

## Article

# The Body of the Artist, in the Body of Christ: Toward a Theology of the Embodied Arts

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**Abstract:** One insight at the heart of embodiment research is that the particular, material human body is the nexus of two loci: as an integration of sensory apparatuses, the body is the receptive locus of the world; at the same time, the body is the locus of responsive engagement *with* the world. Working from the framework of embodiment, this essay is a theological exploration of the arts, with particular attention given to the artist. The first half details two controlling ideas about the nature of embodiment and the arts: (i) the arts are necessarily embodied, and (ii) the Christian artist is in Christ's body. Here I examine how the artwork and the artist are necessarily embodied—the body is the horizon on which the arts are possible. With these two controlling ideas in hand, the second half of the essay considers three implications: (i) the artist works in and for the church; (ii) the arts are a gift of the Holy Spirit; and (iii) the arts are a place where the church experiences the Spirit's working. These implications yield, among other insights, the finding that Christ's body is the horizon on which the Christian arts are possible.

**Keywords:** theology of the arts; theology of embodiment; spiritual gift of art; embodied artist; Christ's body



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## 1. Introduction

One insight at the heart of embodiment research is that the particular, material human body is the nexus of two loci: as an integration of sensory apparatuses, the body is the receptive locus of the world; at the same time, the body is the locus of responsive engagement with the world. Connecting the bodily sensorium with other faculties, Jenni Lauwrens explains that “embodiment acknowledges both the material body and the body’s orientation in the environment—physically, psychically, emotionally, cognitively, and intellectually” (Lauwrens 2022a). My body, then, is not merely my physical placement in the world, as one collection of matter among so much other material stuff. Instead, my body is my *way of being* in the world.

Working from the framework of embodiment, this essay is a theological exploration of the arts. My project stands at the intersection of two areas of focus in embodiment studies: *theology of embodiment*, and *embodiment and the arts*. The first area, theology of embodiment, seeks to give biblical and systematic attention to the Christian person-as-body<sup>1</sup>. The second area, embodiment and the arts, seeks primarily to highlight the importance of the body in the production, display, and appreciation of art (see for instance, Lauwrens (2022b); Burke (2014)). Work in theology of embodiment largely sidelines questions about the arts<sup>2</sup>. This area also reflects many of the concerns from earlier trends in theology of the body, especially in arguing for the integration (or even identification) of the bodily and mental-spiritual aspects of the human (for instance, Cooper (1989); Moreland and Rae (2009)). Work in the second area, embodiment and the arts, is predominantly sociological, not theological, and so is indifferent to theological matters.

This essay fills lacunae from the two research areas by bringing them into conversation with one another. Moreover, this essay advances discussions in those areas by addressing concerns lying at their intersection, but which embodiment scholarship largely ignores.

Put another way, although both areas address important concerns, they do not answer the fundamental question of this essay, namely, *What is the relationship between the embodied artist and God?*, and more specifically, *What is the nature of embodiment for the Christian artist and her art?* I will argue that Christian artists, and their artwork, are embodied twice over, both in their own bodily sensorium, and in Christ's body, the church.

To make my argument, the essay will take the following shape. Divided roughly into two halves, in the first half I detail two controlling ideas about the nature of embodiment and the arts: (i) the arts are necessarily embodied, and (ii) the Christian artist is in Christ's body<sup>3</sup>. More specifically, I examine how the artwork and the artist are necessarily embodied—the body is the horizon on which the arts are possible. I argue that the human way of being in the world is to be aesthetically present to it, and so, once again, body and art are bound. I then look at the Christian artist as embodied in another sense, namely, as incorporated into Christ's body. Having detailed the controlling ideas, in the second half of the essay I consider three implications: (i) the artist works in and for the church; (ii) the arts are a gift of the Holy Spirit; and (iii) the arts are a place where the church experiences the Spirit's working. By way of conclusion, I suggest two broad theological effects of my account.

As a final note, while we may think abstractly about 'the arts', I want to direct attention to the fact that this always refers, ultimately, to individual works of art. Further, an artwork is always a concrete, localized reality<sup>4</sup>. An artwork is just that, an artistic working by an artist. Therefore, in this paper I will be attentive to the artist, specifically, to the artist as an embodied worker of arts.

## 2. The Embodied Artwork

The core of the first controlling idea is that the arts are always embodied. Here we can understand the embodiment of the arts in several senses. Perhaps the most immediately evident is that works of art are in every instance embodied things. Artworks are bodily, in a most basic sense, in that they are formed, sensuous objects. This is obviously true for physical artifacts that result especially from the plastic and visual arts. But less tactile artworks, too, are embodied in this elementary sense. We may turn to music for a couple examples. The Portuguese *fado* is audibly present only so long as the *fadista's* body is in motion, shifting air from his lungs, over vocal cords, past tongue, teeth, and lips—all with sufficient force to continue moving the air in surging waves of sound to listening ears, which themselves do not merely hear music but *feel* it.

Examples like this of the physicality and localization of music are probably familiar to many readers. But with a little further reflection, we find that musical art is substantially more embodied than we may have first thought, going beyond well-worn examples like the one above. For instance, the concert pianist must attend to her body's posture not only whilst she practices and performs, but throughout her entire day. Years ago, a concert violinist stayed at my house for an extended visit. One day early on, this accomplished musician voiced concerns about the strain which the door to the guest room may put on her triceps. Opening and closing the heavy door, repeated through the coming days and weeks, affected the musicality of the violinist's body.

