

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

Mark Hadley:

Salvation is here. Feeling inarticulate, critically gosh, or just verbally impotent? We here at Pixmaven have developed the instant art critique phrase generator. So you need never again feel at a loss for pithy commentary or savvy insights. With this device, you can speak about art with both authority and confidence. Use this marvellous tool to amaze and confound friends and colleagues. Don't miss this opportunity to menace and dumbfound professors and artists emeriti.

The instructions are simple. Type any five-digit number in the field below, click create and enjoy your ready-made critical response to the art product, or CRAP. Now you can produce crap critiques as easily and fluently as anyone in your MFA program. Okay, Kaley, have a go.

Kaley Payne:

All right. So please enter your number here. Five, six, four, seven, eight. Create art critique. Voila, your instant critical response to the art product, or CRAP, is here. Although I am not a painter, I think that the iconicity of the, oh gosh, of the facture notates the substructure of critical thinking.

Mark Hadley:

Well, that sounds like crap to me.

Kaley Payne:

Let's do another one. With regard to the issue of content, the disjunctive perturbation of the...

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's producer, Kaley, and director, Mark, having fun with an online text generator created in 2012 to make fun of art critics.

We're talking about art and beauty in this episode, but you can be sure we're not going to be using words like transversal and visuality because beauty ought to be something that's universal and accessible to everyone. The question, what is beauty, has been of interest since the earliest ancient philosophers even began asking questions. It's often considered an essential ingredient to the good life. No beauty, no joy, no imagination, no transcendence. So knowing what beauty is, where it comes from and what it points toward are important life pursuits.

Now we're not going to be able to answer all the deep questions in this episode, but our guests today are experts in beauty, showing beauty, explaining how beauty influences us and what it can show us about life itself.

I'm John Dickson, and this is a beautiful Undeceptions episode.

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *The Beauty Chasers* by Timothy Willard. Each episode at Undeceptions, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, science, culture or ethics that's

either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth.

INTERVIEW BEGINS

I want to ask, high art is often thought of as inaccessible, just for the middle-class nerd. So how can all of this stuff connect to ordinary people, ordinary life?

Russ Ramsey:

So I grew up around, I grew up in a farming community, a small town in Indiana. And when I was writing this book, so my exposure to art was not high-minded, erudite, philosophical city folk. It was soybean farmers, and our town had a pork festival.

And so for me, I think I wanted to approach art from the perspective of, if I handed these essays to the farmer down the street, would he feel like I went way over his head? Or would he feel like that was a good time reading that? So that was what I was aiming for. I think...

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's Russ Ramsey. He's an author and a Christian pastor from Nashville, Tennessee. His latest book is called *Rembrandt is in the Wind, Learning to Love Art Through the Eyes of Faith*. He recently started Art Wednesday on his social pages, posting a series of nine works, grouped either by artist or theme, to encourage people to interact with beauty, he says. This can be an ugly world, he writes, and we need to be reminded of its wonder and glory.

Russ Ramsey:

I think it's a very valid form of art criticism to stand in front of a painting and say, I really like this one. And it's a valid form of art criticism to stand in front of a painting and say, I don't get this one. And I don't think you have to know a whole lot more, but the joy of taking in art is that you have a lifetime to do it. And so you don't have to... And you develop a vocabulary and you develop an understanding of kind of techniques that people use in order to communicate things.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Russ is not a formal art critic. He's just a guy who loves art and decided to write a bunch of essays on the artists he loves and what they've taught him about the world and about faith. The essays are now a book, and I highly recommend you get it. I'm going to say an artist's name mentioned in your book, and you're just going to give me one or two sentences that sums them up.

Russ Ramsey:

Okay. All right.

John Dickson:

Okay. Michelangelo.

Russ Ramsey:

Extremely confident and arrogant and angry, and perhaps the greatest artist the world has ever known.

John Dickson:

You call Michelangelo's David statue the most perfect work of art ever achieved by any one of us. Well, okay. You're going to have to justify that. Tell me why.

Russ Ramsey:

Okay. Listen.

John Dickson:

I mean, I think it's pretty, but...

Russ Ramsey:

I know, I know. Let me get the wording precise. Okay. The wording is, I believe that Michelangelo's David is the single greatest artistic achievement by an individual in the history of humankind. Now I have some rationale for this, but before I even give the rationale, I am fully aware that is an absurd thing to say. I know it's ridiculous. My invitation is, give me the substitute. Tell me, if it's not David, then what is it?

Russ Ramsey:

And some quick hits on that. Don't show me a painting because it's two dimensional, and I'm talking about an achievement, so the technical achievement of it. And don't show me a bronze sculpture, because this is marble. All you can do with marble is subtract. You can't add to it, and so it's unforgiving. And don't show me a marble sculpture of a horse because the naked human form is the most complex thing to get right, carving it out of a single piece of stone where you can't make any corrections. And so when I think about it on that level, and I have to qualify, Michelangelo's David is not my favourite piece of art. I don't even know if it cracks my top 10 in terms of favourites, but I stand in awe of it because of the achievement of it.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Russ, isn't the only one to say this, the esteemed artist and historian Giorgio Vasari wrote, no other artwork is equal to it in any respect. With such just proportion, beauty and excellence did Michelangelo finish it. It depicts the biblical figure of King David, of course. The Florentines loved David as a symbol of their culture. He represents courage, strength, and perseverance, the same things they saw in themselves. Michelangelo made his David obviously uncircumcised, so that too is perhaps a projection of Catholic Florence onto an ancient Jew, which is kind of weird.

