



4-12-2018

A Christian Response to Art and Literature: A Very Short Guide to Images and Texts

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Recommended Citation

Graff, Andrew (2018) "A Christian Response to Art and Literature: A Very Short Guide to Images and Texts," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 18, Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol18/iss1/1>

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Keywords

Cedarville, Cedarville Review

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EDITORS' FOREWORD

*A Christian Response to Art and Literature:
A Very Short Guide to Images and Texts.*

HOW DO ART AND LITERATURE GLORIFY GOD?

The Lord said to Moses, “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft.” (Exodus 31: 1-5)

To understand the role of art in the hands of a Christian artist, begin by asking this: How does a bridge, built by a Christian engineer, glorify God? The bridge is a thing well made, trustworthy, beautiful and purposeful in its own way, and crafted by a Christian who can be salt and light in the spheres of influence God gives him. Art and literature glorify God in the same way. Paintings and poems are things well made, the arts a vocational and Spirit filled calling in which Christians can be salt and light. We design and craft, cut and carve, filled with the Spirit of God.

A common expectation is that artworks and literature must somehow preach in the same way sermons preach: Presenting the gospel entirely or explicitly, using Scripture or the Christian walk as a constant subject matter, etc. This expectation is mistaken. To ask an artwork to preach the way a sermon preaches is akin to asking a bridge to preach the way a sermon preaches. Bridges can't preach, and we don't expect them to. Bridges are the wrong medium

for writing sermons. The same is true for artworks. But that's not to say bridges and artworks have no evangelical function whatsoever. They simply function differently. For example, the abstract artwork of 21st century artist Makoto Fujimura does little to preach in the sense we often think of preaching. However, his non-representational artwork does speak exceedingly well the language of his medium, the language of artists, and has allowed Makoto—a sincere and vocal Christian—to be salt and light within an international art community that might otherwise have none at all. Makato designs and crafts, cuts and carves, filled with the Spirit of God. Makato is salt and light. His paintings are his bridges.

But what of subject matter, and message? Christian writer and thinker Gene Veith provides a great way of thinking about the art and literature produced by Christians:

It is not that authors are deliberately writing about their philosophy in life...rather they are writing about exciting stories or love or tragedy or something funny. Nevertheless, in doing so, they are presenting their subjects through the lens of their particular view of the world, that is, through their worldview (“Reading and Writing Worldview” 2002).

In the Cedarville Review, you will find artworks depicting subject matters that are exciting, lovely, tragic, and perhaps funny, too. We can best respond to these works by understanding the spirit in which they were created. Each work was produced by a Christian artist in various stages of training, working within the language of a specific medium. The subject matter may vary to surprising degrees, but if we look close enough we will find that the presentation and treatment of subject matter is similar. Each work has a Christian worldview behind it. And each work can be viewed as a well-built bridge bringing Christian voice into wide spheres of influence.

HOW IS ART'S SOMETIMES UNCOMFORTABLE CONTENT EDIFYING?

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12 – 14)

Consider the relief and edification that comes from learning that another in the body of Christ struggles in the same way we struggle—a similar season of doubts, a shared weight of anxiety, a fear of man, a grappling with recurrent temptations. In bold and honest and forgiving community, we find great comfort and tremendous growth. Art and literature depicting uncomfortable content can often offer this same sort of confessional partnership. To immerse oneself in art and literature is like taking a field trip through fellow hearts and minds. And to meet fellow hearts and minds, share in their triumphs and messes, can both comfort and sharpen. To hide behind fig leaves is alienating, and neither true nor right. But how is the Christian artist to approach difficult subjects in his work? Can he depict dark subject matter? Can he write a story about doubts and fears, about the failings of the flesh, about people behaving in less than Christ-like ways? Francis Schaeffer, in his essay “Perspectives on Art” presents a balanced and Christian answer:

The Christian worldview can be divided into what I call a major and a minor theme...First, the minor theme is the abnormality of the revolting world...if we are at all honest, we must admit that in this life there is no such thing as totally victorious living. In every one of us there are those things which are sinful and deceiving and, while we may see substantial healing, in this life we do not come to perfection. The major theme is the opposite of the minor; it is the meaningfulness and purposefulness of life...God is there, God exists.

In these lines, Schaeffer expresses the Christian artist's unique ability to depict both the minor and major themes of life. There's no way around it: Darkness exists in this fallen world. Even in the triumphant Christian life, the flesh still calls out to be gratified. Temptation and stumbling still occur. As we learn to walk, Christ forming in us, bold and honest Christian art can help us navigate complexities in life in the same way bold and honest fellowship does. Christian artists are capable of depicting the minor theme through the appropriate lens of the major. We acknowledge waywardness, but we do not celebrate it. We depict fallen nature, but we don't become gratuitous in doing so. The Christian artist can examine life truthfully, both its darkness and light. G.K. Chesterton wrote that "fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten." In this spirit, the Christian artist depicts life as it often is, because he knows the fullness of what it can be.

In addition to the edification that comes by honestly entering a shared human struggle, art and literature also offer the opportunity to imaginatively empathize with others whose struggles we do not necessarily share. C.S. Lewis wrote, "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself...I see with a myriad of eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do." The art of bearing with another as he walks and grows—perhaps especially if he is not yet where he ought to be—is of critical importance to establishing a compassion response. Christian art does not always depict the ideal state of man. It depicts characters and scenes as they are sometimes found in this world: Broken, in progress, hungry for a redemption only the Christian knows.

We invite you to enjoy the breadth and honesty of the works within. They are bridges and images, depictions of humanity in its various states of fallenness, salvation, and sanctification. The works provide opportunities for community, edification, compassion, and forbearance.