The care exercised by my violinist friend may strike some of us as overdone, too conscientious by half. That is until we realize that music is wholly and essentially embodied—the pianist and violinist (and all others besides) must care for their body as instrumental to their music. The body is instrumental, but it is not a mere means to the musician's musical ends. Rather, the body is essential to the violinist's musicality, and so the body must receive just as careful attention as does the piano and violin. The same principle applies not only to musicians, but across the spectrum of artists as embodied art-workers.

These examples alert us to some of the mutuality between the artwork and the human body, an issue on which Merleau-Ponty is instructive. Applying to the artwork some of his thought about subjectivity, we find that works of art are not mere objects in the world; nor are you and I mere subjects that encounter art as some objective (mind independent)

reality. Instead, there is a mutual relationship of reference between the embodied person and the artwork. Regarding the artist, the artwork is perceived—is known—as somehow part of or coming from her body. For the beholder, the artwork is perceivable insofar as it is a dispositional ‘live option’, as Jan Halák explains,

Merleau-Ponty similarly demonstrates that movement can only be perceived by a subject able to move, i.e., that a perceived movement calls for some of the subject’s motor capacities and is itself a modality for these capacities to activate themselves. (Jan Halák 2016, at 32)

Applying Merleau-Ponty’s analysis to the artwork, we see that the beholder can perceive the work of art only if he is already artistically disposed in some way—dispositions that are fundamentally bodily.

We will consider the artwork’s place in the body in a moment. For now, I will conclude this section by returning to our examples about music and musicians. These help us come to grips with a core idea about the embodiment of the arts, namely, *the body is the horizon on which art is possible*. With this expression I have in mind something like Husserl’s transcendental reduction, which locates the eidetic, or essential, structures on which some act or way of being is possible. Following this approach, we find that the body is essential to art because the artist’s body is the subjective condition on which (and in which, as we will see below) artistic happenings occur.

### 3. The Embodied Artist

The preceding examples serve to show the embodiment of the artwork, even artworks not typically viewed as having bodily presence in the world, such as music. By turning our attention to the singer’s lungs and throat, or the violinist’s muscles, our examples have already begun to introduce the artist’s body as another sense in which we can understand the necessary embodiment of art. Attending to the centrality of the body helps counteract Kant’s view of genius, on which the mind is the true source of artistic inspiration, inspiration that the body then dutifully (and secondarily) carries out. On such a view, the artist is primarily a mind tethered to a bodily frame. Unfortunately, views like this seem to be thriving in the psychology of creativity, so that researchers in the field argue that “the association of creativity with the mind has led to a disregard of the role of the body and sensory experience in the creation of new ideas or actions” (Leschziner and Brett 2019, at 341).

Modern philosophers and scientists, then, have thoroughly partitioned knowledge from craft, that is, *episteme* from *technē*. But things were not always so. The Greek writer Xenophon uses ‘*epistēmē*’ and ‘*technē*’ interchangeably. As a statesman, general, historian, and philosopher, it should not come as too great a surprise that Xenophon recognized the fundamental integration of knowing and crafting. For Plato, like his contemporary Xenophon, a craft is a kind of knowledge. Even so, Plato begins to tease out some of the complexities of *episteme*. For instance, a doctor’s work in healing is a *technē*, one that includes a theoretical element by which the doctor has understanding of his field and can give an account of his actions (as in *Euthydemus* 281a). On this account, theory is a necessary element for craft. This holds true as much for the carpenter’s crafting a table as for the king’s crafting a just city.

Aristotle, who makes a much sharper distinction between *technē* as making and *episteme* as scientific knowledge<sup>5</sup>, nevertheless maintains the tight connection between them. On his account, both *technē* and *episteme* are virtues, dispositions of the soul to act, and the aim of the action is always to achieve some good. Whether that good is theoretical knowledge (*theoria*), practical action (*praxis*), or crafting some tangible object (*poiesis*), the particular person must unite a wealth of know-how, theory, and bodily readiness together into the desired activity.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, for all their differences, these early Greek thinkers advocate that the body is the centre of thoughtful creative activity, drawing our attention to the fundamental bodiliness of both the artist and her artwork.

We will need to exercise caution at this point. By concentrating on the materiality of the artist's body and the material effects of her makings, we may easily view the artist simply as a producer or maker. The oversimplified view of the artist-as-maker is reductionist, yielding a mechanistic picture of artists as art-factories built of flesh. When we look closely at such a picture, we see that the artist is kept around only until factories of steel-and-stone, or nowadays artificial intelligence, can be engineered to take over the art-production role from their human counterparts. Such a reductionist view is not only bleak, it also ignores the embodied nature of the artist (and therefore of the arts).

On a more nuanced view, the artist is in a holistic, embodied conversation with her medium. Heidegger highlights some of the complexity of such a view:

the hand's essence can never be determined or explained, by its being an organ which can grasp. . . Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. (Heidegger 1977)

Each action of the body is essentially and necessarily intellective, affective, and volitional. The artist brings to her task a bodily knowing-in-doing, or just as correctly, doing-as-knowing. We have already seen these elements in Aristotle's idea of virtue, which the medievals called a *habitus* (typically translated into English as 'virtue'): a wise way of being in the world and effectively acting in the world, one so embedded in muscle and mind that the virtuous person is disposed to act this way (a meaning our contemporary word 'habit' still hints at). The virtuous person is poised, she is practiced, able, and ready to act in a certain way to achieve certain ends<sup>7</sup>.

Paul, in his letter to the Roman church, identifies the individual body, or *soma*, as the "self" which we are to present to God<sup>8</sup>. New Testament scholar John Barclay explains that the body is so important for Paul because it is "'deeper' than this or that particular practice" (Barclay 2013). Instead, Paul's concern is with "ethic-structuring orientations, allegiances, and dispositions" which, critically, are manifest in the "physical deployment of [the body's] limbs." In sum, Paul is here discussing a Christian *habitus* that is thoroughly embodied.

