

Aesthetics Vision Statement

Definitions

- Aesthetics: standards of taste (“sensory values”); the perception of beauty in all its forms
- Beauty: an assemblage of graces or properties evoking a sense of attraction, affection, and/or pleasure
- Art: any creative human labor
- Decorative arts: the application of aesthetics to everyday life; art that is intended to enrich the environment of ordinary human life; “background art”
- Fine arts: works made for their aesthetic meaning alone; works wherein aesthetics and meaning are expressed in their most intense and purposeful way; works that call attention to themselves, and merit close attention

All beauty – like all truth and all goodness – has its origin and its ground in the triune God, the Source of all things. And as with truth and goodness, there are objective standards for beauty rooted in the very nature of God and in His works. While the Scriptures do not spell these out as explicitly as the others, standards of beauty can be apprehended by we who have been made in the image of God, who have been made to know Him and to reflect Him. And so at Mars Hill Academy our goal is to cultivate an appreciation for the aesthetic dimension of all of life. With that, we aim to bring about an increasingly mature understanding of beauty, and a conscious pursuit of artistry in all our endeavors.

The word art typically conjures up images of paintings hanging in a museum or studio, or music performed at a piano recital or symphony. These are more properly referred to as the “fine arts,” as they have an exclusively aesthetic focus and are highly refined. Certain painting, sculpture, poetry, literature, drama, and music is produced in a more self-conscious, intensive fashion and calls for closer scrutiny than other forms of artistry. The best of it rewards such examination handsomely.

- *The students’ work in the fine arts should be not merely entertaining, attractive, or engaging, (though it should include at least one of those features). And it ought not be work of the most common sort (even while taking into consideration students’ ages and experience). Rather, students should be learning essential elements and skills, practicing them, and striving to create a refined, well-crafted work.*
- *Students should also be challenged to think more deeply about presuppositions and implications related to that genre, to the given subject matter, or to their own particular work.*

But we should not limit our idea of art to these kinds of works. “Art” has long referred to any work wherein people shape materials or their environment in such a way as to reflect the creativity that, of all God’s creatures, is uniquely characteristic of man. A carpenter crafting an elegant staircase, or a teacher designing an effective lesson, or a project manager shaping an efficient and productive team – each in his own way exercises artistry in his work.

- *We should view our callings as students and as teachers as opportunities to exercise skill, craftsmanship, and creativity in our labors.*
- *We should help instill in students the desire to bring such skill and creativity to anything they put their hands to, whether devising a science project, or crafting an essay, or working on something outside the scope of their formal education.*

In still another sense, art can refer to bringing beauty to what would otherwise be strictly functional or plain. A yellow ribbon to tie up a ponytail, the gracious wording of a dinner invitation, a set of fine china, a piece of embroidery – each of these are opportunities for expressing ourselves, for projecting ourselves

into the spaces where we live and enhancing them. The clothes we wear, the paint on our walls, the arrangement of our furnishings, the pictures on the refrigerator, the flowers along our sidewalk, the instruments or CD's we play for our own enjoyment – these so-called decorative arts apply aesthetics to everyday life. Insofar as they fit with their surroundings and usage, they adorn their environment, thereby enriching our lives. Though typically simpler in expression than the fine arts, and less noticeable as well, they are far more pervasive. Thus, taken as a whole, they express more powerfully our aesthetics as well as the worldview underlying them.

- *Standards of school dress for faculty and students alike should be attractive, adorning the men as men and the women as women. They should also be conducive to an environment promoting serious-minded learning and Christian character. Attire for extra-curricular activities should be functional and modest, while special event dress should enhance the evening's activity and highlight its specialness without calling undue attention to itself.*
- *The school building and grounds should be kept clean, neat, and well-ordered.*
- *The hallways, offices and classrooms should reflect neither a drab or sterile institutional environment, nor a gaudy or tritely casual one. Rather the décor should convey a warmth and a humanness consistent with who we are before God and with one another. The classrooms in particular should feature touches of beauty that enhance their surroundings without detracting from the learning.*
- *Special events such as the Christmas Program, Fine Arts Night, and Commencement should be adorned with appropriate decorations, music fitting to the "high joy and solemnity" of the occasion, and speech that likewise elevates and ennobles the proceedings.*

(It is worth noting that our attraction to certain decorative art is often sentimental in nature – the old slouch hat passed down from your grandfather, or the "Old Skipper" figurine you bought while on vacation four summers ago, or the theme song from *Rocky* that was pumping through the gym the night your basketball team won the state championship. Though possessing strong personal associations, such art and décor can still be measured against objective standards.)

So how can we discern standards for beauty in the nature of God and His works? First, the God of the Scriptures is revealed, not "simply" as one, nor as multiple gods existing in close proximity and working in close cooperation. Rather He is revealed to be the one God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whom unity and diversity ("the one and the many") inextricably cohere. Along with this coherence, we see in the three-in-one God of Scripture a basis for our conception of harmony (the love of the Father for the Son, the submission of the Son to the Father), complementariness (the Father purposing, the Son working, the Spirit applying), stability (God's unchangeableness), and dynamism (the ongoing relationship among the Persons of the Godhead, as well as His creative and ongoing work with regard to His creation). All of these provide objective standards for assessing beauty.

The created order too, which proclaims His glory and shows forth His handiwork, provides us a ground for aesthetic judgment. The universe and all it contains is characterized by design and order (though the latter by no means implies "all straight lines and right angles"). It is characterized as well by simultaneous expressions of unity and diversity (at its very most basic, in the infinitely diverse molecular arrangements of all matter), and by the coinciding of form and function (for example, the beauty and efficiency of an eagle's wing). We also see all manner of color, of space, of texture, of sound, utilized to an extent that provides a limitless source of inspiration to our own creative imaginations.

