

# A CHRISTIAN FOCUS FOR THE Arts



**T**he arts (e.g., music, painting, drama, sculpture, and literature) are life-changing, opening up new horizons and opportunities for teachers to connect with students in meaningful ways.

The arts can also be controversial. Perhaps you have heard com-

ments like these:

- “Come on! It’s just an expression of creativity, and can’t be ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’”
- “There’s no need to analyze it—just enjoy it!”
- “Well, there aren’t any swear words in the story, so I really don’t see any problem.”
- “She’s a great writer. How can you say that this book is inappropriate for a college literature class? Those taking the class are adults and not as impressionable as younger students.”

As Christians, we must ask some crucial questions: Are the arts of value? Did God place within humans both the desire and the ability to create things that are unique and lovely? If so, are there divine standards that apply to the creation and appreciation of works of art?

These issues are of concern to Christian educators.<sup>1</sup> We, and our students, should be able to give a reason for what we be-

lieve<sup>2</sup>—a rationale based not merely on tradition, personal preference, or popular opinion. Clearly, our answers must not be superficial or dismissive. Rather, we must carefully examine the arts and seek to formulate guiding principles that will enable us to experience, understand, and thoroughly enjoy what God has intended, while rejecting that which is demeaning, degrading, immoral, or antagonistic to Christian beliefs and values.

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## Defining Art

The arts are forms of expression that clarify, intensify, and interpret life. They stimulate our capacity for observation, train our power of reflection, and help us to identify and empathize with others. Although the arts incorporate many formats, we will consider the following major categories:

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1. The *auditory arts* meld sound and silence, pitch, timbre, and intensity, rhythm, and sometimes words into acoustic productions such as vocal or instrumental music.

2. The *visual arts* incorporate the prime ingredients of mass, space, light and shadow, as well as form, proportion, perspective, and hue to produce painting, sculpture, architecture, and the like.

3. The *literary arts*, such as poetry and prose, weave rhyme, rhythm, simile, metaphor, contrast, alliteration, and the meaning of words into written tapestries.

4. The *dramatic arts*, including theatre and film production, revolve around such key components as plot, unison and dissonance, fluidity and awkwardness, cadence, angularity, and interdependence.

Although some art forms resonate with certain individuals more than with others, each can enrich our lives.

## The Arts Are of Christian Value

Why does a work of art have worth? First and foremost, art acquires merit because it is an expression of creativity; and creativity is of value because God is the Creator, and we are made in His image.<sup>3</sup>

A second reason is that the Bible specifically calls for artistic production. Both congregational singing and instrumental renditions were at various times ordained by God as key components of worship.<sup>4</sup> On another occasion, God directed that simple drama be enacted in order to communicate spiritual lessons.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps one of the greatest demonstrations of the value God places on artistic expression is found in the design of the sanctuary.<sup>6</sup> According to God's plan, there were to be carvings, statuary, embroidered curtains, and artistic depictions of nature. The ceremonies were carefully choreographed. Furthermore, God personally commissioned those who were to prepare these aesthetic components,<sup>7</sup> which provides convincing evidence that God values both the artist and artistic expression.

## Seeking a Christian Framework

Seventh-day Adventist education seeks to bring a distinctive Christian perspective to teaching and learning. To construct a Christian view of the arts requires us to identify biblical principles that guide creative *expression* and provide criteria for artistic



*evaluation*. These include the following considerations:

1. *Levels of understanding influence appreciation*. There are at least three levels of artistic understanding—sensation, comprehension, and valuation.

*Sensation* is the raw data from our sense organs, which stimulates an emotive response. It is possible, however, to sense something without truly understanding it.<sup>8</sup> Much popular music, for example, has strong sense appeal because it is pleasurable on a physical level. Great music is enjoyable, too, but it provides an opportunity to incorporate an intellectual component into the listening experience. It calls for *comprehension* of both the medium and the message.

There is, however, an even more critical dimension. *Valuation* means assessing something in terms of one's worldview.<sup>9</sup> This requires discernment, as one places the aesthetic experience within a conceptual framework and exposes it to normative principles and evaluative criteria. For the Christian, an aesthetic



to change across time, place, and culture.

Such modifications are not intrinsically evil. Ancient Hebrew poetry, for example, hardly ever rhymed. Rather, it used literary devices such as parallelism and alliteration. Does this mean that it is not really poetry (or that modern verse that *does* rhyme is not really poetry)? Certain forms of contemporary music utilize harmonic combinations and sequences that do not appear in music written 50 years ago. Is this wrong? Or could it be, as with language, that 21st-century forms and expressions connect more effectively with the present generation? It seems clear

work should not be merely something one likes or even comprehends, but an experience that lifts one to a higher, more spiritual plane. It implies that while sensory delight and emotional pleasure are legitimate components of the Christian life, the love of God must supersede the love of pleasure.<sup>10</sup> Since art, music, and drama can have such a profound emotional impact, Christians need to carefully apply rational and spiritual criteria in their evaluation of all types of art.

