

Education Lectures 2001

The Teaching of Art:

A Biblical Perspective

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This booklet is based on a lecture given at
Emmanuel College, Gateshead,
on Thursday 27 September 2001 by Mrs Heather
Bowditch

Heather Bowditch has taught Art for the last eleven years at what is now Grindon Hall Christian School in Sunderland. The school is an independent Christian School taking children from the nursery years right through to sixteen. It is expanding significantly with pupil numbers expected to exceed 300 over the next few years. Previously Heather was a training officer with the Manpower Services Commission.

Introduction

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My art education was unbalanced and uncreative. My secondary education seemed to consist of the teacher setting us tasks – like paint a foggy scene and leaving us to grapple incomprehensibly. I was tempted on those occasions to apply grey paint evenly across the whole of my sheet of paper. No guidelines were given and we didn't have a clue.

It seemed to be a case of if you can do this instinctively then you're okay. If you have to think about it – you're not an artist. It reminds me of a quote. Os Guinness said in his book "Fit bodies fat minds," that some people think "for a living artists do so for the love of it." It rather makes the artist out to be someone who does not have to sweat out his calling.

But artists *do* have to think and think long and hard! What inheritance had been bestowed upon me? A fragile one built on mystique and other worldly abilities not brought about by a sound education. Not only did the teacher fail us; most of the group failed the A level. Perhaps the examination board did not share our teacher's belief in talent being aird no matter how paltry the opportunity to do so that existed. I left with a determination that I would teach art and not assume that good practice could be imbibed like some celestial ambrosia.

I have to say that my college education did not do much better. With hindsight, the approach adopted was that of investigation and development. At its best, some amazing things were created from cling-wrap and milk cartons. At worst it filled no vacuum where we underachieved spectacularly.

In Nanson's words, a teacher at Leith School of Art, such a scenario: 'leaves students to develop untouched by tradition, creates a situation where there is no explicit teaching, tutors with no commitment or energy, and leaves confused students vastly under-performing.'

Art History

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How did we arrive at this point? It's worth looking at our art history to trace the development of art thinking and how we have landed up here with art which is almost beyond meaning and measure.

Constantine to the Enlightenment

From the time of Constantine to the Enlightenment, Christian ideas dominated art for the simple reason that the Church had a powerful grasp over every aspect of life. By and large, people understood their lives in terms of creation, fall and redemption. Painters routinely tackled subjects such as Madonna and child, the Crucifixion and the torments of hell.

The role of artist was not what we see today. Artists, prior to the 1500s, were primarily artisans – which meant creating things according to rules – the rules of trade. Artists were skilled craftsmen who worked with materials to produce a chest, an iron gate, a bronze candlestick, a wall hanging. Such crafts people were members of guilds and learnt a trade – handing down traditional patterns and schemes, techniques and tools. This work was not a subject of intellectual argument; it was an expression of the very lifeblood which held communities together. Within the strong guidelines of rules and standards there existed freedom built on prior hard-learned knowledge.

Post Enlightenment

The role of artist changed in the 18th century during the Age of Reason or Enlightenment. Art now became termed 'fine' (interestingly this is what the Drawing and Painting Syllabus is now being relabelled by the NEAB exam board) and the church by and large perceived the arts as a form of decadence to be shunned.

Spurred by the Romantic movement, crafts were relegated to a secondary status, while the true artist was elevated to genius with an almost mystical air and seen as producing almost sublime work. This revering of the artist took the place of religion. Rookmaaker reminds us that “*art became art with a capital “A”*”, a high and exalted calling. “*Yet precisely in that pseudo religious function it becomes almost superfluous, something aside from reality and life, a luxury - refined but useless.*”

Descartes and Baumgarten between them separated the rational and solid from the indistinct and aesthetically perceived to produce two cultures that remain with us to this day - the sciences and the arts. The arts new role took on an other-worldliness and drifted towards an elite position – the world of the connoisseur, thus disconnecting art from the normal nitty gritty of life.

