

Art in the Secular City

by Lawrence Porter, O.P.

And David danced whirling round before Yahweh with all his might, wearing a linen loincloth round him. Thus David and all the House of Israel brought up the ark of Yahweh with acclaim and the sound of the horn. Now as the ark of Yahweh entered the Citadel of David, Michal the daughter of Saul was watching from the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before Yahweh . . . and as David was coming back to bless his household she went out to meet him. "What a fine reputation the king of Israel has won himself today," she said "displaying himself under the eyes of his servants, as any buffoon might display himself." (2 Samuel 6:14-16, 20)

Was David foolish—or was he *artful*? David, warrior-king of a holy people, carried on like a clown before Israel's most sacred possession. But in his wild abandon—in all the crudity of gestures so very human, in the presence of something so very sacred, one cannot help but feel that peculiar tension, that "sublime madness" that is art. As with all good art, this act of David shifts our normal viewpoint—places us at an odd angle from which we may more meaningfully see ourselves. Now David's act has set the human condition in a new perspective. Of course it is upsetting, "provocative" if you will, this paradoxical wedding of the sublime with the mundane. It is radical in the truest sense of the word, but this tremendous surface tension merely belies the intensity of the internal act. Here passionate flesh and passionate intellect fuse in an expression of the passionate spirit,¹ so much so that we might say in the designs David wove upon the ground might be traced all his being.

Here we are at the center, the point at which the sacred and the beautiful encounter each other in man to form the artistic consciousness of the man of faith. The emphatic appropriateness of the artistic act to the act of prayer could be no more forcefully expressed. The issue of David's dance is not the studied peace which comes from the studied reflection that is all too often the low level to which our prayer rises. David's wild "abandon" is a total abandonment of himself to God; in his foolish "display" all the weakness and absurdity as well as the might and wisdom that he is find expression and are elevated to the level of prayer.

But more than expressing the totality of man, art allows him to work with that which man cannot comprehend—that *mystery* which is at the center of all he experiences. Only in this creative act does David find himself capable of expressing what he has felt but could not say. Only in this manner can he realize in a viable form what has been most ineffable in his experience. His rational and irrational natures, his consciousness as well as his subconsciousness find expression here; it is the total man that speaks to us in David's dance. Equally important, art allows man to interpret his experience; not only to give utterance to what he feels but to draw meaning from it, even stamp it with meaning. Art allowed primitive man to create stability and rest in the bewildering turmoil of the universe. In gesture and sounds and signs, the elusive and mysterious yet meaningful and objective experience of life could be in a sense captured and thus come to terms with.

But David's dance as expression of the sacred in man is not the whole story of the relationship between religion and art. A comparison of the aesthetic experience and the religious experience reveals some impressive similarities in the essential nature of both acts that extend the horizons of encounter between the sacred and the beautiful. The recognition of beauty is like responsiveness to the sacred in that both are of the contemplative order. Thus the mystic and the artist seek to "understand" the external world (i.e., *recognition* of value, pattern, significance). Not conquest but appreciation is their goal. Their goals are good and therefore desirable in and of themselves. It is from this final point of agreement that we may now see the point at which art and religion meet.²

Pius XII said:

Often the artist feels within him a noble torment—one of the essential characteristics of art, which consists in a certain intrinsic "affinity" of art with religion, which in certain ways renders artists inter-

preters of the infinite perfections of God, and particularly of the beauty and harmony of God's creation. The function of all art lies in fact in breaking through the narrow and tortuous enclosure of the finite, in which man is immersed while living here below, and providing a window to the infinite for his hungry soul.³

What the pope was saying is that every artistic activity means a transcendence of the data of nature. When this is achieved successfully some idea of transcendence must be transmitted to the beholder. But art is not a substitute for religion; it does not create meaning—it makes meaning possible. It leads man to a recognition, but art cannot realize meaning for him. "Any work of art remains a natural thing functioning in a manner similar to the natural theology of Aristotle in relation to the Christian theology of Aquinas: it leads one to the foot of the altar, but it does not, nor is it intended that it should bring about a communion with the Presence there."⁴ Just as in art, the symbol is not self-sufficient—it points to something else. However, art is the making of beauty for beauty's sake, and thus knowledge here is accidental.

