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“This collection of essays displays the fruit of John Walford’s labors through the work of scholars who have received his artistic insights and share his passion for close readings of visual imagery, clear expressions of doctrinal truth, and joyful experiences of aesthetic delight.”

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James Romaine and his fellow scholars have added a significant new volume to the select canon of books on art and faith. This is a fantastic book.”

NED BUSTARD, editor, It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God; editor, The Church History ABCs

JAMES ROMAINE (PhD, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York) is a New York based art historian. He is a co-founder of the Association of Scholars of Christianity in the History of Art as well as an associate professor and chair of the department of art history at Nyack College.

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Philip G. Ryken, President, Wheaton College

“Art as Spiritual Perception is a rich kaleidoscope of art historical essays all centered around one common theme of increasing importance today—the way in which artists’ views of the world, not least their religious beliefs, shape artistic perception and meaning. I cannot think of a more fitting tribute to the impressive work and legacy of John Walford.”

Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, coauthor, Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts; former senior member in philosophical aesthetics, the Institute for Christian Studies

“It is with great delight that I herald the arrival of Art as Spiritual Perception in honor of Dr. Walford. James Romaine and his fellow scholars have created a fitting work in tribute to Walford and—perhaps more importantly—have added a significant new volume to the select canon of books on art and faith. This is a fantastic book. The chapter on Van Gogh alone is worth the price of admission.”

Ned Bustard, editor, It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God

“This wide-ranging collection of essays by current colleagues and former students will be an encouragement and inspiration to all who love art and love God. It is a fitting testimony to the career of John Walford, whose life and work have been characterized by faithfulness to his guild, faithfulness to his students, faithfulness to his college, and above all, faithfulness to God.”

Lisa DeBoer, Professor of Art, Westmont College
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Jacob van Ruisdael, *View of Haarlem*. Late 1660s. Oil on canvas, 24 1/2" x 21 3/5". Kunsthau, Zurich. © 2011 Kunsthau Zürich. All rights reserved.
INTRODUCTION
You Will See Greater Things than These: John Walford’s Content-oriented Method of Art History

JAMES ROMAINE

John Walford’s art historical methodology may be described as seeing in pursuit of meaning. As evidenced in *Jacob van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1991) and *Great Themes in Art* (Prentice-Hall, 2002), he examines the artwork as a consummation of a process of perception by which invisible and inherent content is made manifest. Through a careful study of the art object’s formal and iconographic elements, as well as the historical, social, and religious context in which the work was created, Walford perceives and describes this essential significance. As a writer and educator, he has modeled this content-oriented method of perception, opening up a world of visual pleasure, intellectual contemplation, and spiritual substance to his readers and students.

In the introduction to *Jacob van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape*, which is based on his Cambridge University doctoral dissertation, Walford simultaneously describes the monograph’s objective and defends his own methodology. Although Walford does not draw direct correspondence between his own methodology and the creative process of perception that he ascribes to Ruisdael, he does address both with the same vocabulary. Walford argues that we can discover an artist’s mindset and method by examining his or her process of motif selection and method of representation. It may also be possible to learn something about a scholar by considering the subjects and methods of his scholarship. While there is not always an affinity between a scholar’s own worldview and that which he imputes to his artistic

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1 This essay’s title is taken from John 1:50.
2 This content-oriented method is distinguishable from form-, iconographic-, context-, biographic-, and market-oriented methods of art history.
subject, Walford’s strategy of meaningful seeing strongly parallels what he describes as Ruisdael’s process of perception.

Jacob van Ruisdael (c. 1628–1682) is widely recognized as the greatest Netherlandish landscape painter of the seventeenth century. Both Ruisdael’s father and uncle were painters. Ruisdael’s uncle, Salomon van Ruysdael, was and remains a highly acclaimed landscape painter. Ruisdael spent much of his artistic career in Amsterdam, after moving there in the mid-1650s. During his own lifetime, Ruisdael’s art was highly valued and praised; his reputation surpassed even that of his uncle.3

Ruisdael was a painter of landscapes. By contrast, his predecessors, including Ruysdael, painted scenes of human activity happening outdoors. In their work, the landscape elements remained contextual to the human subject. In Ruisdael’s art, the landscape becomes the subject; motifs such as trees, waterfalls, hills, and clouds, as well as architectural ruins and windmills, are the protagonists. The presence of human figures is distinctly minimized, leaving the processes of creation as the paintings’ subjects. While figures appear in Ruisdael’s paintings, they read in relation to the landscape.

