

## What about the Arts?

Jonathan K. Dodson | Various Texts | March 7, 2020

We're still asking cultural questions of Christianity. Today, the Arts. While evangelicals are known for supporting church and missions, our support of the arts is embarrassing. "In 2004, four secular foundations including the Ford Foundation and the John D. Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation gave a combined total of over \$200 million to 'arts and culture.' The same year the largest Evangelical and Catholic foundations gave combined \$11 mil. What is art? *Beauty in the Bible, Beauty & the Self, Beauty for the World.*

### What is Art?

Most of us appreciate the Arts in some form: eye-catching graphic design, a beautifully shot movie, a stirring concert, a well-written book, innovative architecture. *But what is art?* Clive Bell, a 20<sup>th</sup> century art critic, suggested there must be some common quality that bands the arts together—why else call them 'the Arts'? What could it be? Here's what he said:

*Significant Form that elicits aesthetic emotion.* The form of the art—its lines, color, sound, texture, precision—evokes a response. Think about the last time you walked out of a movie theatre in awe. Or left a concert still singing. Stood in front of a painting longer than you thought possible. Significant form elicits aesthetic emotion. Simply put: *art is for beauty.*

The beauty of Adelle's voice, the splendor of Hagia Sophia, the magnificence of the Alps, the loveliness of Monet's Poppies cause us stop and linger. *Art points to beauty.*

### Beauty in the Bible

So what does the Bible have to say? It is striking that when God created the *world* he wasn't stingy but lavish: not a hundred stars, a hundred *billion* stars in our galaxy alone. Not two types of fish but 28,000 species of fish. Not a wasteland but a garden. Eden was luxuriant. The garden sat on top of a mountain, with a river that wound out and down in four different directions, irrigating lands filled with gold, onyx, and other precious stones. The trees in the garden were pleasing to the eye and delightful to the taste. Creational beauty. When God designed the *tabernacle*, he required fine wood, gems, blue-dyed skins, gold, and silver. A few hundred years later, the temple was made with the finest materials. Cypress

walls were carved with trees, cherubim, gourds, and flowers, overlaid in gold. Outside, the pillars flanking the front of the temple were completely aesthetic, bearing no weight, their tops sculpted with *one hundred* pomegranates. And the exterior of the temple was covered with precious stones. Now why all the fuss? “[He overlaid the house with precious stones \*for beauty\*](#)” (1 Chr 3:6). The gems and pillars served no function. Pure pragmatism-free *beauty* there to behold. Sometimes I feel guilty for indulging in the orchestra or theatre, but Scripture shows us *beauty is there to behold*. The arts offer God-honoring leisure. Now, the temple wasn’t pasted with pornographic images or lude posters. We must exercise discernment when we enjoy the Arts. A FF button is a grace. The Arts aren’t an end in themselves. Their beauty points to a greater beauty. **Our encounters with beauty are an encounter with God:** [The Mighty One, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, \*the perfection of beauty, God shines forth\*](#) (Ps 50:1–2). Notice God is described not as beautiful but as the *perfection of beauty*. The beauty of this world directs us to a beauty beyond the world. That stirring melody calls attention, not to itself, but to its perfect origin. The stunning performance a hat tip to the Director of creation. The Alps an echo of God’s eternal greatness. Our encounters with beauty are an encounter with God himself. So how do we determine if art is beautiful? Zechariah, [For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty](#) (9:16–17)! Notice God’s beauty, true beauty, correlates with *goodness*. Renown Japanese-American artist Mako Fujimura points out that a lack of goodness detracts from the beauty of a work of art. You may feel this when you see urine in a jar on display at a museum, a gratuitous sex scene in a movie, or a song that extols vices. When I saw Bon Iver a few years ago I was so moved by the performance, but then in between songs Justin Vernon dropped F-bombs like they were adjectives. The combination of beautiful music and profanity sullied the performance. When art lacks moral goodness it detracts from true beauty. Whatever we do (eat, drink, watch, or listen) we’re to do it to the glory, the beauty, of God. Some things we affirm, some we redeem, and others we *reject* for the glory of God.

### Beauty & the Self

The famous American author Ursula Le Guin says, [Imagination, working at full strength, can shake us out of our fatal, adoring, self-absorption, and make us look up and see—with](#)

terror or with relief—that the world does not in fact belong to us at all.” Great art lifts us out of ourselves. Gets us out of narcissistic attention to what others think, social media feeds, anxiety about health. But this will be a terror if you have nothing to replace your self-obsession with. If art is for beauty, we’re meant to follow it to the face of God, not to obsess over our own face: selfies, Instagram, and what others think. If you find yourself evaluating how you appear in every conversation, post, and action you’ll eventually become miserable. This happened to Fujimura who found the more he focused on his art, the less of a person he became. A schism grew inside of him, creating distance in his relationships. He tried to produce even more beautiful art, but the more he did the moodier and more restless he became. Eventually Fujimura discovered his heart could not contain the extravagance of the beauty he sought *until he “found a shelf to place that beauty inside my heart.”* We are made for glory but not our own. And when he found that shelf, the only thing that could bear the weight of thrilling beauty and glory, *he found Jesus Christ.* But to get it, he had to let go of art as religion, give up on self-absorption, and welcome the idea that he was made for God. What do you need to let go of? Are you seeking a beauty that doesn’t belong to you? In your career, parenting, looks, in the church? All three will fail us. **Beauty is not a cul-de-sac; it is a window.** It points to something so glorious it would crush us were we not to find a place to put it. Jesus Christ is that place. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God shines, not in our face but his. Look to him for forgiveness. Ask him to heal your inner schism. Look to Christ and you will not face terror of judgment but find the relief of his saving grace. Put your faith in him, and he will bring his perfect beauty to rest in your heart.

### **Beauty for the World**

Beauty in the Bible, Beauty and the Self, Beauty for the World. Beauty bring us into an encounter with God but does even more. **Beauty imagines a better world.** Perhaps you’ve seen the video of the Italian residents in quarantine in Siena? Their country has lost 1000 lives to COVID and yet they stand on their balconies, singing over the street to one another in pandemic lockdown. They are reaching for beauty, imagining a better world. One person comments, “People breaking out in song, lifting each other’s spirits during this tragedy, is an act of striking beauty.” What is so striking about it? Songs in the darkness point to the light, as if to say beauty is real. It comes from somewhere. It soothes the suffering soul. Out

of Zion, the perfection of beauty God shines forth. *Beauty imagines a better world.* Clothed in blue, serving in a gold-laden temple, surrounded by images of Paradise, the priests of Israel imagined a world to come and led turbulent Israel toward that new creation. City life this is our calling. Priests in our city pointing the beauty of a world to come, caring for those in need, creating a miniature welfare state, bringing life to the city. [\[image\]](#) Canadian painter Rachelle Kearns used actual gold flake in this painting. Commenting on the piece she writes, “[It is meant to ignite the imagination for what one day could be something far greater than what we have known—something so awesome, so beautiful, that it points us to Beauty itself.](#)” Beauty is not a cul-de-sac; it is a window. Will you let the light in? Will you soak in his glory? As sickness and strife swirl about us will you point others to the beauty of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ? Will we practice a peculiar goodness that corresponds with beauty?