

A R T needs no justification

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PUBLISHERS PREFACE

Professor Rookmaaker was working on this book at the time of his death on March 13, 1977. His intention to write a postscript was never fulfilled.

The material has been rearranged and revised, but is essentially what the author wrote. In our attempt to be faithful to his intentions we have been greatly helped by his colleague at the Free University of Amsterdam, Dr. Graham Birtwistle.

This book is not a technical work, neither are its contents exclusively for the artist. It is for all Christians who are willing to see that their God-given talents can be used to the glory of the Giver. It is not a survey of the art scene, nor a detailed analysis of the origins of the problems facing civilization. It is a prophetic call to Christian artists, craftsmen and musicians to weep, pray, think and work before it is too late.

INTRODUCTION

Artists in our society are in a very peculiar position. On the one hand they are regarded very highly, almost like high priests of culture who know the inner secrets of reality. On the other hand they are completely superfluous people. Respected, yes. But others are still quite ready to allow them to starve. We want artists to be serious and create deep things that have almost eternal value, things that people of culture can talk about centuries later. But if artists want to be successful, they have to bow down to present tastes, be commercial and play the clown rather than the sage. Of course this is not a new problem. It has been like this since the eighteenth century when the old concept of the artist as craftsman began to be exchanged for a concept that saw him as both a gifted genius and a social and economic outcast.

Artists who are Christians also struggle with these tensions. But the problems of Christian artists are often greater because it is difficult for any Christian to live in a post-Christian world. Artists are expected to work from their convictions, but these may be seen by their atheistic contemporaries as ultraconservative if not totally passe. On top of this they often lack the support of their own community their church and family. To them artists seem to be radicals or idle no-gooders. They are branded as being on the wrong track even from the start. Thus Christian artists are often working under great stress.

On the other hand we very much need art which is healthy and good, and which people can understand. If Christians can do such work they may not achieve great fame, but many will love their work. And many artists will be able to make a living from it. So there is no need for selfpity. There is a contribution to be made to an age that is often anti-Christian in the most outspoken way.

To the many Christian artists whom I have had the honor to know and whose work I think is important in many ways, this little study is dedicated. In fact, this book is the working out of an address delivered at the 1975 Arts Festival in England attended by a few hundred, mostly young,

artists who professed to be Christian or at least quite interested. I must thank Nigel Goodwin and his staff, who organized this and similar conferences, for the invitation, one of the many tokens of friendship based on a common faith and a common interest.

It may be clear that I speak in the first place to the painter and sculptor, the creators of the visual arts. I do this because my knowledge lies primarily in that field. But I think that the situation and problems are more or less similar with many kinds of artists musicians, composers, actors, writers, dancers, comedians and others.

ONE

BACKGROUND

TO A

DILEMMA

The role of artists was not always what it is today. In most cultures, including our own before the new period that began somewhere between 1500 and 1800, artists were primarily craftsmen: art meant making things according to certain rules, the rules of the trade. Artists were accomplished workers who knew how to carve a figure, paint a Madonna, build a chest, make a wrought-iron gate, cast a bronze candlestick, weave a tapestry, work in gold or silver, make a saddle in leather and so on.

Artists were members of guilds just like other skilled workers. Some were master artists and took the commissions for the shop. Others were helpers, apprentices, servants.

A studio was in fact a workshop with a subtle division of labor under the leadership of the person we now would call the artist and whose name we sometimes still know.

But even if artists did not have the high honor we tend to grant them today (there were exceptions in the case of artists who were honored by their patrons), they did make beautiful things so beautiful, in fact, that we so many centuries later still go to look at

their works and often pay much to have their works restored in order to hand them down to the next generation. There is not a tourist brochure of a city or town or county that does not show with pride the lasting monuments of the past. And whatever those artists gained in making those treasures - churches, statues, grave monuments, wall paintings, reliquaries, lamps, stalls, paintings, illuminated books, houses, stained-glass windows and so much more - today they are certainly of great economic value for the tourist trade. Why are their works still worth looking at? Of course some are masterpieces, but not all of them. Yet most of them have a reality, a solidity, a human value, that testifies to great craftsmanship. They worked in the line of a strong tradition that handed over patterns and schemes, knowledge of techniques and tools and the handling of them; they were, and felt themselves to be, heirs to the achievements of their predecessors. Not originality but solid and good work was looked for. Beauty was not an added quality but the natural result of the appropriate materials and techniques handled with great skill. Their works were not things that asked for intellectual debate and a specialists interpretation, even if sometimes their works were discussed, praised or criticized. The great St. Bernard of Clairvaux, leader of the Cistercian order in the twelfth century, took exception to the strange carved creatures, monsters or fantastic animals that were to be found on the capitals in the cloisters; but even if he condemned them, he did take account of them and criticized their inappropriateness not their beauty or workmanship.

This art was the expression of a common quality and understanding of life much deeper than affluence and status. But within this tradition, this strong framework of skills, of rules and standards, there was freedom. If one was asked to copy a certain work, one was not supposed to be slavish in execution but could still show ones own hand and qualities. Quality, rather than originality or novelty, was cherished, but artists could be themselves.

Only in this way can we understand the mass of work that is still to be seen throughout Europe. Even if we do not want to romanticize those times when hard and long work was required and payment usually limited, all those old monuments testify to

the fact that the work of art was not simply something that was added on. Rather it formed an integral part of the design of a building. What we call art was the natural beauty that was expected of humanly made things. And therefore there was no sharp distinction between the art of painting and sculpture and what we now call the crafts. Skill, quality and appropriateness would be the yardstick.

Art with a Capital A

The role of artists, as well as of the arts themselves, began to change in some European countries during the Renaissance. This movement gained momentum and made a breakthrough in the eighteenth century, the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment. Art became fine art, and the crafts were set aside as something inferior. The artist became a genius, someone with very special gifts which could be used to give humankind something of almost religious importance, the work of art. Art in a way took the place of religion. Descartes, in his philosophy, said that only those things which he could understand rationally, clearly and distinctly, were real and important. Baumgarten, working from the same Enlightenment basis in the middle of the eighteenth century, wrote a book called Aesthetics. He dealt with those things that were not clear and distinct, those that preceded clear knowledge and were based on feeling, the aesthetic things, the works of art. In this way the breaking of our Western world into two cultures, the sciences and the arts, became a reality that is still with us. Much was written on art in the eighteenth century, not least in England, on taste, on the beautiful and the sublime, and on the principles of art. Here we see the very beginnings of modern art history. Much of this was tied to the world of the connoisseur, the person of taste and knowledge, the collector of works of art. Art became disconnected from the normal functions of life, and beauty was seen as an abstract quality unrelated to what is depicted, carrying its own meaning.

With Kant and, in his wake, Schelling and Hegel, art was considered to be the final solution of the inner contradictions of the philosophical systems designed to form an integrated understanding of reality. Humanity is free and yet bound to a mechanistic

universe, and it is art which can reveal inner unity and bypass the rational tensions.

Perhaps for this reason music became the greatest art: it overpowers us emotionally, and yet it cannot be analyzed easily. Its content as such is beyond what we can verbalize.

Before this time, no works of art were made. Altarpieces, portraits, landscapes, paintings or sculptures were designed to fulfill a specific function, either to decorate or to stand as a high metaphor for the greatest values, representations of the Holy Personages, the Virgin and the saints. But works of art came to be considered independent of context, and somebody in the middle of the nineteenth century could write that a still life of a lobster by Chardin was just as important as a Madonna by Raphael. Subject matter slowly became more and more secondary, leading in our century to the rise of nonfigurative art. Photography may have played a part in this, but the trends were there before photography was invented. Art in the nineteenth century expressed new approaches to reality. It showed that the old norms and values were gone, that Christian concepts had lost their hold over peoples minds.¹

One more thing is worth thinking about. The eighteenth century was, if not overtly anti-Christian, certainly searching for an a-Christian world. Religion was fine as long as it was purely private and did not interfere with the important things in this world, science, philosophy, scholarship, the high arts. And so the principle of neutrality was developed: in scholarly work we should leave behind those things that are irrelevant and totally subjective, such as our religious convictions. We should look for the objective, that which is true regardless of our faith.

In passing, the terms subjective and objective are themselves defined by the Cartesian trends in thinking that were the driving forces in the Age of Reason. These words only have meaning in a framework of thinking which begins with a more or less autonomous and rationalistic human race seeing itself as relating to, and confronted by, an objective nature, ruled by eternal laws like $2 \times 2 = 4$, which has its own kind of autonomy. It is a closed system, to which God or any other non-human or non-natural force has no access - a world where the principle of uniformity reigns and where no other forces than those we know in the world today, those we can see, measure, control,

understand, have worked or will ever work. This not only influenced the vision of artists but also that of art historians.

