

So I was hanged in a commanding position with a full view of the  
 site plant and grounds  
 You smile at my career but you would do as I did if you knew your-  
 self and dared  
 In my day we worked hard we saw what we did our self sacrifice was  
 conscientious and complete our work was faultless and detailed  
 Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies  
 with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done

THOMAS MERTON

## Heard and Seen

### THE WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL MOSAICS

When it is a question of decorating wall surfaces of buildings, particularly public or sacred ones, mosaic as a material is hard to beat. Unlike fresco, canvas or panel it is genuinely part of the masonry, and looks it. It is as stable and permanent as the building itself. It can be cleaned by unskilled labour without risk to its surface. Moreover it conduces by its very nature to certain virtues of design and execution: the image must be patiently built by amassing little coloured rectangles of tile and glass; which means that each shape and contour must be the outcome of slow deliberation, and any kind of over-facility or slickness of hand is excluded. (Even a painting by Georges Mathieu, as superficial a pyrotechnician as there is in the trade, took on a certain air of weight and importance when translated, as one of them recently was, into the mosaic medium). Tiny imperfections of congruence between neighbouring tesserae confer a slight and most attractive wobble on the edges of the forms—a sort of factitious impressionism which is further enhanced by the fine semi-regular mesh of joins which runs across the surface, affirming its flatness and continuity. An infinitely appetising range of colours is available, from the richest and most brilliant spectral hues to the subtlest of pebble greys, pinks, fawns and the like.

Nor is the mosaic artist committed to the choice of a colour or a shape until he has had ample opportunity to judge of its effect. His whole design can be assembled on the floor and adjusted until his intention is realised. Yet each of the thousands of tesserae which he eventually places represents an act of decision, albeit a molecular one, in relation to the conceived whole.

Physical permanence; architectural suitability; exclusion of the facile; unity of surface; guaranteed beauty of texture and probable beauty of colour; the

ultimate necessity for unequivocal choice—what more wholesome and stimulating properties could be asked of a decorative medium? And how different, incidentally, from those of oil paint, which as Sickert pointed out, and as we have all seen for ourselves, provides ‘an unlimited licence to bungle’.

The decision of the authorities at Westminster Cathedral to commission mosaic decorations for the vault of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel was both wise and enterprising on these grounds alone. Still more happily, their choice fell on Mr Boris Anrep to execute the scheme—it is not every generation in this country that can call upon a practitioner of his experience and authority. Years of planning and pondering and dedicated meticulous labour followed. And now we are free to see the result: the first glance leaves us in no doubt that Mr Anrep has given his best. The scale of the achievement and the profundity of the Eucharistic theme would by themselves command the most respectful approach on the part of the critic: but respect, fortunately, need not be the sum of his response. It is immediately clear that the whole work is informed by a deep and genuine religious feeling: one, moreover, that combines a scholarly respect for traditional iconography with a liberal readiness to depart from it at the dictates of inspiration.

The next impression is one of *substance*. The forms are chunky, squarish, boldly (sometimes too boldly) highlighted and full of peasant strength. Elegance has not been sought after, and rightly so, since it would be out of accord with the essential conception. Quite validly and with disarming forthrightness the artist has emphasized the close analogy between physical and spiritual nutrition: the whole composition, even in the treatment of such ethereal phenomena as flame and cloud, is imbued with the hospitable aesthetic of the cottage loaf. Indeed, if it were appropriate to sum up my own reactions in the form of an epigram, I would say that Mr Anrep has given us more bread than wine. For bread is opaque, resistant, commonsensical, necessary and everyday. Wine is for occasions: fluid, translucent, dark-hued, mysterious. It anaesthetizes our everyday selves, setting free something which, whether better or worse than our normality, is certainly different and can have a quality of transcendence.

It is the quality of transcendence which I find Mr Anrep least often touches. Meditating on possible reasons for this I am driven to the conclusion that he was in some measure handicapped by his major strategic decision about colour—in studio jargon, by his colour scheme. I am sure that a close inspection of the designs would reveal countless harmonic felicities, and indeed there are very many that can be enjoyed from floor level. But obviously a scheme of this magnitude must be held together by a dominant colour-note and also by a related sub-dominant, if this is not a misuse of musical terms. In such a context what should be the dominant, and what should be its principal correlative? The wall surfaces below the vault are faced with a variety of coloured marbles, in pursuance of that touchingly pious but aesthetically naive policy of *horror vacui* which decrees that in the House of God there shall not anywhere be a plain surface or an unembellished square foot on which the eye can rest. This agreeable profusion of

streaky and mottled tan, ochre, grey, off-white and malachite green was therefore, whether he liked it or not, Mr Anrep's chromatic datum or point of departure. In face of it, two basic policies would seem to have been possible: on the one hand, to punctuate the Chapel at the top of the revetment and move into a markedly different colour and tone range, so that the vault would be seen as a unit distinct from the walls, though perhaps containing in its smaller elements numerous colour-quotations from the marbles below: and on the other, to carry through into the vault the same general tonality as the walls and something like the same degree of colour saturation and warmth.

