

READING THE BIBLE AND UNDERSTANDING ART: HOW TO REDEEM YOUR TIME IN TAKING A LOOK AT ART IN CANADA¹

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The four principles which governed the presentation on how to look at painterly and sculptural artworks with redemptive eyes were the following:

- (1) You bodily (sensationally!) must be a relaxed temple of the Holy Spirit in Christ's worldwide body, despite your sin (cf. I Corinthians 6:12-20, Philippians 1:9-11).
- (2) You need to learn the image-language of the artistry you look at, and take the time to get familiar with the historical neighbourhood and milieu of the art--snap judgments are not Christian (cf. II Corinthians 10:3-5).
- (3) Catch the angle of vision, and sniff out the committed spirit (cultural dynamic) of the artist, as you detect the nuances of meaning in God's world uncovered by the artist's gifted imaginativity (cf. I John 4:1-3, Ephesians 4:7,12-16).
- (4) Judge the artwork's quality, obedience to the Lord, and contribution to you and your neighbours' life with a compassionate justice, ready to grow in wisdom, wary as a snake in the grass but as harmlessly innocent as doves (cf. Psalm 110, Matthew 10:16, II Corinthians 5:17-19).

Introduction

A person should treat artworks first of all like artworks and not like an investment, pacifier or distraction. An artwork is an artwork is an artwork. Artworks give onlookers knowledge all right, nuanced knowledge that can be gathered in by reading the colours and lines, compositional design, surface texture and hues, in all their lambent suggestivity. Do not look at a painting as if it be a xerox copy of something: see the painting as a cartoon.

Current world context in which Canadian art is found

There is significant European art (Anselm Kiefer) that evidences artistic struggle with the wars fought on its soil and the subsequent dislocation of the humanistic purpose formulated for centuries by a synthesis of Christian and Graeco-Roman culture. There are South American imaginative cries (Ana Maria Pacheco) at strong-arm political despotism and duplicity. And there is a double dominant trend in the artworld made-in-USA of sophisticated parodic critique (Jeff Koons) and professionals determined to

¹ This is the gist of an illustrated slide lecture. A video tape of the full illustrated slide lecture is on reserve for use in the library of Trinity Western University.

reduce artistry to a "pure" hermetic artform with awful size and stipulated colour for the connoisseurs to contemplate (Barnett Newman).

Definition of art at work in this lecture

A well-crafted artefact or act distinguished by an imaginative quality whose nature is to allude to more meaning than what is visible/audible/written/sensed, I take to be a human artwork. The bottom line to artistry is skilled formation, and the defining top line to artistry is a subtle quality which permeates the whole object or event with an engaging metaphorical coagulation of nuances. An artwork is designed to be a loosely symbolic gift of oblique knowledge.

My working definition of artistry keeps "fine art" related to artisanry, which I take to be skilled imaginative handicraft still embedded in instrumental service. An artisan weaves and decorates a vessel to carry water. An artist weaves or carves an object to be good for nothing but to excite an other person's wonderment, like a jewel, at the meaning, for example, of contours and shadows. Making toys and arranging a bouquet of flowers can often be somewhere in between craft and art, because flower arrangements and toys elicit primarily aesthetic responses rather than actions of utility. Any thing in the world naturally has nuances, which can be imaginatively highlighted by someone. That is why Marcel Duchamp's subversive ruse of turning a useful urinal into an artistic "Fountain" for the 1913 New York Armory Show had a smidgim of credibility once it was expositied, since art galleries and art museums are places which generate aesthetic expectations.

My definition for artistry, however, asks that the defining imaginative nuancefulness be embodied, ingrained in the object, inhere the enactment itself, rather than need to be attributed to it by a reacting subject. For me artistry is not better than craft but simply different, and frequently in life you want something to hold water rather than just hold your attention. Art museums often will provide an aesthetic setting for utensils to be viewed, and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto sometimes cross-dresses with the Art Gallery of Ontario and presents artworks along with its fascinating cultural artefacts. So there is a fluidity in whether given objects be craft, art, or a joke, and what kind of hidden philosophical definition guides an art curator makes a difference in understanding what is on hand.

