The Ancient Treasure House...

another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord.[4]

May God direct us to discover the former riches in our treasure house and grant us eyes to see them and hearts that delight in them. May we endeavor to be diligent to acquire the skills of musical literacy necessary to sing and play skillfully. May God grant us yet more glorious treasures today, tomorrow, and forevermore. *Soli Deo gloria.*

NOTE: This article is a revision of the 2008 Convocation Address at New Saint Andrews College in Moscow, ID.

ENDNOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Ancient Treasure House," in *Prince Caspian* (NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970), chap. 2.

2. Ibid. p.21-23.

3. Lois Choksy, *The Kodály Method I: Comprehensive Music Education, 3rd ed.* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999), 1-4.

4. The Apostle Paul, Colossians 3:16-17, in *The Holy Bible*; *New Geneva Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995).

The Necessity of the Visual Aesthetic in Classical and Christian Education

by Heidi Stevens

Classical and Christian educators have been about the task of "rebuilding the ruins" for many years now, and have done so with a conscious bias toward building around the framework of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Yet most educators would probably feel some discomfort in trying to enumerate exactly what a purposeful study of Beauty, especially visual beauty, should look like. We're confident that Truth and Goodness will be revealed through the perspicuity of Scripture and the providence of general revelation, but we're less sure that we can draw from these same sources guiding principles regarding a visual aesthetic. While we would never leave Truth or Goodness to flounder in such lack of definition, we're suspicious that Beauty lies inscrutably, as the world has taught us, "in the eye of the beholder," and that we have little right to wrest it from its comfortable position there. We elevate sensate judgment to a role as the final arbitrator of Beauty in a way that we would never expect conscience to be an exclusive judge of Goodness or natural reason to be a solitary source of Truth.

Ultimately, we either recognize the role God calls us to in relation to the visual world He has created, or admit that we are treating an unavoidable realm of our existence as if it is outside His concern. Dutch theologian Hermann Bavinck pointed out that: "There are only two paths open—either humanity, with all its culture, is a means for the unconscious, unreasonable, and purposeless world-power, or it is a means for the glorifying of God. The first can . . . never be believed by humanity, for it is tantamount to suicide. The second . . . brings indeed the True, the Good, and the Beautiful to eternal triumph." [1]

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As we consider these two alternatives, we must begin by seeing that the way we think about the visual arts and indeed all our aesthetic judgments and pursuits (or lack of them) is deeply connected to our theology. What we believe about the Fall and about Redemption has a direct impact on the value we place on training our students to embrace their dual creative call: the call to both critique and create visual beauty.

In Genesis, we learn that God created man to care for His creation but that man perverted that plan through sin. All of creation now bears the mark

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of that trespass; we're told in Genesis 3 that even the ground was cursed because of the sin of mankind. In light of this truth, it's tempting to assume that, since we've managed to "shipwreck the good of Eden," getting overly involved in culture is tantamount to rearranging deckchairs on the sinking Titanic.[2] Forgetting the culturally redemptive mandate we were given at the Ark, it's easy to presume a sort of "lifeboat theology" in which we see our primary task as that of rescue, rather than restoration.[3]

Equally easy is an enthusiastic but extra-biblical elevation of the merits of artistic expression. Since God created and made us creative, the thinking goes, "the arts" must be uniquely and mysteriously spiritual activities. Forgetting the destructive impact of Adam's sin on our original image, we see artistic endeavors as somehow existing above the rest of the fallen created world and thus less in need of the ongoing sanctifying grace of God.

If our thinking on art education starts with this sort of quick check-up on what we believe about both sin and redemption, we can avoid two philosophical extremes. Understanding the reality of the Fall keeps us from believing, with most of the rest of the world, that art exists in some spiritually elevated realm that will lift our students out of the morass of sin. But understanding that God is about the business of redeeming all of creation, and that He's given man distinct privileges and responsibilities within that plan of redemption, will keep us from dismissing the visual realm as something superfluous to the real business we're to be about.

