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The Left's Appropriation of Art

I would like to begin this essay with a story from my youth about aesthetics. The language of the descriptions is, of course, from my adult philosophical perspective, although it accurately expresses what my youthful mind conceived.

In mid-summer of 1964, I was almost 13 years old and had one of the most profoundly memorable experiences of my life. With my family and my aunt and uncle who were visiting from Minnesota we went to the Flushing Meadows, New York World's Fair. For me, the weeks before Fair day were filled with eager, practically bursting anticipation. We lived in Milford, Connecticut less than an hour's drive from New York City, and for months the New York TV stations were filled with reports on the fantastic expositions, wonderous sights to behold and incredible things to do at the Fair. This Fair has been hailed as one of the greatest World Fairs in history. It has become a landmark civilizational event about which many books and articles have been written, and films have been made, documentaries, dramas and intriguing sci-fi movies such as *Tomorrowland*.

The Fair did not even slightly disappoint me in any way. What I saw, learned, imagined, and felt, impacted and formed my character in many ways as I grew into a teenager who desired strongly to be a contributor to the world the Fair presented.

Upon first arriving at the Fair, I was taken by the “giant” Space Age Unisphere which stands to this day in Flushing Meadows. My reverie in gazing at that astounding globe was interrupted by my Mom’s call that the first place we would visit was the Vatican Pavilion. Through Mom’s leadership and Dad’s compliance we were a staunchly Catholic family. It was no wonder, then, that the Vatican Pavilion, which was the most visited Pavilion for the entire two-year duration of the Fair, 1964 – 1965, would be the first place on Mom’s agenda.¹ I knew that the Vatican Pavilion displayed Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. I had seen videos of it on the TV reports and was glad that now I would see it firsthand. I did not expect the deeply transformative experience I was about to have.

As we entered the *Pieta* Hall, we stepped onto a slowly moving conveyor walkway. In a few seconds, I beheld the *Pieta*. At first, I saw it from an angle on the side, but over the next few minutes my vision of it was more and more direct. I was transfixed. Behind a translucent plexiglass shield there it was. It was bathed in a glowing blue light. The ring of those blue lights at almost ceiling height appeared to be a halo gracing the tableau. A large cross draped with a cloak stood in the background of the statue. There was Mary cradling the expired body of her son, the Son of Man. The carved marble was so realistic. The drapery covering the body of Jesus looked like actual cloth with its contoured folds, flowing curves and deep recesses. The body forms of Jesus and Mary were so finely detailed that they seemed to be a high-definition photo of the beautiful, but tragic, scene. Mary’s face expressed the overwhelming sadness and devastation at the martyrdom of her son, but it also appeared to be wrapped in a graceful acceptance of Jesus’s death. Even the face and body of Jesus appeared as if He were in a peaceful slumber, and not the bloodied and battered victim of brutal torture and suffering, although His wounds were clearly visible.

¹ My recollections of the World’s Fair were somewhat influenced by a recently published book: Ruth Nelson, *Our Lady of the World’s Fair* (Ithaca, NY: Three Hills Pub, Cornell Univ. Press, 2024).

Then, after taking in all of these aspects of the tragedy and beauty of the scene, my perception was dramatically heightened. It came to me in a sort of flash that what I was seeing was the ultimate sacrifice that the Son of God made for our sins. This was the scene of Redemption foreshadowing His Resurrection: Jesus was the Way, the Truth and the Light for eternal salvation. Seeing the Pieta had opened my heart, mind and soul to the sacred destiny that He purchased for us.

After being so affected at the Vatican Pavilion, my time at the World's Fair was rather otherworldly. All of the other experiences I had were filtered through the sense that the great achievements of human ingenuity and multicultural harmony I saw were testimonies to the Divine order of creation. That humanity at its best is capable of envisioning and realizing the majestic and salvific power of God. This was the world to which I wanted to be a contributor.

Now, my philosophical reflection on the true nature of great art leads me to understand that the Pieta had engendered in me an anagogical experience of art. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*² (#115 – #117.3) teaches that there are two primary types of meaning conveyed by Sacred Scripture, the literal sense and the spiritual sense, with the spiritual being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical. The literal is the meaning expressed by the words of Scripture discovered by careful exegesis. The allegorical is the sense that all Scripture is a representation of Christ and all the events are related to Him. The moral sense instructs us to act righteously. And the anagogical leads us to understand the eternal significance of our ultimate destiny, the heavenly kingdom.

In my estimation, these spiritual senses of Scripture can be applied as an aesthetic framework for experiencing and interpreting art. The Pieta is obviously a work of religious art, although

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Liguori, MO, Liguori Publications, 1994).

this framework can be applied to non-religious art as well. In regard to my youthful experience of the Pieta, the moral and anagogical senses were certainly active. The moral sense was manifest in my perception that enduring suffering and pain can be a way of redemption from sin, a way of righteousness that is open to all who believe in Him. The anagogical sense was evident in my realization of the awesome metaphysical destiny that His Death and Resurrection purchases for me and all humanity.

