

Art and Service

Larry Hostetter and David Stratton

Does encountering art make one a better person? This question emerged from our ongoing conversation about the relationship between art and ethics.¹ The word «better,» however, is not without its troubles, so using the less problematic language of traditional Western ethics we have rephrased the question, Does art contribute to human flourishing? Generally, most would say yes. That is why we include art in our educational curriculums, we build museums, and we use it to decorate our homes. So, if we come away from art somehow different, in a positive sense, then it seems clear that art has a service function for individuals and for society. John Paul II made this point in his 1999 letter to artists in which he wrote: «Within the vast cultural panorama of each nation, artists have their unique place. Obedient to their inspiration in creating works both worthwhile and beautiful, they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favor of the common good» (para. 4). This paper will explore that service. Hopefully by describing how art functions as a service, we will also contribute to the formulation of a definition of art, something that philosophers have struggled to do without much consensus.

While we will touch upon the question of whether the content of a given artwork is morally good or bad, that will not be our primary focus. Although that is the usual question that emerges when discussing the relationship between art and ethics, we want to take a different tack. We are more interested in how art contributes to the realization of human potential - the goal of teleological ethics. We hope to show that all art, no matter the content, is capable of this end.

THREE CATEGORIES OF ART

For the purposes of this paper we have divided artworks into three categories: those works that have an explicit social or ethical message, those that carry such a message implicitly, and those that might be described as message neutral.²

ART WITH AN EXPLICIT MESSAGE



Julie O'Rourke

In this first category we have works in which the intention of the artist and the content of the work are directed to increased awareness and changing hearts and minds; there is an explicit message. The woodcuts of Fritz Eichenberg are good examples of this category.³ Eichenberg who began to provide illustrations for the Catholic Worker newspaper in 1949 was a Quaker who had expressed a desire to become «an artist with a message» after witnessing the destruction of World War I (Hammond, 2000, para. 2). His works include *Jesus of the Breadlines* (1953) in which a silhouetted Christ patiently waits with others for a charitable handout. The viewer comes away with the message that poverty is dehumanizing, but also that Jesus Christ stands with the poor in a radical way. This and other images, as well as Eichenberg's stated intentions, highlight the vision of humanity and justice that he wanted to communicate with his art.

Kathe Kollwitz is also very clear in her desire to raise awareness through her art. Born in East Prussia in 1867, Kollwitz developed a keen social consciousness while living with her physician husband in a poorer section of Berlin. Her concern for justice was strengthened after losing a son in World War I. After becoming the first woman elected to the Prussian Academy in 1919, she was forced to resign in 1933 and forbidden to exhibit by the Nazis (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2003). In her 1907 work, *Battlefield*, with the use of dark tones and expressive gestural marks, Kollwitz is able to communicate the despair and loneliness of a survivor scavenging or searching a battlefield for valuables or a loved one. She was also very interested in worker's rights and used her art to document the conditions and struggles faced by labor, especially in her series on the Silesian weaver's revolt of 1844 (See, Nagel, 1971, pp. 25-30). Like Eichenberg, Kollwitz had a message and she used her work in a very direct way to communicate her critique of the social conditions of 19th and 20th century Germany. Other artists in this category would include Francisco Goya, Honore Daumier, William Hogarth and Ben Shawn.

One particular example worth noting was recently on exhibit at the High Museum in Atlanta. The show was mainly about the French artists from the second half of the 19th century who were inspired by the transformation of Paris at that same time. The French government decided to modernize the city and in doing so they tore down much of medieval Paris with its meandering alleys and unorganized older buildings. In place they rebuilt a city that was to reflect the modern age. Grand and straight streets, new imperial style apartment buildings, train stations and of course the Eiffel Tower. Most of the works in this exhibit focused on the positive changes this rebuilding brought about. There was, however, a room that featured works from the dark side of the renovation. Since many buildings were torn down and replaced with expensive apartments, there was an increase of homelessness: vagrancy as

