AN AESTHETIC VACUUM

DURING the autumn two exhibitions appeared in London, which although widely different in stylistic characteristics and historical circumstance, admit an identity of purpose. Careful comparison might prove provocative in that both, although possessing a similar sense of direction, have failed to attain to the same measure of success in the communication of this principle. One of these shows consisted of work by the early Netherlandish painter, Gerard David and two of his followers, while the other, the first to be held at the Ashley Galleries, was confined to examples of church art and smaller devotional pieces by contemporary artists. It could be argued that any critical comparison would be unfair, even fruitless, and viewed superficially this is so. We are here concerned with technical arrangement only in so far as it detracts from, or heightens, the artist's power to broadcast his message, rather than with a deliberate attempt to try to prove the existence of technical parallels which in fact are not there.

Briefly the issue is whether religious painting can flourish without the endurance of a broader tradition strong enough to support certain weaknesses in the artist's vision when the grander impetus, such as was found in the major epochs of European art, is dwindling or lost. Mr Wyndham Lewis in a somewhat shallow commentary on the show impatiently dismisses its value on account of David's lack of notable genius, regarding it as a dismal venture. Looking for corroboration he quotes from M. J. Friedlander's introduction to the catalogue where he wrote thus, 'In the history of art David represents the end, the tuneful knell of the fifteenth century in an ageing city (Bruges)'. It is in what some people feel to be a conspicuous absence of overwhelming genius that he makes a definite plea for the foundation of a tradition that can encompass the range of contemporary activities without being pretentious and self-conscious; art today too frequently falls a prey to unhealthy introversion on the part of the artist.

Let us, however, concentrate on David and return to the twentieth century later. The exhibition reveals him to be an unequal painter, but by no means lacking genuine merit and a very real sense of beauty. Generally he cannot maintain the emotional level achieved by the older Flemish masters and so on occasions he may appear thin by comparison. David, through his historical position, summarises the development of the Flemish school, particularly through his tendency to borrow motifs from Van der Goes, Van Eyck and other members of the school. A possible example of this is the pros-

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trate figure in the foreground on the left of the 'Transfiguration' where the pose seems to have been inspired by a soldier in Dirk Bouts's 'Resurrection'; the drawing in the foreground is considerably weaker, as indeed the whole composition is ineffectual beside the other with which he may have been familiar. Even taking into account these and other like deficiencies he still remains a considerable artist, and personally I am inclined to think with Professor L. van Puyvelde that he is on the whole under-estimated, and indubitably his conception of the value of landscape in relation to the figure masses made an important contribution to the advance of anachronistic representation, which is such a dominant characteristic in the development of later Flemish religious art.

The most beautiful and complete expression of his idea of the figure-landscape relationship lies in his triptych of the 'Baptism of Christ'. It is a mature work constructed in an architectural manner combining a harmonious and integrated disposition of the shapes. He has assimilated the humanity of the Flemish school, which is portrayed so wonderfully in the head and gesture of Saint John the Baptist, whose arm is upraised, his hand poised: the instrument for the transmission of the divine grace. The same quality pervades the head of Christ and the look of awe and expectancy on the face of the figure kneeling on the bank clad in a cope of immense richness. There is no discordant note between figures and landscape, which is admirably developed and richly painted. The pigment is notable for the jewel-like brilliance of the tones, and the waters of the Jordan are exquisitely realised, lending a most beautiful effect of translucence. Rising resplendent from the river is a yellow-petalled iris, which echoes the yellow tints distinguishable amongst the garments of the group standing beneath the trees on the left. The purity of his vision has preserved all the essential delicacy of the flower, and is almost sufficient in itself to place him among the finer painters of his period in Flanders. His critics would naturally infer the influence of Van der Goes, for the choice of this particular bloom is certainly reminiscent of his work. Admittedly the question of external influence is a difficult one, and the temptation to attribute everything to them is over-riding today, which course when carried to excess is destructive and false, because ultimately it strips the artist's vision of all individuality and spontaneity. Influences do exist, and their value cannot be ignored, but they only function fully if the artist instinctively feels their spirit to be congenial. If this condition is not present they cannot be sustained without leading to a sterile and artificial art. In the 'Baptism' the entire landscape is depicted with unusual loveliness and naturalistic skill, yet dis-

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playing simultaneously the static, permanent atmosphere underlying Flemish fifteenth-century art.

The other outstanding religious painting in the exhibition was one loaned by the National Gallery, 'Christ nailed to the Cross'. A much earlier work, representative of his Dutch period, it is instinct with religious feeling. The design of the picture is based upon the strong diagonal of the length of the cross, with the figure of Christ stretched upon it. The details of the background are reduced to the minimum and all is concentrated in the action of the soldiers nailing the body of our Lord; and a vital contrast is introduced between the savagery of their activities and the supreme compassion of our Lord's gaze as he regards them. The brushwork is more monotonous and meagre than that of the later 'Baptism', but nonetheless, through the intensity of the idea and the structural unity of the figures, the picture tells in an extraordinary manner.

