
"Why Art Matters" Caring For The Artists In Our Midst

Much is at stake in how one views art and reality, and the calling of the artist in our day. Have we lost a vision for the central place of the arts in community life? Have we relegated artists and the arts to the margins of our lives, the offramps of our information super highways? Some questions to ponder:

- ◆ Is art criticism possible? (What is art? Are such questions answerable, or even relevant?)
- ◆ Is "beauty only in the eye of the beholder"? (Are there any objective criteria for discussing art?)
- ◆ Is art just a state of mind, is it all in the head, or does some form of aesthetic reality exist objectively, out there?
- ◆ What is the relationship between beauty and truth?
- ◆ What is ugly art?
- ◆ What is propaganda art?
- ◆ Is some art secular and some art sacred?
- ◆ Is it all just a matter of opinion? (Is everything just a matter of opinion, let alone art-type things?)
- ◆ What is involved in doing art, in being *an artist*? (Are all artists naturally depressed? Are you depressed?)
- ◆ What is the relationship between doing art and doing life (generally) in the everyday?
- ◆ Does any of this really matter? (Why is it so expensive?)
- ◆ Who was the first artist? (How much did *they* charge for their work?)

Throughout human history, people have communicated primarily through the arts. The best science and most innovative scientists exhibit the highest forms of creative thinking, artistic rendering, and figurative-rich literary expression. Art is foundational to all human activity. Art can also be disturbing, artists can be confusing, works and worlds of art threatening. But for the theist, Xian theists especially, art should not only be woven into the very fabric of their thinking and dreaming but into their mystic union with divine truth, human community, worship and service.

To be a lifelong learner and creator, contributing to the edification of the culture and the world through speaking and living out truth, one should begin in the now and the day-by-day with the intellectual and spiritual disciplines of clear thinking, careful seeing, and intentional and conscious meditation on beauty and truth, existence, life, dogs and cats and flower gardens, one's neighbors, pain and evil, suffering and madness, the good, the aesthetic, the human, the divine.

Beauty draws blood to the heart and speeds up the pulse; sometimes it evokes repentance. I wish more Christians were comfortable with its pull. Too often, beauty raptures us so forcibly that we fear it will lead to temptation. So we avert our eyes. What if we turned our ecstasy into worship?

With provocative hyperbole, a character in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* predicts that beauty will save the world. Commenting on this line, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn imagined that "if the too obvious, too straight branches of Truth and Good are crushed or amputated and cannot reach the light," then "perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, unexpected branches of Beauty will make their way through and soar up to that very place and in this way perform the work of all three."

[Agnieszka Tennant, from her book review "What (Not All) Women Want - the finicky femininity of *Captivating* by John and Stasi Eldredge," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/008/25.60.html> posted 08/10/2006 10:00 a.m. © 2006 Christianity Today. August 2006, Vol. 50, No. 8, Page 60.]

To think critically and perceive analytically, and, with elegance and simplicity, to evaluate the world of ideas found in popular media, press, and culture, one must regularly exercise and discipline the mind. And one must train and develop the mind with a view to a life-long practice and habit of thinking philosophically and living aesthetically. By our very nature, all of us homosapiens are philosophers, thinkers, evaluators of life, the universe and everything.

God grant that we may live in the light of simplicity.

Certainly some revolt against our exaggerated materialism is long overdue. They [the Beat writers] seem to know a good many of the right things to run away from, but to lack any necessary discipline. They call themselves holy but holiness costs and so far as I can see they pay nothing. It's true that grace is the free gift of God but in order to put yourself in the way of being receptive to it you have to practice self-denial.

[Flannery O'Connor, *Letters*, p. 336. Quoted from: *Flannery O'Connor, Images of Grace*. Fickett & Gilbert, eds. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986, pp. 6-9.]

Has there recently evolved among us sapiens (again) an irreconcilable divide between faith and reason, between intellect and spiritual-mystic intuition, between analytic thought and emotion? Has a kind of *romantic Gnosticism* re-emerged out of the void of existential nihilism (maybe after the Beat Generation became mainstream in the 1960s) to ring a death-knell to the scholarly rationalism of the Middle Ages and the Christian humanist ideals of the Enlightenment? On a similar tack—*hello? are you still awake?*—if the subject matter of art is "the world," then knowledge of the world (history, archeology, philosophy, literature) is vital for the aspiring artist to pursue aesthetic creativity—and thus a re-turn to "liberal arts education." To create great art, important art, relevant art, one must have as much knowledge of the world as possible; and not just feelings and impressions, but reliable data, information. To do art, it is not enough to be in touch with one's feelings and emotions, one's interior self, though this is valuable; one must think—and *think well*. The intellect is as important in the process of aesthetic creativity as aesthetic perception, vision, and techné. Within Jewish and Xian tradition at their best, there is no dichotomy between, on the one hand, the mind (intellect, reason), and, on the other hand, immediate perception and *aesthetic intuition* (as Jacques Maritain referred to it).

Father in heaven! What are we without you! What is all that we know, vast accumulation though it be, but a chipped fragment if we do not know you! What is all our striving, could it even encompass a world, but a half-finished work if we do not know you: you the One, who art one thing and who art all! So may you give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills only one thing.

[Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, New York, 1956, pp. 31+218. Linguistic update by *KaveDragenInk*.]

Trumeau faculty member, K.D. Kragen (kdkragen.com), is a philosopher, writer, teacher, editor, husband, father and grandfather. He lives on Bainbridge Island, WA, with his wife Janet (writer and educator), married twenty-nine years. This year Kragen began his seventh novel, third in the sci-fi series *The KillWare Chronicles* (killware.com), published in 2004. His fourth novel, *Plagueman* (historical fiction, plagueman.com), came out in December 2005. Kragen also manages the small POD publishing house, Scandia Patch Press (scandiapatchpress.com), and a local PUD, Kirk Ave Water District. He has eight years of graduate study and two graduate degrees, philosophy of religion (Denver Seminary) and philosophy (Syracuse University). Despite all this education, K.D. had not begun to learn to read until the fourth grade and hadn't read a full novel until he was in high school. His first favorite writers were Robert E. Howard, H. P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, and Jules Verne, which is where his love of science fiction and horror began. It was during his college years that he began writing. He finished his first short story "The Chairs" in 1984. In 1989 K.D. and family moved to Bainbridge Island, where he got a job washing dishes at the Streamliner Diner, joined a local writers group, and started his first novel titled *Creatures of the Heart* (creaturechronicles.com). For the past ten years K.D. has been the managing editor of Scandia Patch Press, and he recently joined the faculty of the Trumeau Arts community as resident philosopher. He taught logic at Syracuse University and has taught philosophy of art as a guest lecturer at the Northwest College of Art and at Trumeau Conferences. Favorite quote: "'I would have perished, had I not perished' still is and will be my life motto. This is why I have been able to endure what long since would have killed someone else who was not dead." (*Søren Kierkegaard Journals and Papers*. Hong & Hong, eds. Indiana University Press, 1978, v.6, pt.2, p.9.)

May the God of serious art protect us from the aesthetic void.

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