

BOOK REVIEW

The Art of the Sublime: Principles of Christian Art and Architecture, Roger Homan (Ashgate Publishing Limited 2006), 213 pp, £50.00 hbk

The Art of the Sublime reassesses the principles of ecclesiastical art and architecture, in order to trace a lineage of the visual arts within Christianity as an aesthetic guided by morality and belief. From Illuminated manuscripts to Shaker furniture, from the Medieval revivalism of Arts and Crafts to puritan iconoclasm, to expressions of 'popular' religion and above all, to the rivalry of gothic, classical and baroque, integrity becomes a key term applied to conventional aesthetics.

The book is therefore premised upon the founding value, within art and architecture, of the sacred before all aesthetic values, or rather that 'true' aesthetic values are intrinsically wedded to an artistic and functional integrity rooted in Christian devotion. Homan associates such a stance with Ruskin, for whom truthfulness and steadfastness of spirit were as much a feature of genuine artistic expression as imaginative and formal qualities. It is this association of beauty with morality that Homan's book aims to reclaim.

In his accomplished discussion of the gothic, particularly, the direction of his project becomes explicit. Gothic emerges as the exemplar *par excellence*, standing as it does in Homan's view for aspiration, for integrity of spirit, and for aesthetic principles of 'truth to materials'. Indeed, as Homan reminds us, for Pugin it represented the truest artistic expression of theological truth. Thus the guiding presence of both Pugin's and Ruskin's principles of morality in art is apparent throughout.

Hand-in-hand with such principles is a sense of art not as an end in itself but as the means to an end. Homan settles on the icon as the supreme example of this principle, as an aesthetic that resists all art critique and is interested only in questions of integrity. Icons function at a spiritual rather than material level, and when displayed as works of art lose all purpose; indeed, he argues, they cease to be icons at all.

In criticism, for so comprehensive a study there is a marked absence of art beyond the 1960s. In fact, Homan displays an evident distaste for contemporary expressions of religious themes, in favour of more traditional forms. This devalues the plurality of experiences of art and undermines what he later upholds as the primary principle of visual images within a context of faith – the extent to which they are expressive of the religious experience of the user.

Furthermore, though the art discussed is considered in terms of, for example, beauty or holiness, the sublime as a category is rarely touched upon – a strange omission considering the title of the book. Even when, in the conclusion, Homan introduces Hegel's distinction of pagan art as the art of the beautiful and Christian art as the art of the sublime, he neglects to mine the richly contentious quality of this difference as a benchmark against which to form a discussion. No doubt Homan feels that the presence of the sublime is implied throughout, but considering its ubiquity in art historical narratives of beauty and sanctity a case could be argued for its more explicit inclusion.

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