

authorities, no easy matter. There can be little doubt, however, that many such private owners would in most cases welcome tactful advice regarding the proper preservation of these precious memorials more especially when they are used for public worship.

We rightly desire the return of the sanctuaries which our Catholic forefathers raised to God's honour in every corner of the land, but before we can hope to deal faithfully with such a wealth of treasures we must show ourselves worthy guardians of that which we already possess. The excellent restoration of the Slipper Chapel at Walsingham, a fourteenth century gem, is an encouraging sign and shows what can be done if right principles and good taste are allowed to prevail. We may look forward also to the restoration of Pluscarden Priory in Scotland, now once more the home of Benedictine monks. Such restorations show the due appreciation of our Catholic heritage.

EDWARD T. LONG

A FRENCH REVIVAL

THE gradual evolution of the imagery of abstract art and the corresponding growth in familiarity with its language have failed entirely to dispel criticism. The general acceptance that usually follows an established artistic convention has not been accorded this form of art and the critics of modern painting remain intractable in their attitude. We need only to mention briefly the already well known objections. They fall mainly into two categories which are diametrically opposed to one another. We are told in the first place that abstract art is based upon a series of symbols conceived in a dispassionately intellectual manner and placed upon the canvas with scientific severity. But then conversely others say that it receives its impetus from an unfettered outburst of emotionalism.

Each of these generalisations results from the limited sagacity of the critic. The former is actuated by an inability to enjoy and enter into communion with the spirit of a new iconography. The persistent dissipation of his faculties through a surfeit of descriptive painting finally deprives him of intellectual clarity, so that when confronted with the uncompromising formalities of a Braque, he is filled with an immediate desire for the emotive evocations of lesser romantic art.

But where is all this leading; what are these people trying to say? The underlying plea is for a human art, and eventually,

although sadly unrecognised, a religious art, the demand is unconsciously being formulated for an idiom capable of re-integrating the complexities of life and transcribing them into a visual form. Even the most enthusiastic protagonist of twentieth century painting if he is both honest and rational must concede the point and admit that contemporary art is not always successful in its endeavour to fulfil these exigencies.

The occupation of France unexpectedly occasioned the rebirth of an old and very beautiful craft. Attempts made earlier in the century to rescue tapestry weaving from its abysmal fate had met with disappointment, principally because of the failure of the artists to adapt their cartoons to the essential nature of weaving. The nineteenth century aberrations which regarded tapestry as a substitute for painting had not entirely been eradicated. During that period Jean Lurçat was amongst those labouring to revivify the art; although displaying a greater degree of competence than his contemporaries his expressionistic tapestries were not in keeping with his medium—he remained a painter.

However, the conflict of his ideas with the political ideology of national socialism caused him to leave Paris and settle in the ancient weaving town of Aubusson. This journey was to prove crucial in two ways. Technically it was invaluable; intimate contact with the weaver bestowed upon him the clarity and precision he had long been seeking. He learned the limitations, laws and structure of the craft and to understand the nature of the weaver himself. It was a revelation. And the resulting panels are amongst the most exciting works of art to be executed in recent years.

Significantly it coincided with a reorientation of his thought. A steady development in the virility and character of his images carries us beyond the decorative flamboyance evinced in some of the earlier works. The tragedy of the war and particularly the ravaging of France left an indelible mark upon him. The gradual excogitation of various symbols, especially the cockerel, typifies the process, it matures from a purely decorative figure to an emblem of strength and vitality, something intensely personal, which yet can be felt by all whose powers of perception are not dulled beyond repair.

'The Birth of the Mercenary Soldier' shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the spring of 1947 was an indictment of Nazism, but its universality is such that it is lifted above an immediate historical context and the passionate abhorrence of the evils of war renders its message cogent and applicable to all mankind as long as war is possible.

It may seem paradoxical to state after the calamitous note of the previous work that many of his designs are instinct with a *joie de vivre*; but the key to understanding him lies in this contradiction. A balance is maintained throughout, misery, despair, cruelty—charity, gaiety and tranquillity; all are represented in their turn.

