

A BIBLICAL BASIS FOR APPRECIATING BEAUTY

BY MORRIS TAYLOR

The Author of all beauty, Himself a lover of the beautiful, God provided to gratify in His children the love of beauty.—*Education*, p. 41.

God has a fantastic imagination! A newly created world springs up at His command. Vapors rise, gems gleam, fish and swans swim. Gazelles and zebras leap and cavort. God says, "It is good."

In His own likeness God forms "man of the dust of the ground." The Spirit of God rushes breath into human nostrils. Bone, sinew, heart, and brain come alive. When God sees female and male He proclaims, "It is very good." The sons of God ecstatically proclaim the accomplishment in paeans of praise.

Before all created things were formed, Christ existed. By Him were all things fashioned; through His energy all things consist and cohere (Colossians 1:16, 17). The eternal Word makes all things; the incarnate Word redeems all things. The Light illumines all living souls.

The good news of the creative acts of God echoes through the heavens. David recommends his poem (Psalm 19) to the chief choir director for musical performance. The libretto relates no weak, pantheistic view. Rather, verses resound in robust rhetoric.

The heavens tell out the glory of God.
the vault of heaven reveals his
handiwork.

One day speaks to another,

A balanced education must include formal study of the various forms of human creativity; student exposure to great literature, art, and music must not be left to chance.

night with night shares its knowledge,
and this without speech or language
or sound of any voice.

Their music goes out through all the
earth,
their words reach to the end of the
world.

In them a tent is fixed for the sun,
who comes out like a bridegroom from
his wedding canopy,
rejoicing like a strong man to run his
race.

His rising is at one end of the heavens,
his circuit touches their farthest ends;
and nothing is hidden from his heat.
(Psalm 19:1-6, NEB).¹

Both testimonies, the natural beauty of God's creation and the perfect beauty of God's law, elicit from David the prayerful response, "May

all that I say and think be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer!" (Psalm 19:14). Such a vision of God's grandeur inspires creative people to respond similarly. The redeemed artist rightfully asks Deity, "May all the artistic expressions I create be acceptable unto You, for You, Lord, are the source of my creative impulse and of my sanctified imagination."

It is right to love beauty and to desire it; but God desires us to love and to seek first the highest beauty, that which is imperishable. The choicest productions of human skill possess no beauty that can bear comparison with that beauty of character which in His sight is of "great price."²

Art in Worship

Does the Bible forbid representational art? A careful look at Exodus 20:4, 5 suggests that graven images and likenesses are not to be made objects of worship. A parallel passage in Leviticus makes it clear that sculpted figures should not be made for worship.

You shall not make idols for yourselves; you shall not erect a carved image or a sacred pillar; you shall not put a figured stone on your land to prostrate yourselves upon, because I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 26:1).

However, at the same time God gave the Ten Commandments on Sinai, He also presented Moses with directions for building and furnishing the tabernacle. Following His instructions artists fashioned many beau-

tifully designed and artistically wrought objects such as angels, oxen, and candelabra out of linen, gold, and other precious material. The detail even included pomegranates in the analogous color scheme of violet, purple, and scarlet to decorate the priest's garments.

God is the source of beauty, even as He is the source of truth. The prophet Zechariah exclaimed, "How great is his goodness and how great is his beauty!" (Zechariah 9:17, KJV). In the Bible the idea of God's beauty is inextricably linked with His character. David sought to "gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple" (Psalm 27:4).

Holiness is said to have beauty. The Lord several times invited persons to worship Him in the beauty of holiness (Psalm 29:2; 96:9; 1 Chronicles 16:29).

The Lord desires His created beings to be happy and to enjoy life. "Thou wilt show me the path of life; in thy presence is the fullness of joy, in thy right hand pleasures for evermore." Paul told Timothy that he

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could trust "in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17, KJV). The sight of natural beauty, the taste of good food, the smell of fragrant flowers, the feel of soft moss, and the sound of a babbling brook all titillate our senses with pleasure. Christians enjoy these things even more because they know that they are God's loving gifts.

A Gift of Creativity

God has given to citizens of earth the very special gift of creativity. To us He bestows capacity and judicious dominion. Though diminished by sin, the mandate continues. Through redemption humans "must be made new in mind and spirit, and put on

the new nature of God's creating" (Ephesians 4:23). God engages in poiesis, the act of creating. As His creatures, we reimagine in mimesis, the art of imitation. "Every human being created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator, individuality, power to think and to do."³

God offers us the opportunity to use the natural world for both enjoyment and inspiration. "Come," David invites, "let us raise a joyful song to the Lord" (Psalm 95:1). Enjoyment is a gift of God (Ecclesiastes 3:13).

Since God is the source of all beauty and truth, it is reasonable to expect that beauty, like truth, reflects His image. The sensitive Christian actively seeks for beauty and truth and perceives their interrelationships.

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.⁴

The Christian teacher can point students toward artistic creations that express truth and beauty as they reside in the Creator and His marvelous works.

Criteria for Assessing Great Art

What are some of the many possible criteria that may help the teacher to select from among various artistic productions? Great art, including literary productions, has excellence of craftsmanship and freshness of imagination. Moral principles guide the artist to portray virtue and truth as desirable attributes. The style and content of the artwork affirm a variety of cultural, ethnic, and national sources with sympathetic understanding. The music, poetry, enactment, and performance represent the best in the society and are as far removed as possible from the sordid, the banal, and the immoral.

