

THE FINE ARTS

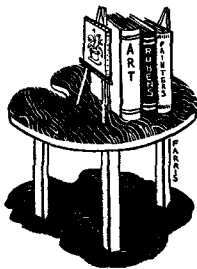
MODERN RELIGIOUS ART

A SHARPENING of interest in contemporary religious art is, I imagine, an inevitable aftermath of war. Certainly after World War I there were many manifestations of a new spirituality among painters and sculptors. The association known as *l'Arche*, for example, proposed an ecclesiastical architecture to which painters and sculptors were asked to make a subsidiary contribution. On the craft level the *Artisans de l'Autel* worked in a comparable spirit of esthetic reform, aiming at the improvement of devotional accessories. Neither of these groups constituted a brotherhood. The most important post-1918 movement in religious art did, or very nearly so. This was the *Ateliers d'art sacré*, instigated by Maurice Denis and Georges Desvallières under the patronage of the Catholic Institute of Paris. Members of this group dedicated themselves to a communal life of piety, called each other "companion," and emulated the German "Nazaries" of the early nineteenth century in severity of conviction. They clearly believed that the creation of a truly religious art requires spiritual preparation.

I have been looking recently at reproductions of the work produced by the *Ateliers d'art sacré* during the period 1918-25. This work is not very good by esthetic standards and this, I think, is tantamount to saying that it is not of maximum benefit to the church it was intended to serve. The religious art of the early 1920's was unquestionably improved in some degree by the organized efforts mentioned above. Even so, it was not adequate, and today much of it looks dated and tawdry, its sentiment sickly or harshly melodramatic. In fact we can now see plainly that the finest religious images of thirty years ago were achieved by men who took no part in planned religious movements in the arts. It is Rouault and not Denis or Desvallières who is the important Christian painter of the time. It is the occasional religious work produced by the predominantly secular artist which carries the honors and comes nearest an inspirational truth.

Perhaps it is the recognition of the latter fact, on the part of a few

eminent Protestants and Catholics, which gives today's religious art so promising a chance for survival. The first encouraging news of this kind came from England, where, in the very middle of World War II, Henry Moore's "Madonna and Child" was completed for the church of St. Matthew's at Northampton. This was the first time in a hundred years, as Sir Kenneth Clark pointed out at the unveiling, that the Church of England had commissioned an artist who worked in a patently contemporary style. The man responsible for ordering Moore's sculpture was Canon Hussey, Vicar of St. Matthew's. Convinced of



the commission's success, particularly since, as he said, "the voices of protest came . . . from those who had no connection with the church, nor with any Christian body, and who resented the feeling that they were being disturbed and outpaced by the church," Canon Hussey soon afterwards appointed Graham Sutherland to paint the large Crucifixion which now hangs in St. Matthew's. His choice was courageous, not only because Sutherland is one of Britain's leading modern painters, but because the latter belongs to the Roman Catholic Church rather than to the Church of England.

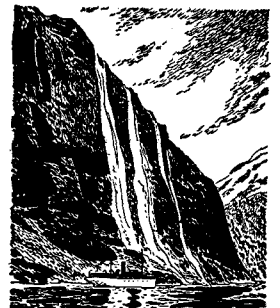
Meanwhile in France a Dominican monk, Father Couturier, had been put in charge of a far more ambitious project—the decoration of the almost completed church of Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce at Assy in the Haute-Savoie. Father Couturier chose his artists without regard for their religious conviction or lack of it. "Faith," he said, with astonishing bluntness, "is no substitute for talent." He chose Bonnard, Rouault, Braque, Lipchitz, and Léger, among others, and today the church at Assy contains the greatest concentration of religious art by first-rank modern painters and sculptors anywhere in the world. One supposes that there have been protests from ecclesiastical authorities, especially since of these artists only Rouault is widely known as a devout Catholic. But Father Couturier is said to have been encouraged by the Pope, and he has stood firm. In 1948, replying to a question as to whether

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he felt that non-believers could create genuinely religious works of art, he replied: "Why, certainly: one almost has an advantage in turning to artists detached from the classical traditions of Christian art. This detachment gives their works a nearly primitive freshness."

In recent months Father Couturier has been supervising another project: the creation at Venice on the French Riviera of Sainte Marie du Rosaire, a small chapel for Dominican nuns. Originally the eighty-year-old Henri Matisse was asked to design only the stained-glass windows, but now he has enthusiastically taken over the entire project, including the architecture itself. His plan calls for a simple white interior enlivened by windows in blazing colors on the south, by huge contour drawings in black and white on the other walls. He is building, in his words, "a church full of gaiety—a place which will make people happy." He emphatically does not want his chapel to be gloomy, "like all the others." Long known as a non-conformist, he has worked on the designs with unrelenting devotion.

