

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON ART

PIUS HOLDEN, O.P.



HE Church has always recognized the place that Art can and should hold in the lives of men, and from her earliest days has never hesitated to make use of it, not alone as a means of directing their thoughts toward God, but also that their prayers and acts of homage might be fittingly housed in architectural triumphs and suitably clad in vestments of colour and rhythm. There has been however occasional controversy with regard to this use of Art, especially during those times when one form of Art no longer appealed and a new one was replacing it in popular esteem. Then there was discussion concerning the nature and end of art, and the possibility of reconciling it, or at least some of its forms, with the Church's teaching and practice in the sphere of morals. A particularly sharp controversy is raging to-day.

The past fifty years have witnessed the failure of what is commonly called "Modern Art" to appease the intense yearning for beauty ever present in the soul of man. The fact is obvious, attested not only by the unsatisfied longing of our hearts after the contemplation of present day creations, but also by the conviction of a constantly increasing number of artists that continuance in the narrow groove of the last two or three centuries is sheer folly. Conscious of this failure, they are groping their way towards a new art, one that will more adequately slake our thirst for beauty,—a long and arduous task, for the fundament upon which they must build their structure, if it is to endure, lies deep and will never be reached by a mere scratching of the surface. At such times controversy is not surprising. Bewildered by the clamour of a work-a-day world which has deliberately bartered the pure delights of real art for material pleasure and mechanical progress, confused by the endless academic discussion with regard to the nature and end of Beauty and Art, hampered by lack of agreement among his fellows, the artist to-day is in sore straits. He stands apart; he alone must answer

the question whether art shall perish from the face of the earth; and he alone must prove his answer. Whether the new art (if there be one) will return to the glories of the Middle Ages or hue its way on and on to something which lies still in the future is a moot point with ardent champions for both a return and an advance. One thing is certain. The artist must return to the inspiration of those Masters of the Middle Ages, and perhaps also, to their method in training and execution.

Let us glance back for a moment at the panorama of the past. A glorious succession of monuments of surpassing splendour unfolds itself to the eye. Masterpieces in gold, bronze, marble and oils adorn the halls of palaces and enhance the beauty of gardens. Mighty cathedrals lift their turrets high into the sky. Love, courage, holiness, all the beauties of every virtue speak to us from pictures and statues. This was an art deeply conscious of the place of Catholicism in the hearts of men, an art which was inspired by the very breath of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, Beauty and Love. Everyone spoke of art and thought of it as a natural activity of Catholic life, a natural perfection of the Catholic soul. That the Church accepted it and used it is evident. There remains only to answer the question—what was her conception of art and what place did she accord it in the scheme of things. Her answer is contained in the teachings of her philosophers, an epitome of which may be found in the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

One will not find in the *Summa* or in the other works of Saint Thomas a complete treatise on Art as such, for the Angelic Doctor considered it only in connection with something else. When speaking of beauty he of course frequently refers to the manner of its externalization and perpetuation. Again, when he asks such questions as "Is Logic an Art?" "Is Prudence an Art?" etc., his views with regard to the nature and end of art may be seen. If however we gather from all his works his various statements concerning art we shall find ourselves possessed of a complete logical treatise.

Since art is the externalization or the concretization of beauty we shall understand his position better by familiarizing ourselves with his teaching with regard to beauty. When Saint Thomas approached the discussion of this question he found the philosophers divided into two opposing camps, the extreme objectivists and the extreme subjectivists. For the former beauty was resident only in extramental reality and existed there in its

fullness entirely independent of our appreciation of it. For the latter beauty was a mere subjective reaction, that is, our mental or physical response to the action of certain stimuli. There were of course various interpretations of both objectivism and subjectivism, but this general division is sufficient for our purpose.

Saint Thomas recognized some truth in both systems, but realized that neither the one nor the other fully answered the questions concerning the nature and residence of beauty. Ever wary of extremes in all his philosophic conclusions, he sought the solution in a synthesis of the two. For him beauty existed not alone in the extramental world, nor alone in the mind, but in both. Almost supernaturally adept at briefly defining, he speaks of beauty as "that which pleases when seen." In this definition are the elements which place beauty in various objects of the external world and in our own mental reaction which follows their perception. It is to be particularly noted that the pleasure afforded by the contemplation of beauty is an intellectual pleasure. For him three elements combined to make a thing beautiful. First of all, it must be integral, that is, possessing all the parts and qualities which, considering its nature and purpose, it should have. Then it must be endowed with proportion and harmony. Finally there is required the surpassing splendour and brilliance of its form. Now all these elements appeal particularly to the intellect since it is the intellect which recognizes the form and the form is what makes the thing what it is and endows it with its harmony and integrity.