- *Objects or themes drawn from the material world (mountains, birds, flowers, sunsets, etc.) are worthy subjects for our visual arts, poetry, and music. So are those drawn from man as uniquely*

man – his emotions, thoughts, experiences, and imagination (drama, also, being a vehicle for communicating these).

- *Appropriate standards for rendering aesthetic judgments include a balance of complexity and simplicity; harmony of form and content or of form and function; connectivity with other works or styles that have stood the test of time; creativity; use of subtlety, symbol, or metaphor; ability to stir sentiment without resorting to sentimentality; fittingness of the medium and the message; ability to adorn or enhance its surroundings; and conformity to biblical standards of truth and goodness.*

We ourselves are part of that created order – in fact, the highest part (“just a little lower than the angels”). Having been made in God’s image, we are “sub-creators,” made to make things, to make them like He did, and to make them to His glory. Like Adam, we were made to observe and describe, to order and arrange, to work with things in order to craft new things that had existed only potentially and in the mind of the Maker. We are, in this sense, all artists serving under the Master Artist.

However, the reality and totality of the Fall cannot be overlooked. In its broadest terms, the entire creation was “subjected to the bondage of decay.” With regard to man in particular, it has affected not only his knowledge and will, but his aesthetic sensibilities, his artistry. His affections and perceptions are often distorted, drawing him to what is false, evil, or ugly rather than to what is true, good, and beautiful. Or he is drawn to works of beauty, or produces works of beauty, but uses them to serve idols, or makes the very works themselves idols – in either case worshiping created things (whether the sun, trees, or Mother Earth, or his own talents and handiwork) rather than the Creator. Merely outward beauty cannot be a substitute for the genuine beauty that adorns truth and goodness – “the beauty of holiness.”

Likewise man’s desire for autonomy, for self-rule, results in relativism in aesthetics just as it does in epistemology (no objective standard for determining truth) and in ethics (no objective standard for determining the good). Beauty and “good art” are conceived of as merely subjective, with no set standard by which to judge them. For all practical purposes the ultimate standard becomes “what I think.” Conversely, the professional artist’s taste and craftsmanship are conceived to be above questioning – “That’s just *your* opinion!” – a popular stance concerning the aesthetics of both torn jeans and randomly-applied paint splashes.

- *We need to affirm the antithesis between biblical aesthetics (rooted in the doctrines of God and creation) and the aesthetics of unbelief.*
- *We must recognize how that unbelief necessarily evidences itself in the fragmentation and ultimate purposelessness of its art, and in its departures from truth, goodness, and beauty in its aesthetics.*

At the same time, unbelievers are still image-bearers of God (however distorted the image), and they still wield the gifts and talents that He has given them. And it is still God’s world they live in, and interact with, and draw inspiration from. And it is still His laws, including those pertaining to aesthetics, to which they’re subject. And so, like Jubal and Tubal-Cain, they are still able to conceive and produce works that are beautiful in form, insofar as they reflect the beauty inherent in the created order; and they are able to have penetrating insight into the human experience, however limited in scope and however rooted, ultimately, in error.

- *We should recognize and appreciate the elements of beauty in the works of unbelievers, and how their insights or perspectives may spur us towards greater understanding (an understanding always grounded in God’s Word, and corrected or completed by that same Word).*

As significant as the Fall is for our understanding of aesthetics, it isn't the last word. Redemption is. And as with the Fall, the reality and totality of our redemption in Christ should not be shortchanged. As critical as it is that we are saved from our sin and guilt, redemption is more than that; it is being completely re-oriented away from self and back to our Maker, to His glory, to being who He re-made us to be – servants of the Lord Christ. As such we are apprentices, as it were, of the Logos-made-flesh, the one through whom the world and all its wonders was made, and who immersed himself in that world when he became what we are, and who is even now asserting his lordship over all things.

So our existence is an “already/not yet” one. We live in the “already” of a redemption accomplished and applied. Christ's work of atonement and resurrection is done, and by God's Word and Spirit this is bringing about life-giving change in us. At the same time we experience the “not yet” of a redemption not yet fully realized. We continue to live in a fallen world, with fallen men still in rebellion against God and His laws, with regenerate men (including ourselves) still subject to ignorance and sin, and with judgment still a reality, both in the present and at the final day.

However, the last word is, again, the “already.” What gives a purposefulness, an ultimate significance to all we do, including our seemingly most mundane artistic endeavors, is our sure hope of working towards an outcome guaranteed by the work of Christ – the restoration of all things.

- *Our fine arts should include acknowledgements or portrayals of the fallenness of this world, and of the reality of sin and its consequences, rather than fabricating a sanitized or saccharine-sweet world of our own making.*
- *All of our artistry should testify to the work of Christ re-making us from within, and should reflect our embrace of the lordship of Christ in every area of our school life.*
- *All of our artistry should particularly reflect our sure hope in the final restoration of all things.*

Our confidence must always be tempered by humility. The humility, first of all, of submitting our likes and dislikes to the standards of God's Word, as with everything else. The humility of looking to the testimony of the ages for guidance in making our aesthetic judgments. And, finally, the humility of affirming our own limitations as finite creatures, whose vision of the beautiful is necessarily incomplete. Ultimately our confidence rests not in ourselves, but in entrusting ourselves and our work to the God whose knowledge of the beautiful is (like His knowledge of the true and the good) exhaustive and perfect.

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