

Painted word

by [Cliff Edwards](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

*Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and Their Meanings*, by John Drury

*Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art*, by Neil MacGregor with Erika Langmuir

Rich in images and interpretation, these two works fill an embarrassing gap on our bookshelves, the gap between "art books" and books on the meaning of the Christian faith. They establish "image" as a legitimate resource in theology and spirituality. Neil MacGregor devotes almost a third of his book to photos of great painting and sculpture on Christian subjects, and John Drury gives almost half his pages to "Christian pictures."

Drury's book offers us both less and more than we might expect. It largely limits its focus to paintings done between 1300 and 1700 and housed in a single museum, London's National Gallery. We might have expected a book subtitled "Christian Pictures and Their Meanings" to include the exciting origins of Christian art in the paintings and carved tablets of the catacombs, or to provide a view of such contemporary works as Barnett Newman's Stations of the Cross or the Rothko Chapel in Texas. But the book also offers more than the reader might expect in that its author is the urbane and erudite dean of Christ Church, Oxford. His comments on some 40 impressive paintings provide insights in both theology and the arts, display a ready wit and include sparkling quotations from great poets and writers. Drury is a renowned literary scholar of the New Testament, with his own considered views on the nature of "Christian mythology" and its relevance for contemporary life. His book has a polished shape and a plot that comes to a convincing climax.

Drury begins with works in which the eye is invited to move between two worlds--the everyday world of the viewer and the dominant world of the "Christian myth," with its flights of angels and heavenly light. But the world of the viewer already asserts itself when Caravaggio gives "astonishing individual actuality" to his youthful, unbearded Christ in *The Supper at Emmaus* and when Velázquez paints the virgin of the *Immaculate Conception* as a quite ordinary peasant girl. Later, we see how Rubens, turning to landscape as a celebration of the world as it is, allows "historical time" to take precedence over "mythic time." The book ends with Velázquez's

*Waterseller of Seville* as "the end and destination" of Christian art. This painting of an ordinary water seller handing a glass of water to a youth focuses completely on the human and material world, displaying the "incarnational way of descent from other-worldliness into deep and unreserved interest in this world." Christianity can dispense with "cosmologies and systems" as love abides and descends into mundane existence. "Like the sacred bread in the Eucharist or the sacred Word in scriptures," says Drury, "the myth has been consumed into the real, the other into the familiar, and has made it wonderful."

MacGregor and collaborator Erika Langmuir provide less of this kind of sophisticated theological sweep, though they offer a good deal of fascinating historical background. They focus on the image of Christ--from his birth through his suffering, death and resurrection--as it is presented in paintings, altar pieces and sculpture. Again, London's National Gallery figures prominently, since MacGregor is director of the gallery and Langmuir has spent several years there. But the tone of this book is quite different from Drury's, as it was published to accompany a television series of the same name first broadcast on the BBC in 2000. One can almost imagine the cameras rolling as the book moves rapidly from one point of interest to another, directing our gaze from one telling detail to another, seeking to keep our interest through providing curious bits of knowledge and historical background.

Many of the works on which MacGregor focuses are in functioning churches and religious communities across Europe, and his firsthand encounters with these works and their roles in worship and devotion add an important dimension for the reader. A popular history of the development of Christian theology and piety unfolds from page to page, and a few recent works by Käthe Kollwitz, Stanley Spencer and Otto Dix encourage thoughtful contemporary comparisons. An enormous number of biblical quotations, some more than 30 lines long, indicates that the imagined audience is one that needs considerable guidance on the Bible.

Both of these works provide a long-needed bridge between image and word in Christian thought and practice--though we still await works that move beyond the Eurocentric, even Anglocentric, focus.