it was then called. The way of dealing with this problem was by making the homeless criminals and jailing them. Artist Alfred Stevens was outraged when he witnessed the arrest of a homeless woman with her two children in Vincennes on the outskirts of Paris. He decided to paint the scene to help raise awareness of this problem. In this 1855 painting, a young woman and her children are being led away by four armed guards, one of them casting a warning glance at another well-to-do woman who is trying to offer some assistance. Even in the very romantic style of this work, that does quite a bit to cover the dehumanization of poverty, the message is clear: there ought to be a better way to deal with homelessness than locking people up. The title of this work also points to its intent: *What is Vagrancy*.

The story that follows is an example of how good intentions can lead to unforeseen consequences. The outrage that the artist hoped to provoke in fact occurred. The king of France at the time was apparently so outraged that he ordered all future homeless to be carted away in a closed carriage rather than out in the open (Rosenblum, 1989, p. 130). So, despite the good intention and visual message, the reaction to the work actually made things worse by hiding an unjust policy from those who might have been offended by it.

Subcategory: offensive art.

This raises the question of offensive art, a subcategory of the first. Clearly many of the middle and upper classes of Paris were offended by Steven's painting. The same is true of the work by Edgar Degas *L'Ahsinthe* (1876). It too provoked a storm of outrage. A young woman is clearly influenced by a very potent and addictive drink. She is seated in a way that no respected lady of the time would have presented herself, she is slouched and the viewer's eye is drawn to the wonderful detail of a turned over foot. For a group of people who prided themselves on their political, economic and technological accomplishments this view of someone on the fringes of society was not appreciated (See, Dunlop, 1979, pp. 159, 162-163).

Another example is Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's painting *Woman at Her Toilet* (1896). This world's typical of his unabashed depiction of dancers sold prostitutes in realistic and often private settings. Although eroticism was fashionable in 1890s France, Lautrec's works did not «prettify» or glamorize the sexual underworld of his day (Cooper, p. 47). Despite this realism, Lautrec gives this anonymous woman a dignity that would not be indicated by her posture or presumed occupation of prostitution. This painting too would have given offense, but also helped its viewers to see those marginalized by society with the dignity they deserve.

Much of the art that we consider provocative or even offensive had as its intention the conversion of hearts and minds, or at least the hope of raising awareness. In other words, it is art with an explicit message. This is also seen in more contemporary artists, three of which will be briefly examined: Sue Coe, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Chris Ofili.

Sue Coe is a contemporary illustrator whose work not only intends to provoke discussion about important social issues but also seemingly intends to offend her viewers. Her work has dealt with issues such as animal rights, the meat packing industry, prisons, AIDS, sweatshops, and war. Her messages are clear and

to the point. In *The Forgotten* (2000) she depicts the horrors and violence of the world's prisons in stark detail. Her work *Target Practice* (2000) is a two-paneled work. On one side a group of generals and politicians view a map with bombing targets. The other panel shows two children with the same targets printed on their clothing. An example of her more pointed work might include *Dr. Back Street Bush Develops a Case of Fetal Attraction* (1992). The work is an illustration of a woman dying in an alley with an ominous George Bush (the first) hovering over her with a clothes hanger. The work clearly means to say that if you allow this president to have his way, women will be dying in the streets from back alley abortions. The question this raises is how does this differ from propaganda style art that seeks to instill fear in the viewer. It seems that the excesses of rhetoric are a temptation for this art form. Honesty is an essential element of art if it is to be truly service, and perhaps most important for socially conscious art.

Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs have been universally recognized for their beauty and many are non-controversial. However, in the late seventies and early eighties he began to take photographs of the people that he was involved with including the homosexual community. His stated intention was to present the unexpected to the viewer and to shock them, thus perhaps sensitizing them to homosexual issues (The Mapplethorpe Foundation, 2001, para. 2). The shock value of these photographs was demonstrated in 1990 at an exhibition in Cincinnati of Mapplethorpe's photographs depicting explicit homosexual and sadomasochistic behavior. Although later in life he stated that he would no longer make work that explicit, in his youth he saw it as an opportunity to show the world the culture and lifestyle of a certain segment of society. The intent was awareness raising but with a force that most people found unbearable (See Cembalest, 1990). Is this awareness raising different from that practiced by Lautrec or even Stevens? That question deserves further exploration.

Chris Ofili is probably the most recent of the controversialists whose work *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) was shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art to a great uproar from some of the public including Rudi Giuliani who called it «sick stuff» («Sensation Sparks,» 1999, para. 1). Many Catholics took offense because the work was created in part with elephant dung. The fact that Ofili is a Roman Catholic who was trying to engage the viewer by juxtapositioning incongruous elements was often overlooked during the controversy. So, in the *Holy Virgin Mary* we have a collage of small pornographic cutouts of women's buttocks and genitals. This proximity of *Mary* with one of the largest commercial enterprises (pornography) was deliberate on the part of Ofili. The *Virgin Mary* is also presented as a black woman whose right breast is exposed, represented in the work as a ball of elephant dung. It should be noted that Ofili regularly includes elephant dung in his work-it serves as a counterpoint to his very decorative elements. As one writer comment, as a young black male steeped in contemporary culture, he found it perfectly sensible to rework *Mary* as a black woman and to place her in juxtaposition with the contemporary discourse of pornography (MacRitchie, 2000, p. 97). It is precisely in this juxtaposition that Ofili may be offering his service as an artist: by challenging our presumptions and attitudes toward women, as either the whore or the virgin, our attitudes to race, and indeed our attitudes to nature. Not dissimilar from Caravaggio when he offended his viewers by juxtapositioning the purity of the *Virgin Mary* with the poverty and dirty feet of peasant pilgrims in his work *Madonna di Loreto* (1605).

ART WITH AN IMPLICIT MESSAGE

The second category includes those artists whose works carry an implicit ethical message. That is, their work has neither the representation-al elements nor the symbolism that characterize the work from the previous category. There is, so to speak, no explicit ethical message in the work. There is

however, a stated intention on the part of the artist to have a positive impact on the viewer. Agnes Martin, a contemporary painter, provides an excellent example of this type of art. Her works are very minimalist but convey a sense of power. Clearly abstract, her images are typified by grids of simple lines with no obvious message.

Nevertheless, Martin's work is ethically significant with an implicit message. The message, however, is not about social change but about the personal transformation that occurs when someone views her work. Thus in Martin's own articulation of the artist's role she can reject any artistic responsibility for creating a better world, while also affirming the transforming power of art. Her stated intention is that she wants people to experience perfection, beauty and happiness (See, Martin, 1991, pp. 137, 153-156). In a 1998 interview she stated that «The value of art is in the observer. When you find out what you like, you're really finding out about yourself. ... People who look at my painting say that it makes them happy,⁴ like the feeling of waking up in the morning. And happiness is the goal, isn't it» (Cotter, para. 15). Martin's writings are filled with examples in which she expresses an intention to have a positive impact on the lives of her viewers through her art. She writes, «Art work is a celebration of reality of the positive. In art work we represent our own happiness because of our awareness of the infinite sublimity of reality» (Martin, 1991, p. 113). Martin wants us to have our own positive experience of beauty and happiness through the experience of viewing art that represents the happiness of the artist. «Beauty» she writes in another essay, «is the mystery of life (p. 153).»