Since there were critical and financial advantages to creating human-drama paintings, Ruisdael’s daring break with convention is significant. Furthermore, since the natural motifs that Ruisdael employed had previously functioned only in supporting roles to human activity, he had to develop new compositional structures that would move them into protagonist positions.4 He treated these motifs with a level of creative visual attention and tightness of painting such that a tree, hill, or cloud could successfully carry a painting. In this endeavor, Ruisdael’s use of color, composition, and technical method correlated to the reduction of the focus on human activity in his paintings of landscapes.5

3Walford notes that, in understanding the value placed on Ruisdael’s works, we must factor in that landscape paintings would not always match in value or prestige genre or history paintings (E. John Walford, Jacob van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991], 13).
4Walford’s Ruisdael monograph carefully traces these new motifs and composition, painting by painting.
5In his Great Themes in Art, Walford writes, “Unlike [Jan] van Goyen’s sketchy, monochromatic style, Ruisdael’s [method] favored greater detail, descriptive local color, and firmer compositional structure, all wrought with the eye of an acute observer” (E. John Walford, Great Themes in Art [Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2002], 311). Compared to the “tonalist” outdoor scenes of van Goyen, Ruisdael’s paintings of landscapes, such as View of Haarlem from the Dunes at Overeen, use color in a more developed method. In fact, Ruisdael needed color to have a more formally structural and visually active role in his paintings, since the viewer did not have a human drama to observe. (In the twentieth century, the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian would find color’s inherent substance and movement to be all that he needed, even dispensing with motifs such as trees from his paintings.)
The prominence Ruisdael gave to nature was unprecedented and unique in his time. Even Ruisdael’s most talented student, Meindert Hobbema, a first-tier painter of the “golden age,” failed to succeed Ruisdael as a true painter of landscapes. Hobbema’s paintings, when they don’t distinctly feature figures, often include domestic cottages and villages as surrogates for human activity in a way that is foreign to Ruisdael’s art. It would not be until the nineteenth century that artists would again address the landscape as the dominant subject of paintings such as we find it in Ruisdael’s art.

In the 1660s, Ruisdael, at the height of his talents and success, developed a method of landscape painting, exemplified by View of Haarlem from the Dunes at Overeen (late 1660s), that Walford describes as “richer in colour, more brilliantly illuminated and more expansive” as well as “more refined, diffuse, and less melodramatic in its concentration . . . combined with a warmer palette” than his previous work. In View of Haarlem Ruisdael applied this “unprecedented force and majesty” to a motif, a vision of Haarlem from the dunes, that he had initially developed a decade earlier.

The work’s title is somewhat misleading since Haarlem, where Ruisdael was born, is just discernible in the distance. This spacious painting’s most prominent motifs are clouds, fields, and the sunlight that connects them. Irregular patterns of light and shadow play over the geometric organization of the linen-bleaching fields. Much of this land had been reclaimed from the sea, and the viewer stands on the dunes that hold that water back. View of Haarlem is filled with signs of protection and prosperity that the Dutch credited to God’s providence. On the horizon stands the church of Saint Bavo, where Ruisdael would be buried in 1682; its spire connects earth and heaven.

In looking at View of Haarlem, one is struck by its rich visual detail. Ruisdael has achieved a highly convincing effect of time and place. The cumulous clouds are depicted with meteorological accuracy. The famous linen-bleaching fields are laid out with precision. The viewer has a sense of arriving at a fortuitous moment when the weather is

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6 An uninhabited landscape would have gone against contemporary conceptions of creation that found its meaning in relation to the wisdom and majesty of the Creator and the human beings to whom he entrusted creation.
7 Walford, Jacob van Ruisdael, 120.
8 Ibid.
changing from overcast to sunshine. He or she is made to feel as if
being, at once, a local (someone who belongs to this landscape) and a
traveler who is encountering this sight for the first time.

