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Liturgical Arts

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A QUARTERLY DEVOTED TO THE
ARTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

AROUND THE WORLD
IN NINETY DAYS
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LITURGICAL ARTS

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Thirty Years at It

JEAN CHARLOT

ONE OF the threads that bind the epochs of my life, otherwise contrasting or disparate, is a love of the liturgical arts. Kept as a rule in enforced idleness, this love proved creative, if hardly lucrative, when chance and commissioned works allowed, that were few and far between.

It is only justice that I should underline the boon of having lived my youth in France, the birthplace of cathedrals, not only in cliché, but in truth. Perhaps Notre-Dame de Poissy, our summer parish, associated with Saint Louis and his mother, Queen Blanche, taught me the dignity of church art more even than had books, however early and assiduously I courted them. Its stones had long ago lost their veneer of polychromy and, weathered on the outside, inside were equally weathered by the feet, knees, and candle-flames of generations of parishioners. There it stood, a lesson in the respect of the material used, in the dignity of concept, and — so loyal was each detail to the aims and modalities of the century that had created it — in contemporaneity.

As instructive as cathedrals were the small country chapels and outdoor shrines, especially those of Brittany. At Breton pilgrimages, such as that of Notre-Dame de la Clarie — as the pious folks in blue blouses, the girls in white coiffes, streamed candle in hand by a road calvary — this active relationship between a functional art and the live folk who enjoyed it raised a question that even the Louvre had failed to raise.

Ca 1916, a group of Parisian adolescents used to gather in a crypt, under the name of "Guilde Notre-Dame." Besides our Catholicism, we had in common a vocation to graft the fine arts onto the sturdy stem of the applied arts; also ours was a desire to take contemporary art out of the category of studio experiment and to restore it to its full dignity as the servant of theology and, incidentally, of architecture.

Our World War, the first, was raging

outside, and managed somehow, even minus an atom bomb, to be thoroughly awesome. It would eventually suck into its maelstrom all young men and we knew our turn to be at hand. This martial accompaniment to a brand of piety as green as it was intense communicated to our plastic expression a kind of desperate urgency. We met regularly for Mass and communion, and to give or hear lectures, egged on by a very practical nun charged by her order with our organization, and soothed and restrained if need be by a Jesuit priest whom we converted to aestheticism: to our pride, adopting gloves with flaring cuffs and a cape that he negligently threw over one shoulder, Father soon acquired a musketeer cast.

Given our specialized vocation that ran against the trend of the day, the older artists whom we could approach reverently were few. Maurice Denis had played a rôle in the symbolist movement as a painter, and an even more substantial one as a critic. He had done, or was then finishing, large mural decorations, some lay, like the dome of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, others religious. He was kind enough to come and talk to us of his concept of liturgical art, of his anger at the lying make-believe to be commonly found in churches: fake marbles, assumed gold leaf, and, worst of all, photographic renderings. At the annual Salons he exhibited, or so it seems to me now, mostly Annunciations, in a palette of mauves and pinks that well fitted the mood of the puppet-like figures, hands thrown outward in childlike ecstasy, with mouths that prayer opened in O's suggestive of an invisible lollipop. How vividly could a Frenchman remember, looking at a Denis, the Corpus Christi processions of his childhood when, dolled up with motherly care in white satin and lace, he felt proud to carry a basket full of rose petals to be strewn on the passage of the Host.

ONCE, when an artillerist on leave, I went to visit Denis in Saint Germain,

where he managed both to paint and to raise a large family. He had just been made an Officer of the Legion of Honor and wore its ribbon at his lapel, with yet another coat with yet another ribbon casually thrown over his shoulders. In his studio, the Annunciation in course proved less exciting than preceding ones seen at exhibitions, perhaps because the taste of war just experienced marred for me the affinities between pale pinks and blues that the Master managed so well. On that occasion, the last that I was to see Denis, I felt a little disappointed in the man and the work, unjustly so, as adolescents will measure against their own fierce untried standards those of older men, somewhat rounded at the edges by usage.

Another of our models was Georges Desvallières, then famous for a "Sacred Heart in a Bomb-burst" painted in memory of his son, killed in the war. I still feel the impact of the work as I felt it then: liquid reds and deep ultramarines bleeding through a scribbled mesh of black lines suggested that the roots of Desvallières' art fed on the same earth where Chartres stood. His style, bold as any I had yet seen, hinted at a way out of the cloying innuendoes of symbolism.

