God in the Gallery

A Christian Embrace of Modern Art

Daniel A. Siedell

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Daniel A. Siedell, God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art,
Contents

Preface  7
Introduction  11

1. Overture  21
2. A History of Modern Art  35
3. Enrique Martínez Celaya’s *Thing and Deception*: The Artistic Practice of Belief  51
4. Embodying Transcendence: Material Spirituality in Contemporary Art  71
5. Art Criticism  109
6. Art, Liturgy, and the Church  133

Conclusion: The Search for Christian Art and the Christian Artist  153
Notes  167
Index  187
Introduction

St. Paul was faced with a choice at the Areopagus on Mars Hill, when he came upon the altar to the unknown god. He could have ignored it or even condemned it as yet another example of the Athenians’ spiritual immaturity and further evidence of their pagan worldview ways. But that is not what he did. He argued that what he knew and worshiped, they were already worshiping, although as “something unknown” (Acts 17:23). Furthermore, St. Paul quotes their own poets in support of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thereby baptizing pagan poetry in the Scriptures, enabling the Spirit to work through those very words (Acts 17:28). St. Paul, then, not only used the cultural artifacts at hand (altar and poetry) but in a radical move he also bent them toward the gospel, making them work for him and his audience as a means of apologetic grace.

Altars to the unknown god are strewn about the historical landscape of modern and contemporary art. They are often remarkably beautiful, compelling, and powerful. But they have been too often ignored or condemned out of hand. This book is the result of choosing the way of St. Paul: to take the cultural artifacts and to reveal and illuminate their insights into what they are only able to point to, not to name. But point they do, and they should be examined and celebrated as such.

As part of the new Cultural Exegesis series by Baker Academic, edited by William Dyrness and Robert Johnston, this book offers an in-depth critical engagement with contemporary art that is nourished by the Christian faith as embodied in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and preserved in the
ecumenical councils, which embody a maximal Christology. This book is, in an important sense, applied or participatory exegesis. It is also a form of art and cultural criticism. In order for the contemporary church to speak to culture, it is important to have a fuller and more nuanced historical, critical, theoretical, and aesthetic narrative of the development of modern art. This book suggests why a certain kind of extended dwelling in contemporary art is important for both church and culture. The rich complexity of the Christian faith unfolds over time as the church engages in cultural practices. It is my conviction that the Christian faith will yield new fruit through its participation in the life of modern and contemporary art. And likewise, it is also my conviction that the contemporary art world will benefit from such an engagement, that it in fact needs the robust contours and textures of the Christian faith to deepen its own practices.

What is distinctive about this book is my vocational location. Before assuming my current position of assistant professor of modern and contemporary art history, criticism, and theory at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, I was, for over ten years, curator of modern and contemporary art at a university art museum. I mounted nearly a dozen exhibitions per year, worked with many contemporary artists, and did a substantial amount of critical writing on contemporary art. I am also trained as a historian of modern art, and my particular area of specialization is art criticism since 1945. In addition to curatorial and scholarly projects, I have taught as an adjunct in a graduate studio art program, teaching art history seminars and working with art students who themselves are struggling with what it means to be an artist and what it means to make art, not to mention the spiritual questions that consequently emerge. Unlike most other commentators on modern and contemporary art in the church, I am neither a philosopher nor a theologian, and therefore my interest in art is not from the vantage point of aesthetics or “theology and the arts.” Both perspectives, the former in philosophy departments and the latter in seminaries, have tended to over-determine or over-inflect discourse on modern and contemporary art as an annex of theology or philosophy. Modern and contemporary art is what I practice—as a teacher, curator, critic, and art historian. It is where, to quote the pagan poet in Acts 17:28, I “live and move and have [my] being.” It is where and how I live out my vocation as a Christian. I do not need warrant from philosophy or theology to practice modern and contemporary art. And so the essays in this book, although they reflect philosophical and theological perspectives, are not a covert attempt to attain philosophical and theological justification or to practice philosophy...
and theology by other means. The question, then, that the essays in this book pursue is not whether but how.

My practice as a curator involves serving as a translator for many diverse and often mutually exclusive publics and audiences. This book is no different. I seek the impossible goal of addressing theologians and philosophers, average Christians interested in the arts and culture, art students studying at Christian colleges, art students of Christian faith studying in non-Christian educational contexts, arts ministry leaders and participants in the emergent movement, and perhaps even artists or critics outside the church who are interested in the explosion of things spiritual and religious in the contemporary art world or who might have grown bored with current ways of thinking about contemporary art and thus are eager for fresh directions.

This book refers to numerous artists and works of art that because of space and cost constraints cannot be reproduced. Therefore, it should be read in conjunction with a good art history textbook with plenty of high-quality illustrations, such as Art Since 1900, written by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloch, or Modern Art, by Sam Hunter, John Jacobus, and Daniel Wheeler. There are no shortcuts to understanding as complex a cultural practice as art, and therefore these essays are intended only to contribute to the reader’s education whatever his or her stage.

Whether or not one agrees with my conclusions or my interpretations of specific artists and works of art as I bend them toward Christ, naming the unknown god of modern and contemporary art, my wager is that my critical approach is expansive enough to encourage and stimulate further and deeper reflection on and experience of one of the least understood but powerful mechanisms of modern (and postmodern) culture.

