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# The Most Exciting Time To Be A Catholic Art Critic

**God makes no junk**

By Dan Vaillancourt

**O**ne of the most profound and insidious prejudices of our time is lookism, the belief that good looks in people secure for them advantages in health, friends, and wealth. A pretty or handsome face, according to numerous studies, is perceived as healthier, friendlier, and wealthier. Lookism, however, does not limit itself to just the structure of the face. It relies on other characteristics, such as smooth and blemish-free skin, white teeth, muscular V-shaped bodies for men, and petite hourglass figures for women. Lookism defines beauty as idealized corporal appearance. If we have good looks, we try to perpetuate them at all costs, and if we do not have good looks we spare no cost to attain them. The two groups pour into the makeover and fashion industries about half a trillion dollars each year.

By contrast, Oxfam and the World Bank estimate that 25 billion dollars each year would prevent six million children (under five) from dying of preventable diseases. Lookism not only names a prejudice but it also defines a madness gripping so many of us. If ever there was a time for an alternative view of beauty, that time is now and that view is the one developed over the centuries by Catholic thinkers. The time may be right to do even more, to propose a Catholic aesthetics.

## Aesthetics

A brief detour into the meaning of aesthetics is the first step. A minor eighteenth century German thinker, Alexander Baumgarten, coined the word "aesthetics" (from the Greek adjective *aisthetikos*, pertaining to sense perception) to designate the science of sensuous knowledge, which included the study of items like beauty (perfect sensuous knowledge), the ugly (defective sensuous knowledge), and the arts. Other thinkers of the eighteenth century, notably Edmund Burke and

Immanuel Kant, added the study of the sublime to their writings on beauty and the arts, and consequently expanded the content of aesthetics. In the first half of the twentieth century, I.A. Richards and the New Critics school initiated a movement that led to the development of multiple approaches to art criticism, giving birth to the philosophy of art criticism and metacriticism (philosophical explorations of concepts employed by art critics). Thus aesthetics today encompasses three broad areas: beauty (and related experiences), art, and criticism. Catholic thinkers have contributed significant ideas to each of these three areas, and these contributions suggest that we should be speaking of a Catholic aesthetics.

## Catholic View of Beauty

God makes no junk, the saying goes. In creating the world, God created it beautiful. But the Scriptures rarely employ the term "beautiful" when referring to creation, God, or Jesus. The preferred word is "glory" (*kabod* in Hebrew, *doxa* in Greek), a splendor of God or Jesus revealed in creation. Simone Weil describes this glory-beauty as a small rip in the surface of the world, always present but requiring an effort to be seen as splendor. To many people, this view of beauty (as glory) may be sufficient, but Catholics demand more.

The incarnation — God becoming flesh, dying on the cross, rising from the dead, and ascending to the heavens — beats in the heart of faith for Catholics. It also animates the Catholic view of beauty. Pope John Paul II in his 1999 letter to artists claims that the incarnation "unveiled a new dimension of beauty." However, he cloaks this new dimension in the garb of mystery and

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the ineffable, in effect clouding instead of clarifying beauty for Catholics. Three years later, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI) in a message sent to a meeting of the ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation articulates clearly the “more” in the Catholic view of beauty. In describing the face of Jesus—slapped, spat upon, bleeding from a crown of thorns—he says, “there appears the genuine, extreme beauty: the beauty of love that goes ‘to the very end.’” Thus, Catholics view beauty as the divine splendor of creation and as more,

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as the call of love that goes to the very end, whatever that end may be. For Jesus, that end was to die on the cross. For us, that end may be to squeeze into the little rip in the surface of the world and to see, to really see, the splendor of every human being.

The Catholic intellectual tradition overflows with thinkers exploring aspects of this view of beauty. As far back as the Medieval period, thinkers like Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure, and Aquinas focused in their works on the beauty of God but, unfortunately, left underdeveloped their comments on the beauty of creation. In the twentieth century Catholic writers influenced by the work of Aquinas developed a more detailed and coherent philosophy of beauty. Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, Francis Kovach, Martin Vaske, among others, discuss beauty as a transcendental of being, that is, being manifests itself as beautiful. However, creation does not exhaust beauty. In other words, beauty identifies a dimension of creation and, at the same time, points like a vector to its source, absolute Beauty or God. But no discussion of beauty in the Catholic tradition is complete without mention of its superthinker, Hans Urs von Balthasar, another writer deeply influenced by Aquinas. His magnificent seven-volume (4,000 pages) *The Glory of the Lord* puts an aesthetic face on theology by arguing for the sensuous dimension of a beauty-glory identified as the glory of Christ. Even Pope Benedict XVI (writing as a Cardinal in 2002) believes that knowledge of this view of beauty “is a pressing need of our time.”

