

EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

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ART belongs to every age and forms one of the common interests of human life. Much of our knowledge of ancient civilization comes to us from archaeological researches among the ruins of buildings and sculptural remains of the past. Art is many-sided and has been approached from many directions. Professor Baldwin Brown in an article in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Vol. 1, p. 845) defines art as that which embraces the element of beauty wherever this appears in the works of men. The philosophers prefer to penetrate more deeply into the heart and soul of art, and they have developed theories on aesthetics, analysing the feelings which are aroused in the artist as he attempts to express these in concrete form, thus idealizing the real. But it is also possible to approach the subject by the way of history, and this is the method adopted in this article, which contains a brief discussion of the two chief departments contained in histories of art, viz., architecture and painting.

Before going farther I should define the word "Christian" as used here. Often the term is employed, in a temporal sense to include the entire period since the birth of Christ. If this meaning were to be applied then this essay would be expected to include all phases of the artistic faculty, irrespective of their quality or subject, and would thus have products hostile to the principles of our religion. Christian art is here limited to those expressions of the beautiful which are inspired by feelings and thoughts which originated in the Christian Faith, or are associated with the formal worship of the Church. I adopt the words of Dr. Westcott, "Christian Art is the interpretation of beauty in life under the light of the Incarnation." (*Epistles of St. John.*)

A further note is needful as to the period included. In using the word "early" historians have usually restricted themselves to the first six centuries after Christ which are separated by very definite features from the succeeding centuries of the Medieval age.

I ARCHITECTURE

Architecture is the mother of the arts and makes an appeal to a much larger number of people than any other art. The need of shelters for the body and of places for human intercourse

is primary. Some critics will object to the inclusion in this branch of human effort of such buildings as the ordinary home or the simple country school-house; yet one often finds in these simple buildings some trace of decoration such as an ornamental porch or panelled door or cornice above the window which show how spontaneously the love of beauty manifests itself. Others again may question the use of the term art in connection with some of the more ambitious of our modern buildings which studiously avoid all decorative features in the interest of strict utilitarian aims, depending only on the monotony of straight lines.

But we must pass to Christian architecture which has been called, "the noblest and most important form of Christian art." This consists almost entirely of Churches. The primitive disciples had to be content with any kind of make-shift for their gatherings, since they were under the strict and often severe scrutiny of hostile emperors. They used private houses, or small halls, though it seems clear that when the persecutions were relaxed and some liberty was given the Christians, they did erect Church structures which in some instances were quite imposing. Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* refers to "temples rising from the soil to a lofty height and receiving a splendour far exceeding those that had been destroyed." However, under the cruel rule of Diocletian a thorough purge of Christianity was undertaken; and church buildings, especially in the west, were razed to the ground. But when the Emperor Constantine was converted to the Faith, he issued a degree granting equal rights to all religions; and in A.D. 323 Christianity became the state religion of the Empire.

Immediately there began an intensive campaign of Church building in all parts of the land. The Roman Emperors had always recognized the value of architecture as a political agency, and they competed with one another in erecting massive and monumental works such as Baths, Basilicas, Temples, Circuses, hoping thus to impress the people with the majesty of Rome, and to provide recreation and labor for the working classes. It is not strange therefore that Constantine should apply this same policy in regard to church buildings. He recognized that Christianity was the only bulwark for the crumbling empire, and was ready to support the Church leaders in providing these visible evidences of the new religion. Everywhere the building trade felt the effects of a new demand. In the sacred shrines of Palestine, in Asia Minor, in North Africa as well as in the

capital cities of Rome and Constantinople, beautiful churches appeared. One of these, the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem continues to the present day in much the same form as it had when built in the earlier part of the 4th century.

The builders did not need to invent new methods of structure, since the science of architecture had long since attained a high degree of efficiency. The ruins of the civic buildings in Rome bear testimony to this. The pagan builders had already discovered the secrets of covering large buildings with the intersecting vault and the dome, they for many years used concrete as well as brick and stone, so that the Christians inherited a fully developed science of the principles of structural stress and strain, as well as guilds of well-trained masons. But this does not justify the conclusion that there was no originality in this new departure. The specific beliefs of the Christians called for new application of the rules of architecture, so that out of this an original type of erection emerged.

In ancient Egypt the temples were vast in size, leaving the effect of awe and almost terror. The high sloping walls were suggestive of monastic isolation and within these halls the services formed part of an elaborate ritual. Darkness pervaded the most sacred room in the remote end of the temple. Dr. T. R. Glover quotes a Greek proverb, "Like an Egyptian temple all splendid on the outside and within a priest singing a hymn to a cat or a crocodile."

