



BROADCAST TALKS

How Artists and Their Art Can Point Us to the Creator

by Russ Ramsey



C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

Russ Ramsey is a pastor at Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee. He studied at Taylor University and Covenant Theological Seminary (MDiv, ThM) before becoming a pastor. Russ is the author of *Rembrandt Is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art Through the Eyes of Faith, Retelling the Story Series* and *Struck: One Christian's Reflections on Encountering Death*. A forthcoming book, *Van Gogh Has a Broken Heart: What Art Teaches Us About the Wonder and Struggle of Being Alive*, is scheduled to be published this fall. For four years, Russ published each week “Art Wednesday” reflections on beauty in art. While he took a break beginning in January 2024, past issues are available [here](#). His personal mission is to communicate the truths of Scripture in accessible ways to people in process.

The following is adapted from an interview with Russ Ramsey, conducted by Joel Woodruff, President of the C.S. Lewis Institute. It was broadcast on March 24, 2023, as a virtual event titled “[Discovering Beauty, Goodness, and Truth: How Artists and Their Art Can Point Us to the Creator](#),” having been recorded the previous month.

BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C.S. Lewis Institute.



Portrait of Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn

It's

my pleasure to introduce Russ Ramsey, a pastor at Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee. He's married and has four children. He's an award-winning author, his most recent book titled *Rembrandt Is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art Through the Eyes of Faith*. Russ is

active on social media, including publishing "Art Wednesday," a series of reflections on beauty and art.

Q. Russ, as a way of introduction, could you please share how you came to faith in Christ and a little bit about your own spiritual journey?

When I was born, neither of my parents were Christians. They became Christians when I was about five years old, and so my introduction to the church came by way of first-generation Christianity, nothing cultural. It was them just coming to discover who Christ was. So I got to be a part of that growing up, and the Lord was always present in my life. I became a believer—I knew I was a Christian may be a better way to say it—when I was about 15 years old. At a youth retreat—there was no altar call or

anything—there was a moment where I realized that Jesus was real in my life and that everything moving forward in my life would be affected in some way by that. And that has borne itself out. That’s true.

I ended up at Taylor University. Through the course of being there, the Lord started a call in my life to pastoral work, pastoral ministry, and working with words. That’s been the trajectory that I’ve been on ever since. It’s been 34 years now since then.

You mentioned your time at Taylor University. It seems your own vocational interests took shape there, and you mentioned an interest in writing. Tell us, how did you become interested in creative aspects of life? Writing, art, or that type of thing?

I’ve always had that disposition. I’ve always been the kid who was interested in learning instruments and writing songs. I started doing that early. Actually, that was my first creative love, was song-writing, which involves the consternation of working with words carefully. You know how difficult that is. It’s something that has always been a deep, deep thrill for me, working with language and words and trying to communicate things in artistic ways. When it comes to the visual arts, I always loved drawing. I grew up in central Indiana, in a small farming town. I was blessed to have art teachers who wanted to instill in us, their students, a lifelong appreciation of the arts. I dedicated this book to them. It’s dedicated to my art teachers from middle school and high school.

My art teacher in high school gave us this advice: if you want to have a lifelong relationship with the arts, find an artist you connect with, and then just pay attention to them for the rest of your life. They will introduce you to their mentors, their colleagues. You’ll go visit them at museums, and on the walls next to their work will be others, and you’ll get to know them. And it’ll be this deepening understanding and appreciation of art, but from a relational rather than an academic way. And so that’s what I did. It was Van Gogh for me and Rembrandt. Lo and behold, Van Gogh introduced me to the Impressionists, and Rembrandt introduced me to

the Renaissance painters, and on it's gone. And so that's a lot of how I have engaged with the arts ever since, it's paying attention to things that I like and having a general posture of curiosity toward all of it.