My preferred master was Marcel Lenoir, partly because his name reminded me of Bloy's Marchenoir, one of my heroes, partly because Lenoir was one of the few men of his generation to practice and to understand true fresco. He had a loving understanding of perspective that, at his best, compared with the straightforward complexity of Uccello. Repeatedly, and very much against the grain of his generation, Lenoir tackled liturgical subject matter, dissused forms such as the polyptich, dissused ideals, such as a nobility in the treatment of the human form so insistent that some called it stereotyped. At one Salon, Lenoir, despairing of ever receiving a bona-fide mural commission, carted in, rigged on wheels, a brick wall that he had built single-handed, then

plastered and frescoed. I learned from him to love above other media the tactile feel, mat surface, and limited palette of true fresco.

My own work as a guildsman was mostly in sculpture, carved directly in wood and painted. I proudly brought samples of my carvings to Dom Besse, the rotund Benedictine, active in the liturgical revival. Looking at the roughly hewn panels, he guessed shrewdly that I was of Breton stock, which pleased me all the more as there was not a grain of truth in it.

After the war, I remained two years in Germany with the troops of occupation. So thoroughly scattered by them were the members of our guild that I do not know how it all ended. I would visit when on leave the workshop where Marguerite Huré did stained glass, and did it beautifully. In Germany, as we slowly road horseback along the Rhine, bivouacking all the way from Mannheim to Cologne, I started work on my first way of the cross. The stations were large woodcuts on pearwood, cut in part with hammer and chisel, and closer in technique to carving than to engraving.

Demobilized, my first mural commission proved a failure. It was to be a frieze running on both sides of the nave of a newly built suburban church. Between the start of the preparatory work and the completion of the gouaches to scale, the priest in charge changed his mind. He said so in a curt note, declining even to look at the sketches.

Germany shook my faith in order, in this order à la Poussin that, in France, I considered essential to art. The mediaeval Cologne Masters raised the query in terms of good taste that, up to then, I pictured as the orderly perspectives of Versailles. Their Teutonic double-chinned Madonnas that dwelt in rose arbors where roses and angels, equally fat and dimpled, grew like cabbages or gambolled like puppies, were in the worst of taste—and also they were beautiful. In Colnar, the Grünewalds constituted an apotheosis of the demonic that, in France, I had plainly dismissed as devilish. It was great art based on unrest, from the rabidly gnarled outlines to the willful assonances of color-chords. I began to experience the kind of intellectual quartering that became my lot as a displaced person, partaking of one culture after another. It was little comfort to think of El Greco, split between Byzantium, Titian, and Torquemada. I understood

then how wise a policy it is for the Frenchman to stay at home and to ignore geography.

MEXICO increased this feeling of doubt. In 1920, it was emerging uncertainly from violent revolution into some kind of topsy-turvy order, with the underdog cast as the upper-dog. Even attempts at reconstruction were marked with violence. The politics just risen to power, especially the Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos, took delight in turning over to a handful of untried muralists—thought by some to be cruel pranksters—the walls of ancient palaces or churches, with their noble domes, graceful arcades, and airy patios. It is there that, working elbow to elbow with men whose ideals and actions were far from pious, I realized one of my early longings, that of uniting painting with architecture.

In the buildings that we started to decorate, ancient murals stood as a lesson as well as a challenge. On the walls of the Preparatoria School, where Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and others, including myself, painted our first murals, could be admired the decorations signed in 1760 by our great predecessor, Antonio Vallejo. Arched to fit the vaulted ceiling of what had been the sacristy of the school chapel, scalloped to make way for doors and sculptured lintels, optically conceived to answer their unusually high position, these oil paintings on canvas were indeed true murals. The zest with which the rococo master spattered his earth and his heavens with smiling saints, and ushered in with mincing ballet steps the seven Archangels in silvery armors and plumed helmets, was a climax of mural craft. Moreover the content of his work remained a true witness to these past centuries when Mexico constituted a near theocracy.

