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How Should Christians Be Stewards of Art?

A Response to Nathan Jacobs

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As a contemporary philosophical aesthetician, I come at the problem differently from theologian Nathan Jacobs with his realist philosophical credentials. My response to the question posed, begins by asking a follow-up, defining question: "(How) does the artwork produced serve my neighbors wisely with love in God's world headed for the *eschaton*?"

If the work of my hands and consciousness as artist, art critic, art patron, art onlooker and audience, and aesthetician is marked by a redemptive spirit and somehow bears and/or lifts up the burdens of my neighbor with hope, then we have been faithful stewards of God's creational gift of making and responding to art in our generation (cf. Gal. 5:25–6:2).

When an Inuit carver such as John Tiktak (1963) turns a piece of stone into a seven-inch figure of a tired mother nobly plodding on, carrying her baby on the back, and gives it as a wedding present to a friend, Tiktak has brought joy to a household that struggles in the Arctic cold [illustration A]. When an impoverished Zulu woman intones an ancient pentatonic folk song while washing clothes at the river and other women pick up the voiced melody along the long river bank as they scrub their threadbare clothing on the rocks, the air carries the lovely pulsating stanzas and refrain happily over their labors like a caressing benediction. When master craftsman Rembrandt van Rijn received the commission to do a group portrait of the *Syndics of the Cloth Guild* (1662) and portrays these industrious burghers so diligently busy at their financial dealings they hardly can take time, it seems, to look the portrait painter's way, the art object produced gives crafty imaginative insight into the Dutch ethic of doing business in the

prosperous 1600s A.D.[1] When Georges Rouault (1871–1958) gave prostitutes the opportunity to come into his studio off the winter Parisian streets to warm up, his paintings of their manhandled plight and desecrated bodies are artistic cries to God that parallel the biblical psalm laments: how dehumanizing we men can be toward women!

(A) John Tiktak, Canadian (Rankin Inlet), 1916–1981, *Woman and Child*, c. 1960s, stone. 16.0 x 5.6 x 8.8 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Twomey Collection, used by permission with appreciation to the Province of Manitoba and Government of Canada, public trustee for Nunavut, Estate of John Tiktak. Accession #: 2060.71. Photo by Ernest Mayer, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

For me as theorist, these are examples of artistry that evidence *stewardship* when one conceives of the matter with biblically led reflection. *Stewardship*, we might understand, is "faithful implementation of appropriate resources to beget *shalom*."[2] Tiktak's carving, the Zulu song I heard, and Rembrandt and Rouault's artworks are resourceful artistic acts that answer well God's creational call for humans to be imaginative and to bring aesthetic blessings to our fellow humans in society and into the world at large.

Because this is a journal of markets and morality, readers probably have an interest in several interrelated but distinguishable matters connected with "stewardship of art": (1) Are the artists acting stewardly in their task? (2) Are those responding to the artworks produced being stewardly with their time and money? and (3) Do the criteria of stewardship vary for different kinds of art and/or in different historical circumstances?

First, artworks, as I understand the matter of artistry, are objects or events produced by imaginative humans who have the skill to give media (stone, paint, words, voice) a defining quality of allusivity that brings nuanced knowledge to others who give the object informed attention.[3] Although craft control (*techné*) is basic to art-making, a set of skills is not sufficient to qualify the production of art. I could play a piano piece with metronomic precision and not strike a false note, but the performance will be stillborn as artistry if it lacks an imaginative finish. As a good blues trumpeter would say, "Don't play the notes, man, play music!"

Artworks can be beautiful, like most statues of Buddha, or ugly like the grotesque painting of Christ's crucifixion depicted by Mathias Grünewald in the Isenheim altar at Colmar, France. If a would-be artwork misses being molded to a suggestion-rich metaphoric nature, the object or event could be a great show of technique, an honest burst of angry feeling, a lovely investment, but it is not *bonafide* artistry. Artwork is an entity or act defined by adequately answering in its very structural formation to God's creational ordinance, "Be imaginative!"