If today we study the great artists and their achievements, we are never told what was the driving force in their life, what they believed, what they stood for. Those things, being seen as subjective, are left out of the picture. We are given the impression that those great people in the past could make their masterpieces out of their own genius, talents and insights alone, and that religion had little to do with it. We must be aware of this, and not fall for this inherent perversion because it is fundamentally untrue. Modern scholars, historians, art historians and philosophers (as well as artists), do more than just follow trends. They work from a basic outlook on life and reality. This outlook is often a kind of irreligious religion.

A Crisis in the Arts

Out of all this came a crisis in the arts. Art was called to be a kind of religion, a revelation, a mystical solution to the deepest quests of mankind, but artists were often hungry and alienated. Unless they bowed down to poor taste and could allow themselves to express cheap sentimental content, they were left alone. Art, high Art, was lifted out of daily reality and placed in its own temple, the museum, where the catalog provides the guide to the liturgy.

This has made life very difficult for many artists and art students. Why are they working? What are they working for? For many it has become an individualistic search for their own identity through and in their work. They are like a person looking in the mirror; everything is an expression of self, and everything else becomes unreal. Art is supposed to be the expression of our innermost being, but what if you find little inside? Artists are supposed to be geniuses, but geniuses cannot be taught, we are told, and their delicate subjectivity should not be upset by others who say there is something to learn. Young artists are thus left to find and express themselves. Some reach despair, but they are reminded that it is art itself which will bring deliverance. The poor works of these sad artists often crumble under the load and

disintegrate. Basically artists are being asked to design their own religion which we can talk about but are never asked to believe completely. Unless an artist is strong and endowed with great talents or filled with a powerful ego-drive, it is hard for him or her to succeed in the art world.

Art became art for arts sake, a kind of irreligious religion, in a world where religion has no clearly defined practical role. It means that art is such a rarified, special thing that people need art appreciation courses and lectures to have it all explained. Some indeed must feel as if they are looking at the Emperors new clothes.

As a result we see people everywhere searching for the meaning of art. The fact that so many books are published that deal with the arts is not a proof that people are sure what art is all about, but rather the opposite. This quest for the meaning of art is a sign of crisis. But too often this search ends in contradictions. Art has to have a message, but it should not be didactic; art has to enrich life, but it is only for the rich and those with specialized learning. In a way the really good art of class and fame is too far away from the people, and the arts that are popular are seen as below the level of acceptability. Of course differences in quality and kind have always existed, but the sharp division of today is a new phenomenon.

I see this as the result of placing art on too high a pedestal, lifting it out of its ties with daily realities to the level of museum art, the work of a genius. Art has suffered from this. High Art has shunned all practical demands such as decoration, entertainment or any role that might smack of involvement in real life. Yet this type of art inevitably attracts almost everybody who has some talent. In the art colleges are many who study painting or sculpture as a free vocation, and they will become the free artists of tomorrow, most of whom will not be able to live from their work.

But inevitably the low arts have suffered as well. They became the popular arts, sometimes called commercial.

It is art in the service of Mammon. As all genuinely talented people tend to shun this field, its quality has deteriorated, and too often what is produced lacks all imagination or quality. And because that is usually the art that is offered for con

sumption, it means that everybody, knowingly or not, suffers. It has its share in the ugliness of our world today.

At the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century, it is good to balance the books and ask what we are doing, and how far we have come. A friend of mine said to me some time ago, When you published your book on the death of a culture² I thought you were much too pessimistic. Today, as I look around in the field of the arts, high, low and in whatever medium, I think you are right.

There are always exceptions, for example in the graphic arts and industrial design even if here not much exciting and new is to be found. But if these fields are better, it is certainly the result of the work of many concerned people. Laments over the low quality of the arts that were produced, especially in the field of the crafts, the aesthetic design of things for daily use, had already begun in the last century. I can cite the names of Ruskin, Morris and his Arts and Crafts movement, and many more.³ In our century we cannot by pass the Bauhaus which had a healthy influence on design in general. But looking at all those efforts we cannot say that the goals set more than a century ago were achieved. Maybe it was onesided to look mainly at the design arts as needing renewal and strengthening. Perhaps there ought to have been more discussion about the pretentiousness of high Art. But certainly those who were involved were usually concerned for the good of society and not only for aesthetics and artistic quality.

A Crisis in Our Culture

Most of the activists, critics and artists who tried to renew the arts and give our world a more beautiful face did argue in one way or another that just to face problems in art was not enough. They understood, more or less, that the crisis in the arts is an expression of a much greater crisis in our whole culture. That greater crisis is a spiritual one which affects all aspects of society including economics, technology and morality. The quality of our lives is tainted, and words such as alienation, despair, loneliness, in short, dehumanization, are all relevant and have to be used too often.

This is not the place to go into an analysis of all these things. Certainly the

problems are related to the fact that since the Age of Reason our culture has focused on the relationship of mankind with nature in order to master reality and use it to our advantage. But as C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* has analyzed so ironically, to master nature and be able to use its powers is usually only the privilege of the few. The few are therefore better able to exert power over the many. Manipulation and loss of real power to live the life one wants to live are the result. Counterefforts are made everywhere to change things or to try to overcome the evils of the system. The Marxists are conspicuous in this. Many listen to them since they at least signal the evils. But whether their remedy is not worse than the illness is a real question. If alienation only means that our relationship to things is broken, if the overpowering of nature is still seen as a goal, if material values are still the primal aim, and if the problem of sin is avoided, then the most serious questions remain.

Yet, if we work for a better society and for a resolution of the crisis in the arts, changes will have to come. It is important to think these problems through. We must not expect solutions to arrive on our doorstep. Time will be involved. But we should be on the move, all of us, including artists.

TWO

THE

CHURCHS

RESPONSE

If as I have said our world began to change in the eighteenth century as its inner direction was set on a humanistic track, where mankind is the master, and pleasure (through money) and power are the ultimate values, where were the Christians? They were not few in number. Some people even call that same period one of great revival.

The mainstream of Christianity turned to a kind of pietism in which the idea of the covenant, as preached in the books of Moses and throughout the whole of Scripture, was bypassed. The Old Testament was often neglected, and the meaning of the Christian life was narrowed to that of the devotional life alone. Too easily, large areas of human reality, such as philosophy, science, the arts, economics and politics were handed over to the world, as Christians concentrated mainly on pious activities.

If the world's system was a secularized one, missing true spirituality, the Christians' attitude also became a reduced one, missing its foundation in reality, being uninterested in the created world. It sometimes became a ghostlike spirituality without a body. Christians have indeed been active. But they have often optimistically believed that it was enough to preach the gospel and to help in a charitable way. In concentrating on saving souls they have often forgotten that God is the God of life and that the Bible teaches people how to live, how to deal with our world, God's creation. The result is that even though many people became Christians, nevertheless our world became totally secularized with almost no Christian influence. Our society's drive is determined by the world and its values or lack of values.

Two Consequences of Retreat

If we say that to work as an artist is not spiritual enough and that art has no place in the Christian life, we are open to deep conflicts and contradictions. I know of a Bible school where they had organized a course on Christianity and culture. Question one was, What has Christianity to do with culture? As they were not able to answer this, the next question was, Why do we have this course?

But what happens when these students leave the school and begin their work, let's say in evangelism, and start a campaign somewhere? There may be a big tent and a fine preacher. But what about the music that will be played before the preacher speaks? Or will there be no music? And if there is music, what kind of music will it be? Shouldn't this be thought about? Or doesn't that matter? Music is also communication. Suppose this communication spoke the opposite of what the fine speaker said?

The same applies to the pamphlets being handed out, the posters being made.

These should be well designed and in good taste; they are often the outsiders first encounter with Christians. In a way they constitute our outward face and appearance. Just as people show who they are by their clothes and the way they move, so these things (music, posters - in one word, art) are the things that form our first and sometimes decisive communication.

If we have responsibility for the building of a church, should it just be bare? St.

Bernard of Clairvaux wanted the monastic churches bare and simple; but the architecture was beautiful. People still go to these old monastery churches to look at the fine architecture. But if we are not that extreme and look for some appropriate decoration, a stained-glass window for instance, should we not look for a good artist? And who is going to play the organ? And what will the organist play? Very often we have created barriers against hearing the gospel because we preached that we care for people and that this world is Gods but did not act on those principles. Our lack of care showed that we were not really interested in people or in Gods creation. This is the first consequence in the churchs recent retreat from culture.

In contrast, from the Middle Ages through the time of the Reformation up to around 1800 when spiritualistic pietism began to drive beauty out of the church (as if one can have inward beauty without the outward signs of it), there may have been simplicity but always beauty in the things Christians did. That was not an artificially imposed process; it was just the natural way of doing things; art had not yet become Art. In fact, these things were so beautiful and good that people still go to look at them. The paintings of Rembrandt (from Christ on the Road to Emmaus to a still life), the fine churches, the crucifix, the music of Bach (church cantatas as well as the Brandenburg Concertos), the poems of John Donne, Handels Messiah and Water Music, indeed too much to be enumerated, all still testify in this secularized age that Christianity at least once did mean something. And these things often still communicate their message. Quite without realizing it, these people, the patrons, the artist and the Christians in those days, erected signs for another age that the Lord had done great things in the world. Today they

are often the only witness of a Christian mentality in our public life. For that reason it is good that Christians work as art historians and museum staff, keeping alive the understanding of these old things, which point to the eternal Word of God.

