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Homan's "The Art of the Sublime: Principles of Christian Art and Architecture"

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HOMAN, R., *The Art of the Sublime: Principles of Christian Art and Architecture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. vi + 213, ISBN 0-7546-5073-1, Hardback, £50.

Roger Homan, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Brighton, has produced a timely and compelling reflection on the nature of sacred art and the way principles of Christian art have been mistreated by a secularising historicisation of artist and art. His book is a call to the position where 'sacred art is appreciated first as sacred and then, if necessary, as art' (p. 2). It is a rejoinder against the worldly and the over-literal approach to what counts as 'sacred', a quality determined for Homan by integrity, honesty, and motive of production (p. 3). Thus, for Homan, the sometime emphasis of art history on the sensationalist aspects of artists' lives obscures the appreciation of the source and inspiration of their art. At the same time, work on a religious theme may not be sacred art if its motive is to undermine devotional responses to what it purports to represent.

For readers of this journal, the chapter on puritan aesthetics is most germane, focusing heavily on the Quakers as case study, and most familiar, as some of the evidence and arguments in the book have been rehearsed in earlier volumes of *Quaker Studies*. However, placed in a wider journey through aspects of Christian art across time (earlier chapters focus on the 'The Beautiful and the Holy', 'The Fear of God' and 'The Gothic' and later ones on 'Spirituality and Conscience' and 'Morality and Christian Art'), Homan's analysis of Quaker aesthetics or the hedge-breaking art of Joseph Southall gains a richer texture and, all too rarely in Quaker studies, contextualises Quaker devotion within wider movements.

Homan wishes to recover the sacred function in sacred art and feels Christianity has been particularly easily plundered by the critical tradition of Western thought (p. 164). Galleries are perceived as a moral problem and 'bad taste', when driven by the principles of sacred art, defended. Christian art rises above the world, quite literally in terms of churches like St Bartholomews in Brighton or the statue of *Christ the redeemer* above Rio de Janeiro. Homan claims that 'Size matters: it affirms or engenders confidence' (p. 170). But Christian art also 'rises above' because of its higher purpose, often visible in its textures or materials, ultimately in the choices made out of the devotion of its artists. In this way, bold Shaker architecture and plained Quaker aesthetic are still highly visible responses to the holy. They rise above in their own ways. What is also crucial, Homan argues, is that images and furnishings

need to raise devotion rather than unsettle it: Homan ends the book suggesting that 'the Quaker notion of resting the spirit provides the clue to the relationship of visual harmony and devotional purpose. It is achievable for those of different orientations to piety as much in a richly ornamented sanctuary as in a simple meeting house' (p. 173).

The book contains fourteen plates, a useful glossary, a list of works cited and a gazetteer of buildings and artefacts of interest, mostly in England but throughout Europe and including some in the USA. As always, Ashgate books are expensive, but also well-chosen and well-produced. Here, the argument is both provocative and compelling and very much worth our time.

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