



REVISED AND UPDATED ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Refractions

A JOURNEY OF FAITH, ART, AND CULTURE

Makoto Fujimura



An artist with the craftsmanship and global appeal of Makoto Fujimura comes along all too rarely. Such an artist with a strong faith commitment who both inspires and leads other artists—now that’s really rare. Mako is a fine writer. I learned and was provoked and frequently moved by these reflections that through Mako’s eye have become unique refractions.

PHILIP YANCEY, author of *Where the Light Fell*

In these essays, Makoto Fujimura reveals himself to be an artist not only with pigments but also with words. His translucent prose warrants close, meditative reading to capture the subtle meanings refracted through its poetic lens.

NANCY PEARCEY, professor and scholar in residence at Houston Christian University

Like his art, Makoto Fujimura’s essays harbor a depth of luminosity that requires and rewards patient contemplation. This collection is an important contribution to the conversation between faith and art and between art and our beautiful, broken world.

ANDY CROUCH, author of *The Life We’re Looking For*

At once bold and gracious, these “dispatches” from one of our finest living artists will provoke and inspire the reader at the deepest levels. If ever there was a time when we needed Fujimura’s profound evocation of art as a harbinger of peace in a fractured world, this is it.

JEREMY BEGBIE, Thomas A. Langford Distinguished Research Professor of Theology at Duke University

Mako Fujimura has spent a lifetime seeing “through” the remarkable gift of his eye. He has painted for us, and now, remarkably, he has written for us about the truth he has seen.

MICHAEL CARD, musician, author, teacher

Mako Fujimura brings together spiritual reflections on the observed world with the devotion of an accomplished painter to his work. Through lived encounters, Mako traces evidence of healing and signs of God’s beauty and grace.

REVEREND SUSAN JOHNSON, former senior minister at Hyde Park Union Church

A bicultural abstractionist with a deeply meditative turn of mind, Makoto Fujimura has as much to say in words as he does in images. These essays, like his paintings, are rich and thoughtful explorations of art’s redemptive power and its place in a violent, broken world. Rarely has a visual artist shed so bright a light on the wellsprings of his work.

TERRY TEACHOUT, former drama critic for *The Wall Street Journal*

Mako’s art reaches from earth to heaven, and so does his poetic prose. His essays bring out what a brilliant artist sees and a text-oriented historian might overlook: the texture, color, and poignancy of living in New York after 9/11 and a world laden with both horror and hope.

MARVIN OLASKY, senior fellow at Discovery Institute, cofounder of Zenger House

In the pages of this book, you will find the work of a man who loves the Creator of the universe and the art his creation produces. I recommend it.

MARK JOSEPH, columnist for *Newsweek*

This elegantly penned collection sets a very high bar for future conversations about faith, art, and the hope we all have for the healing of our fractured world. Makoto Fujimura is a tender prophet of beauty and peace. The breadth of his spiritual vision is awe-inspiring.

IAN MORGAN CRON, author of *The Road Back to You*

Makoto Fujimura's personal memoir circles on the demands of art and faith and their final inseparability. *Refractions* weaves a tale of art with the flames of 9/11 flickering in the background.

DALE BROWN, founding director of Buechner Institute at King University

Fujimura represents a new breed of artists, whose lives match their work in their power to inspire. They remind us just how much we need them to notice the miracles.

SAM ANDREADES, founder of Higher Ground NYC

These essays weave a luminous tapestry of observation and insight, and they're a great read. Fujimura the artist has become a national treasure, and with these essays he demonstrates that he is also a serious writer and thinker. His prose is artful, moving, and bristling with wisdom.

SCOT SHERMAN, founder and executive director of Center for Church Innovation

In these remarkable essays—“refractions” indeed—Makoto Fujimura takes us unflinchingly into what he calls the war zone of the human heart, shedding light along the way on how art, fused with a hope born of a deep religious calling, transforms and redeems. . . . A powerful and passionate exploration of what it means to be a Christian and an artist.

