

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

J.A. Anderson and W.A. Dyrness
IVP Academic, 2016

The writing of this book was stimulated by another, published some forty six years ago: *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, by H.R. Rookmaaker. While Anderson and Dyrness are out to underscore the valuable significance of Rookmaaker's work, they also aim to critique and bypass it, hence their revisionist title: *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*.

At the outset of their provocative book, before turning to modern art specifically, Anderson and Dyrness first explore the general context of secularization theory in modernism. This, it appears to me, is a pertinent move on their part. Whether or not the modern period (1800-1970/their dates) was by and large anti-religious, as it so often has been represented to be, is a massively important question. The authors argue that such a negationist portrayal of any religious contribution to modernity is now being debunked, notably on historical and sociological levels. They contend that many interpreters lacked openness to a religious element and that in turn this produced an unwarrantedly bias narrative against religion having any influences on modernist culture. While a reductionist picture of secularism, therefore, is in the process of being upended, this does not mean that religion is readily welcomed back into the fray, but that it is at least increasingly considered as part of the discussion of the tumultuous story of the modern world.

Since, in Anderson and Dyrness' view, a revised account of modernity is gaining ground, the results of this rereading will inevitably have important implications for an understanding of artists and art during these times. Any religious involvement in modern art, nevertheless, is not to be perceived as a complete reversal of the secular-

ization thesis – as if it were now the plot of the whole story. This was not the case. Religion, as in the wider cultural context, should be viewed as a relevant and formidable feature, among others, in modern art. According to these authors, this period was one of deep doubt and serious questioning, yet the trajectory should be characterized as “fragilized belief” over outright “unbelief” in God.

Building off this revisionist narrative for understanding modern art, Anderson and Dyrness promote a redrawing of the landscape. They make a strong case for a religious, especially a Christian influence, and offer a well substantiated argument that modern artists were grappling with huge meaning of life questions, which included theological concerns. And this is right at the heart of where they take issue with Rookmaaker (and others) concerning modern art and its supposed anti-religious character and image.

After this excellent Introduction with its discussion of secularization, religion, modernity, and art, where sometimes churches and artists seemed to be on different planets, the authors turn to pick up more emphatically on their interaction with Rookmaaker.

Anderson and Dyrness point out that Rookmaaker's book made several useful contributions, including a call for a renewed Christian involvement in the visual arts and a revised critical reflection on modernity by Christians, who often ignored the crucial ideas of the times. Yet, Rookmaaker's work had another side, which amounted to a cultural - historical analysis of art. The authors contend that this aspect of *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* is extremely negative towards modern art and far too one-sided to be credible. Rookmaaker argued for a declinist narrative that envisioned modern culture and art as slipping further away from humanity and reality, thus leaving God out and thereby

becoming unspiritual. But, according to Anderson and Dyrness, the real story of modern art is much more complicated and complex, and is indeed contrary to Rookmaaker's interpretation, which they go on to develop in the rest of the book. They argue that history and criticism, the lynch pins in the discussion of religion, art in modernity, need to be re-explored.

The authors begin to do this with the main core of the book. They take readers on a geographic tour of modern artists (including, but not limited to those in brackets below), artworks, critics, and historians, in France (Courbet, Gauguin, Cézanne, Picasso) and Britain (Gill, Jones, Sutherland) moving through Germany (Friedrich) and Holland (van Gogh, Mondrian), Russia (Goncharova, Malevich) and North America (Cole, Church, Ryder), drawing this journey to *provisional* closure with a fascinating examination of mass media in the latter. This last chapter delves into several stimulating and controversial characters (Pollock, Cage, Rauschenberg, and Warhol).

Modern artists and their artworks, the authors maintain, should be approached with sympathy (a hermeneutics of charity), as the artists were not entirely missionaries of meaninglessness or revilers of God and reality, but those who struggled deeply with significant theological and cultural questions and issues that Christians should be able to connect with in a receptive, yet critical fashion. There has been far too much anti-modern art (or any art) in Christian circles, largely due to misreading both the culture and the art (and I would add the biblical text). The authors provide a persuasive corrective to this lack of knowledge and sensitivity that deserves an attentive hearing.

Throughout their work Anderson and Dyrness have clearly shown that any cate-

gorical divide between secular and religious in modernism and modern art is unfounded and that such reductionistic discourse requires a profound reassessment. Hopefully, their book, as they repeatedly plead for, will be the *beginning* of a rich and fruitful conversation between a variety of disciplines that will now move in fresh directions, developing a more accurate portrait of the modernist period in general, and of its art in particular.

Siedell's Afterword is a fitting closure to this tour de force. He applauds the book as a dynamic resource and necessary alternative to the Rookmaaker narrative, the broader history of modern art, and as a valid response to his own question – *So What?* Considering all the work these authors have done and the level which they have contributed to the conversation, Siedell suggests several pertinent reasons why every page has value, notably due to the authors' immense labor of love for the subject matter. He concurs that much of the reading of modern art, notably within Christian circles, has simply distorted modern culture and he thanks Anderson and Dyrness for their efforts in calling readers to a dedicated rethinking of both.

Modern Art and the Life of a Culture is so good, I read it through twice. Each chapter is well documented and offers a finely balanced scholarly investigation, not merely for the specialist, but for the general reader as well. Anderson and Dyrness are to be congratulated on their well-argued insights and careful analysis into this complex and divisive topic. In spite of their book coming out some forty-six years after the volume written by Rookmaaker, it was well worth waiting for.

Gregory J. Laughery