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# Erotic, but not Pornographic

BY JOHN PECK

**The amazing new pervasiveness of pornographic art is enough to make us wonder if there can be erotic art that is not pornographic. Can we still produce distinctively Christian art that is true to the biblical vision of sexual love? Our generation desperately needs that vision.**

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**O**ur culture is fairly saturated with art products—not only pictorial images, but also art in literature, dance, and even music as well—that deal with sex in ways that assault our moral sense as Christians. Distressingly, we are becoming used to this; but in our more lucid moments we recognize these products to be “pornographic.” The mass media (a phenomenon specific to our age) has raised the public availability of this pornographic art to new levels worldwide. Its allure and amazing new pervasiveness are enough to make us wonder if there can be erotic art that is not pornographic.

A tragic result is that most contemporary Christians, and especially evangelical Christians of the western world, are not capable any longer of producing erotic art. We would be frightened. Maybe I’m wrong, but certainly we have problems producing erotic art for our generation that is really true to the biblical vision of sexual love. Yet our generation desperately needs that vision.

Among Christians, sex has always been an unruly animal in our backyard, frighteningly powerful, horrifyingly pleasurable, and yet unavoidably necessary. But at least we knew the rules of sexual activity, even if their rationale was unclear. Art, on the other hand, was uncharted territory. In a life committed to saving souls from a lost world, art was at best a worldly distraction, justified only by being used as religious or moral propaganda. With no clear aesthetic criteria, much of our religious art was unbearably kitschy and inept; amongst aficionados we were a laughing-

stock. And any art having sexual implications has been automatically taboo.

This might be regarded as rather strange since we are committed to a foundational text, the Bible, that is saturated with positive references to art forms, including music, song, storytelling, the plastic arts in the sanctuary, and even poetry that is often quite secular in content. Specially relevant here is the Song of Solomon, an erotic poem in the heart of Scripture, with virtually no religious language in it—no mention of prayer, sacrifice, worship, temple, or priest, with but one reference to the Sacred Name, abbreviated, as a sort of adjective! Perhaps even worse still, some of the language is uncomfortably explicit. If it were not in Scripture, it would be difficult, by common Christian criteria, to regard this as “acceptable to the LORD”!

### **DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN ART**

Our modern global culture, reflected in its artwork, is fragmented, alienated from historical precedents, and lacking agreed symbols, even among Christians. “Onward, Christian soldiers,” for instance, which to past saints was a proclamation of allegiance, sounds to a later generation like mindless triumphalism. We are confronted with a smorgasbord of artistic styles—cubist, surrealist, constructivist, abstract, and primitive—which are often experimental, and all are struggling to achieve something that may be called “pure” or “authentic.” The question arises, of all these, is there anything *distinctively Christian*, or not?

I’m convinced that there can be distinctively Christian art, even when it has no obvious religious or moral content. This is not to say that religion and morality are unimportant, simply that they are not adequate as defining criteria for Christian art. I have seen religious pictures that portray Jesus more like a film star than a homeless rabbi.

Other qualities will be characteristic of typically Christian artwork. To begin with, Christian art will express a distinctively Christian worldview. This will have at least two implications for our purpose: a distinctively Christian conception of art and a distinctively Christian understanding of sex.

For a Christian worldview, it is surely necessary to go back to our founding literature. We have in Scripture the literature of a people that, as a special means of divine revelation, provides an authoritative sample of God’s dealings with human beings in a particular cultural environment. Some features will stand out clearly.

First, Scripture affirms the reality of our physical existence, a reality derived from the will of God. Though spoiled, the physical world is good, not evil. Typically Christian art will recognize this; it will tend to be “incarnational.” While it may use abstract styles, it will not despise representational art; nor will it distort the physical world in ways that make it fundamentally sinister. But because creation *is* spoiled, the artist will be

wary of idealizing it. Indeed Christian art will be prophetically critical of any sentimental optimism that glorifies the rose with no awareness of the thorn.

The hope of divine redemption is the second salient feature of the Christian view. I have and treasure a painting of downtown Detroit, a street with low, drab monochrome houses, with flat, horizontally lined frontages. Yet in one corner there is a green shrub, which is just enough to offer the hope of new life. And above, some of the clouds have a vague, subtle angelic shape.

Third, Scripture views humanity as imaging a transcendent Reality, and as capable of making moral self-commitment to either good or evil. Flowing from these three key features come distinctive views of history, work, social relationships, nature, truth, authority, and, of course, sex.