Beauty is, of course, found in the things of creation. The omnipotent and beneficent God, Who has communicated His perfections to His creatures, would not withhold the greatest of these perfections. Apart from philosophical reasons we have the testimony of our own experience. Who has not felt the splendour of the tossing sea or towering mountains, and who has not found delight in the brilliant colourings of the setting sun? But beauty is found not alone in those works which are directly from the hand of God. When He made man in His image and likeness, He made him particularly like Himself by bestowing upon him the ability to create, as it were, and perpetuate works of beauty. This ability we have designated "art." Art in the popular sense is an object such as a painting, statue, etc., the contemplation of which provides pleasure. Saint Thomas, more precisely distinguishing between art and its externalization, defines art as a habit of the practical intellect directing man's pro-

ductive activity enabling him to endow the thing produced with all the qualities its perfection demands.

It may perhaps be recalled with profit here that we speak of the speculative and practical intellect because of its twofold operation; the one, of knowing; and the other, of doing or making. The speculative intellect is concerned entirely with the apprehension of truth, while the practical intellect directs that activity of man which terminates outside himself. The practical intellect has itself a twofold operation—that of doing in the moral order, and that of making in the efficient. Art is the habit which directs man's activity in making. Art has been defined as a habit, just as knowledge in the speculative order and prudence in the moral; but, unlike knowledge, it does not remain an immanent thing, altogether in the intellect; its term is in some extramental object: and, unlike prudence, it is not, at least directly, concerned with the final end of our moral acts; its solicitude is only for the perfection of the art-work here and now to be done. But just as prudence directs us in all the acts by which we approach our final end, so art directs the artist in all the acts which tend to the perfection of his work and warns him from such as would render it imperfect.

It is however scarcely sufficient to speak of art merely as a habit of the practical intellect, for, unless we are deeply analytical, the real significance of the statement will escape us. Art is a thing of the spirit, a perfection which has its birth and fullest being entirely within the soul of man. It is a mirroring of a beauty (first of all in the soul of the artist, and later, perhaps, in colour, lines, or rhythm) which is ultimately resident in the Divinity Itself. This it cannot do unless the artist has first seen and appreciated beauty, which is accomplished by the immanent operations of the intellect and will whereby he discerns beauty and takes delight in it. Intense activity of the mind is required that he may discover beauty, for, let us remember, the beauty of a thing arises from the brilliance of its form and the integrity and harmony of its parts, and these are the objects of the action of the intellect whose office it is to know the essences of things, their ends, and the harmonious ordering of all their parts to those ends. Briefly, if the artist would be true to his vocation, his spirit must commune with the things that are beyond and above matter, especially with the divine Spirit; his soul must be attuned to the rhythmic movement of all creation (towards its

end), for only then will his art, like creation, be a reflection of eternal Beauty.

Since art is such a vital and intimate part of the artist we can readily see that it is vitally and intimately connected with the civilization, or rather, with the thought and spirit of the civilization of which the artist is a member. He leads his own life, it is true, just as we all lead our individual lives; but not one of us can escape the distinguishing characteristics of the civilization in which we live. Its spirit and thought influence our every act. Herein lies the reason for the chaotic condition of art in the present day. Our civilization was profoundly disturbed by the three revolutions, the religious, the political, and the industrial. Customs and habits of life were changed; moral and esthetic values distorted. When these things which affect art so vitally were attacked it was to be expected that art itself would suffer in consequence. It was repudiated by the first revolution, surrendered to patronage and commercialism by the second, and frankly exchanged for material progress and mechanical technique by the third.

