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POLI 113

6 May 2025

The Courageous Subject: God Is Dead and So Is Art

I've always been a student of the arts. In childhood, this meant little more than a devotion to paper and pen. Later, when I could be trusted to clean up after myself, I graduated to paint. But something shifted as I moved into higher education: I was no longer just asked to create. I was asked to mean. Suddenly, aesthetic value was judged not by what stirred within me, but by what it stirred in others. I became a student of interpretation, of messaging, of impact. Friedrich Nietzsche would have hated this. He believed that turning art into a gesture for others is a disinterested, moral performance drained of vitality. According to Nietzsche, when art stops being for the artist, it stops being art at all.

There's a particular kind of death Nietzsche mourns. It's not just the death of God, but the death of spirit–the loss of grandeur, ferocity, and fire. This death is felt most acutely in the art we create and consume. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche contrasts the Old and New Testaments, presenting them as two opposing moral worlds: one majestic, fearsome, and full of raw power; the other sentimental, meek, and domesticated. But this isn't merely a theological commentary. It speaks to something far deeper about our culture. Nietzsche's critique cuts through more than moral philosophy, it cuts to the heart of how we engage with creativity itself.

Art, once a domain of strength and freedom, has been tamed and softened into something safe, predictable, and palatable. This transformation isn't just a change in style; it marks a deeper cultural shift. Art's raw vitality, once born from the fierce, ungovernable will of the creator, has been traded for works that soothe rather than challenge, that fulfill social expectations rather than break free from them. What was once a site of danger, sublimity, and force, an Old Testament kind of art, has been reduced to kitsch: emotionally digestible, mass-produced, politically agreeable, and spiritually tame.

Nietzsche saw the loss of awe and intensity in modern culture long before it fully arrived. He writes, "In the Jewish 'Old Testament,' the book of divine justice, there are men, things, and sayings on such an immense scale... One stands with fear and reverence before those stupendous remains of what man was formerly" (p. 67). What Nietzsche admires here is not moral comfort or sanitized virtue, but sheer grandeur of human presence at its most elemental and overwhelming. This is the aesthetic of awe, not agreement. Think of Michelangelo's *Moses*, fists clenched, seething with divine fury. Or Caravaggio's *David*, gripping Goliath's severed head with eerie composure. These are not polite figures meant to affirm the viewer; they unsettle, overpower, and command reverence. They exemplify what Nietzsche calls the "Will to Power"; the fundamental drive in all living things to grow, assert, transform, and overcome to not just survive, but expand and shape the world according to their inner force. These aesthetic examples are shining forms of brute strength, but the deep, driving force within life that seeks to assert, expand, and transform.

Compare that to the kind of art we're surrounded by today. Safe. Clean. Branded. Designed to comfort, not challenge. Designed, quite literally, for the walls of a beige apartment. This is what Nietzsche would call the "New Testament" of art. "The New Testament, the book of

grace... appeals more to his heart... there is much of the odour of the genuine, tender, stupid beadsman and petty soul in it*"* (pg 67). This isn't a personal attack on Christianity but is instead a cultural warning. When we blend the Old and New Testaments, when we merge strength and sentimentality into one single "moral" system, or as Nietzsche calls it "perhaps the greatest audacity and 'sin against the Spirit' which literary Europe has upon its conscience"(pg 67). Through these testaments we've taken two irreconcilable energies and smashed them into a comfort package. That's what we've done to art too.

Religiously, Christians once gathered to reframe scripture, combining texts and doctrines in ways that best served their evolving interests. And while the two Testaments carry distinct moral and aesthetic conventions, the shift from the fearsome grandeur of the Old to the sentimental compassion of the new marked a profound change in spiritual tone. Art, in many ways, has done the same thing to itself. The moral turn in contemporary aesthetics, where the value of a work hinges on its social utility or prescribed meaning, mirrors this transformation. But it isn't just morality that tames art. Capitalism, too, plays its part. The pressure to produce marketable, easily digestible work has flattened artistic ambition into branding, forcing artists to survive by making themselves legible, agreeable, and endlessly consumable.