The Greek Temple was very different from the Egyptian one: it was neither forbidding nor dark since this wonderful people loved beauty and light; but the interior of the building was used for the Greek ritual and not for the people. The temple was primarily the home for the protection of the image or statue of the Divinity. It was the exterior of the Greek temple that was so profusely adorned.

In passing from these ancient temples to the nature of Christian worship we are in a new sphere of ideas. Here the Church is fundamentally a place for the gathering of the people, for those who had accepted Jesus as the Son of God and their living Saviour, whose spirit met with them as they gathered. In this community each one felt that he had some definite part; and this social aspect of Christian worship became the creative influence in determining the type of building. A large open space was required so that all eyes could look toward the central point—toward the apse where the communion table or altar and the seats of the clergy were placed: all being arranged so

that the congregation could hear the reading of the Scripture and the prayers, and join in the singing of hymns. The Christian Church had to be built with a new orientation. The interior now became the most significant part, to which the attention of the builders for the most part must be directed.

In this early age we are discussing there developed two special styles which have left an abiding effect upon subsequent expansion of Church architecture; and we pass to the first of these called the *Basilica*. This came to be the prevalent form during this period. It remained the standard for Rome and in general for Italy, and all cities in close touch with Rome. The building was simple in structure and called into exercise the elementary problems of roofing. Its ground plan was rectangular, with a long central nave leading up to the apse as the local centre of worship. This nave could be enlarged by adding two or more side aisles, which were separated from the nave by pillars carrying the weight of the walls of the nave. Often these pillars were taken from the columns which had previously adorned the outside of some Greek temple. The light was brought in through windows pierced in the nave-walls rising about the roof of the side aisle. This was called the Clerestory. Some of these buildings have continued in use till our own time such as St. Clement's, St. Paul's outside the walls, St. Lawrence and others. The most striking of these Basilicas was St. Peter's, which was replaced in the 16th century with the present Renaissance structure; but the plans have been preserved and they furnish us with the best idea of the noble quality of their style. In *The Cambridge Ancient History* we read: "The creation of the Christian basilica is only properly appreciated when it is revealed as the most brilliant achievement of the late efflorescence of Roman Architecture." Vol. XI, p. 569.

The second style came from Byzantium, another name for Constantinople, and it became the prevailing type in the Eastern Greek Church. It originated in the desire to have a much wider and more open space, without the interruptions caused by the pillars between the nave and side aisles, as in the basilica. Accordingly the rectangular form gave place to a square ground plan which in its turn demanded a different form of roof from the simple one supported on beams stretching from wall to wall, and bringing into exercise only a downward thrust. Now the vault and dome came into use, and this involved new and more delicate treatment, where in addition to the downward force was a side one, called the lateral thrust. Thus architecture became

more organic and called forth those principles of building which issued eventually in the Gothic cathedral.

The outstanding example of the Byzantine order is the Church of Holy Wisdom (St. Sophia) in Constantinople, begun in A.D. 532 and completed a few years later, all under the direction of the Emperor Justinian. Few buildings have had so illustrious an history. The dome is one of the largest in the world, having a diameter of 100 feet. This rests on four large pendentives, which like arms stretched out from the four upper corners of the walls, meet in a circle on which this dome rests, forming the most spacious church in Christendom. Professor Conant of Harvard University writes: "A single voice calls the building to life everywhere and choral song flows from vault to vault like an enchanted flood. Whether filled with song or silence, the material fabric broods over the interior space and typifies the inward-looking and contemplative character of East-Christian religion in a most beautiful way. No sensitive visitor remains unmoved by its spirituality." *The Arts and Religion*, p. 80.

Thus these early years supplied us with two most important styles for Church buildings. Many experiments were tried out, new methods adopted, and the erection of these Basilican and Byzantine Churches provided for many centuries the main demand on the various guilds of the building fraternity.

II (PAINTING)

Painting. The materials, though increasing in quantity, are not sufficient to form any final judgment on painting in the first three centuries. It seems probable from the writings of the Church Fathers that there was considerable objection to the decoration of the Church with image or picture. Tertullian, the most outspoken of these, wrote a treatise on "Idolatry" under which he included all adornment of Church walls. But there is no sign that this was the prevailing tendency, and there are many evidences that the great bulk of Christians were not hostile to the cultivation of the beautiful, except the pictures or sculptures were representative of pagan religion, or where the subjects were impure and unseemly.