But anyway, Michelangelo created his David from a single block of marble, somewhere between 1501 and 1504. He's only 26 years old when he got the commission. The statue was destined to be one in a series that would line the roof of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. the famous dome of the cathedrals still pierces the city scape of Florence today. I love Florence. Shout out to any listeners there.

But once the piece was finished, it was clear it was going nowhere because it was impossible to lift. So the statue of David took its place in the nearby palace. It now sits in the Galleria dell 'Accademia.

By the way, in 2015, a Melbourne family added a four-meter concrete copy of the statue of David to their front yard, much to the dismay of the neighbours. The statue was called vulgar, tacky, an eyesore. Fair enough. Perhaps beauty is also partly about context and originality.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

Can we go briefly philosophical? Okay. What is beauty? And I guess I want to say, is it an objective thing, or is it purely subjective matter of taste?

Russ Ramsey:

Well, it can't be purely subjective because it's universal. And so if beauty is something that thing that beckons a human being to engage, which is one of the things beauty does. By nature, it attracts. So we are drawn to beauty, whether it's me seeing my wife for the first time in college and perking up, or us getting in our vehicle and driving to see the Grand Canyon or, or flying across the ocean to visit the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland. There's something about a pull that beauty has that draws us as human beings toward it.

As a Christian, I believe that beauty is a reflection of the nature and character of the creator of the world, that beauty reflects the one who made the world that we live in. And so, there's an element of that where when we engage with beauty, it's a kind of engaging with God. And so, now we're now we're not just philosophical, but theological, I suppose, but-

John Dickson:

Well, all good philosophy ends up theological.

Russ Ramsey:

Doesn't it? Doesn't it? So, yeah, I think, beauty is one of those things... I think it also, beauty is something that works in our lives to show us places where we're wrong about things. This is an idea that Makoto Fujimura shared with me. He's an artist in New York City, that he got from a woman named Elaine Scarry, who wrote a book called *On Beauty and Being Just*, and she talks about how beauty shows us where we're wrong, that you can form a kind of a prejudicial impression of a place or a people or a food or a culture. But if you experience it, if you get up close to it, if you immerse yourself in it, you will find how small your vision was. And the beauty of a custom, the beauty of a flavour or a dish or a kind of music being performed for you in person will, it'll humble us.

Makoto Fujimura:

When we talk about purpose and utility, we kind of miss the mark.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

And that is Makoto Fujimura, A leading contemporary artist and author he's well known for his process-driven, refractive, slow art. New York Times writer, David Brooks, called his process "a small rebellion against the quickening of time".

Makoto's work imbues feelings of hope, of healing, redemption and refuge. And he travels the world as an international advocate for the arts. He's also very public about his Christian faith. And his latest book is called Art Plus Faith, a Theology of Making. I was super excited to get him on the podcast.

Makoto Fujimura:

Because God is the artist, God is beauty, and therefore art exists simply as a reflection of God's being. And so we don't have to justify it as if it needs a purpose because it is at the heart of creation. And what I mean by that is actually it counters the Darwinian struggle that we find ourselves in the survival game, scarcity mindset, zero sum game that we play. And Jesus stands on the hill of Galilee, reminding us to consider the lilies of the field, look at the birds of the air. And we ask why? We need to survive. Give us something practical and purposeful. And yeah, Jesus says, no. The whole creation is based on abundance. Remember the creation which was given to you as a gift with really no purpose other than its own existence as abundant beauty and this heart of God, which is love. And love will create generatively in creating sometimes very, what one might call useless things.

When we go on a date, we don't do oftentimes purpose-driven things. We do unnecessary things. And that shows that at the heart of love is this gratuitous beauty, abundance that is given to us as a gift. And we want to give that to each other. And so I would think art belongs in that gift territory that we are given creation and ourselves, our lives as a gift from the creator. And we are simply to return that. If we love anything, that means we are creating from the abundant mindset into new creation.

John Dickson:

It's a bit like at the relational level, true friendship, isn't it?

Makoto Fujimura:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

John Dickson:

True friendship isn't about utility.

Makoto Fujimura:

Yes.

John Dickson:

In fact, there's something, if you are using someone to some end, it's not friendship. It's a really strange thing.

Makoto Fujimura:

Yeah. And C.S. Lewis says, phileo, the friendship is the highest of the loves. And, and I think that what you just noted is exactly why. It is gratuitous. It is excessive. It is something that we have as counter to survival. But oftentimes that very thing, that excess of creation is what saves us at the end.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Philosophers have long suggested that one of the things that makes us distinctly human is our desire, our longing for goodness, truth and beauty, Peter Kreeft is the Catholic philosopher we featured recently for the Kingdom Come episode. He writes that goodness, truth and beauty are the only three things that we never get bored with and never will for all eternity, because they are three attributes of God, and therefore attributes of all God's creation. He's echoing a long philosophical tradition in Christian theology, and even before. These are universal properties built into creation. Everything in creation participates, to some degree, in goodness, truth and beauty.

The fifth century genius, Saint Augustine, you knew we were going to slip him in here, writes about beauty in his classic *de veritate religionis* of true religion. And he poses the question, are things beautiful because they give us delight? Or do they give us delight because they are beautiful? He emphatically opts for the second. Beauty is an objective thing built into the creation, and it calls out to us. It produces in us a transcendent kind of joy.

