



OUR LADY OF SORROWS, by *Joan Morris, S.P.*

DOMINICANA

Vol. XXXIV

MARCH, 1949

No. 1

THE REVOLT OF MODERN ART

HILARY KENNY, O.P.



CHRISTOPHER DAWSON has shown that culture is a product of religion, and that a culture will reflect the error or truth, the narrowness or comprehensiveness of the religion. Culture, although produced by religion, will be affected and modified by the economic and social conditions of the times. It is not surprising then that with the coming of Christianity a new culture appeared, and that the new religion should at an early date be reflected in its art.

To the pagan mind of the first century the most significant note of Christianity was its other-worldliness. Never in the history of religion had there been such a strong belief in an after life, and such a willingness to sacrifice the present life to attain that after life.

This Christian emphasis of the spiritual over the material, of the subservience of the body to the soul, was immediately apparent in the art of the early Church. The Hellenistic concept of beauty, essentially naturalistic, was rejected. The cult of the body gave way to the cult of the spirit; the pursuit of beauty to the pursuit of truth. Nowhere in the art of the Catacombs is there to be found beauty for beauty's sake.

CHRISTIAN ART SPIRITUAL

To the modern eye the art of the early Church and of the Middle Ages, will seem at first sight crude and unskilled. Nurtured as we have been on the art of the Renaissance, whose roots are to be found in pagan Greece, we find it difficult to appreciate or evaluate

Christian art. To do so we must realize that the difference between the two art traditions is not essentially a difference of technical skill, of mastery of perspective, of design, of color or chiaroscuro. Many of the artists of the Catacombs, we may be sure, had been pagans and probably had studied under pagan masters. They did not lack skill, rather they deliberately rejected the method and technique of their old masters. As for the Middle Ages, the objection that in losing contact with the Greek world the medieval artist lost the skill to produce naturalistic works will not hold. First of all it is a moot question whether or not the Middle Ages had lost all contact with Greek art. Also, Byzantine art, which is farther removed from the Greek concept of art than is the art of the Middle Ages, was the art of that part of the Christian world located in the Greek sphere of influence. It would be foolish to say that the Byzantine artist had lost contact with the Greek world.

The essential difference between Christian art and the art of the Renaissance and its tradition is a difference of intention, of vision, of concept, and not one of skill or style. Unless we keep this in mind we shall never be able to appreciate Christian art. The Renaissance artist, like his Greek prototype, endeavored to portray physical beauty in all its godlikeness; the medieval artist to capture spiritual beauty in all its Godliness. To attain this objective, an artist like Fra Angelico, living in the 15th century in the first surge of the Renaissance, calmly repudiated the methods of his contemporaries and painted in the seemingly unskilled and archaic manner of the medievalists. To evaluate the art of the Catacombs, of the Middle Ages, of the Italian Primitives and of Fra Angelico—and this is Christian art—we must appraise not with the eye of the body but with the eye of the soul.

RENAISSANCE ART NATURALISTIC

The Renaissance artist was satisfied to immortalize in stone and paint the myriad forms of natural beauty. Keats in the closing lines of his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," fittingly enough, sums up his and the renaissance-man's credo:

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

The beauty of Keats as also that of Cellini, of Titian, of Raphael, was the beauty of nature. It was essentially sensuous, and when the Renaissance artist sometimes succeeded in penetrating to the inner beauty of things it was because his vision was not yet completely

bounded by the material world; he was still too close to the Ages of Faith for that. That the Renaissance produced great art there is no gainsaying; but it is essentially naturalistic and earthbound. Even the works of Botticelli were inspired more by a poetic and imaginative vision than by a spiritual one. And if we are to judge things by their spiritual content then Renaissance art is inferior to the art of the Christian centuries.

For four hundred years the mainstream of Western art went back to the Renaissance as to its source. It was naturalistic, imitative¹ art, an art of perfection, in contradistinction to the art of the Middle Ages, which had been symbolic, religious, an art of the imperfect. Few of the great painters of Europe rejected the imitative naturalism which had become the traditional form of Western art. El Greco, in the 16th century, and Rembrandt, in the 17th, are probably the greatest painters who did so.

