

Heard and Seen

IRISH SACRED ART

Four or five years ago the editor of *Das Münster*, Dr Hugo Schnell, manifested a sudden interest in Irish sacred art and began looking for photographs and an article. *Das Münster* is one of the best of the reviews that specialize in sacred art, and Dr Schnell is an art historian and critic of catholic yet discriminating taste. He had seen the work of Irish artists at the Salzburg *Biennale*—he instanced Louis Le Brocquy and Evie Hone—and had been much impressed. Assuming that there was plenty more where their work had come from, he had concluded that Catholic Ireland was the scene of a revival of Christian art.

The strange thing was that, in a way, he was right. He was, of course, unaware of the towering backdrop of conservatism against which the exciting achievements of Irish artists must be viewed. Scores of churches have been built here since the war, but scarcely a dozen of them could be described as good. Our leading architect, Michael Scott, who built his famous *Busarus* (*anglice*, bus-station) nineteen years ago, is only now building his first church—though he has done a Lady-chapel for the Jesuit church in Galway, a project in which he collaborated with Louis Le Brocquy. Plaster statues are still without serious rivals for the esteem (if it is esteem) of clergy and people. The truth is that for the average Irishman art is about as much part of everyday life as it is (dare one say it?) for the average Englishman. The common attitude puts one in mind of the barely-literate farm-labourer who felt constrained to don his Sunday suit when he had to sign his name to a legal document.

Of course, the problem of sacred art is not merely or primarily a matter of aesthetics; the priest's primary concern is with the ministry of the word and the sacraments. He will be understandably wary of an artistic revolution which may upset traditional patterns of worship. Nor will his uneasiness be lessened by meeting (as he may) apologists for the new art who affect a mandarin's disdain for the spiritual needs of the simple faithful. Even if he has the most open of minds, the ordinary priest needs reassurance. He needs to be convinced that at the very least, the change to a living art and architecture can be made without prejudice to the salvation of souls. His support will be far more forthcoming, however, if he can be convinced that (as I believe to be the case) the change will positively assist the salvation of souls. He can learn a great deal from the experience of others who have taken the plunge already. Unfortunately, up to the present there has not been a sufficiency of such experience in Ireland. Nor has there been enough communication between clergy and artists.

However, things have been improving. For one thing, public interest in sacred art is on the increase. That was made obvious by the large crowds who flocked to Dublin's Municipal Gallery of Modern Art to the recent exhibition

of modern German churches. More than twenty-six thousand people visited the exhibition in four weeks—a record for the gallery. (The exhibition is to go later to Cork, Glenstal and Belfast.) Undoubtedly, an excellent television programme on the exhibition helped a good deal. So did the dynamic new curator of the gallery, Mr James White, whose determination to make art a normal element in the lives of Dubliners has thrust the gallery into a prominence it never had before. The newspapers helped too, by giving the German exhibition far better coverage than they had given the exhibition of reconstructed French churches held a few years in Maynooth College. That in itself is an indication of an increase of public interest.

The most significant development to date, however, has been the achievements of the Irish artists themselves. The late Evie Hone had set a magnificent headline. Almost the whole of her working life was devoted to stained glass, and in twenty years she executed fifty large commissions, of which the most famous is the window for Eton College Chapel. A woman of deep, unaffected piety, she had all the marks of the contemplative. This, allied to her great talent and her artistic integrity, gave her work that quality of 'the sacred' which is so indefinable and which cannot be counterfeited. It is due, perhaps in some measure to her prestige that in Ireland stained glass artists are rather better off than others. Patrick Pollen, for example, has done all the stained glass for Johannesburg cathedral. His work, and that of Phyllis Burke, Imogen Stuart and Patrick Pye, may be seen to good advantage in the Church of St Peter, Milford, Co. Donegal.

The Salzburg *Biennale* of contemporary Christian Art has had, I believe, some influence on the development of sacred art in Ireland. It has been an enormous encouragement to the artists themselves to find that their work was so well received there. In general, the exhibits which have been sent to Salzburg have been very favourably received and two Irish sculptors have won gold medals, Oisín Kelly in 1956 and Patrick McElroy in 1960. Oisín Kelly's sculpture may be seen in several Irish churches and he is at present at work on a large panel of the Last Supper for Michael Scott's church at Moyvane, Co. Kerry. Patrick McElroy, a young Dubliner, had been a blacksmith in the Irish public transport company (C.I.E.) before devoting himself wholly to sculpture—he now teaches in the National College of Art. He likes to insist that he understands metal and has a feeling for it: 'If you want a wheel, I can make it. If you want a set of altar candlesticks or a crucifix, I can make them'. If you tell him that his work has a great harshness about it, he will remind you that metal has its own responses to hammering or forging. None of his work has as yet appeared in an Irish church, but he has a tabernacle in a church in California.

