

Is Contemporary Art Perverted Art?

Joseph Schickel

IN THE October 1989 issue of *Crisis*, under the title "Contemporary Art Is Perverted Art," Mr. Frederick Hart states: "The air is becoming suffocatingly pungent with the incense of pious indignation from the art world concerning Congress' reaction to the way the National Endowment for the Arts is spending taxpayers' money." This is a factual and welcome observation. Mr. Hart goes on to make the case that "the contemporary art establishment" is perversely manipulating an unknowing public. Moreover it "delights in" and "thrives on a belief system of deliberate contempt for the public." It is clear that Mr. Hart passionately believes this. The facts are certainly not documented in the article.

Contemporary art is the art of any current time. If one is an artist in 1990 he or she is a contemporary artist. Whether a particular artist is in tune with the profound realities of his or her time, or is rebelling against them, is another matter. An architect friend once told me he would be happy to design a Gothic church if the bishop would supply the Goths to build it.

Is Mr. Hart's Vietnam Memorial statue—a contemporary work—glorious or perverted? What about Maya Ying Lin's Vietnam Memorial wall? I would offer that neither of these remarkable works is perverted. The better question is which of the two works, one frankly contemporary, the other at least purporting to spurn its quality of being contemporary—is more profound. Which speaks more eloquently of the heroic sacrifices of the soldiers? Which is more ennobling? Which better serves and nourishes the spiritual and emotional needs of visitors? Which better comforts the grief of family and loved ones? Which is more inspiring? Which better raises the spirits? Which is more beautiful? And above all before you answer—go and look!

The dictionary tells us that "pervert" means "to deviate from what is considered right, good, and true; to corrupt." It seems intellectually sloppy and irresponsible to generalize that the art of our time is perverted. Certainly some is and just as certainly some is good, true, and beautiful. I am grateful to Mr. Hart for starting some much needed discussion—discussion woefully neglected in the Catholic journals. There is much for a civilized community to discuss. Does public rejection or acceptance play a role in the worthiness of art? Have works of great inspiration initially been condemned, then later revered? Have works at first acclaimed been later recognized as shallow? Can works of art that are disrespectful of flag or crucifix be true reflections of an unpatriotic and faithless society? Is the problem with the art, or the public, or both?

IS THE ART of Georges Rouault or Mark Chagall glorious or decadent? What about Mark Rothko or Jim Dine? Should the government be funding art in the first place? These are questions worthy of consideration. As a Catholic, it is my hope that Mr. Hart's insightful article will stimulate serious discussion about the role of art in a life of faith. It is this hope which prompted my response.

Historically, art has been the engine of civilization, and its wrecking ball. Jacques Maritain, regarded by many as the pre-eminent philosopher of art of this century, speaks of the indispensable roles of art, the artist, and beauty—in civilization, culture, and spirituality. He uses the ancient, crisp, and refreshing language of the Schoolmen—art is a virtue, a *habitus*. Truth, goodness, and beauty are the three great transcendentals. In *Art and Scholasticism* he writes:

"The moment one touches a transcendental, one touches being itself, a likeness of God, an absolute, that which ennobles and delights our life; one enters into the domain of the spirit." The thoughts and words of Maritain and Yves R. Simon (rooted in the good metaphysical soil of Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle) are desperately needed if the current cultural and spiritual crisis is to pass.

As the son and grandson of working (very hard) artists, I was introduced to both the joyful discipline (*habitus*) of art, and the fickle foibles of a certain self-proclaimed "art world" at a young age. My father, William Schickel, told me about the true role of the artist in civilized society. "Beauty," he said, "is food for the soul." These few words explain the role of the true artist rather well. As Mr. Hart points out, the artist is called to serve—to serve the common good and to feed spiritual hunger.

In times past, the Church, linchpin of civilization, saw that she had a pivotal cultural role to play here. Recognizing that there could be no spiritual revival without cultural renaissance, she pursued them together, as one and the same effort, with breathtaking results. The Church's great treasures in art and architecture stand in witness to both the effort and the success. The Church in America today faces the same challenge as the Church of centuries past—to play its spiritual and cultural role. But instead of commissioning works in art and architecture that are concrete, contemporary expressions of timeless traditional truths which could nourish the spiritual hunger of the faithful, she . . . forms committees.

The current cultural bureaucracy in the form of guidelines, directives, boards of review, consultants, and so on, has become a hindrance to fine art and design in Church-related projects. Parkinson's law states that as bureaucratic structure grows, organic reality diminishes. My grandfather, the noted stained-glass designer Emil Frei, commented that a board of review will stop the best projects and the worst projects—with uninspired mediocrity as the result. My father quips that liturgy now runs a close second to sex in the sheer volume of publications, manuals, workshops, guidelines, how-to books, and audio-visual materials that are available. It would seem that the level of satisfaction in the two fields is also comparable. Quips and good intentions

aside, and looking at the big picture (for happily a small amount of high quality work still occurs), we can say the Church's cultural bureaucracy hinders rather than helps good art and design. It frustrates the result it seeks by looking to the false authority of bureaucratic structures to insure authority of the true (and greatly feared) authority of the qualified artist can hope to produce such a result. Put bluntly, it can never be assured! But the artist is the only one who

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offers the hope of success. If you want guarantees, buy government bonds. But if you quest for pure, inspired, unadulterated brilliance, commission a fine artist and let him or her work. False authority is vigorously exercised by cultural bureaucracies in many dioceses—even as these dioceses shun their legitimate moral and theological authority. Yves R. Simon's eloquent *General Theory of Authority* is badly needed here.

About a year ago, several members of my family started the Maritain Gallery. It is our effort to fill a void in contemporary culture. Today a person of faith,