We do not need a wholesale acceptance of virtue ethics to value one of its core insights, namely, that equipping the soul to realize an artistic good is at once also an equipping of the body. For the artist, artistic *habitus* is fully embodied. Thus, when we consider the embodiment of the artist, we find more than her producing hands. We find instead those hands in network with eyes, nervous system, deep beliefs, and intentions<sup>9</sup>. In short, the artist is not embodied insofar as she is a physical maker of physical art objects. The artist is embodied in that she is a body artistically habituated: she is artistically virtuous, and that virtue extends, necessarily, throughout her body, thereby disposing her to act artistically in the world.

As an example, we may turn to architect and writer Juhani Pallasmaa. In his influential treatise *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pallasmaa unveils some of the many nodes of contact involved in the architect's artistic workings,

. . . during the design process, the architect gradually internalises the landscape, the entire context, and the functional requirements as well as his/her conceived building: movement, balance and scale are felt unconsciously through the body as tensions in the muscular system and in the positions of the skeleton and inner organs. As the work interacts with the body of the observer, the experience mirrors the bodily sensations of the maker. Consequently, architecture is communication from the body of the architect directly to the body of the person who encounters the work, perhaps centuries later. (Pallasmaa 2005)

Pallasmaa directs our attention to the ligaments connecting the architect's body, the environment, the artwork, and the beholder. In so doing, he helps us begin to see just how embodied are artwork and artist. The artwork is not one physical body alongside the artist's body. It is not as if at time 1 there is only artist and, after some physical activity, at time 2 there is an artwork sitting next to its artist, two objects in space and time. Instead,

as Pallasmaa highlights, the artwork is *in* the artist's body even before it is born into its own materiality. Psychologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone approaches this insight from a psychological vantage, arguing that,

Whatever the artwork, it cannot be separated from the artist, not in terms of the artist's intentions, but in terms of the artist's actual forming of the work itself, her or his compositional process or making of the work. That compositional process is a dynamic process, a process that in essential and basic ways is through and through informed by the process of thinking and movement. (Sheets-Johnstone 2013, at 23)

True, the completed artwork is in time and space, but it is first in the space of the artist's body; the artist out-works the artwork, bearing it into the world from its previous place in the artist's body<sup>10</sup>. In this way we may say that the artwork is doubly embodied. It is in the world by being in the artist, and it is then manifest into the world in its own sensuous form and matter.

The notion that the artwork is in the artist certainly includes, but also goes beyond Plato's insight that the artist has an idea, or mental plan, to which she looks as she works in her medium. As Pallasmaa points out, the building is embedded in the organs and muscles of the architect. 'Embed' has the sense of some item being thoroughly stuck in another. Better for our discussion is the concept of 'incorporation', which draws on Paul's metaphor of grafting<sup>11</sup>. On this conception, a foreign item is integrated onto/into a living organism, the item is now *in* the corpus (i.e., body)—in-corporated—and is hereby part of that living body.

Returning to Aristotle for an example, the carpenter has a comprehensive habitus by which he is prepared to work wisely and effectively in crafting with wood. The wooden object is necessarily embodied, both in its wooden form, and in the habitus of the carpenter; and the carpenter is an artist precisely because his woodworking virtue is a bodily virtue. The necessary embodiment of the artwork and of the artist may be seen as corollaries. More accurately, both embodiments are incorporated within one another.

#### 4. Humans Have Their Being Artistically

This paper's first controlling idea is that the arts are necessarily embodied, and so far we have considered two senses in which this is true: the embodiment of the artwork and its 'incorporated' corollary, the embodiment of the artist. The third and final sense we will consider is the necessary embodiment of the arts as an extension of the aesthetic nature of human embodiment. As an initial line of evidence we may turn to Nicolas Wolterstorff's (1980) dictum that "Artistically, man acts". The idea here is that the purposes of art are coextensive with the purposes of human life. Art, Wolterstorff argues, is our way of acting in the world.

Wolterstorff's analysis of the arts in action prompts us to ask *why* humans act artistically. One compelling reply is that humans act artistically because we are irreducibly artistic beings—*homo aestheticus*, as some have ventured<sup>12</sup>. On such a view, the human person is well-matched to an aesthetic world. The value of this world as an aesthetic one is an important element to the Christian story even from its outset. For instance, when God completes each new stage of creation, God sees it to be good (*tov*), that is, valuable and in harmony with God and God's plan. Only after crafting man and woman and setting them carefully in their geographic-temporal-cultural place, does God survey the whole of God's work and sees that it is *very* good (*tov me'od*): abundantly good, complete.

Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* is helpful here. Often translated as 'being-in', the principal idea is that there is no such thing as bare existence, onto which properties and relations are then added. Instead, and in respect to people, to be a human is already to be in ever expanding, intricate systems of relational involvement with the world. On this understanding, we are not so concerned about some human nature which is essentially artistic. Instead, as Heidegger helps underscore, to be human is to be involved in the world in an



artistic way, both in varying forms to varying degrees of intensity. (Helpful here is Hubert Dreyfus (1990)).

Returning to Genesis 1, this part of the creation story tells us, among other things, that to be human is to be ordered toward harmony. Humans are created into, from, and for an already aesthetic and value-laden universe, all crafted by an aesthetic God. We may therefore correctly say that humans are aesthetic beings. More correct, though, is to say that the human *way of being* in the world is to be in it artistically. Thus, artistically humans act, and this because artistically humans have their being.