An artist is called by God, I believe, to serve the imaginative needs of one's neighbors with artworks.[4] An artful image, constellation of sounds, or staged dramatic conflict, can disclose states of affairs normally unnoticed by people whose habit of daily perception and thought is casual, if not slovenly. To surprise gently such persons with the glory of shadows in God's world or the flaws in a respectable public character such as Othello is the offering a poet or dramaturgic artist presents, especially to the imaginatively handicapped. Many disbelieving, godless artists ply this task well, albeit skewed by a myopic world-and-life view and often driven by a spirit of vanity. Stewardship is only one of the mesh of many concomitant norms an artist grapples with in fulfilling his or her professional (or amateur) art-making activity.

The Bible presents stewards (*oikonómos*) as shrewd managers of goods and of people working for them (Luke 12:41–48; 16:1–13). Stewards have the office of administrator, a householder or landlord entrusted with a commission to take care of the master's valuable possessions (Matt. 24:45–51; 1 Cor. 9:17), like a proactive treasurer (Rom. 16:23). God's parable injunction to stewards is to be a faithful trustee in tasks and open to initiative. This means to me that a stewardly artist will be responsible before God to be thrifty *and* generous with the materials he or she uses to spread around imaginative insight.

That which is stewardly art-making will always be moot. Artisan monks composing icons c. 1100 A.D. were chary in using turquoise because that color was the most expensive, but then that precious purple-blue-green gave the most honor to the saint being pictured. Canadian painterly artist Gerald Folkerts, with Dutch frugal ingenuity, used palette paint left over from his major figurative paintings to concoct whimsical abstract art pieces, as a kind of complementing commentary on the main work, thus piquing viewer curiosity.[5] I have a question—not a judgment—about how stewardly are Christo and Jeanne Claude's huge artworks (paid for from their own monies) in which they wrap up prestigious public buildings or famed coastlines and orchestrate intercontinental happenings by installing mammoth umbrellas in California and Japan. Is the staggering imaginative bang worth the buck of resources spent?

My tentative hypothesis would be: artists whose sound artworks can be multiplied by repeated *personal* performances will tend to be good candidates for honest-to-God stewardship. The multiple prints of a woodcut still reveal the original artist's own hand, and the many covers of Bob Dylan's (1963) "Blowin' in the Wind" song establish an artistic communion that represents fruit of an artistic concept a hundredfold. If the original woodcut or composed song is mediocre or of shoddy construction, the fact that it can be more economically reproduced than a one-off oil painting or architectural monument is not worth much.

I am not talking about "mechanical reproduction," which Walter Benjamin wrongly thought would end idolization of artworks.[6] Benjamin's millenial hope for ending fetishization of art is disproved by the ubiquity of *Precious Moments* kitsch merchandise, and the enormous spendthrift salaries paid to cinematic "stars." I also do not mean to imply Alice Munro's short stories are necessarily a better return on the quotient of words than a Dostoevsky novel. Each kind of artwork has different resources that are needed and appropriate for its faithful implementation—to bring healing or to fascinate with cheer. I realize and cherish the profound imaginative wisdom one can only experience by being bodily present among other persons standing alongside the inscribed wall of lament of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Memorial* in Washington, D.C.—great understated stewardship of black granite placed in a dugout wound of the earth.

Second, what should mark the response of the art public, art critic, and art patron if they would be good stewards of artistry? In my judgment, as Christians we should respond to art as worldly-wise (*phrónimoi*) as snakes in the grass and remain as innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16).

