Living Art: Christian Experience and the Arts

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As Christians, we are committed to truth and goodness; what about beauty? Can theology aid us in understanding aesthetic experience? Is it possible to deepen our appreciation of the arts without endorsing suspect critical snobbery?

**The Bible does not speak about art at all, in the sense in which we most often use the term.** We may forget how recently that use began. When the Declaration of Independence was written, the words art, industry, democracy, class, and culture were not yet being used in their modern sense.1 The political revolutions in America and France and the Industrial Revolution in England brought about not only a change in Western culture, but also a **new way of speaking of culture**. Before that change, painting was thought of as a craft.2 The long corridors lined with portraits in the great houses of Britain were not begun as museum galleries. The paintings were hung to remember ancestors, not to exhibit artists’ works. As André Malraux has observed; the modern attitude to “art” has created a “museum without walls.”3 Not only do we stack museums with historic “works of art” stripped of their original purposes; we have come to think of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or even the cathedral at Chartres as a “work of art.” Art critics serenely ignore the religious motivation of museum paintings and display professional outrage at anyone who might dare to offer a moral objection to “artistic” pornography. Painting sculpture, photography, music, poetry—that which we call “art” has become an end in itself; indeed, it is given an absolute value that not only resembles religion, but also demands religious commitment.

Christo, the Bulgarian-born environmental artist, in 1991, masterminded the erection of thousands of giant umbrellas: 1,760 yellow ones in California, and 1,340 blue ones in Japan. The wind uprooted one of the 480-pound parasol in California and flung it against a young woman, killing her. A Japanese worker was electrocuted when lifting one umbrella with a crane that touched a power line. Christo’s comment: “the beauty, the tragedy, the joy is part of that project.”4 The sacrifice of unwilling martyrs is offer3ed to the goddess Art.

But if beauty is not to be deified, is Deity beautiful? We catch glimpses of what we find to be beautiful in the world, yet beauty seems to defy analysis. “Beauty at the same time shows and hides itself: it shows itself through a fine work of art, but it cannot be definitively revealed by it because it always exits above that through which it appears.”5 Plato could appeal to the elusiveness of beauty in order to describe beauty as an ideal reality in which the world of sense participates. Calvin Seerveld has perceived the unbiblical assumptions of the Platonic and Aristotelian concept of beauty.6 He warns against deifying beauty or making artistic “inspiration” divine revelation. But does the Bible offer a different way of relating our experience of beauty to God, our Creator and Redeemer?

**The Living God Reveals His Beauty**

In His works of creation, God reveals Himself. Creation, according to Genesis, is not an emanation from God’s Being; it is the work of His Word. He speaks and it is done; He commands and it stands fast. That work, extrinsic to Himself, meets with His repeated approval: “And God saw that it was good (Genesis 1:10, 12, etc.). The Lord contemplates with satisfaction the form of his creation. In the garden where God put the man he had formed were “trees that were pleasing to the eye” as well as “good for food” (Genesis 2:9). The beauty of the trees in Eden echoes as a superlative in the oracle Ezekiel received. There Assyria is imaged as a cedar of Lebanon, whose beauty is “the envy of all the trees of Eden in the garden of God (Ezekiel 31:9).
The visual beauty of the garden displays the order given to creation by the Spirit and the Word of God. God orders by division; he divides light from darkness, the waters above the firmament from those below it, the land from the sea. He orders by creating living forms marked off “according to their kinds” (Genesis 1:25). Creation formed by God’s Word has its own language that delights those with ears to hear (Psalm 19:1-2).

Abundance as well as order marks creation. Life appears in abounding forms; the seas, the earth, and the heavens teem with the munificence of God’s design. We are told of the treasures in the land of Havilah: gold, aromatic resins, onyx. Rich resources await the hand of the human creator made in God’s image. The gold used in the furnishings of the tabernacle and worn on the forehead of the high priest is gold provided by God for the inspired craft of Bezalel and Oholiab (Exodus 35:30-35).

God expresses joy in his creation as he pronounces it good. The human pair, made in the image of God, may share His joy in the order and beauty of creation. God does not simply pronounce them good as a part of His creation; he blesses them as the heirs and lords of creation. They are to continue God’s work of ordering what he has made. As riches are theirs as God’s gift, to explore, to conserve, to develop.

In the fall, the sin of Adam and Eve violates their relation of the created order as well as to the Creation. The serpent wanted the woman to see the beauty of the trees as evidence of the malice of the Creator who denies what he appears to offer (Genesis 3:1, 5, 6). The fruit is desirable but forbidden; God creates beauty, but he tantalizes His creatures by denying the desires he has kindled. God is not to be trusted, for He fears the independence of humankind come of age. Eve can judge for herself; she need not take God’s word for it.