This is not the place to discuss all facets of the Christian faith. But we ought to realize that a second consequence of the church's retreat is a negative attitude in Christian circles toward culture (in a narrow sense) and the arts.

We should remind ourselves that Christ did not come to make us Christians or to save our souls only but that he came to redeem us that we might be human in the full sense of that word. To be new people means that we can begin to act in our full, free, human capacity in all facets of our lives. Therefore to be a Christian means that one has humanity, the freedom to work in God's creation and to use the talents God has given to each of us, to his glory and to the benefit of our neighbors. Therefore, if we have artistic talents, they should be used.

The Lord knows why he is giving these. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (12:12-27) speaks about the Christian community as the body of Christ. Each has his specific function therein. And not one can be left out. Certainly some play the music, draw the likenesses, photograph the movements and write the stories. These are the artists. They have their rightful place in the family of God. Again, the life of the body of Christ, and certainly a renewal, an awakening, is impossible without these members called by God to do their job.

As the body moves, works, thinks, speaks not for its own sake but called by God to be the salt of the earth, artists are not just servants of a Christian subculture but are called to work for the benefit of all. Of course at times it may be unavoidable that we work for the subculture or that we are a subculture. Sometimes we have to withdraw if the world asks us to do things that are negative and destructive. But if we are rejected not because we are foolish or stubborn or are trying to bully everybody into our own ways and customs but because we do not want to compromise our biblical principles, we can expect the Lord to help us. Remember that Christ said to his disciples that if for his sake we forsake things that are near to our heart and in the center of our life, he will in this life

return to us in another way what has been lost. He will take care of us (Mark 10:28-31).

While we must not forsake his ways, we are not only free but are called to work for the benefit of all the people around us.

A Call for Reformation

If as Christians we often feel so much at home in this world, then we have to ask ourselves whether we have not been influenced by the standards of the world around us.

Maybe the realm of our faith is a tiny part of our life, where piety and devotional literature still have a place. But is our lifestyle, the music we listen to and the values we endorse in practice different from society's? No wonder that the short, weekly sermon we listen to in our easy chairs becomes otherworldly and impractical, religious in a narrow sense, more a question of feeling than daily reality. We sing that Jesus is the answer; yes, but to what?

I am convinced that only a true reformation can lead to a renewal of our culture, a reformation not only of Christianity, even if it certainly has to begin there, but of our Western world. I do not believe in the Marxist solution or the technological solution.

Christians need to wake up. Their feeling of powerlessness or futility has to be replaced by a new impetus to work. In short, Christians themselves need to be aware of the fact that the only prophetic word for today is to turn back to the Lord and look to him for solutions. Let us listen again to his Word. The Old Testament prophets spoke to a world that had known the Word of the Lord and had turned away to live what we now would call a secularized life. Lightheartedly they bypassed the many ills of their day. These prophets did not speak of a sweet, saving grace disconnected from a turning away from the evils of their days and a return to his commandments. The reading of the prophets is not easy. Their words are alarmingly appropriate for our times.

Of course nothing can be done if the Lord does not go before us. We cannot make a new spirit or turn judgment and curse into blessings. The Lord has to move. Our prayer is as those fellow believers of old who composed and sang songs like Psalm 10:

Why dost thou stand afar off, O LORD? Why dost thou hide thyself in times of trouble?

We are admonished in Zephaniah (2:3), in a situation very much like our own, Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility.... Although there is no promise that Christianity will again be acknowledged as influential in our society, our task is not to shy away from our responsibilities. We are called to be the salt of the earth, working against corruption. We are admonished to be humble, not to dream of doing Gods work in our own strength. At the same time we are commanded to be righteous, to do our task, to walk in Gods ways. That means to care for this reality that is his creation the way he has. We have a task if we love the Lord and therefore want his name to be hallowed, his kingdom to come. Everybody, each in his own place, must begin at this beginning. Artists are not excluded. In fact, I think they have an important part to play.

Weep, Pray, Think and Work

The beginning I refer to can be summed up in this formula: weep, pray, think, work. This is what the prophet meant in his day when he wrote, As for me, I will look to the LORD with the great expectation that follows (Mic. 7:7-11).

Weep for the present situation. See how far we have drifted from an acceptable foundation. Let us care about the many who lead lives that seem to be empty and useless. Even the world is concerned about these things. TV demonstrates in a totally secularized world that commercialism, violence, sex, cheap entertainment and escapism are the only realities left. Meaning has to be rediscovered and restored to our actions and endeavors. We must analyze the situation, try to find out what is wrong, and assess our own place and role in it.

To weep is to see that things must change, to begin to care for the victims and to pray for forgiveness. Too often we have been accomplices in all that has happened.

Would the Lord not speak to us as in the days of Amos (indeed, these things were written down in order that we should learn from them), Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory... who sing idle songs to the sound of the ha.... who drink wine in bowls, and anoint

themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:4-6)? The question is how far our affluence today can be considered a blessing, and how far it is a blessing turned into a curse. Can we stand easily before the Lord with all our commodities, the things invented to make life easy and luxurious? To weep is also to see our own weakness, our own shortcomings, and to see where our love and our care and our efforts have been lacking. It drives us on to prayer.

We pray in the knowledge that we cannot change things ourselves and that we need help. We pray also to ask for wisdom, strength and perseverance to work for a better solution. Perseverance certainly is the most difficult, to know that it will all take time, that it is not enough to work now, but that we must go on and that perhaps we may never see the results ourselves.

The Reformation of Luther and Calvin was in the early sixteenth century, and the rest of that century saw a situation of confusion in the search for new principles and methods. But out of all the work done, in obedience to the Lord, listening again to his Word, grew another culture in many ways better and richer in spirit. The arts of the first half of the seventeenth century were in many ways fruits of this; not perfect, but rich. To change a whole society, to reorganize thought-forms, customs and insights, takes much time. Even so the changes were only partially realized.¹ But the arts were part of it all and did not tag on behind.

When we have asked the Lord for help and listened to his words, we must think, think out our position, where to begin and how. I'm convinced that we will never get out of the problems, the crisis, unless we see how we have been caught by the spirit of the Enlightenment, believing in the power of Reason and relegating any belief in God to the subjective and strictly personal. God is good in saving souls, but we have tended to keep him away from our big decisions in scholarship, science, politics and so on. We have got to understand the thought-forms of Western intellectual history and their consequences - a reduced world, relativism, neutralism, neutrality of values which are a-Christian if not anti-Christian. We have to think through the proposed solutions, including Marxism, and so prepare ourselves. This thinking is the task not only of the great philosophers. We

are all involved.

We must also think through what Christianity means and its relation to cultural issues. We have been freewheeling too long on this point, assuming that the words of the few people who dealt with this were sufficient. Indeed, our Christianity itself must be thought through again. There is no reformation without theological renewal, or rather, a strengthening of biblical insights.

And only then can we come to action and do something with perseverance. Of course then we can start again; the sequence has its own logic; the one cannot be begun unless the other has been done.

Weep, pray, think and work.

THREE

THE

CHRISTIAN ARTISTS

TASK

The artist cannot wait, in fact nobody can, till the world is renewed, the crisis solved, and new cultural principles worked out. We have to participate in the life of our times. In fact the artist might even stand in the most difficult place, as the spirit of anti-Christianity, of dehumanization, of despair is strongest in the avant-garde tradition of the arts. But maybe there is still something left of the strong old traditions that can be used as a starting point. But it must be given a new foundation, so that it can be a living reality, not just a tradition.

The Role of Artists in Reformation

Artists are in a crucial place. They have to take part in a movement that has no organization, that has no name, the movement that I call reformation, the return to the

Lord to seek the Truth, the Way and the Life that is in Christ Jesus. Artists must be part of it. The arts are in principle very concerned to protest against technocracy and look for alternatives. Artists are the ones to create the poems, the songs, the images, the metaphors, the forms that can both express what has been gained in insight, wisdom and direction, and pass them on to others in a positive and incisive way.

Often the question has been posed whether there is a place for art in the Christian framework. Do we need art? And the answer is, it depends on what you are talking about. If one means whether a certain percentage of the art produced for the museum should be by Christians, then certainly one can say that it has a place as it makes the presence of Christians felt; but primarily we are looking for artists who are working within society and in that way are taking their share in making life livable, rich in a spiritual sense, deep and exciting.