Subject matter changed – before this time no works of art were made per se. They were functional and didactic, fixing our minds on the highest values and exaltations. A starry night by Van Gogh was suddenly just as important as a Madonna by Raphael.

This eventually led to non-figurative art possibly aided by the introduction of photography which did the realistic bit quite well. Why compete with a photograph if you are looking for reality? New approaches were being forged and the old set of values and traditions including Christian narrative was lost.

Rookmaaker uses that time worn phrase “*art for art’s sake, a kind of irreligious religion where religion has no clearly defined practical role.*”

People now need art to be explained to them - it is a high and lofty matter which is beyond mere mortals. Art now becomes a rarefied province. Only the rich can afford it. You don’t buy art unless it’s a print from IKEA, Athena or Matalan. It becomes divorced from real life.

Post-modernism

Post modernism emerged out of what Brand and Chaplin refer to, as “*the minor theme of pessimism and cynicism*” as it became obvious that wars were depressingly prevalent and Oxfam shows no sign of closing due to lack of business.

This minor theme led to the disintegration and subverting of modernism where old values were finally washed away and anything was acceptable because no one really cared. Post-modernism is the denial of any overarching framework to our lives as summed up in Neitzsche’s nihilism. A grand story no longer existed – just my/your story. ‘Post-modernism knows no commitments’. It offers a do-it-yourself, new-age approach to everything.

‘Given the ever-present absence of God’ concluded the atheist art critic Peter Fuller, *‘art, and the gamut of aesthetic experience, provides the sole remaining glimmer of transcendence.’*

There followed a paring down to what appears to be the essential primeval bones of life. Artists felt themselves freed from the need to follow any tradition or formal aspects to creating art. Both Newman and Rothko’s work appears to be an exercise in the paring down to the real essence of art, stripping down to what they considered to be purity.

Peter Smith sums it up like this: *‘The painting, as it truly opens our eyes, will have resonance and echoes which are unpremeditated, unsought and unrecognised by the artist himself.’*

Turner poignantly paints the contemporary scene as one in which *‘the movie director, actor and rock star are far more readily listened to than the preacher or theologian. We know more pop songs than hymns, more movie plots than Bible stories. There is more fanfare surrounding the opening of a new city art gallery than the dedication of a new church or cathedral...’*

Art - the necessary luxury?

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Art should be helping us see things as if we had never seen them before. *'We need to clean our windows'* said J.R.R. Tolkien, *'so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity'*

Turner quotes Nick Park, creator of Chicken Run, as warning that as an artist *'you have to respect your audience and not to not try to do their thinking for them'*. Pete Docter of Toy Story fame, believes as a Christian that art is essentially about expressing those things which cannot be captured in language. *'You can say it in words, but it's always just beyond the reach of actual words, and you're doing whatever you can to communicate a sense of something that is beyond you'*

The best art does not instruct people what to believe but enables them, for a short while, to see things differently, and the Christian can enable people to glimpse the world through eyes that have been touched by Christ. Of course this does not mean having to tell the whole story, as Muller suggests, *'Christians who are artists, need to feel free to show just a fragment, a section, of life'*.

Peck and Strohmmer remind us that the special power of art is caught up in creating the barest outline of a situation, the experience, the vision; just enough clues for you, almost unconsciously, to work the rest for yourself. (A process used by our Lord in the parables). This is why artistic activity does not appear to offer a 'clear message'. If it does, its cover is blown. Its power gone.

It is also about developing a new perspective – CS Lewis was fond of saying that he believed in God like he believed in the sun: *'Not because I can see him, but because by him I can see everything else'*. We have a choice – to paint, draw, sculpt, write, act, teach about the light, or about what we can

see from the light. And then there is the redemptive process of 'healthy subversion' that Os Guinness talked about, where you turn situations and people around by showing them the weakness of the other position. Art can be a powerful means of doing this.

Turner reminds us that a lot of our art making is instinctive. What compels us to create is something inside that needs to get out. That is why the quality of our interior life and motivation, as Jesus stressed, is so important.

