
*Visual Theology: Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts.*


Visual Theology: Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts is an edited volume of essays compiled by Robin M. Jensen and Kimberly J. Vrudny to honor the work of Professor H. Wilson Yates, founder and former president of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies. Here, in a single volume, is a selection of representative interdisciplinary writings from seminal thinkers from European, North American, and Australian contexts who shape our understanding of the ongoing discourse between the arts and religious and theological studies—something that Jensen and Vrudny have called “visual theology.”

In the following review, I will seek to clarify why the chapters in this edited book cover the ground they do. My first impression was that all chapters were undoubtedly interesting and certainly had something to say about the study of art itself, as well as the study of theology and art, but not all of them qualify as “visual theology.” A theological reflection on a work of art does not necessarily qualify as visual theology as the term is framed by the editors unless it is “a medium of knowing as well as showing ... [where] the nonverbal or symbolic modes of expression ... challenge the limits of the verbal.” Furthermore, referring to the first generation of theologians who developed a method for integrating the arts in theological studies, Jensen and Vrudny state, “They understood the arts as a nondiscursive means of expression or transmitting aspects of faith (dogma) or prophetically calling for social and economic justice (ethics).” Behind that assertion is an understanding of theology as involving a certain methodology and/or subject matter.

In either case, a concern for a more careful relationship between Christian theology and visual arts is at stake; my advice is that readers ask themselves some clear and deep questions that will help them understand the reflections inherent in the authors’ perspectives. Not only will this help readers understand more clearly what the authors are talking about, but also why they chose certain artists to explore, and why the authors write the way they do. It will also help readers sharpen up their own perspectives on contemporary art and theological thought.

The editors have organized the volume into five sections of three essays each, concluding with an amazing study by Wilson Yates on death that was inspired by the work of artist Käthe Kollowitz. “Visual Theology and the Traditional” is the first section. The first three essays focus on the contributions of artists
such as Gustav Klimt, Kasimir Malevich, and Tina Blondell. Charles Pickstone chooses Russian art found at the Hermitage Museum as well as the Russian long tradition on iconography. Throughout, Pickstone poses the question "to what extent do the icons of European art on display in the Hermitage similarly offer access to power for latter-day believers in the religion of art?" Pickstone introduces Black Square (1923), a provocative painting by Kasimir Malevich. The methodology he utilizes in his analysis, however, is more appropriate for aesthetic than theological studies. It does seem easy to relate to Black Square, as a contemporary icon, yet this seems to bear little resemblance to the ancient Orthodox iconographic tradition. His redefinition of what an icon is seems very far from the Russian tradition. Black Square may possibly move its viewers to philosophical reflection, but not necessarily to a transcendental experience.

Sara Henrich's "Living on the Outside of Your Skin" is another significant contribution to the section. Her comparison of two paintings of the biblical figure of Judith—a more traditional work by Gustav Klimt (1901), and a contemporary piece by Tina Blondell (1999)—opens up a dialogue between artists and visions. Henrich concludes, "Tina Blondell's I'll Make You Shorter by a Head (after Klimt's Judith i) is a prophetic interpretation of the work of Gustav Klimt that brings her closer to the biblical story of Judith than she imagines." Henrich's argument confirms that art can identify and represent the transcendental questions of human existence.

The second section, "Visual Theology and the Political," with essays by Robin Jensen, Rod Pattenden, and Kimberly Vrudny, engages the discussion of contemporary sociopolitical issues and their representation by the visual arts. These chapters provide an in-depth description and analysis of the ways in which the artist can be a prophet of his or her times, particularly amid the atrocities of war, violation of freedom, or any brutality against life. Being from Argentina, I was particularly touched by Vrudny's essay "Deforming and Reforming Beauty: Disappearance and Presence in the Theopolitical Imagination of Ricardo Cinalli." Cinalli's work encapsulates more than ten years of military dictatorship in Argentina, showing how the Roman Catholic Church was unable to unite in opposition against the military. Vrudny supports Cinalli's argument using liberation theologian William Cavanaugh's book Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ (Blackwell, 1998). As Cinalli shows in his paintings, Catholicism in Argentina failed to heal the divisions within Argentine society. Vrudny reflects deeply on this, and her essay is one of the book's best. It effectively demonstrates how visual theology can be a true example of art as expression of the Incarnate God.

The attitude the artist adopts due to ecological concerns is the key to the theological reflection presented in the third section, "Visual Theology and the