

Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism

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Bringing Together Art and Theology

With the release of *Modern Art and the Life of Culture*, IVP Academic launches their new Studies in Theology and the Arts (STA) series. Seeking to enable Christians to reflect more deeply upon the relationship between their faith and humanity's artistic and cultural expressions, this series encourages thoughtful engagement with and critical discernment of the full variety of artistic media to inform Christian thinking.

"The Studies in Theology and the Arts series provides Christian scholars, artists and church leaders with an opportunity to shape our theological perspective on the arts in light of the creative realities of our Maker God," says Makoto Fujimura, renowned artist and director of the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology and the Arts at Fuller Theological Seminary.

"These resources can help by extending the salvific narrative into broader creation and new creation narratives, enriching our grasp of the gospel, and revealing how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."

By drawing upon the insights of both academic theologians and artistic practitioners, this series brings together two competing worlds to give a more holistic look on different aspects of their faith. *Modern Art and the Life of Culture* is written by two such authors, Jonathan Anderson, an artist, art critic and professor of art at Biola University, and William Dyrness, a professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary.

"I suppose we may appear to be a wonderfully unlikely duo," writes Anderson. "Happily, I am an artist who is deeply interested in and invested in theology, and Bill is a theologian deeply interested in and invested in the arts. In other words, we have both been actively reaching across the disciplinary boundaries that separate us, which creates a mutuality that is very important for a project like this to work. I think this kind of collaboration is extremely valuable for creating more meaningful and mutually enriching dialogue about and between art and theology, and I hope we have modeled something that others will also pick up and run with."

Dyrness adds, "I think our different styles and inclinations made the approach richer. Jonathan's work on art history and theory led him to see in those discussions theological questions that are mostly overlooked or even actively suppressed; my interest in the development of theology inclined me to see a similar generative process taking place in the interaction of religion and art. So we came often from different directions, but we were seeing and trying to explain the same phenomena."

Their book responds to the Hans Rookmaaker volume *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970). Anderson and Dyrness bring their different backgrounds together to argue that modernist art is underwritten by deeply religious concerns. They assert that there were

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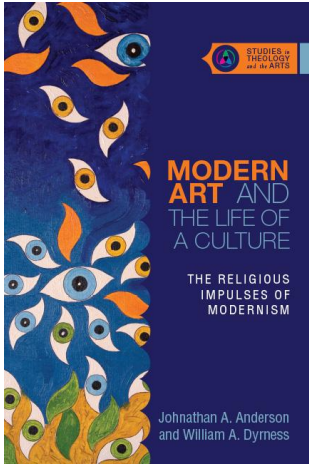
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BOOK DETAILS

actually strong religious impulses that positively shaped modern visual art. Instead of affirming a pattern of decline and growing antipathy towards faith, the authors contend that theological engagement and inquiry can be perceived across a wide range of modern art and through particular works by artists such as Gauguin, Picasso, David Jones, Caspar David Friedrich, van Gogh, Kandinsky, Warhol and many others.

“This series is an exciting and critically important development in the burgeoning theology and arts field,” says Jeremy Begbie, professor of theology at Duke Divinity School. “It promises to advance the discussion in fresh and highly fruitful ways.”



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Jonathan Anderson (MFA, California State University, Long Beach) is an artist, art critic and associate professor of art at Biola University. He is the coauthor, along with Amos Yong, of *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* and a contributor to *Christian Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century: Prospects and Perils*. Jonathan has given scholarly presentations for associations such as for the Society for Christian Scholarship in Music at Yale University and has received research fellowships from the Center for Christian

Seeking God and Seeking Happiness

William Dyrness and Jonathan Anderson recently chatted with David McNutt, associate editor of IVP Academic and series editor of IVP's forthcoming Studies in Theology and the Arts series. Their new book, Modern Art and the Life of a Culture, contends that theological engagement and inquiry can be perceived across a wide range of modern art. The following is an excerpt from their interview.

David McNutt: As the title suggests, your book offers both great appreciation for the influence of Hans Rookmaaker and his *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* as well as a response to some of his conclusions in that seminal work. What role did he play in the development of your own thought regarding the relationship between faith and the arts? What within his work did you think needed to be updated or corrected for today?