My primary argument is that since most Christian commentators have been theologians, philosophers, and “Christian artists,” there has been a remarkable lack of interpretive charity granted to modern and contemporary art as a whole. This lack of charity, however, is remarkably ecumenical, cutting across lines that usually divide mainline Protestants, Catholics, evangelical, and the Orthodox. However, this ecumenism is derived less from the Nicene faith of the church fathers than it is from contemporary (secular) cultural discourse, which is deeply suspicious of high art in general and modern art more specifically, and which has developed a shrill polemics in public discourse that has grown immune to subtleties, qualifications, nuances, and ambivalences. Subsequently, most Christian commentators rarely address modern
art on its own terms, within its own framework of critical evaluation. Rather, those commentators produce theology, philosophy, apologetics, or politics that rely on—or even require—a superficial understanding of modern and contemporary art. They do not produce art criticism. This book is nothing if not criticism of modern and contemporary art, criticism, however, that is nourished by a Nicene Christianity that seeks to embrace all that is good, true, and beautiful and to reveal, quite possibly, that some artists are “not far from the kingdom” (Mark 12:34).2

But it is not enough merely to offer an alternative narrative of the history of modern and contemporary art. Art needs to be engaged and experienced. This book is an attempt to chart ways to do this, revealing the rewards and challenges involved in taking every thought captive and receiving contemporary art as a manifestation of God’s gracious gifts, revealing contemporary art itself to be gift, albeit one that needs to be named as both a gift and a gift from God.

An important consequence of the church’s approach to modern and contemporary art is that in its commentators’ zeal to engage it through certain philosophical, theological, or political perspectives, they have tended to reduce art to visual illustrations of propositional truths better expressed in other forms, usually words. This kind of soft iconoclasm, which is distrustful of letting art be art, has led to an impoverished ability to experience both the aesthetic presence of much of modern and contemporary art and to write about it allusively, expansively, and suggestively, recognizing that art is a distinctive mode of cognition and knowledge about the world.3 As George Steiner provocatively observed, art is a dangerous thing that can take over our inner house and transform us.4

For art to work, we need to be receptive to this “danger” of transformation, trusting that our Christian faith—which is more than a philosophy, worldview, political perspective, or a theory of culture—is strong enough to handle it and that our own appropriation of the faith can become stronger, more supple, and more nuanced in the process. In this way, we may “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Eph. 3:18) and in the process discover for ourselves how much wider, longer, higher, and deeper is the faith that we claim to know. Too often commentators on modern and contemporary art have approached the subject with a rigidly stable “Christian perspective” that is then merely applied to art. Little, if any, commentary reflects a dialogical and dialectical relationship with modern and contemporary art, in
which the art is able to exert some counterpressure, stretching and shaping this “perspective.”

This has indeed been my experience, for both my understanding of modern and contemporary art and my participation in the Christian faith have undergone significant and, at times, unexpected and uncomfortable changes. My practice of the Christian faith has become, as a consequence, more premodern and more ancient.5 My experience of certain currents in contemporary art has provoked me to attempt to retrieve the ancient fullness of the faith as a network of robust liturgical, sacramental, and ascetic practices. Far from being out of step with the art world, this ancient, robust faith and practice might in fact offer a provocative framework for understanding contemporary art.6

An important part of this study’s critical framework is the recognition of a distinction between contemplation and communication. From secular and Christian contexts, art is too often assumed to be merely verbal communication pursued by other (and inferior) means, that the artist is trying to send “messages” that we as viewers must receive and understand linguistically. This is distinctly not the case with art. Art requires contemplation that focuses attention on the viewer developing a relationship with the work of art, not merely passively receiving a message. Starting with the Reformers of the sixteenth century, particularly the Lutheran polemicists, art has tended to be viewed as a form of communication that serves specific educational ends. A Christian faith, however, that is creedal and conciliar has the resources—the very mind of the church at its disposal—to recognize the importance of contemplation as a spiritual discipline that can underwrite and manifest itself in artistic practice. This study pursues that course.

But this expansive, receptive, and hermeneutically open way of experiencing modern and contemporary art, which privileges contemplation as a spiritual and aesthetic virtue, does not merely baptize all modern and contemporary art for Christ, equating the movement of the Holy Spirit with the movement of a particular aesthetic practice of high culture. It instead offers a basis to discern what is worth our effort to understand and for what reasons.

Structure of the Book

This book consists of seven essays that address separate subjects from quite different vantage points, yet taken as a whole they form a comprehensive
though idiosyncratic critical engagement with modern and contemporary art. These essays speak to the importance of a distinctive, yet expansive, Christian critical reception of modern and contemporary art. A narrow, monolithic “Christian perspective” will not be prepared or even concerned to name the altars to the unknown god that populate the landscape of modern and contemporary art.

Chapter 1 lays the conceptual framework for the remainder of the essays by providing historical, philosophical, and theological considerations. First, I discuss what art is and its relationship to other forms of visual imagery. What historical practices and traditions do I mean when I refer to “modern and contemporary art”? Second, it offers an explanation of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of my approach to art as a curator and critic. What is my working definition of art? And third, it explores the theological implications of icons in the Eastern Church and their potential for aiding the experience of modern and contemporary art. The “economy” of the icon can provide an important foundation on which to rethink modern and contemporary art.

