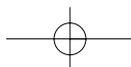
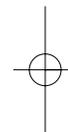
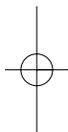
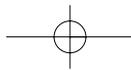


ART *for*
GOD'S
SAKE





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A CALL TO RECOVER THE ARTS

Philip Graham Ryken

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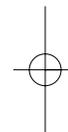
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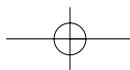
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*To Margaret, Jeff, and all their children;
to the sons and daughters of Jubal and Bezalel;
and to the beautiful Savior who puts the truth in their
work and the joy in their song.*





INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1996 I traveled to New York City to see paintings by Makoto Fujimura. The exhibition was called *Images of Grace*, and I was dazzled by what I saw. Fujimura has mastered the ancient Japanese art of *Nihonga*—in which mineral pigments are applied to paper—and wedded it to the Western style of abstract art. The results are magnificent. The use of mineral pigments gives Fujimura's work a shimmering depth of color, and as I moved through the gallery, I was stirred by the transcendent beauty of the paintings. His artwork also carries deep meaning, especially since each mineral pigment has a symbolic value. Gold represents eternal transcendence; silver—a precious metal that tarnishes through time—represents both the value and mutability of human life; and so on. Fujimura uses this traditional symbolism to give clear expression to his Christian faith. As the title *Images of Grace* suggests, the paintings in this particular exhibition

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were about the grace of God: his common grace in creation, redeeming grace for the city, healing grace for downcast souls, and sacrificial grace for sinners.¹

At its best, art is able to do what Fujimura's paintings do: satisfy our deep longing for beauty and communicate profound spiritual, intellectual, and emotional truth about the world that God has made for his glory. Is it any wonder that the best artists are celebrated?

But there is another side to art—a more difficult side. It is never easy to be a painter, a poet, a musician, or any other kind of artist. While every calling has its own unique trials and tribulations, the life of the artist seems especially hard. There is the difficulty of the art itself—of creating, executing, and perfecting a design or a composition. It is always costly, in personal terms, to produce a work of art. Then, once the work is produced, it is sometimes undervalued. People fail to hear its message or appreciate its artistry. To be an artist is often to be misunderstood. There is also the inescapable fact that many artists are underpaid. But even highly successful artists may struggle with feelings of isolation and inadequacy, with frustration over the elusiveness of expressing transcendent beauty, or with the heavy sadness of their sympathetic identification with human pain. These are some of the sufferings that artists must endure.

Introduction

If anything, things are even more difficult for Christian artists. Some churches do not consider art a serious way to serve God. Others deny that Christians in the arts have a legitimate calling. As a result, Christian artists often feel like they have to justify their existence. Rather than providing a community of support, some churches surround them with a climate of suspicion.

These common tensions were exposed in an article from the student newspaper at a Christian college featuring a senior art student who reveled in her calling: “God made me to be an artist. He gave me that talent. . . . That’s my response to God, to his world, to his message of salvation. When you see something that’s so wonderful, you want to join.” Unfortunately, as the artist learned, not everyone wants to join after all. “By the end of her sophomore year,” the paper said, “she was sick of her peers’ indifference to her calling. She was fed up with comments that suggested art is a waste of time, a field for slackers and weirdoes.” The artist wrote in her journal, “I felt I had to justify myself. . . . That is a terrible thing. I am a child of God. God made me a person who sees the world in a manner that is different from most perceptions. He gave me the urge to create.”²

What hope does the gospel give to someone who has this urge to create?

