

ARTS

THE ARTS
IN
RELIGIOUS
AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES

THIRTEEN
ONE
2001

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Sung Dam Hong

Having Noodle

1979; 90.9 x 65.1 cm.

See Jae Ho Gil, "Seeing God Through Minjung Art," page 20

The Work of Margaret R. Miles

by
Deborah J. Haynes

Deborah J. Haynes is Professor and Chair of Fine Arts, University of Colorado at Boulder. She is the author of *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, 1995) and *The Vocation of the Artist* (Cambridge, 1997), and the editor of *Opening Our Moral Eye* (Lindisfarne, 1996), a collection of essays and talks by artist and writer M. C. Richards. Her latest book, *Between the Book and the Screen: Meditations on the Vocation of an Artist*, is presently under review. She wishes to acknowledge Ivy Walker for her research assistance in the prodigious task of reviewing Margaret Miles' published work.

Since meeting her in 1984, Margaret R. Miles has been teacher, mentor, and friend to me. Under her tutelage, I studied the history of images within Christianity, Greek and Russian Orthodox icon traditions, and theories of the image within European and American cultures. I worked for two years as her research assistant. Over the past decade, she has provided me with a powerful example of how a feminist proceeds in public service and private life, in reconciling social and institutional responsibility with the creative drive. Margaret has encouraged me to take myself—and my yearning and vision—seriously. I owe a great debt to her, a debt that is related to both her scholarly work and personal identity. I am pleased to write this essay, which may be read as an homage or tribute. But writing these words, I hear her voice, urging me to analyze with a critical eye. I therefore hope that readers unfamiliar with her writing will find here both a generous and critical discussion; and that those who know the work will find new insight.

In what follows I address the question of what Margaret Miles has contributed to the interdisciplinary study of religion and the visual arts during more than two decades of sustained reading and writing. She has authored nine books and edited two; and she has published more than 50 articles, book chapters, and encyclopedia

essays. Margaret Miles is not a narrow scholar, but one who thinks comprehensively, responsibly, and across disciplinary boundaries. Her work might be compared to that of senior art historians David Freedberg and Barbara Stafford, who have written about the power of images in both historical contexts and contemporary culture, or to religion scholars such as John Dillenberger, who has published extensively on the theological interpretation of visual art. Miles is unique, however, in terms of the content of her work and the methodologies she has developed.

FROM THE LITERARY TO THE VISUAL

In terms of general content, Miles has carried out a sustained reading of primary written texts within the western Christian and literary traditions—ranging from Plotinus, Augustine, the early church fathers, Thomas Aquinas, and medieval and early modern devotional manuals, to modern and contemporary writers such as Carl Jung, Rainer Marie Rilke, and Toni Morrison. She has been an astute reader of images that define religious and moral values: catacomb paintings and architecture of fourth-century Roman churches; fourteenth-century Tuscan and other Renaissance paintings; sixteenth-century paintings and architecture; contemporary media and advertising images; and film. Miles consistently reads images in relation to texts; and her work is a sustained plea for training in how to read texts and interpret images in relation to their social and historical context. Her work builds on and carries forward the work of other contemporary critical theorists and philosophers, such as Jean Baudrillard, Jessica Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Frigga Haug, Luce Irigaray, Martha Nussbaum, and Craig Owens. Working within this broad context, Miles explores five interrelated themes in historical Christianity and in



contemporary culture: the body, its representation, and values about embodiment and carnal existence; the representation of women and the way

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gender issues are expressed in images; the nature of bodily and visual pleasure and delight; the role and function of beauty in human life; and cultivating moral responsibility for what we see and how we live, especially as this relates to valuing difference(s). In dealing with the body, for instance, she addresses issues of representation, the dichotomy between nude and naked bodies, and issues of difference and diversity related to gender, race and ethnicity, class, age, and sexuality. Similarly, her approach to the concept of beauty is complex, as she links it to morality, moral responsibility, and attitudes of care toward others and the earth.

A GENEROUS AND RESPONSIBLE METHOD

Certainly, much more could be said about Miles' sophisticated development of these themes, but undergirding all of them is her commitment to articulating clearly the methodological and theoretical foundations of her work. This is where I would identify her major

contribution to the study of religion and the visual arts. There are at least three ways of describing her methodology, two of which are explicitly related to how we read, the third to how we analyze what we see. All three of these interpretive practices can be adapted to interpret texts and images. In urging a "hermeneutics of generosity" combined with a "hermeneutics of suspicion," in cultivating a practice she calls "reading for life," and in consistently linking texts and images to their social and historical context, Miles shows us how to move carefully through the intersections of religion and the visual arts.

