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The
**ARTISTIC
SPHERE**

**THE ARTS IN
NEO-CALVINIST
PERSPECTIVE**



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.



GENEVA'S ARTISTIC LEGACY: FROM CALVIN TO TODAY

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THE REFORMATION HAD AN IMPACT NOT ONLY on the faith and theology of its followers but also on how they viewed the visual arts. As with other Protestant traditions, Calvinism developed its own relationship to art. To narrow our focus, our topic here will be Calvinism and art in the Netherlands, with an occasional mention of artistic developments and artists in other Calvinist countries.

By giving a historical overview of Calvinism and art, this chapter serves as an introduction to the rest of the book and will touch briefly on topics amplified in other chapters.

CALVIN AND HIS FOLLOWERS

In his *Institutes*, Calvin writes, “I am not gripped by the superstition of thinking absolutely no images permissible, but because sculpture and painting are gifts of God, I seek a *pure and legitimate use* of each.”¹ This statement deals a square blow to all who think, many Calvinists included, that there is no place for visual art in the Reformed tradition. It makes clear that Calvin was not against the arts in general but that he was against those

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: Westminster, 1960), 1.11.12.

works of art that were *impure* on the one hand or *used in an improper way* on the other hand. He gave the following guidelines for what he considered “pure” art: submission to the Word of God, humility, sobriety and simplicity, faithfulness to the nature of things, skill, harmony, and moderation. That Calvin was positive about art in general should actually not surprise us, as his theology embraces all of creation as a good gift from God, including the gift of art.

What did Calvin consider to be an improper use of art? Critical of the devotional practices of his time, Calvin was wary of the danger of idolatry. He was against the veneration of images of Mary and the saints and the custom of praying before and through them. In order to prevent this, he not only advocated for the removal of these images from churches but also ordered that the doors of churches should be closed during weekdays. This is in line with his emphasis on the direct relationship humans can have with God. God is always with us; we can always communicate with him. We do not need to go to a church or stand before a statue in order to pray to him. We can and we should, according to Calvin, live our life of faith at home and in the world.

As to worship services, Calvin’s emphasis was on the preaching of the Word. He saw the presence of images as a distraction from the inward focus on the Word of God read, preached, and sung. Calvin’s theology also placed great emphasis on the Holy Spirit and his work in us during the church service. Five centuries later we may ask if images might not also help us to inwardly focus on God, but to Calvin images in churches fell in the category of improper use. However, it is not true that Calvin ordered the iconoclasm of his day. Rather, he wanted the magistrates to remove the paintings and sculptures in an orderly fashion.

Calvin also objected to images of God and Jesus. This sprung first of all from the second commandment and a fear of idolatry, but also from a concern that images of God and Jesus are bound to fall short of their majesty. Calvin said: “Surely there is nothing less fitting than to wish to reduce God who is immeasurable and incomprehensible to a five-foot measure!”²

²Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11.4.

To sum up Calvin's position, he cautioned that art should be used in the right way and that the art produced should be wholesome and pure. Granting this, he affirms and embraces the visual arts of his day: painting, sculpture, woodcuts, etchings, drawings, stained-glass windows, wood and stone reliefs, silver work, and scenes on tapestries.

As an example of the expanding Calvinist art production in the sixteenth century let us briefly consider a work by Gillis van Coninxloo. Born in Antwerp, after this city was reconquered by Spain in 1585, he fled to Frankenthal, a small Calvinist town near Heidelberg, Germany. This safe haven for many Calvinist artists became known for its tapestries and paintings of landscapes and, to a lesser extent, of biblical subjects. The Frankenthaler School, as this group of painters came to be called, made an important contribution to the development of landscape painting. Gillis van Coninxloo was the first painter who devoted himself to wood landscapes. Thus it comes as no surprise that in his *Elijah Fed by the Ravens* we see a combination of a large wood landscape and a small Elijah (fig. 1.1). Van Coninxloo moved to Amsterdam in 1595, as did many Calvinist painters who originally came from Flanders and France around this time. They were a major influence on the flowering cultural life of seventeenth-century Holland.



Figure 1.1. Gillis van Coninxloo, *Elijah Fed by the Ravens*, ca. 1590

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The seventeenth century in the Dutch Republic is usually referred to as the Dutch Golden Age. On the whole it was Calvinists who formed its trading, governing, and cultural elite. They lived in stately homes with rich interiors, in which art played a central role.³ The Dutch Protestants actually did not call themselves Calvinists, which had a negative ring to it, but *gereformeerden*. They were not afraid to display their wealth, as prosperity was commonly thought to be willed and given by God. A moderate use of what creation has to offer was not considered sinful. Even a strict preacher such as Willem Teellinck was positive about art: “We also have decorated our houses impeccably with paintings and figures . . . as none of us has said that making sculptures or paintings is wrong in itself.”⁴

This is remarkable, as it makes clear the distinct difference between the more art- and world-shunning Puritan culture of the English, Scottish, and Americans and the lifestyle of the Dutch. In the Netherlands, Puritans were read and valued for their teachings, but not for their behavioral dos and don'ts. Things that some *gereformeerden* considered worldly were the playing of cards, theater, dancing, and popular amusement—but not music (there was a lively culture of singing in the homes, usually accompanied by one or more instruments) and visual art. However, as to the latter it is possible to roughly distinguish between two streams: one that adhered strictly to Calvin's ideas about art and one that allowed itself more freedom. To the former belonged Jan Victors, a pupil of Rembrandt, in whose work no nudity or images of God, Christ, or angels were to be found. As to biblical works, he painted only Old Testament scenes.⁵

Jan Victors's painting *Abraham's Parting from the Family of Lot* depicts an Old Testament subject that has been portrayed by only a few others (fig. 1.2). After dissension arose between the shepherds of Abraham and Lot over inadequate pastures for both flocks, Abraham proposes here that Lot and he part ways, leaving the choice of direction to Lot. “Is not the whole land before you?” Abraham asks magnanimously. In Victors's

³Marianne Eekhout, *Werk, bid en bewonder. Een nieuwe kijk op kunst en calvinisme* (Walburg Pers/Dordrechts Museum, 2018), 9.