What a great word of advice from your art teachers and that relational approach. You mentioned beginning with Van Gogh and then leading to Rembrandt. Maybe you can tell us a little bit more about Rembrandt. You titled your book *Rembrandt Is in the Wind*. What is it about Rembrandt that seems to touch people when it comes to spiritual issues? Henri Nouwen wrote a famous book that we use in some of our Fellows Programs; titled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, it was inspired by Rembrandt's painting. What is it about Rembrandt that seems to connect still with people today?

When you're in the hands of a great painter, they're not just showing you a picture. They're telling you a story. When you engage with the picture—Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* is a perfect example of this—your eye follows a path when you look at that painting. Your eye is going to be drawn to something first and then second and then third and fourth; before you know it, a story has unfolded, not just a picture. Rembrandt had this way of telling stories visually that had a profundity to them; for me as a teenager, I would just sort of fall into the painting. I would be so taken by the drama and the expressions and the ... I didn't know it at the time. It was something I learned later—this idea that we look at a painting in sequence, but we do. You should try it. Look at a painting and pay attention to the path that your eye follows. How does that unfold a story? Rembrandt has this way of bringing, to me, so much heart into stories, particularly biblical stories that have so much familiarity to them, and yet the way they unfold and the affection and the tenderness in people's eyes, the way he painted that sort of thing, and the drama and the scale and the contrast of light and dark. It's a dramatic experience to take in a Rembrandt.

So if I hear you correctly, you're saying that some artists are very intentional about telling a story through the art. I think oftentimes

we just think of artists as reflecting something they see, but there's a lot more to it.

When you walk up to a painting by an artist who knows what they're doing, they take you somewhere. In fact, with the art—you mentioned “Art Wednesday,” the series that I do on social media. One of those Art Wednesdays, I dedicated to the visual path of a painting and posted seven or eight different paintings to look at and pay attention: where does your eye go first? Because with Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*, your eye immediately goes to the embrace between the father and the younger brother. And then your eye goes to the older brother, who is—he's not as illuminated as the father and the son, but he's the next most illuminated character. Then you follow his eyes, he's kind of looking down and to the side, and in the process of doing that, you start to see the other people in varying degrees of presence: Somebody in a doorway, somebody back in the shadow. So it's this kind of inventory of who's there and what's happening and how are they engaging with the moment. It's a fascinating thing. It's why so much art has endured over time. It's not just that you're looking at something that's really detailed and complex, but you're looking at something that is telling you something in a narrative form, even though there's no motion to it. Or it's not moving, it's a still frame, but it's a story that's unfolding in your mind as you engage with it.

The cover of your book is another Rembrandt painting. Can you tell us about that one and what's behind this painting of Rembrandt and the Sea of Galilee there?

It's Rembrandt's only seascape, *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. It was stolen in March 1990, from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, part of an art heist where 13 pieces of work went missing. Worth an estimated \$500 million. It was the single largest property theft in American history at the time. And they've not been seen since. I doubt they will ever be recovered. I hope they're recovered. My guess is that they've been destroyed, which is tragic. The Rembrandt painting was cut out of its frame with a razor knife and rolled up and taken out. If you



Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son"

go to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum today, the frame is still on the wall. It's just empty. And there's legal reason for that, which I get into in the book, why that frame is still there. But the painting itself is so compelling. In fact, it is the painting that drew me to Rembrandt. It was that one. I saw that in high school. It had not yet been stolen. One thing that's so cool about that painting—Rembrandt paints himself into it. He's one of the disciples in the boat. When you look at the painting, the grouping of disciples, there are six of them on one side trying to wake Jesus and get Him to do something. And then the other six are on the other side; they're struggling with the boat and trying to just keep it from sinking. Rembrandt is standing in the foreground of the boat looking at the viewer. He's got his hand on his hat, and he's holding onto a rope. He's looking directly at you or me. So the title of the book, *Rembrandt Is in the Wind*, is a play on the idea that he's actually in the boat in the wind. But also, something being in the wind is a euphemism for something that has been stolen and not yet recovered. What I love is when Rembrandt breaks that "fourth wall" and looks at the viewer. It's a way that he is inviting the viewer into the painting. It's his way of saying to us, the viewers, "Do you feel it, too, that we're perishing here?" It's a really fascinating way that a painter will engage a viewer on a very personal level. If you ever see paintings where one of the figures is looking out at the viewer, the odds are decent that it's the artists themselves; it's their way of drawing you in as well, so you're not just a spectator, but you're a participant in the unfolding drama and the scene there. So yeah. That painting has long been one of my favorites.