Some art is joyfully playful. But even this is a crucial component of art and perfectly in keeping with a Christian understanding of creativity. You only need look at the seemingly infinite variety of species in the animal kingdom ...can't we see God at play in the designs?

'God' said Picasso 'is really only another artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant, and the cat. He has no real style. He just keeps trying other things.'

Bartholomew describes art as '*having its own kind of service to neighbours just as do medicine, plumbing or fishing. It is not an optional luxury for a society but is comparable to the minerals and vitamins in one's food; one can survive without them for a time but it is unwise and ultimately dangerous to do so*'. There must be a pathway made between the high 'cost a lot of money in a gallery' art and the popular art practised for the masses. The commercialisation of artistry tends to dumb down art and trivialise it. It has no special significance. Popular art may provide what is wanted rather than needed.

Art and the Bible

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What does the Bible have to say that will guide us in this confusing mish mash of trends and counter trends? *'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path'* are comforting words for us to hear. At first glance, the Bible seems to be strangely quiet on the issue – rather prone to emphasise the dangers of the arts rather than the advantages.

Derek Kidner tells us that the Bible gives us *'an example of art which has found its station in life: subordinate to the Spirit and shaped by truth, yet all the freer for being purposeful and unselfconscious.'* Our minds need to be renewed, bringing all things in line with Jesus' teaching – taking every thought captive to Christ.

In the beginning, God created and it was very good. Calvin Seerveld warns us that *'if we lose the overwhelming biblical view of creation because we are so heavenly minded, citified or just plainly insensitive to the Old Testament we soon become warped and unfaithful stewards.'* We need to start at the very origin of the world and take our lead from the Creator God. God created man to marvel at his world. But He also created the unseen – the world of ideas, emotion, imagination, memory, sensitivity, instinct. He is no less a creator God now than he was during the week of heavenly activity. Jesus' parables were full of creation imagery too.

To go back to the Old Testament – interior design, dress (fashion), music, instrumentals, installation art, architecture, poetry and prophetic performance are all found here. And for the record, the first person to be filled with the Holy Spirit appears in the Old Testament as well – he was Bezalel – a craftsman involved in temple decoration.

All of art – all of life - became painful toil when Eve made the deadliest of decisions, to do her own thing (a touch of post-modernity (?!)), and eat

because it *looked* good. Sin is not a bruise that is painful when touched. Sin is like an invidious gas that will spread through and contaminate everything in its path. It is a bit like the virus that assaulted my home computer two weeks ago and spread through my address list to friends across the world! And let us face it, nothing exists which is not in its path. The best of our art has been tainted – all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

Chaplin and Brand cite the exhibits shown in the Sensation show at the Royal Academy as being negative and inhuman. Mark Quinn's 'No visible means of escape' shows a hung flayed corpse or Damien Hirst's in your face sliced cow. Is this all there is to us? God has been taken out of the picture. But Christian artists have a major theme of hope and purpose, living out the role of salt and light, healing and reconciliation.

Turner reminds us that although people may commit such horrendous sins that they lose their own sense of dignity, but they never lose their dignity before God. They are still fearfully and wonderfully made, and the Christian eye will see beyond the damage and the workings of sin. The Catholic painter Georges Roualt painted prostitutes, but the art critic Louis Vauxelles noticed the difference: 'Unlike Lautrec,' he wrote, 'when he (Roualt) paints a prostitute there is no cruel pleasure in seeing vice exalted by a creature. He suffers and weeps'.

Chris Gidney calls us to claim back the arts with the bold statement '*Sorry this belongs to Jesus*'. Jesus came to reconcile all things to himself - he also gave us a ministry of reconciliation. Al Wolters tells us that reconciliation is the going back to an original state, the practical implications of which are legion. Karen Muller exhorts us to be Christians who 'stand on the primacy of redemption and have nothing to fear'. Doing anything other will produce starved imaginations and a bunker mentality. Bartholomew reminds us that Redemptive art can only be recovered through community – artists working to recover tradition, discipline and a sense of ownership through Christ.

