The role of the artist in any given society, in any given place, and in any given time is extremely varied. As I have tried to order my thoughts and feelings, I feel a bit like someone trying to catch a fish in waters which vary from murky to limpid, with sharply shifting highlights and almost opaque dark shadows. As a sculptor I am conscious of the need for structure. As a painter I think about support. Odd, isn’t it, that one says support, rather than surface. The surface is the end result of the paint and other media placed on the support, whether it be a wall of stone or stucco, or canvas, or board, or paper.

The Gospel according to John starts out "In the beginning there was the Word…" But I think that is more of a metaphysical image. I tend to focus on the Genesis beginning which describes chaos. The subsequent description of the creation process resembles the historic earthly start-up of human beings attempting to imitate God by creating some sort of form and order out of the swirling setting.

Order implies a plan. And action implies a purpose. The usual purpose underlying the early objects which could be construed as art is religious. These earliest forms are crude expressionist clay or stone small sculptures of females with large bellies and hips and large pendulous breasts. Apparently from the beginning humans realized a connection between fertility and females. We really cannot be sure whether this was a desire for fertile human females, or fertility in connection with farm crops or simply the wild fruits of the earth to be found and gathered.

Connected with the hunting theme we also have found crude animals carved or formed from clay, and paintings on stone walls in caves or out in the open, showing the hunted and the hunters, with the hunted being shown in much more realistic mode than the humans in the scene. We have inferred that this type of art was created with the purpose of controlling the desired outcome . . . namely provision in one form or another of the basic needs of sustaining life.

It is interesting that the Bible contains in the most basic list of rules, the Ten Commandments, an interdict against making statues of gods. By extension Islam bans depicting all human form, and its highest art consists of forms of the "word," a word not to be made "flesh" in the metaphor used by St. John. However, I do find it interesting that initially God the Creator is not shown. Nor can I think of male forms which predate the various Venuses such as the Willendorf. But by implication, the biblical bans against creating images which could be set up and be worshipped implies that early on a variety of gods were conceived, formed, and set up on altars both public and private.

Initially the artist or image maker was respected. Indeed, the artist, shaman, and chief were often one and the same individual. But as time went by, and life become more complex and organized, roles became more specialized. In a tribal setting, there might be a wise elder chief, a war chief, a medicine man, and a wise woman serving the varied needs of the group. With agricultural and herding, and camps becoming settlements which would grow into towns and cities, each category grew into cadres. Councils or senates for governance, priests and priestesses, healers of both sexes, and the military became formal divisions of the society as a whole, growing in size and importance as the territory controlled by an initially small informal group grew.
All these various groups needed headquarters. Not only a place to meet, but where activities pertinent to each category could be conducted. Buildings and spaces had to be clearly designated so as to make explicit the specific activity and status of the societal group in question. Does this sound like a work opportunity for artists? It does to me.

However, this is not work which springs from the curiosity of the artist’s eye nor is it powered by the heart’s desire to give form to inchoate ideas. This is now a job, which can be described and overseen not by an individual patron or a small group of cave-dwellers who will be dazzled by whatever is done. Now we have stepped out onto the road leading to the realm of major projects, major money, and the mass market.

Now the artist is not looked up to as a keeper of mysteries, a companion to whom God and Nature whisper secrets. No, now the artist has been de-graded in status to a workman for hire, or worse by far than this, degraded into the quasi-human status of slave. At this point we see the artist putting skills not at the feet of the gods, but at the feet of human wanna-bes. Think of the demagogues of Egypt Greece, and Rome and the erection of statues and temples in honor of individuals who required, and indeed insisted and enforced, abject worship. Failure to provide suitable and satisfactory groveling brought horrendous torture leading to death by means guaranteed to deny human status to the soi-disant heretic enemy of church and state.

Some of the slave artists did very good work indeed. Some became famous in their own right, so that thousands of years later, we all have a fair idea of the name and work of Praxiteles, for example. But by and large we have no knowledge by name of the adorners of the various pyramids of Mayan culture or Incan culture or Cambodian culture. Who made the convoluted decorations on Shang bronzes, the terra-cotta armies of the Chin emperor, the bloated ladies depicted in the Tang dynasty who somehow evolved from the sinuous women of the Han dynasty. Mysteriously the makers of form shaped the prevailing mood and tone of different eras in different places.

Think about it. As humanity spread over the surface of the earth, different styles evolved, and the face and form of humans also rearranged and changed in many subtle variations of shape and texture and color. The Xenophobic choose to ascribe values or ranks to color, or shape of features, or stature, or texture of hair. But peel off the skin, and the muscles and organs and blood are the same. Blood types vary, but the categories are found in every race. The person in need of a transfusion today needs only to know if the blood type matches. And most telling of all, humans from any part of the globe can reproduce. If there were a biologic difference, this could not happen.

One of the very earliest influences on my thinking was the series which Malvina Hoffman did for the Field Museum in Chicago. She traveled all over the world doing portraits for the collection called The Races of Mankind. Outer shape and indeed posture and activity do vary. But what shines out of each head through the facial expressions is intelligence.

The series of portraits in the Prado which Velasquez did in the 17th century of the dwarf jesters of the court also come to mind. Despite all the statues and paintings I’ve seen of the Passion of Christ, the painting of Don Sebastian de Morra is for me the exemplar extraordinary of the combination of pain and indomitable dignity. The slight tilt to the noble, indeed, handsome head contrasts with the doll-like lifeless pose of the body whose humanity is revealed only in the clenched fists.
Images which once glimpsed pierce our hearts and remain with us forever are examples of the meritorious. The subject matter doesn't have to be as lofty as human heads. Durer's lovingly careful rendition of a segment of turf showing form, color, and rhythm, or Mondrian's orderly progress towards distilling landscape or cityscape into his understanding of its essence has enriched anyone who examines these works. Thus the exploration and interpretation of nature is in my opinion a good and meritorious activity. To those activities and products which widen our eyes and broaden our understanding at any level, we must award merit.