That's interesting. How would you describe the difference between, let's say, hearing a sermon on Sunday morning from a biblical passage versus seeing it expressed through a piece of art? How does that communicate to our hearts and minds? What are the positives and negatives in those two different kinds of approaches? We're so familiar with the Word, hearing it, but seeing it is just another way of doing it.

Yes, it is. I've decorated our church with high-quality reproductions of a lot of famous paintings, including *Storm on the Sea of Galilee* and *Return of the Prodigal Son*; we have some Monet and Van Gogh and Caravaggio and others. One reason I put this art everywhere in our church is because of the way human beings interact visually with things—forming personal collections that we carry around in our imaginations and in our hearts, paintings that we've connected with, for which we've said, "I really like this one. When I see it, I feel like it's one of mine." So the collection we've put here in the church has been intentionally an attempt on my part to supply paintings for people's personal collections; we carry these things around with us, and we think about them. We think about the composition and what's happening and the detail and the drama and the mystery, too, of something painted four hundred or five hundred years ago that is still being regarded globally as an irreplaceable, transcendent piece of art.

The Lord made us to be people who don't just learn things didactically. We don't just learn "Tell me how A plus B equals C." We learn by way of story, and that's what a lot of visual art is. It's storytelling. When you think Jesus, His primary method of teaching was, you know, "There was a man who had great wealth. . ." He told stories. And it's because stories are a Trojan horse for truth. You can slip a lot past the defenses of a person's heart by just telling a story. In fact, Flannery O'Connor said, "A story is a way of saying something that can't be said in any other way." When I think of visual art, most of what I'm thinking about is its storytelling, which is what the book is really; the book is telling the stories about the stories.

As for sermons, I joke with people that I basically write an eight-page paper a week. That's my job, or one of my jobs. There's something about being together in a congregational setting where we're all in a room together, and we're hearing something that has been prepared and now is being delivered. As a preacher, if I have a hundred people in the room, I'm assuming that people are hearing a hundred different sermons—that

the Lord is doing what He's doing, and I can't really predict how He's going to work through that. There's something about the communal nature of hearing Scripture explicated, unpacked—the rhythm of it. That is a beautiful thing. But with art, it's not so much the rhythm of engaging with art as much as it is the hiding it away—it residing in your heart and you carrying it around with you.

Who would be some of the other artists whom you have found to impact your own life and have found helpful in spiritual matters?

So Caravaggio is one. He's a mystery to me, because he was this paradox of corruption and grace. When you look at Caravaggio's paintings and his interpretations of scriptural events, they are rich, they're deep, and they have a profound sense of the wonder of forgiveness and the compassion of Christ. And yet he was a carouser. He murdered a couple of people. One of his biographers said that, for Caravaggio, there was only Carnival and Lent and nothing in between. That he would paint these paintings like *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, which is the famous painting of Jesus guiding Thomas's finger into the wound in His side. He would paint these scenes that just arrest you. Then he'd get the commission, and he'd go out, and he'd spend it all on drink and women and brawl; then he'd cloister himself off and spend three months painting another transcendent biblical story. What's fascinating to me is everybody I know is like that in some way. We're all these paradoxes of corruption and grace. We all have a need for the forgiveness that he painted so beautifully. He's an example of somebody whom I look at and I think, "Okay, he complicates for me in a way that I think is healthy." He complicates for me my desire to be really binary in the way I think about people—that you have good people and you have bad people and you have folks who have got it figured out and folks who don't have it figured out. He's sort of an extreme caricature, because of the brilliance of his art, of that picture.