To summarize, the first controlling idea is that the arts are necessarily embodied, and we examined three senses in which this is true. The first is that all works of art are formed, sensuous objects. Second, artworks only exist through the artist's body (i.e., through her making), and in the artist's body (i.e., as her artistic *habitus*). Third, the arts are necessarily embodied because the human way of being is artistic. Artistically, humans act. Humanity is contingent—we did not have to exist. Once humans are on the scene, though, so are the arts. The arts are not a result of humanity's existence, but rather the arts are a way that humans necessarily exist. In at least these three senses, we find that the arts are in every instance embodied.

## 5. The Doubly Embodied Artist

The second controlling idea is that the Christian artist is in Christ's body. The Christian artist is embodied twice over: her lived bodily artistic experience, and her life as a member of Christ's living body. The artist, then, is embodied and re-embodied, with both informing and elucidating the other. In this section, we will approach the artist's incorporation into Christ's body by considering several bodily metaphors expressed in scripture.

John gives us one of the most suggestive corporeal metaphors in his gospel, where Jesus explains to Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again,” the latter expression also signifying being born ‘from above’<sup>13</sup>. Jesus' metaphor is just as striking—and puzzling—to modern hearers as to its original recipient. The Christian life is something like that of the foetus: gestating, waiting, needing to be re-introduced into the world, but this time as a new person, somehow dead to self and to sin, and now alive to God in a critical way.

Importantly, the foetus is not self-sustaining but instead depends for its entire existence on the mother's body, which envelops it, feeds and sustains it, speaks to and caresses it, carries it and then carries it into the world and toward full maturity. The person who is (re)born does so into a family, a community. Theologically, the Christian is adopted as daughter or son, that is, born into a pre-existing family which helps care for the infant, and which is itself changed as it makes a place for its newest sibling.

Another biblical allusion that we will consider is the body as the temple of the spirit<sup>14</sup>. Jesus' invisible Spirit takes up residence in believers' ‘hearts’ (our psychological and bodily centre). Because of this residence we offer our entire bodily life as a living sacrifice. Both the dwelling of the Spirit in the body, and the body's sacrificial life of holiness are necessary because some principle of our flesh (*sarx*) is still tied to human limitation, brokenness, and sin. The body, then, is the epicentre of God's sanctifying activity, and the point of expression or realization of that work in the individual Christian. The Holy Spirit is the enactor of God's plan in the body. In embodied action, we carry out God's will in the world and, crucially, in the church.

The final biblical allusion to the body that we will consider is perhaps the most well-known. This is Paul's metaphorical description of the collection of Christ-followers as the body of Christ (*christos soma*). Paul deploys this metaphor several times in his surviving letters, and with it he gives us perception into the nature of embodiment<sup>15</sup>. For Christ's body, the church, is the spatial-geographical location of much divine interaction with the world. It is through and with the body that the world experiences God's working. The church is not the only place of divine action, of course. But as Merleau-Ponty argues with his notion of ‘first cultural object’, the body is the initial place where human behaviour is

manifest (Maurice Merleau-Ponty 2012). Extending this analysis to the church, we find that Christ's body is a primary locale of divine action in the world. As members of the body care for one another in sacrificial service, God—that is, God's love, grace, plan, and provision—is experienced. Thus, the body is a locus of experience with the divine for both Christians and non-Christians.

There are other bodily metaphors in scripture from which we may draw. For example, those who are created in Jesus the Messiah are "God's handiwork" (Ephesians 2:10). Paul's use of *poiema* language here situates the discussion firmly into aesthetic territory. However, the three metaphors we have attended to are sufficient to highlight the main point, namely, that the Christian—and therefore the Christian artist—is incorporated into Christ. From the first biblical metaphor we see that to be incorporated in Christ means that the Christian artist is a new person, a new *Christian* artist, born of Spirit and water. Not just reborn but, as the second metaphor shows, the Christian artist is born into the body of Christ. Finally, the third metaphor shows that the Christian artist is a site of Spiritual presence, the centre of the body—the heart—is where the divine Spirit abides.

To conclude our discussion of this paper's two controlling ideas, let us take stock. So far we have considered the embodiment of the arts in cascading strata of complexity and interconnection. We considered the idea that the arts are necessarily embodied. This embodiment includes the artwork and the artist, since the human artist's body is the horizon on which the arts are possible. What is more, humans have their being as embodied beings and as artistic beings. Both art and artist are embodied, and their embodiment necessarily overlap, or are incorporated into one another. We then considered the idea that the artist is part of Christ's body. As *Christian*, the artist is reborn, born into the Church family, and is a home of the Holy Spirit. Now we will explore the Christian artist as *artist*. By drawing out three implications from the controlling ideas, we will see how the artist in Christ's body broadens our vision for the arts and the artist in the church.

## 6. The Artist in and for Christ's Body

One significant consideration from Husserl's work on embodiment is that a subject is already always present to the other. As embodied, the human person is nested within a matrix of relationships; to be human is to be a person-in-relation<sup>16</sup>. Husserl's analysis accords well with our controlling idea that the Christian artist is an artist in community. Paul, who speaks so much of being a member in Christ's body, continually urges the point that to be Christian is to be in the church, and to be in the church is to serve its other members. We may conclude that, as a member of Christ's body, the artist is called to serve the church. In this regard, the Christian artist is no different than any other Christian. For each follower of Christ is twice embodied: through their own bodily sensorium, and through their incorporation into Christ's body.