In all of her writing since the 1980s, Miles highlights the tension between a "hermeneutics of generosity" and a "hermeneutics of suspicion." Interpretation and understanding generally develop through a circular process. The nature of this hermeneutical circle has been variously described by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and others. Understanding evolves through a back-and-forth movement between reader and text, between parts of a text and the whole text, between the past and present. It involves awareness of both the presuppositions of the text and its author, as well as the presuppositions of the reader and critic. Interpretation should also take account of the historicity of both text and reader. In traditional textual interpretation, as Miles pointed out in her 1987 *Theological Education* article, a hermeneutics of generosity would lead to trying to understand critically the meaning of ideas presented in a text, but without particular attention to the author's political commitments, institutional

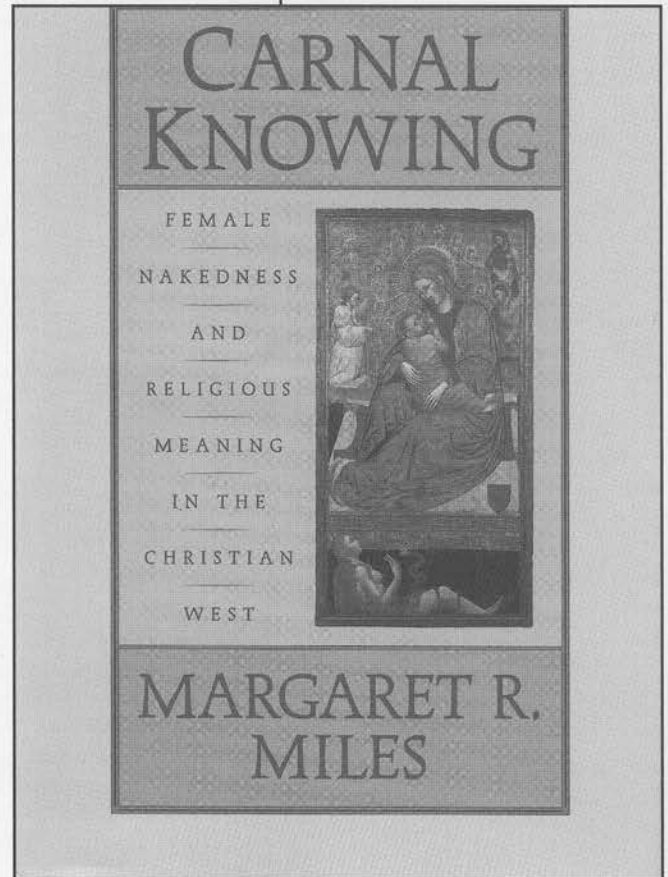


Image as Insight

VISUAL UNDERSTANDING
IN WESTERN CHRISTIANITY
AND SECULAR CULTURE

Margaret R. Miles

"Miles applies her keen eye and vital imagination to the uses of religious art in Christian Rome, the early Renaissance and the Reformation, as well as to the present."
— *New York Times Book Review*



loyalties, or assumptions about gender and other markers of difference. Such a hermeneutics of generosity would not attempt to articulate either the complex relationship of language use to implicit and explicit power structures or issues of racism, sexism, or gender asymmetry

in a text. By contrast, a hermeneutics of suspicion would address these issues directly. From her first book, *Augustine on the Body*, and her careful reading of his *Confessions* in *Desire and Delight*, to her more recent *Plotinus on Body and Beauty*, Miles' readings of Plotinus and Augustine provide readers with just such a complex interpretive framework. Her active and disobedient reading of Christian devotional manuals in *Practicing Christianity* provides another example of how a hermeneutics of suspicion may be

tempered by a hermeneutics of generosity.

In *Reading for Life* Miles offers a comprehensive methodology for approaching texts of all kinds. To read "for life" is to train the habit of attentive listening and critical evaluation that we need in all dimensions of life. There are a number of characteristics or "ingredients" of reading for life. We learn to identify the serious, gathering pictures of the world, including warnings, detailed information, and instruction about how to proceed in our daily lives. We practice (re)imagining the self, learning that each of us has a responsibility in relation to the crises and critical issues of our time. We learn to read generously, trying to hear what the author is trying to say. We acknowledge that being interconnected with all of life requires active moral responsibility, and we begin to

understand that reading is practice for living responsibly. We encounter and perceive great beauty, which is connected to generosity of spirit and responsibility. As Miles writes so eloquently in her 1996 Dubose lectures, "If perceptions of beauty really do produce spontaneous generosity which, in turn, augment responsibility, it is crucial to know how these effects might be generated and stimulated."¹ How we read affects how we live.

