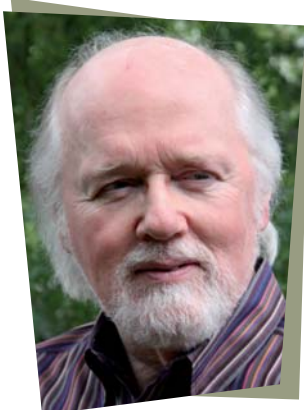


There has been a hushed silence on the subject of religion in twentieth century discourse on modern art. It was acceptable to reference religion as an adversary but not as a grounding influence and shaper of art. And yet there is a wealth of evidence regarding the religious and spiritual sensibilities of many artists who are familiar names in the household of modern art. Despite the inclination to overlook the religious in modern art – its presence was undeniable. Many major shows in the course of the twentieth century take note of the spiritual, going against the grain of standard art-critical discourse.

The *Mystical Landscapes* exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (October 22, 2016 to January 29, 2017) was inspired by the sense that spiritual longing – a mystical element – was present in the works of many celebrated artists at the end of the nineteenth century. The exhibition was shaped with the intent to articulate the deep way in which religious sensibilities permeated the inner lives and thought of the artists and found their way into the art they produced. It has been my privilege to serve on the advisory committee for this exhibition and it has been an enriching experience.



At the end of the nineteenth century there was a growing dissatisfaction with understanding the world in materialist terms alone. Such a view was judged a limited

vision, particularly by artists attuned to a reality beyond the merely physical. Cultural currents in the 1880s inspired artists to see the limitations of mere representation and the Renaissance approach to perspective.



Olive Trees, Vincent van Gogh, 1889

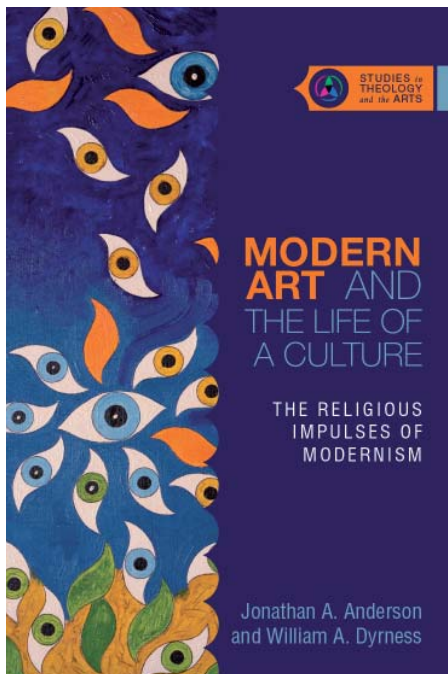
Among those cultural currents we find a turn to esoteric traditions that affirm the power of underlying forces that infuse the material plane. Theosophy (divine wisdom) was very influential among artists. It brought together Eastern and Western spiritual traditions contending that matter and spirit are vital elements of a boundless reality. Both the Russian abstract artist Kandinsky and the Canadian member of the Group of Seven, Lawren Harris were deeply influenced by Theosophy. There was also an increased interest in the “primitive” whether medieval expressions, distant indigenous communities, or ancient traditions such as Celtic culture. These were seen as resources both to inspire the artist and at the same time to resist the influences of a merely materialist account of reality.

The Symbolists (1880s) exemplify this turn to explore the metaphysical world – the

world beyond sense perception. The writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg championed a correspondence between these two worlds. The eye of the soul was directed not just toward nature but to discerning what it is that forms nature. Their understanding of ‘symbol’ was that the symbolic actually participates in what it expresses. In Christianity the cross doesn’t just point to something (a sign) but carries meaning (symbol) and participates in the reality it depicts.

Beyond these esoteric options others worked within the Catholic or Protestant tradition. In 1889 several artists in France formed a group called Les Nabis – from the Hebrew word for prophet. This group included Maurice Denis, Paul Serusier, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard. They devoted themselves to exploring and developing new forms of artistic expression that would

continued on page 4



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

Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness, Intervarsity Press 2016

The title of this new book may have a familiar ring. It echoes a well-known work from 1970, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* by the Dutch art historian Hans Rookmaaker. His book was welcomed as an effort to take art seriously and engage with it theologically. Rookmaaker saw the path of modern art as a downward journey toward nihilism, offering his conservative Christian audience a declinist version of modern art, evident from his title. This new book offer a measured and respectful disagreement with Rookmaaker, as they survey art of the same period as the earlier work, 1800 – 1970. In general these authors are seeking to employ a more “charitable hermeneutic” concerning modern art than that found in Rookmaaker. Chapter two is

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devoted to a careful analysis and critique of Rookmaaker’s earlier volume. It makes clear the significant shift in thinking about modern art that has taken place among those belonging in the same theological tent.