However, as Walford observes, “The more closely an image
approximates to natural appearances, the more easily one can over-
look the modes of perception that inevitably influence the transfor-
mation of landscape into art.”9 In fact, *View of Haarlem* is calculatingly
composed and harmoniously combined, a constructed scene based
on acute observation of the place. Although Ruisdael demonstrates
a sensitivity to the effects of light that anticipates nineteenth-century
artists such as John Constable and Claude Monet, this is not a painting
done *en plein air*, as its size (twenty-four and a half by twenty-one and
three-fifths inches) would have been prohibitive of being painted out-
doors. Without departing from the impression of naturalism, Ruisdael
constructs a composition of areas of light and shadow, which lead the
viewer first across the fields and then through the clouds. The com-
positional structure of *View of Haarlem*, by which Ruisdael brought
together elements, observed and invented, in one unified vision, may
be called *coherence*. This method, like the vision of Haarlem that it
describes, emphasizes order and interconnectedness. In this work,
Ruisdael employs the inherent character of painting to structure and
coalesce its parts into one seamless whole and unified work.

This painting’s distinctly vertical format cultivates a more complex
and nuanced play between the sky, which occupies two-thirds of the
painting, and the landscape. *View of Haarlem* is painted from a high
vantage point overlooking creation. This panoramic view is unusual in
Ruisdael’s work. Most of his works are painted from a lower vantage
point that more firmly situates the viewer on the ground and in the
scene. The implied position in *View of Haarlem* neither has the detach-
ment of topographic mapping of the landscape nor is it painted from
within the space. Ruisdael has found a place, from the dunes, that sug-
gests an overlooking presence without dislocating the viewer from the
landscape. A great deal of this work’s success depends on the selection
of this point of view.

Just as Ruisdael carefully orchestrated the viewer’s position in *View
of Haarlem*, scholars have carefully developed various approaches to

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9 Ibid., 15.
engage his art. Some of the methods employed by scholars in their discussions of Ruisdael have had the effect of reducing him. For Seymour Slive, Ruisdael is an interior decorator, a painter of skillfully composed but meaningless images that might have adorned the parlors of Dutch merchants and are now in art museums for our viewing pleasure.\(^\text{10}\)

Svetlana Alpers describes Ruisdael as a technically masterful transcriber of topography.\(^\text{11}\)

John Walford’s emphasis on the content of Ruisdael’s art engages the Dutch painter as a creative person, someone who means to communicate with the viewer.\(^\text{12}\)

Noting that Ruisdael’s pictorial naturalism disguises his creative and critical perception, Walford writes,

>a painted landscape, however realistic in appearance, is never a pure copy of nature and therefore can never be rendered value free. Implied in the artist’s choice of motifs and his pictorial representation is a certain view of reality.\(^\text{13}\)

Walford calls Ruisdael’s process “selective naturalism,” an interpretive method evidenced in the artist’s motif selection and manner of representation. Ruisdael’s landscapes evidence an active, critical, and self-conscious process of drawing out inherent and essential meaning found in the motif. The work’s semblant spontaneity is the consequence of visual and intellectual composition.

Walford argues that Ruisdael’s selective naturalism was consistent with widely held conceptions of nature in the seventeenth-century Netherlands. Thus Ruisdael’s painting demonstrates a “contemporary” method of seeing “the essential character of things, including their meaning and significance.”\(^\text{14}\)

This perception of landscape distinguished between, without dividing, creation’s “natural,” i.e., visible, and its “characteristic,” i.e., invisible, qualities. Referencing the painter Karel van Mander,\(^\text{15}\) Walford explains, “Van Mander distinguished the


\(^{12}\)In elevating the artist, Walford also elevates the viewer. If Ruisdael is merely a decorator or transcriber, the viewer is merely a consumer. However, if Ruisdael’s art visually communicates a spiritual perception of the world, that content-embODYing painting addresses the viewer as a critically and creatively thinking spiritual being.

\(^{13}\)Walford, *Jacob van Ruisdael*, 16.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., 18.

\(^{15}\)Karel van Mander (1548–1606) lived in Haarlem from 1583 to 1603. The teacher of Frans Hals, van Mander may be considered a founder of visual arts in Haarlem. Beyond Haarlem, van Mander’s *Schilder-
visible world (life) from Nature so that while he considered empirical observation of the visible world essential, it is insufficient as a means to know the essence of Nature.”16 Walford, still writing about van Mander, adds, “In order to represent things in a natural and characteristic way, the artist must therefore learn to discern and select from life. He must combine observation and understanding in order to be true to the essence and not just the appearance of things.”17

Ruisdael’s method of “selective naturalism” was rooted in this cultural/religious context. Walford remarks,

Selective naturalism may thus embody a religious and contemplative attitude towards observed reality. . . . This intertwining of material and spiritual levels of reality is typical in Dutch seventeenth-century thought and in contemporary artistic practice.18

Turning to a critical investigation of “selective naturalism” as a creative method, Walford notes that it is conditioned by the many factors that make up [Ruisdael’s] working context, including the artist’s personal temperament, prevailing artistic conventions, and other cultural values. Together these provide a conceptual framework that shapes the artist’s perception and representation of nature.19

Although, in Ruisdael’s case, we know more about his historical context than about his character, Walford argues that selective naturalism inevitably depends on both equally.