So deep were the roots of modern Mexican art in its colonial past that my new friends, despite avowed Marxist aims, could hardly conceive at first of an art that was not religious. Patronized by a government still lacking its chaps from a meal of bourgeois, freely conceived by men certainly more aware of the world order proposed by Marx than of that sponsored by Saint Thomas, and painted in the midst of what amounted to an official persecution of the Church, astonishing examples of Catholic art came into being: Rivera's first venture was "Crea-

tion," showing the Trinity flanked by personified theological and cardinal virtues. De la Cueva frescoed "The Planting of the Cross in the New World," faced by Revuelta's "Apotheosis of the Virgin of Guadalupe." Orozco, the good anarchist, embarked on a set of frescoes to the glory of Saint Francis. Siqueiros, in allusion to Christopher Columbus, limned a Saint Christopher.

Of these men, Orozco was the one to realize the unusualness of the position. His published apology, in its simplicity, goes deeper than questions of tradition, deeper even than the right of the artist to be *hars de lui-même*—out of self—in the grip of inspiration. "All art is religious. Even if a painter chooses to paint an anti-religious theme, if the result is art at all it will be religious at the core." This felt conviction guided Orozco further away from the early journalistic anti-clerical cartoons of the 1910's, toward subject matter more naturally in harmony with the core of his art. In his last period he painted martyrdoms—several versions of the stoning of Saint Stephen—Golgothas, and the apocalyptic decoration of the Church of Jesus, unfinished at his death.

Never acknowledged in words, unless it be in *artículo mortis*, this unintended conversion proves, by its splendid fruits, how close great art comes to functioning as a sacrament. This thought should shake us off the kind of pharisaical conceit that is the usual vice of obviously good men, such as I was and I had known in the days and ways of our French guild. As Gill, in his autobiography, remarked of his companions in the arts and craft circles, "They are really like that; they're terribly strait-laced and prim. . . . You can see the boys don't drink; you can see they're not on speaking terms with the devil." In Mexico, it was Christ's choice to blow the breath of great religious expression in the nostrils of men who, indeed, were not professional do-gooders.

In Mexico, my own contribution to liturgical arts remained modest. French Marist fathers, who knew me as a member of the Catholic Youth, asked me to decorate the chapel of the school they had built. Nuns were in charge of the lower grades and of the care of the altar, and they stood firm in their determination that the mural be to their taste. Perhaps an atom of the epic spirit of our first frescoes sneaked unbidden into this

new mural, as it failed to meet their timorous requirements. The theme was simple: around the niche that already housed the plaster statue of our Lady of Lourdes, I painted the grotto and its meagre vegetation. This could hardly be motive for reproach, but as the two angels in prayer on both sides of Our Lady took shape, suggestions fell, thick as hail and wrong as sin: "You should know that angels are aristocratic; these look plebeian." "Paint just cherubs with pink cheeks in a blue sky with white clouds floating around." One good nun suggested as models cutouts meant to hang on Christmas trees; another amorously sketched in colored pencils a "correct" cherub's head for my edification. I suppose all the sisters went to confession on the same day and were all of an obedient cast, for, as suddenly as it had started, the hail of open counsels and articulate reprofs stopped. It was replaced by a kind of war of nerves, sisters trooping in and out of the chapel as the angels took color and shape, seized with stage giggles timed and sized to reach me at work up on my scaffold.

Once the work finished and the scaffold removed, there was a genuine change of heart. At evening prayers strange lights were seen to hover over my once maligned angels. I became quickly reconciled to the thought of having painted a miraculous picture, and flattered to have God side with me in this quarrel concerned with the liturgical arts; but, in the end, it turned out that the wall was not quite flat and the pigments not quite mat. Candlelight did the rest.

I can speak of that mural as I please. To-day, the chapel has been transformed into a two-story building, with a refectory downstairs and a social hall above it. Nothing remains of my Mexican masterpiece.

IN FRANCE, Brittany had its quiet and forceful say, heard over the noise of more advertised doings in Paris. In Mexico, though the muralists scandalized the citizens of Mexico City, the countryside ignored them, wherein folk were, as usual, busy producing folk art. Much of it was liturgical art.

Up to then, taking after the theories of Maurice Denis, I postulated the abomination of photographic realism in religious statues, yet these abhorred productions were but colored plaster. In Mexico, the folks who carve statues for country chapels carry realism much

further: made of light wood or of corn-cob paste, Mexican *lulises* are gessoed, lacquered, and polychromed, with eyelashes and wigs of human hair, teeth and ribs of actual bone. Some, puppet-like, display movable limbs; jaws open and eyes roll in their sockets at the tug of a string. They are dressed in linen, damask, or velvet, beribboned, with their feet shod in silver sandals. If the parish can afford it, our Lady will own a whole wardrobe to match the seasons and the liturgy. Besides such practices, Barclay Street merchandise sheds its naturalism and acquires style. Why is it, then, that the atmosphere of Mexican country churches and pilgrimage shrines is lyrical, mystical, and conducive to prayer in a way that many a modern church, obeying all the rules of good art and good taste, fails to convey?