⁴Eekhout, *Werk*, 9. The quote dates from 1611.

⁵Eekhout, *Werk*, 70.



Figure 1.2. Jan Victors, *Abraham's Parting from the Family of Lot*, ca. 1655–1665

painting, Abraham bends toward Lot, longing to connect; he even seems to want to bless him. Lot (despite the quarrel between the servants in the background) is seated at the eating table with his family (not mentioned in the biblical text) but recoils, his hand on his stomach. His face speaks volumes. His wife behind him chuckles: what a fool is this Abraham. Lot chooses the “better” part and will end up in Sodom and Gomorra. As a paragon of faithfulness, the dog is located at Abraham’s side. This is how this work contrasts the greedy broad way with the generous narrow way as a warning for the viewer.

The most well-known Reformed painter of the Dutch Golden Age was Rembrandt van Rijn. He is especially known for his portraits, mythological works, and biblical paintings. These biblical works were not made for churches but for the homes of citizens. Rembrandt stands out because of the craftsmanship, originality, and psychological depth of his work.



Figure 1.3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Annunciation*, ca. 1635. See the more elaborate discussion of this work by Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker on the ArtWay website, www.artway.eu.

His drawing of the annunciation (ca. 1635) is dramatically different from the pious annunciation scenes we usually see with Mary and Gabriel reverently bowing toward each other (fig. 1.3). In Rembrandt’s rendering of the conception of Jesus, Mary actually faints and slides from her chair when this impressive angel suddenly fills the room where she has been quietly reading her Hebrew Bible. She is portrayed as a woman of real flesh and blood. She looks flushed, perhaps ashamed about the intimacy of what is happening to her, while her shadowed face may also

allude to the angel who “overshadowed” her. The angel looks at her full of concern, while extending his wing over her in a protective and blessing gesture.

Biblical scenes did not make up the principal part of the work produced by Reformed artists in seventeenth-century Holland, even though the genre of biblical history painting ranked highest in their regard. There were various other genres that gained prominence, such as portraits, landscapes, still lifes, church interiors, domestic scenes, and genre paintings. Portraits were sought after as people were viewed as made in the image of God, which meant that the individual increased in importance. Portraits furthermore tell the story of God’s grace and care for people, while they also functioned as examples of virtue.

Another genre that had slowly come to the fore in the sixteenth century and blossomed in the seventeenth century was the still life, in which the objects also tended to have symbolical meanings. By way of this symbolism they dealt with the rich beauty of creation, the vanity of life, the danger of temptation, and the reality of sin. In the painting *Bouquet with Crucifix and*

Shell (1640s) by Jan Davidsz. de Heem and Nicolaes van Veerendael (fig. 1.4), we see different flowers, various fruits, and a large shell. They speak of the beauty of nature. But some flowers are almost at their end, and we also see some dry and fallen leaves and thistles. This is how the picture points to the transience and shortness of life. The clock makes this even clearer. Included in the picture are also a pen with a feather (symbol of frivolity) and a piece of paper on which is written: “But the most beautiful flower people do neglect” (*Maer naer d’Allerschoonste*



Figure 1.4. Jan Davidsz. de Heem and Nicolaes van Veerendael, *Bouquet with Crucifix and Shell*, ca. 1640

Blom / daer en siet men niet naer om). This “flower” we see at the left: it is Christ on the cross, who came to redeem nature and life from their vanity. This picture is like a sermon that discusses creation, the fall, and redemption in one simple image.

Then there are the genre paintings that portray domestic scenes and other slices of human life. As they depict the folly of human life, they usually contain a satirical undertone and a moral message. This genre, which goes as far back as Hieronymous Bosch, was further developed by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and his contemporaries and was continued by artists of the seventeenth century as an apt way to speak about the pitfalls of human behavior. These popular works were meant for education and entertainment.

Another important seventeenth-century genre was landscape painting. In these works nature is the main subject, which according to Calvin can be seen as God’s second book of revelation and as a theater for the glory of God. These landscape paintings were not simple snapshots of actual



Figure 1.5. Jacob van Ruisdael, *View of Haarlem from the Dunes at Overveen*, ca. 1670

places, but all the elements in these works were chosen and interwoven with an eye to their meaning—a method John Walford calls “selective naturalism.”⁶ In Jacob van Ruisdael’s *View of Haarlem from the Dunes at Overveen* (ca. 1670), we look down from the dunes over the fields toward Haarlem with its churches in the distance (fig. 1.5). The land in the foreground was reclaimed from the sea after flooding, thus pointing to damage and danger. However, we see restoration in the human commercial activity

⁶E. John Walford, *Jacob Van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

of the bleaching of the linen now taking place on the land. The sky makes up two-thirds of the painting, with the spire of the St. Bavo Church connecting earth and heaven. Some of the sky is blue, some parts of it are filled with clouds, but Haarlem itself—which adopted Calvinism around 1580—is gently flooded with heavenly light. In this way the painting speaks about God's presence and providence.⁷

Even though Reformed church interiors largely resisted representations of biblical figures and histories, it is not true that these churches were bare or that there was no appreciation of beauty. Recent research has shown that Dutch church interiors were not as sober as commonly thought.⁸ The view we have of these interiors tends to be influenced by the austere picture the Dutch painter Pieter Saenredam painted of them, on the one hand, and by the whitewashed church walls of the nineteenth century, on the other. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, memorial boards hung against columns, along with decorated tombs, pulpits, and benches. The organ panels had paintings of biblical subjects, and coats of arms of magistrates and portraits of pastors adorned the walls. There were large illustrated (!) Bibles on lecterns, gilded chandeliers, delicately etched silverware for the Lord's Supper, and colorful stained-glass windows. There were wooden boards with beautiful calligraphy of, for instance, the Ten Commandments, which were accorded great significance for good conduct and were commonly read during the morning services.