Another example is nineteenth century American painter, George Inness, whose atmospheric landscapes are charged not only with the talent of the artist but also his own philosophical and religious convictions. Already an established artist, Inness became a Swedenborgian after 1860 and his works reflect his new found beliefs. Central to Swedenborgianism was the belief that the spiritual is identical with the natural world, specifically that God was present in all living beings, revealed to those who were in tune with that reality (Riggio, nd. para. 3). Inness held that because artistic emotions were of divine origin, artists are particularly sensitive to the spiritual essence of nature. According to art historian Marriann Smith, Inness further believed that the artist had the purpose of conveying the experience of spiritual reality through the artistic media. «The purpose of the painter,» he wrote, «is simply to reproduce in other minds the impression which a scene has made upon him. A work of art does not appeal to the intellect. It does not appeal to the moral sense. Its aim is to instruct, not to edify, but to awaken an emotion» (Smith, nd. para. 1). The instruction here is about the true nature of reality, so that the viewer might better understand his or her place in the universe.

Smith in her commentary on Inness' work *The Coming Storm* (1878) demonstrates how his beliefs impacted his art. She points to the fact that in this work, human reality and nature coexist as equals, living in harmony. There is no dominance by one over the other. The storm is depicted as violent, yet Smith notes that the farmer continues to work the field and the cattle graze unfazed. The overall impression of the painting is one of balance between the various forces of nature and human presence. The work is filled with the fecundity of rural life: the farmland, a stump and sapling next to each other, the coming rain which will drench the land and enable it to bring forth new life (Smith, para. 2).

Despite the fact that Inness was explicit in his intent of communicating spiritual reality, the actual message is only implicit in the work. This due to Inness's understanding of how the spiritual is recognized and received, precisely through the interplay of the traditional elements of art: color, space, and light and dark contrasts (Riggio, para. 5). Inness was not trying to hide the spiritual in nature, but was trying to show how nature and spiritual were truly the same. He wanted to communicate it in the same way that he had received it, so to have a very explicit depiction of the mystical or spiritual would be the integrity of the experience. Yet, he couldn't paint nature in a completely realistic way, to viewer would miss the point. That seems to be Inness's genius; he was able to paint the spiritual/natural world with great subtlety and nuance thus showing their inseparability and ultimate sameness. Even without knowing Inness's intent the viewer comes away with a more profound sense of the true essence of reality, but once this interpretive key to his work is known, his explicit desire to communicate spiritual reality becomes clear.

MESSAGE NEUTRAL ART

The artists of the third category are those who have no specific intention of communicating an ethical message to their viewers, and the works themselves seem to have no ethical content.⁵ One example of this type is American artist Jasper Johns, who is known as the bridge between abstract expressionism and pop art, conceptual art and minimalism. Johns is most known for his paintings of targets, American flags and maps. So often in the history of art, artists have attempted to create a three-dimensional perspective on a two dimensional surface. Critics have pointed to the philosophical character of Johns' work which consists of symbolically charged two dimensional images on a two dimensional surface, raising questions about the meaning of our symbols and their effect upon us. Despite what critics call the rhetorical quality of Johns' work, the artist himself says very little about what he wants to communicate. Robert Berson (2004) writes about Johns' piece *Target with Four Faces (1955)*, «The piece seems resonant with meaning but tells very little (p. 589).» Most of what Johns talks about in regard to his own work is the process of making the work (See, Andrae, 1998, para. 2). So, other than experimenting with unusual material and processes, Johns has no stated interest in the ethical effect the artwork has on the viewer. Perhaps as a response to abstract expressionism, Johns seems to want nothing to do with emotions, whether his own or that of the viewer. He wants to show what the mind already knows (Berson, 2004, pp. 587-588). We have included Johns in this category because of this silence regarding any ethical content in his intention or work, while recognizing that neutrality may be elusive as a description for his art.

Another, who more clearly exemplifies this category, is Giorgio Morandi, an Italian artist who simply wished to paint or draw his observations of the world around him. He was fascinated with the relationships that objects had with one another, and so still life was his favorite motif (Morandi Museum, nd.). Morandi simply took bottles, jars and other objects in his studio, arranging them in different ways. The arrangements often produced interesting patterns and restructuring of visual space, precisely because of the color, shape and position of the various objects used. The intent was to provide a visual experience with no other context. Commenting on this, Morandi said: «What interests me the most is expressing what is in nature, in the visible world that is» (1957). Morandi simply wanted to communicate the images and feelings that the visible world aroused in him.