Come to New York, for a while I felt uprooted and, not knowing what to make of the city all around, under, and over me, worked with the memory of things I had known rather than with the present, noisily rushing and honking outside my one and a half room apartment on Fifty-Seventh Street. Paul Claudel, the poet, then French Ambassador to the United States, would at times come and console me: he had a plan for a cathedral to be built near Chicago, the biggest ever. It was to be a wall-less, sunken amphitheater roofed with a dome to dwarf all existing domes, entirely frescoed on the inside. The plan went as far as a discussion with the architect, Antonin Raymond, of the technical problems involved. I felt less qualms than he did on my behalf, and, as a precedent in gigantism, reminded him that Michelangelo had taken only four years to paint the Sistine ceiling. His reply was factual: the surface of the proposed dome was a hundred times greater than that of the Sistine ceiling. I argued weakly that my style admitted of more speed than that of Michelangelo, being unencumbered by the rendering of muscles, but that evening, nevertheless, I prayed for the first time for a long, long life.

In my room on Fifty-seventh Street, I painted in oils a whole way of the cross, twenty years after the first. It was done in a vacuum, so to speak, that is detached from actual architectural considerations. For its exhibition, Father Couturier, then relatively unknown outside the circle of his Parisian friends, wrote the foreword to the

catalogue. In it, he underlined the fact that there is not one kind of religious art but a hundred kinds; he also had nice things to say about me, but all through his stay on this continent one felt his impatience at finding himself away from France . . . and Braque, and Matisse.

In Peapack, New Jersey, I decorated the Church of Saint Brigid. Mrs Suydham Cutting had it built, and commissioned Elsa Schmid to do the altar frontal and the way of the cross in the direct manner and with the respect of her mosaic material that marks all of her work. It was Elsa who suggested me for the decoration of the apsidal walk.

I was ill-informed of things Irish, even though I once watched a Saint Patrick parade prance as it went by the New York cathedral, and more than once wondered, as "the little green island" popped up in sermons, both in turn and out of turn. It was a pleasant surprise to meet Saint Brigid, a sturdy peasant Saint who brewed the best beer and produced the best cheese, and performed miracles by throwing her bathwater from its wooden bucket on the queue of cripples waiting every day for this holy ministration. In the one poem we have from her hand, she invites the Trinity to come and visit her as the Three Persons did Abraham, and, as an inducement, promises to serve Them with a mountain of cheese and a lake of beer. This was a holy saint indeed, and I sketched with enthusiasm. Alas, the walls were not as vast as the ideas: beer-making was eventually eliminated, but cheese-making got its due. Angels function as milk maids, separate the curd from the whey, while the large wheels of cheese are shelved to ripen. In another panel, Saint Brandon returns from one of his seafaring expeditions with strange birds and fishes for Brigid, and her maidens stop shearing sheep and carding wool long enough to welcome the holy explorer. (Illustrations page 52.)

Helen Cutting breeds Tibetan dogs and, to my delight, asked but for one thing, that her pet dog, Cha-Chu, a gift of the Dalai Lama, figure in the picture. It was just a ball of long hair but provided, however tenuously, this relationship between people and art that, after my experiences in Brittany and in Mexico, I understood to be essential.

Once, writing about Eric Gill, I stated somewhat flippantly:

Are reforms as good as they are novel? Of the impressionists Renoir used to say, "They boast that they paint shadows blue while others paint them black." Of the position of the liturgical arts movement that Gill learned it may be similarly said, "They rejoice at having replaced in their churches the neo-Gothic by the pseudo-Byzantine."

As a modern artist working, when occasion arises, for the Church, and also simply as a parishioner, I wish that I could feel more a part of such a movement, that has cleansed our churches of so much abomination; but are neatness and cleanliness in the liturgical arts closest to Godliness? Does clinical functionalism solve the problem of establishing a loving relationship

between the American parishioner and the statues and pictures he sees in his parish church? Such a relationship exists for a fact in the country churches of France and Mexico.

