VISUAL THEOLOGY

Visual Theology

Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts

Edited by
Robin M. Jensen
and Kimberly J. Vrudny

A Michael Glazier Book

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for

Wilson Yates

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Preface

Visual artists and Christian theologians have been engaged in a contentious dialogue from the beginning (cf. Paul's speech at Athens in Acts 18). The repudiation of idol worship, however, came into conflict with the assertion that the divine was visible in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. John 14:9; Col 1:15). Thus Christianity, following Judaism, had reasonable concern about the power of the image to attract worship, while at the same time it opened itself to that very possibility. The incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity who was both image (*eikon*) and word (*logos*) affirmed that created matter could mediate uncreated and spiritual truth to humankind. Thus sight could lead to insight; the visual could be a medium of knowing as well as showing.

Through the millennia, the church nevertheless struggled with the power and danger of the visual image. Various attempts to control or suppress figurative art are well known to historians of Christianity. Iconoclastic movements, whether in eighth-century Byzantium or sixteenth-century Zürich, were not so much an attack on art per se as an attempt to reaffirm God's ultimate invisibility, unknowability, and transcendence. But, just as the pendulum always swings back, the image returned—with the support of theologians who recognized that the nonverbal or symbolic modes of expression were necessary to balance and even to challenge the limits of the verbal.

In spite of this, Western theology (both Catholic and Protestant) historically had overlooked visual art as a subject for study or reflection. This lacuna began to be addressed in the mid-twentieth century when an integrated, academic study of theology and art emerged, especially in the wake of World War II. At this time a group of prominent theologians and artists began a fruitful dialogue on the interrelationships among theology, the arts, and contemporary culture. Among these pioneering theologians were Paul Tillich, Amos Wilder, Jacques Maritain, Nicholas Berdyaev, Roger Hazelton, and Walter Ong, SJ.

In *The Religious Situation* (1926; English 1932), Paul Tillich described art's immediate task as "not that of apprehending essence but that of

expressing meaning." In comparison with other cognitive modes, he asserted that "art indicates what the character of a spiritual situation is; it does this more immediately and directly than science or philosophy for it is less burdened by objective considerations."[1] Tillich then went on to discuss the works of visual artists, many active in his own time, whose work expressed the era's spiritual situation. These included Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Münch, and the German expressionists Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Erich Heckel.

Tillich's generation was followed by a younger cohort (many of them Tillich's students), including James Luther Adams, Tom Driver, Nathan Scott, John Dillenberger, and Jane Daggett Dillenberger. These interdisciplinary thinkers continued to examine the intersections of human artistic and religious aspirations and endeavors and to develop methods for integrating the arts into theological study. They understood the arts as a nondiscursive means of expressing or transmitting aspects of faith (dogma) or prophetically calling for social and economic justice (ethics). They valued the arts as integral aspects of pastoral care, sacramental mediation, and spiritual formation. They explored the connections between a creator God and artistic creation; art's affirmation of the essential goodness of the material world and its ability to be a vehicle for the holy; and the ancient trinity of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness as not only defining characteristics of the Divine Being but also embodied in the most profound artistic expression.

Among these pioneering thinkers was one H. Wilson Yates. In the following pages fourteen theologians honor his lifetime contributions to the study of theology and art. They aim to show how visual culture reflects or addresses pressing contemporary religious questions by considering the work of a particular visual artist whose work dates from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Their essays explore the relationship between visual artists and theologians in the contemporary world and pay homage to the pathbreaking teachers upon whose work their own thinking rests.

In different ways each essay considers the work of an artist in light of a theological issue or focus. The first three, by Charles Pickstone, Sarah Henrich, and Deborah Sokolove, included in the section "Visual Theology and the Traditional," all study the influences or contributions

[1] From Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, trans. H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Henry Holt, 1932), excerpted in idem, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 67.

of great artworks on artists who drew on them (critically or appreciatively) as significant resources. The authors then consider how the modern works reflect on contemporary theological questions in light of the traditions that inspired them.

The essays by Robin Jensen, Rod Pattenden, and Kimberly Vrudny, published in the section "Visual Theology and the Political," explore ways artists have acted as prophets or cultural critics, speaking to questions of peace, justice, and the need for human redemption and reconciliation in the face of the horrors of war, betrayal, and torture.

The essays published in "Visual Theology and the Natural" turn to ecological concerns and the attention of modern artists to the physical environment. Essayists Don Saliers and Doug Adams write about artists who consciously attend to the natural world as a context and medium for their work, while Deborah Haynes describes her own artistic creation as part of an integrated ecosystem.

The fourth set of essays, by Graham Howes, Linnea Wren, and John Cook, attends to the ways visual artists and architects transform spaces for worship. This section, "Visual Theology and the Liturgical," looks at a number of varied and distinguished examples of spatial and visual theology that exist within or are containers for the ritual, liturgical, and performative works of religious communities.