This is not something light or easy. One has to make sacrifices, do things that others think irrelevant. Economically it probably means being in a weak or vulnerable position. Artists cannot fully accomplish their task alone. A common sense art theory, a guideline for artists that is not a legalistic set of rules is very much needed. But as there is little help coming from the leaders of the church, the Christian intellectuals, every artist as it were has to work it out alone. So if we want to give artists a share in the totality of the Christian life (weeping, praying, thinking, working), if we understand that without artists and their work a reformation is not only unlikely but unfeasible, then we have to think about these responsibilities. It will mean that we have to think through our Christian position and what Christianity means on all levels of human life.

Such a reformation is not only a church reformation. The totality of our being is at stake. It certainly must take in evangelism or church work. But to preach the gospel and to say that in Christ there is life without being able to show something of the reality of that life is to speak in a vacuum. It soon begins to sound false.

The difference must be visible, in all fields. As C. S. Lewis says so beautifully, we have enough little Christian tracts and books, but if we look for the re

Christianization of Europe or the United States, it will not come if people cannot look for a good book in a certain field that comes out of the Christian camp. The world did not become atheist because they preached so hard, but because they worked so hard. In many fields they have led the way. They have set the tone. Art certainly has a great influence on people. Just think of the role of rock music in the sixties. If there were creative, exciting and good Christian music around, if there were visual art that was truly different, not strange but good, if... then Christianity would have more to say. It would have more to say to the world outside the West, the Third World.

Often we are satisfied too soon, too easily. We pick up what the world does, change some obvious things, and then we think we have arrived. Our paintings are sometimes the same as theirs, maybe just a little bit less shocking or radical. But to be a Christian is not to be conservative or less exciting. Obviously artists cannot do it alone. They need the writers of those books, the thinkers who think new thoughts, the politicians who offer other solutions, and also the preachers and pastors to help us to see the way and walk in it.

Only in such a community can we move on. But if others fail or are weak for whatever reason, we must just go ahead and show what can be done. Maybe what you artists do is also weak and feeble. But let us not wait. Maybe the reformation we look for will never come if we do not weep, pray, think and work.

But I think all this is obvious. Artists need no justification. God called them, gave them talents. We cannot go on without them. So let's help them in prayer, in encouragement, not just with words but also in deeds according to what we can give. Indeed, what we cannot afford to be without needs no justification.

Evangelistic Art?

All too often people say to artists, To be an artist is fine if your art can be used for evangelism. And art has often become a tool for evangelism. But let's be precise. As such there is nothing against this. But we must be aware that art cannot be used to show the validity of Christianity; it should rather be the reverse. Christianity is true;

things and actions and human endeavor only get their meaning from their relationship to God; if Christ came to make us human, the humanity and the reality of art find their foundation in him. So art should not be used to preach even if it can help. Yet there is another way that art can be or is meaningful.

To fit into the patterns of evangelism, artists have often compromised, and so prostituted their art. But Handel with his Messiah, Bach with his St. Matthews Passion, Rembrandt with his Denial of St. Peter, and the architects of those Cistercian churches were not evangelizing nor making tools for evangelism; they worked to the glory of God. They did not compromise their art. They were not devising tools for religious propaganda or holy advertisement. Precisely because of that their works were deep and important. They were not the means to an end, the winning of souls, but they were meaningful and an end in themselves. They were to Gods glory.

Art has too often become insincere and second-rate in its very effort to speak to all people and to communicate a message that art was not meant to communicate. In short, art has its own validity and meaning, certainly in the Christian framework. I want to say more about that later.

The Christians art must be Christian in a deep sense, showing the fruits of the Spirit in a positive mentality and with excitement for the greatness of the life we were given. That does not mean the subjects have to be Christian in a narrow way. The Brandenburg Concertos by Bach are no less Christian than his Passion, nor Rembrandts Jewish Bride than his biblical subjects. Indeed, to ask the artist to be an evangelist points to a total misunderstanding of the meaning of art, and, for that matter, of other human activities.

We are Christians whether we sleep, eat or work hard; whatever we do, we do it as Gods children. Our Christianity is not only for the pious moments, our religious acts. Nor is the aim of life evangelism; it is seeking the Kingdom of God.

To put it into a metaphor, art should not be compared with preaching. The best work of art would still be bad preaching. It may be compared with teaching, but the teacher often has to speak of mathematics, geography, history, botany and sometimes,

even if rarely, about religion. But the best comparison is maybe with the plumbing. While we find it to be totally indispensable in our homes, yet we are rarely aware of it. Likewise art fulfills an important function in our lives, in creating the atmosphere in which we live, in giving us the words to speak, in offering us the framework in which we can see and grasp things, say a landscape, even without our noticing it. Art is rarely propaganda, but it has been very influential in shaping the thought-forms of our times, the values people cherish. So the mentality that speaks out in art is important. Its greatest influence is perhaps where it is most like plumbing, where we are not aware of it. We should not say that there is something behind our actions. The deep strivings, the love and the hate, the wisdom and the foolishness, the knowledge and the insight as well as the shortsightedness and false idealism, are not behind the action but in it. Therefore, to work as a Christian is not doing the thing plus something added, the Christian element. A Christian painting, if we use that term with any intrinsic, serious meaning, should not be just a painting plus an added something. Nor should it be holy in a special sense. Art has its own justification.

Human Art

Because a painting is a human creation and as such is the realization of human imagination, it is spiritual; that is, it shows what it means to be human. These things are communicated, for art is also communication. Everything human attests to the human. The human is never something neutral, a void. The painting is loaded with meaning. The better it is the more this will be true. When we understand anything of art, we know that techniques, materials, size, all these technical elements, are chosen to be a suitable tool for expressing what one wants. So the spiritual and the material are necessarily closely interconnected. And therefore the saying that after all a painting is just a painting will not do. This is often said to stress the fact that our particular spirituality has nothing to do with it, which implies that one has nothing to say and that there is no humanity expressed, living itself out in the work. So we are struggling to express clearly what the Christian element in the work of

a Christian is, what the Bible calls fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). What has to be stressed is that it ought to be human, real. The Christian element never comes as an extra. In discussions I am often asked what one has to do if one wants to work as a Christian. I have the feeling that often these questions are within a legalistic framework, as if the Christian element consisted of following some rules, usually of a negative kind. May I do this? Can that be done? But in that way we understand our own spirituality too mechanically. We are not human plus an extra called our Christianity. No, our humanity reacts to the world outside and the Word of God in a way that is specific to our particular personality.

To be a Christian artist means that one's particular calling is to use one's talents to the glory of God, as an act of love toward God and as a loving service to our fellows. It means to be on the way, preparing ourselves as well as we can, learning the trade techniques and principles, learning from the work of others and from their mistakes, finding our direction, experimenting, achieving what we set out to do or failing. To work in such a way, with all our heart and mind and spirit, with all our potential talents, in openness and freedom, praying for wisdom and guidance, thinking before we work, is to accept our responsibility.

Self-criticism is needed, of course, but to be a Christian artist does not mean to be perfect, nor to make things without faults. We Christians are sometimes foolish, and we make mistakes, perhaps out of our sinfulness or because the task was too difficult or because we got wrong advice, certainly because we are human, living in a broken world under the curse. To be a Christian does not mean that one is a genius.

Art with a Difference

If you are a Christian, don't be ashamed of it. Work out of the fullness of your being and give the best you have. You can never be better than you are. Be ashamed to be less, but you fall into pride and foolishness if you want to be more. This means do not be afraid. Live out your freedom. Do not let this be spoiled by your sinfulness. Sin takes freedom away. Walk in his way, yes, but this must be done out of your own convictions,

out of your own understanding, in love and freedom. It is never just the application of some rules, some dos and some donts. It is more real, more honest. It should be a commitment.

So we must work in the best way we can. If we do so we are already changing things. To be a Christian is to be different - not totally; nobody can be totally different. If we were, we would be total strangers, speaking a foreign tongue, and we could not communicate anymore.

It is also impossible to think through everything; consequently we will be children of our age in many ways. Unavoidably we will have much in common with all our contemporaries. We eat the same food, use the same clothes, go to the same stores, speak the same language, read the same papers, have had the same schooling, have gone through the same experiences of droughts, inflation, ups and downs, war and peace. Yet, we are different.

There are things we hate and they love, even though they know these things lead to death, as Paul says at the end of Romans 1. There are also things we do, love, look for, work for, because we find them to be part of going on the way, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, looking for that which is positive.

Christians are different; they partake of the framework of their time and add to it.

Maybe their total framework is larger and richer because of this. We trust it will be. And let us realize that the differences count. To do what is not obvious, or to do something nobody else does, that counts. And we never do that alone. We learn from our friends, and we teach them things too. We work together. And our group, our fellow travelers on the way, his way, are again part of a larger group, and that finally is part of the totality of his people, Gods holy church in the wide sense, the communion of saints.