The aesthetic framework based on the spiritual senses of Scripture can be summarily described as what great art can evoke in us through our experience of it. The allegorical is the recognition that the artwork has representations that have definite significant meaning beyond their appearance in the work. The moral is the righteous instruction the artwork conveys. Finally, the anagogical is the way the artwork leads to metaphysical contemplation and meditation on human nature, the design of creation and the order of being itself.

Of course, there are more traits of great art than what this framework covers. Mastery of form, color, techniques of the medium, as well as subject matter are just some of those traits. It must be stressed, however, that with all great art, it is the artwork itself which conveys its greatness. The aesthetic beauty and the artwork's meanings are, at least originally, objective in the work itself. The artwork can evoke the viewer's contemplation of, and meditation on, the moral and the anagogical senses which goes beyond the artwork itself, although the additional meaning is, again, originally in the artwork.

There are some well-known works of non-religious great art that exemplify the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses of the framework. For example, the famous Statue of Liberty which stands in New York Harbor is full of allegorical meanings. The statue, with its arm extended holding a torch up high, iconically represents so many of the "Lady Justice" statues which have a raised torch of justice, expressing the meaning of liberty and justice for all. An inscription on the statue conveys the meaning "Liberty Enlightening the World." Also, Lady Liberty is holding a

manuscript clearly entitled “The Declaration of Independence.” Botticelli’s painting “The Birth of Venus” is another artwork which has allegorical meaning. For example, the figures and symbols in the work are arranged in such a way to suggest a movement from chaos to order and the transformative power of beauty is seen as a way to bring order and harmony to the world.³

Picasso’s “Guernica” is a clear example of moral meaning in art. The moral instruction decries the senseless horrors of war with innocent civilians caught in the midst of conflict. But there is also a moral message of righteous hope and resilience in the face of terrible adversity. This is conveyed by the woman holding a lamp, symbolizing the power of light and hope to overcome darkness. The American painter Andrew Wyeth’s work, “Christana’s World” depicts a woman, Christina, crawling through a field toward a house on a hill. The moral teaching of the painting is that despite the difficulties and challenges she faces, Christina continues to crawl to the distant house, showing the righteousness of hope, resilience, and the will to survive and thrive.

One of my favorite paintings is Vincent van Gogh’s “The Starry Night” which is a sublime example of anagogical meaning. This masterful work, with its bold colors, swirling skies, fluid cypress trees, bursting stars and benign glowing moon, depicts a cosmic motion that envelops the mountainous terrain and peaceful village. It conveys a wondrous, celebratory sense of the beauty of the vast cosmos. It leads to meditative contemplation on the natural order of creation, and the majesty of its design as given by the Creator. The anagogical sense “The Starry Night” imparts is brimming with metaphysical significance.

These types of great art, with their allegorical, moral and anagogical senses, especially the anagogical, are unfortunately

³ Artst, “Meaningful Paintings – 13 Most Famous,” <https://www.artst.org/meaningful-paintings/>. The examples’ analyses of paintings from Botticelli, Picasso, Wyeth and van Gogh paraphrase some of the descriptions from this article.

achievements of the past because the current art world has been deformed by the political Left. An article by an artist and professor of art history, Daniel Shorkend, is unambiguous in its denunciation of the postmodern narrative of art theory and practice. Shorkend argues that “the postmodern turn has tended to an extreme leftist positioning that has left in its wake an anti-metaphysical approach to art, and touts a narrative that simply categorizes the artist in terms of identity politics, while the art-object is servile to this rather dangerous philosophy in its lack of moral conviction.”⁴

Shorkend further warns that postmodern art suffers from a dearth of meaning-making and an abundance of dogmatic assumptions that artistic taste is entirely subjective. These assumptions yield an anything-goes relativism, except for the all-important meaning of the identity of the artist. The postmodern narrative has become so extreme that the meaning of an artwork itself morphs into whether it supports “queer culture,” or “black,” or “Hispanic” agendas or any so-called oppressed group, with scant regard to anything deeper. Shorkend laments that “Gone are the days of metaphysics or spirituality in mainstream art and therein lies the deplorable state of contemporary art... leftists have expunged art of any metaphysical role or depth.”⁵

As a somewhat hopeful reaction to the dire state into which the leftists have plunged art, Shorkend calls for the revival of the individuality of the artist with a vision of art that leads to a better world. He emphasizes that the artist ought to take responsibility and give his work conceptual depth. The artist has to know the history of art, assess that history, including the postmodern attempts to debunk that history with various narratives, and then

⁴ Daniel Shorkend, “Beyond the surface, beyond arts’ leftist slant: An argument for meaning in art with reference to five principles.” In *Global Journal of Research in Humanities & Cultural Studies* (Vol. 5, No.1, 2024) pp. 1–4.