We can conclude that the Calvinist artistic output of the seventeenth century reflects a rich and broad approach to life. It deals with the daily life of ordinary people, and it paints reality from a biblically informed worldview with a moral dimension. The goodness of creation, the brokenness and transience of life, our responsibility to live godly lives, and God's grace and providence are returning underlying themes. As to style, the Calvinist tendency is toward assimilation and adaptation rather than the development of a unique style of their own. Last but not least, it seems justified to say that the *gereformeerden* were characterized by a high visual literacy and a deep appreciation of skill and beauty.

⁷See the discussion of this work by James Romaine on ArtWay (www.artway.eu).

⁸Marijke Tolsma and Martin L. van Wijngaarden, eds., *Prachtig Protestant* (Zwolle, NL: Waanders, 2008).

THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

The seventeenth century drew to an end and with it its lavish art production. In the following century the cultural climate changed significantly, first due to economic stagnation and the decrease of the political importance of the Dutch Republic. Due to a waning of their wealth, its citizens were no longer able to fill their homes with works of art. It was also the age of the Enlightenment and the cultural dominance of the French, with its preference for the stylized beauty of Classicism on the one hand and the sentiment, soft colors, frivolity, and freedom from tradition of the Rococo on the other. Both these streams did not really fit the ethos and temperament of the *gereformeerden*, who lost their position as the social and cultural elite.

What Calvinist artists were active during this time? No well-known Reformed artist stands out in the eighteenth century. Recently I discovered two eighteenth-century paintings with Old Testament scenes in the old church of Wijk bij Duurstede, maker unknown. I suspect that there are more works like this, in other words that the production of art continued—though definitely reduced—by artists who now needed to struggle to survive. The truth is that this era of Protestant art still needs to be researched.

The same can be said about the nineteenth century, though to a lesser degree. We can, however, name a few Dutch artists of Calvinist leaning, such as Cornelis Kruseman, Ary Scheffer, Johannes Bosboom, and Vincent van Gogh.⁹ This makes clear that among the mainstream of the Reformed—now called *hervormd*—there was at least some interest in art. This was less the case among the generally less well-off *kleine luyden* (little people) of the *gereformeerde* churches that in 1834 and 1886 split off from the more liberal mother church. It would seem that, especially through a lack of financial means (and not through any change in theology or teaching), the *gereformeerden* in the Netherlands lost their appreciation of art. Art—and their former rich visual culture—just bit by bit faded from their view.

Johannes (or Johan) Bosboom (1817–1891) specialized in church interiors, with seventeenth-century painter Emmanuel de Witte as his great example. In 1851 he married Truitje Toussaint, a well-known writer of historical novels

⁹See Eekhout, *Werk*, 98.



Figure 1.6. Johannes Bosboom, *St. Andreaskerk or Grote Kerk in Hattem*, 1860

who worked in the same Calvinist spirit as her husband. Besides oil paintings, he also made watercolors and sepia drawings of churches, often producing several versions of the same church. Here we see one of the paintings he did of the Andreaskerk in Hattem (fig. 1.6). It depicts the moment the afternoon service is about to begin, with the precentor just announcing the first psalm. You would think that Bosboom painted the scene as he saw it, but he actually



Figure 1.7. Eugène Burnand, *Peter and John Running to the Tomb*, 1898

rendered the people in seventeenth-century clothing and included several architectural and decorative elements that were no longer present in his time, such as the gothic tracery of the windows and the memorial plaques. Yet he did opt for the typically nineteenth-century whitewashed walls, which had previously been adorned with colorful medieval murals. In short, he was not interested in historical correctness, but rather in a seventeenth-century-like impression of the church interior that resembled his beloved models.

A Swiss Calvinist artist at this time was Eugène Burnand (1850–1921), who came from Moudon (close to Lausanne) but spent part of his life in Paris and elsewhere in France. He painted Swiss domestic scenes and landscapes but also illustrated a book about the parables and made biblical works, such as his famous *Peter and John Running to the Tomb* (fig. 1.7). In it we see the emotions of these two disciples powerfully portrayed: Peter aware of his guilt of his recent betrayal of Jesus and afraid to face him; John full of longing, but also so afraid that the tale of Jesus’ resurrection may not be true after all.¹⁰

¹⁰See the discussion of this work by William Edgar on the ArtWay website (www.artway.eu).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a Calvinist artist of major importance was Vincent van Gogh. His father was a *hervormd* pastor and was part of a group of theologians called the Groninger School, which wanted to avoid any dogmatism and emphasized an inner surrender to Christ and a life of service to others. Thomas à Kempis and John Bunyan were widely read in this circle. Especially *The Imitation of Christ* and the radically committed lifestyle it advocates had a great influence on van Gogh with his intense personality.

Van Gogh painted landscapes, portraits, still lifes, domestic scenes, and biblical subjects, all of which we may recognize as closely connected to his Calvinist faith. He struggled to find ways to depict the world as God's creation and to show God's presence in all of reality. The naturalism and impressionism of his time, with their surface rendering of reality, made it necessary for van Gogh to look for new ways to represent meaning. In a letter to his brother Theo he says, "I would like to paint men or women with that indefinable something of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations."¹¹

To capture this presence and meaning, van Gogh's work became increasingly energetic and expressionistic. About van Gogh's faith, Jeff Fountain writes, "Critics traditionally have assumed van Gogh's disappointments with the church led him to break with institutional Christianity and to seek the divine in nature. Yet his own writings to Theo and his paintings of his latter phase bear witness to his preoccupation to the end with the person of Christ." For instance, in 1888, van Gogh said about Christ that "he lived serenely, as a greater artist than all other artists, despising marble and clay as well as color, working in living flesh. That is to say, this matchless artist, hardly to be conceived of by the obtuse instrument of our modern, nervous, stupefied brains, made neither statues nor pictures nor books; he loudly proclaimed that he made living men, immortals."¹²

¹¹Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, September 3, 1888, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let673/letter.html> and in Vincent Van Gogh, *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, rev. ed., ed. Ronald de Leeuw, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Penguin Classics, 1998).

