

# Ars Gratia Artis or Ars Gratia Hominis?

*Thomas Storck*



Anyone visiting almost any art museum will see exhibited numerous examples of Catholic religious art, which, depending on the museum, might range from late Antiquity to more recent works. A glance at the guidebook or explanation accompanying the picture or sculpture will usually reveal that the art was originally created for use in a church. It was intended to be the normal accompaniment for the sacrifice of the Mass and the other services of the Church. I once visited, at the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe, a wonderful exhibit of native Spanish colonial art. Triptychs and other altarpieces, along with many other examples of religious art of an exquisite blend of European and American Indian traditions, made it one of the most memorable exhibitions I have ever seen, and it certainly enriched the collections of the Museum of New Mexico.

Many museums are thus enriched throughout the world—as are private collections—but for every object of religious art that enriches a museum, some church or monastery or shrine has been robbed of its riches. Some of these robberies have no doubt been perpetrated by North Americans simply taking what they wanted from Latin American shrines based on their unquestioned assumption that the ultimate and proper end of these religious objects was to amuse and divert the North American museum-goer, or by more conventional thieves looking for a good price, but on the other side are the misguided or even faithless priests who have been only too glad to rid their churches of what they considered the superstitions of their peasant ancestors.

But while such thefts and betrayals justifiably anger us, we do well to quell our anger in order to look at the underlying phenomenon, something more interesting than greed and cultural arrogance. The fact that objects originally intended for use, in this case to accompany worship, are now in museums instead of in churches is a significant fact that reveals something of the great cultural changes that the West has undergone in the past three centuries. For our civilization has taken art out of life and placed it in special institutions, such as museums or concert halls, to be viewed or listened to at special times, away from our normal lives. That what should be the best of our art and music is today seldom created for actual use as part of life is unprecedented in the history of mankind—like so much else in the modern world—and is also the main reason why artists in modern times are so often alienated from their fellows and from the culture around them, for if that culture has lost much of its beauty, the artists

have lost their functional relation with the rest of society. This has created a situation in which the self-expression of the individual artist is seen as the only end of the arts and complete freedom is necessarily demanded for this self-expression. It is true that art has intrinsic principles of its own; nevertheless, freedom for artists could become a rallying cry only in a society which has divorced art from life and thus made any limitation on free expression seem contrary to the principles of the arts. In fact, this notion of freedom for the arts makes sense only if art is understood as something entirely autonomous, that is, having only itself as its law of being, and not related in any way to the common good of mankind or society or even to truth.

But if the divorce of art from life has created the alienated artist, it has also created the bourgeois philistine, who thrives on the plastic products of mass culture. Artist and philistine glare at each other from both sides of a great gulf, a gulf that is not inherent in Western civilization but is the result of the modern world's assault upon the unity of culture. If ever this gulf is done away with, we will find, I think, many problems solved and many things falling into place that we did not suspect were linked to this divorce of ordinary life from the arts.

Before the 18th century almost all art and music were created for some function in life and society. This purpose might be religious or civic or private. Music was intended for worship, for dancing, for military purposes, or to accompany an ordinary activity, for example, eating. The excellence of the art was excellence for a purpose. Just as a good pot is one that fulfills well the purpose of a pot, so good art was art that fulfilled well the purpose of that particular example of art, whether it was a painting for an altarpiece or music for a dance. It was not intended to be something called "art" which must be judged by special canons unique to itself, any more than pot makers would claim that their art must be judged by no one but themselves, without regard to how useful their pots were to the rest of us. This of course is not to deny the existence of genuine aesthetic principles, but simply to point out that they do not operate in isolation from the rest of life or from the function which the art object is to play in life.

As the 18th century progressed, however, more and more music was written for events outside of ordinary life, that is, for concerts, until by the 19th century that was the norm. Similarly, visual artists could now work with the intention of seeing their works hung in galleries, whether in museums or the homes of the rich, special places where one

...the idea that the distinction between art and fine art is that art is skill applied to the making of useful things and fine art is skill applied to the making of things of beauty, is clearly unreasonable—because there is no reason why useful things should not be beautiful, and there is no reason to suppose that beautiful things have no use.

—Eric Gill

went to view “art.” Though noblemen had had galleries of miscellaneous objects since the Renaissance, public art museums, as opposed to heterogeneous collections of art, mechanical inventions and other artifacts, did not exist until around 1800. The Louvre, for example, was opened in 1793. No longer were the ordinary activities of life surrounded by the most beautiful things that could be seen or heard, but these things were increasingly available only in special places where those with enough time and money could go.

Even the forms of the arts changed because of their changing place in society. For example, the symphony, which only began in the 18th-century but became the most characteristic musical form of the 19th, was hardly fitted for any place but the concert hall, because of its length and the large orchestra which it required. In fact, 18th-century symphonies are fairly short and modest works, but by the end of the 19th-century that genre had grown to massive proportions. Similarly, such pseudo-liturgical works as Verdi’s *Requiem* or Rossini’s *Stabat Mater*—however delightful they may be as pure music—were never intended for use in a church, again because of their length and the large number of musicians needed to perform them. Though superficially they were in the form of earlier liturgical music, their musical character clearly indicates the changed use to which music was now put. Such works were no longer elevating accompaniments to divine worship, but were ends in themselves, judged solely by aesthetic principles. It is true that even in the Baroque era there were such monumental liturgical works, such as Bach’s *Mass in B minor*, but they were much more of an exception to the quantity of functional liturgical music written by the best composers of the time.