⁵ This paragraph and the following paragraph quotes from and paraphrase the above-cited article from Shorkend.

find their own voice. For that voice to have any depth beyond their own ego, the artist must connect with an art project of transcendent import. Following his own call, Shorkend finishes by affirming to take it upon himself to strive to impart metaphysical dimensions of meaning to his art.

Postmodernism's devastation of the metaphysical in art is a symptom of what St. John Paul the Great calls the "great anthropocentric shift" in philosophy and culture, beginning with the Modern era.⁶ He explains that this shift privileges a subjective philosophy of consciousness over a realistic philosophy of existence. It was the shift from knowing and analyzing what is objective being, to claiming that what is, is merely the subjectively constituted product of consciousness. The idea constituted by subjective consciousness becomes what is actually real.

In terms of art, the shift eliminates any real metaphysical, transcendent meaning an artwork could have. Art is left bereft of genuine moral and anagogical meaning, since both dimensions of meaning have transcendent import, which are grounded in realism. Consequently, for both the artist and the viewers, the remaining alternative is to constitute the meanings of the artwork as the idea of their subjective political ideology that they represent and support. The identity of the artist becomes supremely important because it is their political identity which defines the meanings of the artwork. Their political identity includes one or more of these traits: their sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, cultural heritage, and religion. In order to appreciate the artwork, the viewer, then, must be able to intersect with the artist's identity as a politically significant idea. With a recognition of such an identity, the viewer can interpret the artwork as a meaningful ideological statement of identity politics. For instance. If the artist's identity is as a member of

⁶ This explanation of the great anthropocentric shift and its bearing on art is based on John Paul II's *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1994) 30–33.

an “oppressed” or a “marginalized” group, the artwork will typically be hailed as an achievement of resisting oppression or a call for inclusion and equity. These are the sorts of politicized meanings that are constituted to assess and establish the aesthetic quality and worth of postmodern identity art.

The ideas of the leftist ideology of identity politics practically dominate postmodern art. Matt Crawford’s article, “Identity Art and Identity Politics: Challenging Norms and Embracing Diversity”⁷ advocates strongly for identity art, employing claims that are commonly asserted in the WOKE Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) movement. Identity artists and their artworks are not as well-known as other more traditional art movements, but the aim of the identity movement is to achieve more and more recognition so that it becomes the premier type of art. And, to date the identity movement is succeeding in its efforts.

In regard to painting, Crawford describes the canvas as a “battleground” wherein “artistic expression becomes a form of resistance, advocating for change by resonating with a wider audience and swaying public opinion.” He continues that, “Our insights into the transformative power of identity art reveal that it is not solely an instrument of self-expression. It is also a potent form of activism, a means to mobilize public sentiment and instigate societal change.” Crawford accurately states that “traditional norms in museums and galleries are being redefined, with a push towards inclusivity and diversity.” Identity art is substantially influencing the curators’ selections of what is allowed to be displayed and promoted in their museums and galleries.

Much of WOKE identity art is nothing more than protest posters for the artists’ DEI social activism. With the exception of some appealing cultural identity art, particularly from “marginal-

⁷ Matt Crawford. “Identity Art and Identity Politics: Challenging Norms and Embracing Diversity,” <https://filmlifestyle.com/identity-art-and-identity-politics/>. This paragraph and the following paragraph quote from and paraphrase the Crawford article.

ized” tropical island nations and American Indians, the identity artworks aim to shock viewers. The shock effect, typically generated by bloody gore and/or human disfigurement, renders viewers vulnerable to constitute the work as a politically meaningful work of great art. But there is truly no great WOKE identity art.

The WOKE Left has effectively censored great art with meaningful moral teaching and edifying anagogical insight. Great art is not being created today in this anthropocentric culture. If by chance a great artwork were created, it would be marginalized and not recognized by galleries and museums. Nevertheless, in the midst of this cultural depression, hope should not be lost. The artist's inspiration to create great art emerges from a transcendent source, and that source can never be extinguished by the wayward politics of human culture. ■

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SUMMARY

The political Left presently dominates the art world, especially with paintings. Its *Woke* “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion” (DEI) ideology holds such sway that “identity art” is fast becoming the premier type of painting displayed and valued at most galleries and museums. Identity art, however, will never produce great art. This article argues that great art must convey dimensions of meaning that identity art will never achieve. Those dimensions are explained as moral and metaphysical meanings, which are incompatible with the political activism of identity art. In developing this argument, the pro and con views of various art critics on the merit of identity art are assessed and applied in exposing the cultural deprivation that identity art is creating.

Keywords: culture, art, the Left, ideology, metaphysics, politics

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