

ANDRZEJ DERDZIUK

WHAT IS ART: THE VIEWER'S HORIZON

Art can be looked at from the perspective of its creator and viewer. At the same time, it is possible to make a philosophical reflection on it, taking into account its nature and the mission it has to fulfil. These reflections have two elements. One concerns the general view of the reality of art in the light of the values of truth, goodness and beauty. The second part of this statement concerns my encounter with art and describing some impressions as a viewer of it.

1. REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CREATORS OF ART

Man, called to truth, goodness and beauty, expresses himself through his material achievements, which reveal the inner harmony of his spirit.¹ Works of art are an expression of the aspiration to show a subjective image of the world in the form of figurative representations and literary and musical works. The reading of the world with all its harmony and dissonances is mapped out first in the mind of the artist and then takes the shape of a work of art as a tool to share one's view with others. Usually, an artistic work is a kind of manifesto of the artist, through which he gives expression to his feelings and appeals to others to notice and then share his view of reality.

The positive side of creative expression is that it shows the ideal shape of beauty and goodness to which a person endowed with sensitivity and talent aspires. Through his artistic creations, he wishes to draw attention to the necessity

Prof. Dr. habil. ANDRZEJ DERDZIUK — the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; e-mail: andrzej.derdziuk@kul.pl; ORCID: <https://0000-0003-4678-726X>.

¹ Cfr. Dawid Kostecki, „Prawda a Dobro, Dobro i Piękno [Truth and Good, Good and Beauty],” *Civitas Christiana* nr 1(88) 2022: 32.

of transcending grey reality and rising to a higher level of existence by striving to discover and recover the harmony of the world, which has its own inner meaning and constitutes a space for the realisation of man's pilgrimage through the earth. Such art has much to do with the deeper truth of reality having its destiny to be a love-filled human world. As Irving Stone wrote about Michelangelo Buonarotti's philosophy of creation in his book *Anguish and Ecstasy*, the extraction of beauty can be compared to a strenuous effort like peeling off a layer of marble to reveal a beautiful form enchanted inside a block of rock.

Man himself is the most important object of inner work, which aims to unveil the deepest motivation for thinking and acting, leading the person to be ready to give selfless gifts of himself. Rejecting layers of selfishness and laziness and overcoming inner and outer limitations is the art of life through which man achieves his fulfilment and happiness. Such an attitude is born out of an optimistic view of the world and a belief that there is a deeper meaning to it rooted in the eternal will of the One who, out of love, brought it into existence. The effort to uncover beauty and to show it through material representations and the questions posed in philosophy and literature is made possible by the fact that man is guided by the assumption that it is possible to attain the ideal. For this, hope is needed, which by its very nature is subject to the outside of man, because man himself experiences his limitation and experiences his rapture.

Art in itself constitutes the ontic uniqueness of the human person who, through the creation of artistic works, discovers in himself the aspiration to transcend the sphere of mere technical utility and rises to the level of reflection on the meaning of his own life and passing. Art thus becomes a form of the desire to grasp and retain the reality lived and to anticipate it by anticipating its further development. By revealing a deeper dimension of reality, the artist finds means of expression to show the ideas and motivations behind decisions and actions.

Works of art are not only a tool for their creator to express his view of reality, but they also reveal his inner world, the fruit of which are the products of his artistic work. This was expressed by John Paul II in his *Letter to Artists*, in which he pointed out the great potentiality of the Church's dialogue with the creators of art. "For in creating a work, the artist expresses himself to such an extent that his work is a particular reflection of his being—of who he is and what he is like. We find countless proofs of this in the history of mankind. For when the artist creates, he not only brings a work of art to life, but through that work he somehow also reveals his own personality. He finds in art a new dimension and

an extraordinary means of expressing his spiritual development. Through his works, the artist talks and communicates with others”².

Hence, alongside works that represent the beauty and harmony sought by man hoping for redemption, there appear in the contemporary world artefacts that are an expression of loss and doubt. They represent a reading of the dramatic turmoil in the harmonious development of the world and man, and reveal the state of mind and heart of an artist who wants to shout a protest against the official narrative that everything is going very well. The experience of drama and disruption is revealed in works of art that present a dissonance to previous forms of artistic expression and seek new forms of expressing the unbearable lightness of being and the banality of duration.

