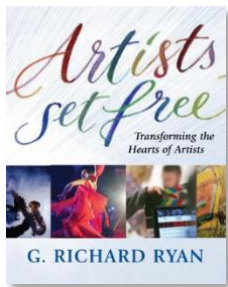


[Review] *Artists Set Free: Transforming the Hearts of Artists*, by G. Richard Ryan



BYRON SPRADLIN

Byron Spradlin DMin, MDiv, MCM, ThM (abd) is the Founder and President of Artists in Christian Testimony International, a missions & ministry sending board for artists and creatives, now with over 650 innovative staff in more than 54 nations. For over 50 years he has served the Body of Christ as an artists-in-missions & ministry specialist, worship pastor, Bible teacher, church planter, senior pastor, music-evangelist, professor, recording artist, published songwriter and arts-missiology, having ministered in over 50 countries—all focused on mentoring and discipling artistic Kingdom servants on mission for Christ. He's a lifetime member of the Global Ethnodoxology Network.



Ryan, G. Richard. *Artists Set Free: Transforming the Hearts of Artists*. Self-published, 2023. 260pp.

G. Richard Ryan has written a strategic book on the place of artists in the church for our day. He is well qualified for this because of his years in the mainstream professional arts world, the local church, and with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.¹ The book is a work of art in its own right, printed in color on high gloss paper and illustrated and designed by the nationally known calligrapher and artist Timothy Botts. It is not a “coffee table book,” but it can be used that way.

Ryan spent the first half of his life working in the professional music theater world, and one of the main goals of this book is to stimulate professional artists to incorporate ministry into their ongoing work. His target audience is working professionals, both within and outside the church. He has intentionally used language and stories, combined with Bott's artwork, to communicate with both churched and unchurched artists.

Ryan pushes artists to face the real longings in their hearts: to “explore the unique paths that lead to freedom—the genuine reality of both long-hoped-for achievement and peace (artistically and personally) . . . paths [that] will lead us into transformation . . . of our hearts [and] of the ways we view ourselves and the world we live in” (7). Given his press for artists (and those caring for them) to take a journey of inquiry, the book challenges the readers to move beyond the current artistic focus on self and self-expression into a more dangerous “imagin(ing) how your arts gifts can impact the world in wonderful and significant ways” (7).

Though Ryan is an unwavering Christian, he writes to all artists, believing and nonbelieving. Because of this, the book is refreshingly subtle. He affirms and reaffirms that we are created by God for things bigger than ourselves. The more we discover and operate in that reality, the more we will find and “walk in fulfilled dreams, sharing the beauty and truth and justice that so deeply motivates us” (7).

¹ Ryan spent three years as an Arts Pastor at the Vineyard Church of Evanston, Illinois, is the Founding Director of the InterVarsity National Arts Ministry, and is one of the key players in starting IVCF's university and conservatory arts fellowships on dozens of campuses across the United States. He currently holds the role of Senior National Arts Specialist with IVCF.

Artists Set Free is organized simply. The book is not written in a formal style, but it will stand firmly alongside those authors who do most of their writing for the academic community. It is helpful whether you are an arts practitioner, an academic, or an arts lover.

Ryan organized the book around ten simple questions:

1. Are the arts important?
2. What's different about artists?
3. Why are the arts so important to God?
4. Do artists hear from God?
5. Where does the artist's identity come from?
6. What are my spiritual gifts?
7. What does love have to do with identity?
8. How is an artist community created?
9. How do artists find their calling?
10. How does an artist cross the bridge to freedom?

Each chapter can be read as a standalone article, yet all the questions fit together, leading the reader to the final, big question at the end. I love that the final chapter opens with the instruction for the reader to stop and reflect, particularly on “how do you take your identity . . . out into the reality of the day-to-day work and still be safe?” (229). Ryan then moves into giving steps leading to personal freedom: a freedom rooted in knowing, confessing our sins, surrendering to, and following the real and loving God revealed in Jesus.

The book's format helps the reader access the content and the transformation for which Ryan argues. The layout includes multiple section titles and bold print. These visual markers, in addition to the pictures and stories, dramatically increase the impact of the written word. In every chapter, Ryan also includes a “Time to Reflect” section with simple guidelines and suggested questions the reader can work through on their own time. Then, he follows with a suggested brief prayer.

This book can serve as a personal processing tool or a small group guidance resource. It is helpful for personal development and in helping others understand the importance of artistic expression and artists. *Artists Set Free* is not an academic work, which opens it to a broader audience than many other treatments of the role of artists and the arts. However, academics will also benefit, as will pastors who will better understand the role of artists in life and ministry.

It is clear to most of us in the ethnodoxology movement that the global church continues to struggle with the place and role of artists in the Christian community. The need to affirm and advocate for including artistic kingdom servants in the global church community's life, culture, and ministries is great. *Artists Set Free* is an accessible work that makes an essential contribution to the conversation.

We need more books like this—books with strong intellectual and biblical substance accessible to local church gatekeepers (clergy and lay), most of whom have neither the time nor the interest to read a stack of academic books. We need books about the roles and nature of artists written so that servant-leaders in our congregations will pick them up and read them.

I have discipled and encouraged artistic Christians since 1968. Over the years, it has become vividly clear to me that artistic Christians need connection and community, affirmation and admiration (not adulation or pandering), relationships and resources, and encouragement and envisioning—all of which help them see they are designed for God’s purposes for the benefit of all those God loves.

In my work, I often remind artists of the following realities:

- You are not strange—you are beautiful.
- You are not crazy—you are passionate.
- You are not eccentric—you are unique.
- You are not bizarre—you are imaginative.
- You are not rebellious—you are innovative.
- God has hardwired you that way, and He likes it, and He likes you!
- Look around! You are not alone! There’s a whole room full of us!
- God designed you to lead others into touching the transcendent realities of this life and the everlasting.

Artists Set Free beautifully declares these same commitments, and I cannot recommend this book enough.

To order a copy of the book, visit:

<https://www.artistssetfree.com/buying-the-book.html#/>