

# The Handmaiden

A Journal for Women Serving God Within the Orthodox Christian Faith



## Beauty & Art

The Christian Artist  
in the World  
by Deacon James  
Bryant

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# The Christian Artist in the World

✠ by Deacon James Bryant ✠



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He is a former chairman of the City of Bellevue Arts Commission, former chairman of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Sierra Club, and has held several teaching positions at the university level.

He and his family are attached to Saint Paul Antiochian Orthodox Church in Brier, Washington.

*“There is a great similarity between the aesthetic experience and the religious experience . . . at its highest point art aspires to a vision of the plenitude of being, to a vision of the world as it should be in its perfection. The true artist . . . will try to see in all things their hidden beauty and to create in his art sensible forms which are receptacles of this ideal content . . . he will give us his eyes so that we can in a fragment see the Whole that is present in it.”*

—Philip Sherrard from his book,  
*The Sacred in Life and Art*

Being a Christian artist does not mean that the artist works only in the realm of religious subject matter. One country and western singer will not perform or record anything outside of the Christian context. That is of course one option. In the broader context of the culture we live in, we are called as Christians to be salt and light, to be leaven in the formation of values and in the life of the world we encounter. We must perform and create our works in the taverns and among the tax collectors, maintaining our integrity, often where even our overtly expressed point of view is unwelcome. The witness of character may be more provocative and have a greater influence than anything we can do or produce. It will inform our art.

Most of us in the arts work in the secular arena, and only occasionally have the opportunity to create something directly related to the life of the Church. The intent of this article is to assist the reader in achieving a broader and deeper understanding of the calling of the artist and the nature of the creative process. It also hopes to define a worthy objective for our efforts, that we may acquire a greater joy in bringing forth a work of art in the so-called secular realm, as well as in the

sacred. If we as artists view our assignment as the transfiguration of the material by the spiritual, then those areas of the secular realm we touch can be sanctified, in some measure, by our efforts.

### The Calling and Responsibility of the Artist

*“Aesthetic phenomena are perhaps the widest and most available gates to the spiritual realm.”*

—Victor Bychkov

In all of the Old Testament, only one person is said to have been filled with the Spirit of God. This person was not a prophet, priest, or king, but an artist. The Scriptures are consistent in saying that the Spirit of God was with or upon prophets, priests, and kings, but they do not use the word “fill,” or any variation thereof. The word used in the Septuagint for “filled” is the same word used in Acts 2:4: “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”

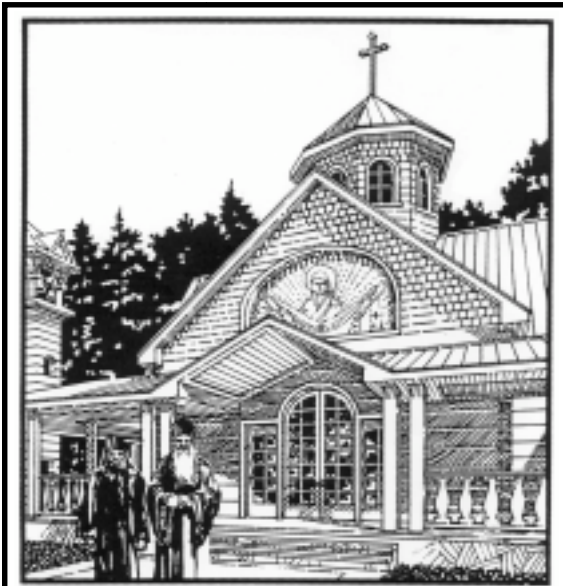
In Exodus, where Moses is being instructed about the building of the Tabernacle and all the accompanying artistic works, two people are called: Bezalel and Aholiab. The verses quoted below not only have relevance to the calling of the artist, but provide the key to the creative process.

**If we as artists view our assignment as the transfiguration of the material by the spiritual, then those areas of the secular realm we touch can be sanctified, in some measure, by our efforts.**

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works. . . . And I, indeed I, have appointed with him Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan” (Exodus 31:1–6).