Obviously, church art in the United States could not wisely follow the forms of church art proper to Europe or to Latin America. Notre-Dame de Poissy or El Señor de Chalma needed centuries to accumulate ex-votos, tombs, mementos, local devotions, carelessly piled up as furniture in the old family attic. How can a gothic cathedral fail to soar upwards when it does so from the springboard of a romanesque crypt built centuries before, with blocks looted in turn from a pagan temple? The

church of Chalma acquires its verticality from the fact, far from forgotten by its Aztec pilgrims, that its crypt, scooped long ago out of the live rock, was once a vault sacred to the awesome Tezozomoc, god of the caverns.

American Gothic is an abomination only because it lacks such roots. In New York, Saint Patrick remains an architectural model out of a course of comparative architecture, unnaturally served on its platform like the severed head of the Baptist in *disco*.

In the same way, alas, some modern churches also lack roots, or are rooted, rather than in the community they are built to serve, in the printer's ink of architectural magazines.

The Editor's Diary: IX

TOKYO, September 6, 1952. Called at Sophia University (S.J.) where Father Geppert, the rector, and Father Joseph Roggendorf showed me around the extensive university grounds, and we commented on the somewhat disparate conglomeration of buildings — the result of lack of coordination so usual on the campus of many of our Catholic institutions. Here I hope to gather photos from Father Hermann Heuvers, S.J., *re* Christian artists in Japan; also photos of some of the competition drawings for the Hiroshima church. We discussed the question of native interpretation of Christian art and architecture *versus* the frank acceptance of modern art based largely on Western norms — what has been called the international style. Those who have been in Japan several decades tell me that Japanese converts do not want anything that will remind them of their pagan past and consequently seem willing to accept any Western concoction in architecture, not to mention the product of the church goods catalogues. In some cases, to make matters worse, the poor missionary is saddled with discarded "elements" from the homeland. All this can easily become the norm of Christian art and representative of the Church in such matters to the trusting Japanese convert. And yet it is totally at variance with the finest elements of their own indigenous art. I wonder why it would not be possible to meet this problem in a more

sensible way? While taking into consideration the convert's desire to shed his pagan past in thinking and belief, why not lead him to accept the universal values inherent in his own art and infuse these values into a truly modern and living interpretation of corresponding universal values of the West which could enhance the beauty of his own style?

In this connection I was grateful to Father Roggendorf for introducing me to an essay, "Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture," by Bruno Taut. This essay was published by the Society for International Cultural Relations, Tokyo. It is the record of a lecture delivered by Dr Bruno Taut, on October 30, 1935, at the Peers' Club. Dr Taut was born in Königsberg, Prussia. For some time after the first World War he was editor of *Frühlicht*, and won for himself a recognized leadership in the expressionist movement in architecture. From 1921 to 1924 he was an active city engineer of Magdeburg. In 1925 he moved to Berlin, where he designed several large-scale "Siedlung" buildings. In 1935 he came to Japan, where his contributions in architecture and industrial arts furnished a new light for the Japanese. Dr Taut was the author of several excellent books on architecture and town planning. On the question at issue to-day, I found the following statements of particular interest:

Eternal beauty no longer means to-day [1935]

what it did only a short time ago. It does not mean an admonition to imitate outer appearance, or to copy with more or less virtuosity, but to take the spirit of beautiful works as a model, and to bring present conditions to its clearest and most perfect form, as was done in those [Italics ours].

But what attracted the architects (in England, Germany, Austria) was not the strangeness of tree trunks used in tea houses in their natural condition. . . . Of Japan they had an idealized conception of cleanliness, clarity, simplicity, cheerfulness, and faithfulness to the materials of nature. . . . Japanese opinions about their own arts orientated themselves too much according to western ideas; and so, Japan eventually was still more violently affected by the carnival of styles than the West. When tradition broke down, standards of quality disappeared, and one copied the foreign even though one's traditional good taste rejected it — it was exotic and therefore interesting.

The answer to our problem in Christian art to-day may well be found in these statements by Dr Taut. I feel it is certainly not in the acceptance of our western theory of the lowest common denominator or the defeatist attitude of catering to an assumed desire of the parishioner for a bastard style, neither Japanese nor western. Such mistaken ideas have flooded Europe with monuments to bad taste. Let us not saddle the Japanese with similar monstrosities under the cover of our prejudices. Here is where the liturgy comes into the picture!

In the evening I strolled through the Ginza district, the equivalent of our Broadway around Times Square. And