Something similar was said by pagan philosophers too. The third century Greek thinker Plotinus wrote, this is the spirit that beauty must ever induce wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight. I love that idea. Beauty isn't just pleasurable. It produces in us a longing, and often it's not just a longing for the beautiful object itself. It's longing for something the beautiful object points to beyond itself.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

You say that beauty is good for us. What does it do to us?

Russ Ramsey:

One of the things I think, that beauty does in our lives is it... I don't know. Without it, our lives would become pretty sterile. Our relationships would become boring. Our work would become perfunctory and a means to an end. But if we look at life through the lens of beauty is everywhere, Rich Mullins, the late Rich Mullins, the singer/songwriter said, there's so much beauty around us for just two eyes to see, but everywhere I go, I'm looking. I think that's the mandate for us is to say, as people who have the capacity to notice beauty, which human beings really are the only thing walking around sentient enough to notice beauty and pause and linger and take it in, and as people who are as, as beings who are engaging with beauty for beauty's sake. And I think that's a unique thing. It would be a shame if we lived our lives in such a way that we just cut that part out.

John Dickson:

Caravaggio.

Russ Ramsey:

Caravaggio, a paradox of profanity and wonder. He created these works of art that are these transcendent pictures of biblical truth. And between painting those things, drank, stole, and murdered people.

John Dickson:

Maybe I should have drilled down on that one.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Sadly, we can't dwell long on Caravaggio, but he's a late 16th, early 17th century, Italian painter. And he was quite the character. One of his biographers put it like this, after a fortnight's work, he will swagger about for a month or two with a sword at his side and a servant following him from one bold court to the next, ever ready to engage in a fight or an argument so that it is most awkward to get along with him.

Even still Caravaggio was hugely influential. His religious art juxtaposed the sacred and the profane. According to Russ Ramsey, Caravaggio was moved by the power of Christ to change people's hearts. Russ writes, the theme of the sinner's need for rescue and Christ's power to give it runs through his entire body of work. It was a story he told over and over again throughout his entire life, presumably because he kept needing to hear it. Fair enough.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

Hey, anyone who travels to Europe sees a lot of religious art. So what's all that about? When was this really religious art most popular and why?

Russ Ramsey:

Well, we live in a time now where you can have a Kindle and you can get books online and carry around a library on your phone. But there was a time when books weren't widely dispersed. And so the ones that tended to be were scripture and mythology. These tended to be the stories that everybody had access to. And so it follows that art would draw on ubiquitous stories. And so that's why you can have painters who by just looking biographically at their lives, you would wonder, is this person a person of faith, or were they just kind of a licentious scoundrel with a gift? And-

John Dickson:

Caravaggio.

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah, Caravaggio would be an example. And I certainly would not want to pass any judgment on the quality of his soul because I think part of my hope as a Christian is that walking contradictions can be redeemed, which is good news, but-

John Dickson:

Did he do the Doubting Thomas?

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah. The Incredulity of Saint Thomas.

John Dickson:

The Incredulity. Yeah.

Russ Ramsey:

The finger where the Christ is guiding Thomas's finger into the wound in his side.

John Dickson:

Yeah. It is hard to look at that and think this guy doesn't understand this.

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah, yeah.

John Dickson:

Was the church only interested in art for religious sake or for the sake of art and beauty itself, because some would just say, ah, the church only sponsored art because it was trying to propagandize.

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah. I mean, I think it's both. I think that when you look at, particularly the era of the Reformation, the Catholic church leaned heavy into creating art during that period. And one of the reasons they did that was because Protestant churches, reformed churches were very critical of any kind of representation of God or Jesus, or really art itself was kind of seen as garish and-

John Dickson:

Well, Presbyterians took a lot of paintings down in churches, did they not?

Russ Ramsey:

Yes, yes. And shame on us for that.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

So what to say about the Reformation in two minutes, which is all producer Kaley is giving me? The 16th century Reformation was a kind of back to basics movement at first within the Catholic church, and then of course, as a breakaway from the Catholic church. Perhaps the key idea that drove the Protestant Reformation was a return to the original simplicity of the Christian faith. It was in fact, part of a larger European movement known as humanism, which was also interested in going back to the original sources, including the Greek and Latin sources of antiquity.

The Christian version of humanism that gave us the Protestant Reformation was eager to go back to the original words of the apostles in the New Testament, rather than rely on the accumulated traditions of the centuries. As a result of this general outlook, there was an overreaction against beauty and art in the Protestant tradition. In trying to make sure people were not distracted by images in their worship of God and stuck to the word of God, protestants have generally had less interest in art. Sorry about that.

Russ Ramsey:

But there was a combination of it. It was certainly used to inspire awe, to draw the eye to, as a means of biblical literacy in a culture where people didn't widely have, couldn't read, where they could see the images. Bono talks about stained glass in those old European churches as the first movies, pictures through light and colour. But it was also a way of, in a way it was a sport. Certain churches would hire certain prominent artists to do the popular works that they would feature in their foyer. And then so that church would have a Botticelli, but this other church might have a Michelangelo, and so it was used for that. So it's a combination. And nothing is really ever that pure. And the church has been a part of that.

And of course, a lot of the Renaissance art and stuff like that, there wasn't much of a distinction between church and state in those times when it came to power and governing people and affluence and wealth, and things that would dazzle were of value to draw people in.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

There's a sense in which the Enlightenment, not just the reformation, was responsible for a further diminution of art and beauty. Enlightenment thinkers, like David Hume and Emmanuel Kant, in different ways and to different degrees, chipped away at the idea that beauty was an objective fact of the world. They said that beauty was as much, or perhaps even more, in our heads than in the world. It's in the eye of the beholder, as the expression goes. The Enlightenment not only stressed human subjectivity in this way, it also focused our attention, rightly in some ways, much more on practical knowledge than natural sciences, technology, utility, and ultimately industry. And there's not much place in these things for beauty. Beauty, in this context, is seen as a luxury. Will we ever recover our thirst for beauty in the church or society?