2. *Both medium and message must be considered.* There are two parallel elements of art: style and message. Each is significant.

Art forms can be used to convey many types of messages—realism or fantasy, truth or falsehood, good or evil; but they *always*



that a Christian must learn to appreciate art forms from various historical periods and cultural contexts, while at the same time making value judgments based on the Christian worldview.

There is one more aspect to consider. Every significant work of art has a close *link* between the medium and the message. Artistic styles, in fact, often develop as a result of a certain worldview. Furthermore, over time, certain art forms become symbolically associated with particular messages.

Thus, one must also consider the real-life connotations of artistic styles, whether expressed through music, sculpture, literature, or any other art form.

3. *It is possible to differentiate between technical expertise and*

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convey a message. In fact, artwork often amplifies the impact of an idea. It adds strength to the encapsulated worldview, whatever it is. An example is the use of artworks as political propaganda to promote racism or bigotry, such as in Nazi Germany. Consequently, the artistic *message* must be carefully examined to see if it matches one's beliefs.

What about *style*? Some individuals reject contemporary art forms, not because they are contrary to a Christian worldview, but because they feel threatened by a new medium or unfamiliar style. But since art is an integral part of life, its forms are bound

*worldview*. Technical excellence is evidenced by the artist's expertise, as judged by experts or by other individuals in sustained contact with the art form. In painting, for example, technical excellence may include the use of color, form, texture, composition, and balance, as well as the handling of lines and perspective, and the unity of the artwork, among other criteria.

By recognizing technical expertise as an indicator of excellence, one can disagree with an artist's perspective on life, while still asserting that he or she is a great artist. In other words, an artwork is not rubbish simply because we disagree with the art-

ist's worldview. On the other hand, if something immoral or untruthful is embodied in great art, it can be far more destructive than if crudely expressed. Hence, the greater the technical excellence of the work of art, the more carefully its worldview must be critiqued.

4. *Both the purpose and the effect of a work of art must be carefully considered.* Art can be created for many reasons. It may be produced, for example, simply as a *work of beauty*; and this is biblical. In the construction of the temple, Solomon “decorated the house with precious stones for beauty.”<sup>11</sup> In the courtyard, there was a “sea of cast bronze” supported by 12 statues of oxen, its brim “shaped like a lily blossom.” Furthermore, there were two free-standing columns placed in the courtyard. In each case, these elements were added because God wanted beauty to be evident.

Art can further serve as an *avenue for the imagination*.<sup>12</sup> Some

Christians have maintained that visual art should be strictly representational—a precise depiction of nature. According to biblical precedent, however, art does not have to be realistic. Rather, it can incorporate creative, inventive dimensions. Woven into the hem of the priest's robe, for instance, were figures of pomegranates in scarlet, purple, and blue.<sup>13</sup> In nature, pomegranates are red and perhaps purple, but never blue. Thus, we can conclude that God values imagination and creativity.

A work of art may also be created as an *element of worship*. Initially, there appears to be a paradox: The same God who prohibited the creation of any engraved image also told Moses to fashion a tabernacle that would incorporate many forms of representational art.<sup>14</sup> The candlestick, for example, included figures of flowers and fruit, while the most holy place included models of angelic beings. This apparent inconsistency is resolved in Leviticus 26:1: The problem was not in the representational quality of the art, but in making it an *object of worship*.

Today, while we may not bow down and worship works of art, perhaps we need to more closely consider our adulation of the producers or performers of various art forms. Only God is worthy of worship.

In addition to its intended purpose, the *final effect* of an artistic expression must also be considered. Scripture reminds us, “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. . . . By their fruits you will know them.”<sup>15</sup> For the Christian, the final test of a work of art is its effect on one's spiritual life. Art that helps us to be better persons—more committed to God's plan for our lives, more attuned to the needs of those around us—is art that is fitting for the Christian to study and create.

5. *While artistic expression should always convey an uplifting spiritual message, it need not be religious.* Religion is a vital dimension of a Christian's life. It centers on God's work of salvation and our response to this marvelous gift. Through special encounters, it seeks to cultivate a vibrant personal relationship between us and God. Being a Christian, however, means more than a one-day-a-week religious experience—it means viewing *all* aspects of life from a spiritual perspective.<sup>16</sup>

How does this relate to the arts? First, artistic expression may indeed focus on religious themes, and this is proper. However, religious subject matter does not ensure that a work of art transmits a Christian worldview. On the other hand, non-religious dimensions of life also offer appropriate themes for the Christian artist, provided that the totality of life is viewed from a Spirit-filled perspective.