Scripture resounds with the call of visual beauty. Though it is true that many references point to a beauty that is intangibly existent in God's character, we're not left without specific earthly examples to instruct us. Aside from the many references to nature's beauty, we find rich descriptions of the creation of the tabernacle and the temple[4] that are filled to bursting with God-ordained human artistic endeavors. Further, we see that these man-made visual arts are intended to move worshippers from an aesthetic to a spiritual response that expresses the delight a believer finds in God.[5]

Again and again, God's Word urges us to *see* and *assess* the visual world around us. Surely we are called to mature in our ability to see wisely just as we are called to grow up in all our other callings. Consider what is real and what is figurative in Psalm 19: we're called to figuratively "hear" the declaration of the skies, but we're to do that based on what is *really* perceived by our sense of sight! We read the book of Revelation and find that our dreaming of the future glory of the New Jerusalem is fueled by enticing *visual* description! The Christian is called to have an informed aesthetic taste because Scripture requires us, repeatedly, to consider what is lovely.

The call God places on us to love visual beauty should be enough, by itself, to argue for a robust art program in our schools. How can we love well what we're untrained to recognize? Some may argue that human awareness of beauty, as a God-given gift, needs no particular training. Yet, in that same vein of thinking, would we set aside teaching theology or logic in favor of trusting a "natural" love of truth? The abundant visual creations of man daily compete for our students' response. What will they esteem as lovely and admirable[6] if we do not train them to make biblical assessments?

If we acknowledge that we must train our students to develop thoughtful aesthetic taste, then we should also consider that in some sense they are called to mature in their ability to *create* visual beauty themselves. This proposition seems meddlesome if we think here only of professional artistic callings. God has *not* called each of us to paint canvases or sculpt marble. However there is at least a pedagogical and at best a principled reason to consider a "doing" aspect to God's creative call.

We learn to attend to what we concentrate on doing. We learn the beauty of the language of math as it's brought to our attention *and* as we struggle to express it ourselves in Euclidian theorems. We learn the relevant and cohesive nature of Scripture as we're told of those qualities *and* as we spend hours in our own exegetical studies. Likewise, we "love" the physical beauty given by our Creator God and recognize the most worthy craftsmanship of others as these things are pointed out to us *and* as we learn to see with the disciplined eye of an artist.

But even beyond these matters of pedagogy, the very fact that God has given us vocations in a physical—and visible—world should make us recognize how much each of us is called to make, arrange, order, and create in various ways every day. Dorothy Sayers is just one of many who points out that the "creativeness" of the soul is one of our most readily discernable image bearing qualities.[7] Observing this, for ourselves, and for our students, how can we

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not desire for them a robust and thoughtful visual arts education?

In the classical model, this education need not be mysterious because it fits seamlessly and logically into the stages of learning we recognize. From the beginning of time, young artists have begun with the study of past masters and the "grammar" of copy work; imitation of the beautiful simultaneously addresses both the mental and the kinesthetic aspect of aesthetic knowledge. A dialectic transition occurs naturally, as students delve more thoroughly into the study of art history and learn to compare and contrast the works they assess, while simultaneously imitating techniques of rendering that require higher levels of logical thinking. Rhetoric students move more fully toward self-conscious interpretive choices in their own works, and grow in their ability to winsomely critique the visual culture around them through a formal study of aesthetics.

We must not be content to let Beauty be caught, rather than taught in classical Christian education. There really are only two paths open. Either we acknowledge the call to a thoughtful aesthetic so present in Scripture and so needed in culture, or we abandon that aesthetic as something beyond our calling and God's redemptive plan. Only when we thoughtfully and consistently train students who are leaders in both loving and creating visual culture will the world see the eternal triumph and interdependent nature of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

ENDNOTES

1. Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908-1909, Princeton Theological Seminary* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 264-265.

2. Paul A. Marshall, *Heaven Is Not My Home: Learning to Live in God's Creation* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998), 30-31.

3. Ibid., 31.

4. Ex. 25-30, 35-39; I Kings 6-7; I Chron. 22-27; 2 Chron. 2-4.

5. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Trempler Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 83.

6. Phil. 4:8.

7. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Continuum, 2004), 23.