¹²Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, June 23, 1888, in Van Gogh, *Letters of Vincent van Gogh*.

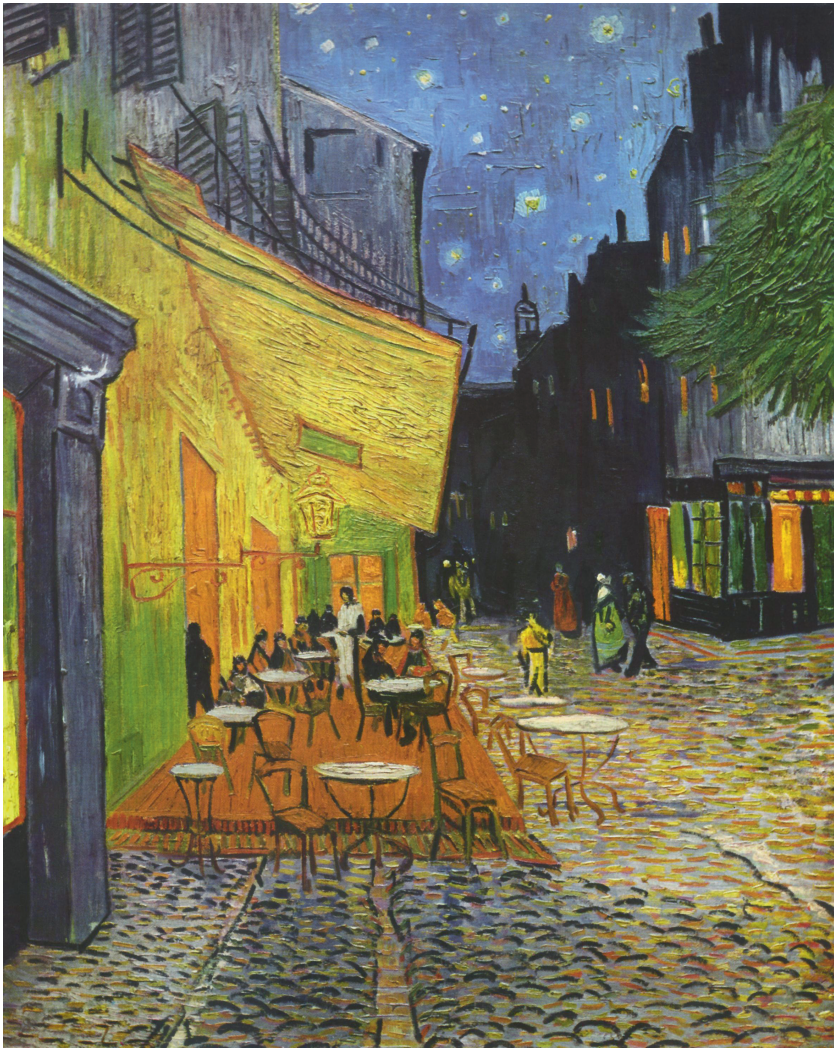


Figure 1.8. Vincent van Gogh, *Café Terrace at Night*, 1888. See Jeff Fountain's discussion of this work on the ArtWay website, www.artway.eu.

Recent research by independent researcher Jared Baxter, endorsed by various van Gogh scholars, declared *Café Terrace at Night* (fig. 1.8) “to depict the Last Supper, complete with a shadowy Judas slipping out the door, a central Jesus-figure with a cross behind him, and the remaining disciples seated at the tables. The whole scene is bathed in a golden-yellow

hue, van Gogh's typical allusion to the divine. Writing to Theo about this work Vincent said he felt a 'tremendous need for, shall I say the word—religion.’¹³

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY—THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, AND ART HISTORY

In the twentieth century the gap between the Christian community and the secular world of art became even wider, as avant-garde artists made work that was further and further removed in spirit from a Christian view of life. Yet there were also various theologians, philosophers, and art historians who emphasized once again the importance of art within a Christian framework.

In the Netherlands the first person since Calvin to point to the significance of art was Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), who was a theologian and pastor, prime minister, leader of a political party, founder of a Christian university and editor-in-chief of a Christian newspaper. His impact on the Dutch Calvinist world was immense. He called himself a Neo-Calvinist, as he went back to Calvin and applied his thinking to his own time. Many know his famous quote, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”¹⁴ This also had its consequences for how he approached and appreciated art. One of his famous *Lectures on Calvinism* dealt with the visual arts. He also wrote a book on liturgy. He said, “The church is not hostile towards visual art, provided that it does not act as ruler and the outward beauty does not drive back the inner beauty.”¹⁵ He was a champion of good Christian art in all its breadth and even promoted murals and stained-glass windows in churches.

Kuyper's ideas were extrapolated into a philosophical system by Herman Dooyeweerd, in which art and the aesthetic were included as one of the

¹³Letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, on or about 29 September 1888, in *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. See also the discussion of this painting by Jeff Fountain on ArtWay, <https://artway.eu/content.php?id=2420&lang=en&action=show>.

¹⁴Quote from Kuyper's inaugural address at the dedication of the Free University. Found in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

¹⁵Harry Boonstra, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: Our Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

fifteen spheres of the created order. Hans Rookmaaker, a pupil of Dooyeweerd, became an art historian, while another of his pupils, Calvin Seerveld, specialized in the field of aesthetics. They both had pupils of their own: John Walford and James Romaine, for instance, follow in the footsteps of Rookmaaker, while Lambert Zuidervaart and Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin build on Seerveld's work. American Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff also devoted a good share of his attention to the visual arts. In the Netherlands the art historian Willem Meijer also belonged to the Neo-Calvinist tradition.