Take the literary arts, for example. The Bible not only contains religious poetry, but also non-religious verse. Take, for instance, the Song of Solomon. While this poem has at times been interpreted as a description of the love of Christ





Christian, if they transmit spiritual values and elucidate the Christian worldview.

In this section, we have briefly examined five criteria for artistic production and appreciation. Principles such as these can help us to view the arts from a Christian perspective, as well as relate thoughtfully to issues that students find particularly relevant. We will now consider two of these issues—the matter of culture, and the question of the sacred and the common.

### **Christianity and Culture**

Christianity and culture can relate in a number of ways.<sup>17</sup> At one extreme, culture is seen as inherently good, and all its manifestations are embraced. At the other extreme, culture is seen as inherently evil, so Christians must reject and try to separate themselves from its immoral influence.

There is a third perspective, however—one that sees culture as a battlefield of the great controversy between good and evil. This view requires the Christian to carefully evaluate culture in the light of biblical principles, affirming cultural components that are in harmony with God's character and plan, while rejecting and attempting to remedy any conditions that run counter to the divine standard.

This "Christ *transforms* culture" orientation is particularly relevant for Christian education. A prime goal of education is to help students value their cultural heritage while preparing them to exert a positive influence on the larger society.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, Christian schools have at times unwittingly led students to either accept culture uncritically or to mindlessly reject it altogether.

How then should we approach the arts, which are inseparably linked to cultural symbols, subjects, and styles? First, we should

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for His church, it is fundamentally a beautiful antiphonal expression of the love between a man and woman—a romantic literary piece placed by God in the Bible. In the arena of dramatic prose, the Book of Esther is considered one of the great masterpieces of all time. Yet, while it powerfully portrays spiritual themes, it never even mentions the name of God. If even the Bible can contain non-religious literary works, it stands to reason that non-religious artistic expressions are fitting for the

help students understand that society and culture were part of God's divine plan for this world. As this world plunged into the conflict between good and evil, however, elements of culture became subverted and distorted. Thus, the initial task for the Christian is to recognize the Lordship of Christ in all dimensions of life, and to carefully assess culture and its artistic expressions according to a Christian worldview. The foremost consideration must be to reject evil and embrace that which is

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good—in harmony with God’s character and His plan for our lives.

There is another dimension, however, within that which is good—the progression from low to high culture, from mass preference to a more refined taste.<sup>19</sup> The art forms of mass culture are often overtly sentimental and filled with clichés. They tend to depict the obvious and at times, the crude or vulgar. These artistic expressions lack an intellectual dimension and do not offer an aesthetic experience.<sup>20</sup> One essential goal of Christian education is to help students develop and mature in cultural appreciation.<sup>21</sup>

## The Issue of the Sacred and the Common

We now turn to the question of the sacred and the common.

While all aspects of life must be viewed from a spiritual perspective, there does seem to be strong scriptural support for differentiating between the sacred and the common.<sup>22</sup> At the burning bush, Moses was commanded by God to remove his sandals, “for the place where you stand is holy ground.”<sup>23</sup> It is apparent that Moses commonly wore sandals, and that this was acceptable.<sup>24</sup> At Mount Horeb, however, he was standing on “holy ground” and must, to show his reverence, differentiate between the sacred and the common. A few years later, Aaron’s inebriated sons, Nadab and Abihu, failed to make this distinction, and were punished for using common fire for a sacred purpose.<sup>25</sup>

What are the implications for education? First, we must help our students to realize the difference between the sacred and the common, particularly in the arts. We must be especially careful not to mix the sacred and the common in our worship of God.<sup>26</sup> Students should be encouraged, however, to experience in their lives both the sacred and the common, each within the parameters of God’s plan for their lives. To limit our lives to the common deprives us of the abundant life that grows out of a personal encounter with God.<sup>27</sup>

## The Christian Life

In summary, we have seen that the arts have inherent value. We have further examined a number of principles that can help us develop a Christian perspective on the arts. By using these principles, we can empower our students to differentiate between medium and message, purpose and effect, and to develop more profound levels of understanding. This will enable them to tell the difference between expertise and worldview and between the spiritual and the profane. Finally, we looked at some ways to help students understand the relationship between culture and artistic expression, and to understand the role of the sacred and the common.

