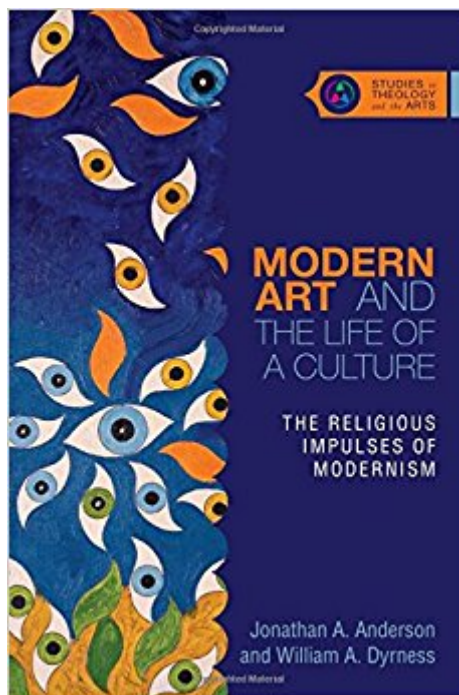


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# Modern Art And The Life Of A Culture: The Religious Impulses Of Modernism (Studies In Theology And The Arts)



## Synopsis

Christianity Today's 2017 Book of the Year Award of Merit - Culture and the Arts For many Christians, engaging with modern art raises several questions: Is the Christian faith at odds with modern art? Does modernism contain religious themes? What is the place of Christian artists in the landscape of modern art? Nearly fifty years ago, Dutch art historian and theologian Hans Rookmaaker offered his answers to these questions when he published his groundbreaking work, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, which was characterized by both misgivings and hopefulness. While appreciating Rookmaaker's invaluable contribution to the study of theology and the arts, this volume—coauthored by an artist and a theologian—responds to his work and offers its own answers to these questions by arguing that there were 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—French, British, German, Dutch, Russian and North American—and through particular works by artists such as Gauguin, Picasso, David Jones, Caspar David Friedrich, van Gogh, Kandinsky, Warhol and many others. This book, the first in IVP Academic's new Studies in Theology and the Arts series, brings together the disciplines of art history and theology and points to the signs of life in modern art in order to help Christians navigate these difficult waters.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In seven chapters, artist/art critic Jonathan Anderson and noted cultural theologian William Dyrness offer a compelling counter-narrative to Hans Rookmaaker's provocative and highly influential *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. . . . This volume is indispensable not only for Christians seeking to be faithful participants in the contemporary art world (artists, curators, critics, etc.) but anyone desiring a fascinating account of the omission of religious sources feeding modern art. Indeed, by taking modern art on its own terms, the authors have demonstrated convincingly that the standard story of modern art as a purveyor of secularism is untenable, making it impossible ever to view modern art the same way." (Bob Cavolo, SEEN/CIVA, XVI:2 2016)"Just what should Christians think of modern art? Is it void of all religious impulses and persuasions? Or is there a deeper vision often left unexplored? Rather than writing off the last century and a half of visual art as purely secular, Anderson and Dyrness meticulously detail the patterns of piety and spirituality that both influenced and empowered artists like van Gogh, Gauguin, Kandinsky, and Warhol." (Wade Bearden, Christianity Today, The 2017 Book Awards)"This book signals an important mid-course correction in evangelical scholarship about modern art and it should become a staple textbook in college and seminary classes." (Gregory Wolfe, Image Journal, October 2016)"Despite his often biting criticism and emphatic rejections of modern art, those who read Hans Rookmaaker closely know that the care and attentiveness he displayed in engaging the art of his day intimated a valuation far beyond mere condemnation. The same spirit of eager and attentive hospitality can be seen in this rejoinder by Bill Dyrness and Jon Anderson. With the studied investment in their diverse subjects and the poignant reflections emerging throughout, they have demonstrated that both Rookmaaker's vocation and burden are live categories for our time. More than a response to the original, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* is an invaluable companion to Rookmaaker and essential reading for any serious Christian encounter with modern art." (Taylor Worley, associate professor of faith and culture, Trinity International University)"This is a book we have needed for a long time. The standard story of modern art, told by religious and non-religious people alike, is that it is the art of secularism and pervaded by nihilism. That was the story told by Hans Rookmaaker more than forty years ago in the book that became enormously influential among evangelicals, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. Anderson and Dyrness tell a very different story. They show that modern art has been pervaded by religious concerns and theological issues. What they have dug up is truly amazing; the book is an eye-opener. They frame their story as a response to Rookmaaker. But the story they tell and the interpretations they offer are for everyone. Only those who refuse to read can ever again think of modern art in the old way." (Nicholas Wolterstorff, Noah

Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology, Yale University, senior research fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia)"As insightful as Hans Rookmaaker's provocative book *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970) was in tracing with broad strokes his concern with the cultural demise of Christian values in the post-Enlightenment West, Anderson and Dyrness make probing and illuminating use of the forty-five years of subsequent research to show that the sacred and secular have been far more complexly interwoven than Rookmaaker recognized. The authors, using the same end date, open up a broad spectrum of well-researched and illuminating contextual material that serves as a needed corrective to Rookmaaker's generalized schema and models a multidisciplinary, art-historical and theological approach that is deliberately generous, open and sympathetic rather than confrontational." (E. John Walford, professor emeritus of art history, Wheaton College)

Jonathan A. 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*. 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 *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* (with Jonathan Anderson), *Senses of the Soul: Art and the Visual in Christian Worship*, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, *Changing the Mind of Missions* (with James Engel), *Theology Without Borders* (with Oscar Garcia-Johnson), and was a general editor of the *Global Dictionary of Theology*.

This is the text for a discussion group I have subscribed to through Biola University. It is great to have other Art knowledgeable folk to bounce this off of. Also the author, Jonathan Anderson, participates. These authors present a pro-Judeo/Christian spiritual perspective on the content and effect of the artwork that has come from modernism.

A great viewpoint on the sacred and secular and where they meet. A great voice and filled with beautiful imagery and information.

Enlightening, encouraging, and a deeper view of the lives of many artists than is usual. I've waited a long time for a follow up book to Rookmaaker's *Art and the Death of a Culture*. This does not

disappoint.

Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness analyze how modern art reflects the cultural mindset in *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*, the inaugural entry in a new series on Studies in Theology and the Arts from InterVarsity Press. The most important thing is whether the book will be of interest to those who have little-to-no training in arts or theology. That is, can the book really bridge the gap between these fields? As one trained in theology, but with only the most introductory (read: general studies requirements) knowledge of art, from that side, I'd say the answer is a resounding yes. Anderson and Dyrness explore modern art through the lens of H.R.

Rookmaaker's *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. However, they are not uncritical of this source material. Rookmaaker, they argue, was too quick to see more points of contact between Christianity and modern art than might be intended. However, Rookmaaker also provided a paradigm for viewing works of art as the basis for critical interaction rather than the life or intentions of the artists themselves. This paradigm is quite useful, but it would be remiss to completely ignore the intent or life of the artist when looking at a work of art. It is this latter point which carries throughout the book, as the authors look at individual works of art, critically reflecting on them while also giving a holistic view of the artists themselves. These descriptions are never boring or overdone. The authors write in an engaging style that weaves theology and art together in ways that are often surprising and frequently thought-provoking. The artists included are from a range of theological background and understandings. Thus, the book provides a broad look at different geographical regions and their art from about the 1800s on (with some dabbling into earlier periods) that will give readers a working understanding of how the development of these styles interacted with the surrounding culture. At times, these stories are fascinating and how did the aristocracy or church react to differing depictions of icons in Russia, for example, and they always provide needed background and concrete examples. The book also includes a number of full-color pictures to examine which are integrated into the text in useful ways. They are beautiful and often haunting. If there is one critique I may offer of the book, it is that more pictures would have been helpful. Some chapters have almost no images. Some have only black-and-white pictures. It is great to have more pictures, but the black-and-white ones make it a little difficult to discern details. More pictures would have helped readers like me, untrained in the arts, to get a better grasp on what some parts of the text were discussing. I looked up multiple paintings and images online to get a better understanding, but having them included in the text would have made it an even more