Imaginative spontaneity, monumental grandeur and human tenderness were fundamental attributes of the magnificent tapestries of Medieval France. Notably one of the earliest known examples, the 'Apocalypse' series at Angers commissioned in 1375 by Louis of Anjou. Deeply imbued with religious feeling it was recorded with dogmatic emphasis and singular directness. Again the 'Life of the Virgin' of the Cathedral treasury at Rheims and the 'Legend of St Stephen', now in the Cluny Museum, in which its fascination partly lies in its narrative continuity and simplicity—although the latter does not preclude great wealth of detail—these three instances of sacred art and the culmination of medieval court weaving in the unbelievably lovely 'La Dame à la Licorne' epitomise the glories of the panels of the Middle Ages.

In the Aubusson tapestries (some of which have recently been showing at Gimpel Fils in London and at the Maison Française in Oxford) Lurçat perpetuates those earlier traditions in a pre-eminently *twentieth century idiom*. The two dimensional method of designing is strictly adhered to, thus disregarding the styles of the eighteenth century Gobelins—that fact is vital to this modern French renaissance.

Finally we cannot avoid dwelling on the poet in Lurçat, for when the revival of the craft has been considered that quality remains and without it all his skill and immense energy would be of little avail. The mystery of existence thrills him but he is also reverent before it. The workings of God as the author of nature are realised through the intrinsic poetry of his vision. The particular is seen as a symbol of the universal. 'C'est l'aube' is an extraordinarily graphic account of the dawn, the inexplicable intensity of the moment just before the sun rises receives a treatment that displays a fantasy and lyricism equal to Marc Chagall combined with an added profundity. It is this marriage of spiritual profundity to decorative refinement that reveals the important significance of his work, indeed it carries it far beyond the boundaries of the craft of tapestry weaving—it is an astounding and exciting achievement offering a worthy challenge to contemporary artists. Already in France others joined during the war in the revitalising enterprise at Aubusson. Perhaps some will recall for example Maurice Brianchon's 'Orpheus and the Muses' or Jean Picart Le Doux's panel

of the 'Birdcatcher' which were amongst the modern French tapestries at the Victoria and Albert. It is an encouraging sign.

Is it too much to hope this dynamic inspiration will spur on the other arts to greater activity—that the enlivening freshness will succeed in fanning the smouldering fire into a welcome blaze? Today abstract art is encumbered by too many followers practising the exterior forms and ignoring the need for the inner content and purpose that gave life to the original instances of this art. The urgent necessity of renewal has been apparent for some time. Perhaps it is unduly optimistic to believe that Lurçat is indicating the direction but I do not think so. Let us not be discouraged by an absence of immediate response, impatience would only encourage a spate of spurious imitators. What is wanted is the inner reality and the road to spiritual and aesthetic maturity is long and arduous.

M. SHIRLEY

OBITER

THE STRUGGLE FOR EUROPE is, according to the latest *Contact Book* (5s. 0d.), one between Russia and America. That this is not the whole story is, however, acknowledged by the inclusion of a discussion between Ernst Fischer, leader of the Austrian Communists, and August Knoll, professor in the University of Vienna and a distinguished Catholic sociologist. 'Can Catholics be Marxists?' is the frank subject of their debate, which takes it for granted that Catholicism and Marxism are today the strongest intellectual and moral forces in Europe. Are they irreconcilable enemies? And is the conflict between the World Powers identical with that antagonism? The second question is perhaps the more searching. Professor Knoll does well to avoid identifying the Catholic opposition to Marxism with any particular social philosophy. He emphasises that

the Church does not wish to issue any political manifesto. Only after a system has been observed in its practical functioning and for some considerable time can the Church say whether its reality corresponds to or conflicts with divine revelation. You cannot say that the Church opposes all revolutions. The Church has both a conservative and a revolutionary function. Its conservative function is proved by the fact that it recognises whatever situation has established itself, irrespective of what it is like. The Church must do this in order to carry on its business which is the pastoral office. It holds no assignment, it has not been commissioned to start revolutions, it is not its task to create political and economic realities. If it were, then it could be accused of acting as a screen