(a) *The Catacombs.* It is on the burial places or Catacombs in Rome that we must reply for enlightenment. During these centuries these burial places of the dead were ornamented with many decorations. The earlier designs were conventional, consisting of flowers, fruits, birds and simple landscapes much like the paintings on the walls of private houses. But we also

meet with figured frescoes of Bible scenes: such as the escape of Noah in the Ark, Moses striking the rock, Daniel and the Lions, Jonah and his escape, Jonah and his escape, the raising of Lazarus. It may be possible that these were meant to comfort the bereaved, who should draw assurance from these instances of God's power to rescue His own people in the time of peril and death. Attention has been called to a somewhat similar cycle in the liturgical prayers. Thus, God is besought to "free the soul as Thou didst free Noah from the Flood, David from the den of lions, the Three Youths from the furnace of burning fire."

The figure of Christ does not appear with any frequency in the earlier years. He is represented as the Good Shepherd or as the Lamb, or in some cases as Orpheus, but as time went on, demands were made on artists to provide a more distinctive portraiture of Jesus. The New Testament did not provide any material for this kind of picture, and the artists were compelled to draw upon their own resources of spiritual insight. The face of Jesus has always been an idealization.

Literary writers had also attempted to describe the appearance of their Lord, but there was no standard common to them. Generally, there were two types. In one He was portrayed with a forbidding appearance lacking charm and dignity in accordance with the words of Isaiah, "There is no beauty that we should desire him, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Opposed to this were the authors who sought to bestow on Him the comeliness and charm of idealized humanity, taking as their scriptural authority the passage in *St. John I*, "We beheld his glory full of grace and truth." The artists for the most part adopted the second type and refrained from depicting the sufferings and agony of the Passion.

The catacomb paintings have been the occasion of much recent discussion. There is an inclination in some quarters to question the priority of Rome as the originator of Christian painting; and the claims of the Orient are strongly urged, especially by Dr. Joseph Strozygowski who writes, "Behind the coastline of the Mediterranean rises as the real originator the compact empire of the Parthians and the Sassanians where at the beginning of Church art, Christian communities were more fully tolerated than at Rome." (*Origin of Christian Church Art*, - p.6)

Debates also have arisen concerning the artistic merit of the Catacomb paintings. Some students emphasize the dependence of these primitive pictures upon contemporary models, and

regard the catacomb drawings as the closing chapters in a declining classical art. But other critics are impressed rather with the new factors that now made their appearance, and constitute the first chapters of a new, virile, and original Christian art. According to this latter view these pictures set forth profound Christian thoughts. They are the symbols of heavenly glories that await the faithful in the world to come. The naturalistic tendency in secular art is intentionally neglected. The love of Nature for its own sake has vanished. These pictures are meant for people who are citizens of an unseen world. The rules of perspective and correct drawing are no longer of great concern, since these artists are eager only to portray the beauty of moral and spiritual realities.

(b) *Mosaic*. The great expansion in building naturally called forth new methods of decorating the large spaces on the walls; and the favorite style of artistic workmanship for the 5th and 6th centuries was mosaic, which consisted of pictures made up of variously colored cubes of marble and glass fixed in a cement background and placed so as to be visible from the ground floor of the Cathedral. Gold leaf placed on cubes of glass and glazed over was also used lavishly, so that the effect of these large pictures was most brilliant, especially when there was a sufficient flooding of light. This mosaic can be studied in the churches of Rome, Constantinople, Ravenna and elsewhere. One of the most familiar examples is that in S. Pudenziana, Rome, where there is a large presentation of the enthroned Christ placed over the apse so that the worshippers while participating in the earthly fellowship could behold the picture of their Saviour surrounded by the Apostles enthroned in glory, and thus be reminded of the promise of Christ that He was always with them in all their earthly worship to comfort and direct.

Attention should be called especially to Ravenna, a city which is unequalled in the Western Empire for its wealth of Byzantine architecture and mosaic. When during the recent Italian campaign it was known that the German High-Command had selected Ravenna as their headquarters, it was feared that priceless monuments would be destroyed; and indeed on September 13, 1944, the German propaganda announced that "all historical buildings and cultural monuments in the famous city have been destroyed by the Anglo-American bombing". Happily the untruthfulness of the Nazis was a welcome fraud, and the official information received from the War Office, January, 1945,

by the "Connoisseur" was to this effect: "Although Ravenna has suffered from bombing and shelling none of the mosaics appear to have been injured, and total damage to important monuments is remarkably light." Evidently in this case, while the bombing of the allies was so directed as to spare the city's monuments, the German high command did not indulge in their usual policy of destruction.