Taking stock of historical Canadian artistry

Original Northwest coastal Indian artisanry served a pronounced liturgical function in their faith festivities. So their magnificently crafted masks, chests and objects made to honour mysterious unknown gods to whom their life and death was beholden, carry an aura secular artists today fain would produce but cannot, because of their faith...in scientific rationality. Inuit carvings moved (too) quickly from superb crafted artefacts into art-gallery prizes in the stores and museums of the kanbunait (heavy eyebrow whites), but the best whalebone and stone artistry of the Inuit bespeak a life of resolute endurance in the wonderful harsh nunassiaq (the beautiful land) of the Artic.

Once one realizes aboriginal Indian and Inuit artistry supplies the indigenous matrix of Canadian art before 1867, then one can better appreciate the important but limited contribution of the "Group of Seven" painters in Ontario toward formation of

"Canadian" art. Tom Thomson and his followers to Algonquin Park and Algoma Canyon deserve credit for depicting the rugged terrain and turbulent weather in Northern Ontario and the truly incredible riot of autumn colour there in fresh ways that set the stuffy Royal Canadian Academy studio artists' teeth on edge. But a few things need to be said:

(1) The "Group of seven" do not represent the crux of Canada and its cities--lone jack pine mounted resolutely against the unleashed wilderness elements.

(2) The untamed North adored by the loose "Group of seven" painters during the period of World War I and the 1920s is unpopulated! as if no one lives there. The rugged place where an intrepid canoeist explorer can find identity far away from the materialism of cities they consistently paint is the old Thoreau/Walt Whitman myth, which is belied by First Nations' subsistence living astride the "true" Northern landscape of our country.

(3) the "Group of seven" was mistaken in thinking their artistic commitment to the land of Canada brought with it a national Canadian style distinct from European patterns.

If one recognizes the significant presence of First Nations' art in Canada and sees the regionality of the "Group of seven" artwork, despite the "Group of seven"'s wish and sometimes push to be "the" national artistic voice (partly because Eric Brown, first director of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 1913 supported and bought their work until he died around 1936), it sparks interest in how other artistic centers of gravity in Canada constituted their artworld.

For example, consider the chaste artwork of Lionel Le Moine Fitzgerald (1890-1956) who became director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery during the difficult depression years. The Winnipeg Art Gallery was conceived and instituted to be an enrichment of the populace at large; it was not formed from the top down as a provincial branch of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art, which was quite snooty--well into the 1930s the Royal Canadian Academy of Art would not admit anyone in Canada as a member who was a practising commercial artist! But Fitzgerald continued the Manitoban tradition of being globally aware culturally but making art locally serviceable.

Problems and possibilities for Canadian artists

Like Piet Mondrian who switched from rich depictions of trees and landscape to De Stijl in 1917, Lawren Harris, after 1933, out of theosophic conviction, moved to paint an abstracted world of simplified spiritual transcendence.

After World War II important Quebec and Ontario artists moved into the orbit of Clement Greenberg's dicta that painterly art is about colour flat on canvas, which can be taken as secular icons or as decorative exercises refining teasing colour combinations. There are also figures in Canada whose parody of past art attracts attention.

A question remains for artists in Canada: Is the art produced in our country today finding a way to be societally relevant to our times impacted by war, poverty, and

heedless commercialism, or has our art been co-opted by dominant international clichés of minimalist design and parodic daring. Was Time's art critic Robert Hughes' judgment possibly correct: the contemporary North American art market has become to culture what strip-mining is to terrain with trees?

David Rueben Piqtoukun's sculpture epitomizes a struggle of native Canadian artists who feel caught between two worlds--the one of shamanic powers and old beliefs versus the white man's world of secularized affluence and power.

There is a wealth of normative, neighbour-friendly Canadian artistry which deals with lived human life in God's world infected by sin and evil yet fraught with hope we should support. Artworks of varied sorts were shown and interpreted, from David Milne, Emily Carr, the murals at Toronto's Pearson airport terminal One (now being destructed), the murals all around Moose Jaw, artwork by William, Kurelek, Mennonite artists, Gerard Pas, and others.

A concluding thesis

The more skilled an artist is allows one to treat tougher problems, if one has the imaginativity to match. What is needed in Canada is neighbour-friendly artistry, artwork with a human face, that in varying competencies treats human joys and troubles in the world filled with marvelous creatures and much evil. With that vision and spirit, amateur, professional, and master artists all have good tasks to perform, because such gritty--it takes grit to love your next-door neighbour--such gritty artistry brings along hope.

For books and materials like this lecture, see www.seerveld.com/tuppence.html