The folly of Eve and of Adam is apparent. Neither they nor the serpent could create the trees of the garden, nor the beautiful fruit of the tree of knowledge. Far less could they create or even gain access to the tree of life, reserved for the obedient Son of God. Grasping equality with God they became dupes of Satan, doomed to death— the very separation from God they had presumed to hazard.

But God spared our first parents and their created world, though under a curse. Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden, but they were given a promise; God would reverse the relation they had initiated between themselves and the serpent. Enmity would replace alliance; the Son of the woman would crush the head of the serpent and bear the wound of that victory. Even the flaming swords of the cherubim guarding the gate of the garden signaled a promise of hope. Three was yet a gate of God on earth; the Lord was present and his purpose would be accomplished; the tree of life would yet bear fruit for the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

The creation that was spared for Adam and Eve was renewed for the family of Noah after the flood. The olive leaf in the beak of the dove and the rainbow set in heaven marked the limit that God set to his judgments. Human wickedness would not bring destruction to this planet until God’s full purpose was realized. At the last, God would bring in a new order of transcending glory. That new order was foreshadowed in the pattern of God’s tabernacle in the wilderness. There in the earthly sanctuary that pictured the true and heavenly dwelling of the living God, the flowering almonds of the garden gleamed in gold, and the cherubim no longer guarded the gate with flaming sword but spread golden wings over God’s throne of mercy.

To the beauty of the garden and of the temple is added the beauty of the city where God had set His name: “From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth” (Psalm 50:2); “It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth…. Mount Zion, the city of the Great King” (Psalm 48:2). The beauty of the Lord’s dwelling anticipates the final blessing of His coming when all will be restored and the curse will be removed.

With the new order will come new life—bounty in nature such that plowmen and reapers will overtake one another (Amos 9:13), and peace in God’s mountain such that the wolf will live with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6). The destruction that fills a world of sin will cease, and the groaning of creation will end in joy (Romans 8:22-23). The beauty of God’s creation will not end in a waste planet, but in a renewed world to be described as a garden, a temple, a new Jerusalem come from heaven.

God’s revelation of beauty in the physical creation points to the spiritual beauty revealed in His salvation. God’s image-bearers are to serve Him in the harmony of personal delight, finding joy in His creation, in one another and above all in the Lord their God. To sinners, God’s salvation brings hope for beauty restored. Even the rebellious are not left without signs of God’s goodness. The first flowering of culture recorded in the Bible in not in the line of godly Seth, but in the line of fratricidal Cain. Metalworking produces a sword, and with it comes poetry— Lamech’s hymn of boastful vengeance. Jubal is the father of all who play the harp and flute (Genesis 4:21).

In Summerian mythology, the elements of culture are direct gifts of the gods, sometimes by way of the birth of appropriate deities—deities of cattle breeding or plant farming, for example. One poem tells how the city of Erech gained the laws of culture—including the arts, crafts, music, and musical instruments—when its patron goddess Inanna stole them from the god Enki, the lord of wisdom, in his watery abyss. In Genesis, by contrast, culture is a human achievement, for humankind bears God’s image. For that reason, humankind in rebellion against God is still capable of cultural and technical triumphs. Cultural success, indeed, became a source of pride. The builders of Babel used their advanced technology in structure designed to accommodate
God’s descent to their cultic specifications. God did descend, but in judgment. He curbed the unity of rebellion by scattering the nations. That judgment showed divine mercy, for among the scattered peoples, God place His own people to bear His salvation.

Clearly, the Bible does not present God’s people as the architects of a bigger and better Babel. Israel did not excel in architecture, painting, or sculpture. Their calling was to the worship and service of God, according to His commandment. When Solomon built the temple that marked the high point of divine blessing, he imported the skills of Tyrian contractors. The temple must excel in beauty to represent the dwelling of god on earth. Israel did not possess the craftsmen capable of such work. A this time, God did not again inspire a Bezalel and Oholiab with His Spirit. Rather, since God is the God of all the earth, and since Solomon’s reign for peace raised the witness of Israel before the surrounding nations, it was fitting that the holy house of God should be shaped by the hands of gifted Gentiles. It must be a house of prayer for all nations, gathered in to behold God’s glory.

