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Greg Sennema
Wilfrid Laurier University, gsennema@wlu.ca

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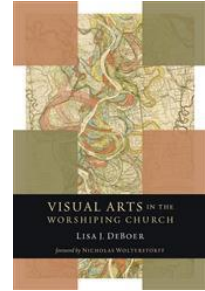
Book Review

Visual Arts in the Worshipping Church

Lisa J. DeBoer

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans

ArtPrize is an annual international art competition held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and in 2015 it was the most attended public art event in the world. I was able to view some of the ArtPrize exhibits in October 2016, and while moved by much of the art itself, I was also fascinated by its placement throughout the city. Nearly 1500 pieces of two- and three-dimensional art were on display at 170 venues accessible by the public, including banks, bars, churches, galleries, parks – even an auto body shop. ArtPrize is described (on its website) as an event where “anyone can find a voice in the conversation about what is art and why it matters.” Lisa J. DeBoer includes a brief mention of ArtPrize in her book *Visual Arts in the Worshipping Church*. She refers to Robert Putnam’s concept (contextualized in Christian congregations by sociologist Mark Chaves) of *bridging* when she describes the ArtPrize involvement of two Grand Rapids Protestant churches. For these two churches, ArtPrize can be seen as creating a bridge with the general public beyond their congregations.



This view – that a Christian congregation would utilize art as a means to make connections with anyone outside the congregation – is perhaps recognizable to many Protestant Christians. Christians from Orthodox or Roman Catholic traditions, however, may have a different perspective. One of the main points of *Visual Arts* is that there is a broad range of views of the role and place of art within the Christian church and its expressions of worship. DeBoer describes how the three major families of Christian churches – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant – view notions of church and notions of art, with the aim of helping readers discern how the visual arts can be practically, faithfully, and fruitfully incorporated into congregational worship.

DeBoer is Professor of Art at Westmont College, and has written and presented on various aspects of art, art history, and liturgy, and how they are connected to private and corporate worship in a variety of Christian traditions, although most predominantly within North American Protestant Reformed churches. The book addresses a problem that DeBoer discovered when working with students to create works of art that portrayed how the Westmont community worshiped. Despite a tacit agreement on the goal of introducing art into worship, it soon became clear that there were varying opinions on the approach that could or should be taken.

There are many biblical and theological rationales to support the use of visual arts in worship, and DeBoer devotes Part 1 of the book (titled *Description*) with chapters describing Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant notions of art within worship. Orthodox churches, for example, invest their energy into the visual arts through icons reinforced by liturgical practice, which as artistic expressions are not intended to portray the gospel story as personal or local idioms. Rather, the point of icons is to *inculturate* the “local idioms into God’s universal kingdom” manifested in tradition, so that we as Christian worshipers are adapted to God’s kingdom. For Roman Catholic churches, DeBoer describes a vision for the

arts that is informed by church documents (in particular the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*) and expressed through liturgical and sacramental procedures. And finally for Protestant churches, DeBoer suggests that within a landscape of widely divergent Protestant groups, and despite an absence of tradition, documents, or strong liturgy, there is nonetheless "some underlying logic" to the Protestant approach to the visual arts in worship. Art-committed Protestant churches will typically have the leadership and financial capacity to support an arts program, and will usually thrive in well-educated, larger urban areas. "Whereas every Orthodox congregation, no matter how remote, will have its icons," DeBoer summarizes, "and every Catholic church, no matter how rural, will have a few basic images and the necessary liturgical objects, the more rural and less educated a Protestant church, the less likely the visual arts will be seen as relevant to the life of the church" (p.152).

Having described the need for a biblical and theological rationale for the use of the visual arts within worship, DeBoer follows with Part 2 (titled *Discernment*), contending that this rationale *alone* is not sufficient grounds to launch a meaningful arts program. Beyond theology, DeBoer argues there are also social and cultural considerations in both our congregations, *and* the various art worlds that surround us. Within each of the three families of the Christian church, DeBoer asks how the visual arts help express a congregation's ideas of their purpose, both as individual members and as congregations. This question is addressed in Part 2 through six broad themes. For example, *Story and Presence* (chapter 5) illuminates the spectrum of congregations that celebrate "the old, old story" on one end, and "God with us" on the other. Story-oriented churches may exclude visual art altogether, while presence-oriented churches may incorporate art into worship to support the experience of God's presence.

Visual Arts is part of the "Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies" series, and for many readers, will likely live up to the series' aim of "stimulating worship renewal in Christian congregations." Drawing upon her wide range of knowledge and experience, DeBoer successfully paints a picture of the sociological and community-based influences on our ideas of the visual arts, beyond the theological or historical perspectives. Less successful is DeBoer's attempt to utilize the visual metaphor of a topographical map, with ecclesiastical land masses and water features affecting the topographies of the visual arts in the worshipping church. The analogy is described in the introduction, but is not taken up in a meaningful way through the remainder of the book.

A strength of this book is the comprehensive research of the three Christian family traditions, supported by appropriate texts and specific examples from a variety of Christian congregations. DeBoer's specificity is intentional and perhaps necessary – she locates her descriptions and experiences in lower western Michigan. I occasionally wondered if examples from other parts of North America, if not the rest of the Christian world, might have significantly affected her intentions (although readers could also consult other books, such as William Dyrness' *Senses of the Soul*). How, for example, have the practices and approaches of more recent Christian immigrants shaped the role of visual arts within worship? Likewise, DeBoer includes a limited number of image reproductions and photographs to help support some of her points, but not others. Understanding her rationale of image inclusion could have been helpful.

Despite what the title may lead some people to anticipate, this book does not offer any practical tips on how to create a banners or colour or lighting considerations for artistic

pieces. This book will work well in the classroom where the focus is on visual arts in both distant and recent church history, or in discussions of theological aesthetics. It will be especially helpful to Protestants who love art and who strive to incorporate the visual arts into their worship services and spaces. DeBoer succeeds in describing, summarizing, and reminding her readers of the elements that distinguish the approaches to the visual arts by different traditions, and how our congregational life and worship will be enriched through a better understanding of different approaches to art.

Greg Sennema
Librarian, Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo, Ontario