

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.

ERIC NEWTON.

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,

then it had to be rejected as dangerous. Since then the Church is supposed to have folded up its interest in the arts. Such a theory has, of course, no relation to the facts. It entirely fails to explain the greatest glory of the Renaissance—the baroque church; this production perhaps is the supreme culmination of the union of artist and religion. After that the relationship did show its first signs of the coming breakdown, and industrialization completed the rift. What now of the future?

It seems just possible that we are coming out of the black tunnel of misunderstanding. Things are still dark but there is a glow which is growing brighter. For too long have artists made art a substitute for life. Art is a careless guide and those who follow her alone are often led to strange places. Many artists are realising that their bright and brave new worlds are only very narrow cul-de-sacs and they long for a way out, for breadth and air again in which to expand and grow. On the other hand, art having become entirely a personal affair of purely personal expression, they still have the feeling that they only, by themselves, must find a personal way out of their own difficulties. At times, how each one sighs for some set of symbols which are understood and easily interpreted by others that could be adopted to make a painting once more an objective business. Oh, the unendurable weight of myself upon myself. . . .

In his fascinating study of mural painting Hans Feibusch has something to say of the self-weary artist of today:

The painter who has long ago left behind the world of realism and is getting tired of pure optical sensations, of playing with detached forms and of wandering through the inferno-like regions of surrealism, would be only too happy to offer himself again as interpreter of the divine message. . . . The Church has lost her superb taste and become used to the horrible, degraded things that commercial unscrupulousness has foisted on to her; of modern art she knows nothing. The artist is probably religious in his own way, but no longer conversant with the doctrine and ritual of the Church and he has lost the conventions of religious art, the language in which former generations expressed themselves fluently. This language has more or less died during the interval, and our changed religious attitude makes the creation of a new one most difficult. Our innermost feelings may be as intense as of old, but we are shyer, less robust, more individually self-conscious, and less attached to traditional symbols. The creation of a new style of religious interpretation is made more difficult still by the fact that there exists no universal new style in art, but only a mass of personal expressions. So what are we to do?’

So asks Mr Feibusch, and in the course of his book he answers himself by a lot of valuable negatives—don't copy past styles; don't go baby-worshipping and reduce all church decoration to nursery wall-

paper designing with chubby Christmas angels, golden stars and lambs and milks; don't attempt religious subjects unless you feel that you are moving naturally and gladly in their world. All these exhortations to the muralist are very sound, and equally so are the author's positive suggestions that a bold Church policy is needed and that only by trial and error can the right attitude and a new tradition be established.

This, I recognize, is more easily said than done. Church decoration is a large-scale operation, an expensive operation and a fairly permanent one. While an individual painter may afford to experiment and to destroy and to experiment again until he has established himself, the same cannot be done with church walls. And if a painter's work does not please him when he has completed it, that is a pity; he can at least try again. But if a decorator fundamentally alienates an entire congregation—that may be a tragedy. In this respect, though, one must take courage by the example of Northampton, where a courageous vicar invited Henry Moore to make him a statue of the Madonna and child. When the statue was unveiled among a congregation largely of boot-factory workers, there were many criticisms. The local press was puzzled and published letters for and letters against for weeks afterwards. I expect that vicar trembled more than once for the fate of his statue. But time vindicated him. His congregation came to understand the Moore idiom after seeing the statue Sunday by Sunday—after praying beside it and living in its presence. Now the Northampton workers are proud of their possession and have also a painting of the Crucifixion by Graham Sutherland.

At this time we certainly suffer badly from the divorce between the secular and the spiritual life. Right up to the 18th century the Church was able to share—more often to lead—the contemporary life of the imagination. The contact was lost and now it is hard to harness both together again. Hence a natural tendency on the part of church-goers to like styles in vogue when Church and artist were united. For religious art to burst into the modern idiom seems to the conservative artist to be quite out of place. His religion doesn't allow for the ever-changing human spirit but only for the eternal spirit of God. Here he has got into a groove of thought. Truth he recognises as a constant, but he has forgotten that there are as many aspects and ways of expressing it as there are human minds to reflect it. He must become more flexible and see truth through other eyes than his own. He must allow for a modern idiom in art as he has allowed for a primitive one, a medieval one or a Gothic one and a Baroque one.

Art can only with difficulty transcend the religious atmosphere of its day. Greek art symbolises the fortitude, justice and temperance of which Plato preached; Roman art the solid strength of the State; medieval art, devotion and contemplation; Baroque art, ecstatic passion and luxury or the unity of spirit and sense; academic English art of the last century, the comfort and decency of the upper middle-class method of life. And so is it not to be expected that our modern, still forming, expression should be difficult and tortuous? Out of the struggles, mental as well as physical, of this era, a contrast of styles has emerged. Some rich and chaotic, yielding and passionate like the religious works of Rouault in France and Hemmingway in England and the secular work of Graham Sutherland, Feliks Topolski and John Piper; others hard and formal and intense like Picasso, Braque, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Ben Nicholson. But are these artists to be condemned for merely expressing what they have felt about the devastating times in which they live? Are they to be forbidden our churches because their message is tragic and sombre and strong? St John the Baptist should be the patron of the modern religious artist. He cried—a voice in the wilderness—and he will understand these new prophets in an old world. These, whether for better or worse, are the men of our time; perhaps they are giants whose message will live, perhaps they are ephemeral, representing a phase in history to be outgrown and replaced by a development as yet unknown. Who knows the answer to these questions? But why should we, living in the present, take such an unbalanced interest in the verdict of the future as to prevent our artists painting now, in case the opinion of posterity should be adverse? The future, undoubtedly, can take care of itself and will preserve what she believes to be of importance and let the rest rot away in the kindest way possible through the inevitable action of time. But we, if we do not produce today and allow others to produce what they have to give, will not leave anything at all for the future to pass judgment upon and to preserve.

Need we be quite so cautious? Quite so careful about whether what we produce is pleasing to absolutely everybody? Couldn't we take a risk and call in our artists to the churches and trust them? And in time might not the Church influence the artist rather than the artist corrupt the Church? Even the builders of our hallowed Gothic cathedrals took a chance against a light-hearted young mason giving a gargoyle the face of a bishop!

IRIS CONLAY.