I believe it has been important to set the scene to what is going on out there

in its broadest context before settling down to talk about art education and the Christian. I want now to pull together these threads to reach some conclusions for the teaching of Art from a Christian perspective.

Art Education

- from a Christian Perspective

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May I offer four areas for consideration:

- *The Environment*
- *The Framework*
- *The Process*
- *The Role of Teacher*

The Environment

In talking about environment I am talking about both physical and non-physical aspects of our schools. One important aspect of 're-engaging' with the arts and 're-connecting' them to life, is to adopt a 'whole school approach' which reinforces the place and role of art and artistic endeavour in the everyday life and work of the school, staff and students.

Some of this will impact on the use of our physical space - the way we attend to, creatively design and use our external and internal environment; the prominence given to displays of work and artistic expression of pupils of all ability; the engagement with local artists in the community – commissioning works of art/collaboratively developing installations/hearing their stories etc; validating artistic expression in developing communication and exploration of our students; celebrating as a school community through the gifts God has given us; being of service to the community through the use of our artistic expression etc. The list is endless.

There are tremendous opportunities for us to develop this type of 'whole school approach' in a way that will help create a learning, celebrating and

serving ethos and environment. This will only be possible, however, if we accord the same enthusiasm and vision to the arts as Steve Turner in his book 'Imagine' –

The arts can sharpen the vision, quicken the intellect, preserve the memory, activate the conscience, enhance the understanding and refresh the language'

The Framework

What is clear from the points I made earlier is the importance of the Christian understanding of life, work and learning within the framework of creation, fall and redemption. This should underpin the way we approach our subject and provide guidelines for the way we appreciate, critique and express art.

Whilst it will not always be possible to espouse this framework explicitly in the context of a school learning environment, it is possible to work within it implicitly and to derive some principles for our approach to art education.

Whilst we don't have a detailed guide to follow, Turner reminds us that we have doctrines that can be applied to any art form in any age.

As far as the Bible is concerned art is shaped and inspired by a **Triune God** who is a community of persons and who ordains that only in community with others can we normally develop our identities, even as artists.

- This understanding will make us passionate about the need for students of art to communicate, develop a shared understanding and share experience rather than stand aloof in self-absorption.

Through our understanding of the **creation** we can assert that expressing ourselves artistically, is integral to experiencing the fullness of being human.

- Surely, as Karen Muller says, knowing our Creator we have more of a mandate to be original than anybody, because the prime mover is the

Father. This should inspire us and our students to explore, improvise and develop creative avenues passionately

We also need to ensure that we hold the **fall** in balance with the doctrine of Creation. The world is neither so full of evil that we cannot enjoy it nor so full of goodness that we can give ourselves over to it.

- Turner encourages us to understand that our mandate here is to help our students appreciate that when we see something beautiful there is always the qualifying thought that it is tarnished. When we see something ugly, there is always the qualifying thought that there is something of the Creator hidden there.

The great themes of resurrection and transformation, **redemption** and hope should shape our approach. This is a particular theme that artists by and large struggle to illustrate.

- Here we probably need to take time to explore how being salt and light in this arena can be worked out in practice. One of the implications of this will be that even when viewing something controversial we seek to establish dialogue rather than closing ourselves down with pre-conceived, narrow assumptions and interpretations.

The Process

How do we set about this task?

We can start by looking at how the National Curriculum approaches teaching art. This body adopts a humanist approach and we must ask some questions.

1. *Does what we do promote the myth of neutrality?*
2. *Does what we do support western ideologies?*
3. *What worldview is expressed in content and structure?*
4. *Where is the source of power and wisdom?*

The typical approach is child-centred, rationalistic and humanistic. Truth is seen as based on Dawkin's scientific truth. All things are viewed from man's perspective. Man is the enquirer and the controller.

