

# North American: III— Rembrandt and Aristotle

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That most expensive of all museum requisitions—Rembrandt's 'Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer'—is in its way an authentic symbol of American culture, and that not merely because of the cash it cost. The picture, with its grave evocation of one generation contemplating another, of one genius paying homage to a predecessor, sums up the seriousness of American interest in the arts—a seriousness, however, which is constantly in need of reassurance. It is not enough to respond to the beauty of a painting or of a symphony: they have their public place, their established share by this in the American image, and they should be made to appear so.

Nowhere in the world are there such temples set up to the glory of the arts, and new and exciting projects, such as the Lincoln Centre in New York, will give fresh and overwhelming evidence of how much Americans care for their heritage, which is no longer simply the possession of old masters or the establishment of superb orchestras and opera. Art is to be used, and the lending services attached to every gallery as well as the huge popular response to concerts, not only in Philadelphia and New York, but in Cleveland, Minneapolis and many places besides, are proof of a genuine and generous interest.

At the same time, the experimental and the naïve are freely available, as can be seen in the multiplicity of New York commercial galleries, with their acres of abstract expressionism, and, of course, in the liveliness of American writing, in which the waves of fashion break ceaselessly in small reviews and off-Broadway theatres. The 'contemporary American novel', about which indeed much that is worth saying can be said, is a favoured subject in any college course in English, and, even academically speaking, Sallinger and Capote lead the way to Henry James and George Eliot.

The arts in fact seem still to be in America an exciting discovery, and the dyspeptic English critic is very wide of the mark if he dismisses so much enthusiasm as the adolescent attitude of a nation that is still growing up. No doubt Mrs Isabella Gardiner in Boston, and the re-

doubtable Mrs Potter Palmer in Chicago, not to speak of the silent Andrew Mellon, regarded their boat-loads of Italian paintings as a very suitable mark of their own wealth and importance, and, after their death, the guarantee of a measure of immortality. But no one looking at these matchless collections—and they are by no means confined to the obvious big cities—can do other than welcome the mixture of motives (and, of course, the guiding hands of Berenson and Duveen) which brought about so wonderful an enrichment of American life.

There is one art, that of architecture, which quite specially characterizes the American achievement. The celebrated view of New York from the entrance to the docks has dazzled generations of new arrivals, for the skyscraper was an early example of exuberance—the incontestable evidence of how far America had come. But it is interesting to compare the (comparatively) old with the new: the Singer and the Chrysler, and even the Empire State buildings have a sort of conscious aggressiveness. 'Higher, still, and higher', they seem to shout. But the newer buildings, and in particular such a graceful office-block as Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building, or, despite confusion in detail, the United Nations block, have no need to assert themselves at all. The slender mass of glass and stone makes a statement about volume and light that is right and inevitable.

It so happens that the Church has had little to offer in the American discovery of the arts. The frozen Gothic clichés of St Patrick's reflect it is time, the taste of its time. But it is unnerving to find that the expensive National Shrine in Washington, only just completed, is so generally admired. It can scarcely be faulted as an academic exercise, but as the contribution of the Church to the present generation it can only confirm the idea that religion is safe, derived and deadly. Again, the rich decoration, muted, with its damasks and bronze, so often seen in restored city churches, is certainly reassuring. It fulfils that part of the American aspiration. But, above all, Americans now want to be reassured about what the architect and decorative artist of to-day have to say, and unhappily the Church has given them few opportunities to speak freely, or indeed at all.

There are some fortunate exceptions, and three churches can be singled out as evidence of what can be done, and what, under courageous direction, is being done. All three are Benedictine monastic churches, and that in itself is very significant. For the Benedictine Order, with its venerable history and its traditional respect for liturgical propriety, is specially well placed to commend what is new—if only because it

indisputably respects what is old. Here, whatever new and revolutionary ideas Aristotle may have, he is surely remembering Homer.

