

Reviews and purchase information

Reviews

"*Aesthetics and the Divine* brilliantly illuminates the vibrant interface between aesthetic and religious dimensions of human experience through a rabbi's inspired dialogues with a painter, writer, and musician. Rabbi Cowen's creative engagement with these contemporary artists reveals how spirituality can enhance the power of the visual image, the emotional persuasiveness of the literary text, and the neurological impact of music. It is intellectually stimulating to follow the lively interchanges between a rabbi with a Ph.D. in philosophy and practicing artists addressing leading-edge aesthetic concepts. The book draws on Judaism's Chassidic tradition in ways that people of all faiths will find that it speaks to them. When I started to read this insightful book, I found it hard put it down."

Professor Mel Alexenberg, Author of *The Future of Art in a Postdigital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness*, *Photograph G-d: Creating a Spiritual Blog of Your Life*, and in Hebrew *Dialogic Art in a Digital World: Judaism and Contemporary Art*. Professor emeritus of art and Jewish thought at Ariel University, former professor at Columbia University and Bar-Ilan University, and research fellow at MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies.

"... beautiful, deep, and thoughtful."

Ilana Attia, Editor, *B'Or HaTorah*

"Rabbi Dr. Shimon Cowen's *Aesthetics and the Divine: Engaging Artists, Fostering Religious Art* represents several decades of his work engaging with a variety of artists. In this new book, Cowen offers a unique perspective on the intersection of Judaism and what he refers to as "high art," informed by his affiliation with Chabad Hasidism. His strong adherence to religious orthodoxy is apparent in *Aesthetics and the Divine* ... Cowen's exploration of the interface between aesthetics and Judaism is insightful and dynamic.

In chapter 1, Cowen offers a powerful philosophical argument for the importance of art in religion, and vice versa. Hegel and Adorno agree that beauty exists not in the universe but in human interaction with the universe. Cowen beautifully connects this idea to religion: in art, we create beauty through our interaction with the object, much as in religion, we create beauty through our interaction with worldly manifestations of the Divine and the practice of Divine ethical precepts. This statement powerfully articulates the importance of the symbiotic relationship between religion and art. In the rest of this chapter, Cowen's arguments on what makes art religious are Jewish-centric but nevertheless effective.

The middle three chapters detail Cowen's interactions with three individual artists and present an argument as to what makes their art religious. Chapter 2 focuses on painter Victor Majzner's "Images of Tanya," a series of twelve paintings from 2001-2002 each inspired by a section of *Tanya*, the eighteenth-century book of Hasidic mysticism .., Cowen's descriptions of each of the twelve paintings provide a clear picture of Majzner's work. His discussion of Majzner's use of symbolism, color, structure, and humor clearly elucidates the connection of the aesthetic and the religious in *Images of Tanya*.

Chapter 3 focuses on author Richard Freadman's 2003 book, *Shadow of Doubt: My Father and Myself* (Bystander Press), in which Freadman recounts his father Paul's life. According to Freadman, Paul failed to realize his full potential due to a lack of willpower, deepening depression, and tendency to put others' needs above his own. Cowen argues that Paul's failures resulted from the dissonance between the "decency of traditional religious, in this case, Jewish, origin, and a success ethic of modern capitalist origin" (76). In short, Paul would have led a happier life if he had lived as an orthodox Jew. This assertion inadequately addresses the psychological underpinnings of Paul's self-destructive decision-making by saying that they should have not been present in the first place. He

might have found greater happiness and fulfillment in traditional religious life, but his failures were surely due to deeper factors. For example, Cowen admits that Paul's propensity to worry excessively was likely a congenital psychological condition. Nevertheless, Cowen draws a fascinating and insightful parallel between Richard's relationship with Paul and the biblical account of Jacob's relationship with Abraham: just as Jacob "redeemed" Abraham (see Isaiah 29:22), Richard "redeemed" Paul by arguing in his book that he was a decent man despite his failings. Cowen's understanding of Richard's relationship with Paul through the lens of the commandment to "honor your father and mother" is insightful as well, demonstrating that Richard in fact gained religiously-based morals and attitudes through his father's decency.

Chapter 4 focuses on composer Felix Werder's "From the Straits," a setting of Psalm 118 for voice and piano. Cowen interprets Werder's use of twelve-tone technique in the piece as an antithesis to the Hellenistic concept of beauty which "models G-d on nature and on the human's natural sense and measure of harmony and resolution" (102). Whereas Pythagorean tonality models G-d on nature, atonality represents a transcendent G-d—"a smashing of the idols, including *all representations* of the transcendent Divine" (102) ...

In the final chapter, Cowen recounts an evolution in his thought: whereas he originally believed that Jewish "high art" could best be achieved by a return to traditional religion, his work with Majzner led him to believe that Jewish high art could be achieved through a "symbiosis...a fusion of skills of the artist with the spiritual knowledge of the teacher" (123-24). Each of the three artists created Jewish art through the process of developing deep Jewish knowledge. This new outlook suggests that artists of any religion should have deep knowledge of their religion to create meaningful religious art. Ultimately, this imperative is the universal message the reader should take away from *Aesthetics and the Divine*. Through the lens of Cowen's Hasidic worldview, the book powerfully demonstrates that connecting religion and art elevates our experience of both.

Aaron Klaus, Independent Scholar

Purchase information

Hard copies of *Aesthetics and the Divine – Engaging Artists, Fostering Religious Art* by Shimon Cowen is available in Australia from the publisher, Hybrid Publishers: www.hybridpublishers.com.au

It is also available from the Institute for Judaism and Civilization, which can ship internationally. Email shimoncowen@gmail.com to order.

It is available as an ebook on Amazon