Artistic experiences can be life changing. Consequently, the artistic domain has become a focal point in the great controversy between good and evil.<sup>28</sup> As Adventist teachers, our relationship with the arts must be congruent with a Christian understanding of God and of His creation, of origin and destiny, of principles and values. We must guide our students to think deeply and spiritually, to observe carefully and discriminate wisely. Together, we must make choices that glorify God.

In the final analysis, the Christian’s life





must be an expression of joy and beauty in the midst of a dark, despairing world. Perhaps the Christian life itself should be our supreme work of art, our greatest aesthetic masterpiece. ✍



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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Francis Schaeffer addresses this matter in his works, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1976) and *Art and the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), as does H. B. Hannum in the book *Christian Search for Beauty* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1975). A perceptive essay by Jo Ann Davidson, "The Bible and Aesthetics" (2000) is available online at [http://www.aiias.edu/ict/vol\\_26B/26Bcc\\_201-265.htm](http://www.aiias.edu/ict/vol_26B/26Bcc_201-265.htm).

2. 1 Peter 3:15.

3. Genesis 1:26-27. A cogent exploration of this concept may be found in G. Spring, "In the Image of God: The Creative Act in Teaching and Learning." In Humberto Rasi, *Christ in the Classroom* (Silver Spring, Md.: The Institute for Christian Teaching, 1998), vol. 21, pp. 315-333. Available online at [http://www.aiias.edu/ict/vol\\_21/21cc\\_315-333.htm](http://www.aiias.edu/ict/vol_21/21cc_315-333.htm).

4. Exodus 15:1-21; Revelation 15:31; Chronicles 23:5; 2 Chronicles 29:25-28.

5. Ezekiel 4:1-3.

6. Exodus 25-27.

7. Exodus 35:30-35.

8. In His day, Jesus noted that some individuals looked without seeing and listened without understanding (Matthew 13:13).

9. Perceptive delineations of the Christian worldview can be found in the following works, among others: B. J. Walsh and J. R. Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1984); J. W. Sire, *Discipleship of the Mind: Learning to Love God in the Ways We Think* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990).

10. Isaiah 35:1, 2, 10; Song of Solomon 2:11-13; 2 Timothy 3:4.

11. 2 Chronicles 3:6-4:5. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations in this article are from the New King James Version (NKJV). Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, 1983 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

12. Leland Ryken discusses a Christian view of the imagination in his essay "The Creative Arts," published in Arthur Holmes, ed., *The Making of a Christian Mind: A Christian Worldview and the Academic Enterprise* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), pp. 105-131.

13. Exodus 28:33. Also note the "unrealistic" descriptions of creatures depicted in the books of Daniel and Revelation.

14. Exodus 20:4, 5; 25:18, 31-33.

15. Matthew 7:17, 20.

16. 1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Colossians 3:17.

17. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

18. See J. A. Banks, "The Social Construction of Difference and the Quest for Educational Equality," in R. S. Brandt, ed., *Education in a New Era* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2000), pp. 21-41.

19. Morris Taylor has developed this concept more fully in his essay "Choosing Music in a Christian College," in Humberto Rasi, ed., *Christ in the Classroom* (Silver Spring, Md.: The Institute for Christian Teaching, 1991), vol. 16, pp. 285-306. A summary is available online at <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae198951040604.pdf>.

20. Paul observed, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

21. While encouraging cultural maturation, we should note that not everything considered to be high culture is acceptable for the Christian. Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," for example, depicts the orgies of a pagan festival that culminate in human sacrifice. Certain works of literature, accepted by some as "high culture," contain language or embedded ideas that do not harmonize with Christian values. Teachers must also take into account the maturity of their students and the sensibilities of their constituents when deciding what to include in the curriculum.

The Christian's imperative is to reject the evil in culture and affirm that which is good. Within that which is good, however, there should also be growth toward cultural refinement. "Something better" is the 'watchword of education, the law of all true living" (Ellen G. White, *Education* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903], p. 296).

22. *Sacred*, by way of definition, is that which especially belongs to God—either because of His direct presence or express command, or because it has been specifically dedicated to God. Examples include the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11; Ezekiel 20:20), the tithe (Leviticus 27:30; Malachi 3:8), and the time and place of worship.

23. Exodus 3:5.

24. Exodus 12:11.

25. Leviticus 10:1-2. Similarly, Uzzah, of the tribe of Judah, perished when he reached out and touched the sacred ark (1 Chronicles 13:9, 10). The Kohathites, of the tribe of Levi, were the only ones expressly commanded to bear the ark (Numbers 4:15). Other examples may be found in 1 Samuel 13:9-14 and 2 Chronicles 26:16-21.

26. Genesis 4:3-7.

27. Psalm 16:11; John 10:10.

28. Ephesians 6:12, 13.