The final set of essays, "Visual Theology and the Communal," builds on these interactions of visual art works with particular communities and examines the ways certain artists have addressed external and often alien communities, sometimes seeing themselves as outsiders or guests and sometimes as carrying messages from one world to another. These essays, by Jann Cather Weaver, Cindi Beth Johnson, and Wilson Yates, share particular and personal attention to the first person "I-Thou" relationship between the viewer and the work of art, while also recognizing the intimate attachment of the artist to her or his creation.

The editors hope that these essays will help readers at all levels of experience with contemporary art to reflect theologically on such work, enabling us all to understand better what some artists are expressing in the images they make public. The fact that many people find "modern" art difficult to comprehend or even appreciate has only added to the misunderstanding that exists between contemporary artists and the Christian community. This situation often, sadly, results in a lack of attention to theologically important and challenging work by both academic theologians and the church. The fifteen essays included here are meant not only to show the range of ways in which different theologians engage with and reflect upon certain works of art but also to encourage

readers to do this themselves, thereby fostering a healthier relationship between theologians and artists.

Thanks must be expressed to those who have assisted in this project in significant ways. Peter Dwyer and the staff of Liturgical Press have been both patient and generous with their editorial and design assistance. The Henry Luce Foundation has provided many of the writers or their institutions with significant financial and moral support for this work. A significant gift came from the estate of Doug Adams to underwrite the inclusion of the illustrations included in this book. Sadly, slightly less than a year before this book went to press our friend and contributor Doug Adams died at his home in California. His loss has been felt widely, but nowhere more than in the theology and arts community to which he devoted so much of his professional life.

Finally, this book is dedicated to H. Wilson Yates, with the deepest gratitude from his friends, colleagues, and students. His work in the field of theology and the arts, as senior editor of the journal *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*, as founder and former president of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies, and as author of numerous books and other publications, has been both trailblazing and inspirational.

In order to provide the reader who is unfamiliar with Wilson Yates with a sense of the man, life artist, and theologian, we print here two speeches written on the occasion of Wilson's retirement from his work at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. The first, prepared by Dr. Rich Weis, was presented to Wilson at United Theological Seminary's Spring Banquet in 2005.

> Wilson, we all rejoice that you will soon be freed of the burdens that this school—or any school, for that matter—imposes on its presidents, and will have the time for the things in life that give you joy. However, I have to say that your retirement also poses some special problems. One of these is the fact that you are not available to be the faculty speaker at Spring Banquet when you are celebrated. This problem is compounded by the fact that you have served more years on this faculty than any other member of it, making it impossible to find a more senior colleague to sing your praises. So instead of listening to the eloquent Wilson Yates celebrate your contributions, you get stuck with me.
>
> In the fall of 1967 a beardless young Harvard Ph.D. candidate, husband to Gayle Graham Yates and father to Natasha and Stiles (who was then "on the way"), showed up on the UTS campus. He was the new assistant professor of church and society. I believe that was you,

Wilson. With an editorial assist from Gayle you navigated the high-risk proposition of writing a dissertation during the first year of full-time teaching, and a career was launched.

Wilson's dissertation and first book were on birth control, family planning, and population growth. He continued to publish in this area into the 1970s, but as we now know, this is not the subject in which he would make his mark.

In 1970 Wilson was promoted to associate professor of church and society, beginning a decade in which the first real emphases of his academic work appeared. In the 1970s two concerns dominate Wilson's publications and the programs he created here at UTS: anti-racism and human sexuality. Through his efforts a workshop on white racism became a part of the first-year "Christianity and Culture" course. In a move that would set a pattern for later activity Wilson also obtained a grant to develop a resource kit for churches to combat the racism endemic to American society. This was the seminary's Church and Race Program. Together with Jim Nelson, Wilson created the Human Sexuality Seminar, which remained an enduring part of the seminary's offerings into the 1990s. This too was emblematic of a recurring pattern, this time in drawing other educational institutions into the collaboration, specifically the University of Minnesota and Luther Seminary.

In 1977 Wilson was promoted to full professorial rank as professor of church and society. As the 1970s turned into the 1980s other interests began to appear in Wilson's work. In 1978 his first two publications pertaining to religion and the arts appeared, one in the UTS house journal *Theological Markings* and the other in *The Christian Century*. Involvements in early United Methodist programs on religion and the arts during his student years and the passion for the arts that he and Gayle shared were beginning to tell. In the early 80s, however, his most visible work was as the general editor, and a founding member of the editorial board, of the *Journal of Law and Religion*. This is another instance of the collaborative pattern, this time with colleagues at Hamline University School of Law and at Emory University. There is also a new pattern here, the creation of a national institution—a journal or society—to elevate and continue an important conversation.