For ordinary followers of Christ to be worthy stewards of artistry, they need to rise to the imaginative occasion artworks present and respond first of all on an imaginative wavelength, not at the level of emotional likes and dislikes or with a judgment up front as to whether its dogmatic content be kosher or not. It may take time for simple, busy Christians to realize that God likes poetry (the Bible is filled with it in Job and Isaiah), God approves of sculpture (unless it becomes an idol; Num. 21:4–9 and 2 Kings 18:1–8), and God asks to be serenaded with songs (both praise *and* lamenting psalms). A Christian *Appraising Artwork for Dummies* manual would ask learners to relax, empathetically take in the subtleties of an artwork, trusting that your basic sanctified sensitivity (cf. *páse aisthései!* Phil. 1:9–11) will give you dovelike protection while your serpentine wariness slips into gear. The more experience a person has in grasping that it is normative in God's world for artworks to transform dissimilars into a similative surprise (N.B. metaphor) that discloses resemblances of an odd sort that provide ambiguous, fine knowledge of nuances[7]—*and that is good knowledge* and has

proven so throughout history—the more such a person will be a reliable steward in reception of art.

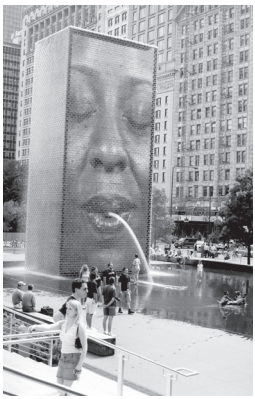
Let me give a contentious but relevant example: Serrano's two foot high cibachrome photograph of a crucifix in urine has a fashionable, chic gold-and-red appearance. That Jesus Christ, the Son of God, voluntarily left heavenly glory to be born through the legs of a woman, to be tortured and die on a Roman cross for my sins (1 Cor. 15:3–4; Phil. 2:5–8) is indeed like being immersed in feces. What a Savior! Descending into the hell of our dirty human excrement. However, Andres Serrano spoiled his ingenious artwork with a "Piss Christ" title, letting his disaffection with the plethora of plastic crucifix junk sold at pilgrimage places in myriad Latin Catholic countries trip him up into a sophisticated, self-righteous dig at the Church, with malice aforethought, as it were.

Stewardly response to art objects will draw wisdom from whatever simulated product is given. One's judicious reception of artworks will normally be mixed, if not conflicted, because human artistry is complex, and the spirit of a piece or rendition may turn its embodied insight off-color. A seasoned, professional art critic such as Peter Schjeldahl will often use an oxymoron, like "this show's violent grandeur," to catch the flavor of Ensor's retrospective at the MOMA in New York.[8] In addition, Paul Borolsky is on track with his plea for art critics to write evaluative art history with flair, in keeping with the prickly, subtle nature of art, rather than assess artwork in pedantic, overly analytic terms, betraying the critic's positivistic lineage.[9]

It is so that Christian art critics remain subjective, as do surgeons contemplating surgery, but one must become the most reliable (subjective) surgeon one can be, plumbing and focusing on the intricacies or shallowness of the art product in one's exposition, so as not to mislead others. It is stewardly to point out Andy Warhol's orthodox Byzantine Catholic orientation with its tradition of icons, to understand his serial silk screen close-ups of famous faces but still brave Warhol's immense popularity by stating, "Warhol represents a typical postmodern stance of non-commitment, a cultivated stance of nonchalance and indifference that looks at the world with a kind of detachment."[10] If anybody has wasted several hours, as I have, watching a cinematic production by Warhol's *The Factory* highlighting the boredom of trivia, one is indeed tempted to characterize such pop art as a bad faith mystification of artistry, falsely pretending there is no difference between artistic events and/or products and ordinary life.

An art patron acts stewardly when the patronage enables artists to serve their neighbors with pertinent artistry that has the wherewithal to make an imaginative difference that has staying power in their lives. To hire a fascinating storyteller for your children's birthday parties, or pay a poet to compose a sonnet for your

graduation or anniversary, or splurge by having a portrait painted of the grandparents before they die, are all stewardly attempts to bring the specialness of artistry in to brighten up and freshen family life with memories that bespeak troth and intimacy.