## Catholic Art

In his letter to artists, Pope John Paul II describes the relationship between the Church and artists as an unbroken two-thousand-year “fruitful dialogue.” He reviews how the Scriptures and the Church have inspired artists to create art forms and art objects of unparalleled beauty, naming as examples Gregorian chant, Gothic cathedrals, Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, Michelangelo’s

*Creation to the Last Judgment* on the back wall of the Sistine Chapel, the sacred music of Pierluigi da Palestrina, the inspirational music of Mozart and Beethoven, and so on. It is hard to imagine art objects as varied, plentiful, and consistently beautiful as the ones associated with the Church. However, this fruitful dialogue must not be read exclusively in the past tense. Pope John Paul II claims the dialogue offers “rich promise for the future,” too.

Perhaps better than anyone else, artists with their art can make the world of the Spirit perceptible, thereby creating a bridge between the secular world and spiritual experience. This promise of Catholic art rings true and loud for two reasons. First, in a world increasingly overrun by lookism, Catholic art can pry us away from our lipsticks and colognes du jour, and nudge us toward the spiritual where creation participates in beauty. Second, Catholic art can promise hope. The end for Catholics is transparent: redemption of the body and person in Christ. But the steps taken in history to attain that end are not as clear. Catholic art can imagine the way and make it perceptible. Beauty and hope, these are the two planks in the bridge of Catholic art.

Not an empty promise, the future of Catholic art looks bright. Some brilliant lights in the area are the young Jesuit scholastic Trung Pham and Sister of Saint Joseph artist Mary Southard. Pham’s life-size St. Clare sculpture in the St. Clare Memorial Garden on the campus of Santa Clara University is breathtaking. Its forward tilt, slightly elongated neck, and left hand all stretch toward the heavens to unite with God, and the surface of the cast-bronze sculpture—rough and uneven knife scrapes—shimmers in the sunlight throughout the day, creating an unearthly glow around the statue. Where Pham employs a religious figure to create his bridge to the spiritual world, Southard dispenses with the bridge altogether and places her figures—sometimes women and children, other times solid-color silhouettes—in the midst of the cosmos, a place of the Spirit. In her multimedia “Child of the Universe,” for example, Southard paints a young girl in a white dress in the middle of a stunning blue-green universe; the girl’s arms are open, her head is tilted back, and she is moving through and absorbing energy from the cosmos. Indeed, a banner that crosses the canvas reads, “It takes a universe to make a child.” Other words describe the infinite connectedness of this fragile human being: “Born of God, made of stardust, a marvel filled with promise.” Perhaps Southard, who describes herself as an Ecozoic artist, has it right.

The destiny of our species is to learn, in the words of Thomas Berry, to be “present upon the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner.” (See the artists’ websites for these and other art works: [www.trungphamstudio.com](http://www.trungphamstudio.com) and [www.marysouthardart.org](http://www.marysouthardart.org)) Pham and Southard represent



only two of hundreds of outstanding Catholic artists, who are busily at work imagining and making perceptible the future's lustrous promise.

## Catholic Art Criticism

Is the art object well done? What criteria are employed to determine its quality? The criticism or evaluation of art has been with us at least since 380 BCE, when in the *Republic* Plato gave his reasons for barring artists from the *polis*—their art works stirred the emotions instead of encouraging the pursuit of truth. In the early history of the Church, a similar controversy embroiled artists and

their works: do religious images assist or hinder the development of faith? The Nicaea Council in 787 decided that religious images were beneficial, since they could point to what they represented, as the visible Jesus “points,” in a sense, to the invisible Son of God. The Council’s support of artists and their works cemented a partnership between Church and art world that endured for more than a millennium.

This partnership also dovetailed the criticism interests of Church and art world for centuries. During this period, mimesis dominated the thinking and vocabulary of critics. Does the art object imitate well its real-life original? At times the question varied—from imitate to represent, resemble, or even improve the original—but always mimesis controlled the context of the discussion. Finally, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a perfect storm of currents, including the philosophy of taste (as in good taste, a standard of judgment) and impressionism in art broke down mimesis as a standard to judge art.

Unfortunately, as mimesis left the scene of criticism, so did the Catholic critical voice. Even a Catholic thinker as renowned as Jacques Maritain could do no better than to say in 1935 in *Art and Scholasticism*, “If you want to make a Christian [art] work, then *be* Christian.” Besides being cir-



Marquette University Haggerty Museum of Art.

cular, this advice is parochial, closing off from consideration powerful critical theories that would soon rise all around him, for example, personal subjectivism (x is good because I like it), relativism (x is good because many people, perhaps experts, have decided that its composition or color palette or...make it good), and instrumentalism (x is good because it produces in people a valuable experience).

But the future of Catholic art criticism can still be illustrious. It is the future of open questions, fresh starts, and novel insights. Is the art object good because it participates in a creation that is all good? Or because it provokes the perceiver “to the very end”? Or because it directs observers to the tenets of the Catholic faith? Or because, in the words of the Second Vatican Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, it turns people’s “minds devoutly toward God”? There is no more exciting time than today to be a Catholic art critic—and a billion Catholics are waiting to hear this critical voice.

Catholic aesthetics brings together from the Catholic intellectual heritage three traditions—beauty, art, criticism—that must speak loudly and persistently to people throughout the world. If lookism speaks to one ear, Catholic aesthetics must make itself heard to the other ear. The need is great, and the time is now. ■