The liturgy is the celebration of the Christian mysteries in time. These mysteries are proper to the transcendent and the eternal and yet must be made immanent, realized, in time if they are to effect anything in man. Thus art, specifically in the form of symbols, allows us to enact these mysteries in such a way that the totality of the mystery is impressed upon our whole being: intellectually, sensorily, and imaginatively; but again notice the tension here: images bring us to a sphere where images are no longer needed; we are again going beyond the power of art. Art is the vessel in which the mysteries of a sacred action (liturgy) are delivered to us in their most accessible, appreciable forms. Art makes possible an intimacy and union with the sacred while preserving the essential "otherness" of the sacred that is mystery. We now see that the crucial and vital role of art is to present and sustain the element of mystery: to initiate us humanly into the mystery that is faith and allow us to work and, in a sense, live in the precarious position that is faith.

Each age experiences faith differently; which is to say, the sense of the sacred is realized differently and the element of mystery is presented and sustained differently in each age. But sincerity and spontaneity are essentials to good art in any age. David's dance though somewhat crude had integrity because it was the sincere and spontaneous response to his experience. Thus another function of art must be to keep man's worship in a dynamic relationship with contempo-

rary experience. Ritual without art would be stereotyped and lifeless.

If the Christian is to use art effectively to enunciate the Gospel in relevant terms to man and enable him to experience the Word in the mode most relevant to his times, certain demands must be made of art. The Word does not lend itself readily to just any form or mode of communication; however, the demands Christianity makes of art are in no sense contrary to art's inner principles. The "tyranny of the Word"⁵ is an insistence upon the artist's integrity of vision; and this integrity of artistic vision is the only legitimate demand Christianity can make on the artist.

With these principles in mind, we may now approach somewhat intelligently a prominent if not the predominant aspect of the malaise at the heart of our experience of the twentieth century. The thesis is not untenable that there is no such thing as Christian art today. Shortly after their divorce, art and religion turned in upon themselves. Looking at the history of the art of the past one hundred years, we see that art is preoccupied with itself to the point of obsession. From the Impressionists to an exhibit opening in New York today, the works of creative artists in the last one hundred years give evidence of an obsession with form, light, color, even theory as ends in themselves. In turn, Christianity took its own course: post-Tridentine triumphalism and the Catholic ghetto mentality that coined that silly anomaly, "Catholic Art," are the more prominent symptoms of religion turning in upon itself. In this light we may see pop art and Vatican II as healthy reactions to both situations.

The rupture between religion and art is of course only one instance of the breakdown in communication resulting from the spiritual problem at the heart of this malaise: "the tragic opposition between life and intellect."⁶ Man's spiritual life forms a civilization and it is through art that a civilization realizes its destiny. Thus any renaissance in religious art will have to be a response on the part of the artist to spiritual values. In other words, a renaissance in religious art will require that modern man share once again the immediacy and intensity of communion that David felt when the dance burst from him as the feverish and urgent expression of his whole being. It can safely be said that if there is an unconscious metaphysic of our age, a spirit that underlies all we experience, it is a technological spirituality that has totally fragmented us. And here most clearly is sounded the note of tragic irony of the spirit denying itself.

Just what is this thing man has lost that once gave him such unity of vision? What is this feeling for the spirit, the spiritual, that has been

lost? Today, the central problem of the theologian, philosopher, sociologist, musician, artist, poet, etc., is the rediscovery of tradition—more accurately a reappraisal of the role of tradition. I shall use the term “tradition” and leave it quite undefined in the sense of putting it in a theological or philosophical context. However, that we may work with the term, I shall place it in the general context of the human experience: our commonly shared understanding of the human experience. Today tradition is singularly lacking in substance: we find it impossible to disentangle tradition from the various forms which it adopted in the past, and this is one of *the* crucial problems with the liturgy. Literary styles and artistic movements as well as doctrinal currents are the *forms* which tradition has taken. These forms are not the tradition; they are merely testaments, witnesses to the power and truth of tradition in past ages. The forms are not sacred, powerful or the truth. The challenge to modern man is to discover new forms, and this is made more difficult by his seeming inability, sometimes outright unwillingness, to grasp or even confront the tradition which these forms must embody.⁷

Examples of this desperate entrenchment are prominent throughout our religious art and architecture. Their evocative powers and ostentatiousness in imitating the past—a type of spiritual nostalgia—paradoxically proclaim that the experience of life in the twentieth century is quite alien to the mellifluous peace that imbues Gregorian chant, the soaring spirituality of Gothic art, the emotional sophistication and intellectual intensity of the baroque. The cathedral of Saint John the Divine, in all its fidelity to form and style, is a spiritual fossil. The National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception seems a pretentious lie, and its rampant eclecticism only reinforces this impression. The only truth in these “works of art” is the witness they give to our painful consciousness of what our faith ought to be.

