

Otto Karl Werckmeister (Berlin, 1934-2023)

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Otto Karl Werckmeister (cortesía autor)

Otto Karl Werckmeister was born in Berlin on April 26, 1934, the son of the art dealer Karl Werckmeister and the artist Rose Petzold; he died there at the age of 89 on June 9, 2023. Werckmeister was a brilliant, at times ingenious art historian with an unusually broad knowledge, who initially worked on early medieval and Romanesque book illumination and sculpture, but in the last two decades of his university career concentrated on modern and contemporary art and culture. For an art historian, his areas of interest were immensely broad, encompassing not only fine art and architecture, but also philosophy, literature, theater, film, photography, comics, modern music, and electronic rock music. About all this he has written several volumes of essays. Like the subjects of his art historical publications, Werckmeister's method is divided into two phases. In both phases, he is primarily concerned with the specific historical context from which he attempts to understand and explain the works of art. Only he defines the context differently in each case. In his early work, he primarily examines the religious and specifically exegetical-liturgical context of medieval art. Later, he is more interested in analyzing the socio-historical and economic conditions under which the modern works of art were created, adopting a decidedly

Marxist point of view influenced by the Frankfurt School (Benjamin, Adorno, Habermas).

Werckmeister studied art history, philosophy, and German literature at the Free University in Berlin, earning his doctorate in 1958 with a dissertation on a major example of Carolingian goldsmiths' work, the book cover of the *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram* in Regensburg. Werckmeister's next project was a study of exemplary examples of eighth-century insular illumination, which he conducted at the Warburg Institute in London from 1958 to 1961 supported by a grant from the German Research Foundation (*Irish-northumbrische Buchmalerei und monastische Spiritualität*, Berlin, 1967). Here he meticulously examines four illustrated pages of three prominent insular manuscripts, including ornamental pages, which he associates with profound theological-exegetical interpretations. Werckmeister's study of insular book illumination is now considered a memorable pioneering achievement in the context of studies on the "theology of ornament."

After a travel grant from the German Archaeological Institute (1961-1962), Werckmeister worked at the German Archaeological Institute in Madrid from 1962-1965, researching early medieval Spanish book illumination of biblical and conciliar manuscripts. Here, too, he breaks new ground. He analyzes the political content of some illustrations in regard to the theme of the relationship between northern Spanish Christians and Islam (see especially his 1963 essay on the three prophets in the *Biblia Hispalense*). Werckmeister emphasizes that the illustrations in question convey an anti-Islamic message by explicitly using Christian pictorial traditions. Regardless of whether Werckmeister's interpretations may always be accurate in detail, they are the most striking and innovative studies published on the subject to date. Werckmeister's contributions to research on the manuscripts of the Beatus Commentary on the Apocalypse are much better known because they were published in English. It is Werckmeister who first proposes the now widely held view that the Beatus manuscripts were intended for the private reading of the monks in the form of the contemplative practice of *lectio divina*. Werckmeister's second innovative approach to the research on the Beatus manuscripts concerns the influence of the liturgy of the dead on some Romanesque

copies such as the Beatus of Saint-Sever and the Silos Beatus. Best known here is his 1973 essay on “Pain and Death in the Beatus of Saint-Sever,” an 11th Century manuscript from southern France. Werckmeister refers here to illustrations of cosmic catastrophes, whose human victims do not passively endure the disaster, but resist and try to escape. Werckmeister relates these unusual motifs to a responsory of the Office of the Dead describing cosmic catastrophes and the Last Judgment. He interprets the efforts of the victims of the horror scenes to escape the cosmic catastrophes as an indication that one could still escape final damnation by establishing a memorial for one’s own soul as well as by giving endowments to the Church.

Werckmeister has contributed important, pioneering research not only on early medieval book illumination, but also on Romanesque sculpture in France and Spain. His essay “The Emmaus and Thomas Pillar of the Cloister of Silos” (1990), for example, should be mentioned, in which he points out connections to the Easter liturgy and specifically the antiphony from Silos that explain the choice of subject and the design of the relief. Probably Werckmeister’s most fascinating and well-known study of the Romanesque period is his essay on the figure of the recumbent Eve on the lintel of the north portal of Autun Cathedral (1972). Until then, the unusual recumbent position of Eve had been explained by the narrow horizontal format of the lintel. Werckmeister, however, convincingly demonstrates that this position has a multiple meaning and found a striking parallel at that time in the similarly humiliating posture of notorious sinners at the rite of public penance on Ash Wednesday. Moreover, Eve, with her naked breasts sensually rendered, embodies the sexual *concupiscentia* that was often cited by theologians as the cause of the original sin, which is why with its regulations the Church interfered in the sexual lives of the faithful. The medieval viewer of the penitential Portal of Autun was thus manipulated and domesticated in several ways, in order to be more receptive to the moral teachings of the Church.

In 1984 Werckmeister became Mary Jane Crowe Distinguished Professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, a position he retained until his retirement in 2002. His most important works from this period include two books, one on the German-Swiss artist Paul Klee and another on the political confrontation

of the arts in interwar Europe. In these later books and other publications Werckmeister’s historical-materialist, Marxist approach is more clearly manifest, since here he sees the arts even more directly determined by their social and economic conditions. This applies especially to Werckmeister’s book on Klee (*The Making of Klee’s Career 1914-1920*, 1989). In the German-speaking world, Klee is regarded as a sage aloof of all material things, but Werckmeister proves that he achieved his final artistic and commercial breakthrough only after adapting to the art market and to the artistic ideals of his patrons and friendly art critics.

Instead of writing a second book on Klee’s later periods, Werckmeister devoted himself to a much larger and more significant topic: the confrontation of the arts and the various political ideologies in the decade from the Great Depression of 1929 to the beginning of World War II in 1939 (*The Political Confrontation of the Arts in Europe from the Great Depression to the Second World War*, 2020). Here he not only compares—as others have done more often—the art and architecture of the three totalitarian states of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Soviet Union but he also contrasts them with the situation in the remaining democratic states, especially those under the Popular Front governments in France and Spain.

In addition to his strictly art historical works, Werckmeister has also published a number of volumes of essays on art and cultural criticism, which provide impressive evidence of the breadth and diversity of his interests and knowledge: *Ende der Ästhetik. Essays über Adorno, Bloch, das gelbe Unterseeboot und der eindimensionale Mensch*, 1971; *Ideologie und Kunst und andere Essays*, 1974; *Zitadellenkultur*, 1989 (*Citadel Culture. The Beautiful Art of Decline in the Culture of the Eighties*, 1991); *Linke Ikonen*, 1997 (*Icons of the Left: Benjamin and Eisenstein, Picasso and Kafka after the Fall of Communism*, 1999); *Der Medusa-Effekt*, 2001 (*The Medusa Effect. Political Pictorial Strategies since September 11*, 2005). This brief survey of Werckmeister’s essay volumes suggests that an art historian of similar brilliance, intellectual breadth, and political radicalism will not soon be found again.

Werckmeister was married to the Spanish literary historian and medievalist Eukene Lacarra Lanz (1944-2023) from 1965 to 1983. He is survived by three children and six grandchildren.