THE SERVICE FUNCTION OF ART

Having explored the various ways that an ethical message is present or not present in art, it is evident that the ethical impact of works of art goes much deeper than just teaching us about what is right or wrong. Teaching or promoting a message can, of course, promote human flourishing. But as the second and third categories indicate, the ethical significance of art is much more than simply identifying and correcting moral problems. We contend that all art has ethical significance no matter to which category it might belong, whether there is an explicit or implicit ethical message or indeed no message at all. This significance transcends the ability of art to teach or communicate a moral message; it is about our deepest selves and art's ability to enter that personal realm. As such, we posit that art has a service function that goes beyond the intention of the artist and beyond the content of any given work inasmuch as we come away transformed when encountering a work of art. This transformation contributes to our flourishing as human beings and affects us more profoundly than simply understanding the ethical message of a work of art or the ethical intent of its creator. Since our reflections on this idea emerged from a discussion on the vocation of artists, this is where the explanation of what we mean will begin.

VOCATION AND ART

Vocation begins with an inner dialogue. For religious people that dialogue is between God and the individual. For others it might be seen as a dialogue with oneself and one's hopes and desires, or it might be a conversation with oneself and with God. In any case, there is a call to something, as the word vocation itself would indicate. We believe that the call is ultimately about becoming complete as a human being, which for many is experienced as a yearning for communion, a desire for connection and mutuality.⁶ A call demands a response of some kind. One way that the artist responds (as artist) to the inner call to completeness is by creating, making art. In this way the artist's call is externalized, and anyone who views his/her work is experiencing not only the created result of the call, but also something of the original experience that led to its creation. Artwork can thus be an icon of the transcendent origins of the artist's vocation and also a conduit to the answer for the underlying quest for communion and mutuality. If the artwork is a response to our God given drive for oneness then that work itself can affirm the possibility of that communion.

What we experience therefore when we are viewing art is not just the result of a creative process but a link to the artist's own inner life, thus providing an insight into the viewer's own interiority. We believe that this is what the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer in his work on aesthetics and hermeneutics was referring to when he wrote: «[The work of art] possesses a mysterious intimacy that grips our entire being, as if there were no distance at all [between minds] and every encounter with it were an encounter with ourselves» (Gadamer, 1964, p. 95).

In this essay, Gadamer notes that aesthetics provides a unique challenge to hermeneutics observing that art seems to fall outside of its province, hermeneutics being defined as the «bridging of personal and historical distance between minds» (p. 100). As already stated, art is unique because it speaks to us directly, seemingly without the need for hermeneutical intervention. For his reason, Gadamer states that art is not limited in meaning to its historical origins. It has always its own present, and the historical beginnings of a work of art have only limited force (p. 95). Thus, the task of herme-

neutics for art is not necessarily to connect with the historical origins, instead it has the task of understanding the meaning of art making it clear to ourselves and to others. Thus Gadamer can write that «The intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar. It is not only the `This art thou!?' disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us; «Thou must alter thy life!» (p. 104).

From Gadamer's point of view, art has this significance and impact whether intended by the artist or not. This impact, we maintain, is a result of the human yearning for communion and mutuality. The reason why we build museums, fund art programs (although always in danger), and encourage people to study art is because of this power that art has over our lives. The artist, responding to the inner voice calling to completeness and communion, produces work that has the potential of providing the experience of mutuality when received by a viewer open to the transformative power of the work. The result is not only a connection of the viewer with the artist (and other viewers) but also with the vocational origins of the work yielding to communion with both the human and the divine.

Implications. Immoral Art?

