

Missing arts

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 19, 2000](#) issue

*Seeing Beyond the World: Visual Arts and the Calvinist Tradition*, edited by Paul Corby Finney

The story is old but appropriate. A German scientist published a book on *The Flora and Fauna of Iceland*. With Teutonic thoroughness he covered everything. Still, Icelanders were bemused by a line in the table of contents: "Chapter Eight: Snakes in Iceland." Turning to the page, they found one sentence: "There are no snakes in Iceland."

There must be some visual arts in the Calvinist tradition, since experts here fill 540 pages with pictures and texts on the subject. Yet for the most part the choices in this book are so random, the examples so idiosyncratic, the discussions so detailed that one is not likely to walk away from a reading with much sense of "the" tradition.

To say this is not necessarily an insult to Calvinism. To say that Islam and Judaism have no tradition of the visual artistic representation of God is not a slam against faiths that respond to divine strictures against such representation. At the roots of the Calvinist tradition, as various authors here show, there are similar prohibitions. Still, Islam has compensated for this with many dazzling artistic expressions, and the reader of a book like this has a right to look for something comparable in Calvinism. But the results of such a search are meager.

The book opens promisingly with a three-page foreword by veteran Princeton theologian Jane Dempsey Douglass. It may be a stretch to say that her pages are worth the price of a book, but they deserve pondering. For her, "Calvin's fundamental conviction that God alone is Lord" meant the "removal of all visual presentations of God and of the saints from places of worship."

Next, Calvinism had a "deep concern for simplicity of lifestyle, so that available resources can meet human needs. If the rich live extravagantly, the poor will go hungry." That meant: don't overinvest in art and artists. Is Calvinism the source of the "starving artist" syndrome? As capitalists, Calvinists often invested in many extravagances. Were they programmed to discriminate in this one case? And can

one demonstrate that they have done more for the hungry and poor than have Christians in iconic and artistic traditions?

A third reason for the Calvinist neglect of art is the doctrine of vocation: "Parents should urge their children to choose vocations that would be useful to their neighbors. . . ." Arts were not so utile.

But Calvinism is also rooted in "Calvin's love of creation and beauty"--which may be the "least known and appreciated" of Calvin's claims. Calvin marveled at scientific marvels, and he concluded that creation was not *only* useful: "God also intended it to be a source of delight to human beings."

Douglass pictures the tension in the mind of the Calvinist silversmith who came with a sense of vocation, created with delight simple but elegant silverware for the Lord's Supper, avoided idolatry, but had to ask, "Are [the products] not costly and even luxurious vessels? What of the poor?"

Douglass also stresses the tremendous regional and national diversity in Calvinist expression, since "Reformed people have many confessions" and their art reflects many different contexts.

Daniel W. Hardy, Philip Benedict, John Wilson and various others also provide synthesizing comment that will help guide readers. The book's essays are of a high level, but they suggest isolated peaks, not a mountain range. How bring together writings on such specialized subjects as "A Sixteenth-Century Limoges Enamel *Tazza* Illustrating the Judgment of Moses," "A note on de Beze's *Icones*" and "Huguenot Goldsmiths in England"?

George Starr writes on "Art and Architecture in the Hungarian Reformed Church," James F. White on "From Protestant to Catholic Plain Style" and Peter W. Williams on "Metamorphoses of the Meetinghouse: Three Case Studies." These essays do advance a theme. Am I a chauvinist to suggest that when one turns to the chapters on the New England churches one at last gets a sense of Reformed church beauty?

The Reformed tradition has hosted one master for the ages, Rembrandt van Rijn. James R. Tanis devotes ten pages to him and includes five prints. He makes extremely cautious claims for the relationship between Rembrandt's art and Calvinism, and helpfully sets the titan in the context of the theological struggles of his time and place. "A son of the Reformed Church, [Rembrandt] was to go far

beyond the theological conceptualization of his tradition and to lead the Reformed from their earlier years of groping with the dichotomy of art and faith to the deeper understanding of art as an expression of faith." Would that "his tradition" had picked up more consciously on his legacy.

Beyond wishing for more on Rembrandt, what else might one have liked to see in this book? Admittedly, much of Switzerland is more Zwinglian than Calvinist, but it would have enriched our understanding of the Reformed tradition had there been some attention to the outcomes there. Zwingli declared that "no one is a greater admirer than I of paintings and statuary." Benedict adds that Zwingli "was willing to allow stained glass in churches, and felt that images of a historical nature, including historical episodes from the Bible," were appropriate in private homes, though not in churches. Calvin and William Perkins also allowed biblical scenes in private households. It would have been helpful to see examples.

It is in architecture that the Calvinist Reformed tradition has been most fully realized. Though Donald Bruggink has written wisely and published widely on Dutch and American examples, he has not contributed to or even been cited in this book. There are stunning attempts to carry out Calvinist themes, as Douglass discerns them, in architecture in the Netherlands, but the book gives few 20th-century examples.

This book originated in a 1995 four-day symposium on its subject at Princeton's Center of Theological Inquiry. All but four of the chapters began as papers given at the conference. One pictures the hosts inviting the most renowned and perceptive scholars on a variety of regional artistic expressions of Calvinism and letting them hold forth. But these presentations do not add up to a consistent approach, the way single-author books do. Many readers will most appreciate the four sections marked "Discussion," which present reflections by scholars who do wrestle with the theme in coordinated ways.

Of a work such as this, which concentrates on an iconoclastic tradition and finds few icons of worth, one must ask, "Compared to what visual arts traditions should we view this?" Of course, Orthodoxy and Catholicism, against which the Reformed rebelled, are icon-rich, and Catholicism encouraged much of the great art of one and a half millennia. The book includes some passing but relatively positive references to Lutheran contrasts. But Lutherans, who can brag about their musical tradition just as Calvinists can about their literary tradition, do not have much to offer in the visual

arts. Calvinists have been iconoclastic, Lutherans iconoapathetic.

Around the world, 21st-century cultures welcome the visual. To reach worshipers and potential converts not only in "old" European and North American cultures but in "new" Africa and Asia cultures, iconoclasts and iconoapathetes both have to find new ways to hold to the core and pulse of their traditions while ministering with more attention to the visual. This book is only a first step in the search for such ways, and it leads one on an expensive and meandering path. Look for it at your library.