By criticizing or protesting, and by showing the better way, we can influence people. It may be the beginning of something God may use in a reformation; but that is his part. Our responsibility is to be good servants and to do what our hands are given to do. We should not lose hope as long as we do our share. Later, perhaps only after the last day, we shall see that it did make a difference. Then those who feared the LORD spoke

with one another; the LORD heeded and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and thought on his name. They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act.... Then once more you shall distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him (Mal. 3:16-~8).

FOUR

SOME GUIDELINES

FOR

ARTISTS

Despite the disastrous consequences of art becoming Art in the eighteenth century, there is still some truth in the idea that art has a place of its own. We cannot justify art, saying that it fulfills this or that function though this has been tried in many ways. Even if art sometimes fulfills one function or another, that cannot be its deepest meaning. When times change and old functions become obsolete, we put art works in the museum; they have lost their function but they are still works of art and, as such, meaningful.

The Intrinsic Value of Art

Consider a tree for a moment. A tree has many functions: it has beauty; it can cast a shadow; in its branches the birds can build their nests; it produces oxygen; when it is dead it can be used as wood, and much more. Yet the meaning of the tree, its existence and reality as a creature, is not in these functions nor even in the sum total of these functions, but exactly in its being a creature, owing its existence to the great God Almighty who is the Creator. The tree has its own meaning given by God. It is no less a

tree when some of its functions for one reason or another are not realized. Rather, being meaningful, it has many functions.

The same is true of human beings. We are meaningful for who we are, not for what we have. Our meaning is not in the possessions we have nor in our qualities or talents. Preachers with a talent for speaking do not lose their humanity nor their meaning in the sight of God and their fellow humans if they fall ill and cannot speak. The meaning is in what one is, not what one has.

The same is true of art. God gave humanity the skill to make things beautiful, to make music, to write poems, to make sculpture, to decorate things. The artistic possibilities are there to be actualized, realized by us, and to be given a concrete form. God gave this to humankind and its meaning is exactly in its givenness. It is given by God, has to be done through God, that is, through the talents he gives, in obedience to him and in love for him and others. In this way it is offered back to him.

If in this way art has its own meaning as Gods creation, it does not need justification. Its justification is its being a God-given possibility. Nevertheless it can fulfill many functions. This is a proof of the richness and unity of Gods creation. It can be used to communicate, to stand for high values, to decorate our environment or just to be a thing of beauty. It can be used in the church. We make a fine baptismal font; we use good silverware for our communion service and so on. But its use is much wider than that. Its uses are manifold. Yet, all these possibilities together do not justify art.

Art has its own meaning. A work of art can stand in the art gallery and be cherished for its own sake. We listen to a piece of music simply to enjoy it, a kind of enjoyment that is not merely hedonistic; it surpasses that even if in some cases it can give great pleasure. But it has the possibility of a great number of functions that result from art being tied to reality with a thousand ties. It is exactly this last element that has been underrated by those people who spoke of high Art as autonomous, for its own sake.

As art does not need justification, nobody has to be excused for making art.

Artists do not need justification, just as butchers, gardeners, taxi drivers, police officers or nurses do not need to justify with clever arguments why they are doing their work. The

meaning of their work and life is certainly not in getting an opportunity to preach or to witness.

Plumbers who give great evangelistic talks but let the water leak are not doing their job. They are bad plumbers. It becomes clear that they do not love their neighbor. The meaning of the job is in the love for God and neighbor. Each person should pray in his or her own way, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, and then work toward that in his or her specific job. If we speak about playing a role or fulfilling a function, we minimize and in a way destroy our understanding of what God calls us to do. There is more to it. It is the same for artists. They need no justification. Of course they need justification in the theological sense of the term. Artists are sinful human beings in need of justification through the finished work of Christ on the cross. Yet Christians work as new creations in the sense of Romans 6. Their art work is as much a part of their Christian being as all the other human activities we mentioned, just as much as that of the preacher or evangelist.

If we see a good work of art it is not out of place to pray, Thank you, Lord. It is a gift from God. Maybe we are thanking God because he answered the prayer of the artist who asked God's help and guidance. And certainly there would be no good art if Christ had not come to lift the curse from this world and save it from becoming hell itself. Art itself is a potential given by God. We human beings only discover this and use it in a better or poorer way. This truth also makes it impossible to make a kind of religion out of art as is often the case with modern art. God certainly does not want us to turn art into a god, making beauty our highest aim. Aestheticism means giving art a place it does not deserve, which can be very destructive.

At the same time art can have a place in religious worship. Indeed, the making of idols is forbidden; but just as we take good care in preparing a gift for somebody we love or think highly of (the love we have is shown, expressed, in the choice as well as in the packaging), we do our best to make our songs as good as we can, make our buildings as beautiful as we can. Beauty can be very simple. Taste cannot be bought with money, though money is sometimes rightfully spent on it.

Art and Reality

Communication and form are the two facets, the two qualities of art. The communication is always through the form, and the form always communicates values and meanings. It can depict reality outside of ourselves, as understood and seen by ourselves. That reality can be the things we can see as well as the things we experience - realities like love, faith, care, righteousness and their negative, evil counterparts.

Reality is outside us, again as a potential to be discovered and to be realized. For example: America existed before any European visited it. Yet in a way it wasn't there for the people in the European world. It had to be discovered, and when that took place, its possibilities had to be realized, opened up, made available. If we now look at that same America, after so many centuries, we see what has been made of it. The Western world has been opened up with bridges, roads, cities and parks. Its potential to bear fruits and to be a livable place has been realized. But much has also been destroyed. So we see that there are many wounds in the reality of that land and its inhabitants, human and animal and botanical. So the America that is here now is a realized reality, showing what people have made out of it. The quality of that is what counts.

So reality is not simply (objectively) there. Reality is potentiality. The reality that we know is always a realized reality. We discovered it, named it, made it accessible. So we can make the statement that we always see what we know, or understand, of the world outside. This is reality: the potential world outside as far as we know it, in the way we know it. The interesting thing is that the painter paints what he sees, but as he sees what he knows, we can also say that he paints what he knows. In the painting, in his visual communication, we can see what the artist, as a member of the human race, standing at a certain point of its history, knew and understood of reality. But our vision of reality is not just knowledge, in the sense of knowing what is there, but creation, in the sense that we want to realize our vision in the same reality. The quality of that vision counts. It may be building up and opening up, positive, beautiful, good; or it may be negative, destructive, ugly, poor. Usually it is a mixture of these two extremes.

Reality is the present; it also encompasses the past. It is the things seen and the things not seen which are nevertheless very real like love, hate, justice, beauty, goodness and evil. So painters will always paint what they think is relevant, important for them or for us. If they paint the past, they will do so because they judge that past to be meaningful for us now. And in doing so they will show their understanding of it. If an artist depicts the Christmas story, he does so not only because it happened so many years ago, but because he understands it still to be of great value and importance to us. And he will show what his understanding of it is. Therefore, when we see the many cheap and sentimental Christmas cards, we really have to question what they stand for. Should that be the understanding of that story now? Isn't that too cheap, unworthy of the reality of the Son of God coming into this world? Is that the quality of our Christianity? If it is, and I think it is, it raises many questions!

Art is not neutral. We can and ought to judge its content, its meaning, the quality of understanding of reality that is embodied in it.

Undoubtedly, there is also a second approach to quality, the way the work is done, the kind of colors used, the beauty of the lines, in short the artistic quality. Theoretically these two ways of judging art can be separated, but in actuality they usually fall together, because we only know the vision and understanding through the embodiment in the composition and artistic realization of the work of art. As art is tied to reality in this way, there is a place to speak about truth in art. Does it do justice to what it represents? Does it do this in a positive way? Does it show the depth and complexity of what it is talking about? Art may be simple; it must be clear; but it should never be silly or shallow.

Art and Society

Art has a complex place in society. It creates the significant images by which those things that are important and common in a society are expressed. By the artistic image the essence of a society is made common property and reality. It gives these things a form in more than an intellectual way so they can be taken emotionally, in a very full sense. Emotional does not mean anti-intellectual. Rather it is more than intellectual.

We think about flags, landscapes, portraits, the songs sung about the land we love and so much more.

It is strange, but through art things are brought closer to us. In a way we begin to see things because the artist has made them visible for us. Seeing, as I understand it here, is closely tied with understanding, with grasping the meaning of things, with building up an emotional relationship. So in peoples houses it is very common to see not pictures of things far away but, quite to the contrary, very near. In a Swiss chalet one sees pictures of chalets and mountains, maybe the mountain that can be seen through the window. In Canada I saw in somebodys house a painting of a waterfall twenty miles away. In a riding school you see pictures of horses, in a Dutch farm, of the cows. A lover of cars will have pictures of automobiles. Indeed, in this way these things gain in reality. Just as things to a certain extent do not exist if they are given no name, are not verbally formulated, so things that are never depicted remain dim and vague since we have not learned to see them.