excellent resource. What is perhaps most important in the book, however, is the critical perspective the authors offer. It is impossible to give a wholesale acceptance or rejection of a field of art, and the authors provide ways to engage with both individuals and single pieces of art in ways that go beyond simply looking at the painting. It can be said, honestly, that the book will make readers want to go out, look at art, and let it speak to them in new and more profound ways. To say that about a book intended to get Christians thinking theologically about art is to give it the highest praise. *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* provides an excellent way to kick off a series on theology and the arts. It is engaging, eye-opening, and beautiful. Readers from many fields will find things of interest, and the authors provide numerous points of contact for future study. It is a highly recommended work.

**The Good**+Introduces reader to an array of topics+Critical interaction with source material+Provides example of art criticism from Christian perspective+Draws from international sources+Includes beautiful color artwork

**The Bad**-Difficult to discern some details in the black and white pictures

**Disclaimer:** I received a review copy of this book from the publisher. I was not required to provide any specific kind of review whatsoever.

**Source** Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016).

Jonathan A. Anderson is an associate professor of art. William A. Dyrness is a professor of theology and culture. Daniel A. Siedell, who writes the Afterword to the book, is an art historian and associate professor of Christianity. *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* challenges the idea that modern art is necessarily secular and a-religious, as if modernity left religion behind. More specifically, Anderson and Dyrness disagree with Hans Rookmaaker's 1970 book, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. Rookmaaker was a Dutch art historian and Reformed Christian, and Rookmaaker depicted modern art as rather hopeless and nihilistic in terms of the worldview that it presented. Anderson and Dyrness appear to acknowledge that there is modern art that transgresses boundaries, and that Christian critics understandably see such modern art as antithetical to Christian orthodoxy. And yet, Anderson and Dyrness argue, overall, that modern art interacts with religious themes, often positively. Anderson and Dyrness profile a variety of modern artists, including (but definitely not limited to) Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Vasily Kandinsky, and Andy Warhol. The book occasionally profiles authors, such as Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick*. In profiling artists, Anderson and Dyrness usually provide some biographical background and discuss specific paintings. Some of the paintings are abstract, but some are of concrete depictions of people, scenery, or objects. Some of the paintings are obviously religious. Some paintings, on the other hand, are not saliently so: Rookmaaker may interpret a certain painting as promoting hopelessness,

whereas Anderson and Dyrness disagree with Rookmaaker and posit instead that the painting is actually conveying a hopeful religious message. In many cases, Anderson and Dyrness look at the writings of artists in which the artists discuss religion. That added solidity to their argument. Anderson and Dyrness argue that many of the artists they profile were Christians, yet they highlight variety in their Christianity. Some were Reformed. Some were Catholic. Some belonged to another branch of Christianity. Some, such as van Gogh, struggled with the Bible, yet Anderson and Dyrness argue that he continued to hold to some form of religious faith. Anderson and Dyrness refer readers to secondary sources that offer alternative viewpoints. Van Gogh's views on religion, for instance, is rather debated within scholarship. In terms of the religious messages that the paintings conveyed, the messages sometimes related to the presence of the divine within the world or nature, or how nature communicated the way that God is. Some focused on the human realm, including the manual labor that people did. Some, on the other hand, presented God as indescribable and transcendent. Whereas a number of artists focused on what was being represented, Kandinsky actually held that the art itself can have a spiritual influence on a viewer. Some of the religious messages that Anderson and Dyrness discussed were more nebulous than others. Perhaps Anderson and Dyrness could have more effectively brought those messages down to earth for the reader in their description of them, or perhaps the authors did the best that they could in light of the sources that they had. Anderson and Dyrness occasionally discuss Christian attitudes toward art. For instance, they talk about Calvinist justifications of art. These discussions would have been better had Anderson and Dyrness talked more about the second commandment's prohibition on religious images, since that has influenced Reformed stances towards liturgy and worship. This book is effective in terms of its overall argument, however: that modern art conveyed religious messages. I received a complimentary review copy of this book from the publisher, in exchange for an honest review.

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