

Kuyper's Influence on and Thinking about Art

By

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Editorial Comment: The proposition of this author is that Kuyper had more influence on Protestant *thinking* about art than on its *practice*. However, his thoughts about liturgy have strongly determined the architecture of Gereformeerde² (Kuyperian Reformed) church buildings after the Doleantie.

Apart from catechism sermons about the Second Commandment, after three centuries of silence, suddenly Kuyper pops up, whose great merit was that he brought art back on the map. The sober church buildings of his day had whitewashed walls with hard wooden pews for the sitting congregation that was ascetic in spirit, avoiding both world and culture.

But had it always been that way? Or was this a mystical and pietistic distortion of Calvin's thought? By going back to the original version of Calvinism, Kuyper wanted to demonstrate that Calvin definitely had a positive attitude with respect to both art and culture. He wanted to integrate this culture-friendly perspective with his new Neo-Calvinist thought world. He exerted himself to free the world of the great prejudice that Calvinism had always and everywhere suffered from cultural poverty.

Art Expert

Kuyper is not thought of as an expert in art, but, judging from the facts, he actually was. For him the term "art" comprised all art forms from poetry to sculpture to music. He did not pay much attention to music, dance or theatre, but as a student at the University of Leiden the young Kuyper occupied himself with literature as well as theology. Even as professor at the Free University³ in Amsterdam that he himself had established, he lectured not only in theology but also in literature and

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² Since there are a number of Reformed denominations in the Netherlands, for the sake of clarity, references to the Kuyperian branch will be in its original Dutch: "*Gereformeerde*."

³ Popularly known as "the VU," itself an acronym for "Vrije Universiteit."

aesthetics. He considered the latter so important that it was a required course for students of theology. That would be progressive even now! Bilderdijk⁴ was his great hero and he himself as prolific author was a master at original literary imagery. Even sculpture art drew his interest. On his travels he visited major museums; he corresponded with the impressionistic painter Jozef Israels. He also published a book with gravure sketches of Biblical scenes by modern painters, among them Maxs Liebermann and Ilya Repin. He explained his ideas about art in the greatest detail in his two publications, *Het Calvinisme en Kunst*⁵ (1888) and in his *Stone Lectures* (1899).

A Cohesive Worldview

In an 1898 essay, he praised the 1831 tombstone of Pope Pius VII, sculpted by the Iceland-Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, that he saw on one of his journeys at St. Peter in Rome. The Pope is shown seated in the centre with allegorical human female figures on both sides. The woman on the right is dressed in a lion skin, symbolizing *fortitude* or divine power. Full of emotion and faith, she looks up, her arms crossed over her heart. The other woman, flanked by an owl and with a book or Bible in her hand, symbolizes *sapientia* or divine wisdom. She looks down in contemplation. Why would this have touched Kuyper? Not only because this Lutheran artist had contributed to this Catholic stronghold, but certainly also because these two women united emotion and reason, faith and power, wisdom and the Word and a focus on both heaven and earth. In Kuyper's own thought, this bond between all these elements played an important role.

In 1863, as a young liberal pastor in Beesd, the Netherlands, he came under the influence of a group of dissatisfied church goers. Even though they were simple villagers and farm hands, they had a broad Bible knowledge, an experiential faith and an integrated worldview that was rooted in Calvin's theology. This led to a significant turnaround in Kuyper's thought that put him on the path towards an orthodox faith and an integrated world view with a Calvinist signature. All his knowledge, convictions and activities united themselves herein to form a cohesive whole. The basis for this integrated whole forms the idea that Christ is the sovereign Lord of everything and everyone, and that His reign comprises the

⁴ Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831) was a famous and influential Dutch Christian poet, historian, lawyer and linguist.

⁵ Translation: *Calvinism and Art*.

preservation of the divine ordinances that the Creator has appointed for each sphere of life or culture—e.g., the church, the state, religion, the aesthetic sphere and art. Every sphere is irreducible to another, obeys its own laws and matures only when it can develop independently and in full freedom. The uniqueness of Kuyper's framework is that art is an inseparable part of it and that it stamps the aesthetic sphere as a necessary element of human life.

Antithesis and Common Grace

A second basic element in Kuyper's theology of art is the threesome of creation, fall and redemption. Art is a component of God's good creation, but can also fall into the grip of sin in various ways—impure, untrue, idolatry, propaganda, etc. Abused genres and styles can subsequently always be turned into the positive. Calvin's reaction to evil in art is characterized by carefulness: no art in church and only versified psalms. His reaction came to expression in his idea of the antithesis.