The world is opened up for us and is given form. We know things in the way the artists have formulated them for us. Sometimes even our lifestyle is formed or at least influenced by artists. Everybody knows how movies have gone deeply into the ways people live and think, their heroes, their views of the world, their dreams and so forth. Films have often played a role in the formation of a new fashion, and fashion is certainly more than just the choice of colors or the length of a skirt; it means the way we move, even feel. If we think about the new society dance that was introduced by Irene and Vernon Castle in the years between 1910 and 1920 in New York, with the early jazz music of Jim Europe, we see how that influenced a whole new way of life, a way of moving, of clothing. It meant the end of formality and the beginning of informal, easygoing behavior.

Art can also give form to our discontent, to our uneasiness with certain phenomena. It can give form to protest. If done in the right way, it should not be destructive or break down what is not right. In the words of our day, you could translate the biblical injunction of hungering and thirsting for righteousness as protest in love.

Films, songs, paintings, cartoons, slogans may be the tools to do this. Certainly literature and poetry play their part.

Art plays a large role in the liturgy of life. I chose this term in analogy to liturgy as we have it in church, the set forms in which we have molded our services. The liturgy of life is the way we do things. Art creates the surroundings, designs the clothes, designs the cup given to the winner or the sculpture that is the token of praise¹ as with the Oscar. In many ways the arts help. The organization of a solemn meeting, such as the inauguration of a president, is in itself a work of art. It counts in how a restaurant is designed, the art of interior design, so that even our eating is influenced.

Norms for Art

The great norm in all this is love of God and our neighbor. In the Middle Ages people spoke of the manifold meaning of a text or a work of art. Its meaning was not only literal (that which was told or depicted) but also allegorical (that which was referred to through the images or figures in the story), moral (the implications of the norms accepted) and anagogical (the impact that the work was making, how it was leading our thoughts and emotions toward and away from God and the life within his covenant). The key question is this: Does art do the truth (see Jn. 3:20-21)? If we love our neighbors, we certainly should not look down on them. Any snobbishness or elite attitude is out of place.

A beautiful example is Isaac Watts, the well-known writer of hymns or metrical psalms in the early eighteenth century. He deliberately made his songs plain, abstaining from the intricate and flowery language often used by poets who were usually writing for a restricted and learned audience with all kinds of references to myth, stories and literary figures the less educated could hardly understand. There is a place for that kind of poetry, but not if one is making church songs, hymns. Watts said he wanted the more simple

church member to be able to understand them. Yet, and that is the beauty of it, he made his poetry such that it was very fine and could stand the test. In fact it has stood the test of centuries, and many of the hymns he wrote are still sung today. Many people know his work without even knowing the writer or realizing that it was deliberately composed to be cherished by common people.

If we say that love is, as in all other things, the supreme norm for art, it certainly affects the subjects we choose, the way we treat them, the forms we give them, the materials we handle, the techniques we employ. In Philippians 4:8 Paul formulated this for all of life as well as for art. In the last chapter of my book on modern art I tried to work this out at more length. This norm is certainly not above or beyond art. It is in the very strokes we put on paper, the beat of the drum, the way we attack a note on the trumpet, the kind of paint we use. Is art doing the truth?

Art shows our mentality, the way we look at things, how we approach life and reality. If we are among artists, there may be a discussion about the details, about the techniques, about the pros and cons of this or that kind of dealing with an artistic problem. I will leave that undiscussed. I only want to point out that none of these things is neutral.

Certainly this applies to the way we deal with a subject. In the past this was called decorum. You had to choose the forms, types and expressions in regard to the subject and the situation. If you see a play by Shakespeare you know after three minutes whether it is a comedy or a tragedy. Just as when you search for some music on the radio a few notes are enough to know what kind of music you are hearing.

In our times the feeling for decorum is often lost. A good example I think is Godspell. Here we see boundaries neglected, a mistake against the norm of decorum. To treat such a high theme as the Passion as if it were a musical, a light and entertaining genre by definition, is wrong on all sides. The form does not do justice to the subject, and the subject is dealt with in an irreverent way. It is a painful experience to sit through it. It is comparable to the above example of the average Christmas card. No wonder that Christianity loses its force. Are not these examples proof of how much Christianity has

lost already? But many more examples could be found. Just go to the modern art museum and see how trite things are treated sometimes as if they were important and great, an exaltation of the too commonplace. Of course it can be done tongue-in-cheek. But it does show the relativism of our age in which anything goes.

I have noticed many young artists by-passing considerations of appropriateness and decorum. I saw a painting that depicted the column of fire at Mount Sinai. It was in the form and on the level of a poster. I saw a young artist painting *ecce homo*, Christ with a crown of thorns among his enemies, but it was badly done and therefore below the line. If you cannot paint a good head, how can you tackle a subject that many artists in the past avoided because it was so hard to do convincingly? We must know our limits and choose our genre as well as our subject since the genre itself is part of the communication.

Norm and Taste

There is no discussion about taste, is an old saying. I do not deny that. One person prefers landscapes, another portraits, one likes choral music, another orchestral, and another again chamber music. There is no discussion whether opera is better than symphonies or blues than jazz. But even if our preferences cannot be discussed, our choices can since quality and content are not just a matter of taste but a matter of norms. If we talk about portraits, some are more, some are less beautiful, others of a higher or a lower artistic quality. But our standard is not only defined by artistic quality; on the contrary, the higher the quality, the more important it is to discuss the content, the meaning, the analogical direction. Likewise a book by a great and intelligent writer on theology is not acceptable just because it is well written or deeply thought out. Even if it is so good, it must be assessed with care and maybe refuted as heretical, antibiblical or ill-directed.

There is nothing wrong even if it shows some narrow-mindedness when somebody says, I like symphonic music, and dislike rock. That is a question of taste. And within these boundaries one may prefer Haydn to Mozart, Brahms to Schubert. But

not every symphony is good because it is a symphony. There is always the question of content and meaning; what does it stand for anagogically? The question of decorum can also be relevant.

As an example, Mozart composed several pieces of music for the Mass. The music is beautiful and could be apt if we were listening to an opera. But I do not think that kind of music, its tone and expression, is fit for a Mass.

Now these examples are about old music. Whatever we think, it does not change history, even if we may argue about the influence of the content of that music on us today. It is never neutral. But if we talk about contemporary things, our assessment becomes more important.

If a record is at the top of the charts (I refer to rock and pop), it means that many people listen to it. Then it becomes imperative to discuss the meaning, content and the influence it has on people -though not in the direct sense of one word or one line nor only the words. The music in its total impact in the melody, the rhythm, the harmony, is expressive of a mentality, a way of life, a way of thinking and feeling, an approach to reality. This is important to discuss, as this music helps to form the lifestyles of those who cherish it.

And how do we react to it? Our opinions are not irrelevant. In our reaction we create ripples which influence our time. The better the record, artistically speaking, the more important this discussion will be. And if we understand that the music we are thinking about is an expression of a mentality, there are two more remarks to be made. If that music's energy is worldly, antinomian (lawless), expressing uncertainty and even despair, then what are we to do with it? Music we have around us forms part of our environment and our lifestyle, that is, ourselves.

The Lord said that not what goes into us makes us unclean, but what comes out of us (Mt. 15:11). The environment that we create is something that goes out of us. But for that same reason we should not conclude that we can never listen to that music. It would mean that we were cutting ourselves off from our own times. That is impoverishing and

would also mean that we would not understand our contemporaries, those we want to communicate with about our Lord, about the Word he has given us and about the obedience to his Word that he asks from human beings.

Another question is whether we can adapt that which is created by the world (that is, by people that do not know or love the Lord) and use it ourselves. There is no easy answer since the norm is that music or art in general should be good on the two levels we explained, the level of quality and the level of mentality expressed. Sometimes Christians make bad music because they have no talents, because they do not try hard enough or because they show their sinful nature. Sometimes the world produces good music, like the blues of Mississippi John Hurt. If it is good it can be followed; if not we had better leave it alone.

Finally we ask on which level, in which situation such music can be appropriate.

The marches of Sousa are very fine but totally inadequate for use in the church service.

And is the rock music of today adaptable to Christian expression? Is it enough just to add other words? Music is never just words. Its expression is total, even more in the melody, rhythm and harmony than in the words. This does not mean, of course, that anything goes in the texts. Not only ought there to be a unity between words and music (the music has to carry the text, underline it as it were), but the expression found in the music has to be in line with the text. However, the text itself certainly has to stand up. I have heard so-called Christian rock in which the words were quite heretical and unbiblical.

In all this, questions of decorum, lifestyle, understanding, emotion and taste come in. Taste is the sense of a fine feeling for the right note, the right rhythm, the right form at the right time, together with the choice of the right word; in short, it is the feeling for what can and what cannot be done at a certain place and time. Also, one considers the impact it makes on others, where it leads them, how they will understand it.

Communication is complex and on many levels.

