

## THE ARTIST'S RELATION TO GOD

A REVIEW OF WINTER AND SPRING EXHIBITIONS IN LONDON

ON comparing the major and some of the smaller exhibitions held in London during the winter and spring, the striking factors were the vividly contrasting choice of subjects and the widely differing styles of expression: to name three examples, The Indian Art, Marc Chagall, and Vincent van Gogh. At the outset it seemed impossible to imagine that a common note could be found. Upon greater reflection, however, it appeared that perhaps their unity lay in the variance that previously seemed to ridicule any notion of coherence—briefly, that the completion of a work of art is, either consciously or unconsciously, an act of worship, and a record of the artist's experience of God. Broadly speaking the common purpose exists in this context.

From a Christian standpoint a notable feature was the almost entire absence of ostensibly religious paintings—as distinct from those which could be religious in their implications—completed in the course of the last fifty years.

This was especially obvious in the exhibition recently held by the Institute of Contemporary Arts entitled 'Forty Years of Modern Art'. The exhibits were drawn solely from British private collections, which may account for the inadequacy of some of them, for instance the Matisse 'Head of a Girl' which was the only example of his work. Also, on recalling the selection of Georges Rouault's paintings, none of his religious works were included, although from the aesthetic point of view the water-colour 'Odalisque' was a superb choice, displaying the characteristic simplicity of his draughtsmanship and the resonance of his colours.

In spite of these limitations it was a fairly comprehensive show, and for this reason it brought the spectator at once to the heart of the problem. Not only was an unusual opportunity provided to study the various technical developments in the crafts but also, and this is important, the works formed a commentary, expressed in terms of painting, drawing, and sculpture, on the trends of contemporary thought.

The result was more encouraging than might have been expected. The effectiveness of many works is bound to be transitory as they are dependent upon fashionable mannerisms both in symbolism and technique. But the sincere and well thought out works were more reassuring. Some not being spectacular or rhetorical in their treatment remained the less obtrusive examples.

The simplicity of Maurice Utrillo's 'Village in Brittany' makes a direct appeal. A delightful piece of painting and satisfying from that aspect alone, yet it goes further. Jan Van Eyck's portrait of 'Arnolfini and his Wife' is naturally quite unrelated in style or subject to Utrillo's 'Village', even so the same dignity and humanity pervade the artist's vision. It is tempting to suggest that these qualities are the fruits of a centuries-old Christian tradition in Europe. The disturbing question is whether they are present to any considerable degree in the more revolutionary modern masters. The urgency of this point should be realised if the deeper responsibilities of the artist are not going to remain generally unrecognised today.

It is quite immaterial whether the idea is couched in a familiar pictorial language. Paul Klee, who appeared to many to be merely a designer (which was a vast under-statement as 'The Face of a Market-place' and other pictures served to remind us) reveals under the charming spontaneity of his pictures a deeply human and sympathetic power of observation.

The principal theme of Georges Rouault's work is a constant reiteration of the message of the Crucifixion. The sorrows of Christ are repeatedly identified with the sufferings of mankind and the pathos of human existence is voiced through every medium he employs. He is painfully conscious of the poverty of life without him. And these things are vitally conveyed in the etchings for 'Guerre' and 'Miserere' exhibited at the Redfern Gallery in January.

The lyrical fantasies of Marc Chagall are a far cry from the poignant mysticism of Rouault. To understand the latter it is necessary to enter into something of his own vision of our Lord, unless the appreciation is to cease abruptly at the technical level of form and colour. To appreciate Chagall one should allow oneself to succumb to the mysterious atmosphere of a fairy tale. He is not a profound artist, and his main significance lies in his decorative abilities and the naïve charm with which he puts down his observations. For these reasons he is unsuccessful as a religious artist and his illustrations for the Bible leave one comparatively unmoved. His canvases at their best are sensuous and romantic, although there are momentary descents into the crude and banal. The incessant searching and striving after new and more vital forms of expression which were such marked characteristics in Van Gogh are quite foreign to Chagall's nature and there is no sense of tension.