This holds true even when the artist is working for his living in a setting which is not that worthy of merit. The portrait Goya painted of the Royal Family comes to mind. Talk about spindle-shanks married to a shapeless sack. Indeed I have to give the Spanish throne credit for not tossing him out. But thinking of Goya reminds me of his brushes with the Inquisition. In modern times art and authority at its most naked has persecuted and pursued artists. This is authority which would strip humans naked and torture them and kill them and try to suppress the work of mind, heart and hand. Despotism can be found everywhere and in all times. It is not a twentieth century invention to create the charnel houses of concentration camps. The monuments of bones and skulls scattered in the wake of the Mongol hordes as they swept west, the varied trophy building of headhunters everywhere, also remind us of another very strange human capability. We kill our own species. And then we seem to have a great need to celebrate this in song and story, dance and glory, stone and paint gory in detail, and frequently monumental in size and scope.

And guess who gets the job.

The nineteenth century poets of the Romantic movement liked to think that art is produced for art's sake. I have never agreed with this. While at times the process and the search can be pleasurable, producing art can be a physical and psychological ordeal. Driven by who knows what forces, the artist probes and palpates his physical and social setting in an effort to understand his world. But understanding is not enough. The artist, or at any rate, the professional artist also wants to communicate his findings. The externalization into a physical form of the artist's inner thinking and feeling produces art.

But it is a rare artist who will always be content with producing miniatures of expression. Sometimes an artist wants to let the ideas leap forth and spread out. And oh so often it was the despot who offered the biggest walls, the biggest palaces, the biggest need for monumental art. In a society where consensus is operative, it is difficult to find agreement about payment for art, much less agreement about the need for art. In our present society what greets our eyes as we travel the roads are huge posters or neon signs or television images blown up to epic proportions in areas such as Times Square or the Ginza. But it is not unique art for the most part.

True, the countryside for miles on end has been wrapped in a variety of materials, and installation art and performance art do get backing. But this is also ephemeral and cannot be even considered to approach long-term existence. To find art which has lasted the longest, I think we have to go into the churches and religious edifices of most religions of the world. I think the original purpose of the religious art now in use was didactic. The precepts and stories of the organized religion were made available to the majority of believers who were unable to read the sacred texts. It makes me wonder if there have ever been studies done seeking a correlation between literacy and a ban on imagery made material.
The monumental statues of the Gods, then the emperors starting with Augustus, then the statues of the saints, Buddha and the bodhisattvas, colossi of every type and description, were subjects of commissions which were surely as tempting to the artist as the apple offered in the Garden. And sometimes the prize is much more humble. Food on the table, a roof overhead, clothing, indeed all the trappings of life once one goes beyond the cave, furs, and food from field and stream are not to be sneered at. Romney, Gainsborough, Sargent, are not really so very removed from the itinerant folk artists who roamed the roads of colonial America, limning people for pride and posterity.

Nobody points a finger shaming portrait artists in general, who honestly recorded people ranging in rank from the humblest to the highest of society. We do view with cold and mocking glances the monuments which arise out of dictatorial regimes such as Fascist governments from Germany and Italy to various South American locales. We also do not have any respect for the grandiose Communist art of Russia and China and other satellite states. Dictator art in general strikes one as empty of artistic value. I don't see much difference between the most elaborate forms of this genre and the "art" of Kinkaide. Repetitive, produced by formula, and interchangeable, this is lifeless art because it is not unique.

Life is both generic and unique at the same time. All humans have a head, heart and hands. We are meant to be erect and to move from place to place on two rather than four limbs. Many of our attributes are symmetrical, but close inspection demonstrates that we are slightly different in form and measurements of our left side compared to our right side. We are asymmetrical within our symmetry. Furthermore, we are so unique, not only in our outer shapes, but even within parts of our individual cells. We are so unique that our DNA can identify an individual out of all the billions of other humans. I hope this boggles your mind as much as it does mine.

Uniqueness also seems to be a requirement of art. The coldness of commercial art seems to me to be a function of interchangeability. One billboard design can be used around the world. If you watch Antiques Roadshow, you know that value is enhanced by scarcity, and anything which once was produced in quantity, but is now just one or a few remaining examples, is worth a small fortune.

As I think about what I've been saying about the meretricious, I think I have been kind to the artists who produce art which is less than great or borders on non-art. This benevolence extends only to those who work to eat however. To the degree that the artist subverts his heart and mind to the service of evil, then that person is accountable. At some point each artist, as indeed each individual in any walk of society, must ask the most basic question. This asks if the action is aimed at producing good, which always also contains truth. If the action is to spread untruth, or has a central aim of causing harm, then one must conclude that the results of this action are meretricious and immoral.

If my musings about the origins of art have any validity, if art started in human attempt to probe the mysteries of the universe, then the results of this probe will yield that which can stir and move others to be more than would be the case if this art had not been produced.

The dictionary describes awe as an emotion of mingled reverence, dread, and wonder inspired by something majestic or sublime. Art attempts to examine and interpret our world and all it holds. At its best, art contains much that is awesome, at its worst it is simply awful. Because dread is an element of the awesome, artists are frequently set at the margins of society, and in some eras were segregated even after death. But artists will to some degree be cherished because this is the group of
humans who sometimes against great odds continue to try to share the deeply perceived truths which the majority do not see or feel without the gifts of the artist.