El Greco, the Greek who lived and painted in Spain, is the most Spanish of painters. He has much of the fierce intensity and spiritual vision that are associated with Spain, the land of the great mystics, St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila. El Greco disregarding fidelity to nature, and with a style that anticipated the best in modern art, succeeded as no other painter had done since Fra Angelico in overcoming the problem of expressing spiritual values in material objective forms. He is closer to the Medievalists and to the Italian Primitives than he is to the Renaissance painters, but like Rembrandt he is outside all schools.

Rembrandt, called by some critics the greatest painter who ever lived, is separated from the Renaissance tradition by the depth of his insight and his repudiation of naturalistic perfection. His paintings have little of the surface beauty of Renaissance art. The palette is meagre (he used only four or five colors), the draughtmanship poor, the figures are blurred and uncomely—e.g., the Christ in *Noli Me Tangere*—but what grasp of character, what unfathomable mystery and discernment is to be found within the frames of these canvasses! The tremendous drama of Shakespeare, the vision of Dante, are to be found here in paint.

¹ Naturalistic imitation must be distinguished from that imitation which concerns the formal element in art. The former is something to be disparaged for it inevitably ends in a dead realism that is essentially photographic. The imitation which is necessary to art is interpretative and brings to the surface the hidden meaning of things. Maritain describes this imitation as "Resemblance, but a spiritual resemblance." *Art and Scholasticism*. (Charles Scribner Co., New York, 1947) p. 75.

But despite the example of these two great painters traditional art went on its successful, naturalistic way, and, as the desideratum was to reproduce external nature in all her moods and shapes, there came a time when perfection, humanly speaking, was reached. By the 19th century artists began to realize that the legacy of the peerless Italians of the high Renaissance was almost spent, and that fame could no longer be bought with the poor pittance of an imitation that was very often merely copying. Nature was conquered, Beauty was possessed, the Pantheon was filled.

REVOLT IN THE 19TH CENTURY

One of the earliest movements to break loose from the deadening banality into which painting had fallen originated in England about the middle of the 19th century. A group of painters who became known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood turned to the Middle Ages and especially to the Italian Primitives for inspiration. It was the intention of Holman Hunt, John Everett Milais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the leaders of the movement, to infuse into the leaden naturalism of 19th century art the mystical and religious feeling of the Italian Primitives. Although the movement produced some masterpieces, as a whole it was a failure. The religious paintings of the Brotherhood are for the most part insipid and uninspired depictions of religious subjects having neither the sensuous beauty of the Renaissance nor the spiritual fervor of the Middle Ages.

In France, around 1870, a number of painters were stimulated to experimentation by the scientific discovery that white light is composed of the spectrum colors. Earlier painters in order to get certain color effects had mixed their pigments; the Impressionists, as the new group were called, used pure color as far as possible. The colors were applied to the canvas in juxtaposition, resulting at close range in a confusing mass of paint, but as the spectator moves away "the eye recomposes what the painter has decomposed." This school aimed at capturing the fleeting moment, and in recreating the blinding brilliance of sunlight. In their paintings sunlight is the true subject. In the works of Monet and Renoir, the greatest of the Impressionists, we find a freshness and airiness that delights the eye. Great as was the artistic revolution of the French Impressionists it was essentially a technical one remaining true to the Renaissance tradition in its adherence to sensual beauty.

Cézanne, a contemporary of Monet, started out as an Impressionist but such an unintellectual art could not hold the cogitative

artist who saw the necessity of reinstating the pre-eminence of plastic form which the Impressionists had made subservient to light. Cézanne was a great theorizer and his theory that all forms in nature are reducible to "the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder" gave rise to Cubism the movements from which modern art, as it is now generally understood, stems. In many ways solidly traditional, Cézanne had no premonition that his theory, passing through the hands of Braque and Picasso, would emerge such a Frankenstein monster.

MODERN ART

In the works of Picasso, the pied-piper of painting, we find the quintessence of modern art. His experiments in Cubism, Surrealism, Abstractionism, have largely brought modern painting to where it is today—to a blank wall; or rather to an exquisitely padded wall, for modern art is decadent and irrational.

Surrealism shackled as it is to the philosophy of Freud is irrational and subconscious, and being such is bad art. For art as St. Thomas teaches is the right way (*ratio*) of making, and a work of art results from a human, that is rational, act. Abstract art, on the other hand, which purports to be objectless, destroys the most fundamental requisite for a visual art, namely the object.