Yet Israel did not lack artistic gifts. God’s worship required thankful confession of His saving deeds and praise hymned to His Majesty. The are of Israel was the art of narrative, of poetry and song, of reflective wisdom, and of prophetic proclamation, Israel did not leave a treasure of representations of the created world, but of poems brimming over with delight in the beauty of fruitful fields, grazing sheep of the hillsides, and the grandeur of clouds rimmed with light or rolling with thunder. Yet these descriptions do not glorify nature; nor are they crafted to draw admiration for the poet. The poetry and history of Israel celebrate the works of the Lord, of God of the covenant. Israel’s inspired poets are not delighted with their own delight; their delight is in the Lord. It is the is religious center of the life of the people of God (or, better, of those whom God raised up to witness to that life) that shapes the understanding of beauty in the Old Testament. Beauty is not comprehended as an abstraction. Yet when the author of the apocryphal book, The Wisdom of Solomon, speaks of God as the author of the greatness and beauty of creation, he only expresses what the praises of Israel have always declared (Wisdom of Solomon 13:5).

How, then, does the Old Testament present God’s revelation with respect to beauty? An extensive vocabulary describes what is perceived to be beautiful, although the terms may often have other nuances and may better be rendered “glory,” “majesty,” or pleasantness. Since we are particularly interested in beauty as related to the Lord, we may think especially of terms for beauty related to worship. The dwelling of God with His people in the tabernacle offers a vivid reference point. The Lord’s presence was signaled by the cloud of glory that rested over the tabernacle by day and of fire by night. The Lord revealed Himself in the beauty of glory, seen in the billowing cloud that filled the viewer with awe.

A second form of beauty displayed at the tabernacle was the beauty of design and craftsmanship: the beauty of the twisted colors in the woven curtains of God’s tent, of the gold-embroidered robes of the high priest, of the golden furniture of the holy place. Israel was called to worship the Lord in the “beauty of holiness” (Psalm 29:2; 96:9, KJV); the priests were to enter the holy place in holy array. If the first form of beauty reflected the awesome majesty of the divine presence, the second from reflected the wisdom of the Lord. The craftsmen for the temple were filled with God’s Spirit of wisdom for their work (Exodus 31:1-11; 35:30-35).

A third form of beauty may best be expressed by the blessing in the divine name pronounced by the high priest as he emerged from the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. It is this beauty of delight that draws the Psalmist to desire the courts of the Lord and to yearn for the blessing of God’s presence there (see, e.g., Psalm 84:2). The praises of Israel respond to a spiritual beauty of loveliness, the beauty of God’s grace.

The terms for beauty in the Old Testament are applied to the Lord and to his deeds. This is clearly true of the first form of beauty, the beauty of glory or of majesty. A term for towering height (gašwah) describes the column of smoke that rises from the bolt of God’s wrath (Isaiah 9:18[17]). In the Song of Moses at the Red Sea, the same root is doubled to describe the towering glory of the Lord: “I will sing to the LORD; for he is highly exalted” (Exodus 15:1). The cloud of God’s glory had led them to and through the sea and had been a wall of defense against the pursuing chariots of Egypt. “In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you” (Exodus 15:7). Israel surely had a clear but terrifying image of the transcendent majesty of god. The association of God’s majesty with the clouds is frequent in the poetry of the Old Testament. “There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty” (Deuteronomy 33:26; see Psalm 68:32-34). That exalted majesty is to identified with the Lord that he can be said to be “robed in majesty” (Psalm 93:1 = LXX Psalm 92:1: “clothe with beauty”).

Alongside the image of the majesty of height and exaltation, there is the majesty of light, the splendor of God’s glory. Light is naturally associated with the glory-cloud of God’s presence. The Lord comes from Sinai and shines forth from Mount Seir (Deuteronomy 33:2). When the Holy One came from Mount Paran, “His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand” (Habakkuk 3:4). “From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth” (Psalm 50:2). A fire devours before him, and a tempest rages about him. The location of God’s splendor on Zion is between the cherubim; from his mercy seat he causes his face to shine upon Israel (Psalm 80:1, 3; 89:15). The brilliance of the Lord’s majesty shines in the fire of this judgment, as well as in the blessing of his regard (Psalm 94:1). The beauty of God’s splendor contrasts with the resplendent beauty that filled the king of Tyre with pride, bringing the judgment by which his own fire consumed hum (Ezekiel
The Lord’s splendor outshine all creatures, human or angelic (cf. Job 40:6-10).

The sun will no more be your light by day,

nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,

For the LORD will be your everlasting light,

and your God will be your glory (Isaiah 60:19).

In the Psalms especially, the terms for majestic beauty are blended in praise:

Honor and majesty are before him;

strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. (Psalm 96:6, RSV and NKJV)

The term *tiph'arah* in this verse is well translated “beauty,” for the term is often used in that sense, not only to describe beautiful clothing and jewelry (and even the beauty of a carved image--see Isaiah 44:13), but also to speak of “glory” in a sense that suggests beauty; the terms is used to describe a crown of beauty of glory (Proverbs 16:31); Wisdom bestows a “garland of grace” and a “crown of splendor” (*tiph'arah*, Proverbs 4:9); God’s people will be a crown of beauty, a royal diadem in the hand of God (Isaiah 62:3); and conversely, “In that day the LORD Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people” (Isaiah 28:5).