The above is repeated in Exodus 35:30–32, with the following added in verses 34 and 35: “And He has put in his heart the ability to teach, in him and Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with skill to do all manner of work.

Names had significance, and uncovering their meaning



**One must ask to which realm is the artist directing the observer and user, to the spiritual realm of light, or the spiritual realm of darkness?**

enlarges our perception of the importance of personalities and events. The Lord called by name Bezalel. His name means “in the shadow of God.” He is the son of Uri, which means “fiery, flame, light, or make luminous.” Uri is the son of Hur, which means “white.” They are of the tribe of Judah, which has the meaning “praise.” It is the tribe of the Messiah (“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes,” Genesis 49:10). The artist Bezalel, under the shadow of God, comes from a noble lineage, out of praise, whiteness or purity, and the luminosity of a fiery flame.

Aholiab means “the tent or tabernacle of a father.” It is not too much to assume that he also was filled with the Spirit of God. He is the son of Ahisamach, which means “brother of support, to lean upon, sustain, helper.” They are of the tribe of Dan, the tribe which judges, as an umpire (“Dan shall judge his people,” Genesis 49:16). The artist’s helper comes with the ability to judge or discern, and can be counted upon for support. (“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you,” John 14:26).

The holy calling of creating and building the Tabernacle in the wilderness was to be carried out by the only persons in the Old Testament filled with the Spirit of God. Bezalel, in the shadow of God, in the context of praise, and his helper Aholiab, who is a supporter, sustainer, a type of the Holy Spirit, the Discerner.

What is it about the artists that was so important that they were filled with the Spirit of God, above prophets, priests

and kings? Four things stand out in relation to the call and responsibility of the artist:

**First, man is created in the image of God, and as such he is also a creator.** God brings into being what He wills out of nothing; the artist must bring into being his works out of elements which God has already created. "God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'" (Genesis 1:26). As a creator, the artist is also an image maker. Images can convey, in an instant, nonverbal messages that penetrate to the inner person, to the soul. The aphorism "a picture is worth a thousand words" is something we are all familiar with, and the advertisers of our age understand it better than anyone else. What and how the artist creates can leave an indelible and long-lasting impression upon the observer.

Second, the artist has within his power the **choice and ability to create beauty** or ugliness, harmony or discord, integration or disintegration. Inherent in beauty, harmony, and integration is the stimulus to live up to that which is noble, good, and the best in one's character. Inherent in the ugly, in discord, and in disintegration is the baseness of our fallen nature, of evil, and that which can ruin the character of individuals and society.

Third, much, if not all, of **art or imagery is symbolic** or has symbolic content. A symbol unites the invisible with the visible. The Greek word for "symbol" and "devil" share the same root, *sumballein*, "to throw or place together," and *diaballo*, "to throw over, divide, or set at variance." One unites and the other separates. A very fine line exists between the constructive use of imagination and that which the Church Fathers refer to as fantasy which leads to destruction. Artists can create that which contributes to unity and points to the beauty, goodness, and truth of God and the created world, or that which contributes to the disunity, disintegration, and dissolution of the created world.

**Fourth, images, visual or poetic, have a way of penetrating to the heart and soul of a people**, far outlasting the words of a prophet, the acts of a priest, or the decrees of a king. The words of the prophet may be ignored or distorted. The acts of the priest may become viewed as obsolete or irrelevant, or not even known. The decrees of a king can be changed, ignored, or evolve into something different. The image remains as created, be it painting, music, poetry, or architecture.

If indeed, as Bychkov states in his book, *The Aesthetic Face of Being*, the widest and most available gates to the spiritual realm are through aesthetic phenomena, then one must ask to which realm is the artist directing the observer and user, to the spiritual realm of light, or the spiritual realm of darkness?