Of the historical, cultural, social, and economic factors impressing themselves upon Ruisdael, Walford is particularly sensitive to the religious environment in which the artist worked. Walford finds evidence in Ruisdael’s landscapes of a seventeenth-century Dutch paradigm that was profoundly shaped by Reformed Calvinism. Walford observes, “Contemplation of the creation as divine revelation was of paramount importance in the seventeenth century”; contemporary Dutch writers, such as Constantijn Huygens and H. L. Spiegel, referred to nature as

boeck (Painter Book), published in 1604, became an inspiration for many artists of the “golden age” of Dutch painting.

16 Walford, Jacob van Ruisdael, 18.
17 Ibid. (emphasis mine).
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 16.
“God’s second book of revelation.”

This view was supported both by contemporary interpretations of the Bible and by the most influential confession of faith of that time. Walford notes, “Exhortation to contemplative delight in the visible world was instilled by the influential *Confession of Faith* and *Catechism* of the Netherlands Reformed Churches. They were the subject of weekly evening sermons and were taught in all schools, so penetrating the entire society.”

Did Ruisdael attend these sermons or share these beliefs? There is little specific documentation of Ruisdael’s religious practices except that, on June 14, 1657, he made a profession of faith and applied to be baptized in the Calvinist Reformed Church.

This Reformed paradigm and its attitude toward creation are furthermore evidenced in the writings of the seventeenth-century Dutch poet Hubert Kornelisz Poot, who described nature as “God’s landscape painting.”

God is described as the original, perfect, and providential artist, whose work is copied by human artists. Reflecting on how nature was described by preachers and poets, Walford adds, “It is perhaps significant that representation of the ordinary Dutch landscape is given an ideological value just at the time when it was receiving greater attention from landscape painters.”

Walford argues that Ruisdael’s process of “selective naturalism” was characterized by a sensitivity to the corruption and changeability of the visible world as well as a faith in the providence of God. Walford writes, “there is a sense of order, of well-being, and of everyday activity, and, in the landscapes of Ruisdael and others, a peaceful harmony between man and his environment despite a prevailing consciousness of the ultimate transience of life.”

Perhaps the natural motif that is at once most fleeting and infinite is light. Walford states, “Light-beams, as an image of divine

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20 Ibid., 19.
21 Ibid., 20.
22 Ibid.
23 Walford explains Ruisdael’s application to be baptized at age twenty-nine by noting that the painter had been raised in a Mennonite family, which, unlike the Reformed Church, did not practice infant baptism. Thus it can be surmised that, in 1657, Ruisdael converted to Calvinism. Walford dismisses any suggestion that Ruisdael made this conversion for anything other than personal reasons and notes that this conversion did not provide Ruisdael with any particular advantages or mark any notable change in his art (Walford, *Jacob van Ruisdael*, 8).
24 Ibid., 23.
25 Ibid., 25.
26 Ibid., 29.
27 Ibid., 20.
providence breaking into a darkened world, are a commonplace of seventeenth-century religious art, not least that of Rembrandt [van Rijn]. It is not surprising therefore that when religious subjects were given a landscape setting, it is with such light-beams that the idea of grace is conveyed." 28 Still discussing paintings with religious subjects, Walford notes,

The manner in which the landscape is represented in these paintings contributes to their meaning. The significance of the lighting in them is made explicit by their religious subject matter. But this expressive potential was also exploited in landscapes that contain no religious subject, yet, as landscapes, are probably intended both for aesthetic delight and religious contemplation. 29

In View of Haarlem, Ruisdael employs light as a sign of God’s providential blessing on Haarlem, which had adopted Calvinism around 1580, and on its surroundings. The land reclaimed from the sea, cultivated fields, and bleached linens all call attention to humanity’s divinely given charge to cultivate and fill the earth. Yet all of these actions and events take place within the delicate balance of forces, from sunlight to flooding, that are beyond human control. The work speaks to our ultimate dependence on the providence of God. The clouds that fill the sky and overtake the viewer suggest that, although we may be situated above the landscape, there is a realm still higher than our own. This recalls promises kept and promises of even greater things to come. Ruisdael’s View of Haarlem may be read as visual description of God’s provident direction revealed both in nature and in human activity, a distinctly Reformed theme and one that would have resonated with seventeenth-century Dutch viewers, who believed that their recent political, economic, and religious freedom was divinely ordained.