Now all this was a chief cause of several related social problems. One, as I said above, was the phenomenon of the alienated artist. With art removed from its function as part of life, and removed from being judged in part on how well it fulfilled those functions, there was no one left who could evaluate the worth of art except the artists themselves and the small band of art critics and connoisseurs, the “arts community,” as it is now termed. In earlier times, artists and musicians worked with reference to patrons who were outside their fellowship, those who had commissioned the work and would pay the bill, whether they were princes, bishops, town councils, cathedral chapters, etc. Artists and musicians today work with reference to a small group, including other artists, museum or concert officials, editors, and grants administrators, who themselves are part of the arts community, and

accept the same standards as the artists. It is no wonder that the judgment of the general public on modern art is so different from that of its promoters.

In the beginning of this divorce of art from life, however, the art and its standards were unobjectionable in themselves. Apart from the fact that it necessarily is divorced from everyday life because of its form, who can fault the music of Beethoven or Brahms? But as time went on, in part because of restlessness and the desire to try something new, in part because of the general dissolution of Western culture, the contents of art, music and serious literature became ever more perverse. But, when the general public or even some intellectuals tried to point this out, they were loudly told to mind their own business. No one had a right to judge art except the arts coterie, and by definition one was not part of the arts coterie if one found fault with contemporary art or music or literature. And of course, the fact that some of the criticism coming from the general public was philistine did not help them make their case against the contents of the arts.

Now at the same time that artists were growing apart from the rest of society, the rest of society was being robbed of its best art. Much of the great religious art was carted off to museums, and few contemporary composers wrote liturgical music really suitable for use in church. Of course, this did not mean that there was no music or art in churches, simply that what there was was too often not of a caliber to lift anyone’s soul to God. In most places plainchant or the masses of Palestrina or William Byrd were no longer sung, but were replaced by music that tended to the mediocre, while the often saccharine statues and paintings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries almost excuse the iconoclastic zeal of the post-Vatican II liturgists. No wonder that most people forgot what good art—functionally good art—was like, and simply appreciated the statues and music that they did have. At least it was part of their life and an accompaniment of important activities. But this turn of events was by no means inevitable.

If the rich heritage of folk dancing, for example, had not been taken from people by urbanization and recorded music, would people be happy to dance to the same steps and music as their ancestors had for hundreds of years? Such music is so clearly superior to any dance music of the last hundred years that, were it again taught to us as young children, could even the bleakness of modern life or our television-dulled sensibilities take away our appreciation of it? Similarly and more importantly, is there any reason for bad religious art and music when there is so much that is superlative? The average

person does not visit art museums or listen to classical music, but his average ancestor of our Western culture worshipped in churches containing the best art and heard the best music, whether it was simple plainchant or the complexities of the Baroque. In some degree, the average modern has been taught to regard good art and music as alien to him. He is taught this by schools that attempt to drill him into liking it, rather than letting him soak it up unawares; he is taught this by the contemporary guardians of our artistic and musical heritage, who have kept the best for museums and concert halls, or who have betrayed their trust by equating Bach or a traditional folk round with the electronic noises of a John Cage.

As a matter of fact this separation of art from life has been noticed by the arts community itself. Thus we have the government's "art in life" program, placing statues in public places, or the NEH putting poetry up in busses or subways. But aside from the fact that quite often the statues or the poetry that is offered does nothing but offend the public, are these really steps in the right direction, however well-intentioned they may be? The placing of statues in public places has a venerable tradition, but I fear that the above are simply efforts to make a little bit of life into a museum. In other words, is there an organic relationship between the piece of art and any public function, the type of organic relationship that exists in even the most poorly sculpted and tasteless war memorial in a city park? The war memorial is trying to do what art has traditionally been supposed to do, beautify and elevate human life by beautifying and elevating the activities of human life, in this case the honoring of our dead. It is a part of life, not a part of a gallery dragged into the public square. In the past great art was created with an end beyond itself. Though aesthetic principles are real and important, they are not sufficient for art that is functionless and organically unrelated to life.

At one time even the theater was not yet divorced from

other activities of life. The ancient Greek dramas were produced for religious festivals and, of course, during our own Middle Ages, drama arose from the liturgy and continued to have an integral religious connection for several hundred years, as in the Corpus Christi cycles, large-scale religious dramas depicting the entire history of salvation, which were performed in medieval Europe around the time of the Feast of Corpus Christi. But to restore anything like that, even regarding visual art and music, it would be necessary once more for our culture to be unified. A unified culture unconsciously expresses what it considers to be truth through art, music and drama, and to a great extent, subordinates everything in the society to the over-arching goals of the society. Thus in the Middle Ages guilds did not simply have an economic function. They had Mass, processions, and special dinners on the feast of their patron saints; they had chaplains and shrines of their own. Indeed, even their economic function grew out of their religious one, in the sense that the recognition of the need to curb man's acquisitive appetite by regulation and the fostering of mutual charity sprang from a profoundly Christian desire to permeate every part of society with the spirit of the Gospel. But as long as society is seen as being made up of warring groups each trying to get the largest share of the pie, the arts community will continue with its program of self-expression and contempt for the rest of us. The fact that so much of the rest of our plastic society does indeed deserve that contempt does not make their criticisms more just or their artistic creations more worthy of esteem. The remedy instead lies in all of us submitting to the yoke of Christ, in cultural as in all other matters, and being willing to jettison both the sophisticated pornography of the elite as well as the false sentimentality of the masses. Only in this way can our culture be unified and the social reign of Jesus Christ the King commence once more.

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