

Art for Goodness Sake: A Chestertonian Critique of Art for Art's Sake¹

Miguel Benitez

MIGUEL BENITEZ is adjunct instructor of Humanities at Palm Beach Atlantic University Orlando and Valencia College. He is currently working toward his Ph.D. in Humanities at Faulkner University on the topic of G. K. Chesterton's philosophy of art.

Many Christian thinkers have embraced the notion “art for art’s sake.” Chesterton did not. To the contrary, he saw such an idea as deeply problematic for a Christian aesthetic. In the following article, I will explore some philosophical aspects of the “art for art’s sake” movement and then explain why Chesterton parted company with it.

“Artists sometimes talk about art for art’s sake,” writes Philip Ryken. “What they mean is that art has intrinsic worth: it has value in and of itself, apart from any utility... God has made us to enjoy beauty, art itself is able to nourish our souls.”² For C.S. Lewis, good fiction, “has nothing to do with truth or philosophy...at all....Every episode, explanation, description, dialogue-ideally every sentence-must be pleasurable for its own sake.” Art does not have to have a utilitarian purpose for it to be valuable. It can be beautiful and glorify God and therefore has value in that sense. Chesterton himself would have assuredly agreed.

Yet Art for Art’s sake has often meant some more—and less—than that. For Kant and Schiller, for example, “the aesthetic object is something utterly different from all utilitarian objects. The enjoyment of beauty and of the sublime brings to man a value that nothing else can provide, since it has nothing to do with cognition or with morality.”³ For Jacques Barzun, writing of the sixteenth century, art and morality had not yet gone their separate ways:

Dunvegan Castle, Isle of Skye, Scotland.

With the artist becoming independent, a dedicated being, art itself begins to be an entity distinct from work, thought, faith, and social purpose. In the sixteenth century it had not *yet sworn off morality or ignored existing tastes*, but the roots of autonomy were there.⁴

Western Civilisation, at that stage, was not quite ready for *swearing off morality*. By the nineteenth century, however, it fully embraced the view that “art is just there and that is all there is to it. You cannot talk about it, you cannot analyse it, it does not say anything.”⁵ And that is precisely the view to which Chesterton objects:

If the principle of ‘art for art’s sake’ means simply that there is a solely technical view of painting, and that it must be supreme on its own ground, it appears a piece of pure madness to suppose it other than true. Surely there never was really a man who held that a picture that was vile in colour and weak in drawing was a good picture because it was a picture of Florence Nightingale! Surely, there never was really a man who said that when one leg in a drawing was longer than another, yet they were both the same length because the artist painted it for an altar-piece! When the new critics with a burst of music and a rocket shower of epigrams enunciated their new criticism, they must at any rate have meant something more than this. Undoubtedly, they did mean something more; *they meant that a picture was not a good vehicle for moral sentiment at all; they meant that not only was it not the better for having a philosophic meaning, but that it was worse.*⁶

In his brilliant little book on G.F. Watts, Chesterton took issue with Art for Art’s Sake and praised Watts and his followers for their stance against it:

The salient and essential characteristic of Watts and men of his school was that they regarded life as a whole. They had in their heads, as it were, a synthetic philosophy which put everything into a certain relation with God and the wheel of things. Thus, psychologically speaking, they were incapable not merely of holding such an opinion, but actually of thinking such a thought as that of art for art’s sake; it was to them like talking about voting for voting’s sake, or amputating for amputating’s sake.⁷

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In Chesterton's view, art for art's sake results in moral absurdity:

Since we find, therefore, that ethics is like art, a mystic and intuitional affair, the only question that remains is, have they any kinship? If they have not, a man is not a man, but two men and probably more: if they have, there is, to say the least of it, at any rate a reasonable possibility that a note in moral feeling might have affinity with a note in art, that a curve in law, so to speak, may repeat a curve in draughtsmanship, that there may be genuine and not artificial correspondences between a state of morals and an effect in painting. This would, I should tentatively suggest, appear to be a most reasonable hypothesis. It is not so much the fact that there is no such thing as allegorical art, but rather the fact that there is no art that is not allegorical. But the meanings expressed in high and delicate art are not to be classed under cheap and external ethical formulae, they deal with strange vices and stranger virtues. Art is only unmoral in so far as most morality is immoral.