Walford acknowledges that the assertion that a work such as Ruisdael’s View of Haarlem is more meaningful than it might first appear raises “a host of questions concerning how meaning is embodied.” 30 Combining an observation of nature with a selection of inherently significant motifs, Ruisdael practiced what Walford calls “a contemplative

28 Ibid., 39.
29 Ibid., 40.
30 Ibid., 1.
mode of perception,” the consequence of which is visual delight, intellectual meaning, and spiritual power.

Walford’s approach recognizes the work of art as a visual realization, through motif and method, of inherent meaning. This has consequences for understanding the role of the scholar, or viewer, who seeks to understand and critically engage that meaning. It would follow that Walford’s method of meaning-oriented seeing would require a selection of subject, observational study of that object’s visual elements, and commentary, informed by contextual knowledge gained through research. Sensitive to the dangers of subjective personal interpretations, Walford describes this “attempting to grasp, where possible, how such pictures were perceived in their own time” as a “control of our reading.” A content-oriented method of art history is not an open license to speculation. These readings must be grounded in the evidence of the art object and the product of research.

In addition to challenging formalist methods, Walford also addressed methods of art history that focused on iconographic decoding. Walford warned, “The tendency in current criticism is to accentuate one of the two extremes: while some writers see Dutch landscape painting in terms of pure depiction and aesthetic delight, others have confronted this with an iconological approach, in an attempt to retrieve whatever meaning or association may be embedded within Dutch landscapes.” If Walford was critical of Slive’s emphasis on aesthetic delight and Alpers’s emphasis on art as depiction, he was equally sensitive to the problem of over-reading visual motifs as an accumulation of codes whose didactic meaning can be solved.

Walford argues,

In seeking to identify which elements of the landscape aroused religious reflection and how this is manifest in art, the basic premise is that selective naturalness implied a depiction of the essence of nature as then understood. Dutch landscapes are therefore best approached not so much as bearers of narrative and emblematic meanings, but rather as images reflecting the fact that the visible world was essen-
Introduction

Initially perceived as manifesting inherent spiritual significance. Concern with aesthetic delight and the presence of meaning are not therefore seen as mutually exclusive but rather as intimately related. If the landscape painter was concerned that his viewer should be inspired by visual sensation to deeper contemplation, we may expect that this would be directed by certain stimuli. These would derive both from the sheer beauty and order within the image itself and also from elements which emphasize the essential character and significance of the visible world.\(^{35}\)

If the work of art embodies themes, already pregnant with meaning, which the work visualizes and infuses with new life, the role of the scholar, as interpreter, is to read these visual elements and contextualize them.

In his Yale University Press–published monograph, Walford rightly frames his method of perception in relation to other art historical strategies. However there is, in fact, a more significant influence on his approach and a more fitting paradigmatic framework by which to understand its importance. That is the effect of his mentor Hans Rookmaaker and Walford’s own contribution to the development of a Reformed Protestant paradigm of art history.

Before pursuing a PhD at Cambridge University, Walford studied art history with Rookmaaker at the Free University in Amsterdam. In an essay entitled “Hans Rookmaaker’s ‘Four Freedoms’ and Christian Art,” Walford wrote, “Rookmaaker had taught me to see and respond to the world from a totally fresh perspective, one informed not so much by my British, secular, and upper-class education, but one informed by Scripture, as filtered through the Dutch Reformed tradition.”\(^{36}\) With Rookmaaker’s mentorship, Walford developed a conception of vocation and adopted a content-oriented method of art history consistent with Dutch Neo-Calvinism.\(^{37}\)

This Reformed persuasion, which originated out of forces that also shaped Ruisdael’s religious context, views creation as ordered by the sovereign will and wisdom of God in fulfillment of his covenant with Adam. It also holds that art making and the vocation of art history,

\(^{35}\)Ibid., 29 (emphasis mine).
\(^{37}\)For a thorough and critical discussion of Dutch Neo-Calvinist theology and the arts, see Jeremy Begbie’s Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).
like all human activity, operate under the lordship and providence of God. Motivated by this faith and confident in divine ordination, Dutch Neo-Calvinists encourage an active participation in all fields of society.