(B) Jaume Plensa, *Crown Fountain*, 1999–2004, Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois. Photo by Calvin Seerveld.

A striking example of large-scale stewardship in art patronage is Jaume Plensa's *Crown Fountain* (1999–2004) in Chicago's Millennium Park [illustration B]. The two, 50-foot high towers of glass on which 1,000 different Chicago inhabitants' faces are projected every thirteen minutes, smiling, slowly pursing their lips until a stream of water gushes out of their fountain mouths, preside over 2,200 square meters of black granite covered with a thin sheet (3 millimeters) of water. The wealthy Crown family has not sponsored an expensive piece of museum art plunked down somewhere (such as the Picasso and Miro sculptures a few blocks away) but has given a fortune for genuine public artwork that breathes neighborly life into the city—the distinguishing mark of real public artistry.[11] Children scream and splash and frolic in the spurting fountain, adults walk around on water, and tourists and locals mingle friendily; I even saw a young fellow without legs wheel his chair into the melee to get wet, happily joining the crowd.

The very antithesis to the blessing of this patronage behind Plensa's people-friendly artwork is the Cor-Ten steel *Tilted Arc* (1981) by Richard Serra, which obstructed pedestrian passage across a plaza in New York City (until its 120 feet long, 12 feet high blank barren structure was forcibly, amid lawsuits, removed).[12] An art patron has great power to shape the imaginative life of artists and bystanders; patrons, from a Christian perspective, certainly need to know what artistry by nature is and does and also *what time it is* and *the place where* they intend to spread artistic grace.

Third, do the criteria for stewardship of artistic practice and responses, including patronage, vary in history? In my judgment, yes. Agricultural minister Joseph probably altered his economic policy during the seven years of plenty and during the seven years of drought in Egypt (Gen. 41).

It makes Christian stewardly outreaching sense to me to explore artistry such as cinema today where the original finished product can be marvelously reproduced and widely disseminated in our post-literate, techno-mediated world culture.

However, when brilliant color photography of painterly art was introduced, it still did not make grand tours obsolete because to experience bodily a well-sited artwork in a given place, and to come unhurried under its spell, can generate unforgettable influential memories in one's lifetime, for good or for ill.

(C) Britt Wikstrom, *Cathedral of Suffering*, 1993, maquette. Photo by Britt Wikstrom, used by permission.

I should like to enlist Professor Jacob's help to update his wish for the Gothic cathedral experience of elevating onlookers to God, as he puts it. Given the incredible, unprecedented global plight of starving children and women who are our neighbors, and given the ongoing warring destruction fueled by *our* nations' profligate merchandizing of weaponry abroad, I think Christian stewardship in art matters would be well served if we found sponsors, for example, to cast in bronze Britt Wikstrom's *Cathedral of Suffering* [illustration C]. It would only cost about what the first-prize amount is that is being offered by Rick DeVos and Jeffrey Meeuwsen of the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, in their imaginative current ArtPrize competition in Grand Rapids, Michigan.[13]

The *Cathedral of Suffering* is an outdoor installation of five poles and three figures. The vulnerable woman figure is bent to shield herself helplessly from the unstopping attacks; the little child, arms raised to protect its face, has its own solitary grown-up pole; the spread-eagled man is crucified between the torture of hanging from two poles; and the empty pole stands waiting for another victim. Evil and sin in what we humans are making of God's world seem insatiable. As you walk away from this poignant testimony of cruelty, in which *we*, too, are implicated—too devastating for earth to bear it, chillingly unacceptable to the heavens, and suspended in-between placeless—it occurs to you that maybe the empty pole is meant for you.