Yet modern art, at least in theory, was a step in the right direction, for it was an attempt to free art from the strangle-hold of matter, and to recapture something of the spiritual element which had finally and completely disappeared from art in 19th century realism. But in exaggerating a truth it fell into heresy, for it has "purified" itself entirely of matter, and in Abstractionism has entered into the world of "pure harmony" and "pure idea." So it is a case of the cure being worse than the disease, for an art that is devoid of matter and spirit is certainly in a worse way than traditional art which is lacking only the spiritual element.

As we have seen, Christian art was symbolic, religious, containing a spiritual vision which has grown dimmer and dimmer since the Renaissance until it is lost entirely in the 19th century; and we have seen that Renaissance and subsequent art has been naturalistic, and imitative of surface beauty; and, very sketchily, we have seen some of the attempts to break loose from that heritage which inevitably ends in artistic plagiarism, and how these attempts have failed because they were primarily technical revolutions and not revolutions of the spirit; and, finally, we have seen that modern art since Picasso has been a search for the spirit, but being divorced from truth and reli-

gion it has followed the spirit of darkness rather than the spirit of light.

A TRUE MODERN ART

Although in itself art is amoral, for it is by definition concerned only with the right way of making, nevertheless as art is an intellectual habit of man, and as the completed work is a product of the whole man, true art must be grounded in moral truth. Otherwise it cannot but go astray. The essential note of art is, in the words of Maritain, "the control imposed by mind upon matter," thus true art will avoid the exaggerated materialism of traditional art and the extreme subjectivism of modern art.

The elements of a true Christian art are very much in evidence in the works of such artists as George Rouault, Ivan Mestrovic the great Yugo-Slav sculpture, Eric Gill, and among the younger painters, Joan Morris.

Georges Rouault, in his youth numbered with Picasso and Matisse among the "Fauves" or Wild Beasts of modern art, now in his old age living in Paris incommunicado to all but a few intimate friends, is called the "monk" of modern painting. The work of Rouault is very modern. His paintings are not decorative nor eye-pleasing, and would look amiss in a museum; they are meditative, and very Christian and, at least those with explicitly religious subjects, should be found only in churches. Rouault studied the art of stained-glass and his paintings are reminiscent of the windows of the great cathedrals. The art of Rouault is very individualistic; he belongs to no school and has no disciples. It is the outpouring of a soul nauseated with the filth of sin. His painting has a parallel in French literature in the works of the apocalyptic Leon Bloy.

Among Rouault's favorite subjects are bloated judges whose mercy is that of a merciless world; prostitutes whose exterior ugliness mirrors the corruption of their souls; clowns whose pitiful countenances look out upon a pitiless world. But above all there are the Christs whose indescribable sufferings proclaim the heinousness of sin. This is not an art to look at and enjoy. This is an art to meditate on and to fear, for if Fra Angelico has painted Paradise, Rouault has painted Hell.

Joan Morris has been successful in developing a religious art that is at once modern and spiritual. An absorption of the symbolic art of the Catacombs and of the Byzantines, combined with a knowledge of the Scriptures, all of which is reflected in her work, has given

the description of "Theological Paintings" to her canvasses.

One of the more representative of her paintings "Our Lady of Sorrows" is reproduced in these pages. Here, as in Rouault, but in an entirely different manner, we have a subject for meditation. It is a three dimension, flat surface oil, with a juxtaposition of forms. In the painting "the Virgin after the day of the Passion contemplates the events again recording the most crucial moments, the repeated hammering of the nail into the hands of Our Lord, the piercing of His side, the crown of thorns, and His last look before dying." The rose in the foreground, saturated with the blood of Christ, symbolizes love, reminding us that the suffering of Our Lord is a beautiful thing, transformed as it has been by His infinite love.

The 20th century has been an age of revolt; revolt in government, in economics, in religion, in art. The world is at the crossroads. In this cataclysmic age, in all the regions of the spirit, the choice must be made—Christ or Anti-Christ. We have seen that a small, but in no wise negligible few, in the realm of art have chosen Him. Whether or no they shall prevail will be ultimately determined by the choice of the world at large.