In 1987 Wilson's faculty chair changed from Church and Society to Religion, Society and the Arts. This reflects the full flowering of his interest in religion and the arts in the latter half of the 80s. During that time he created a Program in Religion and the Arts at United, founded the journal *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*, published a book surveying approaches to the arts across the whole of theological education, and began a steady stream of publications in this area. Even after becoming dean of the seminary in 1988 and its president in 1996, Wilson continued to nurture this dimension of

his own work and the school's life, most notably in creating what we now know as the Theology and the Arts concentration in the Master of Arts degree—to the point where today UTS has a national reputation in religion and the arts, and that dialogue is woven throughout our work as a school.

I will not speak of Wilson's years as president because that will be the focus of other celebrations, but I want to say a little about his contribution as dean. One of the most important contributions a dean makes to a school is the hiring, support and nurturing of its faculty. It was Wilson's fate to be dean at United when the founding generation of faculty started retiring in droves, and thus it fell to him to lead the searches for their replacements, the current generation of faculty. Seven of the ten current full-time teaching faculty of the school were hired and nurtured by him. These colleagues, and others in other parts of the institution, are as important a part of his legacy to this school as anything else Wilson has done.

What sort of person has lived through this history? Since I have shared only the last seven of Wilson's years here, I asked my active and retired colleagues to share their experiences of Wilson as a way to try to evoke more fully for you the cherished colleague we will miss. What follows is a composite perspective with names erased to protect the guilty.

Well, the first word that comes to mind is "beloved." Of course, there are many words that come to mind suggesting Wilson's intellectual and expressive gifts. One does not compile the record of achievement he has without a good mind, great learning, a capacity to see what's important and meaningful, and an ability to express oneself wittily and winsomely. Yet the first word that comes to mind is none of those words, but that other word: "beloved." This word sounds across the generations of both faculty and students. As a colleague said Wednesday, we love you, Wilson. I've known a number of presidents and deans in my years in theological education, many of them very able and deeply respected. I have known few that are loved; actually, I think you're the only one.

We love you for your amazing capacity to mix metaphors so extravagantly that, in the words of a colleague, "you think you are on a ship with a dog that won't hunt, that has encountered stormy weather in a farm field in Missouri but is nevertheless on course." . . . And your wondrously thoughtful and poetic story-telling and preaching have lifted us up and put us down in another place more times than we can count.

We cherish you for your eloquence as the voice of this community, as a voice for justice, as a voice of deep compassion. One colleague captured this so well in a brief story: "In 1978 a referendum was being

held in St. Paul to rescind the human rights ordinance relating to sexual orientation. I remember seeing Wilson Yates debate someone on TV during that time. Wilson was visibly angry. And I learned the difference between a liberal, who would explain why gay people were angry, and an ally, who was himself angry at the injustice." . . . Part of why we love you, Wilson, is because for you justice and peace have never been abstract causes, but an expression of deep caring for real human beings.

We love you even with what to some of us appears as an excessive affection for all things English, and a strange obsession with the grotesque. Especially we love you in spite of some truly scary architectural tours. Every one of us who was a candidate in a search run by Wilson probably has a scary architectural tour story. One colleague tells of the tour during her candidating visit. Apparently that day Stiles had the family car so Wilson went down to Mary Bednarowski's office and asked to borrow her car. Mary looked at him questioningly, looked at this colleague—then only a candidate—and said, "Please make sure he keeps his eyes on the road!" That made this colleague a little nervous, but she only realized the force of Mary's comment when, driving through downtown, Wilson the architectural historian was looking up at buildings and pointing out various items of architectural interest—and was only sort of second-handedly watching the road. She concludes by remarking her astonishment at how much she relaxed when she got out of the car to walk somewhere. . . . And we love you precisely for keeping your eyes on what is beautiful and worthwhile, and for opening our eyes to worlds of creativity and meaning even when it was a little scary.

However, I think, Wilson, you mostly inspire such affection in others because you have such a deep affection and compassion for others. When I was considering whether to come here as dean I surprised a colleague by asking at some length, not about the faculty here, but about the president. Since you've been a dean you know why I asked that, but the point is what I got in reply was a long e-mail full of stories of your deeply compassionate and supportive presence in times of struggle and crisis, stories of how you helpfully untangled a mess and helped someone find the way forward. Once I came here I saw the deep and abiding friendships you had, and still have, with those who had once been your faculty colleagues. And I've come to see you as I think we all see you, as someone who is intensely concerned with persons as unique individuals, with what will enable their thriving in the particular moment or crisis of life in which they find themselves, and with helping them find purpose and hope in that situation, someone who will do all he can to enable that thriving and bring to light that hope.