Here is the challenge that faces the Church of the twentieth century: if the Church refuses to take artistic man seriously, artistic man will refuse to take the Church seriously; and the results will be only more self-defeating for both.

If we turn once again to look more closely at David’s dance we shall see that man’s use of art is much greater than mere self-expression. The wild abandon of the dance speaks of the exuberance and freedom of David’s being at one with God and nature. It is in a sense a realization of the freedom that is God. And herein lies another aspect of art’s sacramentality; for not only does the sacred reveal itself but man comes to participate in eternity: David’s dance is a celebration of

the possibilities of man that David senses in the fullness of life he shares in when he encounters the sacred.

This pushing forward of the limits that define man permits us to see the directional thrust which the Spirit is taking in him. Earlier in this century Cubism gave evidence of a new depth and dimension in man's awareness of himself and the world. This new awareness was partly an outgrowth of and a reaction to the industrial age, but man's vision was not so literal as the industrial age would have it. From this the Cubists prophesied the electric age and its "extensions of man." For art allows us to anticipate future social and technological developments in our own age. Art is a major tool for media control, and in this sense art trains our perceptual faculties so as to make us capable of working with our technological environment—of confronting it and understanding it. That the relevance of the Gospel transcends contemporaneity is undeniable; however, the implications of art as a tool for the control of media cannot help including the possibility or promise of a new incarnation of the Gospel message in an idiom most proper to our experience in this latter half of the twentieth century. Thus not only will art "enable us to maintain an even course toward permanent goals in the midst of disrupting innovations,"⁸ but it will preserve the "mystery" at the heart of life—the total otherness of the sacred and the emphatic humanity of man.

Pressures which push people toward cultural conformity are a prominent feature of our technological society, and such pressures tend to become more dehumanizing as technology and society become more highly developed. A force is needed that can give direction to the creative in secular society and thus foster and preserve humanizing values. In art man finds a valuable tool for directing this "emergence."⁹ Art's relationship to reality is singularly vital in itself, and this truly fosters the emergence of identity. A spiritual or intellectual rationale or even a theology of culture would not be adequate, since this force must be something more fundamental. In a sense it is an intuitive vision, and only the artist is sensitive enough to feel strongly the new world of relationships that is his contemporaneity. Moreover, art can most readily and effectively give us an adequate perspective on ourselves—a healthy distancing from life; an angle from which we may more meaningfully see ourselves. But most appropriately, art alone can surrender to, grasp and sustain the radical ambiguities inherent in the encounter of the sacred and the profane in the secular city. Art is thus best suited to work within secular society to present in a viable form the spiritual dynamic that underlies a civilization.

Now we have come full circle, for is this not what art was doing in David's dance? The sacred and profane were in primordial ferment and under the agency of the dance we saw the emergence of David's identity from the interaction of these awesome powers.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Compare Dorothy Sayers' use of these terms in her introduction to the *Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1949), p. 10.

² Compare Helen C. White's thought on the relationship between poetry and mysticism in her work, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Macmillan, 1956).

³ From an address by Pius XII to a gathering of Italian artists, "*The Function of Art*," April 8, 1952.

⁴ Justice George Lawler, in his introduction to Pie-Raymond Regamey, O.P., *Religious art in the 20th Century* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), p. 10.

⁵ The expression and its use are based heavily upon the thought of Louis Bouyer on the relationship between word and rite in the works *Rite and Man* (1963) and *Liturgical Piety* (1955), both published by the University of Notre Dame Press in the Liturgical Studies series.

⁶ Jacques Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), p. 7.

⁷ An impressive and lengthy study of this problem is Yves Congar, O.P., *Tradition and Traditions* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), note carefully pages 452-453.

⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. xi of introduction.

⁹ William F. Lynch, S.J., "Toward a Theology of the Secular," *Thought*, 1966, pp. 349-365. My use of the term owes much to this essay.

CYRANO -
POETIC
BUFFOON

