ANGELS OVER THE ALTAR. Christian Folk Art in Hawaii and in the South Seas. Text: Alfred Frankenstein. Photography: Norman Carlson. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1961. Designed by Kenneth Kingrey.

This slim volume is an exquisite sample of book-making that clothes an exhaustive piece of scholarly research. "Christian Folk Art in the South Seas" is not, however, as first implications suggest, a study of the art of native con-

verts, redolent with paganism, the present heir to antique cultures such as lured Gauguin to Tahiti. To the architect or the decorator it offers no hint on how to clothe Christian churches in the borrowed splendor of 'savage' crafts. Surprisingly so, the folk art illustrated here is not the work of Tahitian or Hawaiian natives, but that of French or Belgian folks who were sent to these far-flung places as missionaries.

It is a story parallel to that of the Spanish Franciscans and Dominicans who were first to reach Mexico in the sixteenth century. Unable to quickly master the involuted native tongues and yet impatient to preach, these men painted pictures and displayed them on mission walls. Old engravings show them pointing a rod at each subject in turn to instruct their squatting Indian neophytes into the mysteries of the Pater Noster, or the articles of the Creed.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a similar impulse, didactical rather than esthetic, transformed into unwilling artists other zealous missionaries, equally impatient and equally ingenious. In the Pacific islands that it was their lot to evangelize, nature had trained native eyes to lush displays, had rendered men sensitive to the sensuousness of forms and colors. The clerics found it difficult to communicate to their Polynesian parishioners concepts quasi abstract, such as those of good and evil, or to depict in words scenes unseen, such as those of Heaven and of Hell. Why not replace words with paint, or with sculptures, for all to see.

Novel as the subject-matter is, Frankenstein acknowledges a predecessor in the field, Robert Louis Stevenson. In the 1880s, Stevenson, on a tour of the Marquesas, stumbled on one of Brother Blanc's chapels, on the island of Nukahiva. He wrote of it lovingly: "It is impossible to tell in words of the angels (although they are more like winged archbishops) that stand guard upon the door, of the cherubs in the corners, of the scapegoat gargoyles, or the quaint and spirited relief, where Michael (the artist's patron) makes short work of a protesting Lucifer."

Another one of Brother Blanc's rustic cathedrals, built on the island of Atuona, and crammed with his quaint brand of polychrome sculpture, stood a neighbor to Gauguin's last hut. The master casually rendered it as a spot of white topped with a cross and half hid in tropical foliage in one of his last landscapes, where naked riders romp freely in the pagan foreground. The juxtaposition of these two expatriates, Blanc and Gauguin, has curious overtones. Blanc was a true primitive, just as were the Breton artisans whose stone calvaries had been first to fire sophisticate Gauguin with a longing for things primitive.

The book also describes the painted churches of Hawaii, of which the best known is that of Honaunau, the work of a Belgian priest, Father John. A tiny wooden chapel within sight of the ocean, it startles the onlookers who crosses its latticed threshold to suddenly find himself in a Gothic cathedral, seemingly immense and lighted by rays filtered through the stained glass of high rose windows. Father John succeeded here in painting a piece of make-believe as artful in its perspective effect as it is artless in its handling of pigments.

A few years ago, when I visited this little church, known in the islands as the Painted Church, I took it for granted that Father John, being Belgian, had sickened of the insistent beauty of the tropics that hemmed him and his church between palms and papaya trees, and that his painted cathedral was an exercise in escape. In this book, Frankenstein proves that the Cathedral of Burgos, via postcard, is his model, spoiling somewhat my simple theory. Father John had spent some of his seminary years in Spain, so we may now postulate that this strangely moving mural helped the missionary to recapture his youth.

Scenes depicting a good death, and Eve, and Hell, and the stigmatization of Saint Francis, line the side walls. Looking for what models inspired Father John, Frankenstein comes up with a list of names that never were listed in a history of art. It seems that Father John chose his models not for their eminence but for their availability. For his inspiration, he probably consulted what pious cards he had kept within the pages of his missal since seminary days.

The third artist, Father Evarist, is still active today and answered all the queries of the author as best he could. All the more mysterious remains the fact that his church at Kalapana is a thing of beauty. His richest iconographic source proved to be "Le Catéchisme en Images," illustrated with the type of antiquated woodcuts that the enlightened connoisseur can only see as a sort of raw material for a Max Ernst to cut and paste into surrealist collages.

This book, treating of a kind of church art incompatible with what we usually understand to be good liturgical art, does so with a serious kindness and a gentle comprehension that raises for the liturgical art expert grave questions. Decades ago, when the liturgical art movement launched its sturdy battle for reform, one of its most potent weapons proved to be the assumption that good taste is an indispensable ingredient of good art. The battle is practically won. Bad taste has been relegated by the connoisseur into a limbo of its own, even perhaps to its own hell. To look at the naïve works lovingly reproduced in this book suggests a difficult reappraisal. Perhaps the good and the bad in art are not as clearcut as good and bad on moral grounds. Perhaps a kind of pharisaical pride has queered our esthetic manifestos. Brother Blanc and Father John thought of art in terms of function. If taste entered in the making of their art, it was more of the kind one associates with cooking recipes than with art: the proof of the pudding, the proof of their art was in the reaction of the wide-eyed parishioners to these visual sermons. As he docilely molded his esthetic concept to fit local instincts, the cleric turned artist veered away from accepted forms of art, and at times even from acceptable ones.

When we say that church art should be visual prayer, should not the comparison be followed through. There is a kind of liturgical art that patterns itself after the official prayer that speaks for a whole congregation. This collective prayer borrows its formulas from the biblical past and from the doctors of the Church. The corresponding art leans also heavily on the past, patterns its style, after the Byzantine if orthodox modern or, in dubious cases, after the Gothic. A sort of awesomeness emanates from the official prayer and the official art, that underlines the fact that the church is indeed the House of God.

Other forms of prayer are certainly valid. Such is the very private prayer of the publican, half hid behind a pillar, both fists passionately pressed against his eyeballs, intent on improvising words to fit his own personal case. His very earnestness makes his prayer ungrammatical, and unimpressive indeed when compared with the resonant periods of the kings and prophets of ancient days. Has this kind of prayer its counterpart in our concept of a liturgical style or, in our eagerness to equate goodness with good taste, have we swept out of the church and into outer darkness, whenever given the chance, all art that falls

below rather stiff professional standards. This little book raises indeed a grave question, of concern to those brave men who have, by now, practically won their battle for "good" art in the church.

Tying up with what thoughts the reading of this book aroused, I look at a photograph, one of the unretouched kind, of Saint Theresa of Lisieux. There she stands hugging with one hand a plaster statue of the Child Jesus, of a type that even Barclay Street must have discontinued, with, in her other hand the palette and the brushes of a painter. Theresa here consciously posed as the artist. What humble pride she may have felt in her artistic achievements cannot be shared by any conscientious art critics. Yet, the scrolls, and hearts, and lambs that she lovingly limned must have been most pleasing to God. Now that the liturgical battle has turned into a victory, it is perhaps time to ask of ourselves this question: have we kept in the church a place for innocence in art as God has kept a place for His innocents in Heaven?

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