Those of theologically conservative persuasion have been inclined to be skeptical about modern art if not outright dismissive. It has been said that artists have a capacity to see what is coming in a culture and their work indicates the mood and values of society. So learning to read the art of our time provides a means to give insight about trends and values that may otherwise be missed. It may be music or poetry, drama or film, architecture or visual art, these human creations carry more than meets the eye.

Dyrness is a seasoned author whose has written widely on art and theology, while Anderson is a younger professor who is both an artist and an art critic. Together they take the reader on a journey that includes

France and Britain, Germany and Holland, Russia with its icons and Dada liturgies as well as North America and the influence of its Protestant heritage. The book is replete with familiar names in the world of the visual arts, but perhaps more importantly it provides theologically informed insights into their time and work. It celebrates human imagination and affirms what is held in common by all humanity – that extraordinary capacity to make art. It offers an informed and intelligent probing of the place that religion has had among the artists providing unexpected insights into art that has become familiar. It fills a gap left by the most of the purveyors of art history in the twentieth century. This work dismantles the us-and-them mindset and invites informed and thoughtful dialogue on a vital and deeply influential component of our culture. For anyone serious about art and serious about faith this is an important book.

Divine Darkness

Within the Christian tradition human longing for the divine presumes some sense of God as infinite perfectio, goodness, purity. These and other qualities of the divine unmask the truth of human corruption, our inclination to see ourselves as central and to sustain that centrality by employing all means of power and control. The desire to draw near to God poses a challenge to these distorting human inclinations.

The classic Christian apophatic tradition engages metaphors of suffering, absence, unknowing silence, desolation, darkness and loss. There is a thread of apophatic mysticism in which Christocentric devotional practice is the focus where identification with the suffering and abandonment of Christ serve to bring the devotee to a place of greater sanctity... The intentional effort to pare down egocentric activities of ordinary life involves discipline, struggle and suffering. It is a pathway into darkness and disorientation and away from the superficial luminosity of the senses. (from the *Mystical Landscapes* catalogue p.170)



Landscape, seascape: Vågen VIII (Wave VIII), August Strindberg, 1901



Paul Gauguin Vision After the Sermon – Jacob Wrestling with the Angel

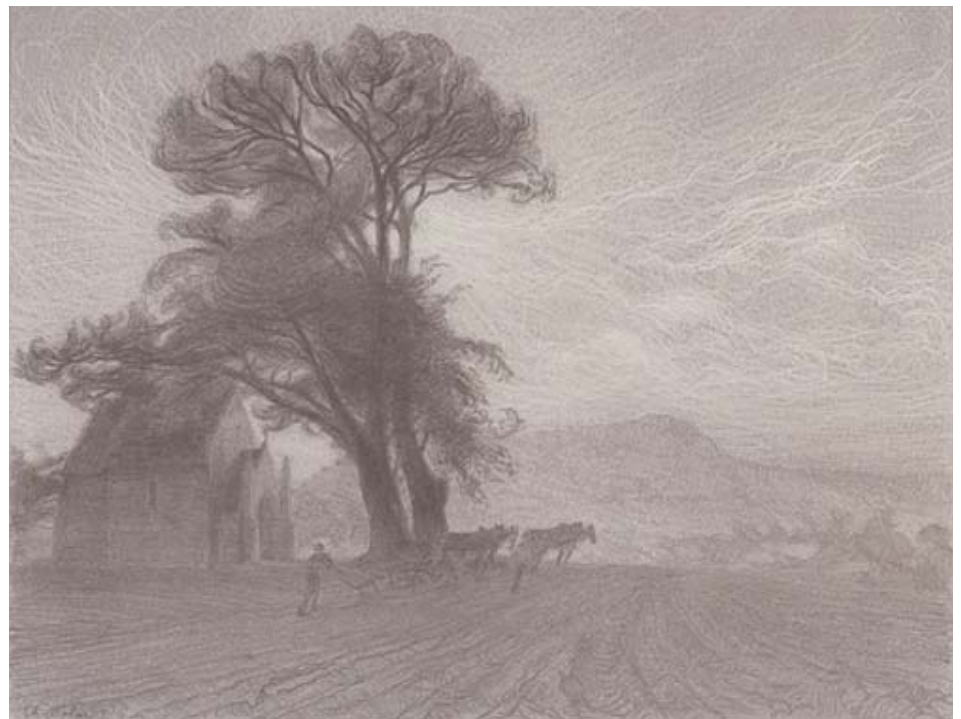
Painted in 1888, this work depicts a group of Breton Women praying after a sermon. The image is divided by a tree trunk setting apart the women from the rendering of the biblical story. At this time there was a religious revival among Catholics that included reports of apparitions. Gauguin who had Seminary training seems to affirm the power of the imagination in taking to heart the biblical narrative. The foreground is the natural world the background points to the supernatural. The strong colours in this painting suggest that the artist was personally moved by what he experienced while living in Pont-Aven.