In order of time, the first of these churches is at Portsmouth, Rhode Island, where a community of monks conducts a boarding school of the smartest sort. But there is nothing 'smart' about the church which Pietro Belluschi has built. It is made of honest natural materials—grey stone and redwood—and its simple, near-circular design is at all points decent and adapted to the daily use of monks and boys alike. Belluschi is a sensitive architect, much of whose early work is to be seen in Lutheran churches in the western states of Oregon and Washington. And it is to those states that his favourite redwood is native. No one would call this church revolutionary, but it does provide for the needs of communal worship: all is subordinate to the central altar. And it contains one of the most magnificent of contemporary sacred sculptures in its wire-composition, by Lippold, creating a *shekinah* as its gold and silver threads traverse the whole sacred space, finding their point of rest at the crucifix suspended above the altar. All is open and free, and even the unsatisfactory glass that fills the huge lantern (glass that has nothing to say except a repetition of crude colours) cannot diminish an effect that is sober yet somehow innocent and always new.

At Collegetown, in the state of Minnesota with its thousands of lakes and huge forests, Marcel Breuer has created for what is described as the biggest Benedictine community in the world (responsible for a university, a seminary, a high school and countless works besides), a church that is at first sight an uncompromising and aggressive affirmation of all that the modern movement in architecture stands for. A vast concrete banner, in which the bells are suspended, seems to straddle the church itself, a trapeze of concrete, with its serrated sides sheathed in granite. It fulfils the traditional function of tower or steeple. But it does so—and appropriately—in a medium that is of its time and somehow it declares the Church's perennial purpose: her truth does not alter, though the words she utters, and the accent of them, must. Within, a vast auditorium is powerfully related to the single altar: nothing competes, unless it be the abbot's throne in the apse—a symbol, perhaps too ferocious, of the superior's ruling power. The detail, of the choir stalls especially, seems crude in isolation. But the total effect of this great church—supplemented by the admirable disposition of the crypt, with its modestly subordinated secondary altars—is exhilarating. Its very structure proclaims that it is a place of Christian assembly, and if here once more, as at Portsmouth, the glass which fills the huge west

wall is weak and largely meaningless, the monumental strength of Breuer's design carries even the occasionally faltering detail with it.

It is at Saint Louis, Missouri, that the most recent—indeed, as yet uncompleted—Benedictine church affirms the honesty of concrete most clearly. Here again is a monastic church that is to serve a school as well, and a circular design of twenty-one thin shell concrete parabolic arches gives a sense of utter simplicity and, too, of utter fidelity to liturgical use. The architect, Gyo Obbata, who was responsible for the Saint Louis airport buildings, worked in conjunction with Nervi, and something of that master's handling of the monumental qualities of concrete is to be discerned in this strong, yet astonishingly delicate, building. Set in a carefully landscaped area, and with the low range of the monastic buildings to offset it, the church seems to spring spontaneously from the gently rising ground. It affirms the capacity of concrete, used integrally, to make its own statement, and that statement is utterly sincere. The opportunities here for decoration are magnificent, and the choice of artists, especially for the large areas of glass in the arches and in the tower above, will be crucial, for any insensitivity could easily distort the harmonies of a building that is a mathematical meditation—and so, for that matter, are the preludes and fugues of Bach, and we know how they can be betrayed by transcriptions.

The decorative arts reflect, so far as the Church is concerned, all too faithfully the weak compromises that so much European sacred art displays. It is significant that the *American Catholic Directory* has pages of advertisements, in which Italian marble merchants or German wood-carvers and makers of stained glass offer their safest styles for the American market. It is almost a mark of esteem that a window should have come from Europe, and in the meantime young American artists have few opportunities to develop their understanding of what working for the Church should mean.

There is one source of indigenous inspiration which so far has had little impact on sacred art, for the art of the American Indians (and, in particular, that of the Pueblos of New Mexico and the Hopis and Navahos of the neighbouring states) has largely come to mean the making of small works in silver or pottery or wood for the tourist trade. The Pueblos are Catholic, and their churches—despite frequent attempts at 'purifying' them to conform to the task of the missionaries who look after them—still retain some hints of the magnificent 'colonial' exuberance of the Spanish conquerors. But their own art, with its intricacy of design and its genuine roots in an ancient, if

mysterious, culture, has scarcely ever been employed for any sacred purpose.

