

the
Art
issue

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We asked some friends to reflect on the relationship between Christianity and Art. The articles in this issue are the result.

God in the Museum

Michael Mitchell

My wife and I were standing in front of a painting by Pierre-August Renoir at the Fort Worth Museum of Art during the Impressionist Exhibit a few years ago. Though crowded, the cavernous room was hushed—the reverential atmosphere of a cathedral swaddling the works of the late-19th-century Impressionist master. As I studied the painting, I was struck speechless by the sublime splash of color, the merging of brush strokes that captured the serenity of the pastoral landscape, and the coquettish innocence of the young female subject. When my wife asked my opinion, the beauty of this painting evoked one mumbled, awestruck response from me:

“God.”

Perhaps this answer would be stupefying to some; after all, Renoir hadn’t painted a portrait of Jesus. There wasn’t a picture of the Bible anywhere in the picture. It wasn’t painted immediately after a morning devotional in which Renoir had listened to a steady stream of Chris Tomlin and Hillsong while working. How could this random painting of a woman sitting in the sunlight lead one to think of God?

The fact is that Pierre-August Renoir had the same ten fingers and toes that I do. He had a brain which resided in a skull, which was also covered by skin. Like

me, he had a beard. His French was obviously a little better than mine, but other than that Renoir and I shared many similarities; and yet, if that same paint brush had been placed in my hand and the blank canvas set before me, the result would have been jarringly different. Why? Because Renoir had something that I don’t have: no amount of studying, practicing, loving, and appreciating will ever approximate what he was able to do. He had a gift—and if there is such a thing as a “gift,” then it necessarily implies the existence of a gift-Giver.

The fact that there is beauty in the world is a testament to the Supreme Artist Who created the universe *ex nihilo*. This is the essence of the “aesthetic argument” for the existence of God. Regardless of time, place, people group, or philosophy, all humanity has recognized the existence of beauty—some ethereal standard of perfection that stands outside of our own ugly realm.

We may differ on the boundaries of that standard, but we all agree it’s there. Our art is an attempt to transcend this present darkness to see and love the Beauty that is there. Whether or not it is *propositionally* about God matters little with respect to the ultimate truth: art *points to* God whether or not the artist intended to. God is the standard that the artist was attempting to interpret; and He is beautiful and excellent.

In his Easter sermon of A.D. 411, Augustine asked, "Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable?" We Christians know the answer. In addition to having given us His Son to redeem us from sin and darkness, He has also given us the ability to transcend this present ugliness and be comforted by His beauty. This is why many theologians have, throughout the centuries, understood the *imago dei* as an ability to create, as our Father the Supreme Artist creates. Art isn't "something extra" that we staple onto the back of our propositional truths; God's beauty IS true. We spurn His gift when we refuse to develop our ability to love and appreciate art.

As a former agnostic, I came to Christ not through a series of propositions that persuaded me (e.g., the "Romans Road"), but through my understanding of aesthetics. As a literature scholar, I decided to read the Bible entirely through as I would any other work of literature, hoping to demonstrate how ridiculous Christians were for hanging on to this dusty old book. After doing so, however, I was struck with the literary beauty of this work—unlike any I had ever experienced. The cohesive theme, written across 1500 years by authors who'd mostly never met one another, staggered my imagination. The same genius that I had recognized in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ovid, Dante, and Dickens was present in this work. By expressing that beauty, they had been pointing to God—whether or

not they were aware of it. I knew that this book was *different*—and that, therefore, the God to Whom it pointed was also different, and worth knowing. Literature, painting, poetry, fiction, dance, film—these are some of the ways that we transcend this present darkness and point a lost world to the one true God.

I don't know much about Renoir's eternal state. But I do know that, regardless of his intent, he created a world that reflected the genius of his own Creator—revealing His beauty with every stroke. There is only One Who could have inspired this, and it is the answer to all the questions that we ask:

God.



God outside the Bible

Kyle Warnock

Though the Bible gives us incredible insight regarding God's characteristics and actions, it does not contain Him entirely. God can be experienced outside of the Bible. It would be a near-sighted approach to our heavenly Father to believe that He would simply confine Himself to a book and not express Himself through His creation. This isn't to demean the Bible and deem it as an inadequate approach to knowing God, but rather it influences how we experience God outside of the Bible. The Bible is the very foundation that will lead us to experience God in His creation.

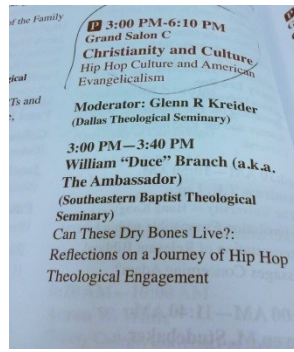
I personally love to be outside, especially when the weather is warm and sky is clear. Two of my favorite places to be when the weather is like this are the prayer walk on campus and the other is my front porch at home. I love having the opportunity to walk around the prayer walk and have a conversation with God. Although I may be able to read the Bible in my room and have a powerful encounter with God, I love to pray with God while walking around outside and ruminating on how He created everything in my surroundings.

