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William A. Dyrness
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INTRODUCTION

The Medieval Context of the Reformation

It is hazardous to generalize about the contemporary art scene – that sprawling reality called the "art world." But even casual visitors to modern art museums and art fairs would come away with one overriding impression: no object in the world, nor any sector of human experience, is considered out of bounds or banned from possible aesthetic attention – even if no one is quite sure what is "aesthetic" about the work in question. Apart from the proliferation of media, one is struck with the endless vistas, materials, and experiences that "art" has come to embrace. One result of this promiscuous artistic attention is the equivocal status of images – what Harold Rosenberg has called the anxious object.[1] Increasingly, artists, even visual artist, are paying less attention to the objects they seek to portray or designate, and are seeking to draw viewers into the complex ecosystems in which these may (or may not) be glimpsed. But here too the very notion of art object or image is reconstituted and deployed in ever expanding aesthetic situations – whether in video, installations, performance art, or virtual reality. This dramatic expansion of aesthetic projects is taken for granted to such an extent that it is often overlooked.

But things have not always been this way. During the medieval period, for example, artisans who made what we call art objects were mostly restricted to particular motifs that served special religious purposes. Panel painters working in the thirteenth century would be amazed at the range of materials – and purposes – that today's paintings display, to say nothing of other kinds of objects – found and made – that are subject to artistic treatment and attention. Things began gradually to change in the fifteenth century, when motifs from the natural world found their way into paintings or manuscript

[1] Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience* (New York: Horizon Press, 1964).

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illuminations, and beautiful objects were crafted to serve non-religious purposes. But it was during the sixteenth century, in what we call the Renaissance and Reformation, when the world was opened up for scientific and artistic investigation. The transformation I have in mind is related but not identical to the change from image to art that Hans Belting pointed to a generation ago. He was concerned to trace the change from images treated as "persons" that were "worshipped, despised or carried" to their treatment as "art" that came to serve the very different purposes of aesthetic contemplation.[2] I am more concerned with the conditions that made such developments possible.

The focus of this book is not so much on the artistic object, though this cannot be ignored, as on the changing aesthetic situation in which artifacts were made and received. That change of aesthetic consideration in the emerging modern world leads one to ask: How did it come about that makers of artwork, including drama, music, and literature, turned their attention away from a rather narrow range of subject matter and began to examine the broader range of human experience? That surely changed the way we think about art, as Belting has argued, but more importantly it reflected a change in the way we have come to explore, investigate, and appreciate the details of the natural order. One result was that art was being liberated to explore the full breadth of the human and natural world.

This is my argument: during the 150 years from about 1530 to the late 1600s, the Protestant Reformation, and the Calvinist Reform in particular, encouraged the move to direct aesthetic attention, not toward the rituals and sacred objects of worship, but outward toward the life of what was already called the *theatrum mundi*. This expansion is closely related to the larger movement, sparked by the humanism of the Renaissance, to investigate and attend to all the details of the expanding world. To be clear I will not argue that the magisterial Reformers brought about the changes I will describe; rather, they reflect a process that went back to the thirteenth century, as I will show. But the Reformers, and Calvin in particular, definitively promoted these changes in such a way that they became normative for modern ways of conceiving art and aesthetics. It is this promotion and the resulting changes that I describe in what follows.

[2] *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art,* trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. xxi. He regrets the decision of art historians to declare all specially shaped objects "art," "thereby effacing the very differences that might have thrown light on our subject" (p. 9). These differences will move to the center of attention in this book.