S. Apollinare Nuovo has perhaps the most remarkable examples of mosaics. The walls of the nave are resplendent with the rich glow and beauty of these designs. On one side the sweeping movement of the martyrs and on the other side of the Virgins advances toward the apse in stately procession, bringing their offerings to lay them at the feet of Christ the King; while above these there are some of the first serious attempts to give visual and artistic expression to scenes from the Life of Christ. On one side are the Miracles and on the left scenes from the Passion. These illustrations reflect the influence of Greek classical art, and convey the story so convincingly that the incidents cannot be mistaken. An interesting fact is that the figure of Christ in the series of the Miracles is that of a beardless youth, while the figure in the series on the Passion is that of a mature, bearded man—thus further confirming the statement already made that there was no standard representation of Jesus. One scholar suggests that the youthful figure represents Jesus on Earth and the bearded figure the majestic Christ in Heaven. What impresses the student of these mosaic decorations is the central place assigned to Christ as the ruler over all, whose spirit pervades the entire building. This we would expect in an era when the divine majesty of Christ had received complete acknowledgment by the Church after the severe controversies and conflicts of the Nicene period.

III

In conclusion I would add a few sentences on the present state of Art and Religion. To begin with, I call attention to a statement made in a recently published report of a special government committee on "Reconstruction and Re-establishment" in which the unwelcome assertion is made that "in Canada art is less cared for than in any other country".

As to the relation between art and religion there has for a long time been an unhappy alienation and a lack of desire on both sides to restore friendly relations, and to return to those

conditions which prevailed for so many centuries in the life of the church.

There have been dark periods in church architecture, which have left many unfortunate results. At times it seemed to be the deliberate intention of the congregations to make their church as unattractive as possible. All love of the beautiful seemed to be abandoned. It was thought that any one could plan a church and that any plan would do. More recently when the secular spirit was in the ascendant, churches were made to conform to the plans of the theatre or music hall. Also, the extensive introduction of organs has not always been favorable. Instead of a window with stained glass in the chancel, or of a beautiful pulpit and communion table or altar, the people have often to look at obtrusive organ pipes, whose dull metallic appearance arouses no sense of the infinite mystery that should pervade the dwelling-place of God.

There are many very fine churches in Canada, and the desire after beauty in style is on the increase; but there should be a much more general appreciation of the significance of such features as form, color, location, decoration, distinctiveness of function.

Here the professional architect may render help by stimulating interest in this subject among the clerical and lay members. He may also strive to study the ever unfolding nature of christian worship and be able to provide the expression in stone, or if need be, in wood, which will be appropriate to these fresh requirements of the advancing religious life of the community. The church is meant to be a building apart by itself, one that should at once be recognized as such, so that all who enter, even indeed those who pass by, will have some conscious feeling, or some undeveloped sense of awe, some movement of the soul, telling them that this is a sacred building dedicated to the worship of God. If it be a fact, as is being stated in many quarters, that Christianity is the bulwark of our civilization, it should be a laudable ambition for people to construct this visible embodiment of the Christian Faith in a noble and worthy form. Will the time ever come when pilgrims will visit towns and villages in Canada partly to see, admire, and worship in the lovely shrines which a renewed sense of God's glory will erect?

Turning to painting, we should recognize that pictures may have a religious element without any direct connection with the church or specifically sacred subjects. The artist

may discover secret glories in nature, may express what Wordsworth calls "the sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused" and may be able to give outward form in some painting of scenery that quickens and elevates our spirit and reveals a beauty in simple things which the average observer had never seen. Or, painting may lend its hand to the cause of social renewal by conveying impressions of the conditions in which so many live and of the ideal society toward which we should strive. Professor Bailey quotes the dream of Tolstoi: "The destiny of art is to transmit from the realm of reason to the realm of feeling the truth that the well-being of man consists of being united—living and working together," *The Arts and Religion*, p. 65.

But above all this should we not hope for the return of the days when again great masters of painting will turn to the reservoirs of feeling to be found in the person and message of Christ, thus emulating the works of the classical period of religious art so that once again in this age of materialism there may be efforts to produce a new idealization of the face and form of Jesus—beholding Him who is full of grace and truth.