ROBERT LOVE TAYLOR, author of *Blind Singer Joe's Blues*

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Makoto Fujimura



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with Tyndale House Publishers

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Preface to the Anniversary Edition

Written in the mid-2000s from a loft three blocks from Ground Zero in New York City, *Refractions*, my first published book, has had the “long-tail effect,” and fifteen years later, I am grateful for enduring readership. Much has transpired in those fifteen years, including the historic COVID-19 pandemic and the conflicts in Ukraine and the Holy Land. Thus, essays referring to the beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq now seem like dimming memories. But in reading back, precisely because they capture a time in history, these sentences seem more precious. My dear mentor Tim Keller wrote the foreword about the Christmas Truce of 1914, and it is indeed a gem. I grieve the loss of his passing; he shaped many of my thoughts on culture and faith. This short foreword, which speaks of peacemaking in the heart of conflict, now seems to echo in my mind, a refractive voice in the dark crevices of memories of Ground Zero, New York City. Much of what I wrote would not have been possible without his influence to “love the city, and to be ‘for’ the city, not be ‘of’ or ‘against’ [it]” (based on Jeremiah 29, a passage he often preached on).¹ I dedicate the following pages to the legacy of Dr. Timothy Keller.

What began as journal entries edited in airports and airplanes on my way to advocate for arts in the US has now become a compendium of refractive thoughts on art, faith, and humanity. These essays were the launching pad for coining the term *culture care* as early as the mid-1990s as a result of years pondering the impact of an artist practicing public theology. Culture care is a path to see culture as an ecosystem to steward rather than a battleground to fight over. My *Refractions* essay series continues, albeit at a slower pace, since I've been composing four more books and countless essays on art and faith over the past fifteen years. This collection captures many early thoughts on themes expanded on and refined in my lifework, *Art + Faith: A Theology of Making*.²

Looking back to reflect on such a journey is a humbling, healthy process. I reexamined every page written, honoring the past, but at the same time accepting imperfect versions, and—only if absolutely necessary—rewriting for the sake of clarity. The goal of each *Refractions* essay is to cast a long-range vision toward culture care as an antidote to the culture war divisiveness that defines our culture today. I am pushing back, on every page, against the encroaching darkness of polarity caused by mistrust, anxiety, and fear—and against the anti-culture suspicion prevalent in evangelicalism. Instead, I posit a generative, biblical, and missional view of culture. In short, in advocating for the arts generally, I am advocating for the Good News of the gospel, a Spirit-filled message of abundance, for the fullness of our humanity and the flourishing of our cultural gardens.

What makes *Refractions* different from the other writings I've done? For one, I've tried to keep these essays tidy, as small,

prismatic thoughts that lead into other writings. They are, therefore, a good entry point for understanding the theses of my books *Culture Care* and *Art + Faith: A Theology of Making*. For another, smaller marker, some form of the word *refractions* is embedded in each essay for readers to discover. For this fifteenth-anniversary edition, I've added a few new essays and removed some essays that seemed more appropriate for a personal diary trapped in time.

I am grateful for Philip Yancey, who encouraged me to keep going after looking at the earliest raw versions of these essays. Thanks, also, to Greg Wolfe, who was my first major publisher in *Image* journal and included the "Fallen Towers" essay in the commemorative book of the best writings, *Bearing the Mystery: Twenty Years of Image*. I am also aware of my sojourners along the way and the encouragements of my bride, Haejin, and her team at Shim & Associates, who have become the first readers and editors of my writings.

I suppose if this text is read fifteen years from now, even what we hotly debate today in the headlines will have abated and what once seemed like insignificant blips and invisible influences may have surprised us as significant inflection points. For such a long-term journey of faith (what I call here the "five-hundred-year question") we need to grow stronger wings toward the New Creation, a future that God invites us to create into. For all the readers who grew their wings with me already, I am grateful, and I'm delighted by "culture care communities" that have developed all over the world. Also many thanks to Caleb Seeling, my first editor at NavPress, who saw potential in this collection of essays and helped me refine the thesis of *Culture Care*. May your own journeys of creativity and imagination be met with refracted grace, as my journey has been.

Foreword

The movie *Joyeux Noel* (2005) is the true story of the famous “Christmas Truce” of 1914. It depicts how, during the hostilities of World War I, the French, Scottish, and German troops spontaneously laid down their weapons, came up out of their trenches, and fraternized during an informal, unauthorized armistice. And at the heart of this astonishing grassroots effort at peacemaking was art.

Kaiser Wilhelm II had sent thousands of Christmas trees to the front lines in order to boost the morale of the German troops. After the trees were set up over their trenches, in sight of the enemies’ lines, a German soldier who was a tenor began to sing the Christmas hymn “Stille Nacht” (Silent Night). Soon the French and Scottish troops began singing along in their own languages. Finally, soldiers climbed out of their trenches without their weapons and began to talk, then exchanged gifts, and finally even engaged in games of soccer. (The full true story is told by Stanley Weintraub in *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*; Plume, 2002.)