The one holy catholic and apostolic church, embodied and preserved in the conciliar Christianity of the seven councils from Nicaea I in the fourth century to Nicaea II in the eighth century, offers significant and provocative resources for approaching modern and contemporary art. Protestant approaches are simply not expansive enough. Although this is merely my own conclusion, the fact that there are very few professionally trained historians of modern and contemporary art (i.e., with doctorates in modern and contemporary art) teaching at evangelical Christian colleges, and little Christian (evangelical or other) scholarship being produced by historians of modern and contemporary art, might offer empirical evidence that my view has some basis in truth.

Be that as it may, the vast majority of Protestant approaches to modern and contemporary art, particularly those of the Reformed and evangelical persuasion, have taught a generation of Christians to avoid the subject altogether. And despite the flourishing of Christian colleges and the explosion of evangelical approaches to visual culture and the arts as part of the revival of the evangelical mind, the lack of critics and historians of modern and contemporary art and the paucity of modern and contemporary art history classes taught at these colleges is ample evidence of the continued success of Protestant approaches to avoid in-depth confrontation with the subject.

The focus on icons is an effort to retrieve premodern Christianity for the contemporary situation. As James K. A. Smith argues in his book on
postmodernism and the church, “a thoughtful engagement with postmodernism will encourage us to look backward. . . . Ancient and medieval sources provide a useful countervoice to modernity.” Therefore, if we take the history of Christianity and the church seriously, if we embrace the creeds of Nicaea-Constantinople, Chalcedon, and Ephesus (as evangelicals are rediscovering the dogmatic importance of the Mother of God), then we might likewise benefit from Nicaea II, from the ancient church’s advocacy of the use of icons not merely as aesthetic teaching tools, but as dogmatic markers of Christology and witnesses to the kingdom to come.

Chapter 2 offers an alternative history and theory of the development of modern art, revealing that Christianity has always been present with modern art, nourishing as well as haunting it, and that modern art cannot be understood without understanding its religious and spiritual components and aspirations. These religious and spiritual components, even when Christians claim to reject them, remain distinctively Christian.

Originally published in Religion and the Arts in the spring of 2006, chapter 3 considers a single painting by Enrique Martínez Celaya, using it as a window through which to view his artistic practice as structured and shaped by a religious worldview, a practice that is best understood through the lens of Christian thought. It also explores and assesses the impact this painting has had on my own development as an art critic and as a Christian. This essay was the product of several years of research and reflection beginning in 2001 on Martínez Celaya’s artistic practice and its implications for my developing thoughts on Christianity and contemporary art. It also marks my initial foray into this line of thinking. Therefore, it is reprinted here, with only slight modifications, to give a record of my development and to provide an in-depth exploration of an artist whose work has been instrumental to my own work. A reader with experience in modern and contemporary art might read this chapter first as a way to track the development of my thought.

Chapter 4 moves outward from a single artist and work of art to consider the theme of “embodied transcendence” in contemporary art and how this “material spirituality” is evidenced in the work of a number of contemporary artists, several of whom would eschew the spiritual or religious nature and connotations of their work. This chapter also charts the interest in things spiritual and religious in contemporary art of the last twenty years and relates that interest to the history of modern art.

Chapter 5 examines the role and function of art criticism in modern and contemporary art, which has been long misunderstood by Christian...
commentators. This chapter rehearses the narrative of criticism’s emergence as a distinctly modern literary genre and explores its diverse purposes. Oscar Wilde once quipped that it is much more difficult to write about a thing than to do it. This chapter reflects on and draws out the serious implications of this instructive aphorism. In addition, this chapter addresses the relationship between the work of art and artistic intention, particularly as that intention is manifest in what the artist says about the meaning of his or her work of art. In addition, this chapter explores the role of the church as an engine for cultural critique.

Chapter 6 explores the relationship between modern and contemporary art and the church, particularly as it relates to the liturgy. It leans heavily on some of the insights of Radical Orthodoxy advocates, including John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, and James K. A. Smith. When the visual arts and the church are discussed, it is most often in the context of using art to enhance the worship experience, which is often shaped by the tendency to conflate aesthetic practices with the spiritual disciplines. This chapter addresses this common problem in the contemporary church from a very different perspective, one that sets up this relationship quite differently, and draws some surprising conclusions.

And finally, the conclusion sharpens my point and adds considerably more torque to the implications of the previous essays by interrogating a mysterious creature, the “Christian artist,” which, like Bigfoot, seems everywhere present but nowhere seen. Both Francis Schaeffer and H. R. Rookmaaker devoted a considerable amount of time to discussing this creature, and organizations such as Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) and the underlying art education philosophy of the Christian College Consortium assume its existence as an article of faith. This chapter examines this creature and whether it is a figment of our imagination that does more harm than good as we proceed in and through contemporary art.