Life and art are too complex to lay down legalistic rules. But that does not mean that there are no norms. Although one cannot define the wrong kind of seductiveness or the right kind of prettiness and attractiveness of a woman by the length of her skirt or the

depth of the décolleté, nevertheless women know the exact boundaries, especially the seductive kind of women as they just play over the borderlines. So in music and in art in general good artists know what ought to be done at a certain place and time, what is appropriate. It is a matter of good taste.

I will add one more point. If we talk about Christian music, we do not necessarily mean music with words that give a direct biblical message or express the experience of the life of faith and obedience in the pious sense. Obedience itself is not confined to matters of faith and ethics only. The totality of life comes in. It is the mentality, the lifestyle, that is given artistic form and expression. Bach's St. Matthew's Passion is Christian, but so are his Brandenburg Concertos. Not only the words of the cantatas are Christian, but also the instrumental parts of them. Otherwise we make Christianity narrow and leave a great part of our life that ought to show the fruit of the Spirit outside the commitment to God, our Lord and Savior. On the other hand, I know paintings that iconographically represent a Christian theme, but their content and impact are negative, blasphemous—in short, a lie. But then another work of the same artist may express a quite unchristian mentality.

Problems of Art and Style

Because of the two-centuries-old way of thinking about art as something high, autonomous and almost religious, there is a tendency today to narrow art to great art, the painting in the museum, the classical music of the great romantic composers, great literature. There is no denying that it is art nor that it is important. But it often means that the crafts or that folk music of one kind or another is not considered worthy of our attention.

One day I met a girl who told me that she had always dreamed of becoming an artist. She asked my advice. Now her drawings were not so good that I felt I could encourage her. But I knew that she was very good at designing clothes, at making fabrics.

So my advice was not to go to the painting department of some art school. It would mean plodding on for many years; at the end she might receive a little pat on the back, but she would likely have a whole pile of unsold paintings in the attic. I told her to search for a good art school in the area of the crafts, textiles or fashion. She did, and when I met her later she was happy. She even felt that she was at a more challenging place, learning more, than at the higher art school where people were discussing all day and doing very little, learning very little - like little geniuses without a goal.

Focusing on visual art, knowing that comparable distinctions could be made in other fields, one can look for two different qualities. First is the amount of naturalness, of depicting force, of representational quality. Here one can range from zero, the totally nonfigurative, the pure form, to extreme naturalism. At the one end is the curve, the circle or the square, the pure color or the simple pattern. At the other is the precise rendering of visual impressions, as in a still life by Harnett or in the precision of Jan van Eyck, rendering things in full detail.

The second concerns the load of meaning that the work carries. At the lowest level (low not meaning less) one finds ornaments, beautifying forms, colors - all valuable in themselves. Certainly this often has great significance. At the highest is the icon, the work that encompasses so much meaning as it carries so many values and stands for such great realities. The idol is a specific and in a deep sense sinful example of an icon. It is the god. But we think also of Michelangelos David, as if it were the personification of all that the Renaissance of Florence stands for; the greatness of mankind. Or think of Rembrandts Jewish Bride that stands not just for Rembrandt or seventeenth-century Holland but also for the greatness of human married love. Of course one can also think of the Byzantine icons. Between these two extremes all works of art have a place, sometimes more loaded, sometimes less.

Every work of art is characterized by these two elements. It can be decorative, low in iconic meaning, even if it shows precisely painted flowers as with nineteenth-century wallpaper. It can be iconically important even if its representational value is low as with Paul Klee or abstract expressionistic work.

The point now is that all these different kinds of art, with or without high icon value, with or without precise representational quality, are valid. It depends on the function it has to fulfill. Again, decorum is the norm. If a decorative work is well done, it may have less icon value but not necessarily less artistic value or less significance. It certainly does not mean that the person who made it is a lesser artist.

Really great art often works on several levels at the same time. Consider a baroque church in southern Germany. Ottobeuren is a fine example. Here the arts work decoratively. They adorn the church. But if you look more closely, you see figures and fine floral ornamentation. When you take more time, you see the stories and, beginning to understand these, you see their meaning in relation to the totality of the church and its function. Finally you can grasp the overall plan. Here all levels of iconicity and of representational value are present. It is decorative and at the same time loaded with meaning, working as color scheme and ornamental finery and with representational precision.

If we understand these things, we can also grasp that the debate between figurative and nonfigurative in the visual arts is of no great importance. I avoid the term abstract on purpose. There has always been nonfigurative art, mainly in ornaments and such. And great paintings have always worked on that level apart from the figuration they give and the meaningful story depicted. And figurativeness does not always mean great depth and loaded meaning. The question is not whether nonfigurative art is right or not. Rather two other questions need to be taken into account.

The first is the question of decorum, the function of the work of art in its own setting. So an ornament or the pattern of a fabric can be nonfigurative. But so can a large sculpture if it stands in a place where it is appropriate. In a way, the Eiffel Tower was such a nonfigurative sculpture, the landmark of an exhibition in 1889. Second is the question of meaning in relation to function. Consider the shape of our watches or cars. We usually call that industrial design. Even here a car-form can stand for luxury, for speed or for efficiency. To decorate the hall of a hotel, one can choose some figurative, decorative panel, but also it may be appropriate to choose some pattern with large

colored areas. Taste is here a guiding principle, a feeling for what is appropriate.

To me what is never good is the abstract, the denial or the dismissal of reality, the negative attitude to reality. By negative I do not mean showing the wrong as wrong, bringing into art a sense of the curse, of sin, of the unacceptable as such. I am not asking for only sweet idealistic pictures. They can be lies just the same, bypassing the realities of life, as some Christmas pictures do. By a negative attitude I mean that reality as such is considered negative.

So what is to be taken into account is the place, the decorum, and the inherent meaning of the work of art in relation to that role. Again, art is never neutral. The totality of our humanness is always involved if we want to discuss it adequately.

Now some words about style. Often I have been asked by a young artist which style to choose. To me this is an embarrassing question. One cannot choose a style at random. Style is part of the content as the expression of the artwork is in the artistic form itself. In a way, an artist does not have a style that can be changed for another. He is a style. In the style he shows who he is. This does not mean that within the larger framework of a style there will not be differences of style in relation to the function and place of the specific worklight at a wedding party, deep and solemn at a social occasion of great weight, tragic and dirgelike at a funeral. But style cannot be chosen at random. Certainly we should not choose a style just because we want to be with it or to make our work more salable or popular. We should have the courage to be ourselves, to be honest. This to me is the minimum requirement for any work of art. We should never compromise our principles or deep aims. Also, we should not just follow trends and fashions as they come and go. That could be, in a bad sense, worldly and show that we have not much to offer of our own. It can easily be understood that young artists are seeking for style, that they are experimenting with the possibilities of expression. But once a style is found, it expresses who they are. Of course that does not mean that it is unchangeable. It will grow with each artist in depth and width. In one word, it will become more mature. Usually that also means greater simplicity and directness because the complexities are mastered and much is brought into a few images. This is the

masters work.

Both elements can be seen in the history of art. In the work of one artist one sees a development, a process of maturation, of gradual changes as life goes on. Sometimes one sees rather sudden changes in style, in the forms of expression. That always means that a drastic change in the direction of the artists life has taken place, either a conversion to another spiritual principle, or the influence and impact of a person or a movement.

Fame and Anonymity

Some artists have become famous. Some of their names are known to everybody. It does not necessarily mean that their works are really known to everybody. But there are thousands and thousands of artists who are not known. If we look into the large artist-biographical lexicons we see many names. They are at least known to the specialist. But apart from these, there are many whom nobody has ever heard of. Yet there was someone who made that particular statue that is the delight of everybody who travels to a certain place with an open eye. Maybe it is well cherished by the local people. When these people say they love their town, that particular statue is part of the image of the place, and it certainly would mean that if it were lost many people would miss it. His statue is famous, but who knows him? Ask people who made the statue that is the landmark of Copenhagen, or who made the monument in Trafalgar Square and the lions that everybody has seen there.

Much of an artists work is anonymous. In that sense he or she shares the fate of the many who work for the public benefit. Who made the train you ride in? Who is the clever person who made the television schedules? Who designed that handy thing you use every day?

Maybe the anonymity is not fate or tragedy but quite normal. The praise for that monument, that handy thing, is the highest reward one can get. A good poster-who knows

who made it? Who cares? Maybe the creators colleagues know him or her. The specialists will know. But in due time the person is forgotten. Who knows who made this or that beautiful statue in Babylon, in Egypt, in Greece or Rome? Who made the famous Marcus Aurelius statue on Capitol Hill in Rome? Or who erected the obelisk in Washington, D.C.?

All this I feel to be right. The fame goes with the work if it is done well.

Panofsky, in his book on Suger, speaks about this in a very wise way. He compares Suger with Michelangelo. Do you know who Suger was? Suger was a great bishop in France in the twelfth century. In many ways he was responsible for the Gothic style. He was the builder of St. Denis, the person who chose and guided the artists. He was a very important man in his time though only specialists have heard of him. Yet everybody who admires the Gothic style is praising Sugers vision and great abilities.