**The whole deconstruction movement in art today is an outgrowth of the abandonment of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in favor of a purely subjective view of all aspects of life, in opposition to objective reality, and in denial that there is anything such as objective reality.**

### The Creative Process

*[Art] must be life affirming and add dignity and joy to the rituals of daily life."*

—Fay Jones

Some of us ask ourselves, why do we do it? Why do

we invest ourselves in what are often arduous and lengthy undertakings to bring forth artistic works? Each must answer these questions for him or herself. How we accomplish what we do is largely a mystery to those outside of the arts. The creative process is essentially the same, whether in the arts, or in science, or in any problem-solving endeavor. The Bible contains instructions on the basics of the creative process. It is not a mystery. It does take work and discipline.

In the words of Exodus, the artist is invested with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. What is the significance of these three attributes? Many times in the Old Testament these three attributes appear together, particularly in the Psalms and Proverbs: "The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;/ By understanding He established the heavens;/ By His knowledge the depths were broken up,/ And clouds drop down the dew" (Proverbs 3:19, 20). These attributes are the basis of the creative process, of how to cope successfully with life's challenges and overcome our own shortcomings, of how to successfully create, design, and solve problems. They comprise what may be called the "know why," the "know what," and the "know how."

First, wisdom is not just knowing facts or information, or about things. The word itself carries the connotation that wisdom is not theoretical or speculative, but is a manner of thinking, of attitude, of prudence, of experience, and is practical. Wisdom is also invested with a moral sensitivity. It is basically the human will subject to divine causes based upon revealed

principles of right and wrong. Wisdom is the “know why.”

Second, understanding is not merely one’s ability to comprehend, or an IQ level. Understanding does not come automatically, but requires persistent diligence. It connotes character. It carries with it the ability of a teacher to convey discernment to students. In biblical terms, it is your fault if you have not acquired it and do not have it. Understanding is the “know what.”

Third, knowledge is parallel to wisdom and understanding. Knowledge is technical ability along with objective awareness. In biblical terms, it has the connotation of moral cognition—the ability to distinguish between (or make judgments about) good and evil. It is the perception possessed by wise men. It is skill in practical matters, such as hunting, sailing, learning, playing a musical instrument. Knowledge is the “know how.”

Wisdom, understanding, knowledge—the “know why,” the “know what,” the “know how.” Interesting order of priority: wisdom first, understanding second, and knowledge third. It is not an accident that they are ordered that way in the Scriptures. We have come to live in a culture that only cares about acquiring the “know how,” with less interest in the “know what,” and almost no interest in or acquisition of the “know why.” Having knowledge without understanding, and especially without wisdom, is like being an unguided missile or a loose cannon—dangerous, with a lot of potential, but wrong direction and wrong focus. Remember, implicit in all three of these words in their root meanings are the connotations of right and wrong, character, and discernment between good and evil. These are the tools and means the artist uses to bring forth a work of art. They are also the tools mankind uses to create or invent anything. No wonder so many inventions and technological advances pose a great threat to the stability and well-being of the planet, from nuclear science to biotechnology, as well as in politics, education, and language. The whole deconstruction movement in art today is an outgrowth of the abandonment of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in favor of a purely subjective view of all aspects of life, in opposition to objective reality, and in denial that there is anything such as objective reality.

Implicit in the biblical understanding of the role of the artist is teaching. What the artist creates communicates and



teaches values, or the lack thereof. Artists teach through the works they create, and historically, mentored those who wished to become artists. There were no textbooks until very recently. Artists as teachers or mentors should convey wisdom, understanding, and knowledge to those who would follow after them, not just the “know how.”

For the spiritual to transfigure the material, the result of the creative process must be life-affirming, bringing dignity and joy to the routine of daily life.