> I give the last word to a colleague, only slightly editing the original words: "You said at your recent 'book talk' that one of the books that influenced you was a work entitled *Life is Commitment*. That pretty well sums up your presidency, and in fact your whole career at UTS. You care passionately about this school and its mission—and each person who passes through its doors. You have given beyond measure. You have placed an indelible stamp on what we've become.
>
> Wilson, from all of us, thank you, from the bottom of our hearts.

Finally, these comments are from the annual gathering of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies, which celebrated the career of its founding president, Wilson Yates, at its November meeting in 2006. They were prepared by Kimberly Vrudny.

> On this very special occasion, in front of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies, a society that would not have come into existence, I think, without the visionary leadership of Wilson Yates—at least, not *this* society—I am asked to try to express even something of what his work in and on behalf of theology and the arts has meant and continues to mean in terms of our common life as an academic community. I find myself at a loss for words about how to express adequately the degree to which we, assembled in this room, appreciate the work Wilson has done, especially in this context for championing on our behalf a cause that has become our own: establishing theology and the arts as a field not auxiliary to but absolutely central to the acquisition of theological/religious/spiritual knowing. So, instead of words, I would like to unveil something of a portrait of this society's founding president. Because I am ill-equipped, however, to produce such a painting myself, I am going to propose instead that we embark together, all of us here this morning, on a search for the portrait artist right for the task of capturing on canvas something of the essence of Wilson Yates.
>
> Knowing the extent to which Wilson is concerned with formalism, our Society would not be able to overemphasize the technical skill our portrait artist would need to demonstrate in order to earn his or her hire. We would be wise to share with the applicants the precision and nuance Wilson has encouraged in his own writing on visual subjects: the manner in which he helps us to see the subtlety of the line in a drawing by Käthe Kollwitz, or the proper distribution of color in a painting by Francis Bacon, or the ideal marriage in mass between two physical objects in a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth.
>
> Once we review our applicants' formal abilities, we would need to analyze their ability to incorporate iconographic elements into the portrait without allowing them to dominate the canvas, for certainly a

scholar of the visual arts recognizes the importance of material culture for documenting that which we hold most precious. We might suggest a host of things to accompany him in his portrait. Surely it would need to include a map, for our Society's president delights in the arts of early twentieth-century cartography. He is also an Anglophile, so our subject might be painted on a bridge crossing the banks of the River Cam in his beloved Cambridge. Or, perhaps better, he could be in his sabbatical office in Cambridge, with a window overlooking the river, so that we can see his bookshelves, where we would find collections on the paintings of Giotto and Duccio, Michelangelo and Rembrandt, Nolde and Beckmann. Books about methods of sociological and political analysis would rest there as well. The complete works of Paul Tillich would share shelves with Niebuhr (either one) and Bonhoeffer. Anne Sexton's poetry would be present there with pages obviously worn, as would be the *Iliad*, and piles of *The New Yorker*. Although a computer might glow, his desk would be cluttered with piles of slides and photographs of his family—Gayle, Natasha, Stiles, and the grandchildren. And he would be holding a genuine ink pen. In his left hand.

But, finally, our portraitist would need to prove an ability to depict a likeness in the face—not a photographic likeness (otherwise why not hire a photographer?)—but rather an expressionistic likeness in the Tillichian sense, in the sense that what is depicted expresses the inner life of the subject. Through the face we could move from formal and iconographic analysis about our subject to iconological—to discussion of meaning.

I would like to see his head posed in thoughtful reflection, as if his ear were resting upon his shoulder, as it does when he is thinking his thoughts most intently. His stylish coat with loosened tie might be visible, but not enough to distract from a face etched by a lifetime's worth of worry matched only by hands massaging aching knuckles: worry about civil rights, about the next deadline, about a grandchild's survival, about nuclear proliferation, about a faculty member's distress, about causes for war, about the financial stability of an institution, about famine, about a student's grief, about the future of the church, about the next speech/the next sermon/the next article/the next book, about balancing demands of career and family, about raising funds for a chapel, about writing grants and establishing endowments, about . . .

But, perhaps most importantly, we would require an artist who could handle masterfully the eyes. As windows to the soul, they would need to express the depth and texture of a life not made cynical by reality as it has unfolded before him, but a life that has retained hope and optimism despite all the reasons even he would cite against them. They would need to communicate a faith that has plumbed the deepest recesses of doubt to emerge only more mature and insightful as a

result. They would be eyes of a teacher, whose concern for his students transcended the classroom; of a scholar, whose work, while significant, is not yet complete; of an author, whose interdisciplinary acumen does not betray a lack of depth or expertise; of a husband, father, and grandfather, whose devotion and love are clearly manifest in those relationships he has nurtured; of a poet, whose wordsmithing is evident in every utterance; of an artist, whose own canvas is life itself. They would be eyes trained to look, trained to see, trained to detect details—in art, in scriptures both sacred and secular, in psyches and in the public square. They would be eyes, finally, whose gaze always joyfully meets our own, welcoming us in for warm conversation.

