

Where Are the War Artists?

Discipling Nations with Paint

In Northern France, one may stand in front of one of the most famous altarpieces of all time, the Isenheim Altar, painted by Matthias Grünewald between 1512-1516. The panels measured over 18 feet tall, soaring high into the stone surroundings of the monastery. The artist's gleaming pigment made from ground precious stones is itself worthy of mention; but the history behind the commissioning of the piece is so remarkable, it must be explained to grasp a full understanding of the painting's purpose.

WE
have
accepted
the
MASSACRE
of our
Culture

During a period when Europeans were dying of the plague, monks in a monastery in Isenheim Germany commissioned Grünewald to paint an altar that would cause all who looked at it to be healed. Before the patients were taken in and washed, they were brought before the soaring, grisly painting of the crucified Christ, about whom Isaiah proclaimed, "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquity, surely He bore all our sorrows, and by His stripes we are healed." The monastery would eventually become known as a place of miraculous healing for the terminally ill.

Such a commission is almost unthinkable today. Yet there was a time when all the arts were done for the glory of God, depicting the life of the Scripture, calling man to reflect on his own mortality. From massive biblical compositions to still life, everything was done with a passion for the mission of the day, to communicate the truth of the living Word of God to the illiterate masses of people for whom the Savior died.

It was during the Renaissance period that paintings began to take on a realistic rather than flat, decorative appearance. As perspective was discovered and people were painted in the costume of the day, paintings began to take on accurate depictions of life. People saw themselves in the biblical images portrayed. Purposefully, the life of the viewer was wrapped up in the life of the Scriptures.

Chiaroscuro, (the contrast of light and shade), was incorporated into paintings and carried on through the 1700's to the Baroque period. This chiaroscuro was not only light and shade in the execution of the painting itself, but it was used as a symbol of spiritual light and darkness, spiritual life and death. The people of the day clearly understood the meaning.

This theme was so widely understood that it even made its way to still life painting where it was commonplace to see a picture of beautiful fruit painted together with rotting fruit, or paintings that included human skulls posed with foods on an otherwise beautiful table. These were intentional depictions of biblical passages to remind the viewer that he, too, was perishing, and in need of a decision regarding his eternal destiny.

The Reformation and the Discard of the Arts

In a fervent desire to extricate the faithful of all influence deemed Catholic, the Reformers of the 1500's such as Zwingli cleansed the church of images and relics as well as the organ, and in some churches, music was disallowed entirely. Calvinism abandoned symbolic forms of worship embracing the thinking that the alliance of religion and art represented a lower stage of religious and human development. The Word and the intellect alone were considered the only valid ways to commune with the Spirit. The practice of entering into worship through other senses having been denied, the Church came to abandon the use of art in its worship.

War Artists

But the heart of man hungers for worship and uses symbols to do it. 400 years after the Reformation, the National Socialists of 20th century Germany strategically permeated the mindset of an entire culture to transform thought using art. Before and during the time they came to power, in early 1933, the first project Hitler embarked on as Chancellor, even before building Berlin, was to build the House of German Art. It was to be a massive museum containing the art that would depict the philosophy of his new religion, National Socialism. All other art that did not depict the thinking of the 3rd Reich was outlawed, and the artists labeled as Degenerates.

Goebbels, the master of Nazi propaganda, appointed *Kriegsmahler*, War Artists, to bring back images from the front lines; images of "bravery and courage" which were selectively chosen for printing in the newspapers to stir the hearts of the people with their "great victory and mission." Hundreds of these war artists went out to the Front with the soldiers and boosted their morale. By the end of the war there was an organized division of *Staffel der Bildenden Künstler*. This staff of 100 fine artists, War Artists, were appointed the task of developing art that was not even for the purpose of propaganda, but for posterity to depict the great "victory" that was sure to come.

So where are the War Artists? Not the Nazi painters of perversion and death whose art ended up used as evidence in the Nuremberg trials, eventually banned lest it stir up the mind of war and hatred in a brain-washed Germany. Instead, where are the War Artists who are called to fight the good fight, to be pressing on to the high calling of God in Christ Jesus? Our enemy prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, and we are asleep at the helm.

Where are the War Artists? Where are the gifted artists and musicians who believe the call of 2 Corinthians 5 that says we no longer live for ourselves but for Him who died and

rose again on our behalf? Where are they who believe we became new creatures and we are now ambassadors for Christ? Who see a primary purpose for art is not to seek the glorification offered by this world's system, but rather seek to glorify the Creator who has freely given us all things?

Where are the War Artists who see art as parable, as a tool and method of communication of the Gospel?

Where are the War Artists who believe the great Commission is a mandate, who believe enough in their calling as artists to seek a purpose that will live on after them?

Where are the War Artists who are ready to band together with the army of the Church, to go to the front lines, leading the army in worship, glorifying the One who has already won our victory at the cross? Where are the people who “die daily”, who take up their cross and follow the Savior to death if necessary to fight the battle that rages before us?

We have accepted the massacre of our culture before our very eyes, watching creativity replaced by depravity then renamed “art.” We have accepted as normal what is perverse, and struggle in isolation to survive the spirit of this age, when our God and Father in heaven calls us by name to be adopted into the family of His Church, as a vital part of the Body. Perhaps we are the eyes, but we are need of the hands and the feet and the Head.

God called an artist by name in Exodus 31 to build what would assist people in worship. He knew his name. He prepared his work beforehand and appointed this man, filled with the Spirit in his craftsmanship. If we hold artistic gifts in the same way we hold other spiritual gifts mentioned in Scripture, we would see that these were given for the edification of the body, not for ourselves. We no longer live for ourselves. We live for Him.

Who are the soldiers weary of raising up a flag with their own name and purpose and now sense the voice of God proclaiming a purpose higher than themselves; who reject the self-willed immaturity and narcissistic self-importance that lead only to spiritual shipwreck?

Who are the pastoral allies who will walk beside the next generation of gifted artists and musicians and disciple them as they would a missionary or pastor sent to seminary to plant a church or preach the Word? Where are the seminaries that will equip those called to put a living face on the Gospel of our living Lord?

A soldier sent into battle empty-handed can do nothing but retreat or surrender. We will not retreat, nor will we surrender. We are calling the War Artists and the musicians and the teachers of the Word to form a new army. You know who you are. We will answer the call of our King, moving across this barren landscape that is our culture, empowered by the wind of His Spirit. We will not surrender. We have declared war and we will win.