The same is true when I'm sitting on my front porch at home. I live in the country in west Texas and I have

the opportunity to see the night sky unfazed by city lights. When I am able to gaze upon the vastness of the night sky, I often find myself at peace knowing that the God who has created all of this holds my world in His hands. It is on my front porch that I have experienced God in the most profound ways in my life. These moments have provided some profound clarity in my journey with Him.

God isn't nature itself, but God may be found in the nature that He created. Allow God to move in your life through His creation.





God in Hip Hop

Terance Espinoza

I grew up on 90s hip hop. When youth group steered me towards Christian music I found that the Christian hip hop scene was sparse. As much as I liked T-Bone and King Shon & the S.S. Mob, there are only so many times you could play those cassettes before wanting more. In the days before YouTube, Spotify, and smartphones (and the internet, for that matter), music was difficult to come by, so as I went to college and then grad school I didn't keep up with the Christian rap scene.

My first experience with post-90s Christian hip hop occurred in church. Pastor Ed Tyler at Christian Life Center, Santa Cruz, California, introduced his sermon by playing a video from 116 Clique's *13 Letters* album. Not only did that reaffirm that I was in the right church, but it rekindled my love for hip hop by showing how there was a whole new world of quality Christian hip hop out there. That moment in the pew still stands out to me as a profound example of what a multicultural, multi-generational church can be. It inspired me to continue to work towards bridging disparate cultures within the body of Christ.

At the last Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Atlanta there was a session entitled "Hip Hop Culture and American Evangelicalism." William "Deuce" Branch (aka The Ambassador) and Trip Lee gave a narrative history of Christian hip hop theology, spoke about the sometimes-distrustful relationship between evangelical and hip hop cultures, and

suggested avenues for further collaboration between the Christian hip hop and evangelical scenes.

For over three hours in this ETS session, pastors, theologians, professors, and musicians sat together and took seriously the theological contributions of Christian hip hop. Sitting there and engaging in theological reflection was inspiring, and got some of us talking about continuing that sort of discussion here at SAGU. We are currently exploring ways to do this in the spring. We may not be able to bring outside artists in, but we would like to set aside a time to get together and dialogue about the impact that hip hop, Christian or otherwise, has on our lives.



Announcements

Spring Courses

REL 4413: History of Modern Revivals will examine revivals from the 18th century birth of Evangelicalism to the modern era. It's not necessarily a how-to, but will closely examine various revival movements. If you've ever wanted to know more about revivals, their origins, and their impact on societies, this may be the class for you. (Mon, 6-9 pm)

BIB2213: Biblical Languages & Tools will teach you to read Greek and Hebrew, and will practice Bible translation using physical & digital tools. If you're intimidated by language, can't fit languages into your schedule, or just want some experience (or more experience) with the Biblical languages, this class may be for you. (T-R 1:50-3:10)

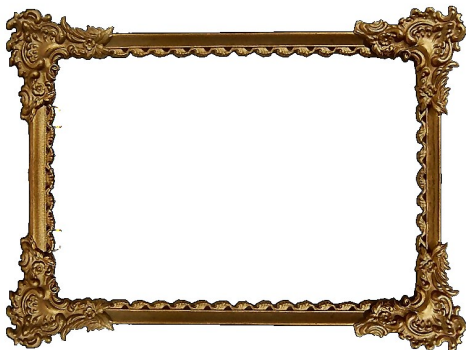
BIB2323: General Epistles will be a book study on Hebrew, James, Jude, and 1 & 2 Peter. The course will explore their 1st century Palestinian backgrounds and reflect on ways to apply their respective messages to the 21st century church. If you love the Bible and want to learn more about these books, this class may be for you. (MWF 1:45-2:40)

Like to Write?

We're looking for writers. *Soli Deo Gloria* is published twice a semester and we want your articles, book or album reviews, restaurant reviews, Spotify playlists, or other material you'd like to share. Contact tespinoza@sagu.edu if you are interested.

DIY Mondrian

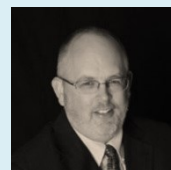
This month's cover is inspired by Piet Mondrian's *Tableau I*. Make & post your own Mondrian-inspired picture in one of the blank frames throughout this newsletter, tag us on Facebook or Twitter and if we share it you win a prize (a Hershey's bar to ease the pain of finals week). #DBTMondrian.



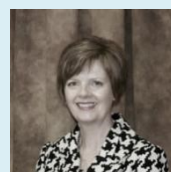
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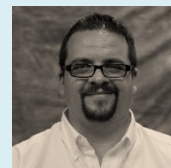
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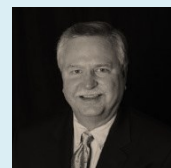
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