The movie adds a fictional character to the true story in the form of a world-class soprano to go with the great tenor. The beauty of their singing breaks through the political dividing walls

and unites the opponents in joy and tears. I've seen something of this unifying power even in my own church services. Because I minister in New York City, our congregation contains some of the best musicians in the world (literally). The music in our services is always excellent, but occasionally we have a musical offering that is so superb and affecting that everyone listening is stunned into silence and moved to tears. And guess what? It is not members rather than visitors, or Christians rather than non-Christians, who are touched. Everyone is brought together; everyone is included. Interestingly, this only happens when the art is skillful and well done. When the music is mediocre or bad, members may be edified a bit if they know and love the musician personally, but visitors and strangers are bored and excluded by the experience.

Mako Fujimura is absolutely right to focus on the peace-crafting power of art. He quotes Tolstoy, who writes that art "should cause violence to be set aside."¹ It is our instinct toward freedom, justice, and beauty. This book of reflections explores Tolstoy's thesis with wisdom, humility, and grace.

I have been a friend and co-minister in New York City with Mako since 1990. Mako's International Arts Movement (now IAMCultureCare) has been a pioneering effort to integrate thoughtful faith with the creation of art that moves us toward the world "that ought to be." I'm delighted to see this book appear and honored to be able to recommend it to all.

TIM KELLER
New York City, 2008

Introduction

I write by the south window of my loft, three blocks from Ground Zero, New York City. The window overlooks the young sycamore trees planted on the opposite side of the street, where one of the plane engines fell like a meteor, almost killing a pedestrian. Like that pedestrian, my family and I were spared from perishing that day, living so close to the site that will be marked as one of the emblems of a horror of the new century. And yet God has called us to call this our home.

God has taught me as an artist and a follower of Christ to live and work for the “prosperity of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7) in the ashes of September 11, 2001. Most Saturday mornings between 2003 and 2006, I sat down to reflect, or refract, on issues related to war and peace, but from the vantage point of an artist, a father, and a husband. As I wrote, I was admitting to the confusion, chaos, and deeper wrestling that I saw in my own heart during and after that fateful day.

In 2003 I was appointed by President George W. Bush to the National Council on the Arts,¹ in recognition of my artistic accomplishments and my advocacy efforts via International Arts

Movement (now IAMCultureCare).² Working with Dana Gioia, the superb poet and visionary head of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), I realized that we have to constantly labor to raise awareness for the arts in the United States and to present America via the arts to the rest of the world. I found that I had a particular vantage point from my bicultural upbringing to do so with some objectivity and passion, as well as with empathy of knowing that the world also suffers from trauma of one kind or another. My new responsibility to advocate for the arts in America increased my travel schedule. Thus, I took with me some of my Saturday morning essays during my travels, weaving in experiences from my international journeys. I remember trying to complete some of these essays by the frost of the plane window flying over Asia before the piercing deep blue of the night sky lured me to sleep.

Terry Teachout (1956–2022), the drama critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, who later joined the Council, encouraged me to keep writing in the blogosphere, saying, “Very few times in history do we have the opportunity to shape a new medium for communication. The blogosphere is one of those rare opportunities.” My daughter, then thirteen, taught me how to post a blog with images, and I was ready to take on a new medium.

Here, then, are dispatches from various points on my journey of art, faith, and culture, written from the perspective of an artist living in twenty-first-century Ground Zero and wrestling with the issues of humanity. As a visual artist living and working in New York City,³ I also dwell in the multifaceted reality of the post-modern visual arts world, a multiphrenic world of shock, cynicism, and irony. I write from within that world, from the perspective

of someone who loves to engage with and create art but also as a Christian whose central identity is in Christ, the ultimate Artist and Peacemaker.

Why art in a time of war? Jesus stated, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). The Greek word for “peacemakers” is *eirenopoios*, which can be interpreted as “peace poets,” suggesting that peace is a thing to be crafted or made.⁴ We need to seek ways to not just be peacekeepers but to be engaged peacemakers. In such a definition, peace (or the Hebrew word *shalom*) is not simply an absence of war but a thriving of our lives, where God uses our creativity as a vehicle to create the world that ought to be. Art, and any creative expression of humanity, mediates in times of conflict and is often inexplicably tied to wars and conflicts.