These scholars did and do provide the conceptual framework for a tenaciously slow opening of the orthodox Protestant and evangelical world to the visual arts. Indeed, this process is still far from completed yet is definitely underway. These days there are many Reformed artists across the world making art for our homes and schools, for the public buildings and squares of our cities, for local galleries, and—when they are given the opportunity—for the more prestigious galleries and museums in the major cities of the world. In addition to this, many Protestant churches and—to a lesser degree—evangelical congregations have opened their doors to the visual arts and are developing an eye for the importance of beauty in the places where they worship.

Because this Neo-Calvinist line of reflection on the arts is only half the story of art in the Protestant world in the twentieth century, mention should also be made of Dutch Reformed theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw and German Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, who each developed their own ideas about the visual arts. Tillich and van der Leeuw have impacted the more liberal Protestant churches. Tillich's influence is especially evident even today in various European countries and North America, while van der Leeuw's influence was limited to the Netherlands. Over the course of time, his followers incorporated Tillich's ideas.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965) contended that religion is not about a higher reality but instead deals with the meaning dimension of our own reality. Religion is not about God as object beside or above other objects, but about manifestations of the divine in and through all things. Hence religious art is not art that deals with a supernatural reality but art that deals with the search for and the experience of a deeper dimension of meaning in life. According

to Tillich, art should deal with existential questions; when it does so, art and religion are closely linked.

Gerardus van der Leeuw's (1890–1950) main undertaking was to clarify the relationship between art and religion. For him, art and religion are not the same; while religion deals with the holy and art with the beautiful, what is holy is more than what is beautiful.¹⁶ He was concerned that the autonomous art of his time no longer had a need for religious subjects and that because of this art and religion had come to stand opposite each other as two hostile forces. It was this gap that he sought to bridge. His conclusion was that art should not be totally autonomous, but that real art should serve God and a higher reality.

Both these theologians were trying to formulate a response to an increasingly secular and autonomous art world. Van der Leeuw's work and the van der Leeuw Foundation, which his pupils founded in 1954, did much to introduce art into the mainline Reformed churches in the period of reconstruction with its many newly built churches after World War II. This new church art (murals, windows, sculptures, liturgical weavings, etc.) followed the modern idioms of the day, so that in its time this type of art was truly revolutionary. Indeed, I would call this period of introduction of art into mainline Calvinist churches a silent revolution, as what happened was totally new and unheard of in the history of Dutch Calvinism. In the 1940s to 1960s at least a part of this art was made by artists of faith, while increasingly non-Christian artists were involved in these projects.



Figure 1.9. Jacques Frenken, *Crucifix/Target*, 1965–1966

¹⁶Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1963).

The followers of Paul Tillich had an even greater preference for the work of non-believing artists, as they stressed that art should ask questions and shock people out of their traditional beliefs. In the Netherlands these ideas were propagated by theologian Regnerus Steensma.¹⁷ It led to the incorporation in church services of works like *Crucifix/Target* by Jacques Frenken (fig. 1.9).¹⁸

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY—ARTISTS

Roeland Koning (1898–1985) was one of the few Dutch Calvinist artists of the first half of the twentieth century. He studied art against his father’s wishes. Koning did not want to paint “sweet Christian pictures” but rather wanted to capture the essence of his subjects, whether a portrait (“as human



Figure 1.10. Roeland Koning, *The Wives of Fishermen from Egmond*, ca. 1927. See a discussion of Roeland Koning by Rob den Boer and a meditation on this work by José Verheule on the ArtWay website, www.artway.eu.

¹⁷Regnerus Steensma, *In de Spiegel van het beeld—kerk en moderne kunst* (Baarn, NL: Ten Have, 1987).

¹⁸See Regn. Steensma, ed., *Jezus is boos. Het beeld van Christus in de hedendaagse kunst* (Zoetermeer, NL: Boekencentrum, 1995), 84–85.

beings are the crown of creation”), a landscape, flower painting (“as a way to listen to God’s voice in nature”), a still life, or biblical work. His painting of the crucifixion (1930) showed the crucifixion scene in all its raw reality. He also made a few works for churches. He won several prizes and awards, was a member of three renowned artist societies, and had exhibitions in various major Dutch museums.

From 1924 to 1927 he lived in Egmond aan Zee, a poor fishing town. There he painted the three women shown here (fig. 1.10). Recent research has discovered who these women are, uncovering bits of their hard lives, in which several of their children died young or at sea and they often had to cope by themselves when the men were out fishing. Koning portrayed them lovingly, with attention to the details of their costumes, caps, and jewels. How well he managed to capture their characters, their tested faith, inner strength, and quiet resignation.

Berend Hendriks (1918–1997) was one of the artists who actively participated in the church-building boom after World War II. Born into a Reformed



Figure 1.11. Berend Hendriks, Bergkerk, The Hague, 1964

horticultural family, he opted for art as his profession and still desired to serve his family background with his art. He studied at the prestigious Rijksacademie (National Academy) in Amsterdam, where Heinrich Campendonk was one of his teachers. He became a versatile artist who made paintings, murals, mosaics (especially with bricks), sculptures, and ceramics, and designed tapestries and windows (especially glass-in-concrete and glass appliqué). His abstract and semi-abstract works in these media found their way into a good number of newly built churches of modern architectural design.

About abstraction, Joost de Wal points out that it

better matched the contemporary view of church and faith, which put a greater emphasis on the general and existential . . . than on the particular and distinguishing. Abstraction was “neutral” and meditative, a play of form and light that brought the holy closer without interference of figuration and traditional symbolism. Abstract art, moreover, was visual without being “image.” Hendriks saw abstraction as the solution to the disintegration of a collective faith and the increase of individual convictions; via abstract art he could again unify all interpretations.¹⁹

As an example of this, his glass panels on the wall behind the pulpit in the Bergkerk (1965, originally Opstandingskerk) in The Hague (fig. 1.11) express a reality that is meaningful to all believers: “I wanted to indicate some lines from above to below and from below to above, from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven.”²⁰ In its non-specified expression, the wall “will always reinforce the sermon and it will permanently point to the resurrection without being explicit.”²¹ Together with the windows in the two side walls, these glass bars are also about the Israelites’ journey through the desert, with the horizontal panels at the sides depicting the people moving forward and the vertical ones at the front picturing God’s presence in the column of fire.