It belongs to the artist however to shape, in a measure at least, the destinies of the civilization in which he lives. The things of God must ever return to Him, and Beauty, perhaps His most glorious perfection, must ultimately direct our thoughts to Him. To the artist God has given the power to reproduce works of beauty. If he is sincere in his service of beauty his work will lift our spirits from out the commonplace of a work-a-day world to the magnificent beauty of the spiritual realm where they will finally discover an eternity of delight in Beauty Itself. The way is unmistakable and unailing, for beauty is also truth and goodness really, and these lead directly to Him from Whom they have come. But it is a hard and difficult way. Beauty is severe and stern in her demands upon her servitors, the artists. And to-day it is doubly difficult for they have not alone the task of preserving their own disinterestedness and freedom from the patronage and commercialism which the world would force upon them, but also the task of bringing the world once again to the feet of real and eternal Beauty.

The decline of Art has resulted in a general dissatisfaction not only among the artists but also among those who are true lovers of beauty. The artist is troubled in spirit because he is aware of his vain striving toward the ideal;—truly a test of the stuff of which he is made for his spirit is fettered by lack of

proper inspiration and by all the disconcerting distractions of a world which is rushing helter-skelter far from the source of its life and beauty, and these fetters will be loosened only by the supremest acts of courage. All those who have the true interests of art at heart have watched with dismay its downward trend through the centuries. The time is a troublous one. How far art has strayed from its proper path may be seen in the pitiful helplessness of the artist. He has been led astray by the promises of the world, promises which it has never fulfilled because ultimately it could not. He has discovered the emptiness of these promises and only the noblest natures could survive the pain of the discovery. Many have become restive and impatient with the slow progress from failure to success. Once more we hear the despairing and cynical cry—"After all is there such a thing as beauty?" "What is it and where is it?" "Can man really produce it?" To the general lack of knowledge there has been added the confusion arising from academic dispute, regrettable absence of precision in terminology, and a rebirth of all the ancient prejudices.

Since the Church has always been a guiding spirit in the various movements of our civilization, a leader to whom all turn either willingly or in spite of themselves, she must once again make clear her attitude with regard to Beauty and Art. Misunderstanding is widespread, not alone outside the Church but even among her children. Odd, when one thinks of it, for she has ever been the protectress of the arts; but querulousness and narrowness of vision born of years of mental repression and misdirection blind us and warp our judgment. This is why we hear such questions as "Does not the Church lay too heavy a hand upon the artist?" "Are not a real art and a sincere catholicism mutually exclusive?" The mistake has been further spread throughout the length and breadth of the land by the avalanche of commercialized religious art with which the Church has been overwhelmed. She stands before us a pitiful spectacle; the eternal Bride of Christ, the Mirror of divine Beauty is to-day a gaudy and overdressed woman.¹ So many of our churches no longer appeal to us as fitting temples of Him Whom "the universe cannot contain." Statues and paintings do not convince us of the real enduring beauty of union of the spirit with God. Nor has catholic literature escaped the deteriorating influence which infects its art. The novel is for the most part an insipid thing,

¹ J. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 208.

without vitality or virility. Its pietistic excess is uninviting and bores us; or on the other hand, its complete lack of any sense of the fitness of things is disgusting. Hagiography is, in the main, hopelessly futile. It places the saints so far beyond the reach and understanding of ordinary men that they merely chill those who seek from them the warmth of divine love. We have seen all this in so many places and for so long a while that we think of it now as a natural condition. It has become a part of our catholic life, just as the parochial church and Mass on Sunday. Is the Church, then, as blind as we? Emphatically no.

The traditional position of the Church with regard to art cannot, after sober thought, be mistaken. We have but to recall for a moment the long list of popes and bishops who have given whole-hearted support to art-production, the long list of masters who have lived real solidly-catholic lives and have left statues and paintings for our perpetual delight, we have but to recall that God Himself gave explicit directions for the beautiful appointments of His temple, to be relieved of any lingering misgiving about the attitude of the Church towards art. She has nothing but approval for art: but this supposes that art be true to itself, that is, that it be always the sincere servitor of beauty, that it never surrender itself to the devastating influence of whatever will seduce it from such faithful service.