This way of looking at the ethical significance of art would also explain how some art can obscure this transcendent reality when the artist uses subject matter that is so shocking or objectionable that it overshadows the vocational origins of the work. For example, Mapplethorpe's photographs have been called exquisite by art critics, even those works with explicit sexual imagery (see Kidd, 2003). Fellow artists or those in the artworld might readily recognize this of Mapplethorpe's work, but for most people the subject matter is so shocking that the work fails, or at least is hindered in providing this encounter with the mysterious yet revelatory origins of the work. This might be what makes a particular of art immoral, when a secondary message is so loud that we cannot hear the divine whisper that inspired the original creative response from the artist. Another example would be the movie *Birth of a Nation* (1915) often heralded as a brilliant early experiment in cinematography, considered immoral by many because of its depiction of the Ku Klux Klan. Those who maintain the autonomy of art would say that ethical content of a work has no bearing on its artistic merit. Others would say that aesthetic merit and ethical merit should be analyzed separately in a work of art. And still others would say that unethical content defaces the aesthetic character (see, Carroll, 2000, pp. 350-387). From our perspective, it would seem that the latter may be true; if a work so distracts us from the service function of art, then it has missed its mark and may indeed be unethical. This is also true for works of art that do not have objectionable or explicit imagery but are so sentimental or emotionally charged that they distract us from realizing the possibility of communion because the sentimentality tempts us to moral complacency. These last few thoughts on the ethical nature of a given piece of art, are however, very preliminary. As we noted at the beginning of this discussion, we did not intend to say much about this topic, there is still much to explore in this question.

For our purposes, we hope that we have shown that an does have a service function. This happens when artists create work that has an explicit moral message that seeks to change hearts and minds. It also happens when an artist has the explicit intention of having a positive impact on viewers but whose art does not have a discernible message. And, as we hope we have shown, the service function of art is also realized in art that is ostensibly message neutral, that just by viewing art no matter what type individuals (and thus society) come away transformed. Again the words of John Paul II: «There is there-

fore an ethic, even a `spirituality' of artistic service, which contributes in its way to the life and renewal of a people (1999, para. 4).»

NOTES:

1. The authors of this paper, David Stratton and Larry Hostetter, are respectively professors of art and theology. This presentation is part of a work in progress that is exploring the relationship between art and ethics.

2. With one exception, the works discussed are principally two-dimensional pictorial art. The categories are created solely for the purpose of discussing the service nature of art. As such, they should not be understood in a rigidly definitive way. The boundaries between categories are at times fluid, which allows some works to have characteristics of more than one category.

3. This paper was originally presented with images of the various examples mentioned. The reader, however, does not need to remain content with verbal descriptions of the images. Most are readily available for viewing through a simple internet search.

4. Here Martin is referring to her 1976 work Praise.

5. David Stratton, the artist of this collaborative presentation, places himself in this category. The following is the description he gives of his own work. «I am a landscape painter. My goal in painting landscapes is to take the vast complexity of a specific vista and to present it to the viewer as object. While there is some element of decision making for the viewer, especially in my multi-paneled work, it is not my intent to coerce a choice. The viewer is to have the same joy as my own in looking, looking again, and glancing back, every time seeing a different emphasis, space, or communication. It is the balancing of issues, details, and motives which provides this possibility.»

6. In the Catholic/Christian tradition vocation is first about being called to salvation through Jesus Christ (John Paul II, 1993, para. 1). Although experienced individually this call directs us to communion with God and with others. Vatican II affirmed this essential communitarian nature of vocation. «In his fatherly care for all of us, God desired that all should form one family and deal with each other in a spirit of brotherhood. All, in fact, are destined to the very same end, namely God himself, since they have been created in the likeness of God ... (Gaudium et Spes, para. 24).» The Catechism of the Catholic Church reflects this teaching: «All men are called to the same end: God himself. There is a certain resemblance between the unity of the divine persons and the fraternity that men are to establish among themselves in truth and love. Love of neighbor is inseparable from love of God (para. 1878).»

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Back to current electronic table of contents