¹⁹Joost de Wal, “Voorbij inktmop en verfspat. Nederlandse abstracte kunst en christelijke thema’s: nieuwe beelden voor Avondmaal, kruisiging en opstanding,” in Verdult Ph., ed., *God en kunst. Verdwijnen en verschijnen van het religieuze in de kunst* (Tielt, NL: Lannoo, 2009), 156-57.

²⁰Regenerus Steensma, “Beeldende kunst na 1945. Theologische bezinning op het beeld,” in *Honderdvijftig jaar gereformeerde kerkbouw*, ed. Regnerus Steensma and C. A. van Swigchem (Kampen, NL: Kok, 1986), 223.

²¹De Wal, “Voorbij inktmop en verfspat,” 156-57.

The art of the 1960s to 1980s by Dutch orthodox Reformed artists was almost all figurative; it consisted of landscapes, portraits, still-life paintings, and church interiors. It was figurative art in a time in which abstract art was fiercely dominant. Against the tide of the art world, these artists persisted in making reality- and creation-affirming art.

Henk Helmantel (b. 1945) became the most well-known of these artists.²² He mainly makes still-life paintings and church interiors (fig. 1.12). Over the course of the years, he has become one of Holland's bestselling artists, and in 2008 he was even elected artist of the year in the Netherlands. Even though his technique leans heavily on that of his seventeenth-century predecessors, his work has a contemporary feel to it. Although differing from his old models in a lack of symbolism, his paintings are serene and very beautiful.

Around the 1990s the art world became increasingly pluralistic and diverse. As in other areas of Western culture, the big stories of the various



Figure 1.12. Henk Helmantel, *Still Life with Large Rummer and Quinces*, 2015

²²Diederik Kraaijpoel and Hans van Seventer, *Henk Helmantel* (Aduard, NL: Art Revisited, 2000).

-isms—such as abstract expressionism and minimalism—lost their credibility, and a much more relativistic and tolerant art climate emerged. Figurative art became accepted again as one possible style among many others.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In today's art many styles, media, materials, and worldviews exist side by side. Contemporary art consists of installations, performance art, multimedia art, photography, video art, and computer art, besides old media, such as painting and sculpture. Contemporary works can be figurative, abstract, or conceptual.

As a start, let me mention three Reformed artists who make outstanding work in the figurative arena today. American artist Catherine Prescott (b. 1944) specializes in portraits and depictions of people. She does not just paint good likenesses of people but uses the tools of her craft with great purposefulness to bring out the character and emotional state of her sub-



Figure 1.13. Catherine Prescott, *Daphne Holding her Neck*, 2015

jects. She does not idealize the people she paints. She makes their portraits intensely human and shows their struggles and vulnerability, but in a loving way (fig. 1.13). Her husband Theodore Prescott, also an artist, says this about her work: “The result is the uncanny sense that she has not only recorded how someone looks, but that she seems to know who they really are. In these paintings she separates portraiture from the common accusation that it necessarily flatters its subject and obscures true character.”²³

In the 1990s orthodox Reformed artists started to open themselves to religious subjects. This was the case in the Netherlands and the United States, but probably in other countries as well.

²³Theodore Prescott, “Catherine Prescott: Three Portraits,” <https://artway.eu/content.php?id=1973&lang=en&action=show>.

Before this their output had by and large limited itself to landscapes, portraits, and still-life paintings. Probably this was due to the Calvinist emphasis on the importance of all of life, the absence of church art, and the huge challenge of presenting religious and biblical subjects in a fresh and contemporary manner.

One artist whose work covers a broad array of themes (from landscapes and still-life paintings to social, religious, and biblical themes) is South African artist Zak Benjamin (b. 1951). His painting *Christ and Consumerism* (fig. 1.14) shows his originality in tackling religious themes. In it we see something that is a cross between an opened box of blocks and a computer. The blocks represent the building blocks of our lives or the keys that we hit again and again on our life's computer: a nice car, a big house, food, drink, relaxation, entertainment,



Figure 1.14. Zak Benjamin, *Christ and Consumerism*, 1999



Figure 1.15. Egbert Modderman, *Father and Son*, 2016

travel, television, and so on. They denote longings. The two burning candles beside the box stand for the religious and idolatrous quality of these building blocks. Yet, whatever key we hit, Jesus keeps on showing up on our screen, as he is the real fulfillment of all our longings. The screen cannot even contain him; he is much bigger than what we think we need.

In 2016 young Dutch artist Egbert Modderman (b. 1989) had his first solo exposition titled “The Beauty of Religion” in the Martinikerk in Groningen. Right away he sold all the twelve large, exhibited works, most of

them with biblical themes. He comments: “These Bible stories describe human nature in all its simplicity, complexity and drama. I attempt to portray these human emotions in my work. My style can be described as figurative with a dramatic and religious flair.” His painting *Father and Son* (fig. 1.15) deals with the story of the prodigal son, but instead of focusing on the father and the younger son—as is traditionally done—he portrays the father with the older son. We see this son taking care of his father, but while he is undeniably the “good” and responsible child, he looks the other way, showing that his head and heart are not really in it. The father on the other hand is all kindness, almost like an old fool extending his open hand to the younger son, to all of us. Though the black mantle of the son is contrasted with the white robe of the father, the collar of his shirt—a touch of grace—is white.

ABSTRACT ART

In the era of modern art, it was theoretically infused art movements such as cubism, De Stijl, constructivism, suprematism, abstract expressionism, and

minimalism that shaped the development and character of abstract art. Nowadays, abstraction has largely left this theoretical baggage behind and has become just another type of visual language. Just like abstract thinking, abstract art looks at reality from a distance so that it gets a better overview. It wants to get at the essence of things and leave out the particulars. Its aim is to capture basic processes and experiences that are applicable to various concrete situations—not a painting of one happy child, for instance, but a painting of the dynamics of happiness in general; not a portrayal of Jesus' resurrection, but of that which is characteristic of resurrection and new life. Through color, contrast, light and dark, lines, forms, and the title of the work, we as viewers can make all kinds of associations with various areas of reality. This means that abstraction is a visual language just like figuration and that it communicates to us, only in another way.