William Dyrness: For me, his influence was definitive. As soon as I had finished my work on Georges Rouault, I sent it to him, and he invited me to come from Strasbourg to study with him in Amsterdam. His personal influence was actually much stronger than his writings. We graduate students of course knew the severe limitations of a popular book like *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. But from him I learned to spend the time necessary before a work of art to feel at home with it – we would spend hours in front of a single painting in the Rijksmuseum – and the naturalizing influence of the Christian gospel. As he liked to say: “Jesus did not die to make us angels, but to make us more fully human.” That is the best short version of Reformed theology I have come across.

Jonathan Anderson: Rookmaaker was also definitive for me, but in a much more conflicted way. I didn't read *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* until after finishing graduate school when I was really wrestling with the (non)relationship between Christianity and contemporary art. I was willing to read anyone and everyone speaking to that issue, and I was quickly referred to Rookmaaker's book, which proved to be an extremely fraught reading experience for me: I appreciated much of what he wrote about Christian vocation and theology, but when he turned to discuss modern art, I found myself baffled and frustrated. His account of modern art simply didn't correspond to my understanding of the history or to my encounters with the artworks themselves. Indeed I began to believe that adopting his declinist narrative of modernist art was actually debilitating for anyone really seeking to contribute to the contemporary art discourse. For years I wished that someone would respond with a book called *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*.

McNutt: Your study of the religious impulses that undergird modernist art includes artists that some readers might be surprised to encounter in this context, such as van Gogh, Mondrian and Pollock. What did you find surprising as you undertook this study?

Dyrness: Van Gogh is often recognized as a deeply spiritual artist, but usually he is pictured as having given up his childhood (Reformed) Christian faith. But closer examination shows

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Q & A

Thought and the Nagel Institute. His research and writing focuses on modern and contemporary art with a particular interest in bringing art and Christian theology into more meaningful conversation and mutual understanding.

William A. Dyrness (DTheol, University of Strasbourg; Doctorandus, Free University) is professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is the author of many books, including *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*, *Senses of the Soul: Art and the Visual in Christian Worship*, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* and *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*.

this not to have been the case. Others, like Gauguin, who are largely regarded as irreligious, turn out to have had deep and formative experiences with (in this case) the Catholic faith. Still others, like Malevich, inherited sensibilities from their religious contexts which made deep inroads into their art. So there is no single story to be told.

Anderson: The research for this book was full of surprises for me. The religious backgrounds of these artists, as well as the ongoing theological content of their work, are sometimes buried deep in the academic literature and primary sources, but once you begin to dig you find extraordinary things. Van Gogh was actually a fascinating theologian, and his paintings were theologically oriented all the way to the end. Mondrian completed his art training in the thick of the best neo-Calvinist thinking of the day. Until researching for this book, I hadn't realized just how deeply Kandinsky was preoccupied with the book of Revelation. Warhol's sharp social commentaries were oriented by his lifelong Catholicism. And so on: the surprises abound.

McNutt: As Christians who are personally and professionally invested in the place of the arts in the life of the church, what would you like to see changed in the church's theology and practice regarding the arts, and how might this book make its own contribution to making that vision a reality?

Dyrness: Personally, I want to see Christians more likely to see engagement with the arts as a regular part of their faith development. Deeply interacting with complex art develops skills that easily transfer to the spiritual life. As Sister Wendy has said, opening oneself to a work of art is like learning to pray. Indeed for me it is often a spiritual site where I encounter God.

Anderson: Yes, and it's also a site where we encounter the spiritual strivings of others. Art is—and always has been—a means by which people attempt to make sense of what this world is and how to be human in it; and in this, Christians can and should find a great deal of commonness with the spiritual longings of others. I'm wary of uncritically importing modern and contemporary art into the liturgical practices and life of the church, but I am very eager to see members of the church making more meaningful and much more charitable contributions to the communities and discourses devoted to modern and contemporary art. I hope this book does a good job of modeling a more irenic and charitable posture toward those modern artists who were wrestling with God.