

No matter what an author writes or a painter depicts, if placed within the scope of “Bible” or “altarpiece,” what has been created is automatically conjugated against a context of “scripture” or “icon.” Whether in harmony or in conflict with the meaning of the sacred “texts” referenced, being placed within such “sacred structures” guarantees a certain tone and a set of interpretive dynamics. In this regard, there is an interesting grouping of artists in the exhibition who use either the altarpiece or the book as an idea or structure within which to explore ideas.

An exploration that leverages itself, so to speak, off of the form of the altarpiece or the book possesses an important additional dynamic for contemporary artists who are interested in exploring religious content. Namely, many artists feel the desire to explore faith through the great traditional formats, but they have, in fact, no real social contexts for doing so. The Church has long ceased to be a significant patron of artists. Even more so, American Protestantism has often seen art as the enemy. Furthermore, there is very little sense of a community with an imagery integral to its liturgy or congregational worship. Although today images are certainly present in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, these are mostly works made in earlier times when the church was still a vigorous patron of the arts, or ones that are merely imitations of older traditions, and so not requiring a creative artist’s fullest abilities. Thus, abandoned by their religious culture and working without a liturgical context for their art, artists find themselves free to experiment more personally with traditional forms.

In this light, several artworks in the exhibition not only deepen the themes already discussed, but also become interesting in terms of this type of personal experimentation. Tyrus Clutter takes on the altarpiece form and the dilemma of context directly in his *Altarpiece of St. Francis of L’Abri* (entry 33). Here, it is the polyptych rather than the diptych or triptych that serves the artist’s interests. Clutter has done a series of works in which he addresses a long and deep pattern in the history of Christianity. Noting that it was common in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions for artists to create altarpieces devoted to specific saints, venerating them for their faith and miraculous acts through contemplation and imitation, Clutter makes modern-day altarpieces devoted to twentieth-century Christians who have also done significant things, but who will never be sainted. That is, they will never be sainted in the Christian tradition from which Clutter comes, which is Protestantism. As he observes in his artist statement, since the Reformation, that branch of the church has veered toward a piety of *sola scriptura*, which has meant not only favoring the Bible over tradition, but also the word over imagery. Indeed, this part of the church has rejected imagery as a legitimate language for both theology and the liturgy, just as it has rejected saints as spiritual mentors and intercessors.

Nonetheless, Clutter tries to bridge these two worlds by creating a modern hagiography, devoting his altarpieces to, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, T.S. Eliot, Flannery O’Connor, and, in the work featured in *The Next Generation*, Francis Schaeffer, who founded the L’Abri Fellowship in Switzerland. All of these “saints” are known to us through their writings, not their miracles, and so Clutter has created small devotional altarpieces with imagery appropriate to each of them. In the *Altarpiece of St. Francis of L’Abri*, he has lined the individual compartments with written words, for Schaeffer was not only a Reformed Protestant theologian who deeply embraced the principle of *sola scriptura*, but he was also a writer who significantly impacted Evangelicalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Schaeffer is best known for his writings, as well as for his gifts as a teacher and preacher. Thus, in the open state of Clutter’s altarpiece we see him seated in the left

wing, and standing, with arms gesturing, in the right. Surrounding him are his own words, an exegesis of The Word.

A strict Calvinist like Schaeffer sees humans as totally depraved, or naked before God. In the center panel of the altarpiece (as well as twice in its closed state), we see the saint standing in naked application. Above him are two mysterious chambers. One holds a pair of stoppered vials containing what appears to be the bread and wine. While the uppermost chamber is empty, its background, one without words, is a richly abstract flowing of deep red and gold, an ecstatic passage signifying the ineffable. Thus, two chambers, one “empty” and one with the bread and wine, hover above a naked Schaeffer, whose right arm is raised up, creating a central hierarchical axis that rises to transcendence and mystery.

Clutter’s work makes for a fascinating project. For although Protestants think that they do not hold to a theology of Saints, Intercession, and Veneration, anyone raised in a Protestant church knows full well that there are modern, desecralized versions of such traditions, which function psychologically very much like the originals. One need only read David Morgan’s study of Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ* to discover the unacknowledged surrogates of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.<sup>85</sup> The interesting challenge for an artist like Clutter is to discover an iconography that suits the non-sacramental nature of Protestant spiritual genealogy, while at the same time celebrating it with an aesthetic of spiritual beauty that Protestantism itself often suppresses.

Several other artists in the exhibition also employ the altarpiece form as a way to bridge the distance between personal expression and traditional, community-based imagery. In *The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels and Saints*, Rosemary Scott-Fishburn has translated Duccio’s monumental *Maestà* altarpiece (1308–11; fig. 11) into an impressive four-by-seven-foot copper relief drawing (entry 34). In Duccio’s masterpiece, the centrality of the Virgin and Christ Child enthroned is asserted. But also crucial to the composition is the gathering of prophets, saints, and martyrs that surrounds the holy pair—in short, a kind of spiritual genealogy that serves as a host of witnesses to the Incarnation of God in Christ through the person of the Virgin Mary. This trans-historical assembly was made credible by Duccio’s innovative composition. The use of low-relief architectural framing sections, gold gilt, and Italianate late-Byzantine-style figuration work together to express an ancient holiness within what was at the time an innovative form of the altarpiece.

Although with Scott-Fishburn we are speaking of another modern appropriation—one suited to the twenty-first century—it is worth dwelling for a moment on the ideas embedded in Duccio’s early-fourteenth-century altarpiece. For only with some understanding of those visual ideas can we fully appreciate what is happening in Scott-Fishburn’s work. As Hans Belting has pointed out, “It has

FIGURE 11  
Duccio  
*Maestà* altarpiece (detail),  
1308–11  
Tempera on wood

