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DeBoer's "Visual arts in the worshiping church" (Book Review)

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Book Reviews



DeBoer, L.J. (2016). *Visual arts in the worshiping church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 298 pp. \$24.00 ISBN 9780802869517

In *Visual Arts in the Worshipping Church*, Lisa DeBoer, professor of art at Westmont College, examines the use of visual art in Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches from a sociological perspective. Her “emphasis is on the human communities, both inside and outside our churches, that have shaped the dialogue between the visual arts and the church.” DeBoer focuses the study on “painting, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, digital media, media, installations, and, to some extent, architecture,” and she primarily examines churches located in Michigan for the study.

The first part of the book provides a description of the assumptions, practices, successes, and struggles of visual art in the three primary streams of Christianity: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. As is to be expected, the Orthodox and Catholic traditions displayed a rich tradition of using visual arts in worship. A true strength of the book is the description of changes in the value and purpose of visual art in the American Catholic Church post-Vatican II. This section would be very enlightening for readers who have a euro-centric understanding of Catholic art that revolves around the Gothic and Baroque styles. In Protestant churches, DeBoer discovered the use of art in worship was usually driven by an enthusiastic congregation member or members, and the artistic values of the members were shaped just as much by secular education as by theological concerns.

The second part of the book moves to a compare and contrast section, where DeBoer takes each of the three streams examines them against six concepts: Universal & Local, Story & Presence, Public Worship & Private Devotion, Institutionalization & Professionalization, Naturalism & Abstraction, and Inculturation & Enculturation.

Overall, the book is well researched, well written, and understandable to both general readers and visual arts specialists. This reviewer was surprised by the relatively few illustrations in the book, and no illustrations were in color. Also, at times DeBoer gave a detailed description of a piece of art or architecture without a corresponding illustration. These are minor caveats in an otherwise excellent work. This book is recommend for colleges and universities, especially those with extensive worship or art programs.

Reviewer

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