

The Creator's Craft

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Chapter 1

Why Are Artists Compelled to Make Art?

It was the most incredible art show ever presented. Landscapes unfolded in dazzling spectacle with strokes both magnificently wide and infinitely precise: trees, plants, flowers and streams coming together in wild concert as never before seen by man. Then the artist's imagination was realized in the form of a seemingly infinite variety of creatures, each one unique, completing a riotous tapestry of interwoven dominance and submission, dependence and independence.

The audience was but a single man, alone with the artist in this gallery of wonders. As the man gazed upon the artist's work, the artist turned to him with loving eyes and, handing him keys, said, "All of this is yours; as long as you desire to be part of it, you will be its master and shall determine its fate." Then the artist paraded before the man each unique work, honoring its new master even more by allowing him to name each one.

What is this story about? It's an interpretation of the Second Book of Genesis, verses eight to twenty – in which God – the Artist – introduces Adam – the man – to the Garden of Eden, and brings before Adam every creature of every form “to see what he would name them.” The interpretation is appropriate because there has always and forever only been one Artist who was ever truly creative – capable of creating something from nothing at all – and that Artist was, is, and will be God.

God Himself sees His work as “craftsmanship”, and we are urged to follow in His ways. In Proverbs 8, we see “wisdom” – the understanding of how things should be – portrayed by Solomon as the “craftsman at His side” when the world was created. God's creation, therefore, is the result of craftsmanship:

Prov. 8:22 through Prov. 8:31 (NIV)

- ²² “The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
²³ I was appointed [or *fashioned*] from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began.
²⁴ When there were no oceans, I was given birth,
when there were no springs abounding with water;
²⁵ before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
²⁶ before he made the earth or its fields
or any of the dust of the world.
²⁷ I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.

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30 Then I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
31 rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.

The beauty and glory of God's creation – especially when considered in its original incarnation, before sin sullied the world – is in fact the true source of inspiration that all artists experience. Everything we know, everything we consider, everything we postulate are based upon our frame of reference – what God has created to surround us in every moment of our lives. We call ourselves “creative”, but in truth our art is ultimately derivative.

If God is the only Artist who is truly creative, then where does that leave those of us also referred to as “artists”? If as a graphic painter I can portray a landscape such as nothing ever seen on this earth, isn't that creative? If as a songwriter I can craft music and lyrics that have never before been heard by man, am I not being creative?

There is an old joke about science that can serve as a reply:

One day a group of eminent scientists got together and decided that mankind had come a long way and no longer needed God. So they picked one scientist to go and tell Him that they were done with Him. The scientist walked up to God and said, "God, we've decided that we no longer need You. We're to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things, so why don't You just retire?"

God listened very patiently to the man and then said, "Very well, but first, how about this: Let's have a man-making contest."

To which the scientist replied, "Okay, great!" But God added, "Now, we're going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam."

The scientist said, "Sure, no problem" and bent down and grabbed himself a handful of dirt.

God looked at him and said, "No, no! Get your own dirt!"

In fact, no matter how abstract or imaginative we artists can be, we are always playing with God's dirt. The most imaginative landscape is nevertheless a landscape – the very concept of a physical setting of any kind is based on what God has created in reality; the most unique song I could write would still use His notes and His concepts to communicate what I want to say.

Christian artists often will acknowledge this reality by attributing all of their work directly to God. Praise one of these artists for doing good work, and he or she will reply, “It wasn't me, it was God.”

As the teaching coordinator of a songwriters workshop at our church, I once led a critique session in which a middle-aged woman – a newcomer to our group – submitted a worship song on tape and distributed lyric sheets for us to follow. I noted that she had no copyright notice on the lyric sheet, and in fact had not even put her name on the page.

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When the song was finished, I began the critique by asking her, "I notice that you did not put your name on the lyric. Why is that?"

"Well, I didn't write this song – God did," she replied.

To which I replied, "Ma'am, if God had written this song, it would be perfect. This needs work!"

I am not proud of that crack – especially since that poor woman never returned to our workshop – but I do believe I spoke truth that day, however insensitively. God may speak through our art, but the quality of the connection is a matter of craft – and the development of that craft is an issue of how well we steward His gift of art (this will be discussed further later on).

The Nature of the Gift

God has given artists a talent, a special gift that allows us to experience the world differently than others. It is not a gift only for our own pleasure and enjoyment, however, because along with that gift came the ability to *communicate our perspective to others*.

This undoubtedly comes as no surprise to you, the reader; the ability to communicate a fresh and original perspective is what is commonly valued about artists. But I would contend that the *purpose* of those gifts is to praise and worship the Creator – and to that assertion many would groan and dismiss my words as coming from just another Christian who believes that everything should be about church.

That is not at all what I believe, but let me clarify my position through a bit of fantasy.