So as somebody who studies artists, I've learned that there are very few whom I would hold up as the example for how to live. Artists tend to be

tortured souls; I always have to approach with a little bit of trepidation. How much do I really want to know about Rembrandt? How much do I really want to know about Van Gogh? Their lives are formed, and their art is formed through suffering and through a desperate need for the gospel to be true, but they're also messy and possessing anything far from a perfect record.

You shared a bit about these artists. Can you name some traits that have made them great artists? What was it in their backgrounds or personalities? Or was it pure talent? What was it that shaped them to be able to communicate in such powerful ways through art?

In a word, suffering. That's the theme I see running through. For some, suffering shaped a tenderness and a humility that evolved in their careers. Rembrandt is a good example; when you look at the things he painted when he was in his twenties, he's flexing. He's showing what he's capable of. He's kind of winking at the camera and kissing his bicep. That's when I see his earlier work that's all so intricate and detailed and just right. But when he gets older, he's suffered a lot. He's buried people, his wife and children that he's loved, and he's lost a career. He's lost money. He's lost fame. Then his paintings become much more intimate and tender. And also defiant, like there's a resolve in him to present the tenderness and affection of the Lord at the end of his life. Van Gogh was the same way. And then you have artists like Edward Hopper, whom I write about. There's a chapter devoted to his work. His suffering was kind of a misery that he leaned into, and he rejected God. It bears itself out in his work, that his suffering has left us with this incredible body of work that is so lonely. When you look at his paintings, there's just this lonesomeness that, for human beings, we recognize: (1) a loneliness that we feel, but (2) the wrongness of it. The hollowness, the emptiness of it is so palpable in his work as well. So suffering is the thread for me that seems to run through these stories that so captivate me and draw me in. They're trying to tell the truth about living in a world that's hard to live in. And that is attractive to me.

To those of us who aren't artists in the sense of having a gifting for it, what can we learn from that? Is it just ability to be vulnerable and transparent and connect with that, dig into that stuff? From a personal level, what can we learn from those artists?

You know, Frederick Buechner said that whenever you feel tears in your eyes, pay attention to them. Listen to them. Why are they there? I think artists really capture the vulnerable moments of the human experience. They lean into that. They feel the things. They feel pain deeply. They feel joy deeply. I think that's a good exercise for us all—to have practices in our lives where we make ourselves feel. So if there are things we do that bring us joy, don't neglect those things. If there are things we do that help us to feel grief, that help us to lament, like visiting gravesides of people we've loved and going through photos—it's important for us to continue to cultivate and nurture our emotional selves. I don't say this as somebody who's a real touchy-feely person. I can be. But as a pastor, I know what it's like to walk with people who, because of their pain and because of suffering they've experienced, have begun to kind of shut off certain rooms of their heart, where they're just not going to allow themselves to feel anymore. It comes at great cost. I've also known people who have said, "No. I'm going to pay attention to the things that I feel, and I'm going to bring them to the Lord in prayer, and I'm going to have people in my life whom I walk alongside who will be able to ask me how I'm doing; I'll be able to tell them how I'm doing." It's such a significant part of what it means to be a human being in this world. It's what the book of Psalms is about.

So many of the psalms are given to us to help us know how to feel and acknowledge the reality of suffering and grief and shame. And also the reality of that feeling of lonesomeness, where you feel like God isn't even listening anymore. We have a number of psalms that ask the Lord if He's sleeping and how long He's going to be silent. I love that God, in His kindness, put those in the canon of Scripture, as a way of saying to us, "It's not out of bounds for you to say this to Me." You can't say

it rhetorically. You know you can't say it hypothetically. There is an answer. But the Lord made us to be people who move through this world as emotional beings. We have to pay attention to it.

That's really good advice. I think about Jesus, who Himself expressed so much emotion. He wept at Lazarus's tomb. He was angry at the money changers. You do see a lot of emotions, and He was being the perfect example of what a true human being should look like. So I think that's a good point. It seems artists are good at helping us identify some of those emotions. Are there some practical ways to express emotion? Are there particular disciplines or habits you think would be helpful for us as believers? Or to express those things to the Lord?