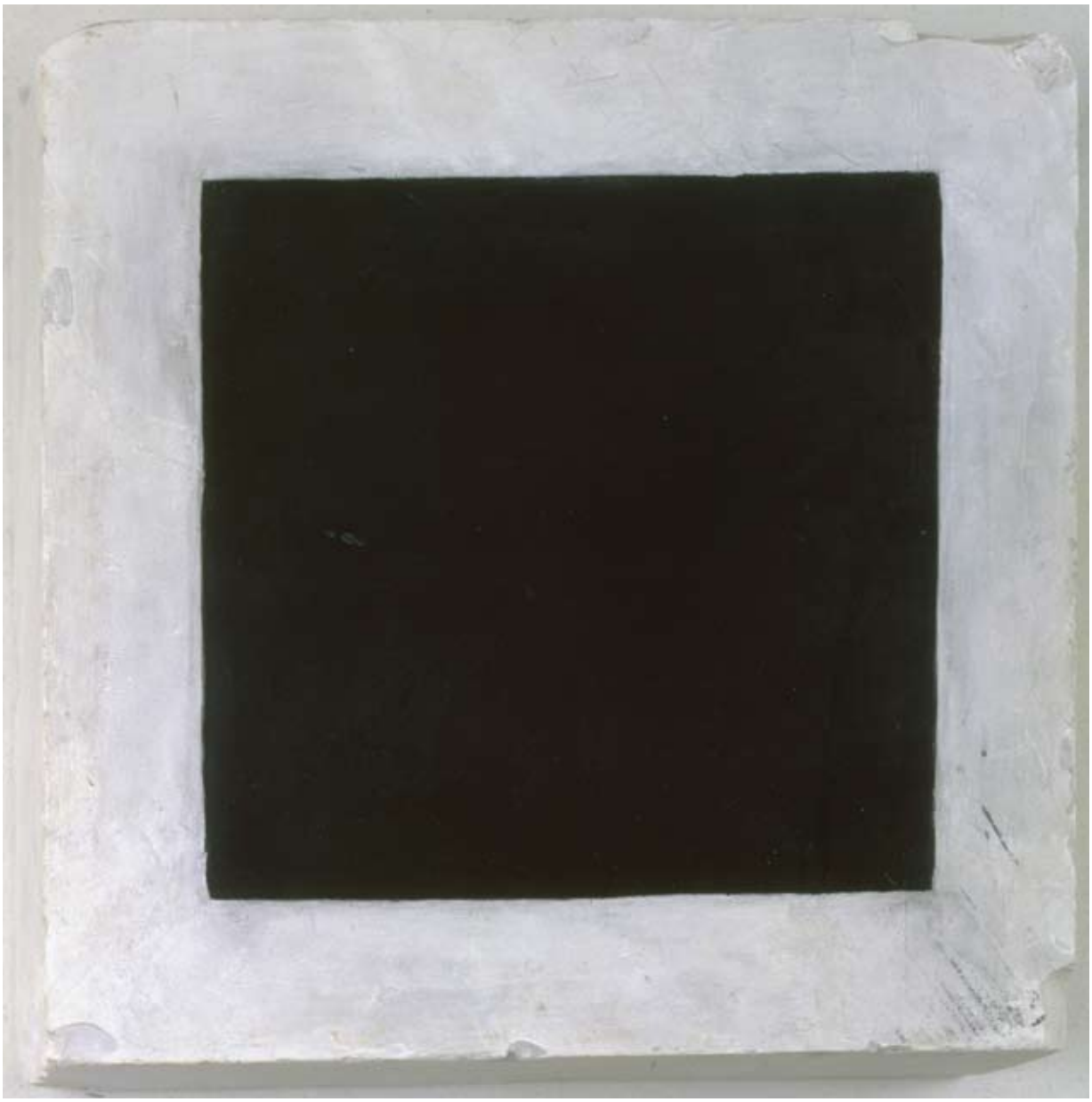
Ours is surely not a project for a novice portraitist, though I think even this would find Wilson's forgiveness and approval, so long as it avoided the label of kitsch.

Wilson, may this gift (yes, finally, of words) express to you in some small way our deep respect and admiration for you.

And may this book give you satisfaction and joy in a life lived influentially.