Imagine for a moment that all the universe and everything in it was one uniform shade of green. If that were the case, would we be able to "see" green? No, because without any contrast to distinguish it, we would be unaware of its existence. It would be a constant without variable, impossible for us to detect by its very universality.

However, even in that context, there would be a way that we could "see" green even if nothing but green existed.

We could *see* green if we could *imagine* red.

The ability to imagine beyond the immediately apparent is one of the artistic gifts. So, too, is the ability to interpret or portray a beautiful sunset.

Our world is anything but a monochrome setting, but there are creatures who move upon, above, or under its surface who show few signs of appreciating its beauty. Man seems to be alone in his tendency to stop everything and gaze, awestruck, at the majesty of a sunset, at the thundering chaos of Niagra Falls, at the sweep of stars across a sky of ink. There is a little bit of artist in every one of us, in that we can appreciate beauty; where the artist differs from everyone else is that he or she can interpret that beauty to give it a unique focus, draw our attention to it so that we experience it as we have not experienced it before, or communicate it so that we can share in it.

Thanks to the artist, we keep rediscovering our world. What could easily become stale and commonplace can achieve a magnificent significance through the lens of a

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master photographer; what could easily become forgotten is instead preserved for centuries for audiences as a cathartic experience delivered through a classic drama.

The Purpose of the Artist: Praise

In short, the purpose of the artist is to reflect, portray, and praise the work of the Creator so that others will be constantly stimulated to experience His wonders and to give thanks to Him. Our work is eternally derivative – that is, we are always in the position as artists of seeking to emulate or interpret or apply that which the original Artist has already created.

When our goal is to portray beauty, we praise His work; we attempt to feature some new facet or some perspective that allows others to experience it afresh.. When we seek to convey experience, we give thanks for His work; we enable others to become aware of the joy and blessings in our lives, including the blessing of our very existence.

The Bible itself is quite clear about our role as artists:

Psa. 150 (NIV)

- ¹ Praise the LORD.
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.
- ² Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.
- ³ Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
- ⁴ praise him with tambourine and dancing,
praise him with the strings and flute,
- ⁵ praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
- ⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD.

We are to praise Him with music “for his acts of power”, “for His surpassing greatness”. We are, in other words, to praise Him for what is evident to us within His creation:

Psa. 19:1 through Psa. 19:4 (NIV)

- ¹ The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
- ² Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
- ³ There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
- ⁴ Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

Psalm 19 makes its case for the evidence of God's glorious craftsmanship. The heavens and the skies are portrayed as inescapably representative of the Creator's Hand; it doesn't matter what language we use or how we communicate – whether we are

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immersed in the culture of Paris or isolated as a savage in a jungle, we still clearly hear the message of His creation that God is praiseworthy and the author of all we see.

Psa. 104:31 through Psa. 104:35 (NIV)

- ³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works-
³² he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,
who touches the mountains, and they smoke.
³³ I will sing to the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the LORD.

We are to praise Him not only for those events and acts evident in the original Creation, but also for what we experience on an ongoing basis. We see his power and greatness in the thundering of a storm, in the wonder of a newborn child, in the tender strength of a fragile flower.

Many years ago, Jim Keiter and I wrote a song to capture the turmoil of emotions I felt as I watched my daughter grow. Here are the chorus lyrics to "Love You Enough":

I can't hold back the wind
Keep a leaf on its limb
Or close the rose that's open to the sky
Somewhere down the road
I'll have to let you go
And love you enough to say goodbye

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In that chorus, Jim and I captured something especially magnificent in God's craftsmanship: that in the weakest of His creations – in the tumbling of a leaf in autumn, or in the blooming of a rose – there is a strength that cannot truly be defied. Certainly we could glue the leaf back to the limb, or enclose the rose so that it cannot open, but in doing so we would only be masking the reality of what is really happening that cannot be stopped. There is no amount of human strength that can keep an autumn leaf on a limb on its own, no amount of human power that can keep a living rose from going through the process of blooming.

I have always been fondest of that song among all those I have written, and in my new view on art – with the idea that our job as artists is to find fresh perspectives on the Art of God – I now understand why I feel that way about it. Jim and I found truth that has, to the best of my knowledge, never previously been expressed in quite that way. We have glorified the Creator's work, just as we were meant to do.

The Purpose of the Artist: Thanksgiving

We are also to develop and maintain a sense of gratitude towards the Creator:

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Psa. 92:1 through Psa. 92:4 (NIV)

- ¹ It is good to praise the LORD
and make music to your name, O Most High,
- ² to proclaim your love in the morning
and your faithfulness at night,
- ³ to the music of the ten-stringed lyre
and the melody of the harp.
- ⁴ For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD;
I sing for joy at the works of your hands.