Praying with a pen in hand is a really good practice. Not everybody fancies themselves to be writers, but it's a good way of being able to think. For me, writing is a way of thinking clearly. It's a way of also keeping a record of where I've been and what I've been going through. I would highly recommend that. Just leaning into the ways the Lord made us to work, like getting sunshine, like taking walks and being active in the world, using our bodies and savoring things. I had a seminary professor who gave this advice to the class: "If you're ever in a restaurant, and they bring out the sombrero or start banging the drum, and they tell everybody to sing 'Happy Birthday,' as a Christian, you should sing 'Happy Birthday' because you're in a moment—and it's not as 'being a witness' to others—you're in a moment where people are acknowledging the dignity of personhood. They're celebrating somebody's existence." And I've loved that advice, because it applies to a lot of things. But I've also found myself in restaurants where I hear the drum coming down the hallway, and I'm like, "Oh! We're about to sing 'Happy Birthday' to somebody. And because that somebody is made in the image of God, I'm going to participate in that."

Just doing things like that are good for us. I think it's good to go to art museums. If you live near one, you should go. It will exhaust you,



Rembrandt's "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee"

because art is exhausting, because it's transcendent, and it's engaging so much of you, even when you don't feel it and you don't recognize it. It's doing work on you. And you'll get . . . I call it museum feet, where you just feel like your feet have cinder blocks attached to them. But that's a good experience to have. Put yourself in the path of things that are beautiful and good and true. And do it regularly and do it intentionally.

Do you have particular advice about how to approach a museum? I've been with some people, say going to the Louvre in France, when someone would check the box, "Okay, we saw the *Mona Lisa*. Check. Saw *Venus de Milo*. Check." What's a way to approach this in a transformative way?

In the book there's an appendix called, "How to Visit an Art Museum." For me, if I go to an art museum, my agenda is to find Van Gogh. And if Rembrandt's there, I'll find Rembrandt, too. I won't try to take in the entire museum. Now, I may end up going through every gallery before I exit, but I'm not entering with, "Okay, I'm going to spend two hours, and I'm going to digest this entire place." No, no. Just go find your people. Like my art teacher said in high school, find the ones you have a relationship with, and then let them make some introductions.

So if I'm in a room where there's a Van Gogh, I'll look at everything in that room. I'll read the little tombstones on the wall next to it that tell the stories. That's a really important thing to do—read those signs. It will give you so much information, not just about the painting, but about art itself. One of the encouragements I would give anybody who's going to an art museum is "Don't feel like you need to have a degree in art history or art appreciation to like something." It is a valid form of art criticism to stand in front of a painting and say, "I like this." It's also valid to stand in front of a painting and say, "I have no idea what's going on here." That's okay. It's a long game we're playing with art. It's a lifelong endeavor. So let yourself off the hook of feeling like you have to understand or even like everything you see. Just go visit your people and let them make some introductions. And maybe you'll pass something on the way to

Rembrandt that you want to circle back to or stop and look at. Then you're going to leave the museum with more than you came in with.

I'm writing a follow-up to *Rembrandt Is in the Wind*, coming out in a year or so. One of the appendices for that is called "I Don't Like Donatello and You Can, Too." It's about what to do if there's particular artist or kind of art that you just don't like and don't connect with. It's fine if there's art you don't like. That's not a problem. It would be weird if people liked or connected with everything they saw. So yeah, that's it. I'll go find my people, find Rembrandt and Van Gogh. And now I'll find some others, because they've introduced me along the way. I trust that time is on my side; if I get to go back to that museum another time, I might go someplace else. But that's how I'll approach it.

That's great. Growing up, I was primarily exposed to the great masters of Europe and North America, but are there other artists from other parts of the world or contemporary artists whom you've found inspiring?

