

# BLACKFRIARS

## A MONTHLY REVIEW

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### A SOCIETY FOR RELIGIOUS ART

PEOPLE have become very self-conscious about art, even the common run of people. They are not only conscious of the cut of their clothes, but also of the streamlined design of their furniture, the nude statuettes on their mantel-shelves, the photogravures on their walls. The only type of art about which the common run of people remain still un-self-conscious is religious art; and religious art is atrocious. The few who are conscious of the need for new forms of sacred art are more embarrassed than any others about the beauty of things made, and that is saying a lot. Their embarrassment produces monstrosities like microphones and churches like garages. They hang on their walls hideous, misshapen forms called 'Madonna' or 'Pieta' or 'St Francis', and before these caricatures they light their candles and say their self-conscious prayer—'Lord, preserve me from the art of the Repository'. They are not to be blamed, these religious connoisseurs and critics, because the whole of the art world is in a sorry condition, having come to the end of a journey and having found nothing at the end. The criticism of the Picassos by the Bodkins is infuriating not so much for its foolish 'cleverness' as for its complete lack of sympathy or understanding of the problem facing the modern artist. If your 'master' is Titian and your criterion photo-

graphic technique, then you cannot understand what the 'moderns' are about. They have discovered that technique is only a means, that realism cannot supply for inspiration. They search about for inspiration, but inspiration cometh not by observation. They are therefore not to be blamed for their self-conscious *cultus* of the deformed and misshapen. But they are not to be encouraged. Equally, the unself-conscious worshippers of Repository statues and holy pictures are to be pitied, not blamed. It is at least better to use a sugar madonna without embarrassment than to praise the Lord pharisaically with a Stanley Spencer nativity scene.

Mr Eric Newton, who has honoured this issue of BLACKFRIARS with a virile critique of Church art, recently described with instructive candour his reactions to an exhibition of native primitive art (*The Sunday Times*, December 29, 1946). The form and rhythm of these queer totems and pagan symbols appealed to him as being live works of art, but the spirit that gave them life appalled him by its cruelty and uncultured savagery. Mr Newton's reactions were very sound. But the savages sought only to worship their savage gods and did not seek consciously to capture forms and rhythms. They had an inspiration given them; there was no need for them to search about for a muse. It was the same in the 'ages of faith'. The muse then was truly divine, even when the artists themselves were sinners. The medieval muse was ousted by a neo-pagan sister at the renaissance and it was she who inspired Professor Bodkin's 'Masters'—great inspiration, certainly, but not Christian. This latter-day muse died a natural death in the nineteenth century, and here we are still beseeching heaven to send us a successor.

Meanwhile, with the heavens still shut against us, the International Society of Sacred Art has been founded to try to make the best of a bad job. With the vast field of ecclesiastical furnishing before the modern artist who is asked to decorate churches restored after the damage of war, there has been urgent need for a society to gather those who have, by means of the faith, an understanding of the spiritual significance of their work, with an equally serious understanding of the rights and duties of art itself. It needs to be international, for one nation alone would soon be trammelled by a false nationalism creeping into its designs and decoration. The self-conscious sentimentalism of France, the elegancies of Italy and the drab symmetries of England and Germany on their own would go the way of all flesh. So the society is to gather artists from every land and to give them an opportunity to develop an effective and vigorous art for the Church.

We cannot ask the new society to achieve the impossible. It must be self-conscious like the rest; it cannot invent its own muse; its

inspiration will be the inspiration of Morris Motors and Handley-Page aircraft. But it should exercise a very beneficial negative influence. It can prevent atrocities and sentimentalities; it will save us from many distractions at prayer and from furious criticisms of the clergy. So it should be given every opportunity of functioning. Churchmen should learn from Mr Newton's article that too often they have confused two spheres and thought they knew the sort of art which was good for men's souls. Religious artists should understand that experiments must be tried and frequent failure accepted as inevitable, as Miss Conlay insists. More important still, all should realise the dangers of a false and vague mysticism which inspires not only Huxley's 'holiness' but also many of the pagan rites of modern art. Only when Christ carries his cross once again through the streets of modern civilization will inspiration return to mystic and artist alike. The city must acknowledge the King crowned with thorns and cease from planning an earthly paradise. But that time is not yet, and until it comes we shall look to the International Society of Sacred Art for the talent that does exist and for the best job that can be made of unpromising material. Do not encourage them to redecorate Fountains Abbey, for if they did they would betray their principles—as we have seen, the divine muse who inspired Fountains has been chased away and her temple is desecrated. But ask them to restore Southwark Cathedral. They have had a successful exhibition in Paris, sponsored by *The Catholic Herald*, but do not encourage them to exhibit except in the churches which they should be restoring. Exhibitions will tend to increase their self-consciousness; but concrete jobs of work will help them to forget that they are artists in their desire to make things worthy of the praise of God. And in any case they are able to arrange for exhibitions of their work, as will be seen in the near future in London and the provinces. But for the success of their plans they depend on those who need things made for the worship of God.

The International Society of Sacred Art may be found in England at 25 Ebury Street, London, S.W.1.

THE EDITOR