He turned against the Pantheism of his day as well as against the excessive fantasy and the subjectivity in the reflection of reality that the idealistic school within the aesthetics of his time propagated. For Kuyper the reality and the beauty of creation were an objective given. He regarded it the calling of art to reflect the beauty in nature in a way that even surpassed that beauty, thus having art anticipate the glory of the future. This left him "to ascend through nostalgic memory of lost beauty up to the anticipation of the coming glory." However, he never fully developed this programme of art concretely, because he considered that the task of artists themselves. Similarly, he developed the antithesis in art in a very limited way, for for him the most fundamental issue here was that other concept of common grace.

Common Grace

Like Calvin, Kuyper distinguished between the special and the general or common grace of God. Special grace was in reference to the salvation of people; the general, in reference to the preservation of the world after the fall into sin, for both believers and unbelievers, so that an honourable and flourishing human life is possible for both groups. In his commentary on Genesis 4:20, Calvin said that the free arts are a gift from God that He distributes to all people without distinction. Then he added, "This radiation of the divine light was, according to the lessons of experience, often more powerful amongst unbelieving nations."

Kuyper's theories about art continued to build on the above and enabled him to recognize Greek art as a high climax in art in which the knowledge of and working out of natural laws of art could flourish. This explains also why Kuyper was open to all traditions of art from all times and all corners of the earth and that he was not looking for a specifically Christian art. For this reason he did not offer a further working out in the field of art of his idea about the influence of worldviews on human doing or thinking as he did for scholarship.

Not His Own Style

The second high point in art was for Kuyper the art of the Renaissance in which a new art developed on basis of the revival of classic values. The central idea here was that the beauty in art had to transcend the ordinary, material and sinful world in order to reflect something of a higher and better world. It should be clear that in his own thoughts about good art, Kuyper reached back to the Renaissance.

The type of art that flourished in the Netherlands of the Golden Age was a third art climax for him. He was of the opinion that this art flourished due to the influence of Calvin. First of all, Calvin freed art from the grip of the church and, secondly, as a result, art could now direct itself to a broad range of new subjects such as landscape, still life and portrait. Ordinary daily life was revalued upwards to a subject worthy of art.

Kuyper emphasized further that Calvinistic art does not need to look for its own style. That is what he praised in Calvin's vision and thus connected with the art of the seventeenth century. But it is a question whether Kuyper did full justice to Calvin, for it can be said that the music of the versified Psalms definitely introduced something new and unique, even under the supervision of the reformer himself. The Psalm melodies certainly adjusted to the idiom of the day, but the use of only notes by the count of one and two in order to promote the necessary dignity of the rhythmic music was really completely new. Here we must remember that people were accustomed to the unearthly Gregorian chant, because of which the revolutionary Calvinist church music was compared to polka dance melodies.

With respect to the art of sculpture, Calvinist artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries line up with contemporary developments, apart from the ban on art in church and on depictions of God and saints. Calvin was of the opinion

that paintings could have two functions, namely, teaching and entertainment. Now the interesting thing is that not only were the Biblical presentations of the time didactic in nature, but the emerging genres also aimed at art that presented ordinary daily reality. A landscape was never just a landscape and a still life never just a still life. Via symbolic elements these works always had a deeper level of meaning with a religious or moral message. As far as I have been able to determine, Kuyper was not aware of this symbolic content of seventeenth-century art and thought of it as a form of realism.

Let us take as example the didactic content of seventeenth-century art a Biblical scene by the Calvinistic artist Jan Victor entitled *Abraham neemt afscheid van Lot en zijn familie* (1655-1665).⁶ After quarrels set in between Abraham's and Lot's shepherds because of lack of fresh grazing for both herds, Abraham suggests to Lot that they go their separate ways. Lot is given the first choice where he wants to go. "The entire country is open to you," says the generous Abraham with a broad sweep of his arm. Despite the bickering in the background, Lot and his family are quietly enjoying their meal-- something that is not actually found in the Biblical text-- Lot moves into the background, his hands on his stomach.

This scene speaks volumes. His wife snickers because of Abraham's foolishness. Lot chooses the best part of the country and ends up in Sodom and Gomorrah. The dog as a symbol of faithfulness stands next to Abraham. Thus this work presents the broad way of greed over against the narrow way of generosity as a warning to the observer.

Liturgy and Art in the Church

The Doleantie of 1886 and the merger in 1896 of various parts of the Reformed family of churches into the Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands, the denomination founded by Kuyper, called for a renewed reflection on liturgy, church architecture and interior design. Between 1897 and 1901, as spiritual leader of this new denomination, Kuyper published 70 articles in his paper *De Heraut*, supported in 1911 by yet another 40 in his book *Onze Eeredienst*.⁷ Here Kuyper drew upon the liturgy accepted by the Synod of Dordt of 1681/1619, which

⁶ Translation: "Abraham takes leave of Lot and His Family."