To understand the Neo-Calvinist paradigm that informed Walford’s maturation, it is helpful to note the influence of Abraham Kuyper, who founded the Free University in 1880. Believing in the universal authority of God over all of creation and culture, Kuyper encouraged Christians to involve themselves in every field of society. While many Christians profess belief in the sovereignty of God over all of creation, too often they have done so from the seclusion of religious institutions and communities. In founding a university, a learned environment in which scholars such as Walford could develop, Kuyper asserted a faith and theology that was both intellectually sound and culturally active.

Kuyper, perhaps to the surprise of those who might suppose that a Calvinist-influenced theology would not value the visual arts, championed art “as one of the richest gifts of God to mankind.”38 In the fifth of his Lectures on Calvinism, delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898, Kuyper stated, “Understand that art is no fringe that is attached to the garment, and no amusement that is added to life, but a most serious power in our present existence.” Art, for Kuyper, was not an activity separate from the rest of creation and culture; it was an activity of both imminent and eternal consequence. Kuyper argued that artistic activity has been sustained by and is evidence of common grace, as manifested in the beauty and harmonies of nature. God’s sovereignty is, according to Kuyper, manifested in the inherent and unfaltering laws of creation that frame all of life. He observed, “Art reveals ordinances of creation which neither science, nor politics, nor religious life, nor even revelation can bring to light.”

As Kuyper argued that the visual arts held a central place in human experience, he also believed that religion, specifically Calvinism, held an important and constructive role in the history of art.39 Passing over the facts that John Calvin did not value the visual arts and that the adoption of Calvinism, in many instances, led to iconoclasm as not

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38 Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism is available on the web at http://reformationfiles.com/files/displaytext.php?file=kuyper_lecturescalvinism.html#lecture5. All my quotations of Kuyper are from this site. For a print edition, see Abraham Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008).
39 Although Kuyper’s argument is not entirely convincing, it nevertheless represents a perspective that is relevant to the discussion of a Reformed understanding of art and art history.
relevant to the question, Kuyper contended that Calvinism, in fact, “encouraged the emancipation of art. . . . as a consequence of its world- and life-view.” Calvinism, Kuyper asserted, not only released the visual arts from the dictates of ecclesiastical and princely patronage; more importantly, it rescued art from the demands, placed there by the Greeks, that it be imitative of nature. Furthermore, he stated that this creative liberty found maturity in the art of the seventeenth-century Netherlands.

Addressing an issue pertinent to Ruisdael’s landscapes, Kuyper asks if the artist, freed by Calvinism, should be an imitator of nature’s appearances. He answered,

if you confess that the world once was beautiful, but by the curse has become undone, and by a final catastrophe is to pass to its full state of glory, excelling even the beautiful of paradise, then art has the mystical task of reminding us in its productions of the beautiful that was lost and of anticipating its perfect coming luster. . . . Calvinism honored art as a gift of the Holy Ghost and as a consolation in our present life, enabling us to discover in and behind this sinful life a richer and more glorious background. Standing by the ruins of this once so wonderfully beautiful creation, art points out to the Calvinist both the still visible lines of the original plan, and what is even more, the splendid restoration by which the Supreme Artist and Master-Builder will one day renew and enhance even the beauty of His original creation.40

The responsibility of the artist is, according to Kuyper, not to imitate nature’s appearances but to see in nature’s present state of being the ordinances of God. Kuyper said, “it is the vocation of art, not merely to observe everything visible and audible, to apprehend it, and reproduce it artistically, but much more to discover in those natural forms the order of the beautiful, and, enriched by this higher knowledge, to produce a beautiful world that transcends the beautiful of nature.” By “beauty,” Kuyper meant harmony, a unity (in multiplicity) and the interdependence of all elements of creation and culture.

40Ruins are a recurring motif in Ruisdael’s art. While these ruins have been interpreted as melancholic, it is possible that Ruisdael, a convert to Calvinism, perceived creation, similarly to Kuyper, as a ruin, a once glorious structure waiting to be renewed. Thus, for a believing Christian, the ruin is not nostalgic but rather hopeful. Indeed, Ruisdael’s ruins are not set in desolate landscapes but rather in lush hills, evidence of God’s enduring sovereignty and grace.
under the common grace of God, who holds all things together and
draws them toward wholeness.41 It is not unreasonable to suppose that
Ruisdael might have been an artist whom Kuyper appreciated.

