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Art for art's sake?

Clare O'Driscoll reflects on unseen value in visible gifts

"It has to glorify God or edify others. It can't just be 'art for art's sake'!"

FELT A COLD CLUNK INSIDE. Having struggled with a lifelong tension between the free-flying desire to create and the guilty suspicion I should be 'more useful', I'd signed up for a Christian gifts course hoping for clarity and perhaps permission to nurture my arty side. Now I frowned at the screen, feeling selfish for my individualistic notions.

Perhaps I was overreacting. This was a course about using gifts for God. 1 Peter 4:10 says, "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another." I couldn't disagree. Yet nor could I shake the sad understanding that my creativeness only had value if it was beneficial to the church. Weren't they missing huge swathes of the richness and depth our God-given creativity brings? Of course, glorifying God and

helping others are worthy (if unquantifiable) goals, but they raise the bar pretty high for a fledgling artist. At face value, my amateur creations fall vastly short. Does that mean everything I love – textiles, scribbling, getting inky fingers – are 'art for art's sake'? And, wait, even if they are... is that so terrible? When the term 'art for art's sake' was coined in the nineteenth century (from the French *l'art pour l'art*), it wasn't negative, despite the implication here. It celebrated art's inherent value, concerned that it loses something when moulded around propaganda.

Maybe those who championed this went too far, demanding art's absolute purity from any cause, but their basic premise that art has intrinsic value shouldn't threaten us. Surely any such value was put there by God, provider of all good gifts?

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Creativity is at the heart of our faith; a name for God; a way of relating. Art can help us make sense of the world. Textile artist Kate André confirms this: "I understand God's message so much better when I process it pictorially." She speaks of responding creatively to the word of God, being revived and being the person God wants her to be when she creates.

As Christians we can feel everything should have some obvious benefit to God, the church or others. It feels frivolous to 'waste' time deepening our creativity when there's so much 'proper Christian work' to be done. But we are not Christian machines, pumping out only good works that glorify God and edify others, however important those ideals.

Author and spiritual director Helen Warwick, who has used art for her own growth and with others, says, "We need to do what makes



Art therapy, formal or informal, unlocks doors which were wedged shut: like the special school where art was a long-awaited breakthrough or the Brighton barista I overheard confessing he forgets everything, even meals, when painting. The beauty of art's vivid palette can make us gasp, restoring our life-trampled sense of wonder.

Through the messy work-in-progress, the self-doubt and questions, we learn to grapple with deeper issues. Making art into a Christian tick-list diminishes it, overlooking the joy, the healing and connection with God that is fostered through the creative process. All these come full circle and actually do glorify God.

us come alive, as that is what the world needs." Not only is it a valid use of time, but if we disregard creativity, we can feel centreless, living a poorer version of life. If ignored too long, the gentle whisper to create can crescendo into a frustrated scream.

Of course we should examine our motives, but those who wish to glorify God with their whole life will naturally do so with their art.

Having freedom to create, no strings attached, means artists will bless God and others because they're at peace with themselves and their world. Conversely, art which is forced to be Christian can feel contrived.

Francis Schaeffer's book *Art and the Bible* describes how in the Old Testament, God's blueprints for the tabernacle and temple included features which

were simply there for beauty, serving no practical or religious purpose. And while Rembrandt's contemporaries depicted religious scenes, he often painted humble workers, showing their dignity and value in God's eyes.

It is less about making 'Christian' art, more about being Christian as you make. Kate calls this "being creative in a godly way"; using her gift in every aspect of life. As well as art helping her know God's presence, she loves teaching, sharing her faith with others gently through creativity and seeing them grow. This echoes my own experiences of soul-restoring afternoons sharing with friends as we gouge linocuts or collage fabrics.

Artist and teacher Audrey Preuss Blessman agrees: "The very act of making art – creating – brings glory to God. He is the great creator and when we make things (be it a cake or an oil on canvas) we are demonstrating how we are made in God's image."

Demanding identifiable Christian benefits leaves the deeper value of art unseen. The gift is two-fold: something we use for God, but also something we receive, to enjoy, even to bask in the love of the Giver.

There is no glory-formula, only a desire to make, put into our hearts by God. We hope to reflect the beauty of God's creation, but even if we don't, something changes within us through creating.

As Kate says, "This is my witness... my glorifying God. I might sometimes make art for art's sake... but the back story is all for him!"

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