Art can play a central role in the making of peace. Jim Hall, the legendary guitarist, in receiving the Jazz Masters Award, stated, “Jazz is our great peacemaker.”⁵ When jazz musicians travel around the world (they are more respected today outside the US than inside), their music carries a message of collaboration, the freedom of improvisation, of community—really, the fruits of democracy.⁶ Jazz communicates beyond the barriers of politics and ideologies because music speaks a universal language.

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian author of *War and Peace*, wrote in *What Is Art?*:

The task of art is enormous. Through the influence of real art, aided by science, guided by religion, that peaceful co-operation of man which is now maintained

by external means—by our law-courts, police, charitable institutions, factory inspection, and so forth,—should be obtained by man’s free and joyous activity. Art should cause violence to be set aside.⁷

Art “should cause violence to be set aside” because to Tolstoy, who wrote under the Totalitarian oppression, art expresses the desire for, and instinct toward, freedom, justice, and beauty. Tolstoy’s argument for this ideal for the arts continues: “The destiny of art in our time is to transmit from the realm of reason to the realm of feeling the truth.”⁸ In other words, the language of the arts translates the universal longing for peace into the tangible *experience* of the desire for peace. The arts provide us with language for mediating the broken relational and cultural divides: the arts can model for us how we need to value each person as created in the image of God.

This context of rehumanization provided via the arts is essential for communication of the Good News. Jesus desires to create in us “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7), so that we can communicate the ultimate message of hope found in the gospel—the story of Jesus, who bridged the gap between God and humanity—to a cynical, distrustful world. The arts provide a necessary backdrop for such an enduring conversation.

As I wrote these essays of *Refractions*, I realized that my passion to advocate for art, beauty, and artists—what I began to call “culture care”—was also embedded in my passion and love for the Good News of the gospel message of Jesus. As we are called to

the pursuit of beauty and goodness, these essays may be a way to move into our contemporary culture, for our children to be sent as ambassadors of grace into the heart of the darkness, even in a place called Ground Zero, with the foundation of God's Truth.

In my studio, I use ground minerals such as malachite and azurite, layering them to create prismatic refractions, or "visual jazz." Via my art I hope to create a mediated reality of beauty, hope, and reconciled relationships and cultures. As a founding elder of a small church in Greenwich Village,⁹ I have found that mediation of any kind is never black-and-white but prismatic and complex too. In order to find hope, even in the midst of the broken and torn fragments of relationships, in order to begin to journey into the heart of the divide, we must first wrestle with the deeper issues of faith. We must be willing to be broken *ourselves* into prismatic shards by the Master Artist, God, so that Christ's light can be refracted in us.

Three months prior to September 11, 2001, I wrote the following for a Santa Fe art exhibit called *Beauty Without Regret*:

Art cannot be divorced from faith, for to do so is to literally close our eyes to that beauty of the dying sun setting all around us. Every beauty also suffers. Death spreads all over our lives and therefore faith must be given to see through the darkness, to see through the beauty of "the valley of the shadow of death."

Prayers are given, too, in the layers of broken, pulverized pigments. Beauty is in the brokenness, not in what we can conceive as the perfections, not in the

“finished” images but in the incomplete gestures. Now,
I await for my paintings to reveal themselves. Perhaps
I will find myself rising through the ashes, through the
beauty of such broken limitations.

Outside my window I see those young sycamores, once covered in the ashes of September 11, now turning to autumn hues, casting their golden shadows on those passing by. Those who walk beneath the sycamore trees are of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Similarly, the culture at large is neither Christian nor secular but fantastically pluralistic, defying conventional categorizations. In each culture we will no doubt find evidences of trauma, like the ashes of Ground Zero, as we all find ourselves building upon our pulverized and fragmented past. We can choose to disengage from such intractable reality, since our hearts will struggle to find rest in such exilic ground as Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Darfur, Afghanistan, and war-torn cities. Or we can accept the splintered condition of culture as a kaleidoscope of common struggles, a reality that only the golden rays of God can restore and recreate via broken humanity. The latter is my starting promise in writing this book. As you journey with me in this refracted light, I pray the Spirit will indeed reveal God’s presence in the undiscovered recesses of our creative journeys.

