MY ART AND/OR MY CHRISTIANITY &

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ABSTRACT

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James Martin Benson

my Christianity from two points of view.

In the first section I describe the changing views which I think underlie the evolution of my work as an art student. I have identified the following four concepts as significant: the dilemma between the inner needs and the outer needs; the absurd in modern society; the means, the visual language; and the content, the meaning. Based on this information, a personal critique of my work is made which illustrates the conflict involved in using a metaphoric means to convey a didactic belief.

The second section examines art and Christianity from a more objective standpoint. Francis Schaeffer's essay "Some Perspectives on Art" seems to draw together most of the relevant issues which are discussed by the leading authorities on Christianity and art. A summary of his principles is made and forms the basis of my conclusions - how I see my work in relation to the worlds of art and Christianity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Delacroix writes in his diamies that he longs to paint like Rubens or Rembrandt, but cannot. Rubens had the freedom to idealize form. Delacroix, on the other hand, felt trapped in an age where the emphasis in painting was based on a more rational world view. The prevailing notion of art dictated that an artist could only paint exactly what he saw. Delacroix was forced to make a decision: should he paint in accordance with his times, or should he follow the lead of earlier masters and idealized form? He solved the problem by starting with realistic studies and then idealizing them as Rubens had done. An example can be seen in his painting "The Massacre of Chios".

In university, I too had been faced with this dilemma of choosing between painting what was expected of me and what I wanted to paint. It has been a recurring problem which greatly affected my work and still does. Uhlike Delacroix, who choose to follow his own creative inclinations, I decided that to be recognized as an artist was more important than trusting my own feelings which I felt were somewhat under-developed.

¹H.R. Rookmaaker, Modern Art and the Death of a Culture (London: Intervarsity Press), 1973, pp. 50-54.

Since I felt that the only way to become an artist was through the educational system, and since I felt the criteria by which an individual is judged as being educated is the difference between an "A" mark and a "D" mark, my goal became one of achieving high marks. I allowed my creativity to be channelled to whichever direction the university saw fit. I was going to be an artist and I wasn't going to let my personal creativity get in the way! The university experience became a sort of game, with the winner being the one who held the most "A's" or "B's". I learned to play that game rather well.

switch universities. Perhaps this was a blessing in disguise, because, if it taught me anything, it was that the underlying principles of art seem to be transient, not only in time but in place. For a while I began to learn the new "rules" for the game, while my training was like a game. Art became absurd and pointless. I could find no universals or absolutes in art: I was like a mountain climber without footing.

I began to realize that my art did not have a meaningful basis for its existence. At a certain point I couldn't
continue working without some principles to guide me. Living
with the concept of absurdity as reality had to be resolved.
There had to be something beyond, some universal truth by which
everything could be assimilated.

I found it interesting to note that, according to

H.R. Rookmaaker in his book Modern Art and the Death of a Culture, Picasso, in his early Cubist stages, seemed to be going through a similar struggle in a search for a universal truth. \(^1\) The analytical Cubist movement was concerned with the discovery of the governing principles "behind" the image. The visually observed images were analyzed in terms of the underlying geometrical shape, a cube or cone, or a pyramid. The painting should then be made in terms of this underlying structure. The resulting works dealt not with specifics but with generalities. It was not the fleeting but the lasting aspects of the subject that were portrayed. As development continued, there was also the urge to break down the image even further in a quest for a more consistent and thorough analysis. When this stage was reached there was a kind of standstill in the development; figures and backgrounds were analyzed until it was hard to tell where the figures and backgrounds began and ended. Contours fell away.

At this point, Picasso must have realized that his search for an underlying visual truth had failed. In searching for the general visual structure of things he had lost the specific meanings in the image. Painting had approached the possibility of becoming a cold equation of analysis. There was nothing in the finished work to give the viewer a personal meaning. His search for a structural meaning in painting has lost the meaning inherent in the objects themselves.

¹ Rookmaaker, Modern Art, pp. 113-119.

Faced with this dilemma, Picasso seems to have concluded that there were no meaningful universal principles governing the visual image. One can conclude that this world is absurd and meaningless. The strangeness and absurdity was now given reality in an art that was trying to show the truth, the new truth, the truth that there is no truth.

As an art student in my early years of university training, I was forced to choose as Picasso did, between ac- > cepting absurdity as the only basis for reality and working within the framework, or taking what I thought to be a step backwards into a belief that absolute truth does not exist. was in a dilemma. I did not feel that I could be honest with myself and continue to work when no-one knew what was good or bad. Everyone had an opinion, but no-one had an answer that would be right for all conditions, i.e., the universal truth. Somehow, however, I was compelled to keep searching for some absolute truth on which to base my work and, in a larger sense, my life. For a period of about four months, I wrestled with the pros and cons of a series of possible solutions. a very confusing and frustrating period. I felt I could not honestly accept one "truth" without rejecting another. conclusion seemed to always to contradict every other conclusion, just as my art teachers had contradicted each other. For example, Catholicism said that if I lived according to its doctrines I might get to heaven, and truth, but others denied the existence

¹Rookmaaker, <u>Modern Art</u>, pp. 117-120.

of heaven. My resolution finally was to move into a relationship with Jesus Christ; 1 my life was totally revolutionized. I
saw in Christ the truth I had been searching for. Since He is
the centre of my existence, then any discussion of my art could
not be complete without the inclusion of that influence on my
life.

It took a long time before the direct change in my beliefs showed in my art work. Perhaps this was primarily because I was somewhat insecure both in my powers of visual expression and my willingness to let others know that I saw myself as a Christian.

In the light of this new truth, my original ambition, that of becoming an artist, took on a new dimension. I could not honestly give myself completely to this dream, because inside I knew that it was Christ whom I must serve, that only in Christ could I be fulfilled. I erroneously believed that before I could do anything for Christ I must achieve a certain degree of aesthetic proficiency.

Only later on did I realize that my goal was to become an artist, not for myself but for Christian ends. The route I followed was essentially that I allowed my way of seeing and my work to become characterized by the art institution I attended. I believe Christianity is no longer the force it was once. Indeed, modern art seems to embrace an atheistic view.

Initially, as a student, I desired to develop a fluent

From an evangelical point of view. (One who holds a belief in the diety of Christ as the Son of God, and in Christ's vicarious death as man's salvation.)

and strong use of visual language. This development was a gradual process whereby works of major 20th Century artists influenced me, but, if I were to credit a major source, it would be the work of Henry Moore.

In Herbert Read's survey of modern sculpture, he points out the following:

There are a few figures by Henry Moore which may be directly related to Picasso's "Design for a Monument", for example, the "Composition in blue Hornton Stone of 1931". But in general Moore's development, though related by a common purpose, was independent of Picasso's. Precisely, the year of the "Design for a Monument" (1918) was the year in which Moore was overwhelmed by Mexican sculpture in the British Museum, and this source of inspiration, with minor contributions from African sculpture ...1

What is Moore's visual language based on ? One of the few statements that Henry Moore has made about his own work was written in 1934. In "The Sculptor's Aims", he describes the qualities which make a piece of sculpture viable. He begins his outline of these qualities with:

Truth to material. Every material has its own individual qualities. It is only when the sculptor works direct, when there is an active relationship with his material, that the material can take its part in the shaping of an idea.

Observation of natural objects ... The human figure is what interests me most deeply, but I have found principles of form and rhythm from the study of natural objects such as pebbles, rocks, bones, trees, plants, etc. ... There is in nature a limitless variety of shapes and rhythms ... from which the sculptor can enlarge his form-knowledge field.²

Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Sculpture (New York: Praeger Publishers Inc.), 1974, p. 171.

²Henry Moore, <u>The Sculptor's Aims</u>, ed. Herbert Read, comp. R.L. Herbert (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc.), 1964, pp. 139-140.

Without being consciously aware of it, my sculpture during this period was created formally along the lines Moore has just mentioned. It was only after having finished my undergraduate years that I felt the repercussions of what had already happened to me. My development had led me to discover the potential of art as a means of communication. My art was communicating, whether I liked it or not, and whether it was for man's benefit or not.

As I began my first semester in graduate school, I came to the realization that the visual means (based on a vitalistic philosophy of art) in which I had allowed myself to be trained were ill-suited to my needs.

I could no longer keep myself from telling others about my affinity for Christ. Furthermore, I felt my art work should bear witness to this. But hindsight suggests that the basis of my powers of visual expression were inappropriate to be used as a tool for communicating anything specific about Christ. In Moore's writings I discovered that he is, as I am, concerned for the welfare of mankind. In "The Sculptor's Aims" he continues:

Vision and expression. For me a work must have a vitality of its own. I do not mean a reflection of life ...
but that a work can have in it ... an intense life of its
own, independent of the object it represents ... we do not
connect the word beauty with it.

Between beauty of expression and power of expression there is a difference of function. The first aims at pleasing the senses, the second has a spiritual vitality, which

for me is more moving and goes deeper than the senses.

Because a work does not aim at reproducing natural appearances it is not, therefore, an escape from life, a stimulation to a greater effort in living.1

Whereas Moore's concern is for stimulating man to live life to the fullest, without any mention of God, gradually I identified my personal concern as the God-less nature of man. I wanted my art to serve purposes that would only directly benefit man in a specific way. To me, excellence of a work of art was to be measured by its capacity to change man. I felt, and still feel, that the begining point for this change is the individual coming into a personal relationship with Christ.

In the magazine, "Christianity Today", an article appears entitled "Solzmenitzyn - Whose Face in the Mirror" by Cheryl Forbes. This article is written about the main concern of Solzhenitzyn - repentance. Thus, he is concerned with the soul of man and how it is affected by good and evil. He believes so strongly about this that he feels it is the duty and purpose of an artist to serve his readers by writing the truth, that there is no art without that specific goal. In the Bible, we are commanded to go and tell others what God has done for us, His Children. It is this desire to move man into repentance (myself included), that I share with Solzhenitzyn.

In his Nobel prize lecture, Solzhenitzyn pulls together ideas scattered throughout his books. An artist should be an educator and, one would almost say, a prophet - priest. As he works, he is responsible to both God and Man. Since that is so, he bears the burden "to be more

¹ Moore, The Sculptor's Aims, p. 140.

keenly aware than others of the harmony of the world, of the beauty and ugliness of the human contribution to it, and to communicate this accurately to his fellow men. His

purpose: Salvation.

The steps to achieving this goal also become clear. First, recognize your own sin, confess your own culpability. Repent. "Repentance," he says, "is the starting point for spiritual growth". Change. "Repentance loses all sense ... if we have a good cry and then go on as before". Submit your will to God's. And dedigate yourself to telling the truth for God's sake and the world's ...!

be rooted in an atheistic heritage of modern art, which to me was diametrically opposed to the message I wanted to communicate, i.e., the condition of man's God-lessness. Much modern art portrays man in alienation, lostness, and in despair. To me, art was visually working well; but also, to me, it painted a negative picture of man that was without God. I felt hypocritical. What I was presenting as an extension of myself; my art, was diametrically opposed to what was at the centre of my life - Christ. It was from this point in time that my most recent series of sculptures developed. How I resolved this unstable marriage between the message and the visual means will be discussed in the next section, where I will present a brief analysis of my student pieces.

Cheryl Forbes, "Solzhenitzyn - Whose Face in the Mirror", Christianity Today, Vol. XX, No. 18 (June, 1976), pp. 10-12.

Critique of the Work

Up until this point, I have presented myself as a sculpture student trying to resolve a dilemma. What follows is a critique of four of my sculptures which I believe represent an adequate cross-section of a larger series of fourteen which I exhibited in February of 1977.1

The title of the series, "The God-Shaped Vacuum", is derived from a statement made by the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal: "There is a God-Shaped Vacuum at the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God Himself". 2

ments in four of my sculptures: Numbers 1, 9, 13, 14. All four are realized in the medium of plaster; all of them are figurative being based on studies of the human form. However, each figure exists as a presence rather than as a naturalistic rendering of human form; even the plaster rasps have been used to submerge objective reality behind a roughly textured, weathered, and decayed surface. The plaster is left in its natural, stark, bone dry-like state. Each piece has a precise geometric cross-shaped hollow carved into its chest. This tightly rendered linear shape stands out in contrast to the remainder of the rough textured surfaces and the flowing organic forms.

These works and this exhibition were partial full-fillment of my thesis requirement. See Appendix for plates.

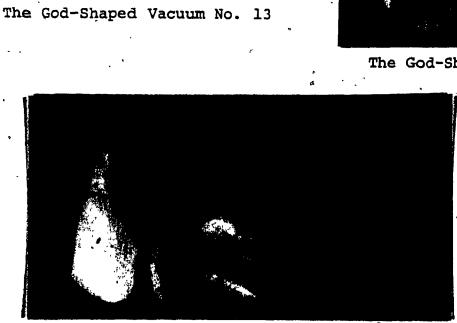
²Blaise Pascal, <u>Les Pensées</u>, texte établi par Jacques Chevalier, 1936; <u>Le Livre de Poche</u>, 1962, p. 176.



The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 9



The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 14



The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 1

"The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 1" is a reclining figure consisting of three pieces: a torso and two legs. The largest piece, the torso, is a pyramid-like shape with all four corners rounded off. A stump suggests a head. A minute section of negative space keeps all three pieces physically separated. Although the surface has been finely rasped, the overall effect is one of relative smoothness.

"The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 9" is a shell of a human chest. The overall form is a positive space which echoes the rib cage and contains two swelling negative spaces or hollows that correspond to the inner "void" of the lungs.

"The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 13" portrays a figure in a sitting position. The presence of the legs, arms and head exists mostly through their physical absence, through their incomplete embodiment as rough, lumpy masses of plaster at the hips, shoulders and neck. This piece seems undefined, unfinished; it seems to thrive on the unresolved interplay between the skeletal structure and the surface effect of bone and flesh.

The final piece, "The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 14" represents a vertical upright figure. As with the previous pieces, there are several areas where the plaster has been left in a rough untouched state. The head and arms are suggested by stumps. The front of the piece is rasped to the point where everything is unified in an overall texture.

What follows will be an interpretation of the four

pieces. As mentioned, previously, this series of works was an attempt to marry a specific message which I wanted to communicate (concerning the God-less nature of man) and my visual powers of expression (which I felt were based on a non-Christian, humanist point of view).

For me, the sculptures are statements about the nature or condition of man. Man is portrayed in a decayed-like state. For example, for the most part there are no heads, arms, or legs. There are only rough, worn down suggestions of heads and limbs. Torsos are hollowed out. Surfaces are worn down like ancient rocks. These are fleeting erroding images of human form. To me, my sculptures speak of the human figure.

In counterpoint to the above, there is etched in each sculpture a cross-shaped hollow which represents what Pascal calls "The God-Shaped Vacuum". A clean, clear geometric non-form, where only a cross could fit, is carved into the rough, textured surface of each piece. The non-cross is designed to stand out; it cannot evade our eyes.

These are statements about man's condition of loneliness and despair. The focus was on the sense of loss and futility. That man feels about his existence without God. I felt I could only present images of man based on a humanist point of view, one in which God is not an integral part of man's existence. Thus, my sculptures have doubled impact; they are both human figures in a state of despair and figures without God. My intention was to

force him to question his relationship with God.

what follows will be the final stage of this thesis, in which I will try to situate my work in the cultural context in which I find myself. At the time of the completion of the sculptures under discussion, my point of view was that of an instrumentalist. I was interested in the effectiveness of my art. My purpose was to make the viewer question his relationship with God. I considered my art a failure when the viewer only became aware of visual forms and their interrelations. If it did not make the viewer conscious of my specific message. I would consider my art successful if it helped advance the cause of evangelism for the benefit of mankind.

My concerns were not sympathetic with a formalist position (art for art's sake). I believed that form must transcend itself, and specifically it must be a message in the service of God.

According to Solzhenitzyn, the specific goal of the artist should be to tell the truth for the purpose of man's salvation. This is the duty of the artist. If he does his job, then his purpose concerning the salvation of his fellow man will be fullfilled. He should not allow himself to be distracted from this goal by gauging his success or failure on the basis of how many repent. He should only concern himself with the truth and how he can communicate this to his fellow man.

¹Solzhenitzyn, Alexander, Nobel Lecture, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux Inc.), 1972, p. 31-33.

I share this desire of Solzhenitzyn, i.e., to move man into repentance. However, while making those student sculptures, my goal was to modify man's behaviour, or more specifically, to bring man to repentance. I now realize, in retrospect, that in my effort to get results, I overwhelmed the means by which I attempted to achieve those results. Predictably, the series was unsuccessful when measured against its intent.

An instrumentalist-formalist approach made it possible for me to speak about the convictions I had concerning the God-less nature of man. Furthermore, I feel that I am closer to a Christian attitude that can be born of art, rather than being one that merely "uses" art. The second section of this thesis will deal with my current resolutions of my beliefs and my art.

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER II

MY PRESENT AESTHETICISM

Long before I began this thesis, I wrestled with the problem of how a Christian (like myself) working in the Twentieth Century could be an artist. It seemed to me that Twentieth Century art was diametrically opposed to anything that even hinted at a theistic point of view, and that God and modern art are rooted in totally opposing camps. To add to my frustration, there did not seem to be anyone who even could suggest an artist to whom I might look for guidance and inspiration. The only avenue open to me was to search through the vast amount of literature in art. If this provided me with any relief, it was that I was not alone in my dilemma.

Earlier on in my search, I found a critique written by Robert Hughes. It is appropriately entitled, "Labyrinth of Kitsch". With few exceptions, not one significant modern artist has built his imagery around doctrinal religion and its themes. Keeping this fact in mind, it is not surprising that, although the collection represents good intentions and it has a few good works, it is an aesthetic swamp. The bulk of the work seems to display all the cliches of modern art coupled with trivial piety.

The collection has no evident criteria of choice, for the Vatican faced with the awkward but basic question of what a "religious" work may be, has been unable to find an answer. Instead, it has accepted anything that seems, however dimly or perfunctorily, to contain a religious motif ... One may regret this or not, but the fact is that to set up a museum of modern religious art in the hope of stocking it with works that are both aesthetically rich and doctrinally recognizable is a doomed enterprise ... it (the Vatican collection) will probably remain more of a curiosity than a museum: an embarrassing document of religion's inability to provoke aesthetic responses.

When I read this critique, the conclusion came as no surprise to me. Christianity is not the major force it once was in society. How can there be a major cultural movement with Christianity as its basis? It seems to me that the Vatican is trying to define something for which there is no clear understanding.

In retrospect, perhaps the direction one should take looking for Christian art in the Twentieth Century should not be with individual works themselves but in the artist's perspective or attitude of life. In other words, if the artist is a Christian, and is daily following God's leading in his life, then that life and all its activities will bear more effective witness for Christ then if the artist tries to force his affinity for Christ through his work. So, in one sense, the Christian life itself should be the Christian's greatest work of art. An essay, "Some Perspectives on Art", by Francis Schaeffer seems to draw together an articulate sense of the relevant issues. Schaeffer's perspectives have enabled me to evolve a Christian's philos-

¹Robert Hughes, "The Labyrinth of Kitsch", Time Magazine, Vol. 104, No. 6 (August 5, 1974), p. 40.

ophy of art and, consequently, a basis for understanding and evaluating it. What follows is a partial summary of Schaeffer's main principles which will stand as the basic framework for my conclusions.

The Art of Work as an Art Work

Today, most people hold the view that a work of art has a value in itself. This is taken for granted. But to many Christians, because they believe art must be in the service of a Christian dogma, this view is heresy. However, art must be freed from this limitation. Beyond its intellectual content, art exists for enjoyment. It is essential for the artist, Christian and non-Christian alike, to recognize the richness of aesthetics and approach each work with this in mind.

Biblically this premise can be supported for two reasons. First, because a work of art is a work of creativity. By denying the validity of creativity, we must deny God, because He is the creator. Secondly, since man has been made in the image of God, then he too has the capacity to create.

Schaeffer used to believe that the concept of creation could only be used in reference to God. Since God has made all things, then man can only make the things that are a result of God's finished works.

But Schaeffer later came to believe that he was wrong. Both God and man can create. The difference is that God creates something out of nothing, whereas man creates something out of what is already there. Thus, to him the term "create" is appropriate. Many artists, Christians included, have overlooked this truth about the value that art has in itself. They view art either as solely an intellectual exercise, or a tool of communicating some Scriptural truth.

Schaeffer believes there are three basic notions concerning the nature of art. The theory of art for art's sake is the first, which is to him an incorrect view. To begin with, no great artist has completely operated this notion alone. Most of the greatest artists of the Renaissance functioned from either the notion of Christianity or humanism. Even Picasso's philosophy has shown through his paintings.

The second notion is the view that art can only be used as a tool of communication. This attempts to reduce art to solely an intellectual statement. With this view, the work has no value in itself.

The third possibility is that the artist produces a body of work which reflects his philosophy. This is the way art should be. In this way, the personality of the artist is not lost.1

¹Francis Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", Art and the Bible (Illinois: Intervarsity Press), 1974, pp. 33-38.

Conclusions

munication best describes my aestheticism during the time my sculptures were being made. This was an instrumentalist philosophy of art. The direction my work took was rooted in a heritage of natural forms, more specifically those derived from the work of Henry Moore. In terms of form and content, the form was rooted in the conventional traditions of the art world. However, the content of my work, the cross, was drawn from a framework that is too literal to be accepted by the art world. It follows that form and content are not integrated and the work can be seen as split.

this problem. The sculptures began as forms which correspond to Schaeffer's first notion concerning the nature of art, i.e., art for art's sake. The second notion comes into play when an attempt is made to use these forms as tools of communication. A cross is then carried as a finishing touch to each piece. I now feel that in the process of making a work of art, the only way that form and content can be integrated is when they are both present throughout the process. One cannot be forced on the other afterwards without some loss of integration.

Although my work can be seen as a failure to integrate form and content; these works did reflect my state of consciousness at the time. I had been trained in a definite visual lan-

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guage which was completely separated from my inner content, my Christianity.

Thus, it could be said that the work was an authentic representation of the split in my training as a student and expressed my dilemma - my attempt to integrate these two opposing worlds.

Art needs no justification. The mistake of many art theorists (and not only of Christian ones) is to try to give
art a meaning or a sense by showing that it does something
... Art needs no such excuse. It has its own meaning
that does not need to be explained ... art has a meaning
because God thought it good to give art and beauty to humanity. 1

H.R. Rookmaaker, Modern Art and the Death of a Culture (London: Intervarsity Press), 1973, pp. 229-230.

2. Art Forms Add Strength to the World View

The Christian must be aware of the fact that art has the capacity to strengthen a particular artist's view, which shows through his art, regardless of what the world view is, and whether that world view is true or false in relation to Christianity. He gives a parallel in literature: "... the effect of any proposition, whether true or false, can be heightened if it is expressed in poetry or in artistic prose rather than in bald formulaic statement".1

¹Francis Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", Art and the Bible (Illinois: Intervarsity Press), 1974, pp. 38-39.

3. Art and the Sacred

it is a work of art is wrong. The Christian need not accept the world view of the artist - even if he is a great artist - simply because it is presented in an artistic manner. As mentioned earlier, art has the capacity to add strength to the world view which shows through the art work. But this world view that is strengthened can be either true or false in relation to Scripture. As a result, because the world view is presented in a forceful and creative manner, the Christian must be cautious to accept or reject the content of what is being presented. The grounds for judging a work of art must be based on other standards than power of visual expression.

¹Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", p. 41.

Conclusions

Before I began my sculptures I had already recognized this power of art, this new dimension that can strengthen the artist's world view. I felt I had reached a certain degree of fluency in visual language and I wanted to use it for the benefit of mankind. Simultaneously, I felt that the visual language in which I had been trained as a student spoke from an atheistic point of view. Therefore, to me it had no viable content in itself. The only solution was to force a viable content onto the work; hence the appearance of the cross.

When we study the really great works of art in history, we always find that in their meaning is a unity; a beautiful idea is expressed and realized in a beautiful way. Each line, each colour, the whole composition, is conceived in order to make the idea clear, and the idea would never have been made clearer than precisely by means of this particular composition with its colour scheme ... Every brush stroke "carries" the meaning of the picture!

¹Rookmaaker, <u>Modern Art</u>, p. 233.

4. Normal Definitions, Normal Syntax

A parallel can be made between literature and the visual arts. In literature, the author must be aware of the tremendous impact that the conventional use of words in a conventional syntax has on his readers. If continuity between normal definitions of words and normal syntax is not maintained, then the author has not effectively communicated with his audience.

In the visual arts, this same principle applies.

The symbolic vocabulary of the visual arts must be used in the agreed upon manner in order to prevent discontinuity; otherwise communication with the viewer will break down.

"Totally" abstract art is an example of this discontinuity between normal definitions and normal syntax. The viewer is in an alienated relationship to the work of art. This breakdown in communication prevents anything but superficial understanding to take place. Much of modern art exemplifies this alienation. In contrast, Giacometti portrays the alienation of man, but he maintains common symbolic forms in his sculptures. He is still living in God's world and, although he distorts the normal vocabulary of visual art, the vocabulary is still there. As a result, there is a communication between Giacometti and his viewer.1

¹Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", pp. 39-40.

Conclusions

In each of my sculptures there are two sets of common symbolic forms maintained. The first set is the style in which the figure is portrayed. There is a continuity of all the visual elements in that set. The second syntax is the manner in which the content is presented. Both these syntaxes are rooted in different traditions.

Is this work acceptable to the world of art or the world of Christians? The Christian community won't accept the style in which the figures are portrayed because the style is rooted in a non-instrumentalist philosophy of art. The non-Christian art world will not accept the distinctions made between the form and the content; nor will they accept the iconography of the cross. Thus, my work is rejected by both, because it breaks with tradition from both the point of view of the Christians and of the established art world. In another sense, this would be seen as breaking with tradition and therefore be seen as acceptable from an avant-garde point of view.

How can we compose music, for example, unless we use organized noise (to use the lowest definition possible)? To do a painting we must use the particular qualities of color and line, realize their potential to represent something in a kind of pictorial language, and put them in a relationship that is pleasing to the eye, powerful and rhythmic and with an aesthetic economy. Then the picture can be "beautiful" even if it depicts something ugly.1

¹Rookmaaker, <u>Modern Art</u>, p. 235.

5. Four Standards of Judgement

If a work of art cannot be judged on the grounds of its artistic greatness, then on what grounds can it be judged?

We must consider four basic points:

- (i) technical excellence;
- (ii) validity;
- (iii) intellectual content the world view filtering through the work;
- (iv) the integration of content and vehicle.

By technical excellence is meant the artist's use of the visual language, i. e., the use of color, line, shade, form, balance, composition, texture, etc... There are degrees of excellence in each of these aspects in the work under scrutiny. If we show recognition of technical excellence in a work, then we are permitted to say the artist may be a great artist, but we do not necessarily agree with what he is portraying in his work.

We would not be true to the artist if we denied his work as having any worth simply because we do not agree with the world view that is being put forth. Many Christians, not only in the past, label many great works as garbage because they believe that, since the content is not in line with Scripture, then the work as a whole is anti-Christian. Unfortunately, because the distinction between the artist's technical skills and the content of the work was not differentiated, many people accept or reject both the art and the artist who made it. This

is a form of prejudice. Man cannot be judged on only one point.

If his artistic excellence is great, then he deserves credit.

If his skills are not of quality, then he does not merit praise.

This is irregardless of anything else.

If the artist is being honest to himself and his world view, then we can say his work is valid. But if he is an artist solely for his material or social gain, his work has no validity. This is the second criteria for judgement -validity.

There is a parallel in visual arts with the art form of preaching. Many preachers find it easy to manipulate the congregation by playing with what they say, or in what manner they say it to colour the overall portrayal of the message for self-benefit. The truth is the whole truth nothing more nothing less. In the same way, many artists play the so-called "art game" of producing work which they know is in vogue. Consequently, they only work within specific stylistic parameters and allow themselves to be dictated by transient whims of critics.

The content, the world view of the artist, which ultimately shows through his body of work is the third criteria for judging a work of art. For the Christian, this world view must be scrutinized in the light of Scripture.

The Christian should be aware that a content which opposes the truth in Scripture can be presented by a great artist, who has a forseful use of visual language. This content can be destructive if presented powerfully. It is the respon-

sibility of the Christian to be sensitive to what world view is presented and view it accordingly. As mentioned before, he should recognize that the degree of stringency in his critique should be based on a recognition of the fact that art forms add strength to the world view presented. Consequently, the greater the work, the more he should be critical of its world view. Unfortunately, the reverse is usually the case.

There is another aspect relating to judging the content of a work of art, i.e., the possibility of a non-Christian artist working according to a Christian world view. Primarily, a Christian is a person who accepts Jesus Christ as his Saviour. He has recognized his sins which prevent him from relating with God, repented of them, received forgiveness from God (by the payment of sins as a result of the death of Jesus Christ), and he then can be received into a relationship with God. He is born anew, not of flesh, but of Spirit.

Schaeffer distinguishes between four types of artists. The first distinction is the Christian who creates within a Christian world view. The second is a non-Christian, who produced works which reflect his non-Christian world view. The third is the non-Christian who expresses himself on the basis of a Christian world view. The last type of artist is the Christian who, for a variety of reasons, expresses a non-Christian world view.

¹ Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", pp. 41-46.

Concerning my technical excellence, I still feel as I did before I began these pieces that I had a fluency in the use of visual language.

I feel that my work is valid because I was "honest" with myself. The work is an authentic reflection of the struggle of a dual existence between being an art student and a Christian. But my views have changed. No longer am I an instrumentalist. I have seen the richness of art. An instrumentalist position runs contrary to what the Christian world should be. However, the work would not be valid if I made it today. I could not possibly limit the function of my art to that of being mere communication.

Etching the cross in my sculpture signifies a turning point in my work, it could be said that I was a Christian
artist producing from a non-Christian point of view. I was a
"closet" Christian. Unlike my present position, I prevented
any appearance of a Christian philosophy from entering my work.

Is it possible for the content of my work to be accepted by both the evangelist and the artist? There are three possibilities: the artist might accept it if he ignored the iconography of the hollowed cross; the Christian might accept it by giving a viable Christian meaning to the form. On the other hand, it is more likely that both would reject it, each one finding it impossible to accept the other one's aestheticism.

The great artists carry on with their work on the lines God has laid down for them, quite unaffected by the aesthetic worked out for them by philosophers ... If they really are great and true artists, they make their poem _ (or whatever it is) first, and then set about reconciling it with the fashionable aesthetic of their time; they do not produce their work to conform to their notions of aesthetic - or if they do, they are so much the less artists, and the work suffers. Secondly, what artists chatter about to the world and to each other is not as a rule their art but the techniques of their art. will tell you, as critics, how it is they produce certain effects ... and from that we may get the misleading impressions that the technique is the art, or that the aim of art is to produce some sort of "effect" ... I only want to stress the difference between aesthetic and art, and to make it clear that a great artist will produce great art, even though the aesthetic of his times may be hopelessly inadequate to explain it. 1

Sayers, Unpopular Opinions, p. 32.

6. The Last Standard of Judgement

The final criterion for the judgement of a work of art concerns the artist's ability to suit the content or message to the medium or vehicle. Schaeffer cites several examples of great works of art in which there is a correlation between the form and content.

One such example is in Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907).

Picasso began this work in the vein of other paintings of the period but, as one critic describes it Picasso ended it as "a semi-abstract composition in which the forms of the nudes and their accessories are broken up into planes compressed into a shallow place". More specifically, Picasso began on the left by painting the forms rather naturally, toward the middle he painted more like Spanish primitives, and finally, on the right as he finished his work, he painted the women as only abstract forms and symbols or masks, and thus succeeded in making monsters of his human subjects. Picasso knew what he was doing, and for a moment the world stood still. It was in fact so strong an expression that for a long time even his friends would not accept it. They didn't even want to look at it. Thus, in his painting of the women Picasso pictured the fractured nature of modern man. 1

Schaeffer concludes by stressing that no one standard alone should be used to judge a work of art. All four must be used together in order to give thorough evaluation.²

²Ibid, pp. 46-48.

^{&#}x27;lSchaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", pp. 47-48.

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I.

Conclusions

The evaluation of the integration of form and vehicle in my work can be seen from the point of view of either the non-Christian artist or the Christian.

If the non-Christian artist could see the form of the cross without its religious "trappings", then the cross and the abstracted figure would be integrated. There would be no opposition between form and content. It is their tradition which makes them oppose. This interpretation would satisfy the art tradition but not the Christian tradition.

From the Christian's point of view, the iconography could be read as the cross standing against the "hollow man". Seen from this point of view, the Christian could see the work of art as being integrated, but he may still have difficulty accepting the negative content (the "hollow man") and the abstract form (atheistic).

There is at the heart of every man a God-Shaped Vacuum which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God Himself. 1

l"Par ce que ce gouffre infini ne peut être rempli que par un object infini et immuable, c'est a dire que par Dieu même?" Pascal, <u>Les Pensées</u>, p. 176.

7. Changing Styles

Many Christians and non-Christians alike reject new art forms simply because they feel threatened by them and not because these works run contrary to their philosophy. The newness of a visual idea in a work of art is not a legitimate basis for rejection. It is one thing to reject a work of art on the basis of what is being said, and another thing to reject it because its style is not that to which the viewer is accustomed. To summarize, Schaeffer states that changing styles in art should not be the basis for judgement of a work of art.

What then should the Christian's attitude towards style in visual art be? In short, Schaeffer writes:

If you are a young Christian artist, you should be working in the art forms of the twentieth century, showing the marks of the culture out of which you have come, reflecting your own country and your own contemporariness and embodying something of the nature of the world as seen from a Christian stand point. I

¹Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", pp. 49-51.

8. Modern Art Forms and the Christian Message

There is more to the problem for the Christian artist than being modern in his art work. To begin with, there must be a distinction between style and message.

According to Schaeffer, there is no such thing as a godly or ungodly style. Some Christians erroneously believe that works of art containing a Christian message must be formulated in a "Christian style" of art. There is no valid basis for this.

In a way, style is neutral. However, as Schaeffer points out, there is some relation between styles and the messages contained in art. The evolution of a style is developed as a series of symbols which reflects a definite world view.

A problem arises when the world view that the artist tries to portray in his work is ill-suited to the style he is most accustomed to. For example, the fragmented form of poetry in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", reflects the view he had of fragmented man. Interestingly enough, after T.S. Eliot was converted to Christianity, not only did the content of his work change, but also the form it was presented in was adapted to his new message. An example of this can be seen in his "The Journey of the Magi".

Caution must be exercised in using Twentieth Century styles for the portrayal of a Christian point of view. The style must not be allowed to dictate the content of the work.

Thus, a form of art that has no capacity to be used as a medium for portraying a message cannot be used in the art work of the Christian. This style is not wrong, it is only limited in its uses and consequently it cannot be used to convey a Christian content. Therefore, the style that the Christian uses must depend largely on its capacity to communicate. This can be measured by the type of feedback that the work elicits. The artist must strive to clarify that he is working in a style for the purpose of conveying a Christian world view, and not just to work in a style for its own sake.

To summarize, the Christian artist may use contemporary art forms, but he must not use them naively, i.e., he must prevent them from misrepresenting the Christian world view. 1

¹Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", pp. 51-56.

How do I situate my work in relation to the world of art? A co-existence of certain multiple styles seem to characterize the world of art today. For example, there is the formalistic tradition, as exemplified by Donald Judd; conceptual art, as exemplified by Bill Vazan; and yet the vitalism of Moore remains with us today.

However, certain philosophies of art do not co-exist with these. The instrumentalist position is not acceptable in the world of art. Thus, my work is caught in the middle of an acceptable style (vitalism) and an unacceptable content (instrumentalism).

Fortunately, I no longer see myself in this position. The aestheticism I now subscribe to leaves me open to many more possibilities.

It follows that the imposition of any particular system of reality on any particular society, or the mere prejudice in favour of any particular system, is due to a kind of stupidity, to a lack of tolerance in the presence of life itself. Any construction which has positive meaning for the individual, or for the community, or for life as a whole, has value, has meaning, has relevance.1

If the difference between pagan and Christian art is explained broadly by the difference in religious content, there is nevertheless a long period of time, in fact many centuries - during which Christian subjects have represented a style of pagan art. As late as 800, the

lHerbert Read, "Art as an Intensification of the Life Process", Religion and Contemporary Western Thought, ed. Edward Cell (New York: Abingdon Press), 1967, p. 129.

Libri Carolini speak of the difficulty of distinguishing images of Mary and Venus without the labels.1

Tradition demands what the modern artist rejects: discipline, conformity, humanity. It may be an inherent tendency for the Christian to seek the security and the self-effacing service of an artistic tradition. But he cannot have it in our age, or in any easily conceivable future. It is not for me to speculate about the future of the Christian faith; I do not regard the future as necessarily incompatible with the irremediable individualism of modern art.²

¹ Meyer Schapiro, "Style", Anthropology Today, ed.
A.L. Kroeber, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1953,
p. 305.

²Herbert Read, "Art Tradition and the Contemporary Visual Arts", Christian Faith and the Contemporary Arts, ed. Finley Eversole, (New York: Abingdon Press), 1962, p. 43

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9. The Christian World View

Schaeffer divides the Christian world view into a major and a minor theme.

The minor theme is the defeated, meaningless, purposeless side of life which is subdivided into two sections;

- (i) men who are in rebellion with God and who have not re-established their relationship to Him. To them life is absurd and meaningless and, from their point of view, they are right;
- (ii) the defeated and sinful side of the Christian's life bears witness to the fact that total perfect living is not possible this side of heaven.

The major theme opposes the minor in that it is the meaningful side of Christian living which Schaeffer divides into metaphysics and morals. He defines metaphysics as an optimistic perspective: everything is not absurd; there is meaning to life. This is based on the fact that God exists and is interested in the welfare of man. From this Scriptural fact is derived the basis of morals: since God exists, then His character is reflected in the moral laws of the universe. As a result, when man comes to the point where he realizes his short-comings in relation to these laws, then he is, in fact, guilty whether he feels guilty or not. God's plan has a solution for this fact of man's inadequacy in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the pinnacle of optimism because it has an absolute basis.

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There is a place for the minor theme in the Christ-

ians' art. The non-Christian is lost without absolutes and the Christian has a defeated side to his life. But the Christian's art should not end there. He can present an optimistic solution. Granted, he must recognize the minor theme, but he has the major theme as a solution. The major theme should dominate, although it must be in relation to the minor, for that is reality.

Much of the art of the Twentieth Century has tended to emphasize the minor theme. Man is often portrayed in alienation and despair. Even when there is an optimistic solution suggested, its basis is not from a Christian world view. As a result, it provides an insufficient solution. The overriding principles of the Christian art must be based on his love for God first, then his fellowman. "Keeping this in mind, the Christian artist who only largely emphasizes the hopelessness of man is not living by this principle of compassion.

Both the minor and the major theme have a place in my sculpture. The minor theme is represented by the forms which depict the state of man - "the hollow man". But there is an optimistic solution with the insertion of the hollowed cross. This is a statement about the lostness of man, but it is also a statement about man longing for God.

My present work does not concern itself with an attempt to present the major theme in each and every piece. If my work is to be judged, then let it be judged as a whole body of work in retrospect. As long as I am a Christian, this body of work will bear witness to Christ. I will not attempt to put everything into one piece of work.

Since man is a citizen of two worlds, he cannot afford to renounce his citizenship in either. He must work out his destiny as a child of nature and as a servant of the absolute.

The Christian man knows that his achievements of intellectual and moral virtue set him at severe odds with the society in which he finds himself. It is not a question of his compromising with the too frequently false standards of modern civilization or of submitting all the high and treasured quality of his meaning as a man and as a mind to what may seem to him the lower character of workaday existence. The necessity of the Christian man, exercised in the Christian understanding of life and of the movements of history and contemporary events, is to comprehend the world in all its weaknesses and terrors no less than in its glories and wonders. With his Christian understanding of and sympathy for the plight of people in a difficult and dangerous civilization, the Christian man must try to illuminate, for himself and for others, the difficulty and the danger ... The Christain knows that he must live as a Christian in the more or less un-Christian world. Having this know-

Reinhold Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion? (New York: The MacMillan Company), 1928, p. 186.

ledge, he will show himself courageous and hopeful in the darkest moments; and his Christian hope will help him make sense today. 2

²Frank O'Malley, "Obstacles to Life of Mind and Spirit", Christianity and Culture, ed. J.S. Murphy (Montreal: Palm Publishers), 1960, pp. 92-93.

10. The Subject Matter of Christian Art

Schaeffer suggests that Christian art should not deal only with religious themes. There is more truth to the Christian world view than found in works which deal only with man's salvation. One only has to look at God's creation to see that God has created more than subjects of a "religious" theme. If God made so many beautiful things, why should not the Christian artist portray this beauty in his work? God is interested not only in man's salvation for the world to come, but in his more abundant life here on earth. God is concerned for man as an individual in this impersonal world in which we live.

A Christian must portray the fullness of life in his work. Art is far too rich to limit its use to the service of evangelism. 1

¹Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", pp. 59-61.

Since my instrumentalist position divided form and content into distinct entities, I could not see the possibility of differing forms reflecting a Christian artist's point of view. My view now is that I can see both the validity of the distinction between form and content and the existence of form and content as a single entity. To me, both possibilities can reflect a Christian view of life. As a result, the subject matter of the works I produce now is not limited to "religious" themes. The subject matter may well be the form.

... Let us turn away from Things and for any concern for grasping in them any transparent reality and hidden meaning. Let us by the same token give up completely, or as completely as possible, natural appearances as transposed and transfigured as they may be, and any representation of Things. Let us renounce the existential world of Nature completely, or as completely as possible. Will not art be revealed at last in its true essence, be freed at last from any trace of naturalism, express at last freely the free creativity of the spirit and the release of creative subjectivity?

Lacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Foetry, (New York: Bollingen Foundation Inc.), 1953, p. 215.

II. The Christian Life as a Work of Art

In conclusion, Schaeffer reminds us that the most powerful and meaningful work of art will be the life the Christ-ian leads. Actions speak louder than works. Every man is creative. This gift should reflect his lifestyle under the leading of God. "The Christian's life is to be a thing of truth and also a thing of beauty in the midst of a lost and despairing world."1

Schaeffer, "Some Perspectives on Art", p. 63

Before beginning this series of sculptures, I could .

not have accepted the notion of a Christian's lifestyle as
being the source of a work of art. In conclusion, I see myself
as evolving through the following transformations. Starting
from the point of my work as formal explorations of various
sculpture media, I began to have an inner conviction that my
work lacked meaningful content, i.e., Christian. At this stage,
I added the hollowed cross in an attempt to use my art as a
medium of communication. The next stage was the use of the
title, i.e., "The God-Shaped Vacuum". It was used because I
felt that my work did not say what I wanted without the integration of a descriptive title.

My understanding now is that no matter if I am a Christian or an artist, the life I lead will ultimately bear witness to that position. My art works inewitably reflect my philosophy and my philosophy my art, but it is through action that meaning is revealed, whether that be through images or words.

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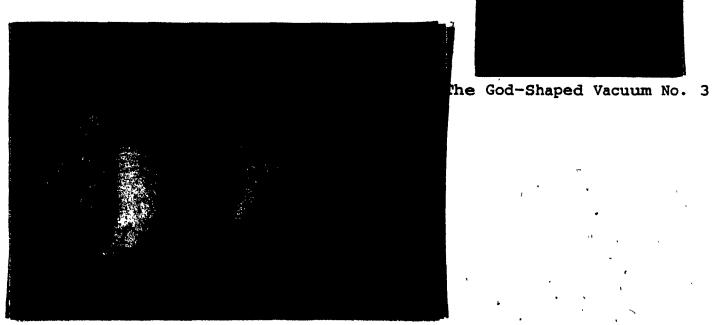
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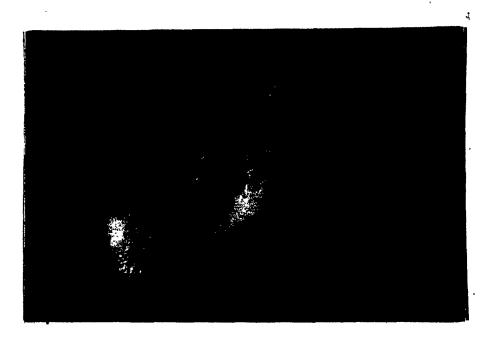
APPENDIX



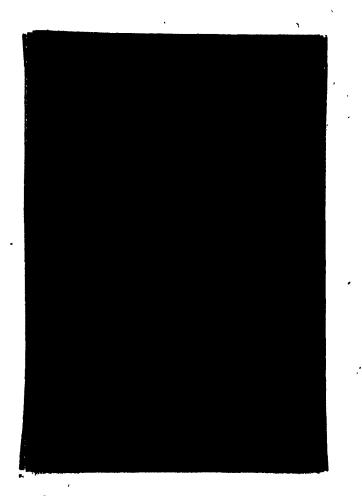
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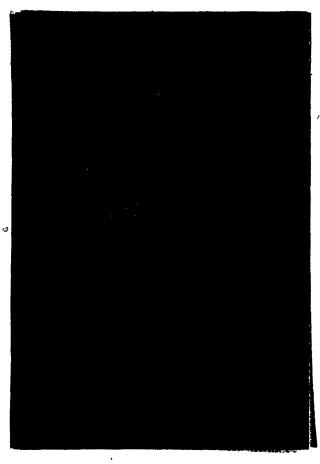
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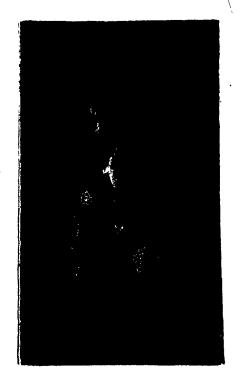
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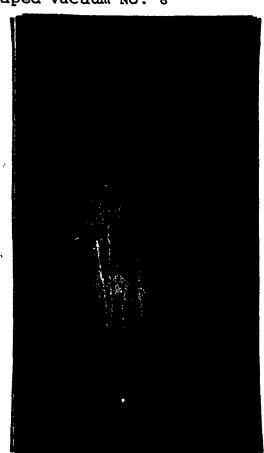
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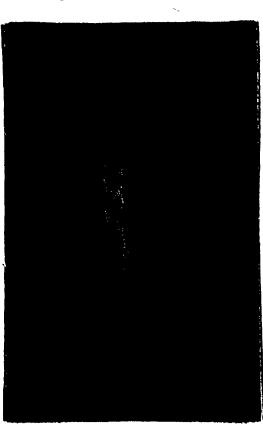




The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 10

The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 8





The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 12

The God-Shaped Vacuum No. 11