If the Neo-Calvinist perspective that Walford brought to his voca-
tion was philosophically rooted in Kuyperian theology, the application
of Christianity to the field of art history was modeled by Rookmaaker.
Beyond the profound effect of encouraging Walford to pursue a voca-
tion in art history, Rookmaaker influenced Walford’s scholarship in at
least two specific ways.

First, Rookmaaker encouraged Walford to study seventeenth-
century Dutch landscape painting. To this point, Dutch landscape
painting of the “golden age” had been largely studied in terms of its for-
mal and iconographic elements. Rookmaaker recognized that this art
visually materialized a Christian content that had been all but ignored.
Rookmaaker located the origins of seventeenth-century Dutch land-
scape painting in “a profound respect for their land (graciously given
back to them by God, so that they could live in freedom), out of a deep
reverence for this divine creation, [and] out of a true love of reality
and all of its beauty and uniqueness.”42 Rookmaaker also debunked
the myth that these landscape painters were copyists of nature, noting,
“the most natural look is achieved only by those who are experts at
composition and the handling of pictorial elements.”43

Rookmaaker esteemed seventeenth-century Dutch landscape
painting, especially the work of Jan van Goyen. In the opening chap-
ter of Modern Art and the Death of a Culture, probably Rookmaaker’s
best-known book in America, Rookmaaker used a landscape by van
Goyen, in contrast with a landscape by Nicolas Poussin, to establish
the centrality of content, as distinguished from (but not detached from)
form and subject matter, in engaging a work of art.44 However, while
Rookmaaker had a deep and personal, if not also nationalistic, appre-
ciation for seventeenth-century Dutch art, he disliked Ruisdael’s art,
which he found to be too far removed from naturalism. Rookmaaker

41 Although, in a work of art, this harmony is visually manifested in the formal composition of parts, on the
level of content this wholeness is the realization of perception—perception not as subjective impression
but rather the recognition of the objective laws.
43 Ibid., 168.
44 Ibid., 5:11–14.
was a prolific art critic, covering such wide-ranging topics as medieval treasures, Rembrandt and the Bible, and Picasso’s *Guernica*; however, he never penned a review on Ruisdael. In fact, Ruisdael functioned only as a peripheral figure in Rookmaaker’s writing, a point of reference in discussion of other artists.

Second, Rookmaaker encouraged Walford to develop a content-oriented method of art history, one that was ahead of most of the field. For Rookmaaker, there was no theologically neutral content in art. All content, whether dressed in “religious” subject matter or not, was measured in terms of its biblical truthfulness. For example, a sentimental painting of Christ might, in fact, be biblically false while a painting of a nude woman, such as Rembrandt’s Bathsheba, might visually present biblical truth.

Rookmaaker himself modeled this content-oriented method of looking at art for its philosophical/theological meaning and consequence to the human condition. For example, in his book on Paul Gauguin, written in 1959, Rookmaaker wrote that,

artists worthy of the name will attempt to make their work into something meaningful because it is related to their fundamental view of reality, to their view of life and the world. This . . . finds expression both in [the artist’s] choice of subject, and the way in which the chosen subject is realized—in the approach, the composition and execution.45

Furthermore, in a 1951 essay entitled “Seventeenth-century Dutch Art: Christian Art?” Rookmaaker wrote, “We may be able to explain the choice of themes and subject matter and the way these are portrayed on the basis of the understandings and ‘prejudices’ of the ‘Calvinists.’”46 These passages suggest how Walford’s method of “perception” was, at least in part, indebted to Rookmaaker.

Rookmaaker’s influence in Walford’s method is also evidenced in Walford’s art history survey textbook *Great Themes in Art*. Tracing the history of Western art from prehistory to the present, each chapter is structured around four themes: spirituality, the self, nature, and the city. These themes form four points on a compass of human aspi-

46Ibid., 4:136.
ration and experience. They allow Walford to both address changing experience over time and stress the continuity of beingness that ties the contemporary viewer to the ancient artist. Combined with Walford’s efficient and fluid writing, as well as his content-oriented method, this thematic structure effectively brings the work of art to the present. Walford makes a persuasive case not only that the Doryphoros, the city plan of Constantinople, Titian’s Assumption of the Virgin, and Eugène Delacroix’s Tiger Hunt are accessible to the contemporary viewer but that there is a compelling and meaning-laden connection to be had.

