

How Should Christians Be Stewards of Art?

A Response to Calvin Seerveld

Nathan Jacobs
Assistant Professor of Theology
School of Biblical and Religious Studies,
Trinity College, TIU

In my previous essay I argue in favor of a realist view of art and show how these same arguments answer the question of stewardship. In Calvin Seerveld's reply, he offers a number of his own conditions for Christian stewardship of art. I identify at least six:

1. Christian art should display a redemptive spirit.
2. Christian art should bring aesthetic blessings to one's fellow man.
3. Christian art should bring hope to one's neighbor.
4. Christian art should be imaginative.
5. Christian art should stir the imagination of others.
6. Christian art should display artistic finesse.

Amid these conditions is a threefold ambiguity, to wit, Seerveld (a) does not explain from whence these conditions come or how they are grounded; (b) whether these conditions must be met by the artwork, the artist, or both; and (c) whether these conditions, when met, constitute real properties of that by which they are met. The importance of these ambiguities becomes clear when considering two possible readings of Seerveld.

The first reading assumes an affirmative interpretation of ambiguity (c): the above conditions, when met, constitute real properties. On this realist reading, condition 4, for example, indicates that *being imaginative* is a real property of either the artist, the artwork, or both—depending on how ambiguity (b) is resolved. If we take our realist cues from my aforementioned defense of realism,

we could say, in resolution of ambiguity (b) that *being imaginative* is an inward perfection of the artist, which is displayed outwardly in the artwork. On such a reading, the ambiguity concerning the grounding of these conditions—ambiguity (a)—could then be resolved by appeal to the realist ontology outlined in my previous essay.

If Seerveld's conditions are read in this way, the claim is largely in keeping with my position. On this reading, Seerveld and I share a common foundation (realism) but differ in emphasis: He has focused on specific perfections that he thinks especially important in Christian stewardship, whereas I have focused on the grounding of art and how this grounding informs the question of artistic stewardship. To be sure, I would agree that many of the things Seerveld names are perfections that an artist may possess and that may, as such, be manifest in the artistic sphere. Therefore, while our differences in emphasis and application are important, they would not, on this reading, be as serious as may appear on first blush.

The second reading of Seerveld assumes a negative, or antirealist, interpretation of ambiguity (c): The above conditions, even when met, do *not* constitute real properties of either *artist* or *artwork*. On this reading, the terms *art*, *artist*, and *artwork* are nominal: They are general nouns the mind applies to certain objects, but these terms are not grounded in reality. What makes someone an *artist* or something *artwork* is being so named. The only objective statements that can be offered about *artwork* are factual descriptions of its material composition (e.g., the object is stone). Beyond such facts are only assertions of preference and statements of utility (e.g., the object is conducive to a fun day in the streets of Chicago), which are relative. As for the boundary lines of these nominal terms (i.e., what does and does not constitute *art*), they are arbitrary. Much like a game, the rules might have been different, and they are subject to change.

On this second reading, Seerveld's six conditions express one of two things. They may be expressions of Christian morality generally. That is to say, the grounding of Seerveld's six conditions is the general obligations of man before God—*all Christian men ought to be kind in whatever they do*, for example. Yet, uniquely *artistic* obligations do not exist, for *art* (and related variants) are nominal terms.

Alternatively, Seerveld's conditions could express a form of elitism. That is, if *art* is a social convention, then the passionate presentation of said conditions is indicative of the imposition of a subculture's arbitrary whims upon others. (To be sure, an objectivist view is not subject to this charge, anymore than is a mathematician who seeks to instruct others in the rules of arithmetic; an antirealist view, by definition, pushes opinion void of objective validity.) The only

reason to do so would be if one thinks his taste superior to the taste of others, not in the sense of having a more accurate grasp on some objective reality but in the sense of being more refined in some social sense—he is part of the in-crowd that establishes norms and trends.

According to my previous installment, I am inclined to think that the realist reading of Seerveld offers the most cogent position. Yet, rarely does Seerveld speak like a realist. Perhaps the closest he comes is his passing remark that skill is properly basic in art. Far more ample is the evidence for the antirealist reading. Three places in his essay come to mind. The first is where he claims that “there is no difference between artistic events and/or products and ordinary life.” The second is where he claims that artistic judgment is subjective, drawing attention to the (supposed) subjective reflections of surgeons on surgery. (I will be sure to avoid whatever surgeons Seerveld uses!) The third is where he claims that artistic standards and criteria of stewardship change with time, appealing by analogy to Joseph’s changing economic policies. All three of these assertions indicate an understanding of art that is relative, circumstantial, socially bound, and ever-changing.