One may well observe that the use of the many Old Testament terms to describe the glory, majesty, and splendor of the Lord does not parallel our use of the term beauty; nuanced as the latter is by Greek idealism and by contemporary aesthetics. The Greek translation of these terms in the Septuagint may be seen as a Hellenizing--intentional or not--of the Hebrew mind. Isaiah and the Psalmists do not think of Yahweh in the images of Apollo. Yet we will miss the force of Israel’s praise of the majestic glory of the Lord, if we think of its as falling outside our conception of aesthetics; indeed, we would not be excluding one of the major dimensions of aesthetic understanding. Trivialized and mannerist art may lose sight of the infinite transcendence that alone can give the life ultimate meaning, but the revelation of God’s supreme glory presents the reality that cannot be escaped, even when it is suppressed in despairing rage.

The complexity of human response to the divine glory makes art criticism a perilous enterprise, easily exploited by pontificating experts.11 Visitors to Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum may have been amazed to learn that Barnett Newman’s giant abstraction *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* was evaluated at $3.1 million. Many presumably saw only a huge panel of carefully blended red paint with a thin blue border on the left. After a vandal slashed it, they may have been the more incredulous to learn that the restorer, Daniel Goldreyer, was paid a fee of $300,000 and then was accused of having done the job with alkyd paint rather than oils and a paint roller instead of a brush.12 No critic, apparently, was able to detect any difference in the appearance of the restored canvas. Why should this simple abstraction be evaluated so highly? Unless the painting exhibits merely the self-deceptive standards of an elitist subculture, the rationale must be found in some sense of the numinous, of sensate splendor, that the painting evokes. In this respect it does not differ from an aching sense that many more people would feel in viewing an Andrew Wyeth painting, one in which the simple form of an open window and a blowing curtain draws one toward the infinite reach of the sky beyond.13 Wyeth may be viewed as a mere illustration by many who lack his skill; they may find his paintings to be evocative only of nostalgia. Indeed, these paintings may not be great art--but they are art, not simply exercise in painting, for they speak the language of the ultimate question.

The second aspect of the Old Testament conception of beauty is the beauty of design. This aspect is also drawn into relation with the Lord. The cloud of God’s presence soared above the tabernacle in the beauty of majesty, but the tabernacle itself reflected a heavenly pattern that brought together in workmanship the fruitful beauty of Eden (the gold almond blossoms of the lamp stand) and the splendor of the angels (the figures woven into the curtains, the gold cherubim on the mercy seat). Terms for glory are used to describe God’s dwelling; the radiance of god’s presence shines forth from Zion, his Holy hill (Psalm 50:2); in the great day of God’s glory, the nations will bring in their treasures, and God will beautify His sanctuary with cedars, the glory of Lebanon, along with pine, fir, and cypress (Isaiah 60:13).

Personal ornaments of many kinds were worn in the ancient Near East, and the clothing of the high priest was richly decorated.14 Designs were woven into his apron or skirt (“ephod”).15 The names of the tribes of Israel were engraved on two onyx stones on his shoulder straps, and on precious stones mounted on gold filigree in his breastpiece. The skirt of the ephod was trimmed with yarn pomegranates alternated with bells of gold (Exodus 28:31-35). In the turban of the high priest was a gold plate with the inscription “HOLY TO THE LORD” (Exodus 28:36). While all of these directions are rich in symbolism, express or implied, they also use elaborate artistic skill to make the ceremonial statements. Umberto Cassuto reminds us that in Canaanite legend a god built the temple, and that the qualities there attributed to the deity for the work are here God’s gift to his workmen (Exodus 31:1-11).16 God’s gift of wisdom is needed, for the beauty of the tabernacle is designed. Bezalel is “to make intricate designs” and to execute those designs in gold, silver, bronze, gams, and wood carving (Exodus 31:4-5). God Himself first plans and then executes His designs (Jeremiah 33:2);
so, too, He calls Bezalel and Oholiab to devise the intricate details of the tabernacle. Bezalel's inspiration does not produce creative frenzy but reflective design.

God is to be worshiped in the splendor and beauty of holiness, for the rich design of His sanctuary symbolizes His wisdom (Psalm 96:9), wisdom that shows His splendor and beauty in His works of creation and in redemption (Psalm 90:16).

