

*Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016, ISBN 978 0830851355, 376pp, p/b, £18.69

In 1970, the Dutch Art Historian Hans Rookmaaker published his landmark *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. Inspired by the American culture warrior Francis Schaeffer, Rookmaaker adapted Schaeffer's thought to his own academic discipline while offering lay readers a compelling explanation of modern culture's failures. The book, therefore, was at once heady and polemical, pedantic and sweeping. And because Rookmaaker seemed to validate lay readers' gut-level hostility toward a cultural 'enemy,' *Modern Art* was immediately popular among evangelicals. Indeed, its jacket image perfectly captured the cultural rot the book seemed to expose: Francis Bacon's *Head VI*, a macabre riff on Velasquez's *Portrait of Innocent X*, suggested, simultaneously, modern artists' animosity toward Christianity and the cosmic pain their belligerence had caused. Bacon's *Head VI*, after all, shows a Christian leader screaming in sightless agony, imprisoned like a museum artifact inside a vitrine.

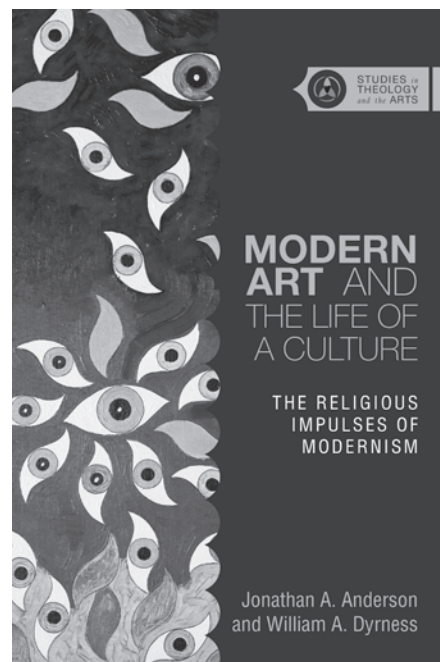
Rookmaaker's thesis goes something like this: in modern times, spirituality and culture have become completely separate. Today's post-Enlightenment intellectuals have relegated spirituality to a private or 'ghettoized' domain, thus robbing mainstream art of its highest themes and suffusing the art world with emptiness and despair. Only Christians have the clarity to preserve art's highest potential, even if that leads to retrenchment and isolation. The word 'preserve' here is especially important, for Rookmaaker's point of view was fundamentally conservative. Like Schaeffer, Rookmaaker seemed unable to grasp the dynamics informing much recent art.

Thoughtful Christians have been subtly pushing back against Rookmaaker from the beginning, and now two scholars – the theologian William Dyrness and the artist Jonathan Anderson – have done so explicitly in their book *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*, issued by Rookmaaker's own

publisher, InterVarsity Press. The thrust of Anderson's and Dyrness's book is evident from the title: the word 'life' has been substituted for the word 'death.' Rather than advancing a sort of rationalist nihilism, modern art, Anderson and Dyrness argue, has often exhibited spiritual purpose and religious underpinnings. In their chapter 'France, Britain and the Sacramental Image,' for example, Anderson and Dyrness cite scholarship demonstrating that the brutally 'factual' Gustave Courbet was influenced by the leftist religious vision of Claude Saint-Simon's 1825 book, *The New Christianity*. The famous *Burial at Ornans*, therefore, should not be read as a cynical debunking of religion, with the hopeless void of the grave at its centre, but as a compassionate look at the stoic faith of the working class. Later, in their chapter 'Russian Icons, Dada Liturgies and Rumors of Nihilism,' the authors carefully present the increasingly accepted view that Kazimir Malevich's abstractions were informed by a kind of apophatic theology. Elsewhere, they unpack some of the fervent, if coded, religious messages embedded in the 'naturalistic' landscapes of the American Hudson River School.

To be sure, the authors (neither of whom are professional art historians) miss some low-hanging fruit. Rookmaaker identifies the Spanish artist Francisco Goya's *Third of May*, for example, as a brutal modernist presentation of 'just the facts,' bereft of hope or transcendent meaning. However, the picture deliberately echoes earlier *Crucifixion* paintings in its spread-armed deployment of the main figure, thereby highlighting the way political martyrdom can recall Christ's sacrifice. The work of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, meanwhile, represents for Rookmaaker a kind of semi-pornography that arose from a classicism purged of allegorical meaning; however, Ingres also produced deeply pious religious images, and there is evidence that his reverence for the human body echoed his reverence for the divine physicality of the Eucharist.

Certain lacunae notwithstanding, Anderson and Dyrness successfully transcend Rookmaaker's 'shadow' art history. Indeed, they have done an impressive amount of work here, reading deeply in a wide range of historical subfields. Frequently they exhibit a sophisticated understanding



of period discourses that surely rivals that of the relevant specialists; their treatments of both Dadaism and North American art seem especially strong. Thus, in addition to doing the valuable work of combatting Rookmaaker, Anderson and Dyrness have produced a potential agenda for young scholars of Christianity and the arts. On the whole, *Life of a Culture* works admirably to pave the way for a reconciliation of the worlds of art and faith.

Does this portend the end of a 'shadow' Christian art discourse? Probably not. Christian art professionals still struggle to navigate honestly the space between their guild and the church. The 'Christian journey', after all, entails a different range of subjective experiences than the life-journey of, say, the typical wealthy Manhattanite. Meanwhile the intellectual space of Christian faith will always contain distinctive *a priori*s, leading to different emphases if not 'alternative facts.' If Christian art thinkers can avoid the combative generalities of predecessors like Rookmaaker, their efforts will be vindicated – even if they remain, for now, outside of the spotlight.

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1 [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/opinion/sunday/the-evangelical-roots-of-our-post-truth-society.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/opinion/sunday/the-evangelical-roots-of-our-post-truth-society.html?_r=0), accessed 4/24/17.

2 Ibid.