

## From ashes to beauty – Exploring the Artist – An Orthodox Perspective

### **The Place of the Artist**

The place and prominence of the artist in society has shifted radically in the last millennium. Very little is known about the artists prior to the end of the Middle Ages. The architects, artists, and craftsmen were not identified. They did not sign their works. Artistic accomplishments were brought forth out of the cultural context and were an expression of the world view or the faith of the people and the time in which they were created. Just as we do not know the names of the bankers, or contractors, or chariot builders, the names of artists were not recorded. It was not until the Renaissance and the rise of humanism that artists began to be identified and sign their works. Even so, the great art works prior to the twentieth century were generally an expression of the virtues and values of a society that was not focused in upon itself. The creativity of the artist was focused upon giving form to a commonly accepted and objective expression of a God centered consciousness.



As man has increasingly become the measure of all things, name recognition has become all important. Public relations companies exist to “brand” corporations and individuals in order to establish name recognition. The production of art became an end in itself. In the process, artists became the self proclaimed prophets and high priests of culture and the evolving consciousness of humanity. Consequently, artists of all types have become identified with eccentricity, amoral and immoral behavior and life styles, and out of the main stream of everyday life. Some would say above the mainstream, however it is most often far below the mainstream, if not in total degradation. The more exalted the artist, the weirder they appear, and attempt to appear. The over educated elite have gotten on the band wagon and embraced the new prophets of the age as those with superior sensitivity and powers of perception. Those who could not appreciate and would not buy into this deception were branded as ignorant, spiritually dull, or living in the past. Artists who persisted in traditional forms of expression were ignored and relegated to the category of mere craftsmen.

In the Hebrew and Christian traditions, artists have had a sacred and holy calling. They lived a life within and not separate from their community. What they produced was designed to bring clarity and beauty into the life of the community. Their creations focused upon and illustrated the values of the community which bound the community together and transcended the existence of the community. Three essential elements made this possible. First, was an innate and traditional understanding of every artist as to their calling and responsibility. In the Christian consciousness was also a Biblical understanding rooted in the Old Testament of the holy character of the creation of artistic works. This has been preserved largely intact in the tradition of Orthodox iconography. Second, the creative process, though not specifically set down as a formula, occurred within the context of a philosophical framework which transcended the personal idiosyncrasies of the individual artist. This has to do not only with the skill of the artist and the ability to select the proper medium in which to work, but also an understanding of why an effort was important or worth undertaking. Third, the question of beauty did not arise. Artists followed a system of composition and proportion that was based upon the created world around them.

## **The Calling and Responsibility of the Artist**

“There is a great similarity between the aesthetic experience and the religious experience...at its highest point art aspires to a vision of the plentitude 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.”<sup>2</sup>

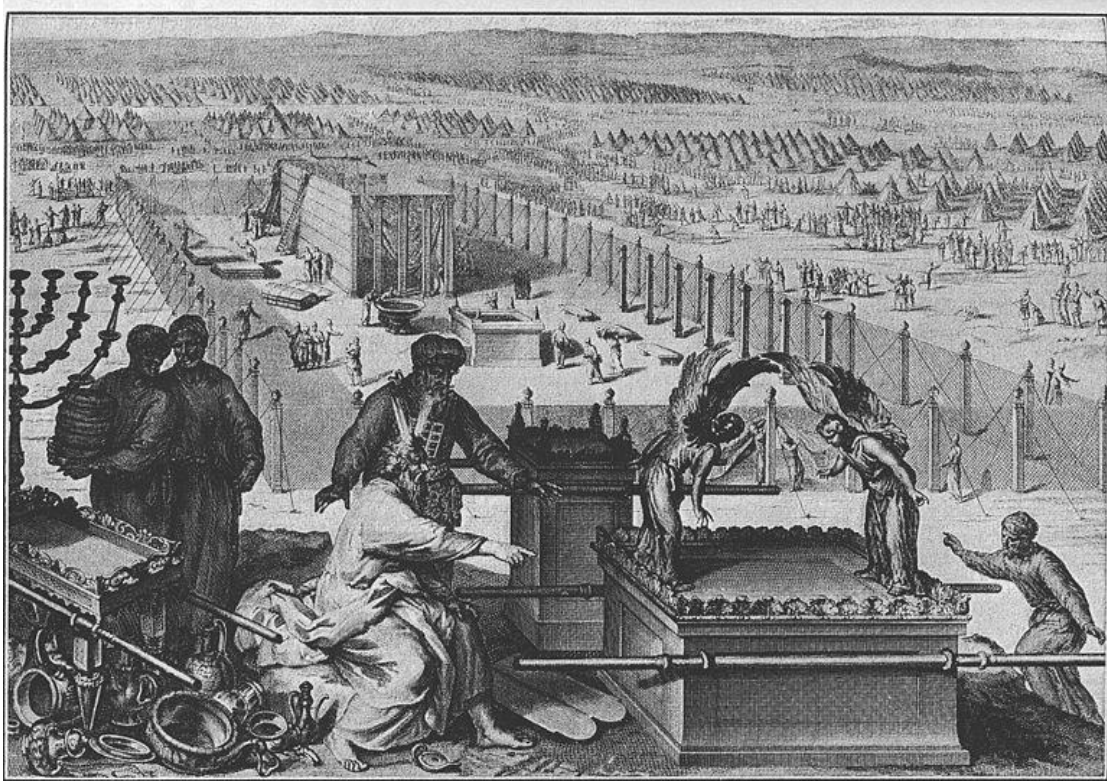
In all of the Old Testament, only one person is said to have been filled with the Spirit of God. This person was not a prophet, priest, or king, but an artist. The scriptures are consistent in saying that the Spirit of God was with or upon prophets, priests, and kings, but they do not use the words “fill”, 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: Bezaleel and Aholiab. The verses quoted below have relevance not only to the calling of the artist, but provide the key to the creative process.

“Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘See, I have called by name Bezaleel 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 31:1-4.

The above is repeated in Exodus 35:30-32, with the following added:

“And He has put in his heart the ability to teach, in him and Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. To them He hath filled with wisdom of heart to work all manner of work.”



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Names had significance, and uncovering their meaning enlarges our perception of the importance of personalities and events. The Lord called by name Bezaleel. 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.” Exodus 49:10). The artist Bezaleel, 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.” Exodus 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 have 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.

Bezaleel, 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 discernor.

### **The Importance of the Artist**

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 will out of nothing, while 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, non-verbal 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, *symballos*, "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 in painting, music, poetry, architecture.

The material world, which God said was “good” remains incomplete and subject to defacement and corruption if it is not sacramentally united to man, its prophet, priest, and king. We are told in 2 Peter 1:3-4 that “His divine power has given unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that has called us to glory and virtue. Whereby are given unto us exceeding and precious promises; that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” The artist in particular by being a partaker of the divine nature is one who has been called to participate in the transfiguration of the material through his works.

In his book *The Aesthetic Face of being, Art in the Theology of Pavel Florensky*, Victor Bychkov stated “Aesthetic phenomena are perhaps the widest and most available gates to the spiritual realm.”<sup>3</sup> If indeed 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?

1. Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art*, Golgonooza Press, Ipswich UK, 1990, p. 15-16

2. Victor Bychkov, *The Aesthetic Face of Being Art in the Theology of Pavel Florensky*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood NY, 1993, p. 23

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