Beyond the awesome brightness of the glory-cloud and the intricate designs of the tabernacle, there is a third kind of beauty that the Old Testament traces to the Lord: the beauty of delight. In Psalm 90, that delight is contrasted with the bitter emptiness of life under the curse. Life is but a breath in contrast with God's eternity; under the doom of His judgment it is a sigh, a moan. A generation is commanded to return to death in the wilderness because God has set their iniquities before Him. But to the God who said “Return to dust! (Psalm 90:3), Moses the man of God, cries out,

“Return, O LORD! how long?
And have compassion on Your servants.
Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy,
That we may rejoice and be glad all our days!” (Psalm 90:13-14)

The psalm ends in benediction:

And let the beauty of the LORD OUR God be upon us,
And establish the work of our hands for us;
Yes, and establish the work of our hands. (v. 17, NKJV)

Life in the wilderness, life under the curse, may be transformed by the intervention of God's faithful love. Not only will he give meaning to the work of our hands in a wilderness where no trace remains; he will reveal to our children his glory (hadar, glory suggesting the beauty of his design), and he will crown us with his own beauty, the loveliness of his grace. The term in verse 17 that the New King James Version renders “beauty” (no'am) is used to describe the land of Issachar (Gen. 49:15). David applies it to Jonathan in his threnody over the death of his friend (2 Sam. 1:26). In the Song of Songs it describes the beauty of the King's beloved: "How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your delights!” (Song of Sol. 7:6, where this root is joined with yaphîh, another term for physical beauty; see also Ps. 45:11).

The delight evoked by beauty is found in praise to the Lord (Ps. 147:1), because God himself is its source. David cries:

One thing I ask of the Lord,
This is what I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.

(Ps. 27:4)

It is the Lord alone whom the Psalmist seeks, and it is in the Lord that he finds the supreme delight of his life. Here is the heart of Old Testament worship. When God threatened to withdraw his presence from the midst of rebellious Israel, Moses prayed to behold God’s glory (Exodus. 33:18). God caused not merely his glory but also his goodness to pass before Moses, and he proclaimed his name, the God of grace and faithfulness. God did not withdraw; he would dwell in the tabernacle among his people, that they might delight in his forgiving mercy (Exodus 34:9).

It is this mercy that makes the Lord’s presence a delight rather than a devouring flame of holy wrath, so that Moses can make it his crowning blessing: “Let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us” (Ps. 90:17, KJV).

This psalm, like the conclusion of Deuteronomy, points to the ultimate blessing. After God kept his promises under David and Solomon, and after he brought his judgments on apostate Israel, the blessing of the latter days would come. God would renew the spared remnant of Israel and the nations. In that day every pot in Jerusalem would be like a temple vessel and “HOLY TO THE LORD” would be on the horses’ bridles (Zech. 14:20-21). The feeblest citizen of Jerusalem would be like King David. What then of the house of David? “The house of David will be like God, like the Angel of the LORD going before them” (Zech 12:8). God himself must come to keep his promises.

When God, the true Shepherd of Israel, comes to gather his scattered sheep, the Prince will also come, the
The Son of David (Ezek. 34:24). The Son to be born will bear the divine names: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). David prophetically understands that his Son must be his Lord:

The LORD says to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”

(Ps. 110:1; cf. Matt 22:41-46)

The Messianic promise appears in other psalms that celebrate the glory of the Son and King (Psalms 2; 45; 72; 80). It is not surprising that in Psalm 45 the glory of the King is celebrated with terms for beauty; what is suggestive is the parallel with expression of the divine beauty and glory.17 The King is “the fairest of the sons of men”; he wears his sword “with glory and majesty” (Ps. 45:2-3, RSV; LXX “in your beauty and your loveliness”).

The celebration of the glory of the King as a bridegroom in Psalm 45 is expanded in the symbolism of the Song of Songs. The Song in its erotic poetry is more than a celebration of love. It celebrates the love of the King, whose position is that of the Lord’s Anointed. In the pattern of the biblical history of redemption, Solomon, the son of David, is a typical figure, anticipating the fulfillment of God’s Messianic promise to David. Since Jesus claimed to be the bridegroom (Mark 2:19; Matt 25:1; John 3:29; cf. Eph 5:25), the early church fathers Hippolytus and Origen did not hesitate to find in him the spiritual beauty that his bride, the church desires.18

Reflection on the beauty ascribed to the Lord in the Old Testament points to parallels in the witness of the New Testament to Jesus. In the Transfiguration the beauty of Majestic Glory” (2 Pet. 1:17) shone from the face and robes of Christ before the cloud appeared (Matt. 17:2). Moses stood on the mountain with him and saw the glory of God, not in a glimpse of his back (cf. Exodus 33:21-23), but in the face of Jesus Christ. Moses’ face had shone with borrowed glory when he came down from Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29), but the face of Jesus shone with his own glory, the glory that he had with the Father before the creation of the world (John 1:14).