Sometimes, the products of art called modern present themselves as an expression of the avant-garde, i.e. the rejection of previous styles in the field of cultural achievements and the search for new original ideological and artistic solutions. One can see in such works a mixture of two separate tendencies. On the one hand, it is a rebellion against the existing world, motivated by previously experienced injuries, and a desire to change it through radical art manifestos. On the other hand, at the basis of such actions lies a desire to notice changes in culture taking place under the influence of technological development and new technologies, and a desire to respond to new challenges caused by technical culture. It often happens that the products of modern art fail to see the use value of the works created and become a subjective and sometimes egoistic expression of the inner experiences of their author.

When I speak of the use value of art, what I mean in this case is that it must be placed at the service of great ideas and must be called upon to show something which enables man to transcend himself. We must therefore bear in mind the useful value of art, that is, its role in inspiring deeper reflection and the discovery of new meanings by showing a different way of looking at a given reality. Artists, “when they follow the voice of inspiration and create truly valuable and beautiful works, not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of humanity as a whole, but also perform a valuable social service for the common good.”³

The impressionists' blurring of shapes reveals the complexity of the world and encourages reflection on what lies beyond the visible layer of the world. For art leads to the perception of things invisible, not easily grasped by the average

² John Paul II. *Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), no. 3; Holy See, accessed November 21, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23_041999_artists.html.

³ Ibid., no. 4.

viewer. At the same time, it is a postulate indicating that the artist should believe in the existence of a spiritual world to which he has access and is able to find means of expression in order to tell about it, or only to signal its existence. Art, then, is something that allows man not only to discover who he is, but also to indicate who he should be.

This was expressed by a contemporary poet in a poem:

I visit beauty in museums
Locked in images but not trapped
The invisible world reflects inside me
Reflection of beauty
A moment of elation
Inner joy.⁴

In terms of the functionality of church art, the following messages of the artists' works can be pointed out. They are of a cultic nature, that is, they point to the person or mysteries that are the object of the worship of the faithful. They also have an anamnestic function, i.e. they remind and show a given figure, and thus they fulfil a didactic and catechetical purpose, as they indicate the path to be followed by the recipient. Works of art also have a decorative function when, by adorning interiors or being an element of space management, they provide aesthetic impressions and refer to lofty values, making them present through appropriately chosen forms of expression. Religious art is meant to direct viewers and readers towards eternal good and beauty. Its task is therefore to depict beauty and to show its attractive value. On the other hand, it must simply and unobtrusively point out evil and ugliness and urge their rejection. For this reason, art in the sacred space of the church must be moderate and orderly and must not evoke adoration of the work itself, but rather refer to something greater.

At the basis of the inspiration of religious art is faith and reference to the supernatural world, in which man finds his fulfilment by striving for a lofty model of love and perfection. In the thought of the Fathers of the Church, it was pointed out that images of saints should stimulate noble competition with them in the pursuit of harmony and spiritual beauty. Depictions of holy figures serve to establish a bond with them and help them participate in the reality in which they reside. Therefore, the artist should take into account not only the content of the mystery itself, but also having experience of cultural heritage, he should be able to establish contact with the mentality of the viewer, so that the message he proposes reaches him effectively.

⁴ Krzysztof Pawlina, *Podarował Mi Ktoś Okulary* [Someone gave me glasses] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sióstr Loretanek, 2022), 33.

Andrei Tarkovsky claimed that art serves man in such a way that it helps him in his spiritual development. Therefore, before the author presents his vision of art, he should answer the question why man lives and what is the sense of his existence⁵. John Paul II stated that “art is characterised by its unique ability to grasp a chosen aspect of the message, translating it into the language of colours, shapes and sounds that support the intuition of the human being who looks or listens.”⁶

Reflecting on the meaning of art, Stanisław Rodziński wrote that its essence remains the artist's desire to reveal his thoughts and experiences, what is important and what is less important and ephemeral. This, however, requires both content, that is the content of the message, as well as appropriate means of expression, which are connected with talent and technical skill. In view of the individualised way in which the artist expresses himself, André Malraux noticed that even the fullest expression of the painter is not enough to create a masterpiece.⁷

The artist must be aware that he is a creator, that is to say that he creates in an original way, through appropriately chosen means of expression, a message that can inspire others and open them up to a new reality. He must remember, however, that he is not a creator who brings reality out of nothingness, and he should refer to a certain existing world which exists and wishes to reveal itself, as it were, through the genius of the artist concerned.⁸

It is therefore important to educate through art, which not only shapes aesthetic sensitivity, but also introduces the pupil to the mystery of the creative process. Above all, it is about developing, that is, educating and revealing the values that creativity brings. To this end, it is necessary to stimulate the imagination, to teach careful observation, to develop the readiness to listen and to skilfully discover silence⁹. In essence, this process leads to the ability for contemplation, that is, an integral and all-embracing stopping at beauty and discovering one's own happiness and peace from communing with something that is sublime and beyond the grasp of temporal sensations.