Russ Ramsey:

I have hope, but I think that we're cyclical by nature as a species that nothing is new under the sun. But I do have hope that we've been through a few generations, I think, of trying to figure out the right way and do things the right way and generations of trying pragmatism and capitalism and things that would put our footing underneath us and establish us forever so we wouldn't have need of anything. But as the

world grows more and more complex, and as we gain more and more access through technology to sad and horrific things happening around the world, our appetite for beauty, our need for it will increase.

Makoto Fujimura:

But I really come to believe any effort to define beauty misses the mark, or anything that tries to make beauty outside of the centrality of who we are and our existence, we tend to marginalize beauty as a result of that.

John Dickson:

So what do you make of that tradition in art that's really quite modern, I can't think of it being a medieval or ancient thing, that is almost a protest against beauty? It's almost a counter.

Makoto Fujimura:

Right. And that's connected with our alienation of contemporary society to the source of beauty who is God. But also, it's an alienation to oneself. We're disconnected from the very source of how we connect with ourselves. So as a result, we are very suspicious of beauty in general.

Now many artists who protest against beauty are protesting against the Western notion beauty, which can be very much superficially heavy laden with Western idealism. But as you may know, my definition has much to do with Japanese way of understanding beauty, which is connected to sacrifice. So it's a very different way of looking at beauty.

John Dickson:

So can you give us that as a counterpoint to the Western idea of beauty?

Makoto Fujimura:

Sure. Beauty in Japan is connected to sacrifice and death. The Chinese idiom used for beauty is comprised of two Chinese characters, or idiograms. It's sheep on top of character for great. So Japanese aesthetic philosophers have traced this and said that in Japan, around 11th century, the idea of beauty which came in from China, which was fat sheep, big sheep that is something to celebrate in autumn festivals as a blessing, has become more known, connected with sacrifice, the idea of sacrifice. So the great sheep is a sacrifice of anything, nature or even ourselves.

And so I note in my book, *Silence and Beauty*, that this idea of great sacrifice, great lamb being sacrificed is connected with Christ and the redemptive, what is hidden in Japanese culture is always this idea that someone has to be sacrificed for our sakes.

John Dickson:

And yet Western art seems to be more fixated in its traditional form with life and creation rather than sacrifice. Would that be accurate?

Makoto Fujimura:

Kind of a perfectionism this immaculate understanding of thinking about anything, including beauty, to be perfection of our image. You know, that's very Platonic Greek idea. But so industrial revolution has done a lot to this idea, which is whenever you improve upon the old, a new iPhone is considered to be perfect for a moment. And then you have the next version, which is as opposed to a Japanese notion, which can enter through something, through imperfection or brokenness or sacrifice. And to me, and that way of thinking is more accurate to the biblical notion of beauty and goodness.

John Dickson:

I've forgotten the name of that incredible Japanese style of mending broken things. What's it called again? And what's its significance?

Makoto Fujimura:

It's called kintsugi, but kint is gold, and sugi is to mend, but it's also to pass on to the next generation. And when an important tea vessel breaks, because of many earthquakes that Japan has, often the family of tea masters will hold onto the fragments for several generations, and they will give it to Japan urushi or Japan lacquer master to mend, but they don't fix it to restore it as if nothing's happened. They actually accentuate the fissures and brokenness and create instead a river of gold through it or lightning or a mountain creating a landscape using gold in a place of where the fracture or the fissures remain. So they're actually accentuating the imperfections, and they're making it more beautiful. The resulting kintsugi bowl is far more valuable than the original, even as valuable as the original may have been.

And to me, this is a great example of a new creation. When the Bible talks about that Jesus' post-resurrection appearance, Jesus appears as a human being, but also as a wounded human being. And his nail marks are still there. Thomas asks to touch it. He doesn't. He worships instead, once he realizes that his question was turned into an invitation into new creation. And so by his wounds, we are healed, and we are brought into this understanding of new creations through the nail marks of Christ. And that to me is very much what kintsugi can represent.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

From the 15th century Italian Renaissance to ancient Japanese practices, we have travelled far and wide in the pursuit of beauty. And we've got further to go from a brilliant female British painter who finds herself in Northern Africa at the turn of the 20th century to a studio in 21st century New York. Stick with us after the break.

SPONSOR BREAK: ZONDERVAN

John Dickson:

This episode of Undeception is sponsored by Zondervan's new book, *The Beauty Chasers* by Timothy Willard. We asked him to put it in a sentence. What's the book about?

Timothy Willard:

When I looked around the church, and even in my own life, I looked at how wonder has kind of dissipated from the church. And this is, I think, a big problem in the church, and it can be even in people's lives. So *The Beauty Chasers* is about a lifestyle change of bringing worship and wonder back into your life.

John Dickson:

What does he hope readers are going to take away from the book?

Timothy Willard:

There's a physicist named Alan Lightman, and he was on both faculties of humanities, both at MIT and Harvard, the only person who's ever done this. And he's brilliant, and he's even a poet and a novelist. And he gives this story actually when he was on vacation, watching the birth of ospreys from the back deck of his vacation home in the summer. And so he's watching these ospreys take their first flight. And they fall out of the nest, and then the one just opens its wings and comes down and shoots out right at him and is looking right at him. And he said, in that moment, he looked into the eyes of the osprey. And he says, in that moment, he didn't really understand what he was experiencing, and this is a physicist. He's a physicalist, a materialist. And so there's answers for everything, but he didn't have an answer for that feeling that he had when he saw that baby osprey look him in the eye and then shoot up past him and take flight.