While praising Watts and his school, Chesterton conceded that at times they were too utilitarian. He disparaged, in Dale Ahlquist's words, "the self-obsessed artists who are concerned only with expressing themselves and not with actually communicating something worthwhile."⁸ For Chesterton, all art communicates something, artists should therefore communicate something worthwhile.

Chesterton believed, in other words, that art is a form of communication that is not merely symbolic of, or derivative of spoken language. "For the truth," he wrote, "is that language is not a scientific thing at all, but wholly an artistic thing, a thing invented by hunters, and killers, and such artists long before science was dreamed of."⁹ Art is a different medium of communication, not simply a step removed from language or merely mimetic. Indeed, because art's purpose is to communicate something, it is essential that art be understood. "The tragedy of humanity," he argued, "has been the separation of art from the people."¹⁰ He would have applauded the view of Roger Scruton that "works of art are meaningful—they are not just interesting forms in which we take an unexplained delight. They are acts of communication, which present us with a meaning; and this meaning must be *understood*."¹¹

Chesterton's core concern, then, was artistic intelligibility. If art is communicating a message, but the message cannot be understood, then in some ways the artist has failed. He certainly appreciated the beauty, skill, and technique that goes into a work of art. However, that does not mean that those works of art do not convey a particular message about the artist, a view of the world, or reality.

But he goes farther than this, decisively parting company with the art for art's sake movement. All art, he says, is ultimately religious. "Religion is the sense of ultimate reality, of whatever meaning a man finds in his own existence or the existence of anything else...whatever is his conception of the cosmos and the consciousness, that will be in his art, even when his practical private morality is not particularly noticeable in it."¹² Art is not neutral. Art does not have the right to autonomy removed from any historical or moral considerations. Art is "the signature of man" as Chesterton states. It has been with man as far back as anthropologists and archaeologists can tell. Artists and philosophers in the nineteenth century determined that art is removed from the truth and goodness that have accompanied its beauty for millennia prior to it. Because art is communication, it is the task of the artist to produce art that has something worthwhile to say. Because art is communication, it can then be judged as good or bad, true or false, beautiful or ugly. It has moral implications and moral meanings. In the end, Chesterton believed not in art for art's sake but in art for God's sake.

1 An earlier version of this article was initially part of a paper written for a course in Faulkner University's Ph.D. in Humanities program.

2 Philip Graham Ryken, *Art for God's Sake: A Call to Recover the Arts* (P&R Publishing: Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2006), p. 47.

3 Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: From Classical Greece to the Present* (The University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa, AL, 1966), p. 286.

4 Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Cultural Life* (Perennial: New York, NY, 2000), p. 71. (Emphasis mine)

5 Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 2006), p. 54.

6 G. K. Chesterton, *G. F. Watts* Annotated (Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2015), Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 762-769. (Emphasis mine)

7 G. K. Chesterton, *G. F. Watts* Annotated (Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2015), Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 243-246.

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8 Dale Ahlquist, *Common Sense 101: Lessons from G. K. Chesterton* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, CA, 2006), p. 60.

9 G. K. Chesterton, *G. F. Watts Annotated* (Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2015), Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 615-616.

10 G. K. Chesterton, "Are the Artists Going Mad?" *The Century Magazine*, Vol. 105, No. 2, (December 1922), p. 276.

11 Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, England, 2009), p. 110.

12 G. K. Chesterton, "Mr. Epstein on Religious Art" in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, Vol. XXXV (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, CA, 1986), pp. 109-110.



Battlesbury Hill near Warminster, Wiltshire, England.