Eastern Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemann once observed that a Christian sees Christ everywhere. This is especially relevant for this study, which is about seeing with the eyes of faith—as the defenders of the icons put it—which opens up the world in order not only to name those altars made to unknown gods but also to see the world the way it truly is, full of Jacob’s ladders, with commerce from the angelic realms. The distance between the immanent and the transcendent, between the material and the spiritual, is wafer thin. A Christian, then, does not merely believe a certain dogma, but has a transformed vision, one that sees the
world as it truly is, as Christ’s footstool, as the sanctuary of God, that is, the world that icons depict. Ultimately, this is the lesson of the economy of the icon. In the words of the psalmist, with all the sacramental echoes of the Eucharistic liturgy, “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8, emphasis added).
Overture

Some of the most deep-seated pleasures of our natural selves . . . involve appetites that had to be educated. If these pleasures are rooted in crude instinct, they nonetheless grow in depth and power as we acquire hierarchies of discrimination, until second nature is nowhere separable from the first. Yet visual art—and abstract art most particularly—remains one of the last bastions of unashamed, unrepentant ignorance, where educated experience can still be equated with phony experience. . . . This syndrome becomes ever more acute as the tradition gets fatter and the works get leaner.

Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing*

Art is a deceptive cultural practice. On one hand, it is ubiquitous in popular culture. Art museums attract thousands of visitors, and local community arts projects abound. And with the current interest in the “creative class” and the “creative turn” in the corporate world, art, as a manifestation of creativity, is good for business.¹ But it is rarely defined. We seem to know what art is when we see it; or, perhaps more accurately, we know what it isn’t. On the other hand, there are few cultural practices that have such a wide disparity and disconnection between the populace and the specialists, who are almost universally assumed to be irrelevant to understanding and appreciating art.²
Any talk of art’s complexity and difficulty seems to fly in the face of its accessible, fun, “child-friendly” nature, which is the message communicated by museums and local arts organizations. By and large, art’s popularity is derived primarily from its instrumentality as an economic tool for the chamber of commerce.

Art might be popular, but it is poorly understood, in large part because its historical and philosophical conditions are believed to be unnecessary for its appreciation. At the risk of being considered an elitist, I argue that such conditions must be understood. This popular understanding of art also manifests an arrogance that restricts art’s horizon, limiting it to a form of decoration, cultural symbolism, or the like. Viewing and understanding art, as much as practicing it, requires hard work and discipline. The common assumption that modern and contemporary artists ignore their audiences ignores this fact. Therefore, it is important to lay some initial groundwork before an exploration of modern and contemporary art can begin in earnest.

Modern Art as Museum Art

The arts are very much a part of the contemporary church. But when the arts are referred to or discussed, it is often in one of two ways. First is within the context of worship, that is, what kinds of art will be incorporated into a worship service. Most often, this has to do with artistic practices that have no direct resemblance to the subject of this book: music, banners, dance, film clips, film stills, graphic design, or clip art downloaded from the Internet. Outside the church, Christian attention to the arts has primarily to do with music and film, a concern, incidentally, that reflects their popularity and ubiquity in the larger culture. Although the kind of art I deal with influences these art forms, this book is not about them.

This book is about museum art. It is “high” or “fine” art. It is art made, as Nicholas Wolterstorff observes in Art in Action, for “contemplation.” This has made Christian commentators, particularly of the evangelical persuasion, nervous. It appears elitist. Huge swaths of visual images are ignored and subjugated to some practice that is considered higher, finer, and part of a practice of high culture that is enjoyed by very few. It is therefore neither populist nor democratic, which also violates key tenants of American religious experience. Even Wolterstorff restricts high art’s importance, emphasizing that it is just one of the many ways that art functions.
This reflects a societal bias as well. Absurd and scandalous works of art, inflated auction prices, public controversies such as the Sensations exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and an idealized and mystified lost “Golden Age” of the (pre-Reformation) past when high art was sponsored by the church and was accessible to the “average person,” conspire to reinforce a deeply negative and suspicious view of museum art produced since 1900. This need not be the case. It is perhaps worth mentioning that both Hitler and Stalin condemned modern art as “degenerate,” a fact that should provoke us to reflect on the origins of and reasons for our negative views of modern art.

The history and development of the art museum is an inextricable part of the history and development of modern and contemporary art. The public art museum developed as part of the political and cultural imperialism of France, England, and Germany in the early nineteenth century, when cultural artifacts from around the world were brought to these institutions for public display. What emerged was a distinctive tradition of experiencing them aesthetically, which de-emphasized the particularities and distinctives of history and culture that laid the groundwork for the development of modern art.5

This development evolved with, and in opposition to, the academy. As Egyptian, Assyrian, and Greek antiquities along with medieval altarpieces, icons, and Renaissance portraiture came to be interpreted within an internationalist, transhistorical modern aesthetic, a living tradition was established that was so powerful that the French realist Gustave Courbet could encourage art students to study with the “old masters” in the museums rather than with the faculty at the academy.6 This living tradition of museum art came to exert a shaping influence on emerging modern artists in the mid-nineteenth century, who self-consciously submitted to this living tradition as the interpretive framework for their artistic practice. Products of aesthetic work by artists participating in this living tradition are responses to and critiques of this tradition, extending it, deepening it. As T. S. Eliot remarked in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1917), the individual artist achieves his identity as an individual by participating in a historical tradition.7

Museum art, then, is a profoundly historical practice with a developed tradition, a living tradition of the dead rather than a dead tradition of the living, to paraphrase Jaroslav Pelikan’s famous description of the church’s Holy Tradition. That much of modern art appears to many museum- and gallery-goers as strange and arbitrary has much to do with not knowing the living tradition out of which such work emerges and into which artists, curators, and critics are baptized. That most are not a part of this living tradition...
does not invalidate its integrity. For example, that T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* or James Joyce’s *Ulysses* requires extensive notes to explain references and allusions does nothing to undermine the fact that Eliot and Joyce were working within a living tradition. It just so happens that this living tradition is not the one of most contemporary readers, neither in Eliot’s or Joyce’s time nor in our own.