#### **TOWARD A CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC**

If we are to develop this so badly needed critical sense, we shall of course learn from current discussions of art, but we cannot rest there. We need an aesthetic, or conception of art, that corresponds with the way Scripture uses art. An outstanding biblical art form is that of story telling. We might, as a sample, start with the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. The context is a query about the most important one of the 613 commandments of the Law. The questioner was probably expecting to engage in a rabbinic debate on the meaning of "neighbor;" instead, he gets a story. Everybody relaxes; we all love a good story. Art is thus akin to play, with an initial offer of pleasure.

Jesus sets the scene with a formalized vagueness, "a certain man" (KJV)—almost, "once upon a time." This arouses a particular kind of expectation by introducing the hearer to a "let's pretend" world, which is imaginary, but analogous to this real one. It is an enjoyable world, a world that you can enter into, make decisions, play a part, or just watch, without facing any of the usual consequences. A war film may take you into a war scene quite vividly, but you will never get shot; or listening to a stirring military march you may feel the disciplined pride of the soldier, but never have to fire the gun. Now any "let's pretend" world must have its own self-consistency to make it credible. An actor forgetting his lines can be bearable, but letting the audience notice it is unforgivable.

So here, in a typical triad of events, the lawyer is initiated into a moral dilemma. He initially appears secure: he can pass judgments freely because he doesn't have to walk the road, meet the Samaritan, and so on. The power of the art then becomes clear: "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Jesus asks, and our moral character is located by our response. The lawyer is trapped; refusing to use the hated name, he mutters, "The one who showed him mercy." The method of communication is indirect, slipping past the mental guards put up by

prejudice, pride, and even logic. The truth is left implicit in the story, for the lawyer to *work it out for himself*. Christian art then, for those who will receive it, will be redemptive, rescuing the imagination from the limitations of creatureliness and sin.

Not all art is so obvious in its effect, of course. It is often more subliminal, simply giving a sense of discovery, satisfaction, hope, or whatever. But always a work of art *initiates the recipient into an experience that carries a meaning or value significant enough for the artist to want someone to share it*. Thus poetry can initiate us into emotions and desires beyond our normal experience, drama into experiences of social interaction, music to provisional moods, painting to fresh ways of seeing the world, and so on. Art does this by providing clues, using what Calvin Seerveld calls “allusiveness,” to enable us to see for ourselves. The simplest example of this process is in a good joke. Of course the artist takes a considerable risk of being misunderstood, ignored, or rejected—the sort of risk that Christ took in becoming human.

All this suggests some important criteria for evaluating art. One criterion is that good art must maintain the illusion; the outside world must not intrude. Another is that the clues must be adequate, but not too obvious. A third is about the values implicit in the experience into which the recipient is being drawn. Imagine Jesus telling the story with the Samaritan going over to the wounded man, laughing, and giving him a kick in the ribs! A revealing example for applying this third criterion is a comparison of Fagin’s fate in Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist* with that in the musical *Oliver*. In the first, Fagin, that procurer and master of young thieves, is hung; in the other, he meets his child thief protégée and they go off laughing together. We might ask the question, how could that second ending, unthinkable a century ago, give us pleasurable feelings today? Why, given the modern preoccupation with the evils of child abuse, wouldn’t we want to change it? Such questions show how a work of art can unmask hidden, unconscious attitudes to life that develop in us through interaction with our social environment, even as Christians. And this is not merely a matter of content; style also comes to bear. On the one

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hand, abstract art may wrongly divorce meaning from sense experience; yet on the other, representational art may suggest that sense experience is all there is. Employing explicit Christian symbols may not help, for they also can be too obvious.

### **CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF SEX**

Clearly, if art initiates us into a world where values are implicit and powerfully operative, developing our sensitivity to erotic art demands a consideration of a biblical Christian attitude toward sex. Some years back, my wife and I were foster parenting a teenage girl who had run away from home. One afternoon Carol happened to be in the room as I was listening to a tape of a talk I had given about sex. Apparently she must have heard some of it, because later in the day she questioned me in a tiny voice, fraught with shocked disbelief, "Aren't you supposed to have sex, then, if you're not married?" Recreational sex is a norm now for many people, and even among Christians, marriage as an institution has come under challenge. We are aware that other cultures have different forms of sexual relationship. So in this, as in so many other issues today, we have to go back to basics.