Ireland, for its size, is quite rich in good sculptors. There are several other sculptors whose work comes up to the standard of McElroy's and Kelly's. There is a magnificent statue of the Risen Christ by Edward Delany (who is much influenced by Germany's Heinrich Kirchner) in the lovely mortuary chapel built by Richard Hurley for the Medical Missionaries of Mary, Drog-

heda. The work of Brother Benedict Tutty, O.S.B., may be seen in several Irish churches, notably in the fine garrison church on the Curragh, built by McNicholl, Ryan and Curran. Ian and Imogen Stuart (they are husband and wife) are two young artists who work in wood and metal and who have done stations of the cross and statues for a number of churches in Ireland. All of these sculptors have not only talent and a sympathy for the media in which they work, their work is also 'sacred'.

Another contribution which the Salzburg *Biennale* has made is that it has provided Irish artists with an incentive to produce works of sacred art at a time when commissions are still very scarce. The work of twelve Irish artists (twenty exhibits) was sent to the 1960 *Biennale*—compared to fifteen French artists (nineteen exhibits) and one British—Georg Ehrlich! In preparation for the 1962 *Biennale* a special exhibition was organized in the premises of the Arts Council, Merrion Square, last February. The Arts Council put up £1,500 to be distributed in prizes at the discretion of a jury of four. It was also the task of the jury to select the works to be sent to Salzburg.

The exhibition was a minor revelation. Not even the organizers dreamed that so many exhibits would be forthcoming, or that their quality would be so high. Close on two hundred entries were received—about seventy of them had to be eliminated for lack of space. The sculpture and metal work was particularly impressive, the prize for sculpture (the jury decided to award three prizes of £50 each) going to Gerda Frömel's bronze Last Supper, a small but very perfect piece. A large treatment of the same theme in concrete, by Nell Murphy, was highly commendable. The prize for architecture was awarded to Richard Hurley, for his simple and sensitive design for a convent chapel at Bettystown, Co. Meath. Painters receive even fewer commissions than do sculptors, and this was revealed in the exhibition by a certain lack of awareness of what painting for a church demands. However, George Campbell's *Jesus Falls the Third Time*, which was awarded the remaining prize, was an excellent and eminently suitable piece of work.

The experience of the Germans, the French, the Italians and the Swiss has shown that before good modern church architecture can be produced, a great deal of thinking must be done by priests and architects together, at a theological no less than at an aesthetic level. A certain amount of work has been done already in Ireland—a good deal of it by the two architectural institutes—but it is only recently that it has begun to look like taking root. Thanks to *The Furrow*, whose editor (Father J. G. McGarry of Maynooth) has done more than most for sacred art in this country, we now have a small quarterly devoted to sacred art—it is published as a free supplement to the *Furrow*. And the recent liturgical congress 1 and 2 May at Glenstal was on 'Our Churches', with the speakers' rostrum being shared by priests and architects. It is to be hoped that one result of the Glenstal congress will be the establishment of some organization or centre for study and research into the problems of church building in the twentieth century.

However, even though we have as yet had nothing quite like the collaboration between Rudolf Schwarz and Romano Guardini, or like that between Father Couturier and Le Corbusier, there are a few of our new churches which are good. The most notable is the Church of St Peter, at Milford, Co. Donegal, by Messrs Corr and McCormick of Derry. They had already built very creditable modern churches in Limerick City and in County Clare, and the Milford Church is the fruit of a good deal of thought and experience. (When they were working in the south of Ireland, they were fortunate to have had the advice and help of an open-minded and thoughtful Limerick parish-priest, Monsignor Moloney, for whom they built their first church.) The Milford Church seats five hundred and was built for a total cost of £29,000, which amount includes the cost of commissioned works of art of high quality. Apart from the stained glass already mentioned, there are statues by Oisín Kelly and Garry Trimble, a tapestry by Colin Middleton and ceramic Stations of the Cross by Imogen Stuart. St Peter's is essentially a modest church (is this not true of many of the most successful modern churches?) but it is in St Peter's and churches like it that our best hopes for the future lie.

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German Opinion

Last year, the editors and publishers of the periodical *Wort und Wahrheit* asked more than 160 German-speaking Catholics to answer two questions: (1) What are, in your view, the most pressing questions that the situation of the Church in the contemporary world poses to the Council? (2) What actual measures would you advocate for the accomplishment of the tasks of the Council? The replies were published as a special issue (vol. 16, No. 10, October 1961). Although the questions were of limited scope and those whose replies are published are not perhaps a representative sample of German-speaking Catholics (being predominantly intellectuals, as will appear below), it is true, nevertheless, that the problems canvassed range over the whole field of the work of the Church, and that the writers, being leaders of opinion, express what German-speaking Catholics generally think. The special issue is, therefore, an admirable summary and survey of Catholic opinion.

Eighty-two replies are published; of the writers (the categories not being mutually exclusive) six were women, fifteen priests of whom eight were regulars, fourteen journalists and writers, twenty-nine academic teachers, and twenty-nine professional people including senior civil servants; twenty-five