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One of the achievements of Belting's important book is to alert students to the hazards of reading back into the early modern period ideas about art and aesthetics that are the product of succeeding centuries, and that even now are highly contested.[3] So it is important for me to detail the notion of aesthetics that I have in mind in formulating my argument. I have been especially helped by the attempts of Frank Burch Brown to move toward a more capacious notion of aesthetics – one that I would argue better suits the transformation of the aesthetic situation I have in mind and, as he shows, that is deeply related to human religious practices. He proposes we think about aesthetics as "All those things employing a medium in such a way that its perceptible form and 'felt' qualities become essential to what is appreciative and meaningful."[4] All those things employing a medium certainly makes possible the unlimited aesthetic and artistic potential to which I am calling attention, but it does something else: it highlights the attraction – the shock or delight – that this broad range of human experiences can spark. And while Brown's broadened definition has in view the manifold aesthetic objects and experiences on offer today, it suggests a particularly helpful way of framing the changes that led from a narrow focus on sacred objects and practices to a wider aesthetic attention to the whole world that I will describe. Calvin and his followers would certainly not have framed their project in the aesthetic terms I will use – though I will argue their language and impulse was aesthetic in terms they understood. Still their neglect of certain practices and their adoption of others opened the way for an understanding of aesthetics – occasions of delight and awe – that would later come to be described in this broadened way.

While attending to the world of art and artifact studied by art historians, the initial concern of this work is with changes in religious worship practices. This is important for a firm grasp of this period, not only because, during the sixteenth century, religious observance and attendance was required of everyone – at least in Geneva and England where this study concentrates, but also because it was in the experience of corporate worship that the emerging patterns of observation and interaction with the larger world were formed and developed. In these corporate practices – the hearing of sermons,

[3] The resistance I have in mind is best reflected in Nicholas Wolterstorff's recent book *Art Rethought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), where, contrary to modern notions of aesthetics as disinterested contemplation, he argues that art has always involved a wide range of social practices, which ought properly to be recognized and assessed.

[4] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 22. Though he does not comment on this, Brown may reflect here his own Protestant heritage.

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learning the catechism, corporate singing of hymns – were birthed the habits of thought and practice that eventuated in new ways of relating to the world. This angle of vision, I will argue, illumines subsequent artistic developments in ways that are often overlooked in traditional discussions of art history.

The focus on worship practices further highlights an important theological emphasis that motivates this study. Modern descriptions of sixteenth-century changes often frame moves that appear to direct attention away from God and worship and toward the larger world – in a Protestant focus, for example, on portraits and landscapes – as secular in intent. For example, in a contemporary exhibition of British paintings, Malcolm Warner explains the emerging choice of subject matter in this way: "Since the sixteenth century when the Protestant Reformation in Britain swept away religious images that were the mainstay of art in the Middle Ages, British art has been dominated by the secular genres of portraiture and landscape."[5] The argument I will make undercuts this tendency by pointing out the theological motivation for this enlarged aesthetic attention. It was the conviction of the major Reformers that God's presence was not limited to specific religious practices, but was evident in all the details of the natural order and, indeed, potentially in all that humans made of that created order. This is true even if, as I have noted, the Reformers did not single-handedly bring about this larger conception of the works and world of God. As Jeffrey Hamburger has noted, and as will be explored later, already in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries artists had rejected the notion that God's presence was limited to particular kinds of (sanctified and canonical) images as in the Eastern church. Art objects even then were becoming free to do multiple things and encourage multiple affective responses – even if these were still largely connected to devotional practices.[6] A similar expansion of possible responses can be shown in the period of my study.

While this period saw major cultural and political changes, I want to question the usual assumption that the Reformation caused a drastic cultural disruption. The received narrative goes something like this: whereas medieval worship involved participation in sacred practices and, in particular, a devotional gaze at sacred images, the Reformation focus on preaching and

[5] "Anglophilia into Art," in M. Warner and Robyn Aselson, eds., *Great British Paintings from American Collections: Holbein to Hockney* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 2.

[6] "The Place of Theology in Medieval Art History," in J. Hamburger and Anne Marie Bouché, eds., *The Mind's Eye: Art as Theological Argument in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 17.

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teaching led to a cognitive and confessional focus that was hostile to the imagination and the arts. This is not to say, at least at first glance, that there is no support for such views: Doesn't the Reformation represent a reduction of sacramentals, of places where believers can encounter God – no more altarpieces, saints' plays, devotional images, or pilgrimages – and therefore a consonant reduction of sites for spiritual seeing? Wasn't the focus now on preaching and teaching specific doctrines? Wouldn't this necessarily result in reduced attention to art and a growing cognitive focus?