Timothy Willard:

And so he talks about this numinous, almost haunting nature of beauty in this flight of the osprey. And what's really interesting is Alan Lightman is an atheist. He's somebody who doesn't believe in God. I wouldn't say he's a militant atheist at all, but I think he leaves room for wonder. And you find all kinds of people doing this. They look at these things that seem like natural phenomenon, or just everyday wonders and beauties. And they, when they really get deep into it, they go, you know what? There is something here. And I want to leave room for that. I think those are the kinds of things that allow us to ask questions and go, you know what?

If the world is filled with so much wonder and things that we don't understand, unanswerable questions like Alan Lightman calls them, that I feel like that people who are searching or maybe who are on the fringe or whatever might find in this book something they can look at and go, oh, okay, I see what Tim's kind of getting at. And maybe if I can get out into nature myself and look and take the time and slow my pace, maybe I'll find what Alan Lightman seems to be finding.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Timothy Willard's new book, *The Beauty Chasers*, obviously fits right into what we're talking about in this episode. It's another great book to go and check out and dig deeper into this subject. You can order it at Amazon right now or head to zondervan.com for more.

SPONSOR BREAK: ANGLICAN AID

In Tanzania, people living with a disability suffer discrimination and social isolation. They also have trouble finding employment and education opportunities. Nearly half of people living with a disability in

Tanzania can't read or write. In some cases they're even denied medical care or access to services that offer food and shelter. Anglican Aid is changing this by supporting the Karagwe Disability Program in the Kagera region of Tanzania. The program offers dedicated medical care and rehabilitation to people living with disabilities, as well as giving them access to education and a pathway to employment. It's fantastic. You can help Anglican Aid support the life changing work of the Karagwe Disability Program by visiting Anglicanaid.org.au. That's anglicanaid.org.au. Thanks so much.

EPISODE CONTINUES

Kaley Payne:

How are we doing?

Son:

Good.

Kaley Payne:

Okay.

Son:

I'm doing good too.

Kaley Payne:

Yes, you are.

Son:

And no white spaces.

Kaley Payne:

No white spaces. Is that important?

Son:

Yeah. That's important...

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's producer Kaley and her five-year-old son on one of their crafternoons. Like most households with young kids, Kaley's dining table is a mess of paper and textures, stickers and glue.

Makoto Fujimura:

We're all artists until third grade, right? Somebody tells us we're not, and we believe them. And we spend the rest of our lives looking for a way to really make something. And we may be very successful in what we do, but what have we made is the ultimate question.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

I was really moved by this interview. I think I used to be creative. My first full-time career was writing, recording and performing songs. Not so much anymore. I suppose I still create books and arguments, but it's not the same. I miss creativity, almost with an ache. And not long after my interview with Makoto, I had some weeks off. I mostly read, practiced Latin, went for long walks, but I also wrote a new song. The first song in, let's just say more than a decade. Don't worry, I'm not going to play it for you. But I don't mind telling you, I cried. The song is no masterpiece, but the whole process of once again creating a melody, chords and lyrics was like falling into the embrace of a long-lost friend.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

But just in daily life, how to cultivate that pursuit of beauty?

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah. I think allowing yourself the permission to stop when something is happening in front of you or around you and give yourself, you don't have to give yourself an hour to watch a sunset, but if you give yourself 20 seconds to stand and watch a beautiful sunrise or a beautiful sunset before moving on, the difference that will make in your life versus not giving it that 20 seconds will be, no pun intended, night and day, is that I think there is beauty and grace happening all around us. The question is, do we want to be there for it? And so it's cultivating the habits of trying to pay attention.

John Dickson:

Can we talk just practically for a second about your daily practices in the studio?

Makoto Fujimura:

I am here in my Princeton studio. It's a horse barn turned into a studio, and I come here every morning. And I have a series of paintings that I started about two years ago based on the Psalms. It's 48 inches by 48 inch canvas that every month I take one Psalm, and I work on it. So it's going to take me another decade to finish this 150 Psalms. I didn't think about it when I started it, but that's how I start my day meditating on Psalms. And then I have commissions, and I have projects that I want to complete. So I work on that.

And then in between time, because the process of how I work is slow and layered, there's a painting downstairs that it's probably going to take me two years to complete with over 200 layers. And I want it to be a slow process, and it doesn't have any purpose other than me wanting to use this particular azurite pigment that I just got from my dear pigment maker in Japan. And so sometimes it's purposeful

like a commission, serving some client or collector. Most of the time, it's a meditative, contemplative practice that I get to focus on here in my studio.

John Dickson:

Do you push through when you're not feeling the creative juices? Or are you just so blessed that you are always feeling creative?

Makoto Fujimura:

Yeah, there are times when you are young, you do wrestle with when is a work finished, and you want to say everything in a single piece. And then you get to a point where you realize, it's best to stop a work when it's about to give birth to 10 other paintings so when it's most pregnant with generative possibilities. And then you work on these 10 other paintings that you want to do. And so I've never had an artist block since I realized that in my twenties, actually, because I don't have time on this side of eternity to finish all the works that I want to do. So making art, making anything is hard work. And you do have to be very disciplined because you are bringing in something invisible on this side of eternity.