Eph. 5:19 through Eph. 5:20 (NIV)

¹⁹Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Col. 3:15 through Col. 3:17 (NIV)

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Gratitude is born when one is able to recognize that what has been given – and accepted – could have been withheld. The old saying “There but for the grace of God go I” has been murmured countless times by those who have witnessed tragedy or the outcome of it. Life usually provides only a limited number of such revelatory moments, however; through art, the opportunities for us to appreciate our blessings is vastly extended.

The Range of Art

It is true that most exhortations to praise and thank the Lord refer to the use of musical instruments, but that was also one of the more prevalent arts of those days – and, for that matter, most of the Psalms were written by a songwriter (David). However, I would also argue that the constant reference to nature in those verses also comes from the sensitivity of the artistic eye. If David had been a graphic artist (And who knows? Maybe he was!), he probably would have tried to portray the heavens and skies declaring the Lord's glory and proclaiming the work of His hands. It seems obvious that David successfully tried to invoke those images through his words; it only makes sense that he would have done so through paintings had he been capable.

There are many examples of the divine appointment of artists throughout the Old Testament, all employed to honor the Lord (e.g., **Gen. 4:19-21 – the birth of Jubal – “the father of all who play the harp and flute”**; **1 Chr. 15:16-22 – the appointment of musicians for the Ark**). In constructing the tabernacle, Moses tells the people:

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Ex. 35:30 through Ex. 36:1 (NIV)

³⁰...See, the LORD has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³¹ and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—³² to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ³³ to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship. ³⁴ And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. ³⁵ He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them master craftsmen and designers. ^{36:1} So Bezalel, Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the LORD has given skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary are to do the work just as the LORD has commanded.”

In a treatise entitled “Heavenly Art” that is part of the Basic Jewish Studies Unit, Dr. Dov Schwartz - professor of Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv in Israel – addresses the above scripture:

The Mishkan [Tabernacle] in the desert fulfilled the same purpose that would later be filled by the Temple; it was the spiritual center of the People of Israel, the pinnacle of the service of G-d. Constructing this important center demanded the total involvement of an artist who excelled at drawing, knew the art of sculpture, and was a craftsman experienced in casting, engraving and "all manner of artistic work" (Ex. 35:33). His task would be to create 'divine art'. Our sages taught: "A candebrium of fire came down from Heaven" (Menachot 29a). According to this midrash, Art is the imitation (Greek - mimesis) of an absolute ideal. The artist's obligation was to study the heavenly models which had been shown to Moses when he was on Mount Sinai and give them a human, artistic interpretation. Just as the Mishkan was the height of religious service, so was it also the height of achievement of the visual arts in the generation of exodus.

<http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Eparasha/vayakhel/schwartz.html>

Likewise, dramatic renditions, stories, story songs and epic poems, all contribute an element of adventure, humor, danger, tragedy, joy and exhilaration to our lives that might otherwise be missed in an average, “civilized” life. Is comedy an art? Well, does it help us see the “little things”, the everyday aspects of life that we take for granted, in a completely different light? Yes it does – and the art of being a comedian almost certainly represents one of the most difficult crafts to master.

Jesus understood the power of portrayal to make us aware of our relationship to our Creator. When the people surrounding him heard his stories, they carried away with them a concrete image that illustrated a message that might not otherwise have been understood had it been delivered only in expository form. When Jesus told a story, he undoubtedly intended for his listeners to visualize the narration in their imaginations; when a play, musical, television show or movie draws us into a vicarious experience, we are left at its end with a vivid memory of a perspective we might not otherwise ever have considered.

Consider how Jesus explained to his disciples why he spoke in parables:

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Matt. 13:10 through Matt. 13:11 (The Message: New Testament)

The disciples came up and asked, “Why do you tell stories?”

He replied, “You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn’t been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That’s why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight. In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they’re blue in the face and not get it.

Jesus portrays the people as being unreceptive, not able to see what is right in front of their faces – not unlike being “unable to see green” because no one has suggested the idea of “red” to them. The stories helped them make connections between the seemingly disparate earthly and spiritual worlds.

Is that artistic? Every one of Jesus stories could also be described as “metaphors” for the Kingdom of Heaven – and the use of metaphor is one of the staples of artistic craft. When we analyze a Shakespearian play, or we think about a movie such as *The Truman Show* or *Braveheart*, we are inevitably drawn to its significance as a metaphor for our own lives.

Conclusion

Any work of the artist is derivative of God’s Work as the only truly creative Artist. We are grounded and dependent upon the context He has created for us, but we are gifted to be able to view – and communicate – his Creation with fresh and original perspectives and insights, so that our audiences will be constantly re-stimulated to appreciate - and be thankful for – and be inspired by – and praise Him for – the wonder of His Love and the glory of His Power.