—Robin Jensen and Kimberly Vrudny
August 2008

Visual Theology and the Traditional



1 Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935)
Black Square, ca. 1923–1930

Oil on plaster, 36.7 x 36.7 cm. Photograph: Jacques Faujour. Musee National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Photo Credit: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

Charles Pickstone

Art's Last Icon

Malevich's *Black Square* Revisited

The winter palace of Catherine the Great sits on the south bank of the river Neva. Saint Petersburg's river, like that in any self-respecting European capital of culture, has a south bank. But the south bank of the Neva is different. Anyone expecting to find the usual history of radical art and dens of protest is going to be at least partially disappointed. Certainly populists, anarchists, and nihilists—not to mention Dostoyevsky's Petrashevsky Circle—did once plot together here. But the whole area—indeed, the whole city—is dominated by Catherine's Winter Palace, her "hermitage," as she herself called it, with its collection today of three million works of art in 350 rooms, including 25 Rembrandts (a hundred before Stalin secretly sold off many of them to the Americans after World War II to feed his starving people), a score of Matisses, and an amazing lineup of paintings from Cranach to Kandinsky, from Titian to Cézanne. Here, to her hermitage, Catherine would come to escape the crowds and meditate, alone among this quintessence of the world's cultural riches that she had distilled. Pathetic? Maybe. But prescient.

Perhaps Catherine guessed that some 250 years later this extraordinary collection, even in her own time one of the wonders of the world, would become such a marvel. In an age in which culture would be queen, millions of tourists—in greater numbers than the Russian nobility who crushed into her lavish halls glittering with chandeliers and marble for balls and diplomatic receptions—would flock to her collection from all over eastern and western Europe, Japan, and the United States. Thanks to them, St. Petersburg would again grow wealthy after the bleak years of the Cold War.

In 2003, St. Petersburg's tercentenary year, I had the good fortune to be invited to a conference there. The Hermitage was so flooded with visitors that the few security guards were quite unable to keep us at a respectful distance from the pictures. One weary American tourist was observed unwittingly leaning against a Picasso. Catherine's Hermitage is today a fantastic source of income for St. Petersburg's new Tsars (presumably those who have the money to snap up the plasma-screen TVs that cost a lifetime's earnings for an ordinary person, advertised all along the main road from the airport to the city). Certainly, to judge from the state of our expensive though run-down three-star hotel, with its bathrooms totally lacking in hot water despite being filled with antiquated rusty piping, and its bedroom mattresses evidently not renewed since it had been a rather grand brothel in the late nineteenth century, someone out there was making a lot of money.

Even so, the story of the Hermitage illustrates beautifully the trajectory of fine art over the last few hundred years, from plaything of the autocratic rich to pilgrim destination for the relatively poor. The Hermitage, as its name suggests, is a place of spirituality: its great works are truly icons for our age, crowning glories of the fine art tradition that distill the values and energies of Western humanism going back to the fifteenth century, objects of veneration and bearers of the hope for enlightenment of countless masses of cultural pilgrims. Perhaps.

Russia, of course, knows all about icons. The great Eastern Orthodox tradition of icons goes all the way back to St. Luke's first authorized painting of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the miraculous image of Christ on the Mandylion of Edessa. Recently revived after years of decadence and sentimentality, the icon tradition claims to allow the worshiper direct access to the divine reality at the heart of everything. Every recently refurbished Russian Orthodox church or cathedral offers an iconostasis full of these stylized pictures of saints in their prescribed order. These icons may date from the eleventh century, as at Novgorod, a medieval town that preserves the oldest church in Russia a couple of hours outside St. Petersburg (see illustration 2, page 5), or from this year.

Saint Petersburg's churches, interestingly, are full, with a mix of ages and genders, and appear to have a sense of purpose and mission. At the Church of St. Nicholas, during first vespers for the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, the patron saints of St. Petersburg, a packed upper church watched a procession of magnificently gold-clad clergy pass through the doors at the center of the iconostasis and down into the nave, and then queued up for long hours to be anointed (though not for quite as long as the art pilgrims in the three-hour queue outside the Hermit-

2 St. Sophia's Cathedral, Novgorod, Russia
Photograph: Gayle Graham Yates

age for those who had not prebooked a guide). Truly, here was heaven come down to earth, the procession of priests a living counterpoint to the work of the icon in opening up paradise to those still in the world. (It was also darkly rumored that many of the most rigid party faithful, back in Cold War days, are now the most fervent Orthodox Christians—a transformation that psychologically, at least in retrospect, is entirely credible. But we digress.)

A community's icons are highly significant. Icons reflect very clearly the power structures of the community they serve. Russian icons, for example, are not simply folk art. They give access to power at a fundamental level—the power that lies behind the universe itself. To say that

icons are an opiate of the people is a gross oversimplification: they are part of a nexus that once ran from the merest serf to the Tsar himself and beyond him to the divine. Orthodox theologians repeatedly compare the saint of the icon to the friend at court, the intermediary who can intercede for a suppliant and who must be respected, since the emperor is his friend.