Other paintings in the show were not always of the same high standard, but they served in their function well enough and could not be disregarded altogether. The series depicting the miracles of Saint Anthony of Padua are amongst these. Owing to his lack of dramatic imagination, they severely lose through his inability to heighten the narrative tension, although the details are there. He was not given to the portrayal of excited dramatic gesture, and his significance lay in a quieter mood, at its summit and most inspired conveying a foretaste of paradisal serenity and bliss, and at least a pedestrian passivity.

Since it becomes obvious that he was not an artist of considerable imaginative facility, and yet he managed to avoid triviality, one may be drawn to ask what kept him above this? The reason seems to lie in two factors, one technical and the other closely related to the character of the artist. Both these reasons seem to have an important bearing upon our contemporary religious artists, whatever the medium. David arrived in Bruges around 1480, and, as already indicated, the city was witnessing the close of the great era of Flemish art; the dynamic impetus evinced by his predecessors was rapidly falling away and the school had passed its zenith. Primarily what lived on for some time was a healthy tradition of craftsmanship and a love for the medium. The second aspect was the continuation of the use of a recognised set of symbols used in the transcription of the holy stories into visual language. These relied for their vitality on a continuous orientation towards the fundamental realities of human existence and thought and man's spiritual aspirations, and grew indirectly out of the artist's relation with his fellow-men, and

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his perception of a real beauty inherent in life; the art of living is essentially bound up with it.

Eric Gill, who affords the principal source of inspiration to the artists exhibiting at the Ashley Galleries, brought about a situation fraught with as many artificialities as that from which he tried to rescue religious art in England. The sustenance he derived from his way of life was pre-eminently a personal affair and cannot be successfully emulated by others. Indeed it is highly debatable whether there is sufficient strength to warrant the formation of a school from his idiom and stylistic formulae. This is not intended to depreciate the sanctity of the man. But in a way it has been unfortunate (indirectly of course) for the health of religious art in this country, because the abstract truths contained in much of his writing has been taken as justification for the adoption of his own practical style in the matter of art. He aimed for the right ordering of ideas, and for the reform of the common outlook towards the problems of industrialisation and similar complexities of modern life. His own solution was one of escapism which, although admirable in its ideals, yet fails to accept certain implications, and his art, mirroring this, fails to achieve an equivalent grandeur to that expressed by the fifteenth-century Flemish masters' works. There is an insularity and rigidity that makes him outside the broader stream of aesthetic achievement. The virtues inherent in his art lay in the desire for a greater simplicity and truth, but the symbols invented for the translation of this were circumscribed and lacking in a larger generosity. Compensation for these shortcomings are shown in the obvious devotion and humility in which he carves and the continuous attempt to return to some simpleness of approach. These are very great gifts, but they came principally out of a personal spiritual quest, and that, together with the idiosyncratic technique he employed, almost certainly dooms his followers to failure. The system of draughtsmanship he practised based on the use of sharp incisive line is one that cannot successively be copied, and unless the line is put down sincerely the result will appear stereotyped and artificial. That is the danger that threatens now. Gill's types were uncompromising and not open to modifications, and leave little room for the experimental or for innovations even if his followers were desirous of attempting any such thing. Partially the fault lies in that the idiom is divorced from the main stream of life; it is out of touch with the urgencies of modern civilisation, for however many misgivings the artist may entertain as to the desirability of the contemporary scene, he still holds the responsibility of inventing a language to suit the theme. The other way is a personal solution and not concerned with the

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universalities of salvation; although at times Gill managed to combine both, and David Jones (who is not exhibiting here) transformed his economy of line into a romantic poem built up of tentative caligraphic images.

The wood engravings were perhaps the most satisfying in the show, no doubt because the laws governing the craft are radically different to those ruling the painter or sculptor; it is a more restricted thing and the Gill style is well suited to it. Denis Tegetmeier contributed a beautifully carved and austere Crucifix in wood, the figure conveying both compassion and a real dignity. Also May Blakeman, outside the Gill tradition, presented a terra cotta relief of the Nativity. The system of composition is reminiscent of certain Byzantine reliefs, but the forms are not derivative and the relief is perhaps a trifle too low to be entirely satisfactory. The exposition of the subject is intimate and tender, relying on simple directness rather than any dramatic force to tell the story. But these are isolated instances and even so they do not contain the inner power displayed by some of the lesser masters of earlier days.

The problem still remains, unsolved. Perhaps it may be suggested that the solution lies in the hands of the faithful themselves. The strength of religious art ultimately seems to depend on the lively faith of the populace; they create the demand for something vital to express the virility of their own faith and to tell its story. Crowds flocked to see van Eyck's Ghent altar-piece when it was painted, and until we witness a similar enthusiasm born of faith, and the integration of art and life becomes re-established as it was then, the existing vacuum is likely to continue.

M. SHIRLEY.

OBITER

ART VERSUS CHRISTIANITY is a form of the age-old problem of Christian humanism or art and morals, a form which the Editor of the attractive American *Catholic Art Quarterly* (Christmas issue; Newport, Rhode Island) sets forth boldly to elucidate. This Art Quarterly follows in its clear and clean American way the traditions laid down by Eric Gill, so that we are not surprised to find the Editor taking up the problem on the assumption that art is skill in making. This skill may of course become too attractive in itself, and ceasing to be a means to an end it becomes introverted and the skill becomes its own publicity agent. It is here that art ceases to support morals or Christianity.

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