I think of Makoto Fujimura. He's Japanese, but he's here in the States. His art is fascinating to me, because it changes. Because of the materials he uses—the elements he uses—his work changes over time. This is kind of cheating with the question, but there's a Frenchman named Mark Maggiori who paints the American West. He lives in New Mexico and paints these beautiful cowboy pictures. He's a wonderful person to follow (on Instagram) as an artist because he shows you his technique. He shows you works in progress. But they're works that I just fall into. It's fun to see this European painter who has latched onto Arizona and New Mexico and Utah as his subject matter. Yeah. It's beautiful stuff.

You mentioned Makoto Fujimura. He's a little more abstract. I know some of us are more accustomed to realistic or Impressionist art. How should we approach art that's not realistic?

I would say give yourself grace to know that there's going to be a learning curve there. For me, I have been slow to appreciate a lot of the more



Detail from Rembrandt's "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee"

abstract art. I'm thinking of Mark Rothko as an example. I have grown to really love Rothko. He painted basically color fields, squares of different colors on a canvas. I'm doing a terrible job of describing him. Rothko is an artist—you really need to be in the presence of his paintings. Looking at them online won't quite do it. I was going to New York City, to some art museums, and a friend said, "When you go to the Met, make sure you see the Rothkos." I said, "Yeah. I've seen Rothko before. I've seen some of his stuff, and I just don't get it." She said, "No, no. You have to stand in front of it and look at it for thirty seconds and just tell me if it doesn't stir something in you." Lo and behold, I stood in front of a Rothko and just took it in; I wanted to weep. I don't know why. I still to this day don't know why. But it's part of the transcendent quality of art.

And there may be people who would say, "I've seen Rothkos in person. They do nothing for me. There's nothing to it." To each his own in that sense, but here I stand. I stood in front of a Rothko. It was one of the most moving experiences I've ever had in an art museum. And I've spent a lot of time in them.

This might be an unfair question, but if you had to pick one piece, what piece of art has impacted you the most, ever? Why?

Hmm. That is a good question. Ask me on a different day, and I'd probably give you a different answer, but what I'd say today is Rembrandt's *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, a nativity scene. The characters are in the stable. The source of light is Jesus Himself. You don't look at the painting and think, "That's a painting of a glowing baby," but it is. He is the light source in the painting. I was in London earlier this year and making my way through the National Gallery. I didn't prepare myself. I didn't know what was in the National Gallery. I didn't have a list of things I was there to see. I was looking at a Van Gogh, then, down a long series of hallways, I saw a Rembrandt, a self-portrait. I was with my daughter, and I said, "Ooh! Look! There's a Rembrandt." So we walked toward the Rembrandt, and I stood in front of it and looked at it. Then I turned around to point out something, and on the opposite wall, right behind

me, was *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. This is a painting that I've looked at digitally. I've looked at online photos of this for decades. But there it was in person. It's always been a painting I've loved. It surprised me. It was so much more magnificent than anything I'd ever seen online. And you never know what size these things are, so even the size was not what I was expecting. When I just caught it out of the corner of my eye, my heart leapt; I knew exactly what it was. It just drew me over. My daughter, being a twenty-year-old, took a video of me wandering over to this, like it had me in its beam. She was like, "It's happening! This thing you do, Dad, where you just get transfixed by these works of art, and I lose you, and you sort of go to this other place." So she has a video of me just being awestruck by the surprise encounter with that Rembrandt painting.

And what is it about a painting like that that draws you closer to Christ? How does that affect your spiritual life?

I think it's unfolding the story of the artist's personal life and seeing what they have created through a lens of understanding of who they were. That is what ministers most deeply to me. It's what the book is. The book (*Rembrandt Is in the Wind*) is ten stories. It's not art history. It's not analysis. It's just storytelling. That's all it is, because that's what captures my imagination and my affection for the Lord. I mean, as human beings, we're trying to find our way through a world that's broken. It's hard, and things break, and we weep, and we grieve, and we celebrate, and we taste, and we touch, and we—all these things that are part of the human experience. For a painter like Van Gogh, for example, he is to me the striving man in Ecclesiastes. He's the guy who's trying to find the beauty and the meaning and the reason for his existence, and he's doing it through painting. He paints at this feverish pitch, and he doesn't ever sell anything except for one painting while he was alive. And yet we look at him now as this person whom we regard as the consummate artist. He's the one who seemed to understand what nobody else was getting.