Art, born from observation and experience of beauty perceived in the cosmos and in man himself, is capable of interpreting it correctly and of showing a new way of looking at reality. To a large extent, it is capable of leading man to the perspective of infinity, where the ideals of beauty, truth and goodness find their realization. “Art is like an open gate through which, before the eyes of man's

⁵ Cfr. Stanisław Rodziński, *Autoportret malarza* [Painter self-portrait] (Kraków: Petrus, 2012), 36–37.

⁶ John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, no. 3.

⁷ Cfr. Rodziński, *Autoportret malarza*, 116.

⁸ Cfr. John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, no. 1.

⁹ Cfr. Rodziński, *Autoportret malarza*, 128.

mind and heart, there arises and is perceived that which he has not seen before. The aesthetic sensation he experiences raises him higher, directs him towards beauty, really, towards what is transcendent and eternal. Finally, art allows us to participate in spiritual values, mainly through aesthetic experiences, opening us up to the tripartite structure of the manifesting God, who always manifests himself as the fullness and perfection of the beautiful pulchrum (aesthetic value), the good bonum (ethical-moral value) and the true verum (cognitive value)”¹⁰.

The metaphysical and theological value of art is today forgotten or even rejected. This is due to the progressive secularisation of society and the rejection of religious beliefs. However, a new spirituality is emerging that also has its beliefs, that is, assumptions taken on faith, without thinking about who articulated them and how they relate to the truth about things. Therefore, the artist has the right to ask about the sense of reality and its deeper meaning. Above all, he must show the motives for a life of hope which give man the strength and conviction to take up creatively the challenge of transforming the world in order to make it more human. There is a danger today that, in the technocratic mentality of modern man, the concept of gratuitousness and the capacity to delight in reality can be lost. This leads to an inability to rejoice in what is and a tendency to process everything technologically according to man’s fashion and expectations.

The technocratic world degrades man to a small speck in the vast machinery of the world and reduces his existence to a meaningless episode in the history of the world. As Nicolas Diat wrote: “In classical anthropology, man was the pinnacle of the animal world. For fifty years, he has become the lowest rung of a world dominated by technological idols. We are reduced to the role of a weak link in a system that we have voluntarily created.”¹¹

2. MY EXPERIENCE WITH ART

My first strong impression of an encounter with art was in Florence, where I attended a language school in 1990. As the school programme included a visit to

¹⁰ Wiesław Block, “Wstęp” [Introduction], in *Zanurzony w pięknie. Efreń z Kcyni (1894–1970), kapucyn. Stanisław Klawitter. Materiały z międzynarodowego sympozjum zorganizowanego w 50. rocznicę śmierci artysty* [Immersed in Beauty: Efreń of Kcynia (1894–1970), Capuchin. Stanisław Klawitter. Materials from the international symposium organized on the 50th anniversary of the artist’s death], ed. Wiesław Block (Kalwaria Zebrzydowska: Calvarianum, 2020), 8.

¹¹ Nicolas Diat, *Czas umierania. Ostatnie dni życia mnichów* [Fr. orig.: *Un temps pour mourir. Derniers jours de la vie des moines*; A time to die. Last days of the life of the monks], trans. Agnieszka Kuryś (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sióstr Loretanek, 2021), 59.

the museums of Florence, I was able to see the masterpieces of art collected in this city. It was then that I learned about the Stendhal Syndrome, which means that, when confronted with great art, an unprepared person can become so dazed that there are cases of fainting. This is confirmed by the special benches placed in the Galleria dell'Accademia, where the statue of David by Michelangelo is located. During my visit to the Galleria degli Uffizi, located in Piazza della Signoria, after two hours of sightseeing I had to run out of the museum to avoid fainting from the excess of impressions. Passing from one room to another, where the works of the most eminent masters were exhibited one after another, I felt moved and admired, which opened me to beauty and made me aware of the fragility of human existence in the face of the harmony of beauty and goodness contained in the artefacts gathered. I remember the experience of being involved in the relay of history when, walking through the very long corridors of the museum, I could admire sculptures from ancient Greece and Rome. A sense of connection with that civilization was born in me, as well as an appreciation for the products of a noble culture left for posterity.

I had a slightly different impression when visiting the Louvre museum. The masterpieces gathered there are placed in rooms where there is not such a crowd of paintings and sculptures. The rather sparse arrangement of the individual works of art in separate rooms is conducive to greater concentration and does not overwhelm the enormity of the wealth of works of art on display. With its solemnity and atmosphere, the interior of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris made me think of the great heritage we are given to enter through the artistic works recorded in stone, stained glass and paintings.

