

## Art

Art particularly addresses man in his life in the body, for artistic productions are always thoughts clothed in material goods, and not only in words.

The particular techniques of art ought to be more widely taught and not left in the mysterious limbo of apparently exotic talent. Anyone who can sign his name has enough control of his pencil to draw recognizable plants, animals, people, and landscapes. The average person — the *average* person — can learn to draw, paint, and sculpt in a recognizable manner. Ordinarily, the fine arts are considered too expensive to include in a public school curriculum, or, if offered, frequently become the vehicle for anti-cultural propaganda. Catholics of an earlier generation were accustomed to inspirational representative art their Churches. We can reasonably challenge the cultural illiteracy about imagery and the cultural blindness to beauty.

### BEAUTY

Art is about beauty. What is that? How curious it is that we can talk about art for years without addressing the only question that matters: what is beauty? What are we trying to accomplish with all these techniques of charcoal and watercolor, of architecture and clay?

Beauty is the thing that shakes the soul with joy and tears. Whether words or paint or music, beauty has this characteristic of intensity, not merely of the emotions, but of the deepest feelings of the soul itself. And it is normal for Catholics to distinguish the feelings of the soul from merely emotional feelings, for we know that sin allows pleasant feelings for things that wound the inmost heart and produce sorrow.

For this reason, the Culture of Life seeks to produce works of beauty in union with truth and goodness. In a specifically liturgical or religious setting, this means to portray the saints, the good Lord, and the mysteries of faith in a beautiful and meditative manner. In a civic setting, it means to portray the world and human events in a manner that examines what is thoroughly truthful and ad-

resses the nature of goodness; even if the specific events portrayed are sometimes negative, the call to truth and goodness is there, serving the Culture of Life. Even in the most informal settings, illustrations of hallways, books, magazines, or homes, the artist portrays beauty in the natural and human world in a manner that is restful, uplifting, or informative, but always with an eye to order and beauty, to the hungers of the soul.

For the Christian, — for the Catholic Christian — art is beauty capturing the soul for truth.

The situation of Protestants is more complex and troubled because their original confusion about the Second Commandment and the use of images has led them, in varying degrees, to reject religious imagery and to undervalue images for many years. Islam, while affirming beauty of pattern, still rejects images, sometimes to a degree that inhibits learning.

Historically, the greatest flowering of art took place within developing Catholic Christianity before the Protestant confusion. Once displaced from the service of faith, art withered for a time, and when it returned, the world was deeply changed.

Beauty has a work to do for truth and goodness. Truth can be dry, after all. It can command the mind and yet leave the person indifferent and without the impetus to change. The heart that should seek goodness may be adrift, or asleep — untouched. Within the Culture of Life, art is the shaping of objects of material beauty directed to stirring up the heart, ultimately for God. C.S. Lewis aptly quotes Plato, saying, “The head rules the belly through the chest” — the reasonable man rules his passions, not just directly, by force of argument, but through the influence of the spiritual faculties on our life of feeling: and this is the realm of art and the rightful power of beauty.

### PASSION WITHOUT TRUTH

What if there is no knowledge of God, no confidence in truth? What if there is no clarity about the difference between the emotions on the surface and the feelings of the inmost soul?

Then art is merely the awakening of passion. It is a shaking of consciousness, pleasurable, even

intoxicating, but without a wise purpose, without a right relation to thought. In this case, art may be dangerous, and, as Aristotle suggested, the more such art is beautiful, the more it is akin to ugliness.

### HOW CAN THIS BE?

Skillful, passionate, and inviting portrayal of sin contradicts the living beauty of ordered human life. An art directed to the awakening of strong feelings without a right relationship to strong goodness or immutable truth is a kind of rape, drawing the human person to deny his heart by engaging in an outward relationship with what is unworthy of him. The image of rape is not too strong, for in rape, the physical body of a woman and the emotions of her personal nature are deeply invaded with no regard — even with disdain — for her spiritual life. Similarly, a work of art that shakes consciousness with physical attraction and emotional intensity, yet leaves the spirit dry, or even insults the spiritual sensibilities, is a betrayal of the human person.

Also like rape, this betrayal leaves a scar in the person who is thus divided within the citadel of the union of body and soul — the very union which constitutes the nature of man. Such divisions are not readily healed. In the case of artwork, strong evil images can torment those who have deeply absorbed them, even for years and years after they have turned their lives around to have gracious relationships with friends and with the Lord.

Beauty is strong and real. We have a responsibility for developing sensitivity and skill in the arts.