So as you get to know those stories, of the suffering we talked about

earlier, and then you see the work that was produced while Rembrandt was grieving the loss of his wife. The grief is there. The yearning for redemption is there. It's all there, and it's so moving. So the great joy for me when it comes to studying art is studying the stories behind the people who create these things that the world has seemed to recognize as transcendent—pieces that should be housed in a places where people can come and see, preserved forever. And that's pretty profound to me.

You mentioned middle school art teachers giving you advice about how to approach art in the world. Being a parent yourself now, what advice would you give to children today, as they begin their journey, about how they should approach art, artists, creativity?

I would say a couple of things. (1) Put yourself in the presence of great art. Go to art museums. You won't regret it. (2) Understand that any creative endeavor is a craft. It's not something that you don't know how to do one day and then you do know how to do the next day. It's something that you get to spend your entire life practicing and learning how to do. As you learn, you make mistakes. It's whether you're writing songs or painting or drawing or writing poetry or cooking. All of these creative endeavors, and there are so many more, are things that we get to practice. We don't just do them, but we practice them and hone a skill. The better we become at something, the more joy we will derive from it. Mastery begets joy. So, if you can be kind to yourself, have patience, understand that you will never master anything fully. But in the process of becoming really, really good at something, you understand complexities behind it. You understand the joy of what you're able to do with it. So I would say, approach it as a craft and as a lifelong endeavor, not something that you're just going to get a handle on before the end of the summer. But that this is something you'll—it'll be part of your life.

A final word. I think within the Christian community artists have oftentimes been on the fringe, you might say. There are even some people who would say Christians really shouldn't be involved in the arts at least in a public way or in front of the world. Any advice in

that regard how we, as believers, should approach the whole idea theologically about art, artists, and creativity?

One thing I appreciate about this question is that it's a very Western question, meaning, we can be very, very pragmatic with things and say, "If this doesn't clearly deliver something for me or do something for me or advance me in some way, then I'm going to question its usefulness." Art defies that. You can ask about the usefulness of art all day long, and it will not give you an answer. And that's part of its usefulness. Part of its usefulness is to check us and say, "No, no. We're not just here to learn principles for living. We're here to live and to experience life. And life is a multifaceted thing made by God."

What's more, if you say that you want to know God, or you want to have a good handle on theology, and engaging with art and beauty is not part of your process, you will miss very significant realities of who God is. One thing that we learn early on about the Lord is that He is too glorious to behold, that glory is a part of His nature. It's a part of who He is. It's such a part, such a powerful part, of who He is, that when Moses wants to see Him, God says, it'll kill you. "My glory will be too much for you." So when we practice being in the presence of beauty, and we put ourselves in the path of beauty, whether it's paintings of the American West or Rembrandt or a sunset, whatever it is. When we're intentionally putting ourselves in the path of beautiful things, it is a way of knowing God better because He is the Author of beauty, and He is beautiful Himself. He is too radiant to behold, but we're meant to know Him as He is.

And so when we don't engage beauty, and we don't engage art or music or things like this that stir the soul, we're cheating ourselves, because God is radiant and beautiful and compelling and loving and all of these things that are tied to the idea of transcendent beauty. And so we have to. We have to.

[Additional information about the topic of this talk is included in Russ Ramsey's book *Rembrandt Is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art Through the Eyes of Faith* (Zondervan, 2022). While, after publishing Art Wednesday for four years, Ramsey took a break beginning in January 2024, past issues are available at: artwednesday.fathomcolumns.com.]



Portrait of Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn

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