### Beauty

*There is the lively awareness that beauty imitates the divine nature; that to create beauty is to imitate the divine activity; and that to be a lover of beauty is to be a lover of God.*

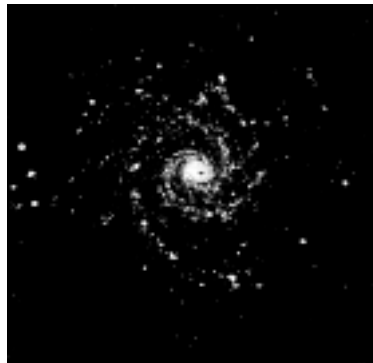
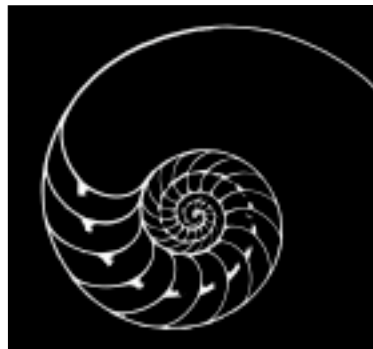
—Jane Merriam de Vyver in her book,  
*The Artistic Unity of the Russian Orthodox Church*

Seven times in the first chapter of Genesis God looks upon that which He has created and says “it was good.” The word

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**The same inherent order,  
geometry, and proportion  
are in the spiral of the DNA molecule,  
the spiral of the sea shell,  
and the spiral of the galaxies.**

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“good” as translated does not convey the depth of meaning of the original Hebrew or its translation in the Septuagint. The inherent connotation of the word is also “beautiful.” The Greek word *kalon* is explained by Philip Sherrard in his book, *The Sacred in Life and Art*, “[*kalon*] emphasizes more particularly the aspect of beauty, and the Greek theological tradition has correspondingly seen in the beauty of the created world the manifestation of that divine beauty, the desire for whose expression provided as it were the motive force lying behind the fiat: God’s desire to reveal His formless and occulted beauty in forms in which He could delight is dependent upon its accordance with the inner harmony of His own being; for it is precisely this harmony which determines the ultimate norms of beauty.”

With the Fall came a disconnect which resulted in the impairment in mankind of the capacity to perceive the image and glory of God in himself and in every other aspect of creation. Consequently beauty was severed from its source, and the creation and design of artistic works became an end in itself. Even so, as long as mankind the world over remained conscious of and retained the memory of God, the creation of artistic works was rooted in a perception of the order and harmony of the created world. But this has changed, particularly in the last 150 years.

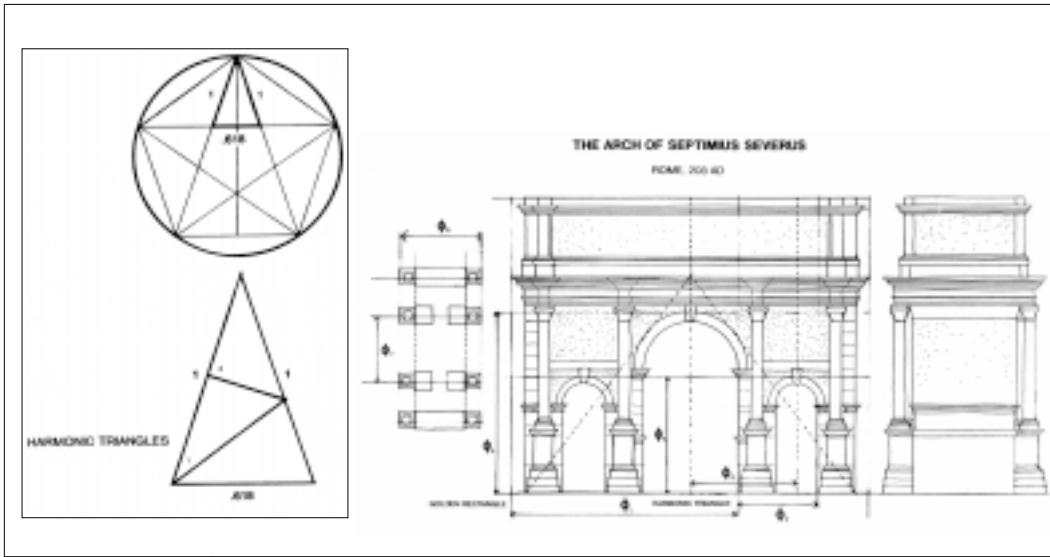
Sometime during the Ages of Enlightenment and Reason, the acceptance of an objective criterion for beauty and the creation of artistic works was discarded. In its place the idea arose that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. An artistic object—be it a building, painting, sculpture, or musical composition—no longer was held to have any inherent truth, value, or beauty, but only that which was accorded to it by the subjective and relative view of the observer. This plays into the reality of the fallen nature of man. The consequences are that if indeed beauty is a characteristic of God, the further one is away from God, the further one is removed from beauty, the ability to comprehend beauty, or the ability to create beauty. In a world that has rejected God, modern art looks into the depths into which humanity is falling, rather than toward the higher state of unity with God and all of creation to which humanity is called.