Throughout her books and articles, Miles sets forth a complex theory of representation. In *Image as Insight* she describes three non-sequential steps for training oneself to choose and use images. We must become aware of the messages we receive from images, question images presented in the media, and select and develop our own repertoire of images to aid in visualizing personal and social transformation. Images always convey

Certainly, much more could be said about Miles' sophisticated development of these themes, but undergirding all of them is her commitment to articulating clearly the methodological and theoretical foundations of her work. This is where I would identify her major contribution to the study of religion and the visual arts.

particular meanings to particular viewers and are as significant as verbal language in conveying senses of self, relationship, and community. We must understand, however, that the visual experience of historical viewers differed from that of people today in several ways. The understanding of and theories about vision were different. In the past, images were often experienced

in the context of worship and piety. There has also been a tremendous increase in the quantity and impact of visual images. In interpreting images, whether historical or contemporary, we need to look at their reception, and not only at the intentions of patrons, commissioners, or artists.

Miles acknowledges the power of images to provoke repression, but she also sets forth a nuanced perspective on the productive role of feeling, emotion, and the body in our responses to works of art. In *Carnal Knowing*, she most vividly articulates her view that an accurate understanding of the power of representation must include a "social theory of the subject," that is, a theory of how socialization, subjectification, and sexualization are developed using both verbal and visual languages. Building on the work of Michel Foucault, Miles argues that a repression hypothesis is inadequate for

pursued rather than imposed as external requirements."² Using Foucault's categories of weak and strong power, she emphasizes that whereas weak power uses threats and physical force, strong power stimulates and attracts the individual. Images function most effectively to attract and thereby regulate our desire, and scholars must be attentive to this process.

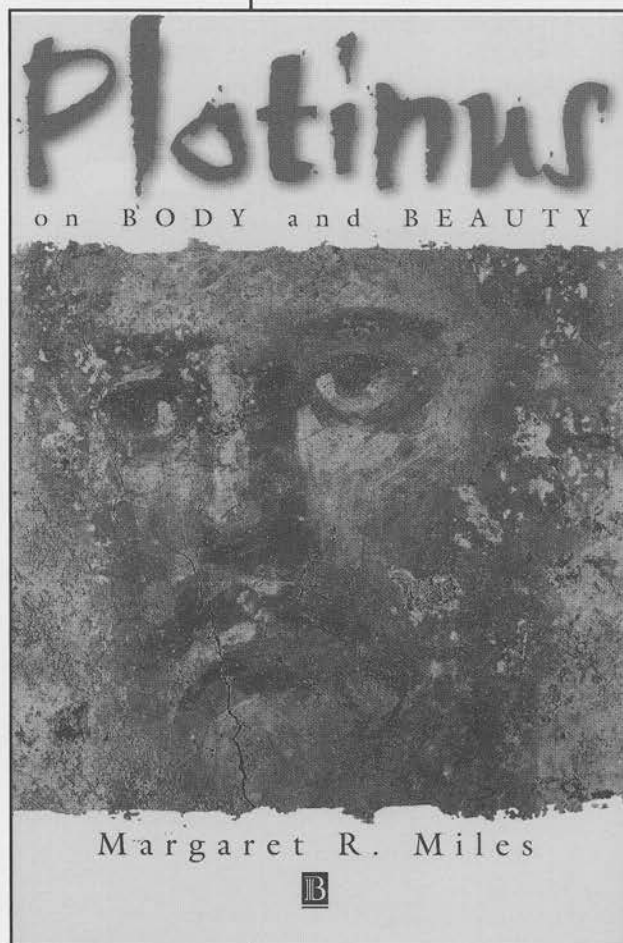
Rather than developing a theology of art or offering narrow theological interpretations of texts and visual images, Miles has developed a complex method for exploring differences between devotional image use and contemporary media spectatorship. She remains interested in how the term "image" functions critically in religious studies, how we can study the social effects of representation, and how images are manipulated. All images inform. They socialize and attract. Although the meanings of images change dramatically over time, their power over us does not. It therefore behooves us to develop sophisticated methods for interpreting images. A careful reading of her work demonstrates that Miles has done just that.

DISOBEDIENT READING

While I find so much that is compelling in Miles' writing, there are two areas in which I must exercise my own critical perspective. First, her focus on beauty, pleasure, and delight does not actively acknowledge that there is also a crucial role in our thinking and theorizing for "the ugly." Second, Miles's ideas about visual culture are based largely on "expressivist" theories of images, which developed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century

Her writing thus has profound implications for both our public and private lives. Read carefully, it invites us to cultivate within ourselves a generous and responsible spirit that actively enjoys life. Regardless of whether we work as artists or ministers, as scholars or critics, this invitation is a great gift—for which I am most grateful.

understanding either the power of images or the construction of women's subjectivity. Productive forces of attraction and regulated desire also help individuals to create a self. As Miles puts it, "Formation by attraction, or the creation and direction of an individual's desire, is effective, economical, and problematic because particular forms of socialization appear to be chosen and



Beauty,
Pluralism, and
Responsibility



Reading for Life

Margaret R. Miles

philosophy and which fail to account for the constructed character of experience.