However, not all abstract art is directed toward representation. Sometimes it just wants to bring some color and beauty to a place while being mostly decorative or just wants to be a study in form or paint. Or it is out to create an atmosphere of serenity and peace. This is often the case with abstract art in churches.

Dutch artist Martijn Duifhuizen (b. 1976) likes to quote Mark Rothko: "There is more power in telling little than in telling all." In *Last Supper* (fig. 1.16), a minimalistic work from 2012, he has reduced the scene of the Last Supper to its essence. Here we see thirteen similar quadrangles; eleven are black with a thin golden rim, one is totally golden, and one is totally black. In this way Duifhuizen portrays divine and human nature. Jesus' rectangle is golden, while those of the disciples are black. Thanks to Christ

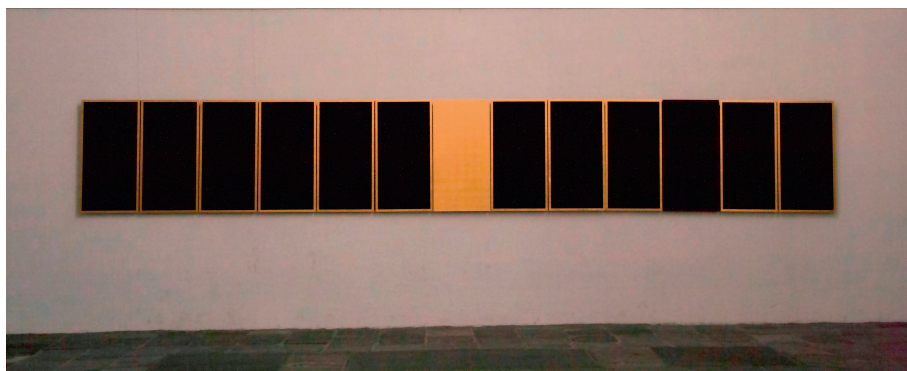


Figure 1.16. Martijn Duifhuizen, *The Last Supper*, 2012

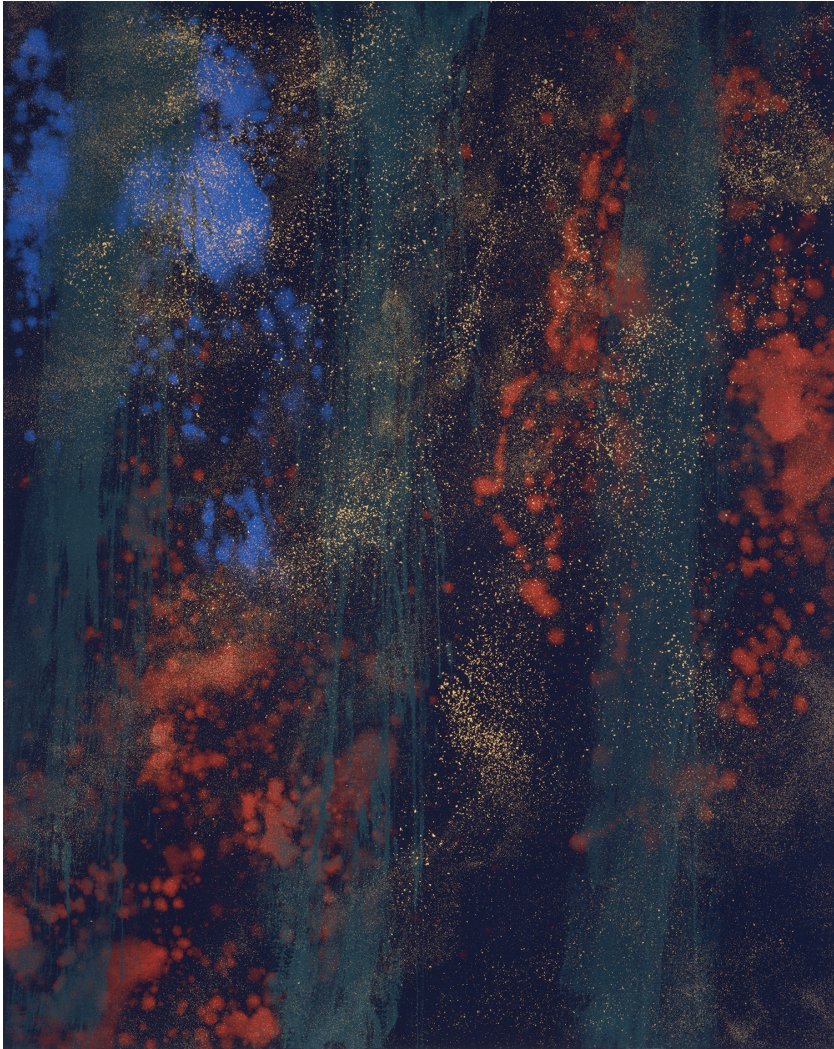


Figure 1.17. Makoto Fujimura, *John—In the Beginning*, 2011

eleven have a golden rim, while Judas’ rectangle is completely black “as Satan entered into him” (Jn 13:27). The artist remarks that the black is also meant meditatively: “Just as you become quiet when you enter a dark church, as if you enter a different frequency.”

Presbyterian Makoto Fujimura’s abstract and semi-abstract works have received wide recognition. Fujimura (b. 1960) is an American artist, born in

Boston to Japanese parents. As a student he acquainted himself with the ancient tradition of Nihonga painting in Japan. Besides an artist, he is also a writer, speaker, and cultural advocate.