But this book suggests the story may be told another way. While the images and artifacts of medieval worship were often abandoned, this was not true in all places touched by the Reformation, and in some cases the changes were not permanent. Moreover, even in places where they were discarded, they were soon replaced by other liturgical practices and associated artifacts – preaching, singing, communal prayers, and prayer books – reflecting an emerging Protestant view of God's relation to the world that carried deep implications for the role of sight and the senses.

The challenge I intend to mount suggests three qualifications to the received narrative. First, as will become clear, I do not intend to reinforce the common assumption that the Reformation simply replaced images with words, changing from a focus on what is seen to what is heard.[7] While language became increasingly central to the Reformation project, as I will show, this directed a new and broadened attention to what was both seen and heard. As a result, I will challenge Robert Scribner's claim that the Reformation replaced the medieval sacramental seeing with what he calls the "cold gaze"; a seeing that involved participation in the object was replaced by a cognitive seeing as understanding.[8] As I will argue in a later chapter, the new importance Luther and Calvin gave to language reflected broader cultural changes that these theologians made use of but did not initiate. Moreover, their attention to language and its aesthetic

[7] This assumption dates to an earlier generation of Reformation studies and can perhaps be traced to Walter Ong. See, for example, Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967). Even Belting is guilty of promoting this oversimplification when he reports that, at the Reformation, the word was assimilated by hearing and not by seeing. *Likeness and Presence*, p. 15. I have attempted, along with many others, to broaden the understanding of what was going on in Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[8] This conception of clarity of sight, Scribner thinks, illustrates contemporaneous developments in optics: sight was coming to be understood as seeing through a lens that made everything clear. "Popular Piety and Modes of Visual Perception," in *Religion and Culture in Germany 1400–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 120–125.

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(and rhetorical) uses did not predetermine how images and other cultural artifacts would be produced and evaluated.[9] My argument insists that the charge of Reformation logocentrism obscures the rhetorical situation that Calvin in particular intended to create and the change of dramatic focus that this implied, and indeed the enhanced role sight and senses came to play in this change. This will be argued in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

Second, I do not claim that the changes I describe simply reflect a parallel transformation of the focus from what is external – images, novenas, and pilgrimages – to what is inward – a faithful adherence to God's promises. This common view reflects the assumption that since the Reformers denied that God was accessible by way of these outward sacramental practices, believers turned inward to encounter the presence of God.[10] To insist on a growing inward orientation during the Reformation is not wrong, but it oversimplifies a complex reality. First, as I will show later in this chapter, the Reformation inherited a long-standing movement encouraging the inner life of prayer and meditation. Second, the inward focus of spirituality that became visible later, for example, in the stark inner orientation of John Donne's poetry or in the later Pietist movements, represented developments that *succeeded* the period of the Reformation even as they fed off the mystical traditions that preceded it. Thus it is important to carefully assess the role of the major Reformers in these developments. While Luther was deeply influenced by Rhenish mystics and his own monastic heritage,[11] Calvin had never been a monk. Though the struggle with the consciousness of sin was important for him, Calvin was famously hesitant to make use of the rich medieval mystical tradition, and he did not encourage the introspective obsession with evidences of election that came later to characterize this tradition.[12]

Third, I want to resist the common tendency to see iconoclasm as the guiding metaphor for the Reformers' understanding of cultural objects and

[9] On this subject, see Jérôme Cottin, *Le regard et la Parole: Une théologie protestante de l'image* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1994), especially chapters 11 and 12.

[10] An important exponent of this view is Edward Muir, who famously argued that during the medieval period, worshipers used their whole bodies in worship; during the Reformation this was restricted to the part above the neck. *Ritual in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 184. In my earlier work I was guilty of encouraging this simplified view that I have come to feel is mistaken. *Reformed Theology*, p. 304.

[11] See Rémi Vallejo, "Les visions de quelques mystiques rhénans: formes, functions, sens," lecture at the University of Strasbourg, Colloquium on the Reformation and the Arts, May 19, 2017.

[12] See Bruce Gordon, *John Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion": A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 27. Cf. François Wandel, *Calvin: The Origin and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1965), pp. 244, 277.