A major problem with many aesthetic theories and theories of representation is that they value only one half of the beauty-ugliness dialectic.

In so doing, such theories miss the subversive potential and role of the ugly. "Ugly" is a powerful word, derived from the Old Norse *ugglig(r)*, which means fearful or dreadful. Nineteenth-century interest in "the ugly" as an aesthetic category had its origins with Victor Hugo's 1827 play *Cromwell*. Hugo insisted that to have a full cognition and rendering of nature, the ugly must be depicted, along with the beautiful. Karl Rosenkranz, in his *Asthetik des Hässlichen*, similarly asserted that the ugly should be considered because it is necessary to any understanding of beauty.

Contemporary artists such as Leon Golub and Nancy Spero have created compelling works that are decidedly ugly, while critics such as Dave Hickey always address beauty in relation to ugliness.

I see acknowledgment of the ugly in two places in Miles' writing: in a chapter in *Carnal Knowing* on the female body as grotesque, and in her chapter in *Seeing and Believing* on Leni Riefenstahl's memoir about her life and films. In "Carnal Abominations," Miles argues that because of women's participation in birth, sexual intercourse, and death, the figure "woman" becomes synonymous with the grotesque. While it is quite difficult to define, the concept of the grotesque implies confusion, discovery, and the existence of a standard against which it

is usually measured. Her descriptions of grotesque figuration—from a 12th century *Sheela-na-gig* corbel to a 15th-century painting of the martyrdom of St. Barbara—are vivid and disturbing, for she highlights how female bodies have been denigrated. But the process of managing women through such images is itself ugly, and not just grotesque.

In writing about Leni Riefenstahl's memoir, Miles focuses on how Riefenstahl represents Nazism as compelling and "beautiful." Yes, we see

Miles has been talking and writing about diversity for many years, arguing that our intellectual foundations and moral values have implications for the wider profession.

in Riefenstahl a life blinded by beauty, a life in which she chose not to acknowledge grave injustices while creating her art. Should we not add to such description a vivid acknowledgment that this is also ugly? I think it behooves us now more than ever to name the ugly when we see or hear it.

Although Miles' use of expressivist ideas is not essentialist and is qualified by attention to social and historical context, in general I do not find expressivism to be an adequate interpretative framework. Expressivist philosophers such as Susanne Langer write about how inner experience constitutes both self and world. Not only do images quite literally show the variety of embodied human experience, but visual language is also a mode of formulating feeling. As Miles describes Langer's view in *Seeing and Believing*, the value and function of art lies in its ability to educate our emotions for a wide range of feelings and perceptions. Langer's claims about art, experience, and emotion are in tension with the socially constructed character of experience. Certainly, Miles' offers a sustained analysis of particularities, especially around gender, race and ethnicity, class, and sexuality. But whenever we use the ideas of

philosophers such as Langer, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of their expressivism.

BECOMING ANSWERABLE

Margaret R. Miles uses scholarly work to address multiple issues concerning theological texts, visual images, and their relationship within specific cultural contexts. I believe that her primary contribution to the study of religion and the visual arts is her methodological clarity and the categories of analysis that she practices before the discerning reader. Reflecting about how much I appreciate and have learned from her reading and interpretive practices, I am reminded of Mary Daly's warnings about "Methodolatry." Daly defined methodolatry as a "common form of academic idolatry: glorification of the god Method; boxing knowledge into prefabricated fields, thereby hiding threads of connection . . ."³ Using her keen analytical eyes to uncover what has been hidden from view, Miles accomplishes the very opposite of methodolatry.

More than anything else, her writing contains sustained reflection about how we should live. What do interdisciplinary commitments mean in a life? How can we "become answerable for what we see," to paraphrase the title of her 1999 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion? Miles has been talking and writing about diversity for many years, arguing that our intellectual foundations and moral values have implications for the wider profession. Our present cultural context is one of religious pluralism. Whether dealing with individual and cultural differences, differences among religious traditions, or differences among disciplines, we should oscillate between acknowledgment of particularity and unity, between differentiation from and identity with "the other," in whatever guise we encounter otherness. Her writing thus has profound implications for both our public and private lives. Read carefully, it invites us to cultivate within ourselves a generous and responsible spirit that actively enjoys life. Regardless of whether we work as artists or ministers, as scholars or critics, this invitation is a great gift—a gift for which I am most grateful. ♦

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NOTES

1. Published as "Reading for Life: Hermeneutics of Generosity and Suspicion," *Sewanee Theological Review* 41/1 (1997) 19-58.
2. *Carnal Knowing, Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) 188.
3. In *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987) 82.