Among my experiences of receiving artistic works, I would also like to mention a visit to the National Gallery in London, where I was able to admire the wealth of the collected works of European painting. I was particularly impressed by the works of the Impressionists, in which I perceived a different view of reality, where slightly blurred colours transport the viewer to another dimension and show a space beyond visible shapes. A visit to the British Museum in London, on the other hand, left me with a certain disgust due to the awareness of the plundering that the English have done by bringing back to London works that had been stolen from their rightful owners. The mummies, paintings and sculptures housed in this museum are an expression of English pride and greed rather than a commitment to beauty and love of cultural works. Where evil and violence are visible, beauty fades and becomes as if overwhelmed. For beauty is delicate and not as noisy as evil and ugliness.

I have yet another memory of visiting Antwerp Cathedral, where the most beautiful creations of painting by Flemish masters were placed on every pillar

of this monumental church. Again, it turns out that the reception of art must be correlated with the overall vision of the space in which they are placed. For I was aware that this beautiful temple today serves more as a museum than a church where the Eucharist is usually celebrated and people could meet with God. When I saw tourists passing by these paintings, having no idea what the painters, inspired by the thought of the Gospel and the experience of faith of the Church, wanted to tell them, I had the impression that they were not able to fully read the message of this art.¹²

This thinking was further reinforced when my guide led me to a restaurant next to the cathedral, where the decor of the walls was the church furnishings discarded from churches in the form of paintings, sculptures and other artefacts. On the door of the toilet indicating its purpose for different sexes was an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The desecration was probably not due to ill will, but to a total loss of a sense of the sacred, which no longer says anything to modern man devoid of religious sense and supernatural faith. Sadness and a sense of loss accompanied me when I saw the painting Adoration of the Mystical Lamb by Jan van Eyck and Hubert van Eyck in Ghent, where the deserted temple had become a sad relic of bygone times.

I have had the opportunity to speak on art many times when asked to do so during the preparation of designs for certain works. Because I know too little about it, I restrained my statements to general statements. I believe, however, that art should inspire harmony and beauty, which refers to the sublime world of values for which it is worth giving one's life. Beauty can help to save the world.

REFERENCES

- Block, Wiesław. „Wstęp” [Introduction]. In *Zanurzony w pięknie. Efrem z Kcyni (1894-1970), kapucyn. Stanisław Klawitter. Materiały z międzynarodowego sympozjum zorganizowanego w 50. rocznicę śmierci artysty* [Immersed in Beauty. Efrem of Kcynia (1894-1970), Capuchin. Stanisław Klawitter. Materials from the international symposium organized on the 50th anniversary of the artist's death], edited by Wiesław Block. Kalwaria Zebrzydowska: Calvarianum, 2020.
- Diat, Nicolas. *Czas umierania. Ostatnie dni życia mnichów* [Fr. orig.: *Un temps pour mourir. Derniers jours de la vie des moines*; A time to die. Last days of the life of the monks]. Translated by Agnieszka Kuryś. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sióstr Loretanek, 2021.

¹² Cfr. Rafaela Rapacz and Wiesław Block. *Duchowość malowana pędzlem. Tablica święteczna świętego Franciszka z Asyżu z kaplicy Bardich florenckiego kościoła Świętego Krzyża* [Spirituality painted with a brush: Solemn plaque of Saint Francis of Assisi from the Bardi Chapel of the Florentine Church of the Holy Cross] (Kraków: Instytut Studiów Franciszkańskich, 2021), 15.

- John Paul II. *Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists*. Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999; Holy See, accessed November 21, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23_041999_artists.html.
- Kostecki, Dawid. „Prawda a Dobro, Dobro i Piękno [Truth and Good, Good and Beauty].” *Civitas Christiana* nr 1 (88), 2022: 30–32.
- Pawlina, Krzysztof. *Podarował Mi Ktoś Okulary* [Someone gave me glasses]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sióstr Loretanek, 2022.
- Rapacz, Rafaela, and Wiesław Block. *Duchowość malowana pędzlem. Tablica święteczna świętego Franciszka z Asyżu z kaplicy Bardich florenckiego kościoła Świętego Krzyża* [Spirituality painted with a brush: Solemn plaque of Saint Francis of Assisi from the Bardi Chapel of the Florentine Church of the Holy Cross]. Kraków: Instytut Studiów Franciszkańskich, 2021.
- Rodziński, Stanisław. *Autoportret malarza* [Painter's self-portrait]. Kraków: Petrus, 2012.