Given that almost none of the Tsars would make any move at all toward the slightest of democratic reforms, despite the advice even of aristocrats and Guards Officers, the "Decembrists," from the beginning of the nineteenth century onward (even Alexander II, who liberated the serfs in 1861, made sure that they would work for another forty-nine years as compensation to their former owners), access to power through the icon was hugely important. A firm belief in an "other" world to which the icon is the vehicle must have been immensely empowering to the faithful in the face of the inevitable passivity of their conditions of life and their remoteness from any participation at all in the life of the ruling classes. One observer, the journalist Alexander Herzen (1812–1870), likened the Winter Palace to "a ship floating on the surface of the ocean; it had no real connection with the inhabitants of the deep beyond that of eating them."[1]

But the crucial question, to which this is all leading, and to which we shall return, is to what extent the icons of European art on display in the Hermitage similarly offer access to power for latter-day believers in the religion of art, that pilgrim crowd of *Kunstgläubigen* who queue three hours for admittance to the shrine and then pour in to worship in such numbers—and if so, why, in a democratic world, such access to substitute power should be so necessary.

The final picture on display in the Hermitage collection is the recently acquired *Black Square* (1923) by Kasimir Malevich—a fitting climax both to the great Russian icon tradition and to the Western fine art tradition that extraordinarily does justice to them both (see illustration 1, page 2). Legend has it that Malevich, as he lay dying, had the *Black Square* placed above his bed, tilted at the traditional angle for a Russian funerary icon placed above a dying person. It was certainly first exhibited as if it were a parody of an icon.

Although this extraordinary work makes comparatively little sense on its own, if it is seen as the apogee of a long tradition of Russian art and spirituality it becomes highly significant. At one level it can be

[1] Alexander Herzen, quoted in Dan Richardson, *The Rough Guide to St Petersburg*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 2001), 83.

regarded simply a reformist piece of religious art, a protest against the degenerate rubbish that haunted nineteenth-century Russian religious art and icon painting. At another level it can be seen as an antidemocratic, almost fascist attempt to heighten the mystery of art in the face of the leveling of the spiritual hierarchies that Marxism and Western democracies variously promoted.

At a deeper level, however, it might be argued that Malevich's *Black Square* forms part of the great apophatic tradition of spirituality that strips away the dross and the second-rate in religion and returns it to its very foundations, finding God in silence, in darkness, and in absence of speech. If the function of the icon is to depict the ineffable in an artistic medium, it is readily apparent that this black square is both closely linked to the Russian icon tradition and also moves the tradition onward. The work, its paint now cracked and dirty, still maintains a remarkable sense of *presence*: here divine secrets are still to be glimpsed, albeit without any of the mythology of religious power—no sea of golden chasubles spilling through the sacred doors, no priestly hands kissed by faithful and obeisant worshipers. Yet despite the absence of explicit religious symbolism, the *Black Square* still resonates with an emphatic spirituality, and not one that can be owned or possessed or manipulated, for there is nothing here to control, only blank color. What a splendidly democratic icon of a spirituality that liberates its worshipers and abrogates power play!

Of Malevich's own beliefs, little is certain. He was influenced by theosophy, by G. I. Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky, and in 1922 he delivered a speech: "God is not to be rejected," a plea to the new government to recognize religion's essential part in humanity's search for perfection. However, these were dangerous times for a believer, and when Malevich went abroad in 1927 his friends, fearing a raid by the secret police, cleared his flat of any incriminating papers. Who knows what they took?[2] "In the vast space of cosmic repose, I reach the white world devoid of its objects, the manifestation of nothingness revealed."[3]

Nonetheless, if Malevich's *Black Square* is the first icon of a nonfeudal Russia, it is also at the culmination of the Western fine art tradition, a fitting final image in the Hermitage collection. For a writer such as

[2] See Edward Robinson, "Ciphers of Transcendence," *The Eckhart Review* 12 (2003): 44.

[3] Kasimir Malevich, *Manifesto of Suprematism*, quoted by Jean-Joseph Goux, "The Unrepresentable," in *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. J. C. Gage (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 168.

Jean-Joseph Goux the blankness of a Malevich painting flattens all nodes of power,[4] much as in a truly democratic community power is dissipated through innumerable different strands. Before the rise of modernism, his argument goes, the Western artistic tradition labored under the tyranny of perspective, of bourgeois realism. Artists imprisoned their subjects in Cartesian space, the subjects their victims (or their patrons' victims). Art was power. Presumably the queuing tourists share in this general belief in the art object and the power it confers on the viewer to make friends at court, to appropriate the power of this language once available only to the moneyed few who could afford the Grand Tour or sent their daughters to be educated in Florence.