In an important sense, the artist is commensurate with the preacher, teacher, prophet, and plumber. As incorporated members of Christ's body, each part is coordinated to the others in a function of service. That is, the telos of each member is the 'fullness' and 'maturity' of the others<sup>17</sup>. The universal call to service excludes certain extremes in how we view artists in contrast to other members in the church. For example, the church cannot adopt the stance toward the artist on which the artist fits into some category distinct from all others by orders of magnitude. Such a view, spurred on by the artworld elite, is voiced to Vincent Van Gogh by a friend in Irvine Stone's *Lust for Life*,

You never have been normal. But then, no artist is normal; if he were, he wouldn't be an artist. Normal men don't create works of art. They eat, sleep, hold down routine jobs, and die. You are hyper-sensitive to life and nature; that's why you are able to interpret for the rest of us. (Stone 2001)

We see here the dramatic separation between artists and everyone else, what Erwin McManus calls "the Great Divide" (McManus 2014). Anything like a 'great divide' view not only isolates artists from the other members of the body, but also leads the church to view artists as something of a priestly class. We catch hints of this priestly function in the

passage above (“you are able to interpret for the rest of us”). Some thinkers explicitly make this sort of identification, going so far as to declare that the artist is “the talented person called to be prophet and priest for the masses, to edify us in great numbers by the beauty that they are able to bring forth”<sup>18</sup>. Certainly artists are some of the best equipped among us to draw out the beauty which God has instilled in creation; and this artistic task is for the edification, or building up, of the church. However, elevating the artist to a function fundamentally different from other Christians goes too far.

On a theology of embodied arts, there is no great divide between the artist and everyone else. Artists, along with each other member of Christ’s body, are called to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, in service to the other members, as Paul explains in his letter to the Romans<sup>19</sup>. In that same place, Paul also recognizes that there are a variety of giftings, and that the members of the church do not all have the same function. One pressing question, then, is How does the artists serve as an *artist*? This question is important, and we will return to it below (in Section 7: *The arts as Spiritual gift*). For the moment, though, I want to stress Paul’s claim that each member belongs to all the others and, as I have argued, belong to each other in such a way as to exclude any great divide between artist and non-artist<sup>20</sup>.

Viewing the arts as embodied in the church also regulates some other popular views about artworks and artists. Take for instance the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’, which was popular especially in 19th century Europe and penetrated into North America during the 20th century. This idea continues to permeate our hyper-individualistic thinking of the 21st century West. On this view, art must be ‘pure’ of any ulterior functions. The artwork “should be independent of all clap-trap”, writes outspoken American artist James McNeill Whistler in 1878, it “should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear” (Whistler 1878). In short, art must be free from serving any functions, including religious ones, other than the artwork itself.

While the church must uphold the intrinsic value of art and maintain a place for abstract art and pure form, the view sketched by Whistler is too extreme. One implication of the incorporation of the artwork within the church is that all works of art do have a common, ultimate function. All art, ultimately, is aimed at serving the body of Christ and furthering Christ’s work in the world. In this way, a theology of the embodied arts proves art to be intensely missional. The arts participate in the calling to serve both the church (by building up the church), and outward, by proclaiming (in its own, artistic ways), Jesus’ Lordship. This implication can be liberating for the artist, who is no longer under servitude of the artwork itself (or the artworld, for that matter). The Christian artist is freed to minister to some part of Christ’s body, and to do so through the Spirit’s empowered activity in her artistic activities.

The Christ-embodiment of the arts also leads us to re-evaluate the idea of artistic ‘authenticity’. Owing much to existentialist philosophy, the artist being ‘true’ to herself is essentially the severing of tradition and duties from the artist’s activity (see Denis Dutton 2005). For the Christian artist, however, to remove the needs and traditions of the church from her artistic consideration is to carve her out from her very limbs and ligaments, to ungraft her from the vine. In so doing she is removed not just from the source of her spiritual life but, because she is doubly embodied, she is removed from the ultimate source of her *artistic* life. As discussed above, the Christian artist is born anew into the church, and so the best way for her to operate in her new identity is to serve the church. Put another way, the Christian artist is most true to herself when she is laying down her artistic life in service to the other members of Christ’s body.

## 7. The Arts as Spiritual Gift

Previously, we saw that the Christian artist receives the general calling to help meet the needs of other Christians in sacrificial service. One biblical theme grounding this idea is Paul’s discussion of the body metaphor to describe the church. On this foundation I argued that the artist is twice embodied. Theologian Katrin Bosse also identifies the double



embodiment of Christians, affirming that “There is no body of Christ without bodies”. Bosse makes the connection between Christ’s body and his availability for Christians in the Spirit, allowing her to conclude that “The body of Christ is to be found where Christ’s—God’s—Spirit is” (Bosse 2021, at 172–73). This connection between the human body, Christ’s body, and the Spirit, is theologically promising and prompts us to look closer at Paul’s discussion of the church-as-body. Amid those discussions, and funding the prospects for their realization, is Paul’s vision for ministry as meeting needs through Spirit-empowered gifting.

I will now investigate two features of the arts in regard to the Holy Spirit’s action in the church. First, the arts are a Spiritual gift to the church, a charism, given in love by the Spirit and realized, in love, by the artist. Second, the artist serves the church in her specific gifting, namely, as artist. The artist does not minister as teacher or prophet. Rather, the artist’s ministry, as a gift meant to meet particular needs, cannot be reduced or folded into any one or more of the other gifts.

Let us begin by considering the arts as a gift of the Spirit to the church. Each instance in which Paul employs the body metaphor in detail (e.g., Romans 12:4–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–30), he does so in context of service. Critically, in the midst of these discussions, Paul also devotes significant attention to the Holy Spirit’s activity of gifting the parts of the body—that is, individual believers—to meet each other’s needs. In those discussions we find a common line of reasoning:

1. The Christian is a member of the body.
2. As member, he is called to serve the needs of the others.
3. He is given gifts by which he is able to then meet those needs.

