

EXCERPT



Makers by Nature

Letters from a Master Painter on Faith, Hope, and Art

January 21, 2025 | \$28, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0980-2

In a series of fictional letters, respected artist and educator Bruce Herman passes on wisdom to a younger generation. Exploring a wide array of practical, philosophical, and theological issues, this resource will inspire artists and art lovers to consider the Maker's invitation to creativity, however it takes shape.

An Artist's Look at Theology, Art, and Philosophy

Gloucester, September 15, 2022

Dear Ella,

Thank you for your letter—good to hear from you, and it was good to see you recently after several years. Thanks also for the good questions you raised, particularly regarding the studio work for your thesis exhibition. I want to respond directly to your questions, but first a little disclaimer. The distinction you (or your professors) are making between skill and creativity is, to my mind, a nonstarter. Art is in many ways synonymous with imagination, but creativity is an overused word that can be found and used literally everywhere and in everything humans do and make. Better, it seems to me, to stick to humbler ways of thinking about making art. We were made by a Maker to be makers, and our hearts are restless until we make something—something beautiful.

On teaching art: it seems almost a fraudulent enterprise if we acknowledge from the outset that art is a mysterious prize outside normal human control—a gift given from the Muse, as the old saying goes. And by *art*, I mean those aspects of painting, music, poetry that refuse definition and elude full comprehension, deriving from seemingly unknown sources (at least in our experience). I am not trying to aggrandize art. I am simply saying that it is mysterious, and that art as gift is something outside human control. That's why it's referred to as a gift.

More directly to your question about art-versus-craft in response to your graduate adviser, I honestly think most of what human makers do is really a form of decoration. And by *decoration* I don't intend to demean our art-making—as in the phrase “merely decorative.” To my way of thinking, decoration is fundamental to human flourishing. It's what we do. We adorn our lives constantly—no matter how rich or poor, comfy or desperate our circumstance. Even amid grinding poverty people add color and design to their lives—decorating their bodies, their dwellings (no matter how humble), indeed, every aspect of their lives. Decoration is a basic human urge, and I believe it to be on par with our need for eating, sleep, procreation, and worship. There is no place and there are no people on the planet where decoration and design are absent. The world of high-minded contemporary art in urban centers, with all its theoretical sophistication, is essentially decoration. The architects of Chartres would, I think, agree with me. But of course, in decoration there are levels of complexity and beauty and worth, as in all human enterprise.

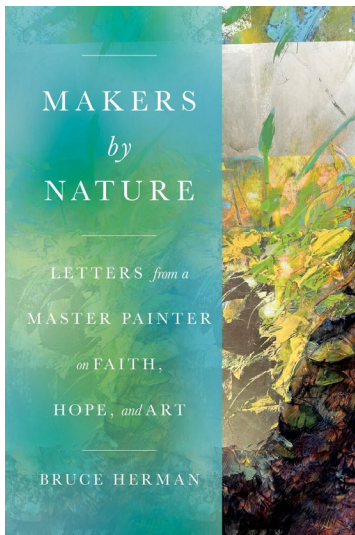
So, what then *is* art if it is *more* than decoration? You've raised a question or made a mild complaint about your professors urging you to be more intentional about making fine art, not merely designing fabric with pattern or decoration. I wouldn't presume to correct your professors—nor would I want to sow discontent. But I believe that urging you to “make art” is probably pointless. In my studio practice I concluded early on that attempting to imbue my work with mystery was a waste of time. The minute I'd try to do it on purpose, to be “creative,” it always fell flat. But when I got on with the work of simply pushing paint around—of arranging color and shape and texture, along with wrestling with my internal conflicts, sometimes that quality of mysteriousness descended on the work as if from on high. In other words, I cannot force it. And those artists who think they can produce art on demand are either self-deceived or hucksters. But of course, painting is more than pushing paint around.



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But all this might leave us without much else to say, right? Why even try to make art or discuss it if you cannot be sure that your work will *carry* it, will manifest that elusive quality we're speaking about? This is where I'd begin with your question: in its very elusiveness and the fact of its *impossibility*, art partakes of this quality, this atmosphere of alterity, of mysteriousness, of gift from outside the system.