Although evidence of Walford’s faith is veiled in this book, it is not absent. The title itself is bound to irritate those who believe neither in “greatness,” nor in “themes,” nor in “art,” but favor politically correct pluralism; who insist that there is no knowable metanarrative; and who prefer terms such as “visual culture.” Walford’s concepts of “great,” “themes,” and “art” are all distinctly rooted in a Reformed paradigm of the sovereignty of God. In fact, all three concepts may be found in the book of Genesis. The notion of “greatness,” that anything might rightly be called “great,” ultimately demands that there be someone who is “great.” Walford’s Reformed belief holds that only God is truly and absolutely “great.” Our human striving for “greatness,” as evidenced in art, is part of our longing for God and an echo of our being created in his image. Aside from a belief in God, there is no justification for a discussion of “greatness.”

From a Neo-Calvinist perspective, “themes” is also a concept that finds its foundation in the Bible. The comprehension of narrative is rooted in our experience of time. However, a meaningful or directed metanarrative originates in something outside of time. A Reformed faith holds that, from eternity to eternity, the narrative of human

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47 At the same time, this thematic structure’s lack of flexibility creates both gaps in and repetition of content that limit the book’s usefulness as an educational text.

48 In this, once again, Rookmaker’s influence may be discerned. In his introduction to the collected works of Hans Rookmaker, Graham Birtwistle, himself a contributor to this book, wrote, “Rookmaker certainly preferred to write in an easily accessible mode, . . . But his use of ordinary language reflected more than just personal preference or a concession to his readers; it was intimately linked to one of his deepest teachings. Throughout his writings runs the insistent theme that reality is God’s creation and as such is neither strange nor incomprehensible to man. Rookmaker taught that to know and experience reality as God intends us to do, it is not necessary to approach it as a puzzle that can only be solved theoretically or scientifically, or as a secret that is hermetically locked from the common gaze” (Graham Birtwistle, “H. R. Rookmaker: The Shaping of His Thought,” in Rookmaker, Complete Works, 1:xix). Both stylistically and philosophically, Walford’s writing in Great Themes follows this same belief in the knowability of God and, by him, the knowability of creation and created things.
beingness is under the providence of God. For the Neo-Calvinist, this is the “greatest theme.” Walford’s four “great themes” each extend from an experience within that narrative. If there is no narrative and no director, there are no themes, only illusions.

Finally, as has already been discussed, a Neo-Calvinist concept of “art” is founded on an understanding of each human being as a creative and unique person. An alternative view, which holds that human identity and experience are culturally constructed, prefers the term “visual culture.” The Genesis narrative describes God as a creative being who created human, creative beings in his image. According to this narrative, there can be no “art” without a creative individual and a point of origin for the creative impulse.

The concepts of “great,” “themes,” and “art” each relate to Walford’s content-oriented method. These terms, further developed by Walford’s four specific themes, are the conduits for a discussion of art, and potentially all of life, as meaningful. In his book on Ruisdael, Walford argued, “Besides giving aesthetic delight [Dutch landscape painting] also invites contemplation of the meaning of things.”

Similarly, this method evidenced in Walford’s own scholarship, to recognize the inherent significance of the visible world, has been both a gift of enchantment in what we can see and the occasion to imagine even greater things than these.

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49Walford, *Jacob van Ruisdael*, 20.
Making a critical contribution to the field of art history, this reader covers everything from sixth-century icons to contemporary art from a Christian perspective. Written by experts from around the world, this book reflects the work of noted scholars, most especially John Walford and Hans Rookmaaker, as well as the richness of the history of Christianity and the visual arts. This wide-ranging collection of essays will be an encouragement and inspiration to all who love art and love God.

“A rich kaleidoscope of art historical essays all centered around one common theme of increasing importance today—the way in which artists’ views of the world, not least their religious beliefs, shape artistic perception and meaning.”

ADRIENNE DENGIRFIN CHAPLIN, co-author, Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts; former senior member in philosophical aesthetics, The Institute for Christian Studies

“This collection of essays displays the fruit of John Walford’s labors through the work of scholars who have received his artistic insights and share his passion for close readings of visual imagery, clear expressions of doctrinal truth, and joyful experiences of aesthetic delight.”

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“James Romaine and his fellow scholars have added a significant new volume to the select canon of books on art and faith. This is a fantastic book.”

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