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practice. The tendency, for example, to contrast the richly furnished medieval cathedrals with bare whitewashed walls of Protestant worship spaces misreads the complexity of the cultural tensions and cross-currents. It is true that there was a deep-seated iconoclastic impulse behind the work of the major Reformers, but this did not focus directly on images, or even on art more generally, but rather on the entire medieval imaginative framework as they understood it. In fact, both Luther and Calvin, though for different reasons, were opposed to the destruction of images in the churches. And the most notorious episodes of iconoclasm mostly preceded the period of the Reformation, which is the center of my attention – beginning in 1530.[13] And for Calvin in particular the focus on what was lost, though not inconsequential, sometimes obscures the challenge he faced in forging new cultural initiatives. When he arrived in Geneva in 1536, as we will see, the Mass had already been abolished, images removed from churches, and so on; his challenge was not how to dismantle that world, but how to determine what should replace it.

These qualifications indicate our growing awareness of the political and cultural complexity that characterized this period and its early modern setting. This complexity suggests caution in making pronouncements about the fate of "art" during this period. While the major Reformers did focus their efforts on preaching, teaching, and writing (and printing) the Word of God, in Calvin's case this did not exclude a growing appreciation of the visible spectacle of the worship service and, indeed, the visible glory of the splendors of the created order. In the case of Luther, though stressing the importance of the external word, he gradually came to have a positive view of visual images as important vehicles for the address of God mediated in worship. Moreover, to understand these changes it is important to place them in the context of long-standing developments leading up the Reformation, which will be the focus in what follows in this chapter.

Medieval Context of Images and Sight

In resisting the easy assumption that the Protestant Reformation represents a sea change in views of art and culture, I want to show ways the Reformation

[13] Much iconoclastic practice predated the Reformation. Henri Naef, *Les Origines de la Réforme à Genève* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1968), vol. I, p. 276; and Mia Mochizuki has pointed to iconoclastic practices such as whitewashing church walls, long before the Reformation. Mia M. Mochizuki, *The Netherlandish Image after Iconoclasm: 1566–1672: Material Religion in the Dutch Golden Age* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 1–3.

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in some cases opposed medieval notions, in others developed them in characteristic ways. To prepare for making this case, in the remainder of this chapter, I will focus specifically on the evolving role that visual elements played in medieval devotion, and the gradually expanding range of objects this encompassed. I will begin with the famous instruction of Gregory the Great, and then reflect on the later practice of praying before icons in the Orthodox tradition, especially as this came to influence the use of images in medieval Europe, and, eventually, the developing liturgical notions in Protestant worship. I argue that, though the objects of aesthetic attention were in the process of drastic evolution, Protestant ideas of sight and seeing were as much a *development* of this Western tradition as a departure from it. Moreover, I believe, recalling ideas of prayer and worship involving icons and images provides a lens with which, mutatis mutandis, later Protestant practices can be more fruitfully understood and evaluated. Though the media of attention were altered – and broadened – the religious (and aesthetic) experience elicited was often comparable.

Images and Icons as a Way to God

It is customary to begin with Pope Gregory the Great's letter to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles in 600. Word had come to him that Serenus had destroyed pagan images in the ancient sanctuaries, and he felt this was mistaken:

> We commend you indeed for your zeal against anything made with hands being an object of adoration; but we signify to you that you ought not to have broken these images. For pictorial representation is made use of in Churches for this reason; that such as are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books. Your Fraternity therefore should have both preserved the images and prohibited the people from adoration of them, to the end that both those who are ignorant of letters might have wherewith to gather a knowledge of the history, and that the people might by no means sin by adoration of a pictorial representation.[14]

What is significant in Gregory's instruction is that "reading" the images, so far from promoting superstition as Calvin would later charge, provided the means of avoiding "sin by adoration of a pictorial representation" – that is, one *uses* images to understand and appropriate the history that is portrayed

[14] *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Scribners, 1900), vol. XII, p. 53, ii/xiii.