The New Testament also presents Jesus in the beauty of holy array. In the book of Revelation he appears among the lamp stands of the heavenly sanctuary, belted with gold and robed as the royal Priest (Rev. 1:13). Not only is he the Son of Man, given eternal dominion by the Eternal; his attributes are those of the Ancient of Days: hair as white as snow, eyes blazing with the fire of the throne (Rev. 1:14; sc. Dan. 7:9, 13-14). The beauty of design in the tabernacle points to the fulfillment of the divine plan in Jesus Christ, who is the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:30; Colossians 2:3). God’s Spirit of wisdom given to the designers of the tabernacle enabled them to build an earthly sanctuary, like in pattern to the true. Jesus, the Priest of the heavenly sanctuary, bears the Spirit to accomplish the plan that the design of the tabernacle symbolized.

The beauty of divine grace is also found in Christ. The desire of Moses to know God is fulfilled in Jesus. Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us” (John 14:8). Jesus answered, “Don’t you know me, Philip….? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father…Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (John 14:9-10). In the Word become flesh, the grace of the Father is revealed. The divine grace and truth of which Moses wrote has come in Jesus Christ (Exodus 34:6; John 1:14, 16-17).

The “Branch of the LORD” is indeed beautiful and glorious (Isaiah. 4:2), more than “outstanding among ten thousand” (Song of Sol. 5:10). He is the royal bridegroom to whom the apostle Paul would present the church as a pure virgin (2 Corinthians 11:2) in the day when “our eyes will see the king in his beauty” (Isaiah 33:17).

The beauty of Christ’s grace, however, is a beauty that shines through hideous disfigurement. The grace of the Lord of glory is lifted up at Calvary. Those who see him are appalled: “his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness” (Isaiah 52:14).

He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of a dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.

(Isaiah 53:2-3)
Surprise arises because we discern variety in kind, experience of surprise. We perceive God's fullness becomes the Servant. In the presence of God, who is not only One but Three, the ultimate awe of a creature gives a creation has been exchanged for the hierarchical difference as well as similarity; if Analogy is indeed a key virtue of which there are, in various degrees, manifestations of the hierarchy of beings." 

The People of God Enjoy His Beauty

In fellowship with God, we perceive the beauty of the divine fullness. The transcendence, the richness, and the goodness of God's fullness are revealed in the Bible.

The Transcendence of God's Revealed Fullness

The overwhelming majesty of God's glory evokes awe and wonder by its very reality. All worship includes “realization.” We recognize the “thereness” of the Almighty Creator. “Hallowed be they name” is more than a petition that God hallow his name in creation. It desires that God hallow his name in his own being—that he be God. Contemplation of the Lord in awe engages not only reflection and surrender but also the supreme delight of our existence.

God's reality opens for us created reality as well. We wonder at the “thereness” of the world about us. Jean-Paul Sartre has poignantly described the nausea that overwhelmed his character Roquentin as he looked at a stone. The horror was simply that the stone was there. He had no relation to it, no control over its existence. It threatened him by its reality. Even the thought of the deep roots of a chestnut tree, unseen and untraced, could awaken the same revulsion. Sartre's insight is profound. The nausea he describes is the horror of unbelief, the dark void that opens with the conviction that God is dead. It is the polar opposite of another emotion: the delight a believer finds in going to the cross as shocking folly, but he had found that it was the wisdom of God. The transcendence of God's plan made foolish the wisdom of the world, made useless the power of the world, and made irrelevant the treasures of the world. Human-centered ideals of beauty cannot conceive of a standard that makes the Greek image of Apollo insignificant. The beauty of God revealed in the grace of the cross opens a delight that surpasses all other aesthetic experience as the rising dawn surpasses the shadows it dispels.

Otto von Simpson describes how the Christian Platonists who inspired the builders of the Gothic cathedrals viewed light. For them physical and spiritual light existed in an unbroken hierarchy of being. “At the basis of all medieval thought is the concept of analogy. All things have been created according to the law of analogy, in virtue of which there are, in various degrees, manifestations of God, images, vestiges, or shadows of the Creator. The degree to which a thing ‘resembles’ God, to which God is present in it, determines its place in the hierarchy of beings.”

Analogy is indeed a key to aesthetic experience and is basic to our knowledge of God, but analogy requires difference as well as similarity; if identity is affirmed, and limited only by degree, the Christian doctrine of creation has been exchanged for the hierarchical chain of being in Neoplatonism. The face of a friend will give a newborn Christian more delight than the surface of a stone, but the source of delight in both flows from the experience of living fellowship with God the Creator. It is the transcendence of God's fullness that excites the ultimate awe of a creature made in his image. The wonder of aesthetic experience echoes the awe found in the presence of God, who is not only One but Three, not only Judge but Savior, not only Lord but Servant.