We see that the gifts of the Spirit are highly intentional, aimed at intersecting with the particular needs of the local group of Christians. Where teaching is needed, the Spirit gives the gift of teaching; where special insight or knowledge of certain events is needed, the Spirit gifts prophecy. Since humans have their being aesthetically, humans therefore also have a range of aesthetic needs. Recall Wolterstorff’s claim that “the purposes of art are the purposes of life” (Wolterstorff 1980, p. 4). Following the line of reasoning just sketched above, we may conclude that the ability to work in the arts is one of the Spirit’s gifts for ministering to the church.

The arts as a Spirit empowered activity are recognized early in the canonical narrative just after the Hebrew exodus from Egypt. To construct the tabernacle—the meeting place between God and humans, heaven and earth—God explains that God will call several artists by name, fill them with his Spirit, and appoint them to their artistic tasks on behalf of the entire community<sup>21</sup>. The artists God called to the kingdom project were apparently already skilled craftsmen. Yet, God still proclaimed it necessary to fill them with God’s own Spirit for those artists to appropriately engage in the artistic tasks at hand.

This story from Exodus helps us to see that the arts as Spiritual gift falls within a wide view of the Holy Spirit’s giftings to the church. On such a view, there are more gifts than the twenty or so mentioned by Paul. Instead, out of love the Spirit gives as many gifts as is necessary for meeting the needs of the church<sup>22</sup>. Further, on a wide view of the gifts, the Spirit may give them instantaneously, or miraculously, to be sure. Following the biblical precedents, such as the tabernacle construction, the Spirit also allows a person natural talent or inclination, the ability to pursue a skill, develop it, and practice that gifting through the Spirit’s leading in intentional acts of service. The artist, as one recipient of the Spirit’s grace, serves artistically in that grace. Further, following the Spirit’s lead, the artist serves artistically as an act of love for the body. Thus, the Christian artist’s work is, ultimately, an act of love (love being another theme common to all of Paul’s discussions involving the body metaphor and the gifts).

Some implications of the biblical account about Spiritual gifts that I have sketched may be difficult to perceive for Western eyes. Deploying some insights about the sociological nature of gifting, especially that of Marcel Mauss, will be useful. Marcel Mauss’ seminal work explored what is now commonly referred to as ‘gift economies’ (Mauss 1970). Unlike

in the West, many cultures do not give pure gifts, that is, gifts with ‘no strings attached’. Instead, a gift is property that is given with a host of expectations and, once given, creates a complex of social ties. One important relation created in gift giving is obligation, which should be viewed in distinction from payment. Where payment is an exchange of commodities, obligation is a social relation. In a gift economy, the gift creates (or strengthens) certain relationships between individuals and communities. A gift incites (or perpetuates) the requirement for reciprocity, that is, for giving gifts back to the giver (or his community).

For Mauss, every culture has a system of gift giving, receiving, and re-giving. Indeed, pure gifts do not exist, since *all* gifting creates certain bonds and obligations: “A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (Douglas 1970). These insights into the sociology of gift economies help reveal some fine, but critical, implications of the Spirit’s gifts. First, what the Holy Spirit gives are *charismata*—graced things that are completely unearned. The Spirit’s economy is not a commodity exchange, we do not receive goods for which we exchange other goods or services. Instead, the Spirit takes what is the Lord’s and gives it freely to the Lord’s own. Even so, as in all gift economies, the action of gifting creates certain obligations and social ties. In the case of Christians, those who receive gifts are obligated to serve other Christians with those gifts. In this way, the Spiritual gifts create “interlocking exchange relationships” (Yan 2020) between the Holy Spirit, the gift-receiving Christian, and the Christian(s) receiving the fruits of that gift.

It is worthwhile to point out that not all art whatsoever made by Christian is Spiritual gift. Even in the church, giftings are not always exercised in dependence on the Spirit. Nor yet does one part of the body always act in service to the others, as we often prefer to serve ourselves. In short, the Spirit’s gifts are just that, gifts given to Christians. Even so, the Spiritual act of gifting obligates the Christian in a network of service to other Christians and, ultimately, to glorify Christ. Thus, the gifts become that Christian’s—they belong to her and are subject to her will, beliefs, and choices—and so she may use them to serve the church, or not.

Additionally, my argument should not be understood as ruling out activities such as private art, artistry-for-hire, research as practice, or other artistic activities that are not immediately identifiable as ministry. There are plenty of limit cases that need to be worked out in a fully developed theology of the embodied arts. I cannot enter into those limit cases here, since my task is to outline some initial steps *toward* such a theology. However, I may point out that these questions are not unique to my view of the embodied arts, but rather are questions that must be addressed by *any* account of the relationship between God and the arts.

Above (in Section 6: *The artist in and for Christ’s body*) we surveyed several ways that, given a theology of the embodied arts, the role of the artist is limited. That is, the arts as Spiritual gift exclude some views about the artist and the arts. Understanding the arts as Spiritual gift now opens some other vistas, allowing an expanded view of the arts in several respects. For instance, we are familiar with Wolterstorff’s claim that the purposes of art just are the purposes of humans, since humans have their being artistically. We may advance this general view to Christ’s body. As Spiritual gift, the purposes of art now become the purposes of the Church—art is now part of the manifold outworking of God’s kingdom project. We previously found that the body is the horizon on which the arts are possible. Viewing the arts within Christ’s body as Spiritual gift, we can now add another corollary: *Christ’s body is the horizon on which the Christian arts are possible.*

True, the artist is no different from any other Christian in being doubly embodied, and therefore in being called to minister to the church. However, many Christian traditions err by seeing the artist as called to serve as a teacher, or missionary, or prophet. Put another way, art is seen purely as a means to some other end, such as teaching, missions, prophecy, etc. In practice, if not in theory, the arts are viewed as merely a means for accomplishing or enacting some other gifting. Through a theology of the embodied arts, we can view the artist and her calling correctly, namely, the artist is called to serve the church *as artist*.