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there and respond in suitable ways. Gregory's pastoral concern motivated him to open the way for the many who could not read to appropriately reflect on the pathway to God. Gregory here provides an early template for the role that images (and relics) would play in moving one from physical sight to the contemplation of God. As Herbert Kessler notes of this period, "as a first step, by engaging physical sight, art might at least attract attention away from the mundane world and call attention to more elevated things."[15] That is, the image was to initiate a process, Kessler says, of linking and replacing one thing – the physical – with something better – the spiritual. Of course the physical image itself could lead believers astray, as Bishop Serenus feared, so it was itself involved in the spiritual struggle of medieval believers. But in their minds, there was no way of escaping the need for the mediation that images provided.

In the East, the focus of this mediation came to rest on the icon, especially the icon portrait, which provided the privileged means of lifting the mind. But in reflecting on Eastern conceptions of sight and seeing, it is important to remember that images were not meant to provide a mystical way to God that belittled the physical world or human sight. St. John of Damascus was emphatic that "the eloquent Gregory says that the mind which is determined to ignore corporeal things will find itself weakened and frustrated. Since the creation of the world the invisible things of God are clearly seen by means of images."[16] When we make an image of the God incarnate in Christ who converses with us, the Damascene believed, we are making an image of what can be seen, and, in so doing, he insists, we honor matter: "I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with his grace and power."[17] In this way physical seeing was not despised but enhanced, as the Damascene says, "leading us through matter to the invisible God."

The correspondence of the image to its prototype moreover involved an important likeness. This was not a physical likeness, of course, but a theological one, which Orthodox theologians insist could be traced back to the time of Christ's apostles. Each of the icons then provided a veridical window into the heavenly reality, indeed into the very reality of salvation as this was accomplished by the Incarnation and embodied in the liturgy.[18] In this

[15] "Turning a Blind Eye," in Hamburger and Bouché, eds., *The Mind's Eye,* p. 415. And for what follows, see p. 417.

[16] *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 2002), p. 11.

[17] *On the Divine Images*, p. 20. Following quote is at p. 67.

[18] Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky. *The Meaning of Icons*, ed. Urs Graf-Verlag, trans. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kabloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1982), pp. 27, 28. Icon painting corresponds "to what the Gospels preach and relate" (p. 30).

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process believers were lifted up beyond the physical, indeed, beyond time itself. As a modern scholar notes, the process of *lectio*, *meditation*, and *oratio* (reading, meditation, and prayer) before an icon, which lifts the soul to God, involves a suspension of time.[19]

Icons then represented a particular notion of "symbol" that is important to my argument. The images – of Christ Pantokrator or the Theotokos (Mary as God-bearer) – embody the "presence" of what is symbolized; the icons *stand in* for this presence. The seeing that was elicited was not merely didactic; it appealed, Paul Evdokimov claims, "to the contemplative faculty of the mind, to the real imagination, both evocative and invocative."[20] This surely would have included an aesthetic response to the beauty of the icon, but one that was deeply integrated with its spiritual purposes. This symbolism, and the incarnational theology that funded it, implied a broader conception of aesthetic and spiritual possibilities, even though this was undeveloped at the time.[21] The tradition was aware of the dangers of idolatry and carefully distinguished appropriate veneration from idolatrous adoration. As Ouspensky and Lossky note: "The icon is not a representation of the Deity, but an indication of the participation of a given person in the divine life." The goal of praying with these figures, they argue, is that worshippers become themselves an "icon" capable by word and deed of creating external icons, embodying this divine life in the world.[22] These portrait icons made the reality of the divine life present; they were the extension of the invisible "in the world of sight."[23]

Notice that though physical sight and material reality are not despised they are intentionally integrated into an ascetic and spiritual process. That is, one appropriates these media of the divine life in the process of linking and replacement involved in the journey toward God.

The Medieval Appropriation of Icons

As is well known, Byzantine portrait icons were foundational to the development of Western panel painting. As Italian painters took over these images

[19] Gregory Collins, *The Glenstal Book of Icons* (New York: Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 7.
[20] Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990), p. 167.
[21] Cf. Gregory Collins: "Iconography is a contemplative art. It opens up the possibility of a Christian aesthetic, a redeemed way of seeing and depicting the world." *The Glenstal Book*, p. 19.
[22] *The Meaning of Icons*, p. 36.
[23] Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting* (Abo: Akademi ABO, 1965), p. 40.

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