

ART AND THE CHURCH

NOTHING that an art-critic can say about the relationship between art and the Church can have very much value. By his very nature, the art-critic is bound to tackle the problem from the wrong end. The proper person to speak with authority would be the church-critic, but since church-criticism is not a recognized occupation, and since, even if it were, I would not be competent to undertake it, I can only envisage the problem from the end nearest to me—the wrong end, I admit, but at least *an* end.

The problem, as I see it, is this. The Church is certainly one among the various employers who recognise that the artist can be of service to them—the manufacturers who use his posters, the writers who use him as an illustrator, the personages who want him to paint their portraits and thereby preserve their memory for posterity. But, oddly enough, the Church is the most timid of them all. Poster designers and illustrators, though not usually in the front rank of illustrative artists, at least tend to use the current idiom: they are 'modern' in the sense that they have learned their language from men of their own generation. But the artists employed by churchmen use, on the whole, an idiom that was developed in Italy in the 15th century, was superseded by the Baroque 17th century, forgotten by the frivolous 18th, revived, diluted and sweetened by the piously sentimental 19th and which survives into the 20th because it has been commercialised and further devitalised by firms of Church decorators. With a few startling exceptions the clergy allow these firms to supply them with works of commercial, devitalised art merely because without such furnishings the church would seem bare and incomplete. If one were to ask the name of the artist who designed this brass crucifix, that plaster statue of St Francis, these mass-produced Stations of the Cross, no one would know. But no one *does* ask because no one cares. And though medieval religious art was equally anonymous, I need hardly point out that it was so for the opposite reason. The medieval artist was so conscious of the importance of the cause he served that his individuality ceased to be of consequence. The artist of today, engaged on designing church furnishings, is so convinced of its unimportance that he feels no personal pride of authorship.

In view of such a situation the critic is bound to take up an attitude. It is not enough to condemn the feebleness of the average church statue or picture, or to note that this pose is copied from Ghiberti, that fold of drapery from Fra Angelico. Art is the expression of personal experience, and religious art should be the

expression of exceptionally profound experience. It should therefore be more, not less personal and 'original' in the true sense of the word, than secular art. If it is not, someone is to blame. If the blame rests with the artist, it is not because he has forgotten how to paint or carve, for plenty of competent pictures and statues are produced today: it must be therefore because he has ceased to have real religious experience.

If, on the other hand, the blame rests with the churchmen, it is not because they do not think that art is desirable. They know well enough that art is not only desirable but necessary. The reason must therefore be that they do not know what art is for, and therefore play for safety by choosing the least vital, the least vigorous and personal kind of art that they can find.

The alternatives are inescapable. Either the artist can no longer produce truly religious art, or the Church dare not accept it. If the former is true, this article is not worth the paper it is printed on. For if religious experience is dead the Church is dead. If the latter is true, then the only cure is a change of heart—or, at least, an enlargement of vision—among those who are responsible for Church art.

For myself, I am in no doubt as to the answer. The modern artist is no longer concerned with the world of appearances as he was when Impressionism was the dominant creed. Typical British artists of today are very seriously tackling the problem of what lies behind the surface. In other words, they do possess the first requirement for a religious painter. If they do not choose specifically religious subjects it is largely because they have never been asked to do so. What they have lost is not the *power* to turn religious experience into paint, but the *habit* of doing so. It is here that the Church's responsibility is manifest. An artist is a manufacturer of goods, and if no one wants his goods he ceases to produce them. If someone wants goods that he could make but has lost the habit of making, he will soon acquire that habit again. I admit that the clergy may well feel a little nervous at the thought of employing him, for they too have, since Cromwell's day, lost the habit of employing him. Such religious pictures as the 19th century produced are mostly in art galleries. The few churchmen who, in the 20th century, have commissioned a truly creative artist to carve a statue or paint a picture, have earned the reputation of daring pioneers, willing to make a brave gesture in the cause of art instead of being thought of as normal men who know how to make a sensible gesture in the cause of religion. One of the most moving religious artists of our time is, in my opinion, Stanley Spencer. Two of his finest religious pictures are in the Tate Gallery. His chapel at Burghclere, filled

with mural paintings, was built by a private patron: it was used as a food store during the war and is now a place of pilgrimage, not for Christians but for art lovers.

The blame, I am convinced, for the decay of religious art in our times, lies with the Church; and since, as I stated at the beginning of this article, I am not a church-critic, I cannot expand that theme. Certainly, to rebuild a lost tradition requires courage, but surely courage is precisely the quality that the Church herself should possess. It also requires conviction, without which courage cannot be canalised. Once conviction has faded, it can only be restored by close contact with men who have it. And, in my experience, the men who have it most today are artists. It may sound a topsy-turvy suggestion, but I do suggest in all seriousness, that if Churchmen would seek to establish contact with artists, they would learn the meaning of art. And having done so, they would realise how potently art could serve the Church if they would only give it a chance.

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EXPERIMENT OR SUFFOCATE

IN England it all started in the respectable years of the early industrial development, when common sense was valued above sensibility and far above spirituality, and when church-going was done more for the sake of propriety than to worship God. In that time the pious vaguely felt that art was wrong and the artists were sure that religion was silly. The Church glared at the artist and the artist at the Church, both mutually suspicious. And there was no growing school of religious art—none in the Protestant Church for the state of affairs indicated above, and none in the Catholic Church because Catholics at that time had neither status nor money.

At the eleventh hour who should turn up but the Pre-Raphaelites. They swept Puritan prejudice before them and proceeded to paint religious subjects and even to make a lot of money out of their productions. But the Pre-Raphaelites did us no good. By their superior pastiche they put the clocks of appreciation right back and the sentimental 'Light of the World' is still influencing public taste.

But in spite even of the Pre-Raphaelites the average middle-class educated man still refused to take art seriously. He considered it as a furbelow in his house and far less important than comfort. He gave no thought to art in the church whatsoever. The churches were as bad. Even they had the idea that art was something that had been taken up by the Church as an extra glory in the Middle Ages, but as soon as art showed up in the Renaissance as a truly pagan business,