The artist chose the second alternative. Its advantage has been a general blond unity of the whole interior, a unity of continuous animation in shallow space. Its disadvantage, generally, is that light colours on the warm side of neutrality tend to stop the eye on the picture surface, to lack the potentiality of depth-illusion and therefore of all that depth, emotionally and spiritually, implies. And this is particularly true of the dominant pink, a cheerful nursery colour, which Mr Anrep used as symbolic of the vault of Heaven, and likewise of the yellow-green which is its principal answering note. It may well be that seen in natural daylight instead of brightly illuminated by clusters of incandescent bulbs these colours would appear cooler and proportionately more sublime: I wish I had thought of asking the sacristan to switch off the lights and thus verifying this conjecture. But in normal usage I assume that the vault will be seen lit as I saw it; and I am sadly obliged to avow that for me the overall colour impact was ineloquent, and moreover that the high general key had the effect of making many of the darker tints, particularly shadow areas on flesh, seem sometimes colourless and heavy—though I reiterate that detail passages abound in colour inventions of the greatest beauty: the flames on the altar in the Covenant of Noah scene or the vine-tendrils in the reveals of the windows, to give but two examples. Where, on the under-surface of the entrance arch the Archangels Michael and Gabriel are depicted against a subtly muted dark blue, so that their lighter parts are luminous against a deeper ground, my judgment seems confirmed.

Just below them in a pair of small alcoves are a peacock on one side and a phoenix on the other, which in terms of colour gave me more pleasure than anything else in the ensemble. Though unimportant both in scale and in iconographic significance, they seem to me to exploit the mosaic medium with a perfect mastery. Here pink is used, but it is a grey pink—or at all events it is made to appear so by the full-blooded reds and oranges which occur in its vicinity; impelling speculation as to whether the pink sky in the main ceiling might not with advantage have been inductively cooled by juxtaposition with some largish and uncompromising notes in the scarlet range. Such a scarlet in fact occurs in the pattern-work on the Cross which is the central motif of the apse. The treatment here evokes for me, I don't know how rightly, the Russian peasant tradition of ornamental embroidery and cassone-painting, and its modern revival by such artists as Gontcharova and Bakst. The effect is magnifi-

cent: in perfect accord with its theme it is both plangent and joyful. I only regret that this supreme symbolic focus has not been permitted to float unencumbered in its recess, instead of resting as it does on a globe containing a representation of St Peter's against a sky-within-a-sky, below which there emerges in turn a rocky landscape with the four rivers of Paradise. Enough is enough. Here if anywhere was a case for the application to iconographic elements of the famous dictum of Mies van der Rohe concerning those of architecture: *Less is more*.

To do anything like justice to the whole opus, a verbal conducted tour and bay-by-bay appreciation would be called for. But it would be tedious both to write and to read, unless one could command the pen of a Ruskin and the Victorian longanimity of his readers. This however matters but little, since we can all sooner or later go and see for ourselves. After prodigies of care and labour these mosaics have now taken the first steps of their long journey into time. What has been expressed here is one observer's reaction after one visit. Thousands upon thousands of others are going to look, discover, enjoy, appraise; and perhaps few or none will share my critical reservations. In a sense I hope they won't. But even those who do will agree unquestioningly that a work of massive dignity, sincerity and substance has been accomplished.

CHRISTOPHER CORNFORD

## Theological Survey

THE HERDER LEXIKON:

A REPORT ON PROGRESS

With its sixth volume the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* has now reached *Marcellino*, which is quite a reasonable rate of progress (see BLACKFRIARS, May 1959; June 1960 for earlier reports). The original protector of the work, Archbishop Michael Buchberger of Regensburg, died soon after the publication of volume II, and the *Lexikon* is now under the protection of Archbishop Hermann Schäufele of Freiburg. Denzinger references are now given according to the numeration of the 31st edition (1957), in which a different system has been adopted for the modern period, preparatory to the more fundamental revision announced by its editor, Karl Rahner, who is also one of the two editors of the *Lexikon*.

Some of the general principles guiding the editors have now become clearer. This is particularly true of the discussion of major theological topics under two heads, as regards the place and structure of the tractate concerned, and as regards