Van Gogh compels us to look at and *love* the intrinsic beauty of simplicity which he conveys with magnificent force and originality. Despite the misfortunes that overtook him towards the close of his life, his work is pre-eminently sane. The wholeness of his perception

is staggering and he was deeply aware of the value of each incident he portrayed. Sincerity dominates all his work and his art is essentially unsophisticated. A quite unique and endearing personality lies beneath the turbulent passion of his brushwork. He was consumed by an overwhelming impulse to transcribe the humble scenes around him into pictorial form. Obsessed by the goodness of the land he forces us to share in his enthusiasm. In his later periods, however, a brooding mood of tragedy can already be discerned, reaching its climax in the terrifying emotional intensity of 'Crows flying across a cornfield'. Because of the extreme directness and breadth of the treatment and the simplified palette—a fierce ultramarine sky relieved only by the menacing shapes of the birds hovering over a field of Indian red and yellow ochre—rendered it unforgettable.

The essential innocence and affection in his nature, which is eternally recorded in the memorable letters to his brother, illumine his compositions with even greater vehemence. The obvious emotion that motivated his artistic activities has led to a popular supposition that that is the basis of his paintings. This is a false belief which has been evolved through an insufficient analysis of his character. The conversion of emotion into the visible forms of painting was the outcome of considerable intellectual activity coupled with an instinctive urge to express himself in that medium. He was an ardent student of the writings of Delacroix and during the latter part of his career he derived a great deal from Rembrandt, for example in the paintings of 'The Good Samaritan' and 'The Deposition'.

Van Gogh's sensuousness bears no resemblance to the sensuality found in Indian sculpture, although both obtain their inspiration from a continually renewed contact with nature and scenes throbbing with the heat of the sun. Then again a parallel cannot be found in the mysticism of Rouault (or for that matter any other European school of painting) to that of the Rajput miniaturists. Indian art is quite naturally a complete thing in itself and the logical sequence of totally unfamiliar religious and cultural traditions.

Cycles of flamboyant and over-decorative art followed by virulent waves of iconoclasm have attacked India. These were similar to those which occurred in England with the final dissolution of the medieval civilisation and the inevitable appearance of Puritanism which temporarily stemmed the rising tide of the Renaissance. It is doubtful whether in India the results of this iconoclasm have persisted for so long a period as they have in Europe.

But to return to the art; an immense difference both of theme and treatment separates the painting and sculpture. The painting is mainly two-dimensional, depending for its effect upon colour, linear

rhythm and, to a certain extent, a highly stylised set of symbols. This does not necessarily denote monotony and the deeply poetic mood present in some has great power. The sculpture is moulded and conditioned by the soil itself and its vitality springs from it. The generosity of the forms and the insatiable curiosity in every aspect of nature and desire to represent it indicate a predominantly peasant origin. Whereas the foundations of the painting are aristocratic and refined.

In spite of the crudity observable at times in the carvings it is not quite true to maintain that it is a profane art. Much of it was created for an expressly religious purpose.

I must now return to what I said in the beginning in order to justify the introduction of Indian art here, apart from the mere fact of its being a winter exhibition. As the relation of the artist to God is such a fundamental point perhaps repetition and elaboration can be forgiven. Indian sculpture especially gives form to certain rudimentary aspects of human nature and these qualities receive adequate and spontaneous treatment. They are in fact praising God by following natural and unrepressed impulses to use the abilities with which God himself endowed them.

They are far removed from the spurious, introspective and self-conscious manifestations that are too frequently purported to be works of art today. This condemnation is not specifically aimed at contemporary art, it is a situation common to all ages. Owing to the passage of time the undesirables of other epochs gradually became obliterated. A genuine work of art is activated by the artist's love for the object he sees. The effulgence of this experience illuminates his work. The concrete realisation is dependent upon the clarity of the conception, the degree of spiritual awareness he possesses and his capacities as a craftsman. Regarding the craft, the greater knowledge and practical ability he enjoys the more effectively can he communicate the depths of his feelings.

Of course, subsequently, spiritual apathy would vitiate his chances of becoming an artist, although he could remain a competent painter. A sense of the presence of God is ultimately indispensable. Indeed the more he can apprehend the infinity and perfections of God's love for his creation, the more clarified his own position will become. And that is to reflect this love and praise his munificence.

The strength of this realisation varied in the exhibitions I have reviewed above. But it was present in all, including 'The Forty Years of Modern Art', and in so far as it persists art will continue to live.

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