John—In the Beginning (fig. 1.17) is part of a series of paintings commissioned by Crossway Publishing for an edition of the Gospels commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. The painting shown here is the frontispiece of John's Gospel. Just like the first chapter of the Gospel of John, it deals with the origin of creation. We see splashes of bright red and blue and swarms of golden particles against a black background: glorious color, light and life overtaking the black void. We also see three green vertical lines, pointing to creation as a joint act by the three persons of the Trinity. As such, this painting is a representation of the mystery of creation.

CONCEPTUAL ART

Conceptual art started around 1960. It is a form of art in which intellectual and theoretical ideas tend to be more important than material considerations, including beauty. Conceptual artists begin with a concept for which they seek an adequate visual representation. To do so they move beyond the traditional borders of art and incorporate all conceivable materials, media, and objects: from found and made objects, paintings, photos, sculptures, texts and textile to sound, performance, and video. Conceptual works have addressed a varied array of themes: from social and political criticism to ideas about culture, nature, perception, reality, humanity, relationships, identity, suppression, and religious themes. They sometimes let us experience something. They can, for instance, create spaces that we can move around or lie down in, or they can have an interactive side by offering the viewer the opportunity to perform certain acts. They intend to offer us new insights and to renew our thinking. These works *can* be plainly obscure, but by now there are plenty of examples of installations that have appealed to a broad audience. The ones that do tend to be the ones that are carefully crafted and have beauty. Calvinist artists have also embraced this type of art. They have tied in with the reflective, critical, interactive, and socially minded sides of conceptual art in a way that is meaningful and enriching.



Figure 1.18. Margje Schuurman, *At the Other Side of the Door*, 2011

At the Other Side of the Door (fig. 1.18) for an exhibition in and around the buildings of the faculty of behavioral and social sciences of the University of Groningen. This work was placed in the Hortus, an old university garden designed to show the wonders of the world. The cut-out door suggests there is another world we can step into (literally in this case), like when we move into a new home, in a different country perhaps. The work may also refer to death or to a spiritual reality that is only a passage through a thin door away from us. Light is suggestively coming through the trees behind the door, while shadows darken the front—but another time of day and different weather will evoke another set of associations. The work makes me think of C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It seems to be a child, after all, who is passing through the door. If you look carefully, however, the child may not be moving away from us but coming toward us. From this other reality someone is coming toward us! And the door is a person! This well-constructed work gives the attentive passer-by plenty to ponder.

Hans Thomann (b. 1957) is a Swiss artist whose sculptures and installations focus on the human figure and current concepts and ideals of humanity. His works ask questions about what it is that moves people today and where they are headed. He exhibits regularly inside and outside his country and he also makes works for churches, both Protestant and Catholic.



Figure 1.19. Hans Thomann, *Aureole* (*Heiligenschein*), 2011

Thomann employs all kinds of materials and uses all kinds of modern techniques. He selects his materials for their meaning. In *Aureole* (fig. 1.19), for instance, the artist contrasts the rods of rebar steel of the human figure with wooden firework sticks. One material is nearly indestructible, and the

other will go up in flames in no time. The firework sticks radiate from this person's heart in all directions, forming an impressive aureole. Yet all they may do is shoot into the sky for all to see, produce a big bang, burst into a moment of dazzling light and evaporate. All that remains is a trail of smoke, and then nothing is left. It reminds me of the vanity theme of the book of Ecclesiastes. So much of our striving for riches, success, and approval is chasing after wind. But this white solid figure can also choose a humble life in contentment with God and devote himself to acts that “strengthen the things that remain.”²⁴

EPILOGUE

We have seen that throughout its history Calvinist art in the Netherlands and elsewhere has had its ups and downs. First there was a period of great flowering, especially in the Netherlands. This was followed by a period of increasing artistic poverty and lack of interest in art. In the twentieth century we saw a slow re-acceptance of the visual arts, which is now developing into what could become a new phase of flowering. It is certainly justified to say the latter when we look at the number of Protestant professional artists who are active at this moment.

Another development we have observed is the introduction of art in Reformed churches. To me this is a justified correction of Calvin's view of art in the church. There is no reason why images cannot be as beneficial to worshipers as words. Word and image each have their own way of speaking to us and therefore can complement each other.

When we look at the present art world, we see that it is not without its problems and that for young Christian artists especially it is not easy to find their way. Yet it is much easier than fifty years ago, as there is more freedom in the pluralistic art climate of today. Artists can look for their own voice and be accepted. When the quality and appeal of their work is high enough, they will even be appreciated by the art world, as the favorable reception of artists of faith in various countries show: Henk Helmantel and Marc Mulders in the Netherlands, Hans Thomann in Switzerland, Roger Wagner in the UK, David Robinson in Canada, and Makoto Fujimura in the United States.

²⁴A quote from Bob Dylan's song “When You Gonna Wake Up?,” *Slow Train Coming*, 1979, www.bobdylan.com/songs/when-you-gonna-wake/.

Artists can embrace what is good in today's art world and try to avoid its shadows. To my mind the greatest problem is that art is put on a pedestal and that, in order to meet this high calling, it has become esoteric and incomprehensible to most people. Hence the great challenge put before us—artists but also curators, museums, galleries, art critics, art educators, art websites, magazines, art organizations, and churches—is to bridge various gaps: between the art world and the public, between the Christian art world and the Christian public, and between the Christian culture and our culture at large. How great would it be if art would again be considered an important and valuable part of human life, if a new visual literacy would be developed, and churchgoers would once again start buying art?

What this asks for, above all, is a different mindset. We should stop regarding the artist as some sort of prophet who should be totally autonomous in all that he or she does. Instead, it would be much more helpful if artists would start to see themselves as servants: as servants of the communities, churches, and cultures they live in. Autonomy is not a biblical word; servanthood is. Makoto Fujimura recently introduced the term *culture care*, which wants to correct the old paradigm of hostility and suspicion between Christians and the culture surrounding them. Instead, he says, we should start to care for our culture with acts of generosity, care for our culture's soul, and offer it our bouquet of flowers.²⁵

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²⁵Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care* (New York: Fujimura Institute, 2014).

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