⁷ Possible translation: *Our Liturgy*.

meant that he chose for a broader liturgy in place of the sermon-centred worship service to which people were accustomed. He also allowed for a certain freedom in the local and weekly flow of the order of service.

Kuyper regarded the worship service above all as a gathering of the faithful who wanted to meet God in mutual fellowship and worship Him. In addition, they wanted to be strengthened and edified in their faith. “Then,” he said, “the righteous believer will stand in an almost mystical experience: He will feel the throbbing of his love for the brothers in his heart, put the things of this world aside and have his soul reach out to the above.” This for Kuyper was the heartbeat of the service. It is therefore no surprise that he spoke with appreciation about the Anglican liturgy with its accent on veneration and worship. The reference here is to the *traditional* Anglican liturgy, not the high version of the Oxford Movement with its smells and bells. Externalities like “kneeling, smells, Ave Marias and Paternosters” would only divert worshippers from an inner meeting with God.

A comparable field of tension appears in Kuyper’s thought about art in church. On the one hand, he is not hostile to art in church, but on the other hand he also found that “the external beauty may not suppress the internal.” In other words, he approaches art and sculpture with a degree of restraint, even though one would think that these elements, as good creational gifts, could also contribute to the internal experience of God. However he took it all, it was definitely a great step forward that Kuyper opened the door for art in church in the form of stained-glass windows, murals, painted organ panels and other decorative elements.

Church Architecture

From the Doleantie a great need arose for new church buildings. During the subsequent 50 years, no fewer than 400 Gereformeerde churches were built. Based on the idea of the church service as a gathering of believers, Kuyper propagated a basic form of a half circle like an amphitheatre, so it was easy to see each other and the preacher. The pulpit, and thus the Word, stood in a central position. No special room was reserved for pews of the notables, for in church all members were under the Word without distinction. In keeping with his sphere sovereignty theory, he left further details to the architects. Thus there arose in time a typical Gereformeerde church architecture at the hands of a number of prominent

Gereformeerde architects. Originally, these associated themselves with the neo-styles of the day, but later with the Amsterdam School. The Wilhelmina Church in Dordrecht is a typical example of Kuyper's conceptions. Here one finds the stained-glass window with the parable of the sower.

That these architects were not required to be members of the denomination is clear from the construction history of the Keizersgracht Church in Amsterdam. At the insistence of Kuyper, who served a chairman of the building committee, non-Gereformeerde architects were also invited to render sealed contracts. Eventually the contract was awarded to architect G. B. Salm. He enriched the church as an elegant neo-Renaissance Gereformeerde cathedral. An interesting detail is that Kuyper ordered collapsible pews from America because of their suitability for sitting in a respectful manner.

Influence

As we look at the influence of Kuyper's ideas about art, we must determine that, apart from church buildings and art in church, he hardly generated any new activity in motion. It is difficult to imagine that his preference for an idealizing beauty would have any chance of success in the art climate of the twentieth century.

What was more influential were Kuyper's theological and theoretical ideas about art. Philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd further developed the theories of the sovereignty and the aesthetic spheres and the art historian Hans Rookmaker, the father of this writer, the connection of worldviews and art expressions. The aesthetician Calvin Seerveld of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, built on Kuyper's vision of the importance of an art sphere that could freely develop and is *sine qua non* of the aesthetic sphere in human culture. All this, however, still did not mean that in the Protestant milieu there was a warm heart for art and beauty, but Kuyper did set into motion a positive and open vision on art and culture that eventually developed further in fits and starts. Even now attention for art is slowly but surely gaining ground within the Gereformeerde orbit.

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APPENDIX

Trinity: Kuyper Revisited

Tapestry

To celebrate the 140th anniversary of the VU in 2020, a work of art by Wafae Ahalouch was hung in the VU auditorium. Named “Trinity: Kuyper Revisited,” this tapestry beautifully portrays Kuyper’s idea of unity and cohesion in created reality. The artist was touched by Kuyper’s statement that “God created a magical connection between head, heart and hand.” The tapestry displays the contours of the heads of a man and a woman, an anatomical heart and two hands that hold a pen and draw lines that extend into a far distance. The drawing is placed in a square surrounded by a yellow border within a pentagon with three-pointed offshoots at both the top and bottom. The points directed to the outside with the black-white stripes or spheres create a dynamic radiation effect that is strengthened by the orange lines and cloudlets. This artwork brings praise to Kuyper’s involvement in all of reality with head, heart and hands.