Such a riveting cathedral could be a step in stewardly artistic reform of "spiritual devotion" tempted to absent itself from the reigning artworld. Anytime Christian leaders abdicate responsibility in a cultural field of endeavor—art world, labor world, political circles—that realm of human endeavor really goes to hell. If the *Cathedral of Suffering* could be located in the small lake outside Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, or maybe there is a quiet spot near Professor Jacobs' Trinity International University in Illinois, I'd wager it would affect redemptively for generations the temper of the biblical, theological, and religious studies programs carried on nearby—and might even become a well-known pilgrimage

place. Such an artwork would reward potential *Markets and Morality* sponsorship stewards with its subtle but powerful testimony that we have indeed heard the angels' admonition to Christ's followers on the mountain top at his ascension: "Why do you remain standing here looking up into the heavens? Go back down to the city and do just deeds, giving away shalom to the destitute *outside* your indoor cathedral, lest it be only the dogs licking poor Lazarus' sores in the city square" (cf. Acts 1:6–11; Luke 16:19–31; Matt. 25:31–46). Artist and patron who understand what the LORD God requires of us (Mic. 6:8) will be generous stewards of artwork that makes Jesus Christ's call to repentance and offer of grace to forgive known allusively in imaginative deed to those who never darken the insides of art museums or churches.

Notes

1. Long ago Swarthmore professor Léon Wencelius claimed, "L'idée de vocation calvinienne explique mieux que toute autre l'unité dynamique de la représentation des hommes par Rembrandt," in *Calvin et Rembrandt* (Paris: Société d'Edition "Les Belles Lettres," 1938), 78–79.

2. My formulation of the point Lambert Zuidervaart makes in "Unfinished Business: toward a Reformational Conception of Truth," *Philosophia Reformata* 74, no. 1 (2009): 6n5.

3. See Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (1980; repr., Toronto: Tuppence Press, 2005), 27: "Peculiar to art is a parable character, a metaphoric intensity, an elusive play in its artifactual presentation of meanings apprehended."

4. See Calvin Seerveld, *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves*, *Alternative Steps in Understanding Art* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2000), 46: "God gave us artistry to open us up to nuances in the creation, to tickle our neighbour's fancy redemptively, to focus attention on things you never imagined existed."

5. Calvin Seerveld, "Redemptive Grit: The Ordinary Artistry of Gerald Folkerts," *IMAGE*, no. 62 (Summer 2009): 57–58.

6. Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (1936), trans. Harry Zohn as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51.

7. "Similation" is a fine coinage introduced by Karl Aschenbrenner in *The Concepts of Criticism* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1974), 313–19, which I adapted in an analysis of "Imaginativity": "The singular, determinative feature of a human creature's

imaginative act may be best described perhaps as *a similation of strange affairs*." Cf. Calvin Seerveld, "Imaginativity," *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (January 1987): 43–58.

8. Peter Schjeldahl, "The Id Factor: James Ensor's Irreality," *The New Yorker* 6 and 13 (July 2009): 90.

9. Paul Barolsky, "Writing (and) the History of Art," *Art Bulletin* 78, no. 3 (September 1996): 398.

10. Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, "Art, Faith and Warhol," transcript of a lecture given at the Jubilee conference in Pittsburgh at the Hilton Hotel and the Andy Warhol Museum, February 2006.

11. Cf. Calvin Seerveld, "Cities as a Place for Public Artwork: A Global Approach," in *Globalization and the Gospel: Probing the Religious Foundations of Globalization*, ed. Michael W. Goheen and Erin Glanville (Vancouver: Regent Press and Geneva Society, 2009), 53–80.

12. Although Ted Prescott does not mention Serra's work, I think his remark is apropos when Prescott contends with James Elkins on the role of religion in the current art world: "If continuity is considered as well as change, a somewhat different story of modern art emerges. In that story some contemporary art looks pretty small." See "The Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art," *Books & Culture* (May–June 2009): 24.

13. A flaw in this well-intentioned project, it seems to me, is that popular vote is not necessarily able to ensure artistic quality or to select artwork that will bring regenerating shalom to inhabitants of a city.