Suger, says Panofsky, did search for fame, but it was centrifugal. The fame was in the things he did. That of Michelangelo was centripetal. That means it always ends in Michelangelo himself. You go and look at the Pieta. What do you search for? A beautiful Madonna? A dead body of Christ that stirs you? Or do you see Michelangelo? The same is true of his other works. In a way we forget the thing we are looking at, and we leave the monument not saying, How terrible and yet how joyful is The Last Judgment! but, Michelangelo did it. How great he was!

Which of these two do you look for? We may criticize Suger for some of his ideals. If we say that the Roman Catholic churches are overadorned, that the art is too much, some of that means criticizing Sugers vision. Yet I think his ideal of fame is more Christian than Michelangelos or, if not Michelangelos, than the people who gave him this praise.

We should not look for fame. It may be kindling the sin of pride. It may mean we lose our humility. And God may miss the praise he is owed. This, I think, is the lesson we learn too in Ecclesiastes. All things are vanity, and even the highest praise is evaporated in the air after a year, a century or maybe hundreds of years. Yet the meaning of work

done well is in the joy of being able to have made something that was of some use to somebody. In that way you add positively to the flow of history in the direction of the Kingdom of God.

Maybe young people dream of becoming famous. But it can be dangerous, leading to compromises, to dishonesty even, just to achieve easy fame. It is better to dream of developing your talents, to achieve the best you can. Let others decide and judge and give praise. Do not let that fool you. In the end you have to stand before the supreme judge, the great Lord Almighty. Probably you will say then, Lord, I have only been an unworthy servant of yours, but I have tried to use my talents. It was not perfect, but you gave me so much that I have to thank you for whatever the world says I did.

In the last resort art is anonymous. Who knows the names of the great sculptors of the Gothic cathedrals? Who knows the names of the architects of even the building that has been made quite recently? Everybody knows that a good performance is never the work of one person alone but that he or she needed the help of many others. The one person was in a way the brand name, the trademark. The paintings, the songs, the good designs of cars and other industrial products are anonymous. It is good that way. We have only added to the world God gave us to develop, to beautify. We have added to the lives of many, loving our neighbors. That should be the greatest achievement.

The Qualities of the Artist

Four qualities determine the scope and depth and importance of the artist, any artist. They are talent, intelligence, character and application.

The term talent is taken from the Bible, the story that Jesus told of the talents.

Indeed, a talent is given. It is a potential which one has to use with responsibility. Our Lord has the right to ask and certainly will ask what we did with it. Something to give thanks for? Certainly. Without this no artist can be of any importance. Yet it is nothing exclusive to the artist. Other people have talents. Everybody has been given qualities, positive ones to use and to develop and negative ones to fight.

By intelligence we mean the quality to analyze a situation, to find the right form,

to give the right solution, to master the complexities of the art, to express clearly what one wants to achieve. In a way this is also a given quality. Some people may describe it as a talent. Again there is the necessity to develop this.

Character is also a very important quality of artists. It often determines their greatness and importance. Many artists have failed here. Some, early in life, have success with some work and then go on doing that same thing. What was a creative act, the development of a new principle, becomes in this way a trick, an easy achievement. They dry up and become quite second-rate. There have been great artists who have ended this way. Another temptation for artists is to use their talent below their level to make money, to be popular and acceptable.

Compare Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong. Jazz had become a great influence on popular American music. The temptation to become commercial and to go pop was very great. Louis Armstrong fell for this. Somewhere around 1930 his work became easy and popular and full of tricks and effects. At times he tried again to do something good and creative, but he almost always failed. He even ended sometimes on the level of a clown, singing lullabies for children on TV, in bad taste. Yet he was a great musician, a great trumpeter. But to hear it, one has to listen to his work with the Hot Five or Hot Seven in the years 1926-27, or to his early work with the great King Oliver Creole Jazz Band of around 1922-23. Happily we still have the recordings.

We can understand it though. The years after the crisis of 1929 made it very hard for a musician to make a living. Good quality music was not appreciated enough by the public who preferred it sentimental and light. The temptation was great to cater to these bad tastes. As always, apart from personal weakness and sin, there is also the communal guilt, the situation our society, our environment, puts us in.

Jelly Roll Morton, the great jazz pianist, however, refused to sell out his art to cheapness. He fought on for quality and the principles he stood for. As a result he is still a great artist who has a chapter in any worthwhile history of jazz. But his name is forgotten by the public for whom he refused to play the clown or the caterer of sounds. And he suffered many years of poverty and neglect just as so many other great jazz-men

who suffered and some of whom died in the thirties.

In the lines above one should not read that entertainment as such is wrong. In a way all art is entertainment, the God-given opportunity to relax with good music, with good art, with a fine book. And there is nothing wrong with a ballad, with dance music (Mozart made quite a bit of it) or with making cartoons, posters, illustrations. But whatever one does, it has to have quality.

Remember what we said before of Isaac Watts. He wrote popular songs on the highest level. Or think of Toulouse Lautrec whose posters are still hanging on peoples walls even if the performances he was advertising took place long ago. Most people even do not know the kind of songs they sing. If the work is done well, it survives the occasion, like the Mozart music we still listen to. We still play Bob Dylan even if the period of protest in which his music played such an important role has gone by. One can still look with pleasure at the good entertainment film of years gone by even if the style is dated.

Of course it is dated. Whatever we do, we can never escape being of our time. We live in the now, inevitably. But a thing of beauty survives if its qualities are not ephemeral.

The last quality of every good artist is application. The old saying is that any good work of art is ninety-five per cent perspiration, and five per cent inspiration. Some people may want to place hard work under the heading of character. Anyhow, no great work of art comes by itself as a product of chance. There is no instant art. Apart from coffee nothing is instant in this world! I remember the words of a great pianist:

If I do not do my exercises one day, I will hear it the next day. If I do not do them for two days, my wife hears it. If not for three days, my best friends will notice. After four days, the public will notice.

Then there is that charming story of Hokusai, the great Japanese painter and maker of woodcuts around 1800. Once somebody asked him for a painting of a rooster. He said, All right, come back in a week. When the man came, Hokusai asked for

postponement: two weeks more. Then again, two months; then half a year.

After three years the man was so angry that he refused to wait any longer. Then

Hokusai said that he would have it there and then. He took his brush and his paper and drew a beautiful rooster in a short time. The man was furious.

Why do you keep me waiting for years if you can do it in such a short time?

You dont understand, said Hokusai. Come with me. And he took the man to

his studio and showed him the walls that were covered with drawings of roosters he had been doing over the last three years. Out of that came the mastery.

This story of course does not mean that we can keep people waiting and that we should not fulfill our promises. The lesson is that even improvisation and so-called spontaneous achievements can only be the result of hard work. No artist can ever reach the top if he does not start his day with rehearsing, a painter drawing for a few hours, a musician practicing, anybody studying. Genius is not enough.

On the Way

Of course we pray and ask for Gods help. Of course the Holy Spirit is behind us.

But God, in his great mercy and wisdom, takes us seriously as his creatures, even in his own image. We never become passive instruments of Gods Spirit. He gave us a personality, gave us freedom and responsibility, so we can never say that our work is directly inspired and therefore his. It would be blasphemous to say that our work is Gods work. But we may praise him for the life-renewing force he gave us in Christ and for his help if we achieve something that is full of love, life, beauty, righteousness, peace and joy which perhaps came after long searches and studies.

It comes down to this: Christian artists are artists who work, think and act as artists, using their talents and possibilities. But they work with another mentality and with another priority in life. This mentality implies that we work in freedom. We do not need to prove ourselves since the search for fame and our pride do not need to hinder us and since we do not need to make our own eternity.

Maybe the best way to express this is to say that we are on the way. The Bible

often uses this metaphor. The Scripture is a lamp for our feet on the path that we follow through this dark world. Go on the narrow path. It may be difficult. It asks for an effort. But going on the wide road of sin, letting yourself go, doing whatever you want, leads to the destruction of yourself, already in the here and now. Follow me! Those are Christ's words. Know where you are going. Christ even applies this way of speaking to himself when he says that he is the Way. To live is to go on a way with him - a way of life in a deep sense, a way of truth as he is the Truth. We ought to do the truth which is to love God and love our neighbors. The way is a way of freedom, love and humility, but it is God's way of holiness where he helps and leads. The way is sometimes hard to follow and sometimes asks for sacrifices, in extreme cases even for our mortal bodies in martyrdom. But it is also an exciting road full of new vistas, a walk in the direction of the Promised Land. Even now we experience much of what is waiting for us to come.

NOTES

Chapter One

1 I refer the reader to the excellent book by Linda Nochlin, *Realism and Tradition in Art, 1848-1900* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966) or the exciting lectures of Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

2H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973).

3See Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design* (New York: Penguin, 1961).

Chapter Two

1 I should like to recommend Charles Websters *The Great Instauration* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976) in which he tells at least part of that story.