The Patterns of God's Revealed Fullness

God's fullness becomes the source of beauty in the rich patterns of his revelation. Aesthetic experience is an experience of surprise. We perceive more than we had expected. But the "more" is not just more of the same. Surprise arises because we discern variety in kind, but variety that is linked by analogy, relation. Classical
Greek philosophy long ago perceived that beauty joins diversity in unity. Even the notion of harmony does not fully explain the surprise. The wonder arises as we sense analogy operating across the boundaries of distinct modes of thought and experience. A Bach fugue is full of marvelous surprises as its melodic and rhythmic structures, captivated in their own composition, are also blended contrapuntally to construct fresh harmonies. Yet even the richness of Bach’s music gains a new dimension when he designs it to accompany words from the Gospel of Matthew. When those words are sun, yet another dimension is added.

To some extent, all aesthetic experience is multidimensional. To diagram the mechanics of a bird’s flight or a stag’s leap might be an exercise limited to the perspective of physics, but to watch a soaring eagle or a bounding deer is to sense an “extra,” a suggestive display of power, ease, and symmetry that far exceeds the plotting of muscle contraction and leveraging.

Calvin Seerveld rightly finds the key to aesthetics in “allusiveness,” for without the crossing of boundaries through analogy the discovery distinctive to aesthetic experience would not occur. Since structures of analogy pervade all our experience, affective as well as cognitive, we may chart areas of potential links indefinitely. Neo-Kantian scholar Suzanne Langer has distinguished between presentational and discursive symbolism. The presentional symbolism of a painting offers its message as a whole to an intuitive grasp, but it may also invite sequential analysis. The discursive symbolism of a literary piece marches in linear fashion, yet it may also create a world that becomes intuitively known.

The rich literary art in the Scriptures displays the wealth of allusiveness in which God’s revelation is given. Symbolism appears not only in metaphorical language but also in the elaborate patterns of the Old Testament ceremonial cultus. It is also evident in the accounts of redemptive history and in the shaping of redemptive history itself. Design in the patter of the tabernacle points to the larger design of God’s wisdom in his plan for the redemption of sinners.

Just as the majestic glory of God provides the transcendent fullness that alone can explain the deep wonder of profound aesthetic experience, so, too, the wisdom of God is the fountain of our joy in order, in pattern and design. There is more here than the thrill of discovery; there is the sense of ultimate meaning as well as of ultimate power, but there is also the sense of the infinite richness of those patterns of meaning. We may fault Augustine for following the Platonists in reducing the order of aesthetics to mathematical order, although the application of those harmonic principles to Gothic cathedrals remains impressive. Yet Augustine’s reflections on measure, on the order of creation, and on time and eternity are continually carried on before the triune God who is the Source of all wisdom and truth.

The Goodness of God’s Revealed Fullness

The abounding glory of God overwhelms us with awe; the infinite wisdom of God fills us with amazement; finally, the measureless love of God melts our hearts with delight. Divine beauty would be dreadful in majesty, and threatening in its all-encompassing order were it not for the sweetness of divine grace. The apostle Peter recalls the cry of the Psalmist: “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8; 1 Pet. 2:3). In the experience of divine love the redeemed child of God finds delight that surpasses all human ecstasy.

Not only is the presence of the Lord the pinnacle of all aesthetic delight; it is also that which makes delight possible. Even in a world under the curse, God has not withdrawn the tokens of his goodness, nor has he abandoned the world to the total absence of his goodness that forms hell. Yet the dim and broken awareness of the true delight that remains apart from Christ cannot be compared to the joy that floods our hearts when the Holy Spirit pours out on us the love that God had for us even when we were his enemies (Rom 5:5).

God himself is the fountain of that delight, as the monks of St. Athos were eager to confess at the end of the first Christian millennium. They sought to prepare for the beatific vision by climbing “Jacob’s Ladder” in ascetic discipline, but they knew that only God could open the gates of heaven. Eastern Christian mysticism knew well the rapture of tasting that the Lord is good, but somehow it missed the promise to every believer and forgot that the devotion that responds to grace does not so much seek to gain delight as to fuse delight to the Lord of grace. The love that is kindled by God’s love seeks not its own delight but brings tribute to the Beloved.

The joy of God’s love does not draw us away from the world where we serve him. Rather, we taste his goodness in every gift that comes from the Father of lights. Since the fullness of God’s love appeared in the gift of his only begotten Son, our response of love turns not only to him but also to his purposes in the world he came to save.