If we follow the trail of antirealist evidence, we come to the aforementioned fork in the road concerning the grounding of Seerveld’s six conditions: Are they grounded in general moral mandates or, are they grounded in a cultural elitism? As with realism versus antirealism, the evidence points in both directions. Seerveld’s frequent appeal to Scripture (whether rightly divided or not) gives indication that he sees many of these conditions as Christian obligations, full stop, and that, by extension, are obligations of the Christian stewarding art.

Yet, hints of cultural elitism also appear in Seerveld’s reply. This comes across, for example, in Seerveld’s treatment of *Precious Moments* products. While I am no defender of the artistic merits of *Precious Moments*, I cannot help but wonder why these products do not meet Seerveld’s conditions. They have redemptive aims; some consider them *imaginative* (Seerveld does not define the term); and they lift their buyers up, encouraging them. Moreover, given the grand scale on which these products are distributed, it would seem that *Precious Moments* are examples *par excellence* of Christian stewardship of art as defined by Seerveld. Yet, he dismisses them as “kitsch,” while exalting a one-inch statue by John Tiktak. Why? Without realist grounds, I fear the reason is simply that the modern art culture would find Tiktak’s work fashionable and endorsement of *Precious Moments* to be a *faux pas*. Unfortunately, this fear is reinforced in Seerveld’s talk of those outside the modern art culture as “ordinary” and “simple”—and, based on what he would entitle an art manual for such persons, “dummies.”

So, how should we read Seerveld? In light of the foregoing, I am inclined to think the best reading is a combination of the three. I do not take this to be *best* in the sense of *most cogent*, but *best* in the sense of *most accurate*. I would argue, based on the foregoing, that Seerveld does not have a systematic position on the metaphysical grounding of art. Thus, his language and ideas display this ambiguity in an uneasy mingling of realism and antirealism, and oscillate among artistic objectivism, moralism, and elitism.

Given that Seerveld and I are in agreement to whatever extent he is a realist, I will speak to the antirealist side of this equation. To the antirealist side, I would make two points. First, I would draw attention to the fact that, in my previous essay, I have given an argument for why realism must be presumed, and how art is objectively grounded as a result. No counter-argument has been offered. Antirealism, where asserted or hinted at, is just that—bald assertion.

Second, if antirealism is right and art is an ungrounded, nominal social construct, then two key exhortations by Seerveld become incoherent. The first is his exhortation to be the “best” subjective art critic one can be. Terms such as *best* or *better* imply a standard by which one is judged straight or crooked. If, however, art is not objectively grounded, there is no standard by which to judge a response better or worse, crooked or straight—except, perhaps, the whims of the art subculture, which would lead us straight back to the charge of elitism.

A second exhortation in Seerveld that becomes unintelligible under antirealism is his call to transformationalism—When Christians abandon a discipline, it rots. Integral to transformationalism is the concept that every square inch of this world is subject to redemption; however, the concept of redemption hangs upon the concept of archetypal ideals from which this world is divergent. If the art world is a social convention, then it may be redeemed only where it overlaps with some objective sphere, such as morality. However, the discipline of art proper cannot be said, by the antirealist, to be at odds with its archetypal ideal nor restored to it, any more than the rules of a board game may be said to be at odds with some archetypal ideal or restored to it.

I close by appeal to the one sphere in which Seerveld and I plainly agree—objective standards are binding, namely, morality. Throughout Seerveld’s reply, he appeals to various moral mandates in Scripture. One mandate he did not mention is how we treat the foreigner. When encountering the modern art world, the foreigner often has a sense of disorientation. He steps into a world of unidentifiable objects, signed urinals, horses hung from ceilings, near-bare canvases, and any number of additional oddities, think-pieces, and social commentaries. The foreigner scratches his head because he does not get it, or he replies that his two-year-old could do better—and he may be right. Yet, this same person

is no foreigner when encountering the works of masters, such as Rembrandt, Caravaggio, or Michelangelo. I am convinced that these polarized experiences are the product of two different worlds. The former is disorienting to the foreigner, not because he is uneducated, but because it is, in so many ways, a language game to which he is uninitiated. It is this fact—indeed, this chosen course of action by the contemporary art world to construct a contrived subculture—that makes him a foreigner and is the cause of his disorientation, marginalization, and inevitable exclusion. By contrast, his encounter with the sublime beauty of high-classical artwork is not disorienting because these are grounded in the real to which all have access and in which all are invited to participate. Before these realities, none are foreigners by nature, only by choice.

As one who is firmly committed to an objectivist view of art and is at home among the real, Seerveld's offer to update my cathedral is a ghastly proposal. Were he to succeed in doing so, my response would be the same as many of the elders who saw the building of the second temple in Jerusalem: I would weep at the lesser glory of the new temple—and I already do.