In my own experience studying art, I'm constantly pushed to make something that means something. To make something that has a message, a theme, a point. It's become the measure of whether I'm doing "real" work. It makes the school look good, it makes the professors look good, and if I can attach some half-baked deep meaning to my piece, it gets praise. Honestly, that pressure flattens my creativity. It makes me feel like I'm performing meaning instead of making something honest. It promotes the institution more than it supports the artist. The materials I

once reached for in childhood, driven by pure awe, pleasure, and play, have become little more than tools for fulfilling a purpose.

Amy Sherald's official portrait of Michelle Obama, unveiled in 2018, was groundbreaking in both representation and style. It has been widely praised for its dignity, restraint, and quiet grace. But the figure it presents is composed, still, and serene. An icon, yes, but not a force. The painting invites admiration and identification, not confrontation. This woman is not Moses. She is not rage or grandeur. She is poised, symbolic, accessible and made to be understood. In that sense, she becomes a casualty of commodified modern art. Nietzsche warns that we should be doubly suspicious of moral and aesthetic gestures that seem to exist "not for myself," but "for others" (pg 46). These sugary sentiments, he argues, might not be virtues at all but deceptions that gain power precisely because they please the viewer. Sherald's painting is tailored to be loved. It flatters the liberal art world's hunger for representation and redemption, and in doing so, avoids the kind of raw, unsettling artistic force Nietzsche admired. Political "meaning" becomes a replacement for artistic danger. Meanwhile, the primal will of creation like Jackson Pollock flinging his psyche across a canvas is dismissed as messy, apolitical, or indulgent. In a culture that rewards "disinterested contemplation," the art that dares to unsettle becomes an outlier.

Pollock's work is more in line with Nietzsche's ideal. It's aggressive, non-representational, uninterested in being understood. It does not "mean" anything in the soft sense of the word–it simply is. That alone is an act of spiritual rebellion. Like the Old Testament prophets who screamed at God or ripped their garments in grief, Pollock's work doesn't aim to soothe the viewer but to unsettle them. There's power in that, even if it's chaotic. Nietzsche

would likely see Pollock as a rare modern example of someone whose art still burns. Pollock doesn't reflect us; he erupts. He paints as a mode of becoming, not as a means of acceptance.

On the other end of the spectrum, we get Thomas Kinkade. His paintings sell millions. His cottages and lighthouses glow with pre-programmed comfort. His work tells you exactly how to feel–*Main Street Celebration, A Peaceful Retreat, A Prayer for Peace.* There's no grandeur, only sentimentality. It's the New Testament in brushstrokes. We don't stand before his paintings with "fear and reverence." We smile. We imagine them on our mother's wall. They remind us of a good old Hallmark Christmas movie. That's the point. Kinkade's work exists in what Nietzsche would see as the death of the human spirit, not made for meaning, but for mood regulation. It's aesthetically functional, like a scented candle.

Nietzsche doesn't just lament this trend, he sees it as spiritually dangerous. The fusion of grace and justice, sentiment and power, results in cultural stagnation. What was once dismissed as weak has become the dominant taste, shaping our museums, music charts, and bookshelves. Art is now wrapped in social virtue and market value, reduced to what Nietzsche would see as small-souled expression. No wonder people don't look at art in awe and instead they scroll past it. But awe is the point. Nietzsche urges a return to a way of being and creating that isn't merely moral or marketable, but magnificent. Not perfect. Not pretty. Magnificent. The kind of magnificence that made the Old Testament terrifying. That made art an act of Will to Power rather than a performance of goodness. The question, then, isn't just about art or God or kitsch. It's about whether we still believe in the possibility of grandeur. Have we lost the sublime? Can we get it back? Because if we don't, we're not just killing God–we're killing art too.