For that reason, our vision of God in the triumph of his grace leads us to a vision of the world as the theater of his redemption. In the worlds of art no less than in the other dimension of life our calling to bring glory to the Lord, J.R.R. Tolkien author of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, was once rebuked for writing “escapist” literature. He cheerfully acknowledged that his epic was escapist but observed that the escape he offered was escape from illusion, from a secularist dream world that has lost the distinction between god and evil.

Our aesthetic response to the revelation of the divine beauty must always first be receptive. We are creatures in God’s image, and we cannot ignore his revelation in the natural world, nor in the world of human culture
that image-bearers construct. Contemporary art is often world-denying and sometimes defiantly world-destroying.

Further, we are stewards in God’s covenant. In art we are responsible to God and to others. Art is doxological and ministering. Although art reflects a distinct aspect of human experience, it is not for its own sake. Since the source of aesthetics is in God, art is for his sake. Apart from reference to God, art readily becomes idolatry, an idolatry that can self-destruct into nihilism. Since all Christians are stewards in God’s covenant, all are called to a life-style of joy in the revelation of divine beauty. Artistic expression is not an elitist pursuit, encoded for a restricted circle of initiates. It cannot be limited to what we speak of as “the arts,” for its root is spiritual and the highest art is the exercise of what Jonathan Edwards called “religious affections.” Gifts in the “arts” vary vastly; highly gifted artists will always find their most appreciative audiences among those who are most familiar with the history and “language” of their world of expression. Yet every Christian is called to share his or her own vision of God’s glory. In art as in theology, Gnosticism is unchristian.

Our aesthetic response is also creative. Life-style artistry explores in freedom the richness of styles and of media that are offered in our cultural setting. It has tasted the thrill of allusiveness; it affirms imagines, explores. The history of Christian hymnody shows that those gifted in God’s praise are not always major poets or musicians. Yet the same devotion that delights in a child’s praise will be driven to bring to the Lord the best we can offer—better than repetitive incantations or heedless words to half-remembered echoes of musical scales.

When we catch the aesthetic dimension of doing all to the glory of God, we will be sensitive to dress and to etiquette, to house furnishings and flower arranging. Creativity always requires discipline. An artist knows the dialogue of creativity, for in the creative process the limitations and uniqueness of the medium result in a transformation of one’s original vision. The ultimate dialogue is the fellowship of the creature with the Creator, found not so much in the display of artistic genius as in a simpler way: Jonathan Edwards walking in the fields in meditation, singing forth his praises to the Lord.

Endnotes

11. Calvin Seerveld rather floridly warns, “Art--doing, viewing, or buying it--can make a man a prig, parasite, a nauseating, self-satisfied, elegant bore” (*A turnabout in Aesthetics to Understanding* [Toronto: Wedge, 1974], p. 11.
12. See the article in *Time*, 6 Jan. 1992, p. 64.
17. The Messianic reference of Psalm 45 was recognized in the Targum as well as by the Christian church.

19. See Bertram, “c a l óV … ,” pp. 552-56
22. Jonathan Edward held that “the beauty of the divine nature does primarily consist in god’s holiness… the beauty of this moral attributes,” so that delight in God must begin with a delight in his holiness, rather than any other attribute. His point was that there could be no by-passing of the holiness of God in the religious affections, so as to be delighted with his power or goodness without knowing his judgment and salvation. One who knows the holiness of God may then also delight in his power and loveliness (Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959], pp. 256-58).
23. See Wolterstorff’s discussion of “fittingness” in relation to left and right placement on a scale of opposites in *Art in Action*, p. 109.

Early Christian Art (150-1100): Visual Arts During the Early Period of Christianity. This topic concerns Christian art of the early era of Christianity, up to the establishment of the Eastern Roman Empire in Constantinople, and the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in Rome itself. We then examine how this nascent religious art developed in one particular country (Ireland), during the period c.550-1100. We have chosen Ireland, because it was the only country in Western Europe who kept the flame of Christianity burning during the Dark Ages, while managing at the same time to preserve other forms of ancient art and culture, including elements of Mesopotamian art and Greek civic. A distinct type of Christian art and architecture was evolved in Egypt (see Coptic art). In the eastern part of the Roman Empire the development of the Early Christian tradition was continued under the auspices of the Byzantine emperors (see Byzantine art and architecture). Bibliography. See R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (1965); J. Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (1970). In such buildings as Saint Peter’s in Rome and the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the martyrium structure and basilica were combined, creating a new formal synthesis of great significance for the religious architecture of the medieval period. Eastern Traditions. A distinct type of Christian art and architecture was evolved in Egypt (see Coptic art).