Modern art’s profoundly historical character has given rise to important philosophical reflection on the nature of art. Philosopher Jerrold Levinson argues that art’s historicity is the defining and distinguishing characteristic of what art is and how it is identified. In addition to this historical aspect, two different and, at times, competing, ways of thinking about art have informed my own work as a curator, critic, and art historian: philosophical considerations and theological reflections.

**Philosophical Considerations**

Art is not only a cultural practice, it is also an institutional practice. Therefore, any discussion of art must take into account its institutional framework. Modern art’s primary institutional framework is the art museum. Modern art and its living tradition exists not only invisibly in the hearts and minds of its practitioners and participants but also embodied, mediated in and through its visible public institutions. And it is in fact this public or outward manifestation that produces the private and inward experience of art. What art is, then, is defined through a public network and not merely by private assertion or opinion.

Moreover, what art is cannot be derived exclusively from what it looks like—what philosopher George Dickie calls its “exhibited qualities”—because many examples of modern art look very similar, if not identical, to objects and images that are not considered art. Examining art’s institutional framework enables those qualities that are unexhibited to be more proactively constitutive of what art is. These unexhibited qualities are the attitudes, beliefs, intentions, assumptions, and practices that are absorbed in the very institutions that produce, shape, nourish, display, and interpret art. Moreover, it is these unexhibited qualities that connect artistic practice with other cultural practices. The Russian art historian, mathematician, Orthodox priest, and martyr Pavel Florensky observed that “for better or worse, the work of art is the center of an entire cluster of conditions, which alone make possible its
existence as something artistic; outside of its constitutive conditions it simply
does not exist as art.”

An influential, albeit much criticized, definition of art is the institutional
definition, whose primary adherent is George Dickie. He was influenced by
Arthur Danto’s essay “The Artworld,” published in 1964. Danto’s essay was
an attempt to reflect philosophically on a single problem: how could Andy
Warhol’s plywood Brillo Box be understood as a work of art since it is virtually
(visually) identical in every way to a simple cardboard Brillo box? “To
see something as art,” Danto observes, “requires something the eye cannot
decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art:
an art world.” The difference, for Danto and especially for Dickie, is that
Warhol’s reliance on the familiarity of the ordinary object provides the inter-
pretive ground for his hand-painted copy of the mass-produced original
and becomes art when it is placed in a museum/gallery space that invites and
provokes certain responses on the part of the viewer. The viewer, in short,
responds to it as a work of art by contemplating its union of form and content,
which Warhol produced, in a particular way and by reflecting on this experi-
ence as a distinctively aesthetic experience. For Danto, it is the presence of
interpretation and theory that enables an object to become a work of art. For
Dickie it is the museum/gallery space that enables this transformation. It is
this space, as a literal and conceptual space, that shapes both artistic practice
and audience response.

Although Danto’s test cases were Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol,
for Dickie it is Marcel Duchamp who is the prototype artist who reveals that
art is an institutional practice. It is important for the purposes of this book
that Warhol and Duchamp are the lenses through which Dickie and Danto
view contemporary art, since these two artists are perhaps the most vilified by
Christian commentators of any twentieth-century artists. This has much to
do with the philosophy of art that many of these commentators utilize as well
as the historical narratives of modern art that view Warhol and Duchamp in
decidedly uncharitable ways. A more empathetic interpretation of both Warhol
and Duchamp will acknowledge the importance of a robust living tradition
of high art within which both artists worked, even while they critiqued and
undermined certain of its aspects.

That high art—museum art—has for over two centuries developed a living
tradition that functions institutionally has important ramifications for Chris-
tian reflection on contemporary art. Museum art developed only with the
emergence of museums. Thus art is but one manifestation and embodiment
of a certain kind of aesthetic practice. Although this subject will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2, it is important that modern art is not regarded merely as an abrogation of its divinely appointed place in the church. Human institutions are neither purely good nor purely bad. They are means by which human persons work out the cultural mandate in community (Gen. 1:28).

Modern art as an institutional and historical practice, defined in and through the museum, is no different. Not all products of modernity are theologically and spiritually suspect. The development of modern art offered a particular opportunity to address certain distinctive features of aesthetic practice and visual representation that were not given preeminence in other institutional manifestations of aesthetic practice, including the church.

A distinctive characteristic of modern art is the preeminent role aesthetic practice plays in the development of the self and its relationship to the world. This aspect of our humanity is given sharp focus and attention in and through the institution of high art. This aesthetic or stylistic aspect of our humanity has received broad-based attention from the church fathers, who understood individual Christians to be shaping themselves into icons of Christ through spiritual formation, to Jean-Paul Sartre’s belief that our lives, as products of our decisions, are works of art. This characteristic has also received considerable popular attention recently, in works such as Virginia Postrel’s *The Substance of Style*, and is confirmed through Robert Wuthnow’s sociological research on the role of the arts (very broadly speaking) as a practice that forms identity.¹⁴ The modern institution of high art draws particular attention to the role of aesthetic practice in human development, and as such, it has become, under the conditions of modernity, a significant framework for such reflection.