Understood as a specific gift, given by the Spirit to meet specific needs in specific locales, the arts are freed from a purely instrumentalist viewpoint.

On this broadened view, the artist may (and often does) work *with* the teacher, missionary, etc. But the arts are never reduced to pedagogical tool, decoration, or whatever else. The tabernacle construction story in Exodus foreshadows the arts as a distinct ministry. This idea is now cemented by the arts as Spiritual gift to be exercised principally, but not exclusively, on behalf of Christ's body. The purposes of the arts are as wide as the purposes of the Church—Christ's body in which the Spirit works to build the kingdom of God. On this broadened view, the artist is once again on an equal footing with *all* of her brothers and sisters: her calling, just as theirs, is ultimately to serve one another in building up the church as part of God's kingdom project.

## 8. Christ's Body Experiences the Spirit's Working in the Arts

I argued above that the arts are a gift of the Spirit, a charism to the body of Christ. One entailment which I examined is that, on this view, the artist is freed to serve the church *as artist*, and not as reduced to or subsidiary to some other gifting. Here I want to examine another idea that follows from the arts as Spiritual gift, namely, that the arts are a place where the church experiences the Holy Spirit.

We may begin approaching this idea by considering the Holy Spirit's relationship to the gifts. For instance, Paul explains that the gifts are given (*didomi*) by the Spirit, they are a manifestation (*phanerosis*) of the Spirit in the human worker. God is the one who energizes, or effects (*energeo*) the gifts in the Christian, and through the Spirit the human worker is able to make some positive effect (*energema*) in Christ's body<sup>23</sup>. Directed to the arts, this means that the artist who ministers in the Spirit is both a recipient of the Spirit's grace (*charisma*), but also a conduit of that grace directly to others. The sculpture and song are manifestations of the Spirit to the church community no less than the preaching of the word or the healing of ailments.

As an example, we may compare two members of a local church, an artist and mechanic. One week, we can imagine, the artist prepares an installation piece in the sanctuary during Lent using charred branches to cover church windows and the altar. During that same week, the mechanic donates his time and expertise to change the oil in the cars of the church's widows, free of charge. In one sense, there is little difference in these activities: both are acts of service, through the Spirit's giftings, which demonstrate God's provision and love to other members in the church. In another sense, though, the artist's work is quite different from the mechanic's. For the artist brings her brothers and sisters into sensible encounters with beauty in ways that the mechanic's repair-work cannot.

Moreover, the artwork is a sensible medium of the invisible logos, or divine order and intelligibility, that God has invested in creation<sup>24</sup>. That is, art is, or can be, a bridge to experiencing God's goodness and beauty. That experience is of the triune God, that is, the Father who shares beauty with the sent Son, who together send their beautiful, beautifying Spirit<sup>25</sup>. Yes, the mechanic manifests the Spirit's effects (*energia*) through his sacrificial work in his gifting. Unlike the installation piece, though, the lubricated engine of the car cannot make visible (or hearable, touchable, smellable) the underlying beauty that God invests in all things. The artwork itself is continually present to the sensorium, allowing the beholder to experience God's invisible being—and all this through the artist's work in bringing the artwork into embodied presence to the other members of the church.

The artwork does not mediate an encounter with divine beauty in an abstracted or general way. Instead, the artwork and its maker are always particular: it is *this* particular artist, using *these* particular branches, in *this* building during *this* season, which brings me to encounter this particular aspect of God's longsuffering kindness (or providential care, or saving liberation. . .). In other words, the arts as doubly embodied—once through the artist and into the world, and again in and for the church—are fundamentally particularist. The relationship between the beholder and the work of art, and the resulting experience of the Spirit's activity, are not very fungible, if at all. Just about any mechanic using most

brands of oil and filters can do the job for vehicle maintenance. But it is the particular branches arranged just so, in this particular place and time, that yield my living encounter with a personal God. The theological claim that Jesus of Nazareth, the first century Jewish man, could be the saviour and king of all humans is often referred to as the ‘scandal of particularity’. On a theology of the embodied arts, the artist’s and artwork’s particularity is a blessing, an irreplaceable gift.

## 9. Conclusions

In this essay I have explored theologically several aspects of the embodiment of the arts. Grounding my exploration are a pair of controlling ideas. The first is that the arts are necessarily embodied, understood in the context of the artwork and artist, as well as the artwork being born from the artist’s body. The idea is that the Christian artist is doubly embodied, once through her own sensorium, and again through a rebirth in which the Holy Spirit is in her body (her heart), and she is in Christ’s body, the church. With these foundational ideas, I argued that the Christian artist is embodied in Christ’s body, that the arts are a Spiritual gift, and that the church experiences God in the Christian arts. I will conclude this essay by raising a couple broad implications of my account.

The first has to do with the notion of the ‘Christian arts’, a term I have used several times but until now have left undefined. On a theology of the embodied arts like the one I have articulated, Christian arts have a definite character within the relational web of artist-Holy Spirit-church. More exactly, *the Christian arts are those artistic persons, practices, dispositions, and products that occur in reception of the Holy Spirit’s gifting and in service of Christ’s body*. This is a terse characterization, not a robust definition, and much more would need to be said for a full account. My aims in this essay are not (and cannot be) to develop an account of the Christian arts. Even so, a few brief thoughts may be proffered.