Modernist art, Goux's argument continues, heroically attacked this tradition—a process taken even further in postmodernism—thus denying the importance of the author altogether: no author, no authority, no misuse of authorial power. Malevich is the little boy who laughs at the naked emperor's birthday suit.

But surely this is by no means the end of the story. Malevich may have demythologized the religion of art, but he has also remythologized painting. His minimal black square still has resonance or presence. So, similarly, for the Western fine art tradition the subject may now be decentered in a world without perspective, but artworks still have presence—not, now, because they link to some "hyperreality" outside or inside consciousness that guarantees their "truth," but perhaps because they connect to the richness of the web of meanings of which they are a part. Their truth is more a matter of coherence (of links and relationships) than simply some putative correspondence to "objective reality," whatever that may be, and with all its disastrous implications for reason and democracy. (Just imagine: with one grain of absolute truth you could tilt the universe!)

This more democratic version of truth differs completely from the previous, power-centered version in which the truth of things lay in their correspondence to a "reality" out there, transcendentally guaranteed, as checked off by an observer playing God from some privileged position. Rather it sees truth, and therefore meaning, as the languages spoken by, or the games played by, or the network of beliefs created by, different communities—each community creating a web of beliefs and values, with the more obvious on the surface, the deeper and less visible nearer the center. Each web is interlinked (as that community

[4] Goux, "The Unrepresentable," 191ff.

shares members with other communities) with other webs. Perhaps at the center of the web of webs there is an ever "deeper" invisible center, but such an assumption could hardly be verified unless we were to identify it with the biotic core that lies at the origin of all thought, the very point at which thoughts and ideas and images appear in the brain cells that beget them, as matter turns into thought. Maybe Malevich's *Black Square* is as close as one dare approach.

In summary, a democratic vision of truth that shares out power can still energize works of art and allow them presence or aura.

What, then, form the threads of meaning that hold in place this richness of perception, belief, and value? At one level they are whatever binds a community together (hence the importance for democratic society of freedom of speech and association), but at another level they comprise such intangibles as desire and (especially) memory.

For example, in his 2002 film *Russian Ark*, the Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov takes the viewer on a guided tour of the Hermitage across time. A single camera, representing the viewer's gaze, travels through the galleries in the company of a Virgil to our Dante, an eighteenth-century French diplomat, the Marquis de Custine. From Catherine herself through several episodes of St. Petersburg's history, from Nicholas and Alexandra and the siege of Leningrad to the present army of tourists gazing at the paintings, the extraordinary historical resonance that defines St. Petersburg (and prevents it from being a mere façade—an eighteenth-century theme park, as is sometimes suggested) is carefully exposed. The many-roomed palace becomes the unconscious, the place of dreams. The film is a celebration of memory, creating a kind of coherence out of the scattered fragments of St. Petersburg's history. The resonance of memory gives the Hermitage presence and makes the film "auratic" (possessing aura), in Walter Benjamin's sense.

The film culminates in a great ball set just before the Revolution and with Valery Gergiev himself conducting the Marinsky-Kirov orchestra. For a considerable time the gilt and stucco and chandeliers of the halls of the Winter Palace glow with light and elegance before finally the ball is over and gilded crowds descend the great staircase—slowly, ineluctably, swirling down and down, like a fetus approaching the birth canal—toward the winter storm raging outside. Sokurov seems to be suggesting that newborn Russian democracy will inevitably clutch these fine aristocrats, these soldiers and girls in their *jeunesse dorée*, into its chilly embrace.

Once that has happened, once democracy rules, will the power distilled into this great building inevitably be dissipated? Will Catherine's hermitage be stripped of all aura, of poetic and artistic resonance? Will

barren materialism reign instead? Probably not. Thanks to the Western world's making such a fetish of art, this very aristocratic collection of high art will endure for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps one day, however, both East and West will discover the "aura" of the everyday. Saint Petersburg was built by Tsar Peter the Great to be a bridge between Russia and the West, Russia's window on the modern world. Today, at the junction of East and West, Russia is in a position (at last) to bring the rich cultures of eastern Europe and northern Asia to bear on the narrow materialism of the West—to renew its perceptions and also its democratic practices. Malevich's *Black Square* may not be the end of art, but actually its beginning.

The river Neva flows quietly by the Hermitage. On the other side of this huge river is the fortress of Peter and Paul where lie the tombs of the Tsars and the royal family, visited by huge crowds on public holidays. Meanwhile, the river ripples endlessly by on its way to the sea, waves briefly popping up and breaking here and there, unpredictably, whenever a number of ripples happen to collide—an image of nodes of power endlessly moving and unfolding and refurling in the charged flatness of a truly democratic and yet "auratic" society whose icon is the *Black Square*.