

## BLACKFRIARS

### MISCELLANEOUS

MODERN SACRED ART. An International Annual Review. Edited by Joan Morris. (Sands; 7s. 6d.)

This book is both encouraging and disappointing. Disappointing not through any fault of either editor or publisher, but because much of the work reproduced in it and of the opinions expressed in it are marked with that blight of art, "preciousness." This has always spoilt art, but singularly affects modern art. Not surprising since it is a parasite which attacks when artists have become distracted from the realisation, so essential, that art is a blossoming from within. The modern artist has, perhaps more than any other artist, had enough distractions to kill art altogether. And neither is this surprising since modern research has resurrected to haunt him all the best productions of all the best artists of all the best periods. He is possessed by a legion of powerful spirits. Instead of learning from the work of other times the secret of its magic, he tends to reproduce them in such a brutally Procrustean way as to make Surrealism seem sometimes the only aesthetic cure.

On looking through the book one cannot but miss the true artist's vision. The beauty of a work of art results from the perfect balance between the artist's vision and the expression of it so that each "component part" is informed by this vision, binding the whole into unity. The artist's choice of symbols in colour tone and line, as the poet's choice of words and the musician's choice of notes, must be inevitable. Inevitableness and spontaneity suppose a proper digestion of experience and a real valuation, intuitive knowledge and command of experience and invention over and above or rather before the technical ability and dexterity that the particular art demands. (Even this technical skill is sometimes lacking in these examples, some of which are not even soulless beauties.) Leonardo da Vinci's saying, though clumsy, is deadly true. "The inspiration is the general, and the ideas the soldiers." It is easy to swallow, so hard to savour, and with such a mob of soldiers as there is to-day it needs a general indeed to order them.

It does not follow that a work of art is true because it is the outcome of an intuition of beauty, such an intuition or vision is but the licence for endless elbow-grease. "The great precept is: take infinite pains, and make something that looks effortless" a description of Michael Angelo's and advice for the man of vision only, for the labour of artistic creation would kill anyone less. Maritain, in an excellent article in this book called *Reflections on Sacred Art*, tells of the lacking "truly religious inspiration and character in modern church art." There is not that savouring and appreciation of the subjects the artists are trying to portray,

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yet if ever it is love must labour it must in art, and without the artist's appreciation, love and consequent creative vision even this labour is lost. Maritain's essay might well be a model for its perfect balance of content and expression.

Great art is a living art. It is born and lives in the fashion of a particular age and never dies. It is born and lives of a particular mind and never dies. The reason for this is that an age's fashion, or an individual's nature, inasmuch as it is sincere, is but a manifestation of Beauty which never dies. It is a shame that Severini deplores the existence of individualism in art. However, Maritain in the following article reinstates the individual, showing his likeness to God as Creator. If, as Leonardo da Vinci says, art is the grandson of God, then the artist must be the son who makes in his own image as he was himself made in God's image. He must create in his own order in the way that God creates—in his own personal image. Fr. Benedict Williamson, first in the book, uses so fascinating a phrase as "the living style" all the more fascinating for the mystery he leaves around it. It is not easy to define. "Not every building," he says of a particular period, "was in the living style." In this book by no means many are wholly in the living style, but all reflect it if only as extraneously, as some of the minor impressionists reflected Impressionism. And incidentally, it was there began the living style of our time. In all the chaos of Post-Impression there is reflected the principles of our living style. The style is not yet clearly existing, due to lack of tradition in other spheres (deplored in his article by Mr. E. I. Watkin), but each school that has arisen in the last fifty years has reflected this groping of ours towards a better appreciation of both the artist's vision and his material. Each has falsified by too exclusive a choice, but the deposit of truth has grown. Further the arts have done much, as they always did in their graciousness, towards a better realising of the vices and virtues of modern life. And modern sacred art does as much for the Church to-day. A style is beginning to live, and in showing this, this book is extremely valuable. The defect that it shows is a still rather persistent flogging of a dead tradition inadequately summed up in the unfortunate word, used in one or two articles, "academicism," and a rather weakminded attention to the distractions of former traditions of art. But these bad habits are weak now, and really a hang-over from former times. On the other hand it reflects the existence of a genuine renaissance, for though all the above defects are still sucking the vitality from modern art, still the greatest reactionaries have established themselves, and not merely as reactionaries. There is a multitude of individuals and societies who have in varying degrees "arrived."

These general criticisms embrace most of modern art,

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but sacred art suffers along with it, and with it will be remedied. After a better appreciation of the artist's job there will follow a better appreciation of sacred art which is but an application to particular requirements and subjects. Sacred art is a part of the Liturgy, and as it would be foolishness to impose the Liturgy upon pagans or even uninstructed Catholics, and just as the liturgy supposes belief and a certain elegance of manner, so sacred art supposes a true appreciation of the sacred and a technical proficiency.

There are interesting articles on the work done by various societies all over the world, and two articles on the metaphysic of art. One is by Mr. Watkin, in which he stresses the importance of tradition, and another by Father Terburg, O.P., *On the Concept of Beauty*, in which he compares Beauty with Goodness. He makes this important point that Beauty is an object of knowledge and not, as the Good, of desire, an interesting point in an age when many people seem to consider art a kind of useless luxury, and tend to forget that all kinds of knowledge and the perfection of knowledge should be exploited by us whose object in this life is to know, and consequently to desire, God.

WILLIAM HARRIS, O.P.

THE WHITE FATHERS IN AFRICA. By Donald Attwater. (Burns, Oates; 2s. 6d. and 3s. 6d.)

Mr. Attwater has produced a really interesting and exciting book; this appreciation found on the cover flap we make our own; (the cover and binding of the cheaper edition is almost an act of disrespect to the subject and its author). Foreworded by His Eminence Cardinal Hinsley this brief sketch of the beginnings, aims, and growth of Cardinal Lavigerie's great missionary project for Africa admirably justifies so gracious a sponsorship. Missionary zeal, especially French missionary zeal, only too often carries with it a host of imprudences; in theory and in practice the activity of the White Fathers' Society appears to have evaded them almost entirely, and this mark of their rule and life, so ably demonstrated by the author, is cheering. The author depicts in a generous attractive style a sphere of Catholic activity that bespeaks the presence of the true Spirit of Christ. Do not take up this book if you are unwilling for the mind and heart to be stirred—stirred with the spirit of the missionary and with the realisation of that eminently social intimacy that characterises the Body of Christ.

An appeal—for prayers, vocations, material aid—is occasionally perceptible, putting up its head between the lines; was this, inoffensive though it may be, necessary? Emphatically no; the tale itself has been told too well. It overflows with strong sugges-