Matisse's chapel, when completed, may well mark a turning point in church decoration. For whereas even so great a religious artist as Rouault has worked in a revivalist spirit, harking back in color and form to the Romanesque and Gothic traditions, Matisse utilizes a strictly contemporary idiom. He does not attempt to restate sacrosanct iconography through the intervention of a personalized style, as did Léger in designing the mosaics on the façade of the church at Assy. Matisse takes as point of departure an important modern rediscovery: that symbolism in art can be abstract as well as specific. In describing his chapel, he has said: "The windows run from floor to ceiling, fifteen feet high. They will be made of pure color shapes, very brilliant. No figures, just the pattern of the shapes. Imagine when the sun pours through the glass—it will throw colored reflections on the white floor and walls, a whole orchestra of color."

Matisse's views on church decoration bring me to a claim by which I intend no irreverence whatever. This is that the so-called "abstract" art of our time might in certain instances quite properly and effectively be used as an adjunct of church architecture. We tend to forget that religious symbolism was often extremely abstract until, at last, Renaissance humanism engulfed the world. Indeed, Father Couturier, with what seems to me excessive zeal, prefers extreme forms of contemporary art to the painting of the later Renaissance—and by religious standards. "He feels," ac-

cording to a recent interview in the *Paris Herald Tribune*, "that modern art is less sensual and more spiritualistic than the lush paintings of the Renaissance Romans and Florentines. . . . He feels cubism is closer to the Christian art of the Middle Ages." If I for one find it hard to believe that a cubist Picasso will ever rival a Raphael in Christian consciousness, I nevertheless think that Father Couturier is right in asserting that the Renaissance tradition can no longer be emulated directly. "The academic Beaux-Arts painting," he says with justice, "is dead."

Perhaps the only thing to do, then, is to try, like Matisse, to find out what contribution the advanced forms of contemporary art may make to religion. At times, of course, an isolated artist will propose something interesting in an established vernacular, as Giacomo Manzù has done lately in his prize-winning designs for the new doors of St. Peter's in the Vatican. Yet on the whole it appears to me that modern abstraction more frequently approaches a valid transcendentalism of which the various churches might well avail themselves. Could there be a more appropriate decoration for a chapel niche than Brancusi's "Bird in Space"? And what would happen if Mark Rothko's remarkable new paintings, shimmering with a quite unphysical radiance, were hung in a church? The story of Christianity is conveyed today by the spoken or written word, and only secondarily by the visual image. We should at least be willing to discover whether modern art is really antipathetic to religion or whether, in this as in many particulars, it sometimes penetrates to the core of the human spirit. In any case, the only alternative, with rare exceptions, is calculated revivalism. The history of religious art is strewn with its arthritic bones.

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.



—From "The Challenge of Modern Art."

Mantegna's "Madonna and Child" (1460).

Graphic Unfoldment

THE CHALLENGE OF MODERN ART. By Allen Leepa. New York: Beechhurst Press. 256 pp. \$6.

By JEROME MELLQUIST

MODERN art, which but recently took some scattered sniping from a well-barbered lot of opponents, has here enlisted a new agent in its defense. But Allen Leepa does not curvet and lacquer the phrase as did some of the accusers. As a teacher of art at the Brooklyn and Metropolitan museums and as a full-time member on the faculty of Michigan State University who is himself a practising painter, he prefers a more patient kind of building. Apparently he has learned that the only correction to current bewilderments—and these surely gave the attackers their initial chink of opportunity—is to be fortified with sound and pertinent knowledge. Quietly then he proceeds to set brick upon brick in a structure—a virtual new schoolhouse of the mind—which no attacker can demolish.

Before constructing this new shelter of understanding, however, he first shows wherein it will differ from others of the kind. "This book," he declares, "is an attempt to fill the gap in our appreciation of modern art by appreciating it through the artist who creates the pictures instead of through the critic or the art historian." That much being clear, he rapidly ascertains the artist's nature—physically, emotionally, and intellectually—and briefly editorializes on the effective role the painter today can perform in leading the world out of its present rummage of alarm. And then he submits his chart of construction: three chapters of historical background, three more on the so-called tools and vocabulary of vision, and, last, a batch of citations from the artists so as to keep the matter continually alive in terms of their understanding.

While disclaiming any wish to confine himself to a straitjacket of arbitrary design, he does, nevertheless, somewhat fence himself in with his quick thumbnailing of mankind's graphic unfoldment from past ages to the present. Only when pointing all his data towards the emancipation of man's space-creating faculty does he continually bathe his material with that light more consistently emanating from his fundamental intention. He well knows, for example, that Giotto merely did bas-reliefs with a hint of shading, so to speak, and that not until the verge of the Baroque did the painter drop the forestage notion of his space area and finally mingle