The literary and artistic materials studied should agree with the objectives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Within reasonable guidelines, flexibility and artistic freedom

can exist within artistic compositions and critical evaluation. For the Christian, one criterion for evaluating artistic merit might be the following: taken in context, and making allowances for the maturity of both the teacher and the student, does the individual art have a Christian world view?

Sophisticated art is not necessarily an expression of high moral worth. Conversely, simple art is not necessarily an expression of low moral value. Avoiding snobbishness on one hand and naiveté on the other, the Christian teacher can educate on two levels. Striving toward moral integrity and spiritual growth, the teacher can open new aesthetic experiences for student self-expression and enjoyment. When balanced by religious principle, the student may soar to artistic heights.

Creating an Artistic Environment

An aesthetically pleasing and orderly environment fosters learning and improves behavior. Students

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respond favorably to a well-designed building, appropriately decorated classrooms, attractive bulletin boards, and tastefully dressed instructors. Living plants, an aquarium, quality pictures, and three-dimensional art enhance the educational experience.

Students should be encouraged to express themselves in creative ways, such as illustrating assignments with interesting designs and alternative formats. The teacher provides materials and inspiration; the student utilizes these resources on an individual basis. Although certain basic and specialized skills are important for students to acquire, the best teaching encourages self-expression and crea-

tivity. In terms of the student's creative development, one original picture transcends any carefully produced copy; an original poem any memorized sonnet; an improvised costume any rented outfit; a home-grown plant any commercially raised one; a student musical performance any professional presentation. The student-produced product should be attractively displayed and enthusiastically commended.

Resources

A good school library contains important literature and well-illustrated books about the arts. Other sources of information include the public library, museums, local colleges, and musical societies.

Students need the opportunity to personally confront great art. Whenever possible, arrange a field trip to an art museum, a quality concert, or an example of excellent architecture. Through personal enthusiasm and insightful instruction the teacher may lead the class to true enjoyment and

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THE RELEVANCE OF FEELINGS

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hand, allow us to emotionally participate with light so that our experiences and feelings provide the basis for understanding Jesus' metaphor in saying "I am the light of the world."

Feelings are the source of meaning in our lives. Out of our experiences and feelings we learn to think and reason. The poet Ezra Pound once described experience as a "sudden emotion," an "Instant when something outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective." He could have described understanding, meaning, and knowledge the same way.

Students in the 1960s sought meaning; they wanted to understand not facts but experience. Perhaps in the 1990s, these same students, now teachers themselves, will find ways to get a different generation in touch with their feelings, to help them understand their emotions, and to learn to use them for others. We may thus effect an enlarging of the Adventist educational creed—to educate the mental, the physical, the spiritual, and the emotional.—Cheryl Jetter. □

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appreciation.

Preparing students to view great art takes effort and patience. In addition to offering suggestions for appropriate behavior, the teacher can distribute a worksheet before the field trip to help students know what to look for and to enhance their appreciation and understanding.

Various arts integrate well with other subjects in the curriculum. Social studies, religion, biology, and practical arts lend themselves readily to interdisciplinary approaches. While studying the history of a period, the artistic achievements may also be surveyed. Biblical events can be illustrated by song, sketches, sculpture, or play acting. Nature serves as a direct inspiration for artistic expression. As students master the skills of carpentry or clothing construction, why not encourage them to design and decorate their creations?

But the arts should be much more than just an addenda to the curriculum. A balanced education must include formal study of the various forms of human creativity; student exposure to great literature, art, and music must not be left to chance. When presented attractively, the arts refine human nature and restore finer

sensitivities. As a person's physical body grows and his mind expands, his emotions must mature as well. In an increasingly technical society, young people need the balancing values that artistic pursuits bring to their lives. While everyone should be conversant with the cultural achievements of our civilization, it is even more important to absorb the best and most beautiful experiences the arts have to offer. The arts enrich

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and enliven. They promote health and happiness as they open the senses to receive new sights, sounds, and perceptions. Through the arts human beings may be drawn close to one another and to their Creator.

An Invitation

You and your students may practice heaven's panoply of praise. Come, join John who jars our jaded senses. Fire and ice mingle. Torches burn before the throne of God. In front of the throne stretches what seems to be a sea of glass "like a sheet of ice" (Revelation 4:6). Chromatic colors encircle the throne. Chanting creatures proclaim, "Holy, holy, holy is God the sovereign Lord." Twenty-four elders finger harps and fragrant

bowls of incense. Myriads of angels sing lustily in honor of the Lamb. A vast throng from all ethnic and language groups stands in review before the universe. White-robed, palm-waving earthlings shout together, "Victory to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" □

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REFERENCES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all texts in this article are from *The New English Bible*. © *The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1970. Reprinted by permission.*

² Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 249.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

MUSIC, CAN YOU IMAGINE?

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5. Music should be considered part of the curriculum, not an extracurricular activity. It is as valuable to students as English, math, and social studies. Biblically, we find a precedent for including it as one of the core subjects in the curricula. The Old Testament lists music as one of the four subjects taught in the schools of the prophets.

6. When introducing students to various styles, remember that *good* does not mean old, dull, or boring. Good music may be found in virtually every style. Look for positive attributes in every kind of music, even in the kinds that students seem to listen to most. You may not find much to praise, but if you do find anything at all, you will have gained credibility with your pupils!

7. When playing music for your students, be sure to select good quality recordings and to maintain the equipment properly. Use a good playback system to assure quality reproduction. Better yet, invite local musicians and composers to perform for your students and to talk about their music.

8. Teach students that music is not something that is always good at church and bad at loud parties. Expose them to both sacred and secular music, and teach them how to make wise choices about the quality of each.

9. Help students understand that music