John Dickson:

In my own heart, I feel like this one needs a drum roll. Rembrandt.

Russ Ramsey:

Rembrandt.

John Dickson:

Come on. Tell me about Rembrandt.

Russ Ramsey:

Yes. So when Rembrandt was at his peak, other artists referred to him as the master, so his own contemporaries regarded him as the master. He is one of the most brilliant, enduring painters who was in control. One of the things that's fascinating to me about Rembrandt is when you look at his body of work, which is really, if you're appreciating art, that's a sweet place to get to is where you're not just appreciating a painting, but you're learning more about a body of work. It's sort of like following Paul Simon, where you know the Simon and Garfunkel songs. But now if you know the stuff he wrote after 2000, you're like, what a career? And you see this body of work of a person changing. Rembrandt is that way.

John Dickson:

Yeah. I think of Sting the same.

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah. Yeah.

John Dickson:

If you think The Police, back to Synchronicity right through to his amazing multicultural stuff.

Russ Ramsey:

The Rembrandt has these, he painted the scene of Joseph and Mary presenting Jesus in the temple, and Simeon is there. It's in Luke, chapter two. And he painted one version... He painted it twice. He painted one version, when he was 24 years old, and it will knock your socks off. It's just this elaborate painting of the temple, and the architecture is there. There's over 50 people kind of standing on the steps, which are acting like risers. So you can see all of them as individual pieces. There's this shaft of light coming down, and it's ornate and just takes your breath away.

But then the year before he died, when he was, I think he was 60, he was in his sixties. I don't remember exactly, but it was the year before he died. He painted that painting again. And all it is an old man holding a baby, and it's kind of muted in the brush work. It's not elaborate. And there's a woman standing over his shoulder looking on. And what you see in the trajectory of his kind of growth in life as an artist is in his twenties, he's trying to dazzle. He's trying to show you what he can do. But then as an old man, the painting looks like somebody who just wants to hold Jesus. He just wants to... It's intimate in a way that the other was an elab... He goes from elaborate to intimate, and from just technically precise to this kind of warmth.

John Dickson:

Do we know anything about his own faith? I mean, some of his paintings, you think how could this man not have understood things? I'm thinking of the prodigal, that prodigal and the father embracing the son. What do we know of his religion?

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah. From what I understand, he was he was a person of faith, and that his faith in his art were hand in hand. You see it because his prodigal son, even the return of the prodigal son, there's another of the prodigal son off in the far country. And it's a self-portrait. He's there. And the woman that he's got his arm around is his wife. And she died tragically. He buried children. He lost his fortune. And so over the course of his life, he was a man who suffered.

John Dickson:

Why does he put himself in paintings? He does it quite a bit. Right. Is this just the original selfie? Or is there something more profound going on?

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah, no, no. This was a method of evangelism. This was a way of saying this story is my story.

John Dickson:

Yeah. Right.

Russ Ramsey:

And so when an artist puts themselves in the story, it's a way of them saying, I'm part of this. So he's one of the... There's a raising of the cross painting where he's one of the people raising the cross which Christ is nailed to, and he's there in his kind of typical blue velvet that he paints himself into often. And then when he looks at the viewer, it's not just that he's putting himself in the story, but he's asking the viewer, aren't you in this story too? And so it was very much a way of drawing the viewer into the story and in a pretty pointed way.

John Dickson:

Well, of course you still as a regular Christian have time for reading the Bible and praying. I mean, you're not such an artist that you don't like words as well. Is that right?

Makoto Fujimura:

Well, word is art. I mean, if we understand that God is the artist, I'm not talking about something outside of essence of and something that is superficial or cosmetic. I'm talking about art that is fundamental to the creator, and that source of all wisdom and beauty is what rejuvenates us, what our souls hunger for. And so when we read the word of God, we are encountering a portal through which we actually get to tap into that. And God wants to sanctify our imagination so we can be given wings, not as C.S. Lewis notes, we're not horses that are trained to jump higher and higher hurdles of moralism. We are creatures with wings, and we have to exercise our wings and imagination and faith in order to fly into the new creation.

And so word of God, prayer is fundamentally an act of training ourselves to use these parts of us that are growing. And many times when you first try to do this, you land very awkwardly many times. And it's part of, I think, a discipline, but also communal. The church journey is to grow our wings together. And oftentimes that can only happen if we are honest and vulnerable to each other, and as artists are. To be able to look at the world, full of fractures and pain and say, yeah, this day I'm choosing to create something new into the world. And if we can do that together, that will be such a powerful statement in light of what we are experiencing today.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

More than 150 years ago, a British woman began her journey to become one of the world's greatest artists. Her mentor was a renowned art critic who believed that technique must be acquired hand in hand with the skill of learning to look. Technique and the gift of looking was something that Lilius Trotter seemed to have in abundance. Lilius Trotter. Now, again, my listeners won't have heard much about her. Why did you choose her for your book?

Russ Ramsey:

So Lilius Trotter was a painter who grew up in kind of Victorian London, well to do, well off, talented. And she did watercolours. And there's an art teacher, critic, philosopher, artist named John Ruskin who lived in London. And he was kind of the... If Ruskin put his arm around you and said, this painter is somebody to pay attention to, everybody took notice. And Lilius's mother, Lilius and her mother, when she was a

girl were staying at a hotel the same time as that Ruskin was there. And her mother asked Ruskin, can I show you some of my daughter's paintings? And Ruskin was going to endure the request, but wasn't expecting anything to happen. And he was undone by what he saw, particularly that such a young woman would have such a technical precision without any training, that she was doing things the right way in terms of how art teachers would teach art students how to paint. And he asked if he could keep some of them. He used them as examples for what his art students that he taught should do.