We are dealing here with a human activity, which is to say, the activity of beings made in the image of God. To function as an image means that our lives, all our activities, point beyond ourselves. They are never *merely* actions. So, like everything else, sex is body language. So, what does sexual intercourse *mean*? Clearly, the bans on adultery and fornication demand that sexual expression has to take place within a relationship of mutual commitment. But equally clearly, the form of commitment is particularly significant, since it has the potential for reproduction. All of this adds up to intercourse meaning, on the part of both partners, "*I surrender control of myself to you.*" Paul, with stunning egalitarianism, expresses this in terms of authority (1 Corinthians 7:4). Sex is also an appetite, that can be checked, directed, or stimulated, and because of its special character, it can be stimulated to a point when control is weakened and finally lost altogether.

### **EROTIC, BUT NOT PORNOGRAPHIC**

This enables us to gain some understanding of the difference between pornography and eroticism. If intercourse means surrender to another, then obviously the dominant interest and value is in the other person. Of course our instinct is satisfied, and pleurably, for God has made us that we might meet life's needs in pleasure rather than pain. But pleasure is not the main purpose. It follows that any Christian erotic art will focus on the relationship between the persons, rather than on the physical experience. One of the clearest expressions of this I know is in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, where part of the marriage vows has the words, "With my body I thee worship." That our physicality will be present is inevitable, but it will be subservient to that sort of vision.

Some years ago the Tate Gallery in London, which is well known for its avant-garde exhibitions, displayed a large, virtually life-size charcoal drawing. It portrayed a naked woman lying on a bed; on the other side (to the viewer) of the bed, on his knees, was a naked man, looking down at the woman. But what dominated the scene was the look on the man's face—of sheer adoration. Hardly even a smile, more a look of wonder, awe, and worship. Erotic it was, certainly, but not pornographic; the picture had no interest in sexual arousal. To put it another way, erotic love is about self-giving; porn is about possession. It is this that preserves the integrity of the erotic, but not pornographic language of the Song of Solomon.

This example highlights another aspect of our subject. Intercourse is not something that is normally done in public! It is essentially a private matter. (In our culture, unfortunately, this is allied to our intense individualism; we assert that the entire relationship within which it takes place is private, so the public ceremony of marriage becomes a superfluous institution. This reasoning is faulty because if sex symbolizes a total earthly commitment, then it will involve more public things, like common ownership, legal obligations, possible responsibility of children, and so on.) Privacy is an important aspect of our humanity. We sometimes complain of people “who wear their hearts on their sleeves,” meaning they reveal the secrets of their inner life too easily, so that they and their relationships are devalued. An implication of a total commitment is its exclusivity; it cannot be shared with more than one person at a time. Two people consolidate their marital relationship by sharing their privacy together. A significant side effect of the Tate Gallery picture is that the viewer gets a sense that the two figures share something that is not for others to know. By contrast, pornography is a deliberate exposure, implying an invitation to the viewer—or viewers, it doesn't matter—to enjoy the secrets of the body of someone who is not properly theirs to know, and hence to invade her (or less commonly, his) privacy indiscriminately.

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The significance of this deepens on theological reflection, making us aware that privacy is the equivalent in human beings of what holiness is in God. Hence the Song of Solomon is punctuated by language of restraint. The lovers repeat invitations to “come away” and for love not to be aroused “till it please.” The final assertion of the beloved, “my own

vineyard is mine to give" (8:12 NIV)<sup>†</sup>, makes what follows so precious. "Keep your money, Solomon," she is saying, "I give myself away."

The nature of art itself, however, offers a final distinction between the erotic and pornographic. We have seen that art involves a kind of illusion, which Konrad von Lange calls *bewusste selbstausschung* (willing self-deception): the offer of a convincing imaginary world within which we can live for a time, but which, in the knowledge that it is not 'real,' allows us freedom to enter into new modes of experience. What is essential to this is that however close the real and imaginary worlds may be, they must not directly interact. (We may watch a battle occurring in a play, for instance, but not at the risk of our lives! And close to this confusion is the use of art as propaganda, in which the real world is manipulatively associated with that of the imaginary.) By the same token, erotic art may introduce us to new dimensions of sexual attraction and commitment, but if there is a focus on sexual arousal, then the illusion has been abused and the art has become pornographic. Such a production is not only non-Christian; it is also, quite simply, bad art.

#### **NOTE**

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