

Seeing Beyond

Reflections on art and Christian faith

Man and Woman
Heinrich Hoerle



Wax on strong paper over plywood, 1933

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Even without seeing the title to this drawing, most people would probably recognise it as depicting a woman on the left and a man on the right. But would a computer? Could it work out which lines to use as outlines, which shapes to bunch together and which ones to ignore? You could almost imagine this being one of those “Are you human?” tests we encounter when submitting forms online.

Our brains instinctively know how to pick out the two human figures from the background; to include the woman’s hair and to see the two circles on her torso as breasts, thus identifying her as female. The large green shape and narrow swirls on the man’s torso, by comparison, are simply dismissed as irrelevant and the figure thought of as male. From birth we learn to recognise the human form and to respond to it. And remarkably soon afterwards we are encouraged to divide those humans into two main categories: male and female. We learn to distinguish in other ways, too, and by the time we are teenagers, we see a person’s clothes, hair style, skin colour, manner of walking, way of speaking and quickly make judgments. An evolutionary adaptation allowing us to distinguish at speed between friend and foe, and if in doubt, run to save our lives.

Surely, we have outgrown these evolutionary needs? How, then, do we move away from this instinctive categorisation of people? The division into “them” and “us”? A filter through which we start relating to the other person? Is it just about eliminating our “unconscious bias”, to use the management speak term? Going on a training course?

And if we do manage to strip away all these categories and get rid of the little boxes we see ourselves in: what then? What is it that we have in common? What does it mean to be human? And how do we relate to one another simply as human?

The New Testament speaks of God’s unconditional love for each one of us. That is our core human identity: to be loved by God. If we can recognise that, perhaps we will start to see that we are each full of the exuberant, colourful swirls of creativity on display here. Not just the ones that are needed to show the human form, but the completely superfluous ones which simply add to the harmony and composition of the overall picture or person. Perhaps we will see that our lives and beings can become enmeshed, as these two human forms are joined and enmeshed. The constantly intersecting lines and shapes in the drawing mirroring the intersections of our lives with one another, changing us and creating new shapes and colours as we relate to one another. Perhaps we will see that we all have the capacity to be filled with love and joy and peace, with patience, kindness and generosity, with faithfulness, gentleness and self-control: the fruit of God’s Spirit living, growing and being active within us. Whether we know it or not.

Biblical References

The fruit of the Spirit ([Galatians 5:22-23](#))