The Church has on occasion condemned the works of certain artists, or perhaps, only some of their works. In such manner also certain schools have encountered her frown of disapproval. This is not because she is taking issue with art itself, but only because the artist has so far forgotten his high vocation as to deliver it up to the dictates of patronage, commercialism or self-advancement, or because, even though true to his art he has externalized it in a manner detrimental to the interests of divine truth which she must ever zealously guard. It is for such a reason that the Church does not look with favour upon Modern Art. Her quarrel with this art is not because it is modern. The Church herself is and has always been modern, for her mission is to all men, and living organism that she is, she ever adapts herself to the particular needs of time and place. She has condemned much of present day production then, not because it is modern, but because that which we know as Modern Art is not real art in the honest service of beauty, but an art done almost to death by constant attack down through the centuries, an art plundered of its source of life and its great heritage and which

can now only minister to the shallow pleasures of sense and the superficial delights of men who "see but do not perceive, who hear but do not understand."

The question of the relation between art and morality is an old one. The Church in her answer particularly insists that art must never be subversive of man's ordination to his ultimate end, God. In its own sphere, it is true, art is supreme. It is the servitor of beauty only. It is concerned simply and solely with an art-work here and now to be done in order to endow it with every possible perfection and beauty. If the artist has any other purpose in mind, any other intention, he is subordinating his art to an alien influence. However, even though art is in itself morally indifferent, its production, the art-work, is not, for, over and above the delight it affords, it will inevitably uplift or degrade. The high purpose of man's creation is that he may spend eternity with God. To do this he must while on earth faithfully observe the law of God. The obligation is grave and incumbent upon the artist no less than upon his fellow men, for he is first of all a man and his artistic activity consists in human acts; he is therefore amenable to the law which commands that all human acts be ordained to God. It follows then, that although art is in itself free, since it plays such a vital part in the lives and emotions of men, it must never contravene this law. More than this; the artist must avoid not only those things evil in themselves inasmuch as they turn him or his fellowmen away from God, but he must occasionally surrender some of the privileges to which, simply speaking, art may justly lay claim. An example of this may be found in the Church's condemnation of the "Crucifixion" of a famous painter. His faith or his artistry were never questioned. He was overwhelmed by the intensity and bitterness of Christ's suffering. His painting portrayed the features of Christ so distorted by pain and grief that it endangered the tradition and theological teaching of the Church which hold that the serene operations of His mental faculties were never disturbed. And so, the condemnation. Another instance is the use of the nude. Nudity is not necessarily immorality, and therefore it is not forbidden. It is however always dangerous, especially at a time when there is so much pandering to sensuality. The artist, in his use of the nude, must proceed with the greatest care and caution, strongly setting forth the ideal so that his creation will offer not mere sensual enjoyment but the pure delight of the mind. The Faith of the catholic artist will help him incalculably. His

spirit is fortified by supernatural love for God and man and rectified, directed in its progress toward its final end, by supernatural prudence. Quickened by this lively Faith and ever obedient to its law, he will find fullest expression for his artistic genius and provide for us, what real art should always provide, a fleeting glance at eternal Beauty.

The story of present day activity is not entirely a pessimistic one. There are a few (although a very few) who possess the master's touch. Others, conscious of the failure of "Modern Art" for the most part, are resolved to strive mightily for an art that will satisfy, as far as it is humanly possible, our longing for beauty. The future is promising, with a promise that bids fair to be realized if the artist is sincere in his resolve. Whatever path he may choose as the best solution of his difficulty he may be assured of the constant solicitude of the Church. She will always be, as she has ever been, ready and willing to help and direct him with a wisdom and prudence that have stood the test of centuries. But after all, she can only help. The artist himself must take the initiative. Art is a perfection of his individual soul. He must treasure it as a gift given only to a few. He must nurture it with the greatest care, and guard it well that it may never be debased. What the man is, so will his acts be. The artist will be greatest when the man is warmed by an abiding love for God and fellowman, when he is strengthened by a fortitude superior to every obstacle, when he is guided by a prudence which will ever keep him on the path of truth and goodness. His intellect must penetrate to the most secret places of creation, nay even to God Himself, and grasp the secret of being, for only in the man who knows the ways of the God Who is Beauty Itself will art receive its fullest being. Once he has prepared himself well for the exercise of his art, his choice of theme is unlimited—as much so as Infinity Itself. But, there has been enough of cynicism and ugliness. Let his art be true and bring to us real beauty. Let his sculpture and music and painting speak to us of the beauty of love, the beauty of loyalty, the beauty of courage; let it reflect for us the divine perfections of our Creator. It is an anguished cry which is wrung from us, the artist must find himself—for himself and for us.