Russ Ramsey:

And they developed a relationship when he, and he was trying to cultivate her. And he said of her, you can be the most famous living painter in Europe if you pour yourself into this craft, and I can help that happen. But she had this longing to serve the poor. And so she served prostitutes in London, and she served poor and disenfranchised women.

But then she heard some missionaries talk about Algeria. And particularly, she developed a desire to go and minister to the Arabic women of Algeria, very poor country at that time. And so she sought permission through some mission boards to go, and women missionaries wasn't really a thing unless they were married to a man missionary. And so all the missionary boards denied her. And so she and a couple of her friends decided to just go on their own.

And so she basically left what could have been a dazzling career as an artist in the heart of London to serve the poor on the coast of Africa. And I found her story so compelling for a number of reasons. By no means, am I telling that story to say, if you have the choice between being a missionary or an artist, you should choose being a missionary? I don't think that's true. I think if God calls somebody to be an artist with their life, they better not become a missionary because there's this calling.

But one of the things that moved me so much about her story is I started thinking about, okay, here's a woman who had to take something that she was gifted at and had the whole world in front of her. And she basically had to set it down in order to pursue this other calling that she believed was really where the Lord wanted her to go and what she was to do with her life. And so she didn't marry. She didn't have children. She still painted, but she painted in order to break the language barrier between her and the Arabic women. So she painted as a form of communication, but she wasn't painting masterpieces. She was painting evangelistic tracts. And she was painting stories of the Bible in order to teach people.

And one of her friends commented to a reporter later that even though she was completely confident that she was doing what she was on earth to do as this missionary to these women, that there was a pain that she carried with her over the loss of this artistic expression. And the thing that made me kind of perk up and really want to tell this story is her friend said it wasn't when she wasn't painting that she felt the loss. It was when she picked up her brush to paint that she was acutely aware that she wasn't as good as she used to be, that there was an unfamiliarity to this craft that she used to have a level of mastery over. And I just think, who among us doesn't have something like that where when we were in our teens or in our twenties, we thought I'm going to do this thing, and it's going to define who people come to know me to be. And then-

John Dickson:

Yeah, I was going to play for Manchester United just for the record.

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah. Yeah. Other things-

John Dickson:

It didn't work out.

Russ Ramsey:

You could have done it too, if it wasn't for the podcast.

John Dickson:

Yeah, that's right.

Russ Ramsey:

But I think that's a compelling story. I like how it's not the happy ending of, see, she chose the better path, and everything worked out. It was, see, she chose this path, and she was content to believe it was faithful, and it still came at a cost, and it still hurt sometimes.

John Dickson:

In what way does beauty point to transcendence, point to God?

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah. I love this question. I believe that all of us are walking around wondering, is this it? Is this all there is? And I think that you can... I could stand in front of Michelangelo's David even and get to a point where I would say, is this all there is, as transcendent and as beautiful as that may be?

C.S. Lewis had a great statement where he said, if we find in ourselves a hunger that nothing in this world can satisfy, then the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world. That appetite is there, and it's there because we were made to have that appetite satisfied, that longing satisfied. And if we can't get it satisfied in this world the way that it is, it's because we weren't made for this world in the way that it is. We were made for something more glorious and something more beautiful and something more eternal and something more whole. And beauty is where we often go to engage with that appetite, and it doesn't... And I don't mean religious art. I mean any art. I mean, you could listen to a rock band that you loved in college, and it will stir something in your heart that you know is transcendent, that you know is about more than just the notes being played and the rhythm in which they're recorded, that there's something transcendent about it. And art reminds us of that.

John Dickson:

And yet you're saying, it's not fully satisfying, even the best art, it's just-

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah.

John Dickson:

It's just like a window to something beyond. Is that what you're saying?

Russ Ramsey:

Yeah. Yeah. It's a foretaste. It's a reminder to us. That's one of the things that beauty does is that it makes copies of itself. So when you stand in front of a painting, you're going to want to pull out your phone and take a picture of it. Or if you stand in front of the Grand Canyon, you might want to get a piece of paper out and sketch it or paint it with watercolours, because there's something about the encounter with that beautiful thing that you want to somehow try to take it with you. And the question that I would just want to ask is, what's that about? What is it about that there's something in us that wants to collect beauty, that we can carry around with us and that we can have? My faith, I believe, answers that question for me.

Makoto Fujimura:

I think we've all had experience of encountering an artwork or music or theatre that spoke something about the mystery of our lives in a way that didn't expect anybody to understand. It unlocked something deeply within us. And it could be a cinema or movie. You're sitting there, and all of a sudden something breaks open. And if you're not a religious person, or maybe if you are someone who have not had the experience of going to church or synagogue or mosque or whatever that may be spiritual path, you wouldn't know what to do with that. But still, poetry and art and music arts have of a way of untapping the mystery of our beings.

So in that sense, we are all believers. We believe in the transcendent reality when we see a sunset. What do we feel when we see fireflies in the dark skies? Just skies full of them. Or I'm in Princeton here today, and these spring peepers, these little frogs, just came out today. And I went bounding into my wife's office and said, peepers are out. What makes us so joyful about the spring and the flowers and the birds? These are all common experiences, I think. And in that sense, we all believe in the idea that something can give us this experience of transcendence and hope and joy, when frankly, we might be facing a situation which is very bleak.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

In one of the endorsements at the front of Russ Ramsey's book, Rembrandt is in the Wind, the best-selling author, Leif Enger, writes, beauty amid the church's moral twilight might be the last apologetic that holds. Ouch. He's saying there's not much left to commend the church to doubters. That maybe goes too far, but there's something in it.