Visio Divina

There is a long tradition in the history of the church which invites us to a careful and attentive reading of scripture. Heart and mind “listen” to the words and what they express. The practice is known as *lectio divina* – a divine reading that opens us to God. This is an ancient practice that has served well to assist in shaping the character and perspective of its practitioners.

If word can be engaged in this way what about image? One thinks immediately of the Eastern Orthodox tradition and the important place of icons. Like the readings these images are able to move our focus away from the transient and temporal and call us to attend to what is beyond. Pausing to engage with in image may bring some light into the shadowed places of ordinary life.

As part of the *Mystical Landscapes* show at the Art Gallery of Ontario a special room was set aside to display the work of a little known French artist Charles-Marie Dulac. Aware of his impending death through lead poisoning he chose to go to a Franciscan convent. His love of nature and his spiritual



sensitivity are expressed in a series of lithographs that engage with “Canticle of Creatures” by St. Francis. For Dulac nature is a holy place and the images invite the viewer to quiet contemplation. *Jesu Via et Vita Nostra Jesu...*

Mystical Landscapes

continued from page 1

serve to cast light on that reality which lay beneath ordinary perception. The heart of their intention as artists was to capture in image and colour a glimpse of the spiritual. Most in this group were of Catholic persuasion, particularly as found in the Catholic renewal movement in the arts in the 1890s. They were well aware of the importance of attending to human longing for spiritual meaning. Their art became a means to express that longing and open the way for mystical encounter.

The best known of Protestant artists of this time was Van Gogh. Having trained to become a minister and done missionary work he failed to meet the expectations of his denomination and his religious profession came to an end. But his religious sensibility and knowledge of the biblical story was etched into his heart and mind and shows up in his paintings. He once wrote to his brother Theo of his “profound need for, shall I say the word – religion – so I go outside at night to paint the stars.” And in his extraordinary painting *The Olive Trees*, (1889) one gets a strong sense of the dynamic energy of divine presence. This work alludes to the Garden of Gethsemane, though no figures are present in the painting. It is a compelling example of Van Gogh’s belief in the importance – perhaps the centrality of – emotion as essential for the artist’s work. True to the Protestant and Reformed theology of his upbringing he affirmed that God



Sky, Emily Carr, 1935

is active in the material world. Van Gogh is not interested to transcend material but to acknowledge the world of nature as a location to discern the divine presence.

The turn to abstraction can be seen as a further step away from mere representation and the effort to look to an inward landscape of the human soul. Wassily Kandinsky who launched abstract painting in the early 20th century also wrote a small book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910) in which he explores themes from theosophy. Along with other artists of this time he was fascinated with synesthesia. This refers to the drawing together of diverse artistic expression as when we ask about the colour of a note in music or the sound of the colour yellow.

I should mention here that the quest for the metaphysical – that probing of the threshold of human experience to discern what if anything is beyond was found among composers as well as visual artists. Claude Debussy (d. 1916) was part of the symbolist movement. Like the visual artists, he rejected the constraints of conventional ways of doing his art. His compositions brought to the ear shimmering sound that resonates with the paintings of Monet. Eric Satie (d. 1925) whose music captures something of the simplicity needed for spiritual life was influenced in part by his knowledge of Gregorian chant. And the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (d. 1915) was another artist for whom Theosophy had a shaping role and whose music is said to be capable of lifting the listener to a different world.

My purpose in this short space has been to sketch an account that supports the claim that art and the religious or art and the spiritual are not easily separated. They invariably show up together. Both art and the spiritual speak to the affective side of our humanity, bringing balance to our tendency to dwell on the conceptual and rational. Together they provide a more full orb ed account of human knowing.

It is at the heart of the work of Imago to affirm and clarify the close relationship between faith and art. This connection – long ignored – is being increasingly acknowledged in the mainstream culture while the church continues to show signs of greater openness and embrace of human creativity in its very diverse expression in the arts. Imago is committed to keeping the conversation going.

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Imago Hosts Private Viewing at the AGO

The *Mystical Landscapes* Exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario runs from October 22, 2016 to January 29, 2017. On Saturday November 5 Imago hosted over 300 guests to see this show of landscape paintings from 1880s to the 1930s. It captures in a fresh way the importance of religious belief and spiritual sensibilities in the shaping of the art work of this period.

We are grateful to Caritate Foundation for making this extraordinary opportunity possible.