Institutional theories of art account for the role of museums and galleries, interpreters, and other non-aesthetic aspects of art that participate in constituting what art is, so that, to quote Danto, “nothing the Brillo people can make will be art while Warhol can do nothing but make art.”¹⁵ But institutional theories do not offer sufficient analysis of the mechanics of producing and experiencing art. This is perhaps not surprising, since theories of art most often have emerged as means to accommodate the most recent of artistic developments that challenge established philosophical frameworks for understanding art.¹⁶ Institutional theories emerged in an effort to comprehend and interpret the work of Warhol and Duchamp, two artists for whom it is said that art was often more interesting to think about than to look at.¹⁷

The institutional approach to art locates a break between the modern notion of high art as being true art and premodern visual representation—which
functions within other institutional frameworks such as the church—as being something else. Given this, some will assume that the term “art” cannot be applied to premodern visual representation, that art is a modern, Western (i.e., Eurocentric) concept. Although such an institutional approach is helpful in clarifying and distinguishing important differences in visual practices, there is a certain intrinsic meaning in visual representation, or aesthetic embodiment, that a hard contextualism such as the institutional theory cannot recognize.

Philosopher Paul Crowther offers a complement to relativistic approaches to art, such as the institutional theory, that pay insufficient attention to what occurs cognitively in the process of producing and experiencing art. Influenced by the thoroughly embodied phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Crowther develops what he calls the “ecological theory of art,” which involves the development of the self through creative and imaginative interaction with the environment. Crowther addresses the important role that art plays in the growth of self-consciousness as the embodied self interacts with the world aesthetically. For Crowther, art possesses “phenomenological depth” because it has a “cognitive richness” since “we comprehend the world aesthetically, in ways that cannot be derived from other forms of knowledge and artifice.”

Crowther observes that “it is the integral fusion of the sensuous and the conceptual which enables art to express something of the depth and richness of body-hold in a way which eludes modes of abstract thought—such as philosophy.” What is important for Crowther is that visual representation, as made manifest by art, is not merely an institutional practice but fulfills basic human needs such as affirming bodily presence and bodily knowledge, what Crowther calls “body-hold.” Art imaginatively projects a harmonious relationship between the subject and object of experience, which reconciles the self to the other in the preservation of human experience. Crowther thus locates art’s significance in the practice of its making and its experiencing. It “brings rational and sensuous material into an inseparable and mutually enhancing relation.”

Significantly, Crowther also argues that this relationship is at its foundation a transcendent one. A work of art enables the self to move beyond and outside itself toward another object, and this process has a significant impact on the self’s development toward a reconciled relationship with the world. This transcendent relationship makes love possible—which is nothing if not transcendent—by helping us move beyond ourselves toward our neighbor and toward God. Philosopher William Desmond affirms and extends Crowther’s views. For
Desmond, it is the space between Self and Other, what he calls the “metaxu,” the rich “between” in which art, religion, and philosophy dwell.21

Crowther’s ecological approach to art offers what he calls a “transcultural” definition of visual representation, of which the Western institution of high art is but a particular manifestation. Crowther argues that all cultures believe something important takes place in visual representation. Most cultures recognize that this importance is distinctively powerful, magical, and religious. This is not because these cultures are primitive or unenlightened but simply because what makes visual representation significant—that it offers a unique and complex “hypostatic union” between sensuous material and rational ideas—is inexplicable and thus named “religious.”

This mysterious, hypostatic union is the source of high art’s power. Crowther argues that the institution of high art acknowledges this mysterious power, which has given rise to the close relationship between art and religion that has preoccupied artists and critics since the advent of modernism. But it has been named the “aesthetic,” and the museum is the place where such inherently religious experience is called an “aesthetic experience.” Still, the inherently religious—even magical or mystical—nature of aesthetic experience, as a distinct embodiment of the hypostatic union, remains.

Whether a pre-Columbian artifact, African statue, medieval altarpiece, or a Byzantine icon is “art” in the modern institutional sense of the term, all these are visual representations and thus bear a transhistorical and transcultural relationship not only to each other but also to the artifacts made in and for the modern institution of art, because of the common (universal) human practice of making and experiencing. This offers a foundation for a normative aesthetics that can better enable cross-cultural comparisons of visual representations without imposing a modern Western view of art onto them or exaggerating their differences.

What is important to consider in these theories of art is that there has been no discussion of what art is supposed to look like and whether art is supposed to be mimetic (that is, representational, which is the conventional assumption of art’s significance—that it makes images of the world that look real or that correspond to what is empirically seen). Unfortunately, the assumption that art is supposed to be representational, that its images are representations of what is seen and experienced empirically in the world, is often given moral, ethical, and spiritual justification so that representational art is life- or creation-affirming while abstract art is nihilistic and creation-denying.
This is simply not the case. And it was not the case for the Classical Greeks, from whom we receive much information about the remarkable likenesses of their aesthetic creations, whether birds trying to nest in a painting of a tree or a young man falling in love with a sculpture of a woman.

Your artists, then, like Phidias and Praxiteles, went up, I suppose, to heaven and took a copy of the forms of the gods, and then reproduced these by their art, or was there any other influence which presided over and guided their moulding?