But I think Enger is dead right that beauty is a powerful argument on behalf of transcendence. Emmanuel Kant, for all of his enlightenment rigor and critical analysis, thought that beauty was a kind of reverberation in the created order of the elegant mind of the creator. Paul Draper, a popular agnostic philosopher once wrote, theism is supported by the fact that the universe contains an abundance of beauty. Vincent van Gogh put it like this, for my part, I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream. His famous Starry Night and Sunflowers point to the beauty of creation, yet his other works explore the beauty that is less easily seen.

John Dickson:

Van Gogh is now one of the most influential and famous painters of the Western world, but he found beauty in ordinary people and ordinary places. Russ Ramsey says van Gogh is a paradox. In the thousands of words he wrote in letters, mostly to his brother, Theo, van Gogh revealed his immorality, pride and anger, but they also show a striving man who, as Russ writes, recognized beauty, wonder and worth in people in ways few others ever would. And throughout his letters, he never stopped professing his love of Christ despite his brokenness, or perhaps because of it.

John Dickson:

Well, here is my final question. You already confessed earlier on that your favourite artists is van Gogh.

Russ Ramsey:

Yes.

John Dickson:

So I guess I want to ask why, and what's, let's just say, one painting that exemplifies the best of him?

Russ Ramsey:

Okay. So van Gogh, the reason I love van Gogh is partially because of the letters, is because we don't just have work, but we have what he said about the work. So he's one of the greatest resources for understanding the creative process that is available. There are websites that have just his letters organized where you can search them.

But van Gogh had a relentless appetite to capture the beauty in everything that he saw. And he was particularly drawn to scenes of the poor or the working class, or he was looking for beauty in places where beauty is not known to be found. And he was finding it, and he was painting it. And his appetite for it was insatiable. He painted more paintings than anybody else that I know of. On average, if you were to break down how many paintings per year, he painted over the course of his life as an artist, that average is just blows away everybody else. He couldn't find what he was looking for, but he was trying.

The painting that I have right here in my office, I look, I raise my eyes from my desk in my pastor's study is van Gogh's self-portrait with a bandaged ear. And that would be the one that really kind of got me because it's a painting, if people know anything about Vincent van Gogh, they probably know that he cut off his ear and maybe know that he gave it to a prostitute. And then the jokes abound. He painted it while he was in asylum, in a mental institution, recovering from this breakdown that he had. And he paints himself in this moment of vulnerability and shame.

And with a painting, you can show whatever you want. It's not a photograph. You don't have to hide anything. And so he paints a picture of himself with his wounded side showing. And I think as a human being, and as a pastor, that feels like a mandate for me that I dare not try to present myself to my friends or my congregation as somebody who is completely whole and has everything together. If I have wounded parts of me, I dare not hide those from people because we all have them.

But the mystery and the beauty and the wonder of that particular painting is here he is capturing himself when he is the most alone he's ever been, the most embarrassed he's ever been, the most destitute that he's ever been. And it's now worth millions, and it hangs in a museum that you can go to visit and stand in front of with your jaw on the floor because of the honesty and the vulnerability of this master work. And there's something that just moves me about the paradox of that, of the fragility of this man in the moment that he captured being this work of art of inestimable value. And that to me just is so moving.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Well, that's the last episode for the season. We hope you enjoyed it. We're already working hard at planning season seven and season eight for later in the year. And we'll be back after the season break with more Undeceptions.

In the meantime, why not look back through our catalogue and check out some of the episodes you might have missed. Some particularly popular episodes from previous seasons include Resting Well, episode 60, Between Testaments, episode 54, Jesus Philosopher, episode 57, Pro-life, episode 49 LGBTI Christian, episode 24 and our very first episode Old Papers about the manuscripts of the New Testament.

Thank you also to the tons of listeners who filled out our first listener survey. It's given us plenty to think about as we plan the coming seasons. And congratulations to Ros Birt and James Allen who won our season six book and t-shirt packs by completing the survey. We should already have been in touch to get those prizes out to you. Happy reading.

A few other things before I go. Can I encourage you to follow the Undeceptions Network Facebook page while we're on our season break? It's where you'll hear first when the next season is ready. Plus lots of other news about the podcast and our other network podcasts.

Speaking of our other podcasts, you should definitely subscribe to Small Wonders with Laurel Moffatt. She's in the final lap of her first season, and it's one of the most beautiful podcasts out there, I reckon. There's plenty of food for thought in her 15-minute audio essays.

And keep an eye out also for With All Due Respect with Michael Jensen and Megan Powell du Toit. There's plenty more episodes to keep your eager ears busy while we are making the next episodes of Undeceptions.

And finally, if you like what we're doing here, and you want to support us, please head to undeceptions.com, click the oversized donate button and go where the wind blows.

This season, we've been hovering just below the breakeven mark of \$3,000 an episode. I personally take nothing from the podcast, but I do have bills and staff to pay. I really appreciate your help. From all of us here at Undeceptions, thank you. See ya.

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne, and directed by Mark van Gogh Hadley, editing by Richard Hamwi, social media by Sophie Hawkshaw and executive assistant by Lyndie Leviston. Special thanks to our series sponsor, Zondervan, for making this Undeception possible.

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