As a personal example, in my painting *Betrothed* (collection of Walter and Darlene Hansen) I began with a completely abstract composition. I had no plan to include a figure, let alone one symbolizing the church in all her beauty and glory. I certainly didn't plan to do a portrait-like painting of my daughter Sarah and have her become a symbol of all that. What I was doing initially was quite literally brushing out areas of Naples yellow pigment with layers and vague stripes of a certain golden-green and hints of turquoise. I was painstakingly adding areas of gilding—layers of gold and silver leaf (a delicate process in comparison with my usual methods—which include taking a sander or scraper to areas of dried paint).

I'd developed an expansive area of that golden-greenish hue on the wood panel I was using—and I began to "erase" a whole section in the middle with a wash of white and gray, and suddenly I thought I saw a suggestion of a figure off to the left of the main area. I don't mean this as cloud-reading, though there's an element of that kind of daydreaming in my process. What I mean is more like peering into one's own imagination while working on a piece and seeing something *more*. A certain "excess of meaning," as Rowan Williams puts it in his book *Grace and Necessity* (which I highly recommend).

That excess, that something more, is what I am always seeking in my painting practice—and that is what art *is* for me as a painter. It's a grace, a free gift that seems to come from nowhere. Of course, a psychologist might be able to analyze me (or any other painter) and explain how an image arrives seemingly full-blown on its own. But I am not interested in psychoanalyzing the artist's process—my own or anybody's. I'd be at best only mildly interested in what some analyst might say about why that photo I took of my daughter the evening before her wedding came to mind in an early stage of this painting—and strangely while I was wiping out an entire section of the piece.

I just "saw" it—that figure. And then began the difficult task of finding how an image of a young bride might work within the painting as it evolved on an abstract or formal level—shifting shapes and fields of color. I was just adjusting color relationships and playing with the shapes and layers I'd laid down on the panel. I had no plan to do a painting about the mystical bride of Christ. Though of course I'd given lots of thought to that theological reality—to that image or existential reality of the church-as-bride. This image, given to us by Christ himself, is probably the most compelling theological reality that humans can grapple with. I know of no other religion that speaks about the believer becoming wed to God. It is a radical idea; or, more accurately, it is a radical reality that will one day be the denouement of all creation. And that is what *Betrothed* is about, as far as I have been able to tell—a sort of eschatological image-symbol. I know that last bit may sound a little disingenuous—for the artist to speak as though he or she was simply a witness to the image rather than its author, planning out its meaning. But that is the honest truth, Ella. I stand before the work of art that I have made as a witness, a viewer on par with any one of my viewers or collectors—and I honestly do not think I am the best interpreter of my paintings.

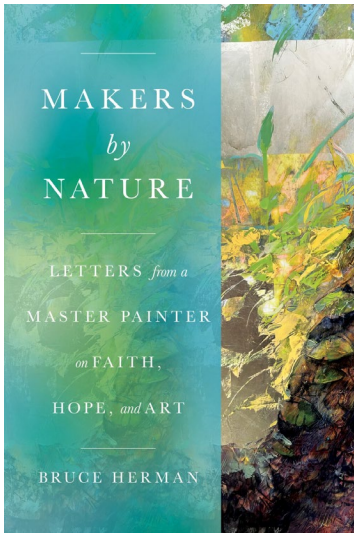
I have gone on at length about this one painting simply to make clear my response to the issue you raise about the pressure to "make art." But I think I'd need to write a whole book if I were to truly take on your issue. In the meantime, my advice is simple: Show up in your studio. Put on your work apron, squeeze out your paints, and roll out your fabrics. *Decorate* to your heart's content and don't worry about what others think. (Including your graduate adviser—he will see very quickly that your work has a



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certain *authority*, and he'll be pleased to step aside and watch you unpack it.) But first you must take the leap and engage in the basic risk that all artmaking entails. There's just no way around this one. We are, at our best, vessels for that excess of meaning. If nothing else, you'll make a decorative object with desirable qualities. Its *inscape* (to use the term of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins) is not under your control. Let me know if there are other things we can discuss. I enjoy writing letters in lieu of conversation around a meal—which is the ideal, right? If you are in touch with your parents, wish them well for me. I enjoyed seeing them last time I was in Dallas.

Sincerely,

Bruce

—Taken from chapter one, "Art and Craft: Letters to Ella"



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