On my characterization, not all art made by Christians is Christian art. What counts are, instead, artworks created by a Christian artist, in dependence on the Spirit, and for the building up of her brothers and sisters in Christ. Christian art is art that comes *from* the Spirit-and-artist, and is made *for* the church. Additionally, my characterization does not comment on the nature/ontology of the artwork, nor on a corresponding set of criteria for evaluating works of art. I lean heavily to an expansive view of artwork, on which all human activity is artistic (recall that humans have their being artistically, and so all human ways of being in the world will be artistic). On such a view, many items are artworks, though much fewer are *good* artworks.

What makes an artwork good? Once again, my account is largely silent on this issue except for one critical criterion: to be a good work of Christian art, an artwork must serve the church well; the better an artwork serves the church, the better it is as Christian art. In this way my account addresses the theological value of art, but not the aesthetic question. Put another way, I have attended, even if initially, to *Christian* art, but not to *Christian art*. There remains a tension between artworks that succeed theologically but fail aesthetically. Take for example the amateur church theatre that encourages the congregation, or brings people in the community to faithful relationship with Jesus. Judged on aesthetic value considered per se, the play is middling; judged on theological value, it is a success. I can do little more here than recognize the tension and add that, optimally, Christian art strives to both theological and aesthetic heights<sup>26</sup>.

The second implication follows from the claim that the Christian artist works artistically in service of the church. I suggest that ministry to the church is the Christian artist’s pen-ultimate purpose, or telos. All activities are ultimately aimed at God’s glory. Within this overarching telos the artist—working as an artist—brings glory to God, by building the church. The artist is born into Christ’s body, as we have seen, which is determinative of (at least some of) her artistic goals. That is, the Christian artist is located in relationship to a set of Christians who have artistic needs. The artist is equipped by the Spirit to meet those needs by receiving the Spirit’s grace gift(s) in the arts. That gifting cements the artist’s obligation to meet some of the artistic needs before her.

In sum, the artist receives giftings from the Holy Spirit, including the gift of artistry, and is thereby ordered to the church as ministering to its artistic needs. The artist's birth into Christ's body and her Spiritual gifting bestow artistic purpose onto the artist. In this way, the artist brings the beholder of her particular works of art into contact with God, especially God's beauty. The artist and her artwork allow experience of the divine in ways distinct from other types of giftings, further supporting our conclusion from earlier that the arts are a unique gift of God to Christ's body, exercised through the artist's body.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For two recent monographs, see: (Allison 2021; Kleinig 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Prokes gives two pages about the uses and abuses of the arts in, Prokes (1996). Ashley gives several pages, though his interest is in the body's place in humanist art; Ashley (1985).

<sup>3</sup> This essay approaches embodiment and art from a Christian perspective. It is as part of Christ's body that I have my own being in this world, and from this orientation do I have perspective from which to reflect on the embodied arts. Further, I purposely avoid confessional or denominational commitments. Though I have leanings to certain traditions and sets of practices, my project is to present a theology of the arts that is inclusive to any orthodox body, and that can be further refined or modified to fit that body's specific needs, ministries, and investments.

<sup>4</sup> Even if some artwork is purely an idea, it is always this or that particular idea, translated through this or that particular medium, and is always located in some individual person who has considered the idea, and in whom that idea-artwork now resides. In short, the particularity and concreteness of art cannot be avoided.

<sup>5</sup> I.e., knowledge that is certain because arrived at through rigorous, logical modes of discursive thought.

<sup>6</sup> On *techne* in classical thought, see Parry (2003).

<sup>7</sup> Some have argued that embodiment itself is or has its own particular virtues. See, Taliaferro (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Romans 6: 12–14.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Burke argues for the deep integration in Burke (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Thus Griffith (2021, at p. 4): "creativity is not just an artist imagining something in their minds and then taking specific action to create it".

<sup>11</sup> Romans 11:11–31. Cf. Jesus' metaphor of the branch abiding in the vine, John 15:1–17.

<sup>12</sup> Dissanayake (1995). Arguing from a different approach, Mark Johnson argues that basic human systems (from speech to emotions) are aesthetic, and these aesthetic systems are the height of the human attempt to make meaning from its bodily encounter in the world (Johnson 2008).

<sup>13</sup> John 3:1–21.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Romans 12:4–8; 1 Corinthians 12:12–30; Colossians 1:18–24; Ephesians 3:6, 4:15–16, 5:23. On Paul's language of body, see Whiteley (1970).

<sup>16</sup> For a good place to start, see Edmund Husserl (1982).

<sup>17</sup> See for example Paul's discussion in Ephesians 4:1–16.

<sup>18</sup> Nicolosi also: "There are two kinds of people in the world: people who are artists and people who are supposed to support them" (Nicolosi 2010, at p. 105).

<sup>19</sup> Romans 12:1–8.

<sup>20</sup> My claim here is not that there is no distinction between artists and non-artists, or that *all* humans are artists. Indeed, as we will see below in our discussion of the arts as Spiritual gift, there are a variety of tasks and callings which distinguish their practitioners. I cannot investigate the point further but only state it here: though all humans act artistically, not all humans are artists.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Exodus 31:1–6.



- 22 Kenneth Berding argues for a broader view than is typically held (Berding 2007).
- 23 See 1 Corinthians 12:4–31.
- 24 Thomas Pfau recently argues extensively for the ability of the image to manifest invisible truth, and even divine presence (Pfau 2022).
- 25 My appreciation to a blind reviewer for stressing this trinitarian structure to me, as well as bringing several other points to my attention.
- 26 The tension should not be overstressed. There is no universal standard for all artworks by which Christian art can somehow be objectively evaluated. Instead, each community has metrics by which its artworks are understood and judged. These criteria are not always applied successfully to art produced by and for other traditions (times, cultures).

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