A beginning might be made, one supposes, in using Indian craftsmen to make small ecclesiastical objects in silver or wood, whose decoration could be wonderfully enriched by the linear simplicity of much Indian tradition. The weaving of vestments could equally be encouraged, and, with such a beginning, an advance made from the stereotyped echoes of European patterns. At Santa Fé, the recent church of Christ the King is an admirable essay in using the traditional adobe system of building for a religious end. But its decoration betrays the whole purpose of such a church: externally, it belongs to its own landscape and evolves its colour and line, but within it is the same story, for the most part, as that of any Catholic church in any town at all.

The excellent work being done by the Federal Department for Indian Affairs in encouraging Indian craftsmen, and, in particular its careful fostering of the best traditions in native design, could inspire a Catholic movement to give the Church its classical rôle of 'baptizing' the cultural forms it finds, applying them to the worship that at every point uses created things and makes of them gifts acceptable to God. It would, in any case, be a partial recompense for the grievous wrongs done to the Indians in the past: it would help to ease the guilty conscience of most Americans in regard to the Indians, whose present state, so often a pitiful and supine dependence on federal 'protection', remains a constant reproach.

For it is here that the meditative Aristotle looks back very far indeed, to the hidden world of American beginnings which is now too often the hunting-ground of the anthropologist or the profitable business of the bogus 'trading-post', selling absurd trinkets for souvenirs. The ceremonial dances of the Pueblo Indians, so grave and disturbing in their ritual splendour, have their meaning in an ancient memory, far older than the mask of Christian conformity which Spanish conquest created. They take place in the open space of the Pueblo village, and no part of them has any ostensible Christian meaning. Yet the *santos*, the crude little statues of the saints, painted and dressed up, are brought out of the churches to witness what the dancers do. It is an analogy, perhaps, of a very deep mystery which the Church has been involved in from the beginning. The native cultures of the peoples that are the territory of the Church's mission are often bewildering, shocking even, to the established categories of a Catholicism that, culturally speaking, owes such a debt to the Graeco-Latin world of its early growth. But

so much that is true, in terms of a primeval awareness of the rhythm of life and death, the mystery of harvest and the providence of sun and wind and rain, has somehow to be assimilated, and a beginning at least might be made with the things that men make—the cup that becomes a chalice, the handkerchief that ends as a maniple.

Of course, the place of the Indians in American life to-day, and, more specifically, in the life of the Church, can only be a note in the margin, and one does not suggest that the splendid churches of New York or Boston should take on an Indian 'style', which has no sort of relevance to the world of the Manhattan Irish. But the place of the sacred arts in the life of the Church is not a mere matter of arbitrary choice or taste: it is a figure of the Church's own understanding of the world of created good and of its need for redemption.

And so Aristotle, who had a shrewd sense of what cause and effect must mean, is an appropriate patron, not only for the Metropolitan Museum and the great collections, but for Christians quite particularly, if, that is to say, they look at the past, not with nostalgia merely, but as the dynamic inheritance that enables them to live for the future.

# A Survey of New Testament Studies

JOSEPH BOURKE, O.P.

I.—*The Prayer-Book of the Primitive Church.*

From the early Church back to Jesus! If one were to sum up in one phrase the scope and purpose of modern New Testament study, this one, of Joachim Jeremias,<sup>1</sup> could hardly be improved upon. One starts with the primitive Christian community; for by the time the earliest of the New Testament writings was composed, numerous groups had emerged of those who believed the gospel and were already striving to live their new faith. The New Testament enshrines the traditions by

<sup>1</sup>J. Jeremias: *The Parables of Jesus*, S.C.M. English translation, 1954, 18s.