MAKOTO FUJIMURA

New York City, 2008

(modified for 2024 edition)

I

A Second Wind

For years poet Dana Gioia served as a vice president of General Foods before leaving business to write full-time. He told me, “I would come home too late and very tired, but each night I made myself sit down at my desk and simply copy the last paragraph of the essay I was working on or the last stanza of a poem. Usually, I got my ‘second wind.’” With this “second wind” he became one of the most prolific and influential American writers of our time. Many of his coworkers and employees did not even know that he wrote poems until he began winning significant poetry awards (leading to his American Book Award in 2001) and his essays began to appear regularly in the *Atlantic Monthly*.¹

I think of what Dana stated when I, too, find myself exhausted by my juggling act of trying to make ends meet, raising a family in this wild city. And yet, no matter how tired I am, when I prepare a panel with freshly spread handmade Japanese Kumohada paper

and enter the daily ritual of painting, I rediscover the joy of creating. The process of creating renews my spirit, and I find myself attuned to the details of life rather than being stressed by being overwhelmed. I find myself listening rather than shouting into the void. Creating art opens my heart to see and listen to the world around me, opening a new vista of experience. This is the gift of the “second wind.” Such a state taps into what I now call eternal timefulness.²

A timeful experience is given when our minds are allowed to fully respond to the senses, to tap into the eternal reality that God opens for us via creativity. It’s what William Blake, the eighteenth- to nineteenth-century poet, meant when he wrote, “To see a world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour.”³ In order to “see a world in a grain of sand,” we must pause to pay attention to the details of life, to let our eyes wander into the crevices of the earth below, to observe the shadows as well as the light, to perhaps even see how the light is refracted in the fragmental remains of sands. And such observational skills must be cultivated as a form of discipline, even in the midst of the hectic lives we lead.

I am often asked, “How do you juggle family, ministry, and your art all at the same time?” Many people have a hard time keeping their creative side alive in the busyness of our times. The advice I give is to dedicate a space, even a small desk, for working on nothing other than your art, whatever medium that may be. Guard against other parts of your life invading that dedicated space. Then, I advise them, do what Dana Gioia did: Make yourself sit down in front of that dedicated space. If you are a poet, like him, copy the

last stanza you wrote; if you are a visual artist, open the sketchbook and look at what you have done. Most of the time, you will get your “second wind” as well.

Much of the days that I spend in the studio, I am preparing, waiting, and working to get ready to paint. Being a full-time artist means spending more than half of my time earning the right to create. I may be making a business call to a New York gallery or waiting in line at the bank to send funds to a Japanese paper-maker. I could be simply stretching cotton canvas onto stretchers to prepare the surface or waiting for the paper to dry. Often, I am simply “showing up” to be in a regular rhythm of *being available* to create, and I may not feel creative at all. But my second wind kicks in to provide surprising moments of creative bursts. I value these moments. They allow me clarity and focus even in the midst of a stressful day.

An artist needs to be attuned to the nuances and subtleties of life in order to create. For me, this means paying attention to the materials I use. I need to know them in the same way that a writer would know, and love, his or her words. Thus, when I open my jar of azurite to pour coarsely ground minerals into a white porcelain Japanese bowl and ladle in melted hide glue to mix, I begin to attune myself to another reality. The grains of sand being pushed about under my fingers begin to tap into the intuitive, creative core of my existence, but this arena also hungers for the sensual reality of earth underneath my fingers. Each grain of sand must be saturated with glue, which forms a protective surface that will act as both a binder and a form of varnish. So I am squeezing out the air in the process of mixing. But I am also squeezing out the

unnecessary concerns of life, the intrusive voices that prevent me from focusing on the inner core. This daily ritual opens my senses to the reality of creativity. And my senses, soon engaged, propel me into a timeless journey again.

The minerals I use are like prisms, and they refract light more than just reflect it. The color spectrum and her subtle hues take awhile to get used to, to truly see. The layering of these minerals reveals a mystery hidden beneath the surface reality, a world full of life and enchantment. It is a world not of competition, but of complementation. In refracted light, no area is delineated as dark, or black; instead, the surface dances to the waves of light evenly. Refracted colors do not war against one another; they move in and out of our sensory arena, like an aurora extending her tails far into the horizon.

So today I pause and consider the world around me, from the May irises on Greenwich Street near my loft to the homeless man (Larry) around the corner from my studio. My role as an artist is never accomplished by executing a painting. My role begins there, but it extends into the earthy reality of the broken and beautiful world around me. Artist or not, when we begin to pay attention to the intuitive core of our experience and see the mysteries there, we, too, like Dana, will find our “second wind.”

April 2004