There was, said Apollonius. . . . Imagination wrought these works, a wiser and subtler artist by far than imitation; for imitation can only create as its handiwork what it has seen, but imagination equally what it has not seen; for it will conceive of its ideal with reference to the reality.22

Visual art was recognized, then, as being more than something that depicts outward, observable forms; it also consists of imaginative projection. The history and development of modern and contemporary art necessitate that we understand that representational art requires imaginative projection while abstract art requires representation of some kind; in other words, abstract art is representational in different ways from representational or figurative art.23 This dialectic between abstraction and representation, between outward form and inner feeling or spirit or imagination, will be discussed in greater depth in chapter 2. Furthermore, this dialectic between representation and imagination or abstraction is fundamental for understanding the economy of the icon.24

My working definition of art is thus derived in part from both a moderate institutional theory that recognizes the important role that the museum space plays in determining meaning and mediating a history, tradition, and theory of what occurs in that space, and an ecological theory of art that affirms that in its making and viewing, art does something to and with the self, projecting an imaginative world of thought in aesthetic form that is necessary for human development. The transhistorical nature of visual representation offers a basis for reflecting on modern and contemporary art through the theory and practice of the icon because its primary goal is to seek communion with God. Its foundation is prayer.

Artistic practice, then, is utopian. It recognizes that the world is not as it should be. And it therefore projects alternative worlds. Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky once said, echoing Dostoyevsky and other Russian thinkers, that if the world were perfect there would be no need for art. Art is a witness to both our fallen world and hope for its redemption. In a bracing
introduction to the work of Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova, Russian-born poet Joseph Brodsky declares, “Art is a form of resistance to the imperfection of reality as well as an attempt to create an alternative reality, an alternative that one hopes will possess the hallmarks of a conceivable, if not an achievable, perfection.”

Theological Reflections

In The Crossing of the Visible, a provocative book about images, icons, and idols, the phenomenologist and Roman Catholic thinker Jean-Luc Marion observed, almost in passing, that

the image-affirming doctrine of the Second Council of Nicaea concerns not only nor first of all a point in the history of ideas, nor even a decision of Christian dogma: it formulates above all an—perhaps the only—alternative to the contemporary disaster of the image. In the icon, the visible and the invisible embrace each other from a fire that no longer destroys but rather lights up the divine face for humanity.

This study takes seriously Marion’s observation that the theory of images articulated in the Second Council of Nicaea—which in AD 787 reestablished the orthodoxy of icons, the holy images of Christ, Mary the Theotokos, the angels, and the saints for use in church worship and private devotion, and reversed the iconoclastic council of 754—can make a significant contribution to the study of contemporary art. The key principle of icon veneration is that the honor shown to the image is transferred to the prototype, and whoever honors an image honors the person represented by it. The icon (eikon, “image”), then, is a material means of grace, a pointer through which devotion, contemplation, and communion with God are enacted. It is the sacramental presence of a transcendent world.

St. John of Damascus, the foremost defender of icons in the eighth century, laid out the several different images. The first image, what John calls the “natural image,” is the image of the Son. The second image is God’s predetermined will, the images that he will bring about. The third image is humanity as the image of God. The fourth image is found in the Scriptures: the use of figures, forms, and shapes that depict “faint conceptions of God.” The fifth kind of image is also found in the Scriptures: images that prefigure the incarnation of Christ. The sixth and last kind of image is made up of...
those that recall the memory of past events either in words (Scriptures) or images. John’s conclusion is “receive each [form of image] in the reason and manner fitting to each.”

An exploration of the economy of the icon is not possible without the study of iconoclasm, which was an organized movement against images used in worship that began in earnest during the eighth century in Constantinople. Although it was ultimately defeated by the church in 847, it lingered, only to reemerge with a vengeance in the West during the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century. Significantly, both iconoclasm and iconophilia trace their roots to Neoplatonic thought, particularly as it is manifest in Origen. They are therefore two sides of the same coin. Cultures, communities, and institutions are simultaneously iconoclastic and iconophilic.

Nicene Christianity does not merely tolerate images in the church. It requires them. Icons are not an alien Eastern addition to Nicene Christianity, but its essence. The Council of 787 in Nicaea, the seventh and last ecumenical council of the church, was an affirmation of the Nicene faith as embodied in the economy of the icon. Religious imagery, particularly the holy icons, was considered to be dogma in paint, painted Scriptures. Canon 82 of the Council in Trullo (691–92) forbids a symbolic representation of Christ as a lamb because it was a “type” or “image” of the coming Christ who has already come and thus should be depicted as a man in “remembrance of His incarnation, passion and redeeming death, and of the universal redemption, thereby accomplished.”

One need not be chrismated in the Eastern Orthodox Church or be a cradle Roman Catholic to draw from the riches of this too-often ignored history of the church. The Protestant practice of freely appropriating from church tradition, which has culminated in what the late Robert Webber called “ancient-future faith,” certainly legitimates the appropriation and adaptation of the economy of the icon for Protestant use.

This aesthetic economy rests first and foremost on the cosmic implications of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which did not merely or only effect our salvation, it renewed all of creation, bringing the creation itself, to quote St. Athanasius, into the eternal triune relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. St. John of Damascus argues for the importance of Christ’s incarnation for the veneration of icons.

Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been seen in the flesh and has associated among human kind, I depict what I have seen of God. I do not venerate matter but I venerate the fashioner...
of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked.\textsuperscript{34}

A key aspect of the theory and practice of icon veneration is that the material world is not, as Greek philosophy assumed, a burden that must be abandoned or transcended in order to achieve communion with God or participate in his divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).\textsuperscript{35} The material immanence of the world is the very means by which divine transcendence is or can be experienced. It is precisely at this point that Christianity critiqued and transformed Hellenic thought. Since the Son, the divine Logos, has put on creation through the incarnation, this is especially the case in the new covenant. Mocking his iconoclastic opponents as super-spiritual, St. John admits that, “since I am a human being and wear a body, I long to have communion in a bodily way with what is holy and to see it. Condescend to my lowly understanding, O exalted one, that you may preserve your exaltedness.”\textsuperscript{36} St. John’s affirmation of the material world as the means of God’s grace is repeated seven centuries later when Martin Luther returned to Wittenberg from exile in 1525 to battle the iconoclastic Andreas Karlstadt and his cohorts, to whom he referred sneeringly as the “heavenly prophets.”\textsuperscript{37}

Reflection on the economy of the icon has much to recommend for a study of modern and contemporary art. From a historical point of view, the icon has never been far from the history of modern art. The development of an autonomous institution of art in the West resulted in painting that takes place on portable panels and later canvases, materials that approximated the mobility and discrete look of icon painting.\textsuperscript{38} Modern painting could be said to be the Western equivalent of Eastern icon painting.\textsuperscript{39}

More important is that a number of avant-garde painters during the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly the Russian painters Malevich and Kandinsky, found in icons the embodiment of spiritual power. And spiritual power—real presence—has been perhaps the driving force of the history and development of modern art. The avant-garde was eager to access this spiritual power and so they began to describe their paintings as iconic. In addition, they borrowed various formal compositional devices, use of color, greater self-consciousness about how they practiced their craft, even, as is evident in Malevich’s exhibition practices, installing some of their paintings in the eastern corners of the gallery spaces, which followed traditional Byzantine practice. For these and many other avant-garde painters well into the twentieth century,
including the Russian immigrants John Graham and Mark Rothko, modern painting functioned like an icon, creating a deeply spiritual, contemplative relationship between the object and viewer. Rothko once observed that if the viewer doesn’t cry in front of his work then he or she isn’t having the same experience that he had while painting it.

The historical relationship between icons and modern art is largely metaphorical. This is not to say that it is insignificant. It is a way to denote that a painting has a certain spiritual and contemplative power. In the mid-1970s critic Joseph Masheck explored the range of this metaphor, perhaps revealing the real power of the metaphor: “We apply certain notions from the earlier history of painting, especially religious painting, to present-day art, not to project meaning onto contentless forms, but to inquire into integral contents in art, at a time when early modern aspirations to a transcendental function for painting have revived.”40 Is the relationship between icon painting and Western modern painting more than metaphorical? Can “iconic” be used in a way that is more than merely allusive? Can a more concrete relationship be established between icon painting and modern and contemporary Western painting? This study takes up Marion’s observation and stretches Masheck’s important essay in order to find out.

Iconoclasm haunts the history of modern art just as it haunts the history of icon veneration in the church.41 Reflection on modern artists’ interests in icons provides productive insights into the religious and spiritual underpinnings of the development of modernism.

Not only are icons relevant to the study of modern art, they are relevant to the practice of contemporary Western Christianity. Eastern Orthodoxy and Eastern Christianity in general have received a considerable amount of interest, particularly among those of the emergent or “ancient-future” faith movements, for which interest in icons is part of a larger interest that includes ascetic practices, candles, incense, plain-song and chant, bowing, prostration, and other forms of ancient practice. From more mainline and seeker Protestant churches, the role of the arts in worship has become an increasingly important subject. Visual images are playing an increasingly prevalent role in Protestant churches.42 As Protestant churches puzzle out the question of the arts in general and images more specifically in worship, the study of icons, their theory, and practice within the Eastern Church can offer significant assistance. The deep riches of dogmatic reflection on icons in the eighth and ninth centuries are not exclusively the possession of the Orthodox or Catholic traditions but part of the rich deposit of the Nicene Christian faith.
The economy of the icon operates in a worldview that is profoundly sacramental, in which the transcendent is mediated through the immanent and is recognized, experienced, and contemplated through material means. As Graham Ward observes, “To desire or to love God is to invest the world with significance, a significance which deepens the mysterious presence of things.”

The vocation of humanity is not only as prophets who proclaim God’s love and as kings who rule as God’s royal representatives but also as priests who mediate between creation and Creator. Alexander Schmemann asserts:

The first, the basic definition of man is that he is the priest. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—and by filling the world with his eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him. The world was created as the “matter,” the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament.

For St. John of Damascus, humanity is by its very nature a mediation of the Creator and the creation: “Man is a microcosm; for he possesses a soul and a body, and is placed between spirit and matter; he is the place in which the visible and invisible creations, the tangible and intangible creations, are linked together.”

Much modern and contemporary artistic practice manifests this priestly function, this yearning for a liturgical reality that reveals the world as gift and offering. Many works of modern and contemporary art manifest this reality. They are indeed poignant altars to the unknown god in aesthetic form. The challenge for the Christian art critic is to name them and testify to what they point toward, however haltingly, tentatively, and incompletely. As the psalmist Asaph observed:

When I tried to understand all this,  
it was oppressive to me  
till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny. (Ps. 73:16–17)