Let me throw out some suggestions about how as Christians we should approach this process:

- Adopting a less ego-centric approach
- Taking time to appreciate context
- Developing 'frontier checks'
- Celebrating diversity

I would suggest that a less egocentric approach be adopted, where the unit of work is primarily concerned with process and regard. The child should be invited to receive information about a process - to observe its outworkings and outcomes. They should be enabled to appreciate the technical skills on show and the resulting artefact as something given from a Godly perspective. This approach is not centred on the pupil but allows the pupil to be caught up in learning as an invited guest, not as the host. This hopefully should build in a respect for process and outcomes, which will lead to the child responding from a rightly informed standpoint. Instead of exploring feelings along the lines of "What does this do for me?" one would initially explore the material. This would obviously evoke a personal response but in a rightly ordered way.

We are trying to place our teaching within the right context. We want to get the horse before the cart! If I could cite an example given by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority of a unit of work outlined for use with a Year 7 class, concerning the study of buildings. It suggests that the pupils explore their ideas and feelings about buildings, spaces, archways, windows, porches etc. I would suggest simply "taking in" these artifices before self-exploration occurs would be beneficial. We should not jump to the "me" viewfinder but should endeavour to place the thing studied in a wider context. There should be a thorough analysis of materials, function and context.

This initial distancing of self knocks out the idea that what we feel about something is necessarily relevant or ultimately, true and right. By setting up a plumb line or standard other than what strikes up from our hearts will place the studied unit in a right context.

The process should look something like this:

- PROCESS - the demonstrating of a skill
- STUDY - recognition of traditional artistry/craftsmanship
- PRODUCES - respect and reverence for God-given skills
- EMULATION of process which will now allow for the pupil to explore his own ideas in the context of a Godly framework.

We also need to help our children to decide how to deal with the experiences that art grants to us. Peck and Strohmer remind us that good, effectively produced art has immense power for good or evil, and thus we need to help children develop 'frontier checks' for their minds and hearts. In love we need to help them cultivate and use their critical senses to check on the significance of those artworks that they particularly enjoy. If this is not developed, the risk is that imaginations will be infiltrated by the assumptions and values of a wisdom that does not come from God.

Art of any kind carries in its bosom a particular way of seeing life, with particular priorities and a particular scale of values. It derives from a certain wisdom. For this reason art always betrays the true values of the culture from within which it arises. It is our duty to help our students develop awareness of these issues and discernment in recognising and 'weighing' the implicit and explicit values and assumptions that lie behind the art they view and create.

The study of the history of art should be done in a humble manner, explaining the different worldviews expressed through the art of other cultures. We cannot ignore the art of other cultures with their rich diversity and context, but we strive to place these works and their stories within the overarching narrative of Christ's imaginative, benevolent and all-embracing rule and authority.

Part of this is helping students understand that art responds to the times in a number of ways e.g. changes in technology and scientific discoveries, philosophical and political ideas and trends, the place and community in which the artist lives and works, cultural and religious influences etc.

Role of the teacher

Finally, may I humbly suggest the teacher should come from the perspective of an informed individual who is there to draw out and instruct from a place of Godliness? And of course it is preposterous for any of us to believe we cannot learn something new everyday and so we do. As the educator, we should for the most part be the one who initiates and leads rather than being equal partners in the learning process.

If we are living righteously and God's laws are constantly before us, then the imaginations of our heart and mind will reflect that. If we are constantly learning from Scripture, even our unconscious will be being purified, and our dreams will be different from the dreams of the unregenerate person.

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The Teaching of Art:

A Biblical Perspective

Beginning with a review of the history of art this booklet examines the role of Art in education.

Prior to the enlightenment, artists were artisans - craftsmen who learnt and passed on skills. The objects they produced were an expression of the lifeblood that held communities together. In the post-enlightenment and now post-modern world the artist is 'freed' from the need to follow any tradition or formal way of working. The end result is that many children are no longer taught art but left to develop themselves - creating an environment for them to underachieve spectacularly.

Art education from a Christian perspective however does provide a framework for learning. It does look at the processes. It examines and seeks to emulate God-given gifts. Only within this Godly framework can pupils explore their own ideas with any meaning.



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