



December 2005

**Dear MARS HILL AUDIO** listener,

A friend of mine, a young man in his mid-20s, recently spent a year or two learning to like jazz. He had an uncle who was very knowledgeable and passionate about jazz, but for my friend, this music was a foreign country. He believed, however, that there was something objectively present in jazz to merit time and energy, so he started a regimen of deliberate, thoughtful, attentive listening.

And in time, as he came to understand what was going on, as he became familiar with this unknown vernacular, he came to like jazz a lot.

He was telling a friend of his, a young woman about his own age (a very devout Christian, as it turns out) about this journey, and she was, as she listened, at first shocked, and then apparently rather disturbed. She had nothing against jazz, but she thought that learning to like a new form of music was a sort of unnatural act, not the sort of thing respectable people did. He was flabbergasted by her response, and as she explained it, he realized that she believed music and musical tastes were so subjective, and so arbitrary, that an effort to change one's tastes was almost immoral; it involved violating yourself in some way. One's subjective tastes were the most intimate, almost sacred part of one's being, so to try to transcend or alter them would be akin to self-mutilation.

I admit this sounds like a pretty extreme response, but only because she was responding to what he did to himself. Imagine instead that he had suggested to her that her life would be richer, fuller, better in some way if her own tastes were expanded. Many people, perhaps many of you now reading this, would probably begin to sympathize with the "My Tastes, My Self" sort of argument. In fact, I wonder whether her vivid reaction to what my friend did to himself wasn't a sort of preemptive defensive maneuver; perhaps she was afraid that he might counsel her to follow his lead.

Many, perhaps most Americans, and probably most American Christians, feel and think about art in general the way this young lady felt and thought about a specific form of artistic expression. The dominant assumptions about art that are present in our time are related to a matrix of assumptions about nature, the self, freedom, and what constitutes a well-lived life.

In many spheres of experience, in politics, economics, the environment, family life, work, and friendship, many Christians strive to be deliberate in raising questions about some of these dominant assumptions. Not all Christians raise the same questions: some are more concerned about personal ethics, some with social justice, some with social order. In thousands of churches on any given Sunday morning, from liberal Episcopalians to reactionary super-separatist Bible-only churches, you will hear sermons about how "the culture" is out of synch with how God wants his people to live.

But if I had nickel for every sermon preached this Sunday on how the dominant contemporary American assumptions about art and beauty are out of synch with the picture of Creation developed in the Bible and discussed by the Church for almost all of her life, I probably wouldn't have enough to make a local phone call.

While there have been many marvelous books published about theology and the arts in the past three decades (indeed perhaps an unprecedented number of books) and while there have been more conferences and seminars, workshops and gallery events, in which Christian involvement in the arts is encouraged, most of these activities are preaching to the choir. That is, they seem to appeal to people who have, independent of (perhaps even in spite of) the Church's witness, already acquired

an interest in the arts.

In my experience, very few pastors are interested in such matters, in part, I think, because they and their congregations really aren't convinced that concern for art is "spiritual" enough to merit sustained attention, in part because most pastors and most congregations are nervous about deviating too much from the typical concerns of the American middle class, and in part because pastors who keep their jobs know that you have to pick your fights, and the more proof-texts and parachurch celebrities you have behind you when you go into battle, the better your chances for survival. And to my knowledge, there is no Ron Sider or Chuck Colson or James Dobson speaking out prophetically on behalf of the arts.

I believe that the typical views of the arts in America today are in many ways characteristic of the ancient but perennial heresy of Gnosticism. For many people, art is largely therapeutic, that is, it is about enabling a sense of happiness or well-being. People tend to pay more attention to what art does for them, how it affects them, than to the integrity of the form of the works themselves. The word "authenticity" is often used, not to refer (as critics sometimes have) to whether a work of art is authentic and honest, but whether I can "authentically identify" with the work, that is, attach myself to it naively, in an unpracticed, sincere, instinctive, honest way. The form of the work itself is irrelevant; what matters is that I relate to it immediately. I suggest that this is Gnostic, because it pays little attention to the medium, the form, the incarnation of beauty, if you will. Art is a disposable means to an invisible and interior end.

This assumption that approaching art in a deliberate or studied way is somehow inauthentic, that the effects of art can be felt immediately, not only without the mediation of time, but without the mediation of apprenticeship, without being taught to grow in understanding, also seems Gnostic. Just as Gnostics believed that God will meet the individual and swallow him or her up without the mediation of revelation or sacraments or teaching or spiritual nurture, so the spirit of a work of art will move me without mediation to unite with it.

A related and even more common assumption is that since attraction or appreciation of art is wholly subjective, art should be a radically democratic enterprise. The idea that some people may understand more about art than I do, and that therefore I should submit to them and learn from them is deeply repugnant to many people. It seems un-American. Implicit in this affirmation of aesthetic autonomy there is often an assumption that the material ordering of Creation itself is inherently meaningless. "Beauty" is a purely subjective matter, a social or personal "construction," not something rooted in reality.

Beliefs about art are not just beliefs about art. What we believe about art and beauty and how we cultivate our aesthetic lives are not matters peripheral to basic Christian belief. Furthermore, the prejudices about art and beauty that are typical in our day are simply a specific expression of broader assumptions about human life and how to live it well that have ramifications in social, political, ethical, and theological realms. If we affirm or deny certain things about art and beauty, either explicitly or implicitly, it is likely that we likewise affirm or deny certain things about God, about Creation, about human nature, and about the shape of Christian spirituality and obedience.

In Isaiah 45, we read one of the many scriptural affirmations of the reality of order and coherence in Creation:

For thus says Yahweh, the Creator of the heavens—  
he is God, who shaped the earth and made it,  
who set it firm:  
he did not create it to be chaos,

he formed it to be lived in:  
I am Yahweh, and there is no other,  
I have not spoken in secret,  
in some dark corner of the underworld.  
I did not say, “Offspring of Jacob,  
search for me in chaos!”  
I am Yahweh: I proclaim saving justice,  
I say what is true. [Isaiah 45:18f.]

God is not only the originator of the cosmos but the shaper, a shaper who repeatedly delighted in his own handiwork on each successive day of Creation, who admired and blessed what he had made, affirming its order and goodness. It is against the backdrop of these twin themes of Creation, the creativity of God and the goodness and givenness of what He has made, that we should think about human creativity and about beauty.

It has often been observed that the human capacity and desire to make what we call “art” is an expression of the fact that we are made in the image of a Creator God. Our creativity thus reflects a likeness that we have to God. Theologian and pastor Peter Leithart recently observed: “Art is a making that imitates the making of God, and it is most godlike when it is purely gratuitous, when it is not meeting a need.” This is why art is often eminently impractical (and thus suspect in a culture that is eminently pragmatic).

But the Christian understanding of Creation has relevance not just for the dynamic of makers, of creativity, but also for the nature of the made thing, the work of art itself. Creation presents us with materials and forms that the artist transforms, but always tethered to some order in Creation. Leithart again: “The artist is always transforming, but this transfiguration is an attempt to get at dimensions of what’s really there, not an abandonment of what’s really there, even if the artist is aiming at fantasy. Art attempts to highlight patterns, correspondences, dimensions to reality that are usually missed in our everyday experience, and to force us to look again at the sunflower or the pipe or the chair. As the Russian formalists say, one of the purposes of art is to defamiliarize the familiar.” The artist is always responding to the reality of Creation in some way, even in the most abstract artistic forms.

Early in this meditation I complained that American churches were not by and large adequately countercultural in their teaching and practice concerning art and beauty. You might wonder what sorts of things would make me happier. It’s true that churches are more likely to “celebrate creativity” than they were a generation or two ago. Since such enthusiasms are often also celebrations of aesthetic relativism, that’s not exactly what I have in mind. First, in addition to affirming the vocation of artists, the Church should affirm the vocation of theologians, philosophers, and critics who help all of us, including the artists, understand what’s going on in art. When artists and people who think and write and talk about art coexist in the same community, each knowing the limits of their gifts, there can be a great amplification of creative engagement.

Second, if the arts are really an important part of life, then churches should be wary of what Josef Pieper (in *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*) calls the “sham practice” of art, art that is dishonest or manipulative or ultimately cynical. Such art, combined with the eclipsing of art by commercially driven entertainment, hurts the lives of individuals and their communities. Sham art often involves a lot of flattery and dishonesty, which are as big a source of temptation in our culture as sex and violence, if less obvious and therefore less likely to be noticed by Christians.

Third, churches can encourage in preaching and practice a posture toward Creation within which

the arts can thrive. American Christians seem much more willing to fight about the fact of Creation (against Darwinism) or fight with one another about how many hours Creation took than they are to order their lives around the structures that God has placed in Creation. Christians want to insist on the *fact* of Creation even as they are willing to ignore the *meaning and significance of the order* of Creation.

Fourth, parents should be encouraged to attend to the ways in which their children's imaginations are formed. The shape of the imagination is as crucial to their spiritual growth as their skills at moral reasoning. The culture we live in urges us toward imaginative engagement only with the new, the sensational, that which can be experienced intensely and immediately, but which can easily be discarded as the next sensation comes along. There is no good reason to abandon our children to that form of exploitation and dehumanization. Yet many parents fatalistically resign themselves (and their children) to it. Churches need to help parents on this front. This is not just a matter of "art appreciation," but of cultivating a more contemplative posture toward Creation. The imaginations of children will be formed one way or another, either by a relentless and restless market or by agents more principled.

Finally, I think churches need to think more deeply about what the Bible means when we are told over and over to avoid worldliness. Many Christians avoid the arts because they think the arts are worldly. Ironically, their indifference to beauty and creativity often reflects a deep acceptance of all sorts of faulty ideas advanced by the world. If we were really avoiding worldliness, American Christians would have the healthiest, richest cultural lives in the country. That is a condition of which we haven't yet been accused.

If you have been listening to the **MARS HILL AUDIO** *Journal* for any period of time, you know two things: we regularly feature material on the arts, and we almost as regularly critique the various ways in which Gnostic assumptions shape contemporary culture. There has been since the beginning of the Church a temptation to read the story of God's saving work as an account of human liberation *from* Creation rather than human redemption *in the context of a renewed Creation*. Christians who overspiritualize the New Testament find it easier to practice a dualistic Christianity, by which the effects of the Gospel are only interior and personal. (Ironically, that is just the sort of faith radical secularists would like Christians to practice.)

At this time of year, you are no doubt receiving solicitations for the support of all sorts of worthy causes. Some of these causes involve people in a life-or-death struggle; others, only slightly less desperate, are nonetheless obvious candidates for Biblically motivated giving. Our work is not as dramatically situated. But after 13 years, we continue to believe that the encouragement of faithfulness concerning the cultural consequences of the whole message of the Gospel is vitally important for the Church and for individual believers. And based on the testimony of many listeners and supporters, we believe our work is providing a unique service for the Church in a time when there is increasing confusion about the interrelationship between Church and culture.

I hope you will consider seriously the importance of the work of **MARS HILL AUDIO** as you plan your year-end giving. Thank you for your time, and may God bless your pilgrimage through the Advent and Christmas seasons in beautiful ways.

Sincerely,



Ken Myers