. Therefore, his follow-up accusation that I censure those who dislike "modern art" to be simpleminded, I consider unfair.
4. Professor Jacobs, reducing my earlier response to six propositions, inadvertently reduces the *skandalon* of my thesis: *any and all* artistry is called to be skilled, imaginative constructs and events bringing hope. If artistry fails in such matters (as Christian artists do too), the artwork discloses marks of ignorance, weakness, or vanity.
5. Cf. Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (1980; repr., Toronto: Tuppence Press, 2005), 63–70; idem, *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves, Alternative Steps in Understanding Art* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2000), 153–54, 181–83; Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 128–59; and Betty Spackman, *A Profound Weakness: Christians and Kitsch* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2005).
6. Murray Krieger, *Arts on the Level: The Fall of the Elite Object* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981).
7. Don Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2008). Cf. also Adrienne Dengerink-Chaplin, "Pros or Cons? Young British Artists and the Turner Prize," *Comment* (24 July 2009), <http://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/1128/> (accessed 6 October 2009).
8. Many have pointed out that "public opinion" in our technocratic days can be highly manipulated by partisan organizing in polls and votes. Cf. Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts, eds., *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

9. A small quibble with Professor Jacobs' formulation about "the sublime beauty of high-classical artwork": Because Edmund Burke and Kant's conceptual distinction of the sublime as that which is *not* "beautiful," but is monstrous or terrifying, aestheticians and art historians have usually realized this distinction was an important opening up of the restrictive notion of (Winckelmannian high-classical Graeco-Roman) Beauty.
10. Hans R. Rookmaaker, "Art Needs No Justification," in *The Complete Works of Hans Rookmaaker*, ed. Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker (1977; repr., Carlisle: Piquant, 2002), 4:315–49.