Until the twentieth century, all those in the arts were instructed in the mechanics of composition and proportion. The

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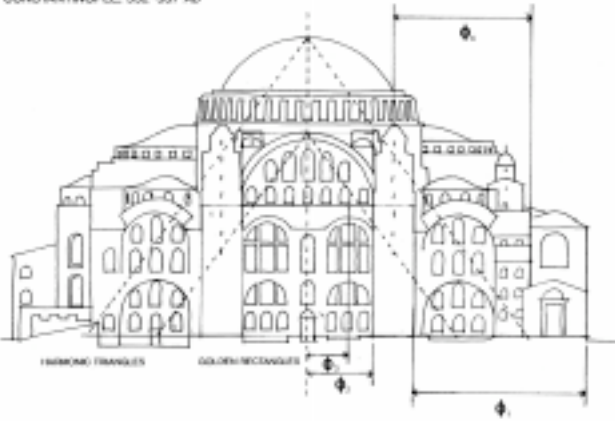


fundamental principles which architects, painters, sculptors, musicians, and all artisans utilized were neither arbitrary nor invented. They were discovered in the very fabric and design of the natural world around them. Indeed, they are inherent in all of God's creation. Romans 1:20 states: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead." God has made it possible for all to know something of His nature. Saint Athanasius wrote that "by pondering the harmony of creation, [we] come to know its Ruler." He is a God of order, and that order may be perceived and in some measure understood in all of creation. The same inherent order, geometry, and proportion are in the spiral of the DNA molecule, the spiral of the sea shell, and the spiral of the galaxies. The same proportional harmonies may be perceived in a pine cone, a flower, the human body, and in the notes of the musical scale.

The basis of these proportional harmonies was quantified by the Classical Greeks and is referred to variously as the Golden Mean, the Golden Section, and the Divine Proportion. In his definitive work on the Golden Mean, *The Power of Limits*, Gyorgy Doczi summed up its significance in its power "to create harmony [arising] from its unique capacity to unite the different parts of a whole so that each preserves its own identity, and yet blends into the greater pattern of a single whole." The record of the arts displays, from prehistory to the

## S. SOPHIA

CONSTANTINOPLE, 532-537 AD



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twentieth century, an astonishing variety of styles and expressions employing the same principles of composition and proportion based upon the Golden Mean. An artist created in God's image and employing the principles of the Golden Mean can be a co-creator bringing order, balance, harmony, integration, and beauty into the world.

The creation of beauty is not an arbitrary and capricious process subject to the eye of the beholder or to the eye of the artist. Beauty is the result of an intentional effort to bring forth a work in conformance with the revealed order of creation and the nature of the Creator, an effort which transfigures ordinary elements and subject matter into a higher spiritual dimension.

To paraphrase Philip Sherrard, quoted at the beginning of this article, the true artist will give us his eyes so that we can see through his creation the Whole, something of the Creator of all. If artists can begin to grasp the authentic nature of their calling, be willing to acquire the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge of their respective venues, and deliberately set out to create the beautiful, whether in the sacred or secular context, perhaps the truth of the eternal will be made evident in the life of the observer. By doing so, the artist will be elevated in the process.

*“God is precisely the Highest Beauty through communion